

northridge

poetry
fiction
drama



northridge review

FALL 1986

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"Every word was once a poem."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Rachel Sherwood was a poet who knew and wrote of the mysteries of the afternoon and evening. On July 5, 1979, at the age of 25, she was killed in a traffic accident, never to touch the farthest reaches of her immense poetic abilities.

Rachel Sherwood studied and flourished in her art at CSUN. In memorium, an annual poetry prize has been established here in her name.

Poets honored with the prize receive 50 dollars from the university and are noted alongside the name of Rachel Sherwood, who was deprived of sufficient time to be the recipient of such honors.

The Northridge Review staff selected Marlene Pearson as the winner of the 1985/86 prize for her series of poems, "Orange Bags on the Freeway." We congratulate Marlene for this achievement.

The Helen Marcus short fiction prize is an annual prize, also selected by the Northridge Review staff. Writers honored with the prize receive 100 dollars. David Green was selected as the 1986 recipient for his short story, "An Explanation."

Marlene Pearson is also honored in this issue by the American Academy of Poets' prize, for her "Orange Bags #9: Sticks reach out like arms/There's fury in those bags."

The cover photograph is by Candice Mattson.

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ron pronk

Audience

There is much to say tonight.
You open the window
and lean into the drizzle.
Again the wind
is not there. Nothing
to carry your words.

Only the trees along the street
and an anxious moon
holding their umbrellas
as you speak.

ron pronk

An Old Routine

This is not goodbye
Grandfather says to his family, laying his head
deep into the pillow
so deep you cannot hear him
breathing at night through the closed door.
Sure enough, he rises at dawn
and hobbles his arched body
through its daily routine.
What he does seems dull to us
but he says the world is always different
in his garden — each day, something new to touch.
Even in winter he wants to study the earth
what it might bring.
How his smile keeps us warm!

ron pronk

In Closing

I want to tell you about this song I heard
one that made me laugh
and remember the parade of children down Buckingham Drive.

I thought I hated parades
the ignorant submission of bodies into rows.
But this song, it made me remember
how good it felt to be the low drooping petal
the faint middle green of the rainbow
amid those who see only wholeness
in flowers and rain.

I think you would want to know I have heard something
that keeps us together
even in winter, in storms.

ricardo means-ybarra

When she came to the door

hammers stopped and they set to
pulling bent nails,
the foreman stayed in the rafters
joints newly set and bolted
the flow of wood
his fingers white on the grain.

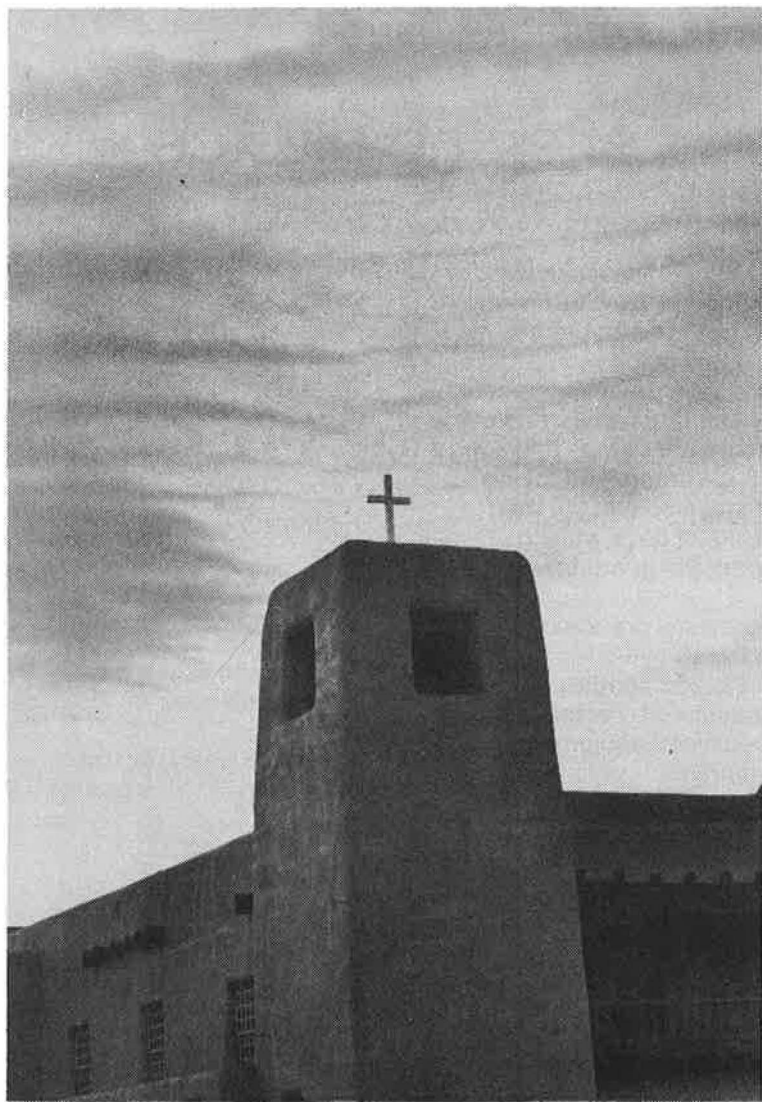
It was the sunset of nuns
walking to rosary,
a man looks at an old letter,
a woman brushes her hair on the porch,
wind sets on wet plaster,
and
the blood hot whine of a 16 penny nail
pulling away.

ricardo means-ybarra

After the divorce

small candles make Sunday difficult
parking at the church where
my grandmother forces me to look
into this place
dark as a drive up the coast
when night has carried off
the beach swings and Jungle Gyms
left ice cream and towels
in the middle of the road
packs of dogs waiting
under the guard towers.

I know my grandmother's with St. Teresa
in the alcove
of the 25c candles.
Beautiful St. Teresa, the nuns said she used
crucifixion equipment to stop the ache
a martyr
waiting for me
to light another
of the thin matches in the center
of my palm.
But I won't do it.
I lit them all when I was a kid
until the light climbed into
the hard wood of the pews
and I'd lay there
stare at the smoke
and think of her.



Property Values

Nothing moves in the summer, in Fresno. Nothing but the dust, and that only when a breeze blows. Sarah sat on the front porch steps of her house and stared across the broad field. She didn't move. Her lower back was damp where she leaned against the old wood, her long hair limp and wet against her neck. She didn't bother wiping the sweat from her forehead.

Far to the right, from the direction of the highway, Sarah caught sight of a small dust whirl. She watched it grow, then saw that it followed the beige Chevy pick-up truck of her neighbors, the Gibsons. Without turning her head, she followed the path of the truck as it wound its way through the fences and over the small wood bridges towards her.

The truck stopped and the powdery whirlwind blew past it, lifting Sarah's hair from her forehead and fluttering the hem of her dress.

Becky Gibson jumped out of the high cab and bounced over to Sarah.

"Have you heard?" she squealed.

"Heard what?"

"About Mr. Conroy, from KBM Industries!" The chubby woman hopped from one foot to the other like a child, her bare feet kicking up dirt, the hem of her blue jeans brown with dust.

"For Christ's sake, Becky, stop bouncing around, you make me dizzy." Sarah motioned for Becky to sit down on the steps, but Becky didn't notice and kept on prancing while she talked.

"Sarah, KBM bought the Myerson's land last week. And KBM wants more land. . . that's why this guy Conroy is here."

"So?"

"So? We could make a killing! Jimmy says KBM will pay full market price. And you know we can't get that from nobody."

Sarah stretched her slender arms and legs, yawned and looked away, past Becky to her own unplowed fields.

"Sarah!" Becky knelt down to face Sarah's gaze. She pushed her damp, black hair behind her ears and the smile disappeared from her round face. She said, "You know the way our land pokes into yours, no one, not even KBM, will want me and Jimmy's property, not without buying yours, too."

"When your great-grandfather bought the land from mine, Becky, that's the way they carved it up."

"Yeah, well it makes our land worthless. If you don't sell to KBM, they won't buy ours."

Sarah patted her small, round stomach, looked at Becky and wondered if she should tell her about the baby.

"Answer me!" Becky stood up. "Jimmy'll have a fit if I go home and tell him you don't want to sell."

"I didn't say no, Becky, I just have to think about it."

"What's there to think about?"

Becky resumed her pacing. "You ain't doing much better than we are, and you live here all alone. You ain't turned a profit in six years, ever since Garth died."

"I haven't tried very hard."

"I know. It must seem impossible without your husband. So, what's the point of staying? You can't run this place by yourself."

"I have Wes."

"That drifter? Sarah, he sleeps in the barn and he talks to the horses more'n he talks to people. And he could drift off one day and then what?"

Sarah sat forward suddenly and pointed to the barn, glaring at Becky. "He's no drifter! Wes has been here three years!"

Becky stamped her foot. "So what'll I do? Go back home and tell Jimmy that you might not want to sell? That you think you and Wes can keep this farm going? Shit, Sarah, there ain't no hope for you to make it work."

Sarah leaned back again and said coolly, "I'll think about it. Tell that to Jimmy. I'm not making a decision on the spur of the moment."

Becky dug her toe in the dirt, opened her mouth to say something, then just turned, got in her Chevy and drove back to the highway.

The Church of the Disciples of Christ's recreation room was filled with people, and smelled faintly of barns and dust. Sarah looked around for the Gibsons, the only neighbors she felt comfortable with. Like her, Becky and Jimmy, in their mid-thirties, were the youngest landowners in this part of the valley. She finally spotted their identically dark, curly hair in the front of the room and headed toward them.

Sarah came up behind the Gibsons and saw that they stared intently at a placard that faced the gathering. Next to the placard stood a small, weasel-faced man in a brown suit, his white hands fidgeting with his tie, with the hankie in his breast pocket, with his hair. Coming closer, Sarah saw that the placard was actually a

map, a big, blown-up map of the Central Valley area they lived in. It was laminated and had numbers written all over it in red grease pencil.

Jimmy turned, the legs of his metal chair creaking under his weight. "So, Sarah, did you think about it? You gonna sell?"

"I don't know. . . that's why I came here tonight, to find out what this is all about." Sarah avoided looking at Jimmy's red, pockmarked face. Since junior high school she had avoided looking at it. Turning away, she pointed to the map and asked what it was.

Becky whispered, "It's got all our properties on it and the dollar amounts KBM will pay for them."

Sarah stood up to take a closer look at the map, but the little man in front cleared his throat loudly and raised his hands over his head like a TV preacher. Everyone quieted and sat down.

The man gave a dull, droning speech about financial equities, escrows, stockholdings and annual grosses and nets. Sarah thought everyone would surely go to sleep, but she glanced around and realized that all eyes were on the laminated map with its illegible red numbers.

The man stopped droning. "Any questions," he asked, "before we proceed to the actual cash value of the land in question?"

The room was hushed. Sarah raised her hand and the man nodded at her.

"Who or what is KBM?"

"I'm not sure exactly what you want to know."

"Well, is there a Mister. . . uh, Mister K, or B, or M? What kind of business does he do?"

The man chuckled. "KBM is a large conglomerate, ma'am. That means a collection of different types of businesses. As far as an owner, if you mean a Howard Hughes-type, no, there is no one man in charge. KBM did start out as a small oil drilling exploration in Texas, in the early 1900's. Run by a family, right on their ranch, not too different from you folks." He smiled, bared little, sharp teeth, then went on. "They were quite successful, went public, and over the years the company has expanded internationally. It now encompasses not only oil, but dairy, paper products, broadcasting in Texas, agriculture, and a new development in military hardware."

"Why do they want this land?" asked Sarah.

"He already told us that," said Jimmy, turning to glare at her.

Sarah ignored him, and said to the speaker, "You said you wanted it for development. . . development of what?"

"Well, ma'am, certain things must remain confidential in the realm of big business. Can't have our competitors know what we're up to all the time. Now look, we can offer excellent prices and if there are no more questions, please come on up and take a

look at this map.”

Sarah had more questions but the rest of the crowd was interested only in the map. She sat still for half an hour, lacing her fingers together, waiting to get near it herself.

Looking at the map, she easily found her land. The dog-leg of the Gibson's property, the part that thrust into hers, pointed directly at the red number that represented her property value. She checked the Gibsons and saw in parentheses below their number, in tiny writing, the word "contingent." Jimmy's beefy red hand suddenly appeared and motioned to the map.

"The prices are really good," Sarah mumbled.

"Damn right. We could make a killing."

"So Becky said yesterday."

"What's it gonna be, Sarah?" The sweaty face poked closer to hers.

"Jimmy, we've got time. I want to think about it."

"What the hell is there to think about?" Jimmy threw his arms out, knocking over the map and its stand. "It's a good deal, damn good. You'd be crazy not to take it."

"I'd like to know what they're going to use it for."

"Who cares? All I know is, they give us cash, and we clear out."

"I don't want our valley turned into some kind of, I don't know, military complex, with jets and tanks."

"Christ, what an imagination. He didn't say nothin' about tanks. And anyway, Sarah, do like us. We're gonna buy a big, fancy house up in Sacramento. Live a life of ease. Just move far enough away and you'll never know."

"It's my land, Jimmy, my parents' land. I grew up here. It's important to me what happens to it."

"Jesus!"

Jimmy turned to his wife who had picked up the stand and was trying to get the map to balance on it. "Becky, are you hearin' this? Sarah's getting sappy on us."

"I just haven't decided, okay?" Sarah repeated.

Jimmy punched his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Goddamn it!"

Becky caught his arm, hushed him and said quietly to Sarah, "You could ruin us, Sarah. Just think about that," and she pulled her husband into the dwindling crowd.

Sarah pulled her Jeep out of the parking lot aiming it toward the indistinct, dark Sierra Nevadas on the horizon. The thirty-five miles between the church and her home were shadowy and flat. The small, high moon, though piercingly bright in the sky, did

little to light up the road. The black sky and the inert, silver-grey expanse of land absorbed the moonlight and nothing was reflected back for human use. But the sky, so huge and dark, seemed to cup her in, cradle her to the earth.

