



# NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

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**R**Eader, there was a sudden  
mistake ('tis too late to re-  
cover it) thou wilt quickly find  
it out, and I hope as soone passe  
it over, some of the humane Po-  
ems are misplaced amongst the  
Divine.



## WILLIAM BOYLE

### *Friend To Childhood, Childhood Friend* (For Jim)

I skipped a rock off your head  
meaning to miss,  
during a time when 'just about' was sweeter  
than a bull's eye.  
Hot chocolate over chess,  
I imagined the ghosts of cows waiting  
for the old west to come clattering home,  
back to your house which used to be a barn.  
Probably we reached escape velocity  
through the car radio, taking us anywhere  
but a hick town. But when I discovered  
rebellion, you rightly kept to the legal magic  
of gum cards and kissing Cathy in the  
untended outfield. When the blood stops, just  
before my eyes, I'll stop seeing you, saying,  
"I can't wait to get into a fight with you!"  
All I can say is that when the stone  
left my hand, I suddenly wanted it back.  
After nearly killing you either by accident  
or by anger, I can still see us  
sharing a parsley cigarette and taking our time  
walking to catechism after school.

## CHARLES HOOD

### *The Paleo-Eskimos*

**B**ones, homes, old threads  
to tease our reason.

These were fossils who knew fossils:

yellow banister mammoth's tusk is Ko-guk-puk,  
earth-gnawing beetle whale,  
dead instantaneously on contact with air.

Other myths run through history clearly as a core sample  
land bridge, war, strange animals gobbled and lost,  
years jammed in ice floes.

Tundra's ghost,

I come to nuzzle tidbits, turn over  
the lost lance,

a carved ivory needle.

clever spins of nephrite

that are fractions of a life that was art.

Glancing towards the cloud-shored coast

I feel my hair floated by invisible drafts of smoke,  
as if I were standing on the exact site  
of our mutual provenance.

JODI JOHNSON

*A Young Boy Thrown*

I am the grass, long-fingered,  
Slim-fingered, and into my hands  
Fell a boy—  
A burr shook loose from the sorrel's mane.  
I caught up his cries in my arms.

His skin was perfect and petal-thin  
At back of knee, underside of wrist;  
His white sickle of nail  
A pale first slice of moon.  
But under his head he left dark blood  
Smearred on the back of my hands.

There, a day, rising  
And sinking to its own pulse;  
And there, a moment, short as a heartbeat,  
Between waking and the opening of eyes:  
Caught shiny-new on my palm,  
They lay round and full in the red drops,  
Moments and days falling from his hair.



## *A Blind Hawk Visited By Schoolchildren*

He flies all day in the dark.  
He turns his head and listens to them pass like clouds.  
Against his breast he feels, five-fingered, the tops of trees.

He is wingless, small —  
But in the blue space of his heart  
He could carry the sky on his back:  
There, he rises in slow circles, climbing ladders of wind.

\*\*\*

I found him trying to fly.  
After two weeks, the thrust of his wings held my hand aloft.  
I tossed him up.  
He fell, slapping the air around my head,  
The sky the color of feathers.

When I was ten,  
I went into a green field and lay down in a furrow.  
I covered myself with grass and dirt  
And left only a white hole for the sun.  
It rained stars on my forehead, coming through the leaves  
in splashes.

When the hawk fell, dark as a planet,  
I lifted my face to catch him.

## *A Mother's Death*

When mother was sick she sent  
Morgan and Jason and me  
Outside to roll down hills,  
Catching hay-colored grass and purple flowers in our hair,  
So that at five years cancer  
Seemed something made of sky and hot yellow splinters  
of sun.

\*\*\*

I picked sweet-peas for mother,  
Purple/pink flowers in a glass by her bed.  
But she didn't see — eyes closed, she sang,  
Her voice dropping like petals in the room.

It was a year before I knew she was dead,  
(Knowing was a dark sour taste on the roof of my heart.)  
I only thought she was gone  
And perhaps walking suddenly into her room one morning  
I would catch her there, smelling of sweet-peas, singing.

\*\*\*

I think that if I could  
I would reach both arms around the waist of the world  
and squeeze it flat as a sky,  
To make the dead sprout up.

## AMY REYNOLDS

### *Your Recent Divorce*

**W**e toasted "Marriage"  
and curled tight around the glass  
of sacrament red wine,  
your hands were hard,  
the nails closely bitten.  
You spoke of his failures –  
a grocery list of inadequacy –  
the time he couldn't get it up  
and you couldn't stop laughing.  
Then you lifted the calico kitten  
that had been sleeping beside the gray one  
by the scruff of the neck  
and shook it.  
Baby talked at it through  
clenched teeth.

I left my wine unfinished,  
and driving home, ran a red light  
imagining your cold, blunt hands  
at the back of my neck.

## *The Flood*

Tracing the sheer, swirling flower pattern of the curtain  
with your blunt, restless fingers  
you stare out at the lawn beyond the rain streaked glass  
and mention that you wish it would rain forever.

Across the room in my usual chair—  
the green velvet one that you once tried to give away—  
I watched you watching the rain and managed my face  
wonderfully

Hiding the fact of my arms' need the desire  
pulsing in my feet to cross the yard or so of carpet  
to your dark shape against the window's gray luminescence.

"I want it to rain forever," you repeat,  
your chin your voice raising slightly  
challenging me to answer.

But I don't.  
I am afraid  
that it will.

## *The Intersection*

**C**rossing against the light  
blue jeans fading to white in the white sun  
smile flung back over left shoulder  
untied tennis shoes ready to trip you up

Staring back across the street  
arm lifting shading sun-sensitive sky-eyes  
squinting into the hot gust that blew you there  
silver-gray-blond hair catches drops of light  
flung like dust in my eyes.

The car pulled over and sucked you in.  
I could have shouted almost did there was time  
I closed my poised mouth pressed the accelerator  
and swept blind on the unleashing green.

## EDWARD HINCHMAN

**H**old the moment cruelly waking  
From its gross plurality,  
Pin it with unpassioned eye;  
In your doubt and dreariness  
(Lost the mask of sleep's unmaking)  
Skulks the stammer of a guess.

Daylight on the panes is breaking  
Lunar *luisance* with a shy  
Quiver of uncurtained sky;  
Demoiselles demure undress  
Monuments of dawn's forsaking  
Passion for *impolitesse*.

Songbirds in their cage are quaking;  
Laymen whine a panicked 'why,'  
While the preacher primps his sty,  
Swollen in his holiness;  
Shouts go out among the aching,  
Tumid tangents of distress.

Sullied by a faultless faking,  
Silent oarsmen sculling by  
Gape in gesture at a dry  
Sunset basking merciless;  
Mortal thirst is never slaking,  
Ravished with a false finesse.

## *Essence of Pastoral*

Like a lunatic somewhere are blinking  
The famished lawns. The sprinklers silver  
Are churning. The earnest grass  
Meanwhile—but not ungraciously—guzzles and drop.  
The seasons are turning; summer  
Plumps in the suburbs. Look, O look to the sky!

But the oar-dinghies manning the sky  
Sink like sunspots of somebody blinking.  
The future, the past, the summer,  
This blinking,—that special something silver  
Is heir to but precedes,—all this drops  
Down to, nestles in, transfigures, politely, the grass.

But is it anything, really, to the grass?  
Are these saffron devices of sky  
More than mere minstrelsy, than drops  
Of rain or munitions, however well boxed? The blinking!  
Stems from the stinging, which grows to a silver  
Suffering at the root of summer.

O for society polite as summer!  
The Social Graces themselves shall weave these stalks  
grass  
And weed through the weft of a silver  
Loom, lunatic fates! And the sky,  
Descending, upended, ever shall be blinking  
Delicious dumb desuetude as it drops.

Standing and standing I drop, it drops  
My attention. It is the same every summer.  
No use to be blinking and blinking:  
It is always the same. This grass,  
The fence, the one tree, the dog-star,—dead; the sky  
Merely mirrors my puddle, its putrid greyish-silver.