Mile after mile, bumping over ruts, over wooden bridges that spanned only sand washes, driving deeper into the valley, Sarah considered the offer. The money was good, fantastic. The temptation to cash in her land, to take the money and run, was indeed enticing. And Becky's last sentence rang in her ears like a litany recited in unison at church. . . "You could ruin us, you could ruin us."

Why did she feel any compulsion to stay? Why was there any doubt about such a great cash offer? Ever since Garth died, she'd lost interest in making a profit. She let her fields go empty, didn't plant anything. So, why was there some small force holding her back, keeping her on the land? She smiled and thought of her baby. She pictured it as the small force, the tiny hand in her womb, pulling back on her, keeping her from making a decision to sell.

Sarah turned right through a break in the fence. She was on her property now, and had only four miles to go. She relaxed, feeling safe inside the charmed circle of barbed wire and wood that enclosed her property. She decided to talk to Wes in the morning. If she could get him to talk.

To wake up at 4 a.m. was the only chance of feeling cool in the summer. Sarah got out of bed and put on one of Garth's Pendleton robes, as much for comfort as for warmth. Unbidden, the thought of KBM burst into her mind. She hugged the robe tighter and wondered what Garth would have done. He had been easy-going, had grown up in the area and everybody liked him. Garth was a prosperous farmer, skilled and hard-working. It seemed crazy to everyone that he died the way he did, thrown from a horse, right outside his barn.

Garth loved the land as she did, but he had also been Jimmy's friend. When she and Garth married, Jimmy was the best man. But also, when they married, they combined half of Garth's family's property with all of hers. How could she sell it, the product of two families . . . four generations each.

By 4:30 the coffee was ready and Sarah began scrambling eggs. Wes came and sat at the pink formica table. It always amazed Sarah that such a big man, with heavy cowboy boots, could move so silently, like a ghost. She finished making breakfast and sat down to eat with him. While they ate, she told him about the offer.

"Why would the Gibsons want to leave?" he asked.

"I think that to them it's some kind of ticket out of here, some kind of ticket to heaven."

"Humph."

Sarah looked at Wes as he slowly wound his fingers in the curls of his pale, blonde beard, waiting for him to say more.

"Well," she finally asked, "what do you think about selling?"

"It's your land."

"I know, but it will be your child's land. I could sell, buy a big house, with air conditioning, wall to wall carpets, a house that won't get full of dust in the summer. That could be your child's house."

"Could grow up in town, huh?"

"Yes. Walk to school, see other kids after school. Have easy chores, like washing dishes or mowing the lawn."

"No horses. Or cows." Wes got up and went to the screen door and looked at the slowly brightening, beige fields. "Sarah, it's good to be raised up with animals. You know pain and death, you know carin'. Makes you a different kind of human."

Sarah came to Wes and nestled against him as he put his arm around her shoulders.

"I like it here, Sarah." He patted her stomach and smiled. "But it's not my land, so I don't have much say. If I was the kid, I guess I'd like this better than town."

Sarah stared at her fields. Off in the distance she could see the thin line that was the fence where it snaked around the Gibson's property. She closed one eye, held her finger up and traced the line against the dusty land.

"Wes," she said suddenly, "that's good land out there, isn't it?"

"Damn good."

"And we could make it work, couldn't we?"

"Could try. Harder than we been tryin'."

Sarah kissed his cheek and turned to clean up the kitchen.

Under the high noon sun, Wes threw hay bales off the back of the pick-up and Sarah was raking them out for the cows when Becky and Jimmy drove up to the barn. Jimmy stormed across the yard to Sarah. "Did you decide?" he yelled. "Conroy's gonna leave tomorrow. He says whoever waits might get less for their land."

"I thought about it, Jimmy. I'm not going to sell."

Jimmy grabbed the rake from Sarah's hand and tossed it away. He pushed his sweltering face into hers. Wes stopped his work and stood at the edge of the tailgate, watching every move Jimmy made.

"Just for you, I asked Conroy what they were gonna do here." Jimmy sneered. "He said it'll be some kinda high-tech dairy farm. Grow all the feed indoors or somethin'. So now you don't have to

worry about no tanks or planes on your precious land.”

“Good.” said Sarah, “Cows make good neighbors. I’m staying, Jimmy. That’s final.”

“What the hell’s here for you? You keep a worn-out bum as a foreman. You ain’t tried to grow crops. You got nothin’ and you want us to have nothin’ too.”

“We don’t have nothing. . . we have the land.”

“You and your precious land. It’s worthless.”

“Land isn’t worthless, Jimmy. It belonged to our parents and their parents. . .”

“Yeah and they farmed the shit out of it and left it for us. . . useless.”

“This land isn’t useless. I want to stay, to make it work.”

“I knew it. Didn’t I tell you Becky?” Jimmy turned to his wife and shook his hand in her face. He looked again at Sarah. “I knew one day the rich bitch would come out in you. One day you’d throw your money up in my face, in the face of every farmer hereabouts who wasn’t quite so lucky as you, not quite as smart as Garth. You two with your stocks and bonds and shit. I never liked you, Sarah, you always thought you were better than us. You don’t need to sell and you’re gonna let us suffer, let us die, just so you can hold on to some godforsaken piece of dirt.”

Sarah turned from Jimmy’s accusing face, and looked at her fields. It wasn’t just a piece of dirt. She and Wes could grow something here, and she longed to see her land be productive again.

She looked Jimmy in the eye, took a deep breath and said, “I’ll buy those forty acres. Not for what KBM would have paid, but for what they’re worth to me. That leaves you 90 acres to sell to KBM. You should still come out fine.”

“Oh, thank you Miss High-and-mighty. Becky, bow down and thank the queen here for her generous offer.”

“I think we better take it, Jimmy.”

“She’s gonna steal half our land and allow us to try and make money on what’s left? You wanna take that?”

“Jimmy, let’s take it,” Becky repeated, pulling on his elbow.

Jimmy turned back to Sarah. “Why’s this such a big deal to you anyway. Why all of a sudden does this land mean so goddam much to you?”

“I’m pregnant,” said Sarah, defiantly. “My baby is due in December. I want it to grow up here like I did.”

“Pr-p-pregnant?” Jimmy stuttered.

Becky looked at Sarah, then at Wes. “Him!” she said pointing to Wes. “Sarah, you’re downright crazy.”

“Damn right she is.” Jimmy grabbed his wife’s arm and headed back to the pick-up. “You keep your land if you’re idiot enough to

get knocked up by some drifter. But you just better buy our 40 acres. Me and Becky are gonna move as far away from you as we can."

Wes went back to work, while Sarah watched the beige pick-up disappear into the dust that whirled around it. She stood still, putting her hand on her stomach. Soon, she'd feel the baby move. By the time it was born, she hoped to have young, green crops started in her fields. Sarah picked up the rake, getting back to work. As she pulled at the dry, dusty day, she imagined herself sitting on the front porch steps to watch her baby run, exploring the wide, flourishing, beautiful land.

The Lil' King

"I'm gu'na tell!"

"Oh no ya' not!"

"Yes I am!" Bobby's face reddened slightly, which, strangely enough, made his freckles more prominent.

"Ya' do and I'll pound ya' face in!" Jimmy's lips stayed tight and his fists snapped up to back up the threat.

"You hit me and my dad'll knock your block off!" Bobby's voice wavered and his face went pale. He took a step backward trying not to let it show in his face.

"I ain't ascafed of ya' dad. Anywayz, I'd beat ya' up worsert the next time. So think 'bout that." Jimmy filled in the space between them, standing so close to him that Bobby could smell his bad breath and see his yellow teeth. Jimmy's two canines stuck out longer than the rest and spittle hung from their sharp tips to his bottom lip when he talked.

Bobby backed up more till he pressed against the playground fence. "We did som'din wrong. We gotta tell before it get worse." Even Bobby's hands were white now, and his freshly cleaned and brushed blonde hair made a sun-lit circle around his head.

Jimmy reached into his pocket and whipped out his "knife;" a fork with the center teeth missing and the tips sidewalk-sharpened into jagged points. He flipped it in his hand once and thrust it toward Bobby's face. Bobby gasped and trembled. Water began to well up in his eyes and his arms shot out, clinging to the fence on either side of him. Jimmy's pointed tongue flickered in and out of his smiling face. He twirled the "knife" slowly between his thumb and fingers, making the two blades blaze in the sunlight till a passing cloud plunged the two boys into shadow.

"I said ya' ain't say'n no'tin and I men' it." Jimmy's voice tightened into a hiss that sent the tears racing down Bobby's cheeks. Bobby's mouth went dry and his stomach twisted so tight that he had to fight back his urge to cry.

Brrrrrrinnnnng!

The recess bell startled Jimmy and he froze for a second before leaping for the sandbox. His legs kicked and his arms flailed as he tried to dig his way under the sand. Beneath the bright, hot sand there lay a cool, dark layer that was Jimmy's favorite

hiding place. He could lay there until it was clear and then "hop the fence" and spend the rest of the day doing whatever he wanted.

Bobby stood frozen also, his hands still spread wide clinging to the fence. Slowly he hung his head and quietly cried. He let loose of the fence, and wiping the tears from his face, he joined the other children in the reluctant march to class. Even the idea of fingerpainting couldn't cheer him up this time. He just walked heavily back to the room.

As soon as he was out of the gate, Bobby raced for home. He knew that Jimmy had hopped the fence and would be waiting for him somewhere. Bobby left all his books in his desk so he wouldn't have to carry them. He ran as hard as he could. Half way home he got a side-ache, but he just grabbed his side as tight as he could and ran faster. He had to tell his Mom. It was just too important not to.

"Ha ha ha haaa!"

Bobby stopped dead in his tracks. There was no mistaking that laugh. Frantically he looked for its source, but could see no one.

"Ha ha ha haaaa!"

Bobby looked up and there he was hanging upside down by his knees from a branch of an oak tree.

"Ha ha ha haaaa!"

Bobby turned and bolted for home. Home was only a block away, but he still wasn't sure he could beat Jimmy there. Bobby rounded the corner and could see, just a few houses down, the brass porch light next to his front door. He ran harder, wondering whether it was Jimmy or only the echo of his own feet that chased him across the driveway and up the porch. He dare not look back. To look back would mean certain doom.

Without the relief he expected, Bobby burst through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

"Hey, what did I tell you about slamming the door, huh?" His mother's voice rang out from the kitchen.

Bobby stood by the door listening for Jimmy's footsteps, but all he could hear was the dishwasher running. Satisfied that it was only his own footsteps he heard chasing him, he locked the door and headed for the kitchen.

"Mom?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Honesty's the best policy, right? I mean, you're always sus-pod'd to tell the truth no matter what, right?"

"Of course you are, why?" The fork she was rinsing glimmered in the sunlight that came through the window.

Bobby's stomach made a familiar twist, and he wrung the

front of his shirt nervously. "Jus' wanted to get it straight in my head. Thanks, Mom."

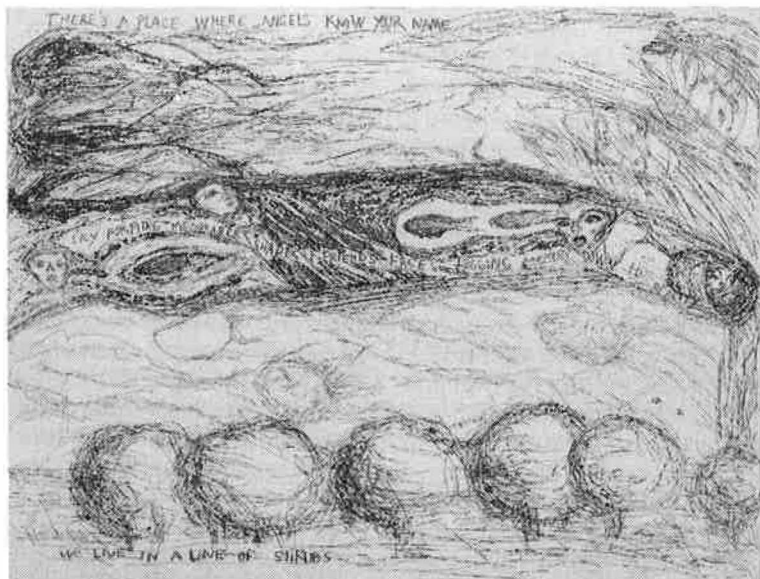
"You're welcome, sweety."

Bobby turned and walked to his room where he sat quietly till it was time for dinner, which he ate in silence.

Outside, Jimmy danced and whistled in the empty lot near the school. He waved his mighty "knife," slicing it through the air. As it grew darker, his dance became more frantic. He leapt into the air, kicking up great plumes of dust. He spun around and around until the world spun, twisted, and teetered all by itself. Then Jimmy ran down into a pit in the center of the field and waited for darkness. In this place he ruled supreme. He always won. No kid was safe if they dared step into his domain.

Jimmy stood at the bottom of the pit, opened his mouth wide, and with his greatest effort he laughed. He laughed because it was dark. He laughed because sooner or later he always won. He laughed because he was king.

"Ha ha ha haaaa!"



david green

The Scar

SCENE: *Place—somewhere nearby. Time—right now. Two men, friends, are laughing and talking, eating and drinking beer. Their names don't matter—we know who they are. MAN 1 is finishing a joke.*

MAN 1: So, the president says, "That's because I'm standing on my wife's shoulders." (LAUGHS)

MAN 2: I don't get it.

MAN 1: Don't you see, the vice president thinks the president is getting off lightly, since he's not as deep in the fire and brimstone, but it turns out the president is just as evil in hell as he was on earth!

MAN 2: Oh yeah. Ha. Yeah, that's okay. I guess I'm not into political humor. (MAN 2 REACHES FOR SOME POPCORN ON THE TABLE BETWEEN THEM, EXPOSING AN ARM-LENGTH SCAR RUNNING FROM HIS SHOULDER TO HIS WRIST. IT IS WHITE AND WIDE AND WAS OBVIOUSLY THE RESULT OF A DEEP AND HORRIFIC WOUND.)

MAN 1: Jesus! When did you do that?

MAN 2: What?

MAN 1: Get that scar. I've never seen it before.

MAN 2: Oh, yea. . . (HE FINGERS THE SCAR, NERVOUSLY AND SOMEWHAT APPRECIATIVELY.) Ha. I have no idea. I just noticed it last week.

MAN 1: No, seriously. How did you get it?

MAN 2: I tell you, I don't know. I was shaving Tuesday morning when I first saw it. I was so surprised, I cut my face.

- MAN 1: Oh, come on. You can tell me to bug off if it's embarrassing or private, but don't tell me you *don't know*. That's a serious wound; it must have been very painful.
- MAN 2: I guess it was. I honestly don't remember.
- MAN 1: Haven't you tried to find out? You must have thought about it. I can't believe you haven't thought about it.
- MAN 2: What's the big deal? It's my scar. What do you care?
- MAN 1: I'm your friend. I've known you for fourteen, fifteen years, and you walk in with a cut from. . . I don't know, a meat cleaver or something and you're too—what?—embarrassed? to tell me what happened.
- MAN 2: *I don't know* what happened. It must have been when I was very young, maybe an infant. It's been here all along and we've taken it for granted. Now, for some reason, we've noticed it. Re-noticed it, sort of. That's all.
- MAN 1: Do you think I'm stupid? I don't forget things like that.
- MAN 2: It's the only possible conclusion.
- MAN 1: Why?
- MAN 2: Because I can't think of anything else.
- MAN 1: So you just accept it?
- MAN 2: Why not? It isn't important.
- MAN 1: Because it's a lie. You know that scar wasn't there the last time I saw you. Remember? I went to give blood and you wouldn't go with me because you didn't feel like it. I grabbed your arm and joked about your healthy veins. There was no scar.
- MAN 2: Maybe it was the other arm.
- MAN 1: No, no it was that arm! I remember it distinctly. You're hiding something from me, you liar.
- MAN 2: Why are you so upset? It isn't important. I thought about it

and I can't remember. It doesn't hurt now; it really doesn't affect me. So who cares? It may as well be on your arm.

MAN 1: If it were, I'd want to know how it got there. I'd ask everyone if they knew when or where I did it. I'd ask my doctor. . . Did you ask your doctor?

MAN 2: No, I didn't. . . That's an idea. Maybe I'll ask him on my next visit.

MAN 1: Maybe? On your next visit? Let's call him now. Let's *go there*. I, we, must find out. Maybe it's not a scar. Maybe it's cancer. Maybe it's eating you, spreading through your body. Maybe it's killing you. We must find out. Let me look at it closer.

MAN 2: No, it's just a scar; I'm sure of it.

MAN 1: Let me see! (HE GRABS MAN 2'S ARM AND EXAMINES IT WHILE MAN 2 LOOKS AWAY, BORED.) It's so deep. If it is a scar, it must have happened some time ago to have healed by now.

MAN 2: See? I told you.

MAN 1: But I tell you it wasn't there last week. How can you be sure it's a scar, if you don't even know when you got it?

MAN 2: It *looks* like a scar. You said so yourself.

MAN 1: What if it isn't?

MAN 2: So what? If it's a scar, it's a scar. If it's a cancer, I'm going to die. Well, I'm going to die anyway, so why worry about it?

MAN 1: Because maybe you can fight it.

MAN 2: Ugh. Strapped into a bed, tubes all over my body, hair falling out, eating with veins instead of my mouth, a bottle supplying food, drop by drop. I'd rather die in peace, with dignity.

MAN 1: Don't be so dramatic.

MAN 2: Well I would.

MAN 1: Who says you have to die? Maybe they can cut it out. Maybe it's not cancer. Maybe it's something else.

MAN 2: Like a scar.

MAN 1: Maybe it's something else.

MAN 2: Like what?

MAN 1: I don't know. Let's call the doctor and find out.

MAN 2: No there's no reason for it. I really don't want to know.

MAN 1: Why not?

MAN 2: It's too much trouble. I have other things to do.

MAN 1: God damn it, I want to know! What if it's not a cancer? What if it's a contagious disease? What if I get one?

MAN 2: Then you can find out for yourself.

MAN 1: Selfish pig.

MAN 2: Well what do you want me to do? It's too late now.

MAN 1: (GASPS) It probably is! (INSPECTS HIS ARMS.) What if it's a deadly virus? There could be an epidemic.

MAN 2: I'm only one man. What can I do? I've already got it.

MAN 1: Do something, anything. Act! Act! Act!

MAN 2: It's only a scar, for chrissake. Scars don't go away; scars aren't contagious; wounds may be fatal, but scars only happen when the wound is not. Why don't you calm down, have another drink?

MAN 1: You. . . you are not going to pacify me. I want to know what that is, where it came from.

MAN 2: Well, you can't.

- MAN 1: So you *do* know! Tell me, or I'll kill you.
- MAN 2: *Now* who's being dramatic? If you do that, then you'll never know, will you?
- MAN 1: I don't care; it's the principle.
- MAN 2: Principle, shminciple. Besides, that's not why you can't know.
- MAN 1: Why?
- MAN 2: Because it's a mystery, an enigma. Like those people who bleed like Jesus.
- MAN 1: That's no mystery. There are medical reasons.
- MAN 2: Some say.
- MAN 1: There are! Just as there's a medical reason for your scar. How can you call it an *enigma* when you won't even see a doctor?
- MAN 2: Don't you see? It was meant to *be*, not to be explained. It is a miracle. It's a mystery for the ages, like the appearance of Mary in that church in Kansas.
- MAN 1: Are you crazy? It's just a scar!
- MAN 2: Maybe.
- MAN 1: You're making a mountain out of a molehill.
- MAN 2: *Me?*
- MAN 1: Yes. I just asked you where the scar came from, and you've built it into a religious experience.
- MAN 2: Only because you wouldn't accept the truth.
- MAN 1: You haven't told me the truth.
- MAN 2: Yes I did. The truth is, "I don't know."
- MAN 1: That's no truth.

MAN 2: Are you saying it's a lie?

MAN 1: I'm saying ignorance is not a substitute for truth.

MAN 2: No, it isn't a substitute. It *is* the truth.

MAN 1: Never. It can't be.

MAN 2: Take it or leave it.

MAN 1: Fine, I'm leaving. Good bye.

MAN 2: Don't you want to discuss it some more?

MAN 1: I'm getting nowhere with you.

MAN 2: Let's talk some more. We can accomplish something.
We can come to an understanding.

MAN 1: I'm going to ask around, find out for myself.

MAN 2: Will you let me know what you find out?

MAN 1: No. Find out on your own. Good bye.

MAN 2: Well, suit yourself. Have a nice day.

MAN 1: I hope you choke on it. (MAN 1 LEAVES, SLAMMING
DOOR.)

MAN 2: (LOOKING AT SCAR.) Maybe it will go away if I ignore it.

END

cathy comenas

This Week

Catherine bleached her hair
when she got to San Francisco
looking like some ivory toy baby
she met Janie
They got a place together
at the Geary street apartments
that's when they came into some money
Stripping paid

From this side of the door
I hear laughing under music
but every time I knock
they tell me no one is home
They've just finished a porno movie
seventeen-year-old Catherine
gets butt-fucked by two black men
who haven't any teeth
this week they're shooting up codeine

cathy comenas

The Baby Killer

Fourteen-year-old Anna
gave birth in her parent's bathroom
She went with an axe at his eyes
that reminded her of her father
then she couldn't hack anymore
hid what was left in the bathtub
and washed herself in the sink

She walked out and sat
with her mother and father
who watched Jerry Falwell on T.V.
talking about birth control
Her father mumbled to Anna
 you should be listening to this

Anna stood up and went to bed
woke up to her mother's screams
and the back of her father's hand
against her fat cheek

When the judge asked her why
she said

 I felt dirty

When the judge asked who
she said

 I can't tell

After the trial the judge told why he sent her to prison
 It was a ghastly, disgusting
 way to get rid of a baby
 why she could have put it
 up for adoption

The judge went home
sat in his favorite chair
and farted

cathy comenas

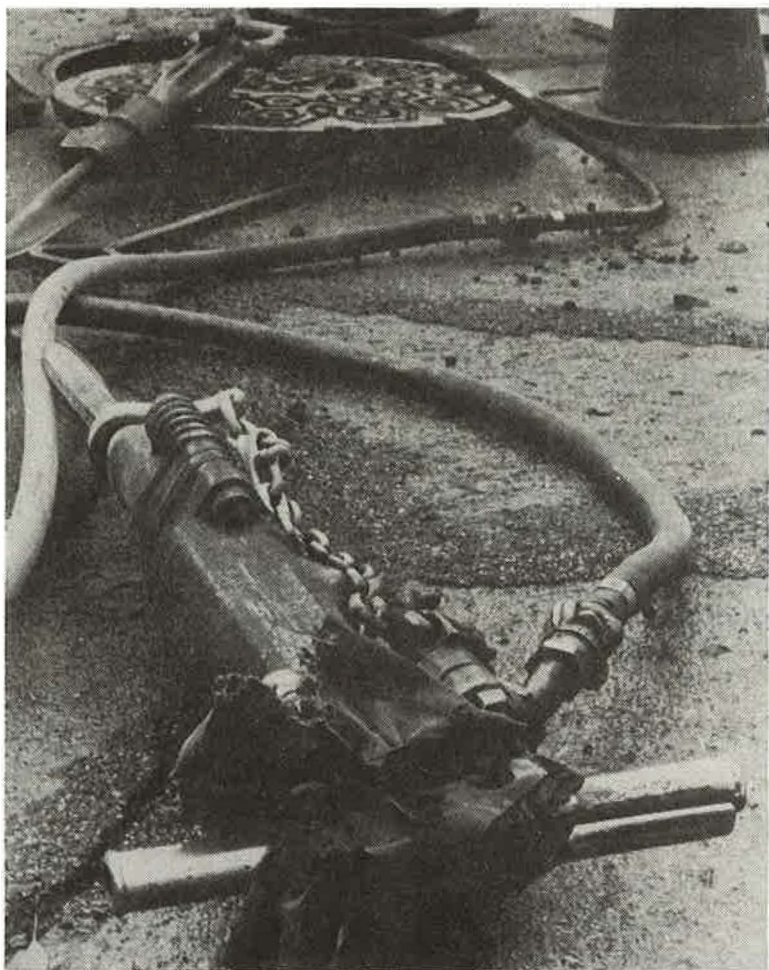
Sunday in Ventura

God's pissing
on the windows
at Warren's grill

Death gray and balding
curled up
over the meatloaf special

A woman with no place to go
sits talking to nothing

Two toothless men walk in
and stop
to say hi to death



eric horowitz

stephen collins

What It Means

So where an I? Beverly and Western, corner of. Like I'm always here man, like it's all I know and all I'll ever know, because it's where I'm at now. But that isn't the story, is it? No, not one bit of it that I'm going to relate to you, not in the least. But, to get on with this. I'm on Bev— and Western waiting for whatever, nothing really— but something I guess. I'm standing there droopy-armed, just finished sliding up and down the block money mooching the citizenry, all these people like chickens without heads—or heads without chickens as it were, or was. Most saying such stuff like, I works for my dough, Joe; some digging for pocket gold. I stand watching the stacks of motorized vehicles vomit in straight lines smog vapor; and so the light turns green and. . . they're off—cars steam-rolling on down purple streets, man, dark black purple and a brown haze and I'm standing.

Then of a sudden it's Ronny B. again coming into view. I see him now walking towards me. He has sad eyes, green serene genius eyes with red lines—he always has sad eyes. But my tenses are mixed up; he HAD sad eyes, which is the story. Or maybe it's just this story where cardboard house boxes plus live-in hobos with paper-wrapped Ripple watch the chickenheads rumble by, proceed past me, under a cleanly plain grey sky with just one, in the far off, a mean bubblish thunderhead cloud. I'm standing here and up came Ronny B., my partner you see, always talking in rapid fire rattles some such scared stuff like,

One day the sun will swell up and suck in the earth and all will die with their shades on, and how much of it is bullshit and how much of it is real and do it make a difference?

Always scratching his fuzz ball black head with both hands or folding his ginger-skin arms in front almost around to his back, Jack, cause he's about as thin as a phone poll, without the wires. And he stops here now with this thing in his hand like a gun. . . yes, it was a gun, most definitely: black mass of metal, huge like a cannon but smaller, you know. He is crying like a baby like he always does, but now it's different because it just is, because he has this gun with him.

Yes, I see it Ronny B.. Nice, but don't bring it near me because bad news, you know; it's bad news. At least that's what I heard on

the street last week from this TH bum, that's 'Thunderbird' bum if you don't know. He, a black bum like RB 'cept older with grey forest-face of curly grey skin, to me and Ronny last week said:

You don't know what the devil them thangs mean, man. Guns are bad news, he told me, cause they could blow a hole in ya, you know.

Yes sir, sure, says I.

But what DO it mean, says RB. What the devil does it mean if not one but several of the same thang?

War, says he. But that's with a hugh numbah son, just takes one still to kill. Why just last night some big Rooster blew up some gibble-gabbling harlot right there in front of the Colonel's place, then tossed the shooter in the sewer on his way out a town.

And now Ronny B. standing in front of me has this one, and he's crying.

You found it Ronny? It's OK man, OK? cause the fuzz don't know, you know? No, don't give the sucker to me, I don't want that, that thang. No way, José. Where—I mean, where did you find it, man?

In a bad can, by an evil yellow peel and some goopish sewer under a tree, says he. He is scared like the skinny buffalos must a been years ago when the white men, like me, came; but let's get on with this story, could we?