Where are the songs of summer, the silver  
Linings, the shinings, the golden drops  
Of cider, lightsome on the tongue? A sky  
Somewhere is pealing, a summer  
Is kneeling, root-broken, in its grass,  
And here I go blindly blinking . . .

In a silver of blinking,  
A sky, a summer,  
Rustled, windless, still drops in the restive grass.



## DEANNA ALLEN-KEE

I need to remember that child,  
always cold  
who squatted by the red clay road,  
stood against the house  
to soak up sun  
although the Lake Superior wind  
always found her.

If she had known  
as her fingers dug in hard clay  
what would be unearthed in life,  
she might have hidden  
forever,  
or eaten the peanut butter sandwich  
she threw away punctually  
every noon,  
and grown bigger.

## *Eric*

You stand before me,  
pajamas on backward  
teeth like a beaver,  
looking up  
through dark-rimmed glasses  
questions of the day  
in your eyes

Your skinny body holds  
the wiring of a man,  
your bravery is that of  
one thousand lions  
as you present yourself  
with no umbrellas  
no shields

There is no question  
you cannot answer  
you frighten my suitors and  
stomp through my mind,  
and I give you the kleenex  
of my soul  
every day

I wonder, as I read the news,  
will you wear your soldier  
suit backward,  
will the lions fall  
dead  
on the field?

# DALE FEDDERSON

## *Paramnesia*

1

Nothing exists in this time.  
All events are remembered: real and imagined,  
Past, present, and future—  
All are pre-existent; brought from memory,  
Recalled for the first time, they float up to light,  
Sink down again, are lost to us.  
We call this time.

2

It needs only a shift of light:  
The black will become white, what is denied  
Will become the whole truth.

One passes from this world to the next,  
Its mirror,  
Sees the earth luminous and transparent,  
and the sky black.

3

Your dreams incriminate you—  
There you walk with the others, your past  
And your future.  
They question, and you must answer.

4

The air here is thick; it fills your lungs,  
Invades.  
Breathe it out; it fills the world.

Black years since you lost your voice.  
You choke; it is the necessity once more  
To say it all.

5

Think of the music, the rhythm;  
It is what has saved you.  
It counted your breaths, traced the swelling  
Heart. Now it whispers again,  
And asks you to choose.

6

Remember, and choose.

## *Sestina*

1

**A** dream within a dream—& soft laughter  
In the next room (far away) & many  
Rising up and falling down; many small  
Faces garrulous on the wall & the wall  
Which I face, at four inches, and inch up.  
And my death which came to me last night.

2

No, not yet not yet the death which last night  
Came to me (I pretend) & the laughter  
In the next room and in this room, climbing up  
Small scales in my head—I, given many,  
Given forty, forty many years to wall  
Myself up in my head; to be small.

3

The fever moves upon my face & the small  
Faces move & the fever moves—tonight  
Nothing else moves & the clock on the wall  
Lying still and still the languid laughter  
From this room and the next room & many  
Voices here—& I still waiting up.

4

Say that I am endless and will end up  
At the end with all and everything (no small  
End by all means) —which means nothing many  
Have not known before: that at the end the night  
Always known is known always. And laughter  
Is no help—but wailing suits the wall.

## 5

Rain falls here & falling rain where the wall  
Stands here (where I fall here) is cleaning up  
Small complaints & faces here. —And laughter  
Falling quickly here & all lost here & small  
Lost voices (and my voice) are lost at night  
When all is lost, even the many.

## 6

Yet the many, O so many, many  
voices and faces are at every wall  
Wailing & no use & so I know night  
(Every night) is inevitable, & give up  
My request, attending now all the small  
Ends and objects & the soft laughter.

Fever & rain! Many faces! —Up  
On the wall I keep my watch and small  
Voices call: the night, and soft laughter.

# SCOTT MARSHALL

## *Crosswalk*

As I travel  
The boulevard  
I find Miss Success  
Tempting me,  
Legs in the air,  
With her promise:  
Wet security.  
For that kiss  
I've left  
Pieces of myself  
Behind, for want  
Of time.

Now I stand,  
Blistering,  
In the crosswalk,  
College barefoot,  
On the hot  
Fleshy pavement.

## *Convenience*

**W**e walked, hand in hand,  
Down the long white hall.  
Our minds elsewhere:  
The dam in the mighty river.  
Filtered through our tears  
I could hear the doctor  
Whistling at his work,  
The nurse's gentle encouragement,  
And the mechanical hum  
Of a simple vacuum.



**HART SCHULZ**

*Blizzard in August*

for Tony Sept '82

**R**emember, Tony,  
how the mountains  
froze our faces  
shut  
but  
we slept close  
like lovers,  
traded jackets,  
and poured coffee

And now we  
sit in my  
living room  
see  
pictures  
of that blizzard  
you and me,  
your wife,  
our unborn children

*The Meeting*

I had not expected her  
to be attractive . those  
dichotomies are rare—dark  
& laughing, talking lightly

leaning slightly against silences.  
Facing such feminine subtlety I  
hurl myself out in generalities:  
“God is dead.” Afraid

there won't be time to say,  
“Whether god exists or not  
is irrelevant. The miracle's  
that we could conceive of him

in the first place.” Our props  
seem infinite, yet for each  
of us they are all too transient.  
Thus we dredge them up in poems:

sun, moon, stars  
earth, air, water  
clouds—a woman's  
face & love

is also a concrete object ! utterly  
illogical, its form  
embraced by lips without flesh  
virginal to mathematics, kissing

the line, that invisible passion  
of verse beyond extension. A  
face first encountered &  
later retraced in the mind.

## *Old Loves*

If things are not repeated  
why does the mind  
turn them over like  
smoothed stones made precious  
by possession? She  
spoke of growing old. At  
thirty-five touching lines,  
new to my eyes, criss-crossed  
contours too familiar worn  
in unknown ways—yet  
the flush of sex  
still inflamed sweet, blunted  
features, inwardly twisting  
curvatures on the muted  
bark of eucalyptus.

Nervous, after thirteen years,  
folding her arms so  
frequently or diving the  
evidence into a pocket  
my eyes were drawn  
by her embarrassment  
to the bright  
token of demarcation.

What was this mass of seaweed  
that connected us  
still so thick & vast  
it stretched beyond all  
known horizons hidden  
beneath the bright  
surface of a dancing sea?

Together we had murdered the children.  
Now we were both barren  
like half a generation.

I did not tell her  
that I am now haunted  
by young faces still  
awash with blood &  
the pleasant plumpness of fat.

Yet, still she is thus, a  
lovely stone  
removed from a velvet case  
its story better left untold.

## *Folk Dancing*

One recalls Matisse's plastic  
figures taller than the  
trees awash with colors of  
spring yellow & green  
    (flesh pink  
& white — all light  
thrown back upon the eye  
linked in conception, bright  
fish driven by forces  
beyond thought, brick & blood  
red egg

    The lights dim  
a wedding dance  
couples dip, tips touching  
fingers of one hand  
while the other  
slips through the music  
drenching the air, bare  
legs bare arms a  
strange absence of seduction

Arms grasp shoulders eyes  
grasp not quite peasant-  
like with hoot & squeal of  
delight—more the joy  
of individual flight—together—

Something symbolic, procreative  
twist & turn, toes as  
precious as teeth or  
mouth . One's reminded  
of Matisse's faceless flesh  
arms linked in perpetual  
swing alight upon the grass

# MARGARET LAVIN

## *Threshold*

**H**ow can I tell  
the space where the door was  
that there is nothing to open anymore nothing  
to close.

Having said, after all  
we are defined by our losses, pain reminds us  
we are here, and wisteria blooms  
in all wounds, the words  
ran away into wherever the door went.

I get messages:  
sorry we left you open-mouthed, but got bored  
with consolations, or don't come looking, or  
we miss you we miss you remember  
the old days

so I do  
I do and turn  
to the space where the door was  
and hang memory on its hinges

## *Common Ground*

What is it about needles  
that angels love them?  
You ask as if love itself  
is the lean metal  
at which our fingers tremble.