I'm under a spy glass, says Ron, a microscope, magnified to intensity and it's getting hot, mistah, hot. Will ya help me, will ya please?

I'm always helping you RB, always man, like it's a job or something.

It's getting real hot, mistah, and I can't let it go outa my hand, can't get the sucker outa my hand and I can't figure what it means.

Calm down Buffalo breath, says I. Just throw the thang away and pretend you never did find it. Why not? Why can't you do it? Never mind; it'll do what it does; if you don't want to listen then I don't give a fuck. I fold my arms and turn my back on the dude, and Ronny B. walks away, or he walked away, I guess, and I'm tired of all the bullshit so you know what I do? It's off to Ray's World Famous Chili Dog's And Burgers, which ain't so famous if you ask me, but who am I anyway? James Dean? Hardly.

Anyway, Ray is a cool dude cause he's never there anyway and I don't have to put up with him, you know; he's short and pudgy and lumpy with a grey 'stash under his nose chopped off at the edges like Hitler's; thinks he's some giant with a cause, the little munchkin. But today I bummed some money and I got the bread to buy some bread as it were, or at least a good dog with some of that tar-like black lumpy chili, like the greasiest thing you ever tasted

this side of the . . . well, of the 76 station across the street; and onions too, lots and lots of onions, always got to have them. So I walk into the place and Ray's not there cause he's being a cool dude today, and this bald headed white guy with no front teeth is chewing his gums behind the counter; and I say, Hey Joe, how 'bout a good one?

A good what, Mac? he says.

But I don't let on that I know what he means and he gets pissed and says shove off if you ain't got no green; and I says to him, fuck you, you ugly greasy-headed white guy. No, it's a lie, I didn't say that, but I wanted to. I just pulled out my wad and said something like, hold it honey, I got money, and he said,

Suit yourself, and started to make a good one with grease and onions, a lot of them onions.

I sat down on a round stool putting my sleeveless elbows on the counter while he made it up and I thought about how good them onions was gonna taste. Just like them old onions I use to eat when I was a wee boy about 18 in high school at lunch-time with the rest of us like it was a party or something. We all sat there, the whole BB team, that's Baseball if you don't know, we sat and had our lunch party—I was quite good at the sport back then if I don't say so myself, pretty good anyway, but not as good as at that grading stuff; like, I got a lot of A's I think is what they called it when you done or did good, and I was pretty, well really actually, good at the math stuff like what was it? Trig something and Abriaga or something and they said I would make a fine engineer in that stuff or physics stuff; but that was two or three decades ago, I think, before the old thoughts didn't seem to click like they always done or did, and I kept talking more and more funny like there was no tomorrow, you know. Then it was off to the Pine Street Center, this place with whitish walls and tall halls with a smell tasting like pennies that they'd lock you in if you had the dough or so you'd not harm community at large, they said. My mommy had some green like this here bald guy asked for, and she gave it to the Pine place, I think it was. And I kept asking these pebble-eyed white jackets with scribbling pens if they ever got the urge to chuck a glass across a crowded room, or punch a nice old lady in the stomach, just to knock the props from under everyone, unjoint noses, just cause all's too perfect, all's too happy, and like old RB would say, what did it all mean anyway? They said I, for one, was not to worry cause all I had to do was try.

Which I did, really; I tried really good. They all said as I was walking out of the place cause my mommy had no more green, and I didn't certainly, you know. That was just like Ronny B. I guess, only years later, or at least that's what the bumble-head told

me when I asked.

One day I went for a visit, just to look at the outside of the place cause I use to live there, and I saw this scrawny black kid pounding on the door with his fuzz ball head saying let me in till a couple youth-type white-jackets come out and throw him in the street and then go back inside giggling nicely. I pick him up and take him home to my cardboard box for a meal and lived with him for a year till one day, just recently in fact, I said,

RB, I couldn't help but notice you came over for dinner and stayed for the duration; and he laughed. Then he said:

I'd like to go back to the Pine Place; and I said:

No way, sugar, not me; and he said:

Not you, I mean, I want to go back.

Why? was my reply.

Cause, just cause, it's where I'm supposed to be, like the birds are supposed to be in the air all the time and never land.

But they do; I've seen them. RB said, Help me, and I said, no way, Jay, help yourself, that's what the Lord said. But he kept on asking me, so I kept on saying No, cause I didn't want him to go, until finally i said, Sure, why the hell not.

We went places, really we did, and I tried like I'm accustomed to doing but to know avail or some such. Downtown by the Greyhounds, we found out the right building to go to and all from some Cat trap named Sally; rode elevators up and down like a couple of Space Shuttles with bells when we'd land, trying to figure out why everyone there was so fat and we just slimmish twigs. Hallways smelled like hot paper and had thin green carpets we staided our feet with. We giggled good and a lot, and had fun for once. Why, even RB didn't cry for about five minutes, till some black lumpish cop or dude of some kind, security pro'bly, gun strapped to side, and full tooth scowl, gave us a one-eyed stare. We straightened up fast-like and found the right office.

Plopped behind a long desk, this chunky octopus-like chick, blue polyesters wrapped around cottage cheese, glasses on her pug-nose (tip of it), phone stuck between this watermelon shoulder and her ear, gabbing and typing away; she, barely looking up at us two, says, Sit down boys or some such, and wait, as is the custom. And so we wait till what seems like next week watching a fern by the door droop, turn brown and die, then blow away; we said nothing, just sat on a hard red couch stiffly staring at her straight on, till finally chunky chubbet snapping her Juicy Fruit said with her nose—It's time.

We at long last got to talk to this beffy fella with a striped suit, a pin one, you know, saying he was a lawyer and he would try to get old Ronny B. back into the place Piny if he could prove he was

violent or could beat really good. Well, old Ronny was no beat-up kind of guy; I know cause I'd knowed him. Then the pinstripe said:

Well, Jesus Christ son, don't you want to be free?

Like the birds, I blurted in.

Free, he said, because you're an American. Pine Street locks you up like a criminal, which you're not, son. Liberty to all, even to the psychotic ones of us, and it was our right to be free to choose and live where we pleased, which was the streets for us, not cause we pleased it, cause we lived it. I thought, well that sounds just fine to me being I'm an American and I tried like all hell to get the dude back in. Not that I would ever want that, I mean, Hells Bells, it's just three hots and a cot, you know. And anyhow, Ronny, he don't need no lock-up joint cause a jailbird-type, crooked felon he's not, not in the least, no way, Jay. Seems like a lot to put up with for three hot meals that ain't actually really hot at tall, more like luke warm, and cardboard's just as good as that cot-like bed stuff, softer even; and anyway, what about yours truly, huh?

But old Ronny B. kept saying, No sir, no sir, mumbling some such like that; he don't or didn't want to be in this world, he said, where there are librarians who hate books and vegetarians who are butchers and teachers that don't learn, who die in space, get AIDS, give grades, hiding in dark classrooms. . . and someone's been stealing his girl friends, and what does it all mean?, cause he didn't know, you know. And then he cried like he always does dripping his eyeballs onto his grey shirt that stunk like all hell if you ask me.

It's been real, I squealed to pinstripe and chubbet, and then I said, come on you old stink butt, pointing to RB, Lets go on home which wasn't far and he dripped his eyes all the way, damn him. We walked fast and straight-armed on the purple-edged gutter, not the white sidewalk cause it's filled with chicken-headed getto-blasters purched on shoulders, or so crate-like, pulled on wheels, filling up the grey air with anthemish squeal-type vocalizations. Trees began to bend and blow as a different thunderhead wasn't in the so far off, but rain and sun, a flower has to have these or it won't grow very well, not at TALL really. We got back before it dampened us, and the first thing we done was to knock on old Ray's door and then go in and say some such thing like, could we PLEASE have maybe a piece of bread or something cause we're hungry and ain't got a dime or a penny even.

And it's like the depression now-a-days, you know, at least that's what it seems from the history books saying this in Hschool. But that son of a bitch old Ray was there and he told the toothless pink gummy bald guy with the greasy head to shoo us away cause they didn't much like freeloaders. On the way out, I said:

But how 'bout at least some of them old yella onions which I am, or was about to eat now. He yelled,

NO, that old bald son of a gun did, or done or some such and threw a paper cup at us which hit Ronny B. good in the head; like wow, if looks could kill, wow!! Ronny was so hurt, not bleeding of course, but inside, that he was crying again and we left and we didn't even get the onions. But that was days ago, or maybe hours, and now with me sitting here sleeveless elbows and all, bald head say:

Hey mac, here's that dog with the Xtra onions, which I proceeded to munch on without any Coca-cola mind you. The place got dark suddenwise, grey actually, cause clouds thick and bubbling covered the sky outside and a wind wipped up and shook like all hell the little greenish sprigs they called trees out front.

Looks like rain, mac, said the bald head, out the window peering he does or did.

That's swell, cause I'm thirsty, said I, and he chuckled wildly. Then he says I wouldn't be such a bad guy if I ever combed my hair or brushed my teeth.

At least I got teeth, says I, and he sputtered his wheezy coughing laugh again like he's about to spit up a turkey. Then he regained himself, slicked the top of his head with a dirty palm and told me he didn't much like being mean to people, throwing them out, hitting them with paper cups and such like that, but old Ray would fire the sucker if he didn't. And I said:

You mean that lumpy ugly stubby grey haired first cousin to Hitler? Boy that did it all cause he was laughing so hard he was druling all over his chin trying to wipe it off with his sleeve with unsuccessfulness of course, and I thought he was just about like me being that I had ketchup dripping on my lips and cheeks and even some on my ear lob—That old white bald guy wasn't such a bad dude, I was thinking when Ronny B. walks in with his eyeballs all over his shirt with a big black mass in his hand, and I said:

Hey RB! Man, what's the haps? And the bald dude said:
Get that fucking gun out a this place.

Where as Ronny B. pulled up the gun and blasted it hard into the chest of the old geezer. Red and Dark blood it was that come out good and fast as he lay sprawled on the floor behind the counter. His head bent crooked-like towards his shoulder with puddles of purplish Red on his gummy mouth, grey apron and the window behind him, and I stood there just watching the sucker bleed. And then I said:

RB, what the hell did you do that for? And he said:

Cause I wanna go back, man. Cause I wanna go back. He says this then drops the gun on his foot and begins to drip his eyes

once again. Them salt and pepper black and whites drove up with their cherry tops whirling and they took old RB away with hand cuffs tight on his back-butt; and I saw his green serenes well up with dew some more and I can remember him saying some such to the cops like:

What does it all mean, he said, what the devil do it all mean?

I'll tell you what it means, man; I'll tell you. It means I don't got no more damn partner no more. I don't got nothing.

virginia webster

Eulogy for a Space Shuttle

for Skip

*If in this sleep I speak
it's with a voice no longer personal*

-Adrienne Rich-

When I was ten my mother
lit the burner on the kitchen stove
I remember seeing the crisp blue flames
from where I sat and how
I startled when a lumbering moth
crackled in a swift puff.
She used to tell me how moths
would fly into a candle's flame, but
I had never seen anything die that way.
So I asked her why it flew into the fire.
She told me it liked the light.

I wondered years later
after I felt the bump of a desert hare
beneath my car one night
wondered what it thought of the two bright lamps
moments before the weight of them passed over its body.
It was the eyes I remembered, darting toward me
the bright panic, blind yellow.

And one day there was talk of men on the moon.

I was watering my marigold seeds when I saw a rocket
on the television, counting down to liftoff.
A book I read said the fear of flying
was really the fear of sex, the fear
of the fuselage erecting, of it holding,
the fear of falling.
I think of that now. How could they
not have been thinking that: giant straight thing.
And the power of the blast loud white noise.

After, when I looked down, I saw
the white-green tip of a marigold pushing up
into sun passing through the curtain.

I think if a scientist could explain
the inert seed cracking into space
stirring from sleep into a jagged mouth of light
then I could say that the light we follow
pulls me for that reason too, how
one day I came to sit at the helm of a ship
pointing toward the sun.

It must have been like this before
seeds moving from womb to womb
one dark space opening into another.
The light is brighter here than I had expected
the clouds are not as soft.
But the edge of heaven is blue.



dorthea westerback

dortha westerbeck

Skeletons + Sugar Frosted Flakes

Prism-eyed
waiting to defract
glances sought
+ found far too late

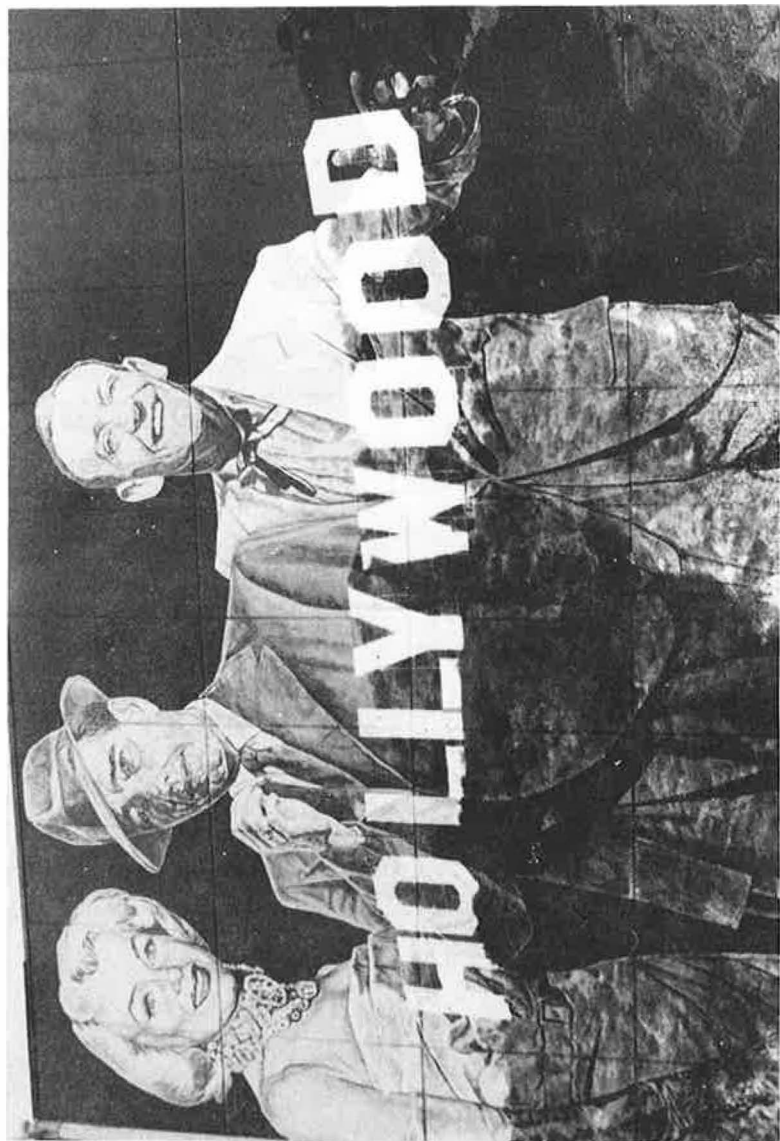
Piecemeal hangman
sure of vowels

They're all paying homage to each other
A world at your feet

You, love, are poised with a peeling back cover
held between lines,
so many pressings of pens

Looking for a home
a door to stir my coffee beige
connected to the world
chased by pigeons
Eager to smear
+ drop
All upon your head

If I call you with
shutting eyes
ashamed to see what's done
will you slip through
the screen
carried long-breezed
towards me?



walter chacon

lori bobrick

Slaughterhouse Two

The scene takes place inside and outside a two-story wooden house. Seymore and Stanley are seated, onstage left, at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading the morning paper. A door separates them from stage right.

SEYMORE: I can't stand reading the paper, it's so depressing. You know, the crime rate's gone up again. The world just isn't a safe place anymore, there're too many lunatics running around.

STANLEY: Well, I don't know, I think it's basically a social problem, there's too much poverty and not enough work. Many people go through life unloved, uneducated and misunderstood. It's a real tragedy.

(WOLFGANG WALKS TOWARD THE DOOR FROM STAGE RIGHT)

SEYMORE: I think there just aren't enough jails. We're so afraid of overcrowding our criminals that we'd rather leave them out on the streets than expose them to such beastly injustices. We're too fair Stanley, and it's finally catching up with us. It's getting to the point now where we can't even open up our own doors without being afraid.

(WOLFGANG BANGS ON THE DOOR)

SEYMORE: (PARANOID) What's that?

STANLEY: The door.

SEYMORE: I'm not going to open it. (LOUD) Go away, there's nobody home.

(WOLFGANG KNOCKS AGAIN)

SEYMORE: (GOES TO DOOR, YELLS) I said go away, there's nobody home.

WOLFGANG: LITTLE PIG! LITTLE PIG! LET ME COME IN.

SEYMORE: Oh damn, it's that wolf again.

STANLEY: Well, ask him what he wants.

SEYMORE: I know what he wants, he wants to eat us.

WOLFGANG: I said: LITTLE PIG, LITTLE PIG LET ME COME IN.

SEYMORE: Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin.

STANLEY: God Seymore, you're so paranoid. At least ask him what he wants before you start acting so rudely towards him. You know, maybe if Sidney was polite and friendly, and let the wolf in, his straw house would still be standing and there would still be three little pigs.

SEYMORE: I can't believe what you're saying. You're defending our brother's murderer.

STANLEY: Murderer? How do you know it wasn't an accident? At least give him the benefit of the doubt and speak to him before you persecute him.

SEYMORE: I won't speak with that murderer.

STANLEY: (GOES TO THE DOOR) Hey wolf.

WOLFGANG: Yeah?

STANLEY: What do you want?

WOLFGANG: I just want to use your phone. My car broke down and I've got to call my wife and tell her I'll be late for dinner.

STANLEY: (TO SEYMORE) Well, that sounds reasonable. Let's let him in.

SEYMORE: (GOES TO THE DOOR SO THE WOLF CAN HEAR HIM) No, this is my house and I won't have a wolf use my phone.

WOLFGANG: Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down.

SEYMORE: Damn it, I knew we should have built a brick house.

STANLEY: I like wood, it gives the house a sort of lived in look, blends more with the surrounding environment, provides a healthier atmosphere and wasn't as heavy to carry as.

SEYMORE: (INTERRUPTS) Wolf, you've got 30 seconds to get away from my door. If you're not gone by then, I'm calling the Wood Chopper who saved Little Red Ridinghood from your cousin.

STANLEY: You know what's wrong with this world? No diplomacy. Now I'm sure we can work this out peacefully and there will be no need for violence.

WOLFGANG: Amen!

SEYMORE: You know Stanley, your psychology classes have ruined you. You've lost your senses.

STANLEY: Maybe so, but I haven't lost my dignity. I will not let some wolf blow my house down just because I'm too paranoid to let him in. We are not people, we are animals, rational and intelligent, we should try to work out our differences. We are no longer the uncivilized savages of yesteryear, we are.

SEYMORE: (INTERRUPTS) We are pigs! He's a wolf! Wolves eat pigs, there's no diplomacy, it's just matter of fact.

STANLEY: (TO SEYMORE) I'll never understand you. Haven't you been listening to me? We should strive towards an understanding with our fellow creatures, draw up new social contracts, learn to love and respect each other instead of confining ourselves behind locked doors. This is no life. We're afraid of our own shadows. We never go out after dark. Let's live, Seymore! Let's take a chance.

WOLFGANG: Bravo! Bravo! Brilliant speech, and may I add that

we are all brothers under the same sun. We must learn to trust each other. To live in fear is never to live at all.

STANLEY: (TO SEYMORE) Listen to him, he's right you know. We are the world.

SEYMORE: Maybe you're right. Maybe I have been too hasty in my judgments. Maybe there's some middle ground. Yes, I like the way that sounds. Let's drop the barriers and open the door!

(STANLEY OPENS THE DOOR, WOLFGANG ENTERS INTO THE HOUSE)

WOLFGANG: Thank you, I just want to use your phone. (LOOKS AROUND) You really have a lovely house.

STANLEY: (TO SEYMORE) See how nice he is, he complimented your house. Oh, Mr. Wolf, the phone's over there on the table. (TO SEYMORE) You know, it's going to be a whole new way of life for us now, I can feel it.

SEYMORE: You know, I think you're right. I really feel good about this.

WOLFGANG: (PICKS UP THE PHONE, DIALS, WAITS A BEAT) Hello honey, good news, we're having ribs for dinner.

(BLACK OUT)

bobbie r. coleman

Inquiring Minds Want To Know. . .

UFOs have been sighted
in Pittsburgh woman
gives birth to
psychic baby
quotes diet secrets
of famous celebrities get
drunk and find new
planet orbiting around
boy raised by pack
of wolves bite man
and give him AIDS
epidemic breaks out
in Lourdes mystical water can
prove the existence
of life after dead
mother gives
birth to Siamese
twins brain kept
alive for two
weeks in large abdominal
tumor turns out
to be woman's twin
Sister Rose guarantees
answers to all questions
about Virgin Mary
appears at seven on
Mondays and Fridays
in Ft. Lauderdale
parking lot!

nadine wassmouth

Rain #1

This time
rain is seventy tiny men
pins for feet
dancing wildly on my face and hands.

jordan jones

Insomnia

The furniture is excitable. It lurches
with a pliant, living hum.

Good poetry
has handles and it pulls you along

I walk through woods along old paths
branches

are the great ignorers.

Windows take on the character of the
scenery before them.

Objects don't mind dust
as much as people do.

An open jar of peanut
butter on the table resembles flowers,
I love its fragrance.

David Green

Biology Lesson

In Florida, there are three types of animals:
those that bite to hurt,
those that bite to kill,
and those that go
bump-squissssh
under the wheels of your car,
at three in the goddamn morning.

pam reichman

Ice Cream Will Melt

There she was
this old woman in the
market line trying
to cash her welfare
check her clothes were
ten years too late
and she hadn't watched
her weight and she probably
had stretch marks from
too many kids

She was slow and didn't
sign fast enough
so the man with the
ice cream
the dripping
ice cream
and keys to his
porsche yells
words
bitch-can't-you-move-your-fat-ass
and she drops her pen
and his ice cream
drips
and he yells
words
goddamn-you-bitch-can't-you-move-your-fat-ass
and she signs and shuffles out
of his way
and smiles

The Pest

When asked "How are you," boring people reply with a detailed story. If you tell them to stop by sometime they do. These folks take everything literally.

Eugene was boring.

Susan and I belonged to a different category. We were cultured, socially useful, and engaging.

Though Eugene and I rented flats on the same floor, the lifelines on the palms of our hands were drawn in opposite directions. That is why his appearance on my threshold was unexplainable. It happened on one beautiful morning at 10:00 a.m.

Eugene told me that his electric shaver was broken. "I would use yours," he said, "but it is not for me to decide." I took him to the bathroom and placed my shaver in front of him. Then I went to the kitchen to try to write an essay. The difficulty was to try to come up with the first phrase. The electric buzz coming from the bathroom prevented my every attempt to concentrate.

Out of frustration I decided to eat. As I was pouring coffee, I heard Eugene behind me. "Would you like some?" I asked.

"It is not my decision," replied my neighbor. I moved a tall ceramic cup and everything else on the table closer to him.

He ate quickly in complete silence. In five minutes he finished everything including the sugar and bread. Then he picked up the newspaper and began to read. Something struck him funny, and he laughed.

I went into the living room to try to concentrate on my first phrase. I could hear him turning pages, overturning cups and dropping plates on the floor. I did not care about the broken china, but I was sorry for the time wasted so far.

Eugene felt sorry too. He apologized for the broken plates. I said, "It's nothing." He agreed with me.

My neighbor was content. He shaved, ate breakfast, and read the newspaper from the beginning to the end. Now he wanted to talk. He wanted someone to listen to him.

And talk he did! I found out about his job and how he lost it, the world news report and how to clean Vodka with permanganate natrium.

At that point, he stopped and lit a cigarette. We did not speak.

I watched the fiery circle move closer and closer to his lips. A column of ash was getting longer and longer. Eventually it became too long and fell. First it fell on his shoe and then rolled onto my carpet. For a few moments our eyes focused on the gray ash.

Eugene got up from the couch and shoved his hands in his pockets. His pants stretched tight across his emaciated ass. Now he decided to talk about women.

There were two women in his life. With one he felt good either with or without her; the other was bad to be with and worse to be without. After discussing his love life, he remarked about his friends, gossiped about relatives, and on and on and on.

Susan came home at 5:00. "Good evening," said Susan.

"It is!" agreed Eugene. (It certainly was a good evening!)

Susan was surprised at this strange greeting, the smoke, the ashes on the floor, the broken plates and me in the corner with no signs of life. It all looked strange, but Susan was polite.

"What's up?" asked Susan. He started from the beginning. He liked it when people were interested in him, but Susan was wearing an absent-minded mask and did not listen. Eugene lost interest and said, "See you later," and left. I knew he meant what he said.

Eugene left at five. Guests arrived at eight. They were nice people. They did not overturn cups, break plates, and did not talk about their relatives. They were talented and unique, and had original ideas and good taste.

Susan entertained the guests with singing, accompanying herself on the grand piano. She had a beautiful voice, almost mezzo soprano.

In the middle of her performance, the phone rang. Someone answered and after he hung up said, "It was Eugene. He's staying with you tonight."

Our guests were not only educated and talented, but they were also human. They could not possibly have fun when friends were in danger. Each of them tried to come up with the best excuse for us, but I did not want to lie and neither did Susan. She warned me that if Eugene spent one night in our apartment, it would not be easy to get rid of him.

We realized that we should keep him out at all costs. Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Susan quickly turned off the light. Everyone became very quiet. We decided to pretend that we were not at home.

In the meantime, Eugene put his thumb on the buzzer in case we did not hear. This agony lasted a few long minutes, then it was quiet again. Everything has its end, even Eugene.

"He left. . ." whispered Susan. I peeked outside. Eugene was

sitting on the floor next to the elevator. He took everything literally. If the owners are not home, they will come back. His face was sad and surprised at the same time. Next to him was a carton with a cake inside.

Four hours went by. The room was dark. We were silent. We could hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen and the tick tock of someone's watch. Susan was sleeping on the sofa. She, like an astronaut, could sleep anywhere in and any position under any circumstances.

Others were trying to make use of chairs, armchairs and other articles of furniture.

Once again I found myself staring out the window still searching for that first phrase for my essay. But more than anything else, I wanted someone to ask me, "How are you?" Then I could tell them about myself and my guests who come not to see me, but come to my house because they have nowhere else to go. I could tell about my love that ended, and now that it has ended, looks as if it had never happened at all.

However, my guests were people with proper manners. No one asked questions. Ahead of us was a long night, and morning was far away.

Eugene was peacefully sleeping by the elevator. . .



cathy comenas

The Burning Monk

Just before lunch the burning monk kneels within his smock, pulls off his thongs, and nudges them to the side of his mat with his big toe. Patty and Ira are on the couch watching TV. Ira holds the bowl out to Patty so she can reach the popcorn. Her face looks hazy and blue in the TV light. The rubber soles are badly worn from the endless walking the burning monk has undertaken over the years. Pilgrimages. I warned him it would come to this.

"The tenth anniversary," Ira says. He means the war.

Patty tugs the blanket up around her neck and asks Ira if she can wear his socks, her feet are so cold. She isn't serious. The door buzzer buzzes. "I'd rather watch *Spartacus*," she says. It's Guy and Linda at the door, both wearing hairy gold alpaca sweaters. Ira lets them in.

Guy eyes Ira.

Ira eyes Guy.