Maybe it's the idea of goldfish  
in phone booths—for fun.  
You are unconvinced, so I yell

Suffering, then! Imagine  
those pale footed holy hordes  
assembled on the ripeness  
of needles (You'd dance, too)

Yes, suffering always makes order  
out of things, a formal feeling  
and all that, a wanting

to take shape. Wait a minute.  
What about esprit de corps?  
From the lonely dregs of grace,  
that vast white expanse.

what could they be but giddy  
upon such intimate space,  
as you are in crowded elevators  
and freshly opened libraries—

electric  
for a while.  
so many of them manic  
with the uncasual touch.

Your answer lies  
in their falling off

which is death which  
makes visible you say

our belief you say  
they want to they want to.  
You stare as if you hold  
in your hand the vowel

that could complete them  
into word, the home  
of the shudder in the bow,  
a vertebrae of afternoon light

in the arguable darkness  
in the darkness how much  
more can we take can we  
take of this  
dancing stitched in our pockets.



## *Water*

**W**hat he hears

Is the sob in the throat of a fish which is nothing  
More than the camouflage of grief, shed finally  
When the fish, grown old and feeble, dies  
Into his sore weight, becoming a sun  
Which is devoured by the listener  
Who grows a voice of water  
And swims inside himself  
Again and again.

## *Someone's Eyes*

Have drowned enough  
To praise their rising

And filled your hands  
With gazing.

Their cry is all  
The color in all the world.

They are the countries  
You have lived in.

They are the desire  
That has found a home.

Out of their tirade  
Walks a clear voice.

In these eyes you are forever  
Wretched forever blessed.

They say, This is the way it is;  
Don't be sorry.

## EDWARD ALFRED GIKA

### *A call to arms (Sinking of the Belgrano)*

This is a piece of real fiction. Fiction because I sit at a typewriter inventing it, reality for the same reasons. It is a story that is no story because it has no end. I am deathly afraid of endings, that is why all my stories end in a death. The end of any story is its own death. This is a story of a beginning. It is a piece of real fiction. Its theme is paradox.

In the kitchen stands my father. He is peeling large onions and tossing them into a deep stew pot. He is crying tossing the sheaths in a desperate violence. Tomorrow I leave for the islands to live out my theme.

The reports said that four-hundred and thirty-six sailors are lost at sea. Four-hundred and thirty-six stories have come to an end but these are not true endings.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am that I am. I am everyman and yet no man. I was born Argentine, bred to be American, branded a Jew, betrothed to an English girl.

I see myself killing Keats, Shelley and Shakespeare on some frozen rock of an island. The poetry of futile blood splattered not on the page, but on the cracks of rock and film of sea. The blood floats like spilt oil. All else is sunk.

\*\*\*\*\*

My fathers eyelids are thick like onion sheaths. He knows what I am writing about. He knows where my story ends and he is afraid. The stew is sizzling. It makes a sound like the whirr of an electric typewriter. It crackles and pops.

"and the guns?" he asks with a voice that crackles and pops, "and the guns?"

\*\*\*\*\*

I go to fight in a war, where the first pain is one of regret. My notice came yesterday. White cardboard and green ink. The seal was official. A green seal stamped on the forehead of four-hundred and thirty-six men. A seal embedded so deep it has damaged their dead reason. I feel my own forehead hot with the press of green ink. It is not the stamp of salvation. It is the stamp of absurdity and its color is appropriate. Green boys dying on a green landscape in green uniforms.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Can you tell me where my country lies?” said the uniform to his true love’s eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am the theme. I am the paradox. My blood stirs for the country of my birth. My apathy lies in the streets of a nation that breeds such apathy. My faith demands isolation. My culture is the knife in the back.

Green men dead and green smiles question. The green smiles and questions of apathy.

\*\*\*\*\*

English eunuchs with stiff upper lips. Spicy boys with splintered dicks.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am breaking all the rules in one last desperate attempt. I am writing a story about writing a story about writing a story. I am lost in the repetition. My characters never change because they are lost in the repetition. An unending chaos, repeated slaughter. Life is a history book whose first page is also the last.

There are only two characters in this portrayal of absurd nature. We live alone. I want to spare all others.

He is cooking stew. I am writing it. One final meal before I go. I see that the main ingredient is blood red. The only spice: salty tears. For a while I lived the illusion that the idea of death is easier to face for an old man, easier to comprehend, to rationalize, easier to stamp with green ink on one's forehead. It is not so. He tells me to keep on typing, not to stop, not to end.

\*\*\*\*\*

I leave because my cousins are dying or dead. I fight and I kill but I do not hate. I lack the main ingredient in the stew pot of war that sizzles and pops with the sounds of howitzers and torpedoes. I do not hate. I am Borges, Faulkner, Singer and Keats rolled into one pile of limp flesh clawing for a reason. Tearing at myself with the shears of philosophy, ideology, tradition. I strip away old illusions and apply the tainted mask of conviction. My death is that I am not convinced. Sitting here writing with the green stamp of death, I am not convinced by the mask. The painted mask. The passionless mask.

\*\*\*\*\*

And the green smiles question glaring green teeth. And the green countries suck their bruised pride with lips that grow flaccid.

\*\*\*\*\*

My father is trying to lose himself in a stew whose sauce is too thin. My father is dying. He is screaming violently for me to keep writing. Not to stop. Not to end this story which is no story. His stew is thinning in the reality of this fiction and now the sounds come like lethargic bubbles that burst on the inside of the lid. I burst my first illusion only to discover I must blow up new ones. I need new illusions, new reasons, if only to get through this absurdity

that binds me to every man. I shed illusions like a snake only to discover they grow back every summer. The mask wears heavily. The green paint melts from it in the summer heat. It needs a new coat.

\*\*\*\*\*

He calls me to dinner now. I leave the typewriter running. He will know I am not finished. Again the illusion.

The table is sparsely set. A basket of multicolored napkins, a bottle of seltzer, one of wine, a set of fork and spoon at two places, a baguette of bread. He is spooning thick potatoes and carrots. They break apart as they touch my plate. He is spooning the stew in a sort of madness, piling it on my plate. He doesn't look at me. All his attention is focused on the pot. His hands tremble as he keeps adding to my plate. A desperate attempt to keep me. I stare down at a growing pile. He ladles another spoonful. I can see his eyes swollen with tears. The spoon misses. It falls dripping on the bread. The spoon is thrown into the pot in anguish. He rushes out of the kitchen. I can hear him pounding his fists on the walls mingled with muffled cries. The drowned cries of my brother and cousins all banging their fists on the walls.

He returns with wet hands. They are rough, thick hands. Running them through my hair, he sits down with a weak smile. Tearing at a piece of bread, he is talking about nothing. Babbling in a slow delirium. He refuses to look at me.

"It didn't take as long as I thought . . . you know . . . usually an hour . . . but I . . ."

He breaks off. His broken English is beautiful. I cannot eat. There is a lump in my throat like a soft broken potato.

"I'm sure it's good . . ."

He nods his head with a slight smile. A smile filled with the pain of repetition.

"Not so good, but it will fill the stomach".

Words of gold spoken in broken English. Not good, but

it will fill the stomach. He dips the bread into the sauce. Suddenly he is aware of the buzzing of the typewriter. He looks at me.

“You forgot to turn it off”.

I nod.

## DEBBIE KORBEL

### *Venus*

Francine looked at him with a thin veil of disinterest. She could always tell when someone was interested in her, and she did not want him to know she had noticed him—not yet anyway. She looked down and concentrated on stirring her Daquiri. When she glanced up, some effervescent blonde was crowning him with a very familiar hello. Figures. It was always the same sequence of events; she couldn't get cast as the leading lady even in her own story. The shower, the perfume, the painstakingly perfect eye-liner, for what, to sit alone in the darkness eating stale popcorn, hoping that romance was just around the next kernel?

Francine wished she hadn't come, that she was home wearing her mu-mu, instead of a denim girdle stamped Calvin Klein. The jeans were too tight when she bought them, but she had planned on the discomfort being the incentive for her to lose a few pounds. Fat chance. She decided that she was tired of feigning relaxation and contentment when she was actually feeling like a pariah, and started to put on her jacket when . . .