Guy puts a powerful headlock on Ira for old time's sake. For the life of him Ira can't get free.

Linda says it's nice out and draws the curtains to let in the sun. There, swimming like a plant on the bottom of the pool three floors down, is Ilene, Ira's Japanese neighbor with the long perfect hair. The burning monk nods and grins and returns to his mat. I can tell he's only kidding around.

Patty puts *Spartacus* on. She is worried for Ira, who can't stand it anymore. Guy is humming the "Marseillaise." As a counter, Linda sings "Waltzing Matilda." This soothes Guy. Then she breaks into "Bingo Was His Name-O." Clap. I-N-G-O. Ira drops blue-faced on the couch next to Patty.

Guy is still singing: "Clap. Clap. Clap-Clap-O."

"The slaves are uneasy," Patty says. "They're about to rise up."

The burning monk exercising on his mat. In. Hale. Ex. Hale. In. Ex. Hale. Hale.

"Can't happen without *Spartacus*," Ira says, panting rapidly. "No way."

The burning monk hasn't much English (a quick learner, though), so I fill him in on the gaps he hears in the conversation.

"This is his best movie," Patty says. Guy and Linda agree.

"Definitely in the top five," Linda says. "Either this or *The Detective* or *The Harder They Fall*."

"Was he in that?" Guy wants to know.

Ira changes the channel back to the show about the war. Hunting the tiger. Hauling the wounded forgetting the goners. Unnerved hoardes at the embassy gates. The burning monk rises from his mat and goes to the window. I pat his shoulder, delicately, to cheer him. A harnessed woman pulling a cart loaded with children passes in the street. One of the children has a radio that sings, "Two become one, under the bamboo treeeee."

"Sure he was in that," Linda says.

Patty goes into the kitchen but forgets what she wants there. For a long time she stares at the miniature-nineteen-twentyish-wall-telephone-magnet stuck on the refrigerator door. Nobody calls. She returns to the living room with a bowl of grapes, red, seedful. Ira sends her back for the sandwiches. "And some nice rice for you," she says, opening her hand to the burning monk. A steaming bowl on the burning monk's mat.

Linda, who has studied the laws of History at Brown, Penn, Pitt, and Indiana State, says: "Did you know that near the end of the fifteenth century, the endless complaint of the frailty of all earthly glory was sung to various melodies."

I know that.

During the next seventeen seconds (the span Linda intuitively allows for thinking on the matter), I have nineteen thoughts; on average, a brand new one every .89 seconds:

A red movie of a leaping whippet clapping a frisbee in its jaws. A black-and-white picture of Oscar Ravez with upturned eyelids. A family of sparrows panicking from tree to tree. One pi minus three pi is negative two pi. A flying raccoon queen wielding an alpinist's two-headed ice axe. Four identical snowflakes. A blue picture of Long John Silver. How delightful really Patty's tits are. Fatty Arbuckle as a featherweight fighting for the title. Ooky ooky ook. I was framed I tell ya framed. A palmful of shaving cream peppered with stubble. The Invisible Hand of God. Boiled cabbage odor. Linda's aren't as nice not nearly. Dotless dice thrown. Our bodies why do we forebear? The artifice of consciousness. How many footballs can fit in a—

"I didn't know that," Ira says.

The burning monk hasn't touched his rice, not so much as a grain. Even though it's too pasty for my liking, I pretend it's just about the best rice I've ever had—scoop after scoop, sucking my fingers clean of it—hoping my friend will take up his spoon.

Patty changes back to *Spartacus*. Linda has finished all the sandwiches and is working on the last grape. With the nails of her

thumb and forefinger she catches the seeds in her mouth and drops them into the ashtray from the Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas. It's the very end where Mrs. Spartacus lifts up Spartacus Junior so Spartacus Senior can have a good look. Then she spirits the infant away. Mile after mile, as far as the eye can see, thousands of extras somewhere in the Italian countryside quietly bear their crucifixions. Guy hurries into the bathroom, where he weeps. "I can't help it," he says from behind the door.

It is warm, and the burning monk has been exercising and not touching his rice, so Patty mists him with the plant mister. He is grateful and smiles, and after Patty mists the African violet plant, the spider plant, and the little baby plant without a name card, she mists the burning monk again. He says it's a wonderful invention, one wonderful thing.

Guy emerges from the bathroom with a pair of enamelled red bongoes. He says he found them in the clothes hamper. He squeezes them between his knees. He can't resist, for old time's sake: ponk-poppa-totta-ponk. Ponk.

Ira changes the channel and turns up the volume. The burning monk takes his can by the handle and pats the pocket of his smock to make sure that he has everything he'll need. He says it's time for him to go, word has come down, so long, thanks for it all, thanks all around. Patty can have his mat, Ira his thongs. Guy and Linda don't get anything. I was afraid of this moment, but I know that what's on his lung is on his tongue. The can is heavy for him—I offer to carry it but he resists, he can manage. From the landing I watch him descend, heaving the can along as if he had a bad hip. Then I follow him.

Ilene is towelling herself by the pool. When she's dry she twists the towel into a turban on top of her head. The burning monk heads for the street, where the people are. Patty and Ira and Guy and Linda follow Ilene's example. Soon they're all wearing towel turbans, too. They wave at Ilene from the window, and Ilene waves back. Linda was right, it is a nice day. On nice days all things open, and the burning monk finds a nice little spot in the middle of the street and sits there, a lovely little lotus, opening.

A half-circle of warm wet faces. They spill from the sidewalk in front of the barber shop: SIX CHAIRS NO WAITING. I point out to Ilene that the intricacies of the burning monk's face are of a lifelike delicacy. She tells me that all warm things fall to the cold and remembers how when she was a girl she used to help her grandmother into sweaters. "The world has its own imagination, don't you think?" she says. Then the gasoline-splash and the flick of the match. I think I love you, Ilene.

The fires flap and pop like little flats. The burning monk tips

and then topples fully on his side.

A pickup truck crowded with three men in green gardener's clothes comes to take the body away. The leader recommends a period of waiting.

A boy with a blue rattail combs some of the ashes into a cloth that he has ironed exclusively for this purpose.

The men of the truck are tired of this sort of thing.

marlene pearson

(Selections from Orange Bags On The Freeway)

1. Silly to question/Someone must be steering this car

swollen orange bags lay in weeds
at the side/ I wonder what is inside

if I open one will my own eyes
look up at me? I keep driving

I will turn off at the mall
buy the tangerine sundress
paint my nails
and wonder about finding my self

later/ there are perspiration beads
on my arm/ enough evidence for today

3. There was one

Orange bag crept
toward steel pole

then leaned there
out of breath

no hand to close
the ripped plastic

triangle like a rust
colored heart

bleeding leaves

4. Speeding

a policeman behind me
turns on his lights
orange-red lights

why is he following me?
why an orange light? what does he know
of my bags?

5. Melodrama of Oranges at 7 am

Someone spilled a bag of oranges
on the Ventura freeway west

every morning for the past week I've seen them
cling to the edge

yesterday I slowed down
and heard them speak

I want to grow up to be like that
orange bag said the hopeful one
pointing his small navel

the realist gave him truth
you wont be one
youll be in one

then a truck swerved to miss
a car and caught two oranges on its tire

we all watched the orange stain
disappear by the time the truck
skid through sand to halt

the door opened
out stepped 2 men
with orange bags and pointed sticks

7. January 28, 1986, the accident

The newscaster interrupted the song on the radio
he said the shuttle crashed
no one knew if anyone

survived. he kept talking. that's when I saw orange bags
7 of them full and tied
leaning in weeds. I knew

if I could just get over 3 lanes
stop and untie the bags, from each one

an astronaut would step out

I'd put them all in my Rabbit
take the Sepulveda turnoff
to the store with a phone

I'd call NASA. tell them they're ok
I'd hand the phone to Christa
let her talk

I flicked on my blinker
looked over my shoulder for a chance
I shouted slow down you fools
but no one would let me over

even if there'd been only leaves
in those bags I could have
rescued them

9. Sticks reach out like arms/ There's fury in those bags

Orange bags stick out
their arms, legs at 55 mph and race
beside my car

beat spine fists on my window
I push on the gas. 60. 65.
lose all but one

her twig fingers cling
to my door. a branch arm moves
across my windshield
she is mouthing something

what do these bags want from me
this is January 4th
I turn up the radio and go faster

no time for rantings of old leaves
dead twigs, ripped pages
yellowed and torn
empty pepsi cans
stuffed in orange bags
tied shut and looking
like my sister

"Orange Bags on the Freeway" is the recipient of the Rachel Sherwood poetry prize for 19985/1986. "Orange Bags #9" is the recipient of the American Academy of Poets' prize.

Sister

Your hair was short-cropped blonde,
pixie cut,
brown freckles on baby-white skin.
We stood at Grandma's dormer window
spitting plum pits off the roof.
Thin legs
matching red shorts
cheeks stuffed with ammunition:
laughing, mischievous girls.

Seven years old, and I knew
all about protecting you.
You were five, the baby;
I was big sister.
Bad things stayed away from you
when I was around.
Grown women now. But
your taste in men
raises big sister in me.
You throw away your Botticelli smile
on overgrown boys,
who wouldn't know a tender heart
from a can of beer.

If I could interfere,
I'd take your man-sized pain
and throw it,
like a plum pit, off the roof.
We'd laugh as it rolled across shingles;
we'd laugh,
pain buried in the cool grass.

adria hirsch

Disneyland Lovers

for Sheryl

They say that

in the past,
women with women,

are yanked by a cane
at the neck

if they blatantly show affection
at Disneyland.

We don't want this.

We just want to hold hands
feel the stars in our blood

in Space Mountain-
connect like constellations

we touch quickly
like the hand on a hot stove

Pull away

hope no one will notice
(and that everyone will)

we make stick shift eyes
with them

we can't hold each other
like Disney lovers

don't yank us—
we love Mickey Mouse

and Cheshire Cat
wants to keep grinning

So,

I'll stare into your
eyes to reassure

that, "yes, me too;
and my arms are around you."

stephen collins

Christmas Eve

Plashlessly we dove into a biting December wind
she leading, and cut through the night
like sharks through black water.
Down Rodeo in stained levi's past
closed shops with store-front windows
full of jewelry, white fur, close-circuit TV,
we dreamt of money and what we'd buy
taste style class were her words
fluttering perpetual from lips, liquid red.
Most of all she said she wanted a Goodyear blimp
to say anything she felt in the sky
then they'd have to listen.
And I said into distracted eyes,
Isn't it interesting how peasants
used to go to Shakespeare plays and now
the rich go to plays and peasants watch TV?

I'm an arrogant son of a bitch sometimes
but only when the curtain's up, the stage is set.
How often do I get to see myself candid?
Only in a memory, maybe in a poem.

At home I dressed her in Christmas tinsel
whirled her in a garland of gold as she giggled,
stacked gifts at her feet. I planted a kiss
on her nose then swiftly to her lips
until she pulled away, always.
We dined on bananas and barbacue potato chips
by candle light smoking grass listening to
Beethoven while I faithfully wrote it all down
on the back of an envelope
so I could use it now.

Sometimes I think I hear the phone ringing
when I'm not home, while I'm walking away
she calls to me, voicelessly, as in a dream
and I can almost feel her fingers spread
through my hair to the back of my neck.
I reach out to hold the wind as it slips by
and end up hugging myself.

rachael goldman

Aborted Conversation

We've run out of things to say,
come up blank.
What we share
is what we shared
years ago;
a mutual past,
a reservoir
from which we've been drawing conversation
ever since.

Here we are again
at what was the water's edge
but the only thing visible
across the hot vibrating distance
is an ox's dry skull.

wes hempel

Emerging

What if you seep out of your hands
spread into the drum of the sky
like a Ryder landscape maple, mist
and fennel along the bank lapping
varnish in the room where you sit
honing verbs into limbs, how
lambent the waves and dissipating sky
ignite in you the dream of sinking
into the body of a carp pinned in
mesh, hands grappling as you fillip
violently twist and surge into air

wes hempel

The Work

My father walked under red and yellow banners flapping
in the hoods he shined at Arrow Auto Sales
across the street from the liquor store
back and forth he moved with rags
in his blue uniform

I drank grape juice and watched
The Birdman of Alcatraz. I had a fever

My mother took in laundry and mending in our neighborhood
We advertised at the grocery store
tacked signs on telephone poles
For underwear bills at J.C. Penney
the living room smelled like starch

At the ironing board back and forth she moved
around buttons and snaps, watching with me
We didn't want it to so it ended

At lunchtime she made soup and my father came home
I sat in the rocker leafing through the catalog
I knew there wasn't anything in there for me

Now it's twenty years and I'm stocking-holed
downtown after leaving my shoes on the bus
and staring at a pair of underwear in the gutter
I'd like to say I'm fond of curbs
but I'd rather be alone

If I were a woman I'd squeeze my breasts and say
the night was dark, the night was blue
around the corner a car flew
a screech was heard, a yell was heard
a man got hit by a flying turd

When I close my eyes I see everything
sky shed of its blue jacket
violet shoe polish black and shadows of birds

My mother lives in a trailer in Alabama now
Moving through rooms with a crescent moon
on her instep, she wears her scars on the outside

I have a friend who can't take off his pants
He's afraid his legs will be gone
I like to see everything. Sometimes
I can never find my clothes

jodi johnson

In Bed

They lie side by side, not touching
except where his right arm cradles her neck,
his hand resting across her chest.
Already he grows solid and heavy with sleep;
where his fingers cup her breast their cells
press together so she can't tell his flesh from hers.
She imagines what might happen if he moved:
he carries off her nipple in his palm, and she is left looking
at the cage of her ribs, red and blue veins,
her lungs filling up like balloons.