"Francine, what are you doing here?"

It was red-headed Ronnie Schulman: he worked at the gas station where she got her car serviced.

"Nothing. Uh, actually I was just leaving, have a nice evening." And on that cliché she escaped blood-curdling tales of cracked engine blocks and overextended credit cards.

Ronnie had already halfway seated himself at the table and now had to make a rather ungraceful contortion to stop himself. Francine pretended not to notice and threw her purse over her shoulder. She knew he wanted to talk to her, but she just wasn't in a charitable mood.

"See you," she said, as she began digging in the bottom of her purse for her keys. "Damn it! Where the hell . . .



ah, here they are." It was always a long walk to her car at night, and her heartbeat quickened as the sound of the music faded. She always walked with her keys projecting from her fist, to ward off any attackers. The way she felt tonight, she might offer them a lift.

The cold vinyl car seat only added to her misery, and she revved the engine like Mario Andretti: she'd get the heater going. Tomorrow was Saturday, and she promised her mother that she'd go shopping with her, and that meant fabricating a neat little lie about what she did tonight. If her mother knew that she spent the night alone in a bar, she'd start in with the "Where did I go wrong . . ." routine. Someday she was going to answer her mother, but not tomorrow, she was too depressed.

Francine walked quickly up the steps to her apartment and unlocked the door.

"Afie . . . Afie, there you are, did you miss your ugly mother? You did? Were you good? You were? How about a cookie, do you have to go outside? O.K., O.K. What a good boy!"

Afie was unaware of this evening's defeat, and having relieved himself outside, the terrier took his usual position at the end of the couch.

Francine made herself a cup of tea and settled in front of the T.V. It wasn't on, and she knew she wasn't going to turn it on. She was in one of those I hate everybody and everything except my fox terrier moods. She looked around the apartment at her belongings, her proof to the world that she existed, and was not convinced.

The ringing of her head, or the telephone, she wasn't sure which, cracked the morning silence like a fresh egg.

"Francine, are you awake?"

"Yeah Mom."

"Did you still want to go to Dregmans this morning?"

"Yeah, sure Mom. I'll be over to pick you up in half an hour."

"O.K. honey, bye bye."

Somehow her car, like a rented horse, found its way back to the stable, and she pulled into the driveway of her

parent's home. Her mother was waiting on the front porch.

"Hi dear."

"Hi Mom."

"They're having a sale there today, we should be able to find some nice things in your size. Oh, did you hear the big news? Ethel Fine's daughter is getting married."

"That's nice," said Francine.

"Did I tell you that Eddie Berman's son just had twins?"

"Yes, you told me, that's very nice."

"Well I'll tell you what I think is nice, if you'd like to know."

Francine didn't answer as she knew her mother would tell her, regardless of her response.

"I think it would be nice if you and Sam Schulman's boy went out. Ronald is a very nice boy. Religious."

"Oh, well that makes all the difference in the world, I didn't know he was religious. I'll call him up right now, do you have his number, or even better we can stop by there on the way to Dregmans, and I'll just say, Ronald, my mother says you're a nice boy, religious, in which case I'd like to have your baby. Would that be nice enough for you mother?"

Francine's mother started to cry.

"I'm sorry mother, really."

"You think I do this just to bother you? You think I don't see all of my friends' children getting married, having children of their own? I only want you should be happy. Does that make me so terrible? O.K., I'm terrible, I'm a terrible mother. Shoot me."

Don't tempt me mother, she thought.

"You're not a terrible mother, I'm just not ready to get married right now. Can we please drop the subject?"

"I won't say another word, you're an adult, you make your own decisions, I certainly can't live your life for you . . . you're going to have to learn from your own mistakes . . ."

"Mother . . . thank you."

After her mother was sure she possessed all the bargains at Dregmans, she finally allowed Francine to help her pile the polyester treasures on the counter. Her

mother started to talk to the saleswoman, Edith Kibinsky. This woman had been in the "Dregs" for as long as Francine could remember.

"Francine, say hello to Edith."

"Hello Edith", said Francine. She loved it when her mother treated her like she was five.

"She hasn't seen you in years. Step back, let her look at you."

Francine tugged at her blouse, trying to cover her midriff. Edith gave her the once over, twice.

"You've gained a little weight, haven't you Frannie? The boys don't like them too heavy these days you know." said Edith. Francine was so glad she came.

The drive home was pleasant; her mother fell asleep.

Francine closed the door of her apartment behind her, but not before loneliness walked in. She thought about killing herself. She fed Afie, combed her hair, grabbed her keys and headed to her car. She drove around for awhile and then decided to pull in at a Seven-Eleven. Minutes later she emerged with what she needed to do the job. Hostess cupcakes and a pack of Marlboros.

# RICHARD SAMUELS

## *A House Of Cards*

“I can bring it up to eight levels now.”

My roommate sat on the couch before the coffee table, proudly displaying his latest house of cards. He brushed his jet black hair off to the side, away from his eyes.

“That’s great, Paul,” I said.

“I’m gonna try for nine—you think I should?”

I mumbled a forced, “Go ahead,” and walked into the kitchen to make my dinner. Paul resumed work on his latest generation of card houses. For nearly a month now, he’d been spending all of his free time sitting in our small apartment and methodically stacking his playing cards into fragile structures. His parents were paying his way through college, so he didn’t have a job to interfere with his precious obsession. Our den doubled as his bedroom, and he’d always be there, always in intense concentration.

Just after his fiancée had broken off their engagement, he could manage an occasional smile. Once he saw that his world had collapsed, his temperament rapidly changed. Since he’d become my roommate, I’d never known him to be emotionally expressive. He was a soft spoken, relaxed person, and a loner. He’d been unobtrusive, which was the very reason I’d agreed to room with him.

Now he was downright morose. I tried for a while to talk with him about it, but decided the depression wasn’t worth it. He was just my roommate, after all. It wasn’t as if he were one of my friends. If I had met him on the street, I would have looked right through him.

I heard Paul shout and ran back to the den. He sat with his head in his hands, sobbing. His house had collapsed.

I was too astonished to say a word.

He looked up at me with reddened eyes. “I hate this place!” he screamed. His eyes darted frantically across the room. He looked over to the door and the front window. On

seeing that the window was open, he raced over to it.

"There's too many drafts!" he declared, and slammed it shut.

I was furious. "It's ninety degrees in here!"

He walked past me and sat back at his place on the couch, and swept the playing cards to the side so that he could begin again. "I can't risk it, Thomas," he said. He was deadly serious.

I started for the window.

"Don't!"

I ignored him and reopened the window.

He jumped up and charged to the window. I blocked his path.

"I'm not going to suffocate because of you!"

He was determined. "I've got to have it closed!"

"Why? So you can build your damn houses?"

He paused, fuming with a rage infinitely out of proportion.

"Yes." He tried to reach for the window. I grabbed him by the wrist.

"If you try to close that thing, I swear . . ."

He glared at me. He knew I wouldn't actually do anything, but nevertheless retreated back to the couch and his cards.

The phone rang. It was just beside him, but I knew he wouldn't take it and quickly answered it myself. It was my girlfriend, Denise. I immediately made plans to take her out to dinner, and was out of the apartment in less than ten minutes. I ran to my car, anxious to escape as quickly as possible.

We had dinner at a pizza place just off campus. It was a Tuesday night, so the crowd wasn't as large and obnoxious as usual. I told Denise about my irritation with Paul and his cards.

She said I should let it go. She said I should ignore him.

"That's kind of hard to do," I explained, "He's always there—all the time, morning, noon, and night!"

She took a bite of the pizza, chewing on it as she spoke. "Well . . . why should you care . . . you're not his mother."

I shook my head. "You don't understand, Deni . . . I mean, don't you feel sorry for him? I mean, the guy was going to get married."

She giggled, and poked at me, making me laugh. "And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Come on, you know what I mean! She broke off with him. Ever since, he's been getting worse and worse."

She put her arms around me. "Well, *you'll* never have to build card houses."

I put my arms around her. "Hope not." And I kissed her.

I didn't return home until late that night. I expected to find Paul at the same place on the couch, with his cards on the coffee table before him, but he wasn't there.

I heard a tapping to my left, and turned to face it.

I could have fallen over.

In one corner of the den stood a square booth, made of unfinished wood, about three feet on each side and extending to the ceiling. The side that faced me had been fastened with an aluminum-frame glass door, behind which, illuminated by a small desk lamp secured to the wall, sat my roommate. He, in turn, sat behind a low shelf. There stood his latest card house.

Paul stared at me, waiting for a reaction. He pointed to the card house and held up ten fingers, indicating he'd reached ten levels.

I walked up to the booth and ran my hand along a corner of it. I wasn't entirely sure it was real.

It was.

I shook my head in disbelief. "You can't keep this thing here!"

He gave me a small, insulting smile, reached above the door to a hidden enclave, and pulled down a shade.

I'm not sure how much time he spent in the booth that first night, but Paul was still there early the next morning. The shade was rolled up and the yellow sunlight highlighted the card house.

I stood by the booth door until Paul realized I was there. He pointed at his newest house and said, "Fifteen levels," and then began work on the sixteenth.

“Don’t you think you’re overdoing it?”

He studied the card house a moment. “No. I think I’m ready for sixteen levels.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said.

“Oh? Then I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You *know* what I’m talking about.”

He ignored me, and added another card to the house.

“It’s getting crazy, Paul.”

He glanced at me an instant. “You’re standing in my light.”

I didn’t move. “We gotta get this thing out of here!”

Paul rolled his eyes. “When I’m finished.” He pulled down the shade again and turned on his light.

“When’s that going to be?” I shouted.

He didn’t answer.

We didn’t talk for the next several days. I tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to go about my life with only a casual, pitiful look at my peculiar friend, who by now had stopped going to school entirely so that he could remain in the booth and work on his houses. For a time, Paul had an obsession within an obsession as he labored to complete his eighteenth level. His attempts would repeatedly end in ruin. At these times, he would pause for a minute, as if in contemplation, then begin again.

After a week in the booth, Paul’s appearance took on a haggard, worn look. His face grew pale, and dark circles appeared under his normally dark, deep-set eyes. Despite what Denise had asked, I found I couldn’t ignore what was happening. I became more and more fascinated with the absolute dedication Paul held for his work. When his parents called, he refused to come to the phone. I felt no misgivings about lying for him. As the second week of his “captivity,” as it were, began, I started to vigorously defend him to my doubtful friends. I told them that Paul would get himself in the Book of World Records someday—and believed it myself.

“What are you doing?” Paul asked me midway through the second week. I was approaching the booth with several cans of paint and a few brushes.

“I’m gonna paint the booth.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’re almost up to 25 levels, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, we’re going to have a party!”

Paul was very annoyed. “Thomas—I don’t want people here!”

“But it’s 25 levels!” I argued. “That’s really something!”

Paul’s current card house collapsed on the eighth level, adding to his irritation. “Hell, it’s only a card house; who cares?”

“They will! It’ll really be something,” I assured him. I held up the cans of paint. “I’m gonna paint the booth with playing cards all over. And I bought a plaque with your name that we’re going to put on the door!”

“You’re crazy,” he said.

I smiled at him. “No more than you are!”

He grumbled, “Fine, do what you want,” and pulled down the shade.

Thirty people squeezed into our apartment that Friday night and took positions around the booth, now painted red, black and white with pictures of kings, queens, jokers, hearts and diamonds. I was a business major, not an artist, so it was all very crude; still, I tried to do my best. The shade in the booth was pulled down. The show hadn’t yet begun.

I went into the kitchen to get some more food for the party. I was nervous and excited. I was looking forward to Paul’s main event. After a moment, Denise joined me. We were alone.

“How come you haven’t called?” she asked.

I smiled, “It’s *only* been a couple of days. I’ve been busy setting up the party . . .”

She wasn’t satisfied. “It can’t take up all your time.”

“Well, yeah, with that and school—”

“Tom, that’s not it. Look at you—you’re a wreck, like Paul.”

“No, I’m not. Here.” I shoved a bowl of popcorn at her. “Help me take this stuff in the den.” I walked in that direction.

“Tom, he’s just your roommate.”

I stopped a moment. “Denise, he’s my friend. I—I just



want to help him.” We went back to the den and handed out the food.

I knocked on the booth door. “We’re ready, Paul.”

Paul let the shade roll up. He looked nervously at me. His hands were trembling. So were mine. Paul looked out at his audience, and began to build.

At first, he was shaking so badly I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to finish the first level, but he slowly regained control of himself and reached his usual, confident clip.

Applause and cheers accompanied the completion of every new level, followed with near total silence as the next level was attempted. My throat was parched by the time Paul completed the 24th level. I was so amazed I was only vaguely aware of the reappearance of a smile on his face, for the first time in weeks.

Now, even the munching of popcorn ceased. No one dared to move. I could hear my heart beating. All eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Paul’s house of cards.

I looked over to Denise. It was as I suspected. Even she was entranced.

A card slipped from Paul’s grasp. He cautiously picked it up and returned it to what was to be the 25th level. He leaned that card against another to create the first two walls. He added a third. He reached down and removed a card from the deck to become the fourth wall. He leaned it against the other cards. All was in order. He let go of the card.

The four walls collapsed. The weight of the fall was just enough to cause the collapse of the level below it, which in turn caused the collapse of the level below that level, and so on to the bottom level.

Paul stared mournfully at the formless pile of playing cards. There was a stunned silence in the room.

He looked up from the cards and searched his audience’s long faces, as they searched his.

Paul examined his playing cards again. He looked about at the room—at the walls and ceiling. He tapped his fingers on the shelf for a moment, as if in deep thought, and then seemed to come to a decision.

“I’m coming out!” he shouted, as if it were a royal decree. He quickly smiled at me, but I was too mortified to smile back. He bounded out of his booth into the crowd of happy party-goers.

There was a great deal of loud, animated chatter. Paul seemed to be apologizing for not completing the card house, as if it were a joke. I was ashamed of him.

I eyed the booth. It stood alone, the door wide open. The pile of playing cards waited silently on the shelf, beckoning me.

I looked back at the others, preoccupied with their everyday lives. I pitied them. There were certainly greater things—more important things. I could see that now.

I climbed into the booth and shut the door behind me. I reached up above the door, took hold of the shade, and pulled it down.

There was work to be done.

## RICHARD TANNENBAUM

### *Rabid Transit*

Intercellular slowdown—a work stoppage to rival city workers and malpractice magicians. Plans and plots congeal like so many drops of blood: coagulation without representation. My mind picks up unfinished business and unwritten laws like burrs as I slide through the California Swamp. Here we find the fledgling jeweler of words—stringing monosyllables in chaotic disarray.

A canyon spreads out at my feet—craggs and quagmires of self-doubt and delusion—coincidence is my sextant, Evil Knevil rides sidesaddle whispering “Don’t worry, Kid, you can make this jump deaf, dumb, and blind”. On the far side of the gulf sits a typewriter with Sanskrit letters and a slot for quarters. On this side a woman stretches out her arms and with the face of a Madonna tells an encyclopedia of lies without ever opening her mouth. I spend weeks with her—years. I writhe with compassion—I give speeches, pass out leaflets, entreat and implore. I plant seeds of understanding for her, sprinkle holy water at her feet with the care of a monk. I pass through disease and famine—I thrive on it—I am almost Saintly with guilt as they strap her down and the Doctor goes at her with a vacuum tube. She screams out like a wounded child—I jump: soaring, spinning, looping, arcing—pausing to wave to the crowd—a half gainer, a flip, a twist—I fall wordlessly, I crash gloriously, I disappear.