She hears the first soft drops of rain outside
and remembers what it meant as a child—frogs.
The shallow pond below the house filled with run-off
and she and her sisters hunted the black-eyed
clusters of eggs. When the tadpoles hatched,
she skimmed them up in glass jars and carried them home.
Once, she dropped a jar on the road and watched them
shrink on the pavement, wrinkled and dry as raisins.
Now she thinks of the sperm inside her
beaching themselves on her womb.

She knows that if she dies tonight, her hair
and nails would grow without her for months.
Her heart could beat in another chest, a plastic and metal one
pump in hers. When morning comes she will pull on her body
like an old shoe. But here, in the dark,
she is drawn out thin as a sheet, feels her skin stretch
so something bright can glow through.

jodi johnson

Sequoia

A thousand winters bowed their heads,
twisted branches close to their chests.
They were no longer slender columns, the sky
arched between them, but thickened and shortened with age
like old women.

She jumped into the blackened belly of one.
She imagined herself covering the narrow mouth with hide
to keep out the rain, sleeping against one wall
on a bed of green boughs. She looked up and could see
the smoke from her fire hanging in a grey cloud.

At Tharp's Log she saw the cabin built in a fallen tree,
the shutters with horseshoes for hinges,
and wondered what it was like to wake up here
in light spilling like water through the windows.
She walked out to the meadow where October grass
rattled its seed pods above her.
When she shook the stalks, white wings of seeds
drifted into her hair like petals.
This is what the trees feel in winter, she thought,
the gods shaking the clouds over their heads, the snow
sifting down through their upturned beards.

Later, she ate lunch in a clearing.
She could see the air moving in streams through the trees,
carrying seeds, dust, ribbons of spider web,
insects on sequined wings. Four crows
flew past sieving the air through their feathers.
On the horizon, thunderheads gathered so slowly
they seemed to be painted there.

If the storm broke, she knew lightning would flash from ground
to sky on the outstretched fingers of the trees.
She thought of God and Adam reclined on clouds, their
extended
hands not quite touching, and felt for a moment
the synapse between things, the leap across it.



An Explanation

Your first murder is a lot like losing your virginity: It isn't very pleasant, but you'll never forget it. To extend this tenuous simile one step further, I suppose I could add that most people tend to worry and wring their hands about both, when actually neither is such a big deal, once you get started.

By the way, I only present this comparison for your edification; the story I am about to tell you has nothing to do with losing my virginity, although it has much to do with my first murder.

My story begins very simply. I had decided to murder a dear friend for an insult beyond my capacity to forgive. I shan't bore you here with the specifics, the background of the offense, but since I am writing this, you will simply have to trust me—the insult was most capital in nature.

Once the idea for retribution came into my head, each step became simpler and simpler. Perhaps, though, before I continue, I could tell you a bit about myself, so you will understand how my mind works. I am a short man, thirty five years old, and not self-conscious about either. I have, of course, a serious education (a doctorate in sociology) that, through the devious machinations of an unfair society, I have never been able to put to adequate use. I am the manager of a supermarket by trade, something I resent but am successful at, perhaps because I can use some of my sociology skills in dealing with employees and customers. As you can imagine, this job puts me in contact mostly with people below my social and educational bearing, but I am occasionally able to pick out a rough gem among the bunch and polish it enough that I can tolerate it, at least for a while.

Overall, I am a tolerant man. I am slow to anger, even though at times it seems that half the world seeks only to arouse my ire. My dear friend, for example (the one whom I had decided to kill), was constantly doing things to bother me. He often watched television while I was meditating, and although I was in my room with the door closed, I could hear the high-pitched wheeeeeee of the set as it sought me out to disturb my solace. I tolerated this. After all, television is the meditation of the uneducated man. He also refused to wash the dishes after eating and would leave his plates on the table, or worse—in the damp sink—for as long as an hour after a meal. In

minutes, I could smell the food turning rancid and often felt sick to my stomach. Still, I said nothing to him. After he went to bed, I would run boiling water over the dishes and pass the metal utensils through fire to destroy the bacteria.

As you can see, my tolerance enables me to endure many horrible things.

But back to my plans. Plans come quite simply to me, it's simply a matter of doing what you can and taking advantage of coincidences. If it rains, you take a romantic walk in the rain; if it shines, you sunbathe. Always work with nature's unchangeable flow. I picked up the classified ads and browsed.

GUNS!!! .38 S&W semi - \$150; 44 Magnum - \$300; 9 mm Browning - \$200; many others too numerous to mention. Buy/Sell/Trade. Protect yourself before it's too late! 555-7634 (pri. pty.)

The ad struck me like a bullet.

A gun would be so simple, so civilized, so American. I decided on the .38—a Smith and Wesson—a romantic's choice.

I called the number and was given directions. They led to an address in the canyons north-west of Los Angeles. A dirt road led off the main road, past a rusty mail box that had been pierced by much buck shot. The name "Jenks" had been daubed on the mailbox with white paint.

Jenks sat on the porch, eyeing me suspiciously. He cradled a rifle in his lap as some men would cradle a favorite dog.

It looked like I should take a friendly approach. "Hi! I called about your ad in the paper?" I stated it as a question, hoping my sincerity would be evident through a smile and a pair of sunglasses I didn't want to remove.

He smiled. "Come on in! I'm sure I got watchur lookin' fer!" He leaned the gun against the porch and led me into a model middle-American home. Plush carpet. Clean. VCR and a Jesus statue on the television set. The smell of fresh paint and warm plastic. Children's pictures on the wall in the kitchen, over the shelf with the microwave, surrounded a red-white-and-blue sign that said, "God bless America and this home!"

"So," Jenks said, as he opened a locked door that apparently led to a den, "D'you want protection or are you jes' gettin' ready?"

"Umm. . ." What did *that* mean? "I'm getting ready."

"Good." He swung open the door. "There's a war a-comin'." The room was lined with cabinets, display cases and shelves, each filled with hand guns, rifles, sights and ammunition.

I gasped.

"Nice set up, eh? I got just the thing for you, if you're gettin' ready." He opened a case and removed a long, slender tube with a handle at one end. "It's an Uzi, like what the Jews got in Israel. Jes' the thing to send the Commies or A-rabs runnin' back fer their boats when they land over at Malibu."

"Oh no," I said, "I just wanted that .38 you had advertised. The Smith and Wesson."

"A .38? Watchu gettin' ready fer? Commie squirrels? You need fire-power, son."

I smiled. "I'd rather keep a low profile."

"Ohhh," he whispered and winked, "A sniper-type!" Jenks grinned appreciatively. "The last line of American defense." He reached down and pulled out a black, well-oiled piece of destructive machinery. "This is gun that won the West, an' this is the gun that'll defend her!" he half-shouted, and passed the gun to me. It was heavier than I had expected.

I eyed the gun apprehensively and it eyed me back. It left my hand coated with a thin film of oil that smelled like warm plastic.

"I'n't she a beauty? I got a pair, myself, next to the bed—one on my side, one on the lil' woman's. If any one ever breaks into this house, God help 'em!" He laughed.

"I know what you mean," I said, and smiled thinly. You have to humor these deranged freaks, you never know when they may crack. "How much was it again?"

"One-fifty, but since you seem to be a red-blooded American brother, I'll give it to you for one-forty."

I smiled again, but inside I wanted to retch at the thought that I could be the brother of such a vile human being.

I handed him the money, said, "Thank you very much," then shook his hand and turned to leave. He showed me to the door.

"I got some friends like you," he said. "Silent types, they're always the snipers. You'd like them. We got meetings Sunday, after church. The boys come over here and we discuss tactics." He winked. "Come on over, ya'll fit right in."

"Yes. I'll see if I can make the time." I waved as I walked to my car, feeling dizzy and nauseous. My tolerance had been stretched to the limit, but my facade had allowed me to purchase the necessary weapon without suspicion or state registration. I paid cash and hadn't even given my name. Jenks wouldn't be able to identify me under any conditions.

The next step was to plan the time of the execution. This was simple. At precisely two a.m. every Friday night (Saturday morning) a local redneck bar closes, discharging its questionable clientele (friends of Jenks, no doubt) onto the quiet streets of my neighborhood. This event is always accompanied by the sudden blaring of half a dozen

stereos, the revving of hyped-up truck engines and innumerable backfires. Precisely fifteen minutes later, the Southern Pacific train roars through the edge of town, horn blasting and bells clanging. I would simply take advantage of these ready-made coincidences.

Access to the criminal (my dear friend and insulator) was simple. I hinted previously that we shared a flat—a detail that was not really important until this point in the story. We slept under the same roof; his bedroom door shared the same hall as mine. He slept with his door and window open. The window adjacent to his bed looked into an old weather-beaten redwood fence, which would also help me.

On the night of the murder, I cooked a delightful meal of broiled sirloin tips, sauteed in a mushroom sauce with German potato salad and sweet miniature carrots for myself and my doomed friend. Even though he had disturbed my meditation once again earlier in the week, I played cards with him and joked for a couple of hours. As I said, I'm a tolerant man. Since it was his last night, I made him a gift of a fifth of Scotch, which he immediately opened and began to down, much to my pleasure. I never drink, but he offered me some anyway, so I took a shot, much to his pleasure. By eleven, he had reached his limit. I discouraged him from drinking any more and offered to help him to bed. He seemed quite touched and remarked that he appreciated my kindness and gentility. He said that sometimes he didn't know why I tolerated him, with my civility and greater intellect; that he was just a poor slob. I almost pitied him then and almost called off my plans, but I remembered it was the talk of a drunk man. If he had actually gone as far as apologizing for the slight that had infuriated me and begged forgiveness, I may have given in. Probably not.

After he was safely in his bed, I went to mine. You might imagine I slept poorly, thinking about my plans. I didn't. Once I decide to do something, it is resolved. I awoke sharply, without an alarm, at five minutes before two. I dressed, got my gun and waited. At one minute past two, I could hear the cars starting at the redneck bar. I walked to my dear friends's room and knelt next to his bed. As the stereos began to blast and the engines to rev, I held the gun out in the firing position. At the sound of the first backfire, I nudged my friend with the nozzle of the gun, hard. They say a man has the right to face his accuser. He jerked and sat up in bed, a look of sleepy, drunken confusion in his eyes. I smiled to reassure him nothing was wrong, then immediately after the next backfire, I pulled the trigger and unloaded a single slug into his temple at point blank range. He grunted and lay down at a grotesque angle. A small hole now appeared in his window screen, exactly as I had hoped. The room smelled like warm plastic. I removed his wallet from the dresser and his watch, then left the room and walked to the front door. There were fifteen minutes to go.

Outside, I crushed the door handle with the butt of the gun, neatly and quietly providing a way by which a burglar could have gained entrance. Then I removed the slug from the fence with a penknife, finding its location easily by aligning myself with the hole in the window screen and my approximate position when I fired. I walked briskly to the tracks, a calm quarter-mile, not shaking or nervous at all, placed the gun on the tracks and waited. I put on his watch; it was accurate. At two-fifteen, the train passed, in its chugging, roaring fury, and demolished the pistol. I inspected the track and found a few identifiable pieces of metal that I placed on the track to be finished off by the next train. I walked back to the flat, tossed the slug into the bushes and my friend's wallet deep into the trash dumpster (after removing the money, license and credit cards).

Back in the flat, I burned his driver's license and cards over the sink and rinsed the ashes down the drain. I pocketed the money. Then I washed the dishes to remove the gun grease and powder stains from my hands. All in the dark, of course. I then prepared a snack of chocolate chip cookies and milk for I had become ravenously hungry. After the snack, I went to my room, locked the hallway door and slept soundly.

When I awoke, I felt as if I had dreamt a very strange dream. I walked into my friend's room and saw the blood-stained sheets and horrible evidence of a heinous crime. I screamed and became hysterical, then ran to a neighbor's flat and broke down. (I am a wonderful actor.) They called the police, who saw the evidence of a burglar surprised in the act and told me of my good fortune in not being in a state similar to my good friend's. I remained a blubbering idiot for most of the next week, and when I called in sick to work, they were very understanding.

I moved shortly thereafter and took a similar job in a neighboring town. The police and press despaired over the idea of a homicidal burglar running around town, but soon it became, in the words of an idiot television news reporter, "Just another unsolved mystery in a big and scary town."

I must admit, I felt guilty for a while, went through fits of melancholy, even considered turning myself in once. But what good would that do? I am not a badman, nor a dangerous one. And there are a lot of crazy, even truly evil people whom it is more important to catch, for all our safety.

If you think I'm bragging about all this, let me contradict you. I was careful not to feel confident, not to commit the sin of hubris. I still expect to be caught any day now. The perfect crime is not possible and I certainly did not commit it; there is evidence pointing to me all over the place. Somewhere in a Los Angeles land-fill is a wallet; somewhere in the bushes of our old home is a slug. These are the

chance things that some idiot-savant detective, driven by a one-track mind (a mind incapable of tolerance), could turn up to drag me in.

Many two-bit criminals and petty thieves commit far-from-perfect crimes for which they are never caught because of circumstances; I simply took advantage of my circumstances. Don't think I'm simply appealing to the macabre and ugly side of human nature, telling this story for your gruesome titillation. It's just that I had to explain how I felt, in writing—a study, as it were, of the mind of a tolerant man.

My story has probably become too expository in nature, so I will finish with this anecdote. Shortly after I moved into my new flat, a local police officer visited, offered his sympathy and recommended that I buy a gun for protection. I expressed reluctance, so he handed me an ad in the local paper and asked me to think it over. After he left, I looked at the ad. It said:

GUNS!!! .38 S&W semi - \$150; 45 Magnum - \$300; 9 mm Browning - \$200; many others too numerous to mention. Buy/Sell/Trade. Protect yourself before it's too late! 555-7634 (pri. pty.)

I laughed.