Coming up for air, sputtering in the milky froth. A drug like moss grows up and over my brain. Thoughts seem out of focus—as if viewed through a heavy rain. It is always raining here; I use sex as an umbrella and learn to breathe without oxygen. Swimming in a river of flesh—crawling tongues and schizophrenic logic: Vivacour—Norwegian

psychopath—waiting for a midnite bus dreaming of Bergman movies and camera angles. My swamplife degeneracy bubbles up like a tar pit and she is caught. We are so closely related it's almost incestuous—an energy exchange, palpable as any space shot, though it won't light up any computer matrix now in use, ties a knot in the subatmospheric plane of vagrant souls. We fall together like a rockslide without saying a word. Whole lifetimes, entire personalities bow in the face of a higher form of magic. The rhythm of Fuck drowns out pasts and futures: careers disappear, skyscrapers implode, friendships dissolve, all memory melts in the conflagration. My body swells—nerve endings shoot skyrockets, histories are rewritten into myths—truths into fantasy. Forget oaths of obedience—pledges of allegiance—vows and promises: I surrender in Bed, with my tongue slashing like a madman inside the cunt of a perfect stranger—preferably one whose language is gibberish and whose delusions are overwhelming. This is the Real evening news: communication that the F.C.C. can only guess at. Under a microscope—revealing protoplasm exchanges, in waves and swirls—Electrons bounce off each other: a few cells of desperation for her, a few protons of schizophrenia for me, and I swallow it all in one eager gulp. Vivacour, she said her name was, tossed around like driftwood. I could climb inside you and run for president or better yet pitch a tent. We soar, pleasure coating—prodding—exploding. Mindless Fuck—the cure for cancer and suicide! I come like a truck driver—she comes down for more but already the Saloon Door swings open and I walk back in: spurs clanging, a satisfied spring in my step—a strut—a smirk—a psychic bounce. She is still smoldering in several archaic languages when I fall asleep.

Wake to the sounds of Vivacour writhing and moaning in her dreamlife of auditions and Immigration Officers. For a brief instant she is Someone Else: feelings well up and then crash in the machine gun realization that Someone Else is gone and I'm still here, next to another abstract cunt without portfolio; without a clue.

I wake her gently and take her back to the bus stop in plenty of time for Rush Hour. Wonder how she makes it in Los Angeles, of all places, without a car.

## *Ignorance Training*

When he spoke, Jeremy Stencil's big hands were like two American flags commanding instant attention.

Raising his left hand to about half-mast, he began:

"Good evening. Welcome to the Ignorance Training Seminar. It sounds ironic to teach ignorance but, I assure you, anything is possible. Before we begin, how many of you have never read an entire novel? Let's see a show of hands."

"Excuse me sir," a young man spluttered from the third row. "Is this a joke?"

Twice Stencil's nose twitched, causing his thick-rimmed glasses to dance above his eyebrows. It was his only sign of perturbation. "I see no hands, so I assume you've all read a novel."

"I asked you sir," the young man stood up, "if this is a joke."

Removing the thick glasses, Stencil lowered resentful eyes to the intruder. "Millions of people have never read a novel, and I'm simply asking if any are here in this room. Does that sound amusing?"

"Yes." The young man was perspiring like sudden bad weather. His neck became slick as a seal's. His pockets were full of nervous fingers.

"Would you care to tell the group what's so funny?"

"That's just it. There is no group. There's no one here except you and me."

The instructor's shirt appeared to stiffen. Like an academic cowboy in a one-sided duel he moistened his lips, ready to fire. The victim cowered, bobbing his head side to side as Stencil approached.

"What's your name?"

"Scott Cooper."

Stencil glanced around the room, a small room inside the Holiday Inn. He stretched his arms emphatically. "Mr.

Cooper, these people have paid to hear me speak, not to hear you interrupt. Is that clear?"

"But there's nobody else here! I'm the only one."

Back at the podium, the instructor said:

"My seminars have always been popular. This one is no exception."

Opening the black book, he called roll.

"Scott Cooper."

"Here."

Stencil closed it and put it aside.

The big hands, Scott saw, trembled with a kind of electric imbalance. If not for the sixty-five dollars he had paid, Scott would have run out the door right then.

"I'd like a volunteer to tell me why they enrolled in the course. Let's see . . . How about Mr. Cooper?"

"If there are so many others here, why not ask one of 'em?"

Stencil checked his watch. "I have two hours to wait."

Sweat dropped from Scott's armpits to his sides, as he slumped in his chair defiantly. He heard footsteps in the hall of the hotel, tapping like seconds on a clock. An evening breeze caused the Venetian blinds to shudder like madness up a spine. He thought he was going insane. He talked almost involuntarily.

"I signed up because of my girlfriend and my buddies. They all say I'm complicated and depressed. It's true. I don't mix well; I'm too deep for people. I've done too much reading and thinking. I've alienated myself with my intellect; otherwise I'd fit in. My girlfriend is beautiful and I hate myself for being bored with her."

"So you want to become stupid just like her."

"I prefer the word 'innocent.' She isn't corrupted or depressed she's—"

"She's stupid Cooper. And you'll be stupid, too."

Scott turned away with chagrin. He was so ashamed to sound so prideless and weak.

"Tell me what books you've read."

"Novels mostly. Kurt Vonnegut's, J.D. Salinger's . . ."

"How do you expect to relate to people when you read that crap? Their ideas are poison. They'll get you ques-

tioning things, intellectualizing, and unable to watch network television. If you must read, read gossip magazines. Gossip is the fiction of the people. As Laverne herself once said, 'C'mon Squiggy, get with it!'

"Laverne from the T.V. show?"

Pacing wildly in front of the empty chairs, Jeremy Stencil said:

"That goes for everyone. I want you all to get with it!"

If Stencil was insane, he was the most organized lunatic Scott had ever seen. His gestures were smooth, his tone so persuasive—Scott envisioned the roomful of students when he tried. They were there: colorless, blurred, but practically alive. Scott's second stage of sweat smeared out, as it always did when he thought about it, making the old sweat stale and offensive.

"Mr. Cooper, are you related to Gary Cooper the actor?"

"Gary Cooper? Of course not."

"You don't say 'of course not.' You say 'no, but I wish I were.' Ignorant people like being related to famous actors."

Scott guessed what Sissy, his innocent, gorgeous girlfriend was up to. Probably trying to paraphrase her Valentine's card, he thought. I can't get down to her level. It's inconceivable. But hopefully, I'll learn to simplify . . .

"Are you paying attention?"

"No. I was—"

"Splendid! Thinkin' 'bout that void out there. It's O.K. Everything is O.K." Stencil clasped his big hands together, congratulating himself for this new revelation in the field of ignorance.

Everything is O.K.

\*

To Alvin Bungard, life was hardship, and each day was an interruption of sleep. He felt this way because of his excruciating shyness.

For years, he felt too shy to answer his telephone. Writing and receiving letters was the only way Alvin could



endure communicating. Even his parents, though they lived three blocks away, had to converse with him through the mail.

Alvin could afford to live in isolation because of the money he had made on an invention. He had invented an electric fly-swatter that vacuumed up the flies after crushing them. He spent many hours using this machine.

Life became unbearable. Alvin tried a “Shyness Clinic,” which did not help. On another spurt of courage, he tried “Touch and Tingle Therapy.” It made him vomit. Suicide seemed inevitable until he read an ad in the newspaper.

**HAVING PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS?  
IT COULD BE THAT YOU'RE TOO SMART  
FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.**

**Call Jeremy Stencil regarding  
THE IGNORANCE TRAINING SEMINARS  
763-4478  
getwithitgetwithitgetwithitgetwithit  
ignoranceisblissignoranceisbliss**

Alvin Bungard enrolled in time for the second session. After class, he approached Scott Cooper.

“What did I miss last week?” he asked in a painful, tiny voice.

“You didn’t miss a thing. Don’t you remember what Mr. Stencil said? Nothing matters.”

“I’d still like to know what went on,” Alvin explained, looking bashfully at the ground.

“Well, it was pretty jocular—I mean lightweight—compared to tonight.”

Alvin panicked. “Listen, could you write down the details and mail ’em to me? Here, I’ll give you a stamp.”

After the fifth and final seminar, Alvin stared directly into Scott’s eyes. “I’m cured,” he said.

★

Alvin’s mother was the hostess of the party. “The guest

of honor will be here soon," she announced.

Without any sign of sweat, Scott Cooper looked at Sissy, his innocent, gorgeous girlfriend.

Sissy smiled into his vacant eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Scott asked Alvin.

"O.K. Everything is O.K."

The two ignorance graduates helped themselves to hors d'oeuvres, and went into the den to watch T.V.

"I can't wait to meet him," Sissy said to Alvin's uncle. "He's done such nice things for Scott. Since the seminars, me and Scott have gotten along so nice."

"As for Alvin," the uncle said, "that fellow transformed him from a sheep, into a human being."

The guest of honor arrived. Alvin's relatives applauded. In a formal black suit, Jeremy Stencil circled the living room, shaking hands and gathering praise.

"I love seminars," Alvin's mother said to Stencil. "I've taken seminars on self-hypnosis, sex and power, and sewing. Next week, I'm taking a seminar on 'how to give seminars.' I plan to —"

"That's very interesting, Mrs. Bungard," Stencil interrupted. "I suggest you remove that newspaper from the table. It may be detrimental to the relatives. That fireplace looks like a good place for it."

Mrs. Bungard did not object, as he tossed the newspaper into the blazing fire.

"What are you watching, boys?" Stencil asked, moving into the den.

"*Three's Company*," they replied in unison.

"That Jack is some kidder, isn't he?" the guest of honor said, eyeing the heavily stocked bookshelves. "Alvin, get me a cardboard box."

Mr. Bungard came in a few minutes later. "Mr. Stencil, I was — what are you doing to my library?"

"I don't think you'll be needing these," Stencil said, packing several books into a cardboard box.

The onlookers sat dumbfounded, as the books crackled away in flames.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" The guest of honor was warming his hands beside the snarling fire.

“You want to help Alvin, don’t you?”

After dinner and many drinks, Mr. Bungard took Stencil aside. “My son has always had a fertile mind. That fly-swatter is an ingenious device. Don’t you think, at some point, he should continue using that mind?”

“Don’t you think you’re behind the times?”

“Maybe so. In my day we took pride in our intellect.”

“If you love your son, burn the rest of your books. The fun things in life occur when one loses his intellect. Take, for instance, sexual intercourse, or situation comedies . . .”

A few yards away, Mrs. Bungard was eavesdropping. She began to fear Jeremy Stencil. Could it be, she thought, that my Alvin’s been brainwashed by a madman? But why? she wondered. What does he want from us? The tray of drinks that she held trembled, advertising her uneasiness to the rest of the party.

“The human race is doomed,” Stencil continued. “It’s not even worth learning about. That’s why I barbequed your books. Knowledge brings truth, and the truth is that we’re a dying species. Why not enjoy the time that’s left, and sign up for my seminars? Get with it, Mr. Bungard.”

“You preach ignorance,” Mr. Bungard said. “Why don’t you abide by your philosophy? You don’t strike me as being ignorant.”

In a harsh, crazy whisper, Jeremy Stencil said:

“One wise man shall rule the earth.”

The drinks flew off the tray, toppling onto the carpet. Jeremy Stencil let out a discordant laugh, as people came rushing to the scream.

## SCOTT MEMMER

### *One Evening in Winter*

One thing for sure, it would be plenty cold out. It was always that way after a storm. Laura gathered herself into her moth-eaten woolens and wondered why she didn't just climb into her car and drive the two miles to the post office. But then she remembered how deep the snow was and the freezing rain the day before and how many cars she and Ma had seen stranded on the side of the road on the t.v.—and she thought better of the walking. So she climbed into her jeans and gray thermals, her faded sweater, woolen socks and thick padded boots, her tattered gloves, red scarf and green drab ski cap, her checkered red hunting jacket—the one Pa had given her with the right sleeve torn—and looked out the window to the barren cornfield below.

“Better hurry, Laur!” her mother shouted. “Gettin' late!”

Laura slipped her hand into the jacket pocket and checked for the key. Yes, it was still there—she could feel it through her gloved hand. She released it and let it settle into her pocket. Then she looked out the window again.

Already she could see the stark shadows lengthening into night, the chill creeping into snowbanks, lampposts and stalled cars—into the land Laura knew so well. The fences and the rivers, the pastures and orchards—everything she saw spoke of her father's life, gone now, and of what had gradually become her own. It had been two years since Pa died. For two years she and Ma had lived alone in this house. Tractors and cornfields defined his life; now they made up her own.

Laura saw the evening coming on, sifting out under the ceiling of the sky like an old cigar-faced man dealing poker. She heard Ma in the kitchen, singing faintly off-key one of those old love songs Pa used to sing before he died. She smelled the stew Ma was making. It had been Pa's favorite.

“Better go!” her mother shouted. “You know what day today is, don’t you? Gettin’ late, Laur!”

Laura finished lacing her boots and pulled the laces down good and tight. She stood, snatched the cap off her head, and gave her hair a few good swipes with the hair brush. She wanted to look in the mirror, but didn’t. Instead she took several more swipes with the brush and stepped out into the hall. It was cold there. Certainly you’re beautiful, she told herself. She set the brush down on the bureau and placed the cap on her head. Of course you’re beautiful. Oh, hell, it don’t matter. So what if you haven’t been with a man since—

“Come now, Laura!” her mother shouted. “You ain’t forgettin’, are you?”

“No, Ma.”

“Then get down here and get goin’ before I boil all this stew away.”

She was a large woman. She was heavy-boned and over-sized, with dark olive skin and long black hair. Her father used to joke to the fellas that she resembled a horse; and yet she had about her that distictly magnetic attractiveness, that aura of wonder and fascination, that exalted mystery, common to the Clydesdale and all other forms of prodigious life. She was strong as an ox, as the saying goes, and could lift nearly as much as her older brother Wayne. She had wide hips specially suited to child-bearing; had had one child, but it died in childbirth. Laura was thirty-four and single; she had never been married.

She trampled down the stairs in her hard boots, crossed the carpeted floor and presented herself to her mother in the kitchen. The old woman stooped over the stove. “Will you turn that stew down and let it simmer, Ma. You’re liable to burn yourself, for heaven’s sake.”

“I’ll thank you to mind your own business,” the old woman said. “Seems I raised some pretty healthy children without so much simmerin’.” Her voice trailed off. She spoke and moved in that slow-controlled motion singular to old people and very young children. The old woman blinked at her daughter and tasted the stew again. She jerked her head away and winced.

"I told you you'd get burnt, Ma."

"Okay, okay," the old woman said. She slid the lid on the pot, leaned over and turned the flame down to simmer. Her hand trembled. Then she straightened herself as much as she could, reached up—straining—and righted the cap on Laura's head. "You have this thing about wearin' your cap crooked, don't you? Used to drive your father damn near crazy. Now will you *get!* it's comin' on dark."

Laura pushed her mother's hands away and angled the cap back the way it had been. "Tell me, Ma—you sure today's the day? It's awful cold out there."

"Sure, I'm sure. And if you think it's too cold take the car. That's what the lady from the lawyer's office said anyway."

"Did she tell you how much the check was for?"

"I didn't ask."

"You shoulda asked, Ma."

"Well, I didn't!"

"We need the money," Laura protested.

"They'll be plenty," the old woman said. With this she went back to her stew, removed the lid again, bent over and adjusted the flame higher. Laura tugged the glove on her one bare hand and shook her head. "They'll be plenty," the old woman repeated.

Laura turned the storm door handle and stepped outside. Her feet crunched on the weathered ice. She eased the door gently into its frame (the spring was broken) and tucked the collar up around her ears. The air nipped at her cheeks.

Laura looked south over the farm to where the land sloped away and the gray woods rose up to meet the sky. The sky winked with its first few impressions of starlight. All about her the peculiar silence of farmland after a storm exhaled into the valley like an old man snoring. Above, Venus, always the first star out, shone like a proud Madonna saying grace. The land hushed itself into secrecy and held its secret close.

And then she remembered the dream, how she'd left the house that day and walked the entire length of the valley. It was almost dusk. Across the southern field she'd

trod, stumbling time and again on the shadowed furrows of the Jenkin's orchard, until, at noon, she arrived at the rusted old bridge that crossed the River Stimson. The river ran along the base of the hills at the far end of the valley. When Laura found herself there she stood on the bridge for the longest time and didn't know what to do. But then a voice called out inside her, a voice resembling her father's, shouting hurry, hurry, Laura, go home—and without hesitation—without any rest at all—Laura ran all the way home. It was twelve miles, but in dreams such things were possible. When Laura made it home she opened the kitchen door and found her mother lying unconscious on the kitchen floor. She was frightened—her mother looked so pale and lifeless. Laura felt her mother's wrist; she splashed water on her face until, dazed and shivering, the old woman came around. It had only been another one of her mother's fainting spells, but it scared the hell out of Laura. She awoke that night with a dry mouth and clammy skin and could not get back to sleep. She watched the snow fall outside her window and stayed awake until first light.

Laura gazed across the cornfields and saw the leaning towers of the cornstalks in the snow. She took one or two halting footsteps, stopped and listened to the beating of her heart. She heard the blood pulsing through her veins. Then she shoved her hands into her jacket pockets and set off across the field.

When she made the road she turned left cautiously (for the road was slippery now and covered with patches of ice) and proceeded west down the lane past the Jenkins' place. Walking this stretch, she always closed her eyes. There were things ahead she didn't want to see, and she wanted to make sure she didn't see them. She didn't want to see the Jenkins' love seat, ancient and rusting, beneath the old elm. She didn't want to see the duck pond, frozen and blanketed with layer upon layer of snow. She didn't want to see windows or stars or her own breath against the firmament of heaven. So she walked in the night, eyes closed, listening. Joey Jenkins was dead now, wasn't he? It didn't matter that she'd had his baby. It didn't matter that

they'd made love beneath the old elm. It didn't matter that the baby had died. Nothing mattered. Laura walked until she was well past the love seat. Then she opened her eyes. The road stretched on through the rows of stark, bare, unfruited trees.

The post office would be empty this time of night; it always was. It was an old building that creaked when you entered it and creaked when you left. Laura stamped up the steps and opened the door. She walked in and slammed the door quickly. It was cold out there. She creaked across the floorboards until she stood in front of the box marked "Woodley," removing one of her gloves, finding the key in her pocket and sneaking it into the lock. It would have been his child. She turned the key in the lock. He would have come home from the war and they would have had a family. She reached in and found the envelope marked "Mrs. Eliza Woodley." It would've been his family.

Laura stuffed the envelope into her pocket, shoved the key in her other and slipped her bare hand into its glove. She closed the door of the box, straightened the cap on her head and creaked off across the floorboards. She opened the door, stepped out, and slammed it shut. She clumped down the steps and into the crusty snow.

It would've been his family.

Several times on the way home Laura tugged one of the gloves from her hands and felt the crispness of the envelope in her pocket. She could hear it rustle between her fingers. Above, Venus shone in all her glory—the brightest star in the sky—while eastward the silver sliver of a moon strained against the horizon. The sky was black. The stars flickered like blue-green candles over the frosted terrain.

Hurry, a voice said.

Laura heard it and stumbled over the frozen hulks of the apples in the road.

Hurry, it said.

Laura made the edge of the field and started to run. Her legs moved sluggishly over the rutted path and the shadows of the trees played on the ground to define themselves in twisted, eerie, ghostly delineations. Her



father's voice shouted hurry, Laura, hurry.

The house was a hundred and fifty yards beyond. Laura saw it but she could not see her mother in the kitchen window. She smelled stew in the air, stew that smelled burnt, charred, carbonized. Her heart raced; her feet faltered over the path. I can't lose her! I can't—not now! The window glared vacantly into the snow. Ma! She clutched the envelope in her hand and dug her boots as deeply as she could into the frozen crust. The stew smelled closer now—pungent, acrid, definitely burnt. Her legs lifted; her lungs burned; her throat felt hot, scorched and dry. She tore the aluminum door open and lunged into the inner door with the full force of her shoulder.

For the longest time her mother just sat there and looked at her. It hadn't occurred to Laura that she might be perfectly well; might, in fact, be exactly as she had left her. But she was. She was sitting quietly on the living room sofa, humming to herself and reading a magazine. She'd merely suffered another one of her lapses of memory,—and forgotten completely about the stew. She was senile; she hadn't even noticed all the black smoke in the room. Laura stood in the doorway, stunned, ashamed, a little embarrassed. She could think of nothing to say. She leaned against the door with her face flushed, her red scarf wrapped loosely about her neck, her green cap angled off to one side, and closed the door gently behind her. She removed her gloves.

"Mother," Laura said, pointing to the stove, "your stew . . ."

The old woman scurried to her feet and rushed to the stove. "Oh, I done it again!" She clawed at the knob and shut off the gas. Laura stared at the back of her neck and said nothing.

It was then that Laura came up behind her and embraced her softly about the shoulders. She pressed her face into the back of her mother's skull and held her body firmly but tenderly between her strong, bare hands. She felt the fragility of her mother's frame, the wizened angularity of her skull, arms and elbows. "Sometimes I worry about

you, Ma," she said.

The old woman stiffened. She tried to pull away but Laura held her fast.

And then Laura began to weep. She wept like a child with huge yearning sobs that shook her entire body. The tears ran down her face and down the back of her mother's neck. She wept for the pain of the lost child and the pain of her lost man, for the pain of a world she didn't understand, and for all the people in it who were gone, gone now, her father among them, whom she had never really known or understood—and for her mother whom she couldn't touch.

The old woman turned to face her. She reached up and held Laura's face between her rough hands. Then she pried herself away and went to the window. Laura tried to hold onto her hand, but couldn't.

"I never told you how sorry I was when your baby died," her mother said. She looked out over the snow and cornfields and watched some headlights pass on the road. "In my day we didn't talk about such things."

"It don't matter, Ma."

The car and headlights passed away and out of sight.

"You're all I have left now, Laura," her mother said. Laura watched her mother's breath frost the inside of the window. "Your brother never even came to the funeral."

"He and Pa could never talk. Maybe because he was more like Pa than anyone else."

"Sometimes I'd like to kick that Wayne."

"Me too, Ma."

Laura put both her hands on her mother's shoulders from behind.

"I resented your pregnancy," her mother said. "From the very first day, I resented it." She placed her hands on the window sill and ran her fingers through the dust. "I never told you this, but I was pregnant the day I married your father. That's why I acted the way I did, Laura—I didn't want you to start out the same way. I know you thought it was Joey. It wasn't. It had nothin' to do with him. He was a good kid. I woulda been proud to have him as a son-in-law."

"You don't have to say nice things about Joey because he's dead."

"I know."

Laura lifted her hands from her mother's shoulders. "Pa never liked Joey. I don't know why."

"Your pa never liked anyone."

Laura reached into her pocket and her hand came upon the envelope. She had forgotten completely about it.

"I sometimes wonder if your father ever loved any of us," her mother said.

"Ma, look," Laura said.

Her mother turned from the window and saw the envelope in Laura's hand. "Oh, that ol' thing came today, did it? Well, give it here then. I been makin' enough of a fuss over it, hain't I?"

The old woman held her hand out for the envelope. But then, almost without thinking, almost as if by reflex, she reached up and righted the cap on Laura's head. She smoothed the hair all around the sides of Laura's face and then let her hand linger upon her cheek for what Laura considered an unusually long time. Some of the dust rubbed off her fingers and onto Laura's black hair.

Laura saw suddenly that it didn't matter about the check. Pa hadn't left them much, after all. It didn't matter if the check was two cents.

Spring—that was what she thought about—that it would be here soon. She could almost see the season, smell it, hear it: the birds winging their way home at last, the brown molting sparrows and the brown earth and the cherry blossoms and the too-full streams and a sense that there was something vastly eternal about it, something forever being born.

Laura tried to think of a name for it, but couldn't.

Instead, she watched the envelope settle into her mother's hand and thought she saw an icicle drop from the eaves outside her window.