"An Explanation" is the recipient of the 1986 Helen Marcus short fiction award.

neal samuels

Learning To Forget

Of course it happens slowly
a slight clenching
in the neck
an innocent heart's betrayal

Years later
you're backing slowly
away
from all human contact
learning to forget
your missing children
and a woman's love
sleeping alone
in the barren
darkness
learning the dead's
silent language

How can you explain
your heart's savage beating?
She was your mother
and she's dead

The soft comfort
of your name
of her lips
one windy night long ago

a story for a child
waiting
learning to forget

Honorable Mention—(1986 Academy of American Poets).

lynn tinker

Hands Folded. . .Ankles Crossed

I In full rooster bellow-forté fashion
Chicken George breaks the morning
well before the softened milky edges of the pre-dawn barn
roof
lift out from the mist
still hanging low on the pasture just beyond

My father snores in the room facing seaward,
out over the stretch of babies' breath,
like fields of clouds, and lupis,
and the spruce grove and rocky ledge, and below to
Cope's Cove.

Only in some rolling seafaring dream might George's call,
on farm side, register shrill as the boatswain's whistle
for all hands on deck, or the screech of gulls
hanging, dropping, hanging, in the aft wind
to catch the bait dregs tossed on the curly seafoam in the
wake.

Dad's nostrils twitch in his sleep
and in the peace of his seaman's dreams
his cheeks fill with air as the exhale
phuh-flutters past slack lips,
 hands folded on his chest
 ankles crossed
 economy of space.

II I lie awake.
The visit has shown me rife lines in his edged face,
due softening, that show my face's furrows less
only in number than in kind;
but it's these fathoms between us that fester.
A far reach between us lies undiminished,
our endless armistice ensuring we flounder as so much
jetsam,
sovereignly bobbing, afloat, but scarcely, and apart.

III When did we make such a dull wicked truce?
to merely tread water here
or as if pace the farm side's acres aimlessly
wandering the mobius path with some promise
to never meet.
I have enfolded sons in this lap
and breathed their hot heads, their sweaty sticky damp
palms,
their vinegar cheeks, their almost necks,
that I might suck them back to me,
and I can measure the love of a child.

I will see you stumble out of your squeaky bed at
morning's light
your eyes as watery as the infant son,
your hair as tousled
your ass crack showing just as dark a slice
above your fallen frayed drawstring at the back.
You are just a grown male,
and we will end this snooze of a romance, father and
daughter,
or we may as soon lie back stiffly down
our eyelides thick and heavy, cheeks falling back
slackened jaws relaxing all the better
for drooling into the sodden puddle ever expanding
on the pillow by our ear.



stuart ackerman

As Flies to Wanton Boys

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;

They kill us for their sport..."

—William Shakespeare

The Tragedy of King Lear, IV.vi.38-39.

It had been six days since Sancho had consumed water. Usually, his iron will could keep him alive through great periods of discomfort. The problem was that his will needed water in order to work properly. He had read accounts of thirst in which people's tongues swelled up in their mouths, but he had never conceived of it happening to him. His legs were weak, his vision was blurry, and he almost regretted going without water, but not quite.

Even though it was rather painful, Sancho knew he was obligated by his own internal code to go without water. The less water he drank, the more the women and children could have. The thought of dying to save women and children kept him going. "Sancho Vasques," he fantasized, "a true martyr, and rescuer of kindred spirits, died of thirst today in the Eternal Bliss Savings Bank vault. The two mothers and five children who were trapped with him, six days ago, are alive today thanks to Sancho."

Six days before, Sancho had taken his wife Louisa, and their three children, Louis, Louise and Lois, on a small outing. He needed to go to the supermarket in order to buy distilled water for the iron and some beef jerky and potato chips for the poker game that night. While in the *Eight Items or Less* lane, Sancho's pocket pager started beeping.

"Damn it all," he said to his wife. "I just can't get away from those airplanes!"

"Ignore it," Louisa suggested. "You've been working at the airport long enough to miss one call. Besides, you've been at it for seven days straight. Spend some time with us."

Sancho nodded his head and clicked off the pager. "Even an air traffic controller should be able to get away from those airplanes sometimes," he said. He silently thanked God for his job. "I'm not going this once. I'm going to escape those planes this once."

After leaving the market, and buying a gumball for each of the

children as a reward for being seen but not heard, Sancho got an idea. He thought that since the bank was right next door, it might be nice to let the children see the safety deposit box he had just purchased. The inside of the vault seemed like an enriching learning experience to Sancho.

The safe was new, as was the bank. The floor was still an uncovered slab of grey concrete. The stainless steel safe deposit box doors, still covered with a slight film of dust, lined the four walls. They reminded Sancho of tiny drawers in a tiny morgue.

Sancho set the distilled water and snack foods in the center of the floor so he could get the key from his pocket. As he carefully searched through loose change, lint wads, and other keys, a woman and her two children also came in to look at their safe deposit box. Sancho ran his fingers through his bent, charcoal colored hair. He was slightly resentful because another family was engaging in what he thought was an original idea.

It was then that Sancho heard the loud deep roar that could only be emanating from a low flying 747. He remembered the familiar whine shattering concentration in the control tower. But this was the center of town, nearly ten miles from the airport. There was only one explanation. Sancho looked out the vault door to confirm the horrifying reality. As it were, through the bank window, he could see the 747 heading directly at him. Someone shouted, "Run!"

"No, you can't escape," Sancho said. Without a cognition or hesitation, Sancho closed the safe door and locked it. He yelled for the women and children to get to the back of the vault. The ensuing crash threw everyone to the ground. A concrete beam dropped from the vault roof, dividing the vault into a quarter on one side, and three quarters on the other. Grey clouds of concrete dust stifled the air and refused to settle. A line of white light broke through the roof where the concrete beam had fallen. Sancho grasped his head at the temples. His ears would be left ringing for the better part of three days.

Sancho stood up and walked over to sit down on the beam, in the light. Twisted wakes of convoluted dust followed each footstep, then eventually settled. Sancho had to now do some quick figuring. He realized that everyone in the bank was probably dead. Therefore, no one could know they were in the vault. Sancho thanked his God that fate had provided enough beef jerky and potato chips to feed a small army. He thanked the powers that be for the two gallons of distilled water. In his thankfulness, Sancho rubbed the throbbing black bags beneath his eyes. He stood, and vowed that he would not strike the women and children for complaining, nor would he drink any of the water that could quench their fantastic thirst.

Sancho often paced about looking at the pale children prone

on the floor. None seemed to mind the suffocating dust as much as he. Louis, his oldest, was stretched out next to a full bottle of water, but didn't drink. Sancho knelt next to the boy and uncapped the bottle. He propped up his son's head, and poured some water in his mouth. It trickled slowly down his throat. Sancho stood, proud.

There was no conversation in the dusty darkness. There was no light, save the shaft that pierced through the four inch hole in the ceiling, ten feet above. Sancho knew that this must be quite a depressing experience for the group, but he wished that someone would break the awkward silence. He decided that this had gone on too long, and became determined to quell the paralyzing fear.

Sancho positioned himself on the opposite side of the concrete beam, in the one quarter side of the vault. He aligned himself directly below the shaft of light. It reflected off the dust in and around his hair, and made the area around the top of his head glow. The black bags below his eyes were highlighted and his four day sparse beard looked thick and full in the darkness beneath his head. He hoped he looked imposing and persuasive here, and began to speak.

"I know you are all frightened," he sermonized at the motionless group. "But we now have a chance to demonstrate our faith." Sancho stood and spoke down to his companions, pounding on the beam with his fist when he made a point. "Remember when the Lord led the Children of Israel from slavery under the Pharaoh? They had no food, no hope. Just like us. They were hungry. But the good Lord provided. He dropped bread from the heavens. All the Children of Israel had to do was have faith. If we have faith, we will be saved."

Sancho climbed back over the beam and sat down against the vault wall. A cocoon of dust surrounded his prenatally positioned body. He was proud of his attempt, but wished for a greater response.

He looked at Louisa, lying across from him. Her wide grey eyes shone glass-like through the diffused light. Sancho saw only fear in them.

Sancho leaned against the vault door, then sat down. He wished he had answered his pager in the market and gone to work. That would have prevented the suffering. But he thanked God for the chance to show his faith.

At long last, Sancho could feel the vibrations of the emergency rescue team working on the vault door behind him. Soon, he could hear them. Before long, there were nearly deafening cutting noises and prying sounds. The lock clicked, quite undramatically, as molten sparks flew into the opening. Blinding light split white across the vault.

Sancho yelled for the children to stay away from the swinging door. Three paramedics entered. Sancho dropped to his knees and

gave thanks for being saved. "Thank-you for saving us." He swallowed the words as he fell to the floor in relief and exhaustion. The disturbed cloud of concrete dust settled on his back. He finally closed his eyes, and slept.

After what seemed like years, Dr. Pistil approached the press conference podium. Curious reporters flung unrefined questions at her in a bellowing flurry. They grew silent as she opened a prepared statement. "Sancho Vasques was admitted to 'Our Lady of Eternal Forgiveness Hospital' at eleven-thirty this morning after being pulled from the wreckage of Flight 333. He was not aboard the plane, but trapped in the bank vault that the plane impacted. He is suffering from severe dehydration, and, while in serious condition, he is expected to make a full recovery. I'm open for questions."

Cigarette smoke wafted from the reporters like a smoldering fillet, yellowing and dimming the T.V. camera lights. A reporter deep in the belly of the group shouted to the doctor, "Why was he not suffering from hunger, as well as thirst?"

"Mr. Vasques had a great deal of beef jerky and potato chips in the vault with him."

The crowd grumbled, reaching an apex, then quieted. A polyester clad reporter in the front row spoke next. "Is there any validity to the report that there were also two gallons of water in the vault with—"

"It's difficult to speculate, but after speaking with Mr. Vasques, it is clear to me that in some odd altruistic gesture, or macho type sacrifice... I don't know... Mr. Vasques was saving the water for those in the safe with him. Apparently, after the crash, he went on as if they were still living... Feeding the children water, speaking as leader, acting as protector... He even went so far as to save water for those he *thought* needed it more than him. That, I think, is why he suffered."

Sancho turned off the television press conference with the remote control beside his bed. He reached for his pitcher of water, but in his weary state, missed and brushed open the window curtains it sat near. A shaft of blue-white light broke through, into the hospital room, and shined in Sancho's eyes. They compensated for the intensity of this light, and he saw the room grow dark. He could barely perceive what looked like swirling storms of concrete dust above him, then settling about him in the room. He heard the silence that he heard in the vault.

He reached again for his water, but couldn't find it with the sun in his eyes, and the room dark. Sancho saw another light as the door inched open. A silhouette stood in the opening, then entered the room. Sancho realized it was an orderly. Still silhouetted, the orderly closed the curtains, then stepped back out of the room. Sancho's

eyes adjusted back to normal, so he reached once more for his pitcher. He emptied it into his cup and drank, hoping to wash the salty taste from his mouth, and the memory of his family from his mind.



cathy comenas

wayne stam

Was I Just Here?

THE SETTING: *A small, quiet, dimly lit den. A stereo is softly playing music suitable for lovemaking. There is a rocking chair in a corner of the room. There are a coffee table and two small end tables around a large, comfortable sofa. On the coffee table are two empty glasses, two album covers, and a few magazines. On the sofa are a MAN and a WOMAN, who appear to be in the early stages of what promises to be a very romantic evening.*

AT RISE: *MAN and WOMAN are engaging in a very warm, tender kiss. They may emit some "yummy" sounds (but let's not get carried away). At some moment, when they choose to break, the dialogue may begin.*

WOMAN: Mmmmmmmm. . . .

MAN: Was I just here?

WOMAN: Huh? (PAUSE) What?

MAN: Was I just here?

WOMAN: (LAUGHS, PAUSES) Yes. I think that was you.
(SHE KISSES HIM)

MAN: That was weird! (HE SITS UP STRAIGHTER)

WOMAN: I thought it was rather nice!

MAN: No, no. The kiss was nice. But the moment was really strange.

WOMAN: Should I be offended?

MAN: No. No, not at all. It didn't have anything to do with you.

WOMAN: I should be offended.

MAN: No. Really. I just, uh, it's hard to explain. My mind was really at peace—it's so nice to be alone with you—I was so comfortable that all my defenses—my inhibitions—had slipped away. The whole world was gone except for you and me.

WOMAN: That's *nice*! I don't think that's so weird.

MAN: That's not the weird part. . . Sometimes when I feel at peace. . . really at peace. . . oh, I don't know, am I making any sense?

WOMAN: I think I'm still back at "was I just here?"

MAN: In that instant, just before I said that, didn't you notice anything? Something different about me? Maybe a long moment of nothingness? (PAUSE) Yeah! Maybe when I perceived I was here, you couldn't! Didn't you notice *anything*?

WOMAN: Well, let me see. . . You know, your tongue sort of. . . (SHE THINKS BETTER OF CONTINUING) No. Nothing unusual.

MAN: I don't mean that. (PAUSE) I, uh, guess you think I'm just zoning out on you. I'm sorry. It's just that somehow, right now, in this moment, this finite, tiny piece of time, this seems so important. (HE WAITS FOR A REACTION, GETS NONE) I'm not talking about a fleeting thought here. I mean, I'm talking about me. The real me. The pure essence of me. I was just here, wasn't I? Really here. All here. (WAITS AGAIN, NO REACTION) Do you follow any of this, or do you think I'm nuts?

WOMAN: No, you're not nuts. I really don't have any idea what you're talking about, but you're not nuts. You're probably just very tired, and as you say "at peace". . . That *is* a very strange and beautiful feeling. Sometimes I almost forget what it's like to experience a truly peaceful moment. (KISSES HIM AGAIN. A LONG, GENTLE KISS) Mmmmmm. . . That's what I call

peace. . . And I'm *sure* you were just here.

MAN: (AFTER A LONG MOMENT OF NO RESPONSE) Have you ever had an "out of body experience?"

WOMAN: (A BIT PERTURBED) Is this a dirty joke?

MAN: (OBLIVIOUS TO HER) I don't know much about them, but I think this has something to do with them.

WOMAN: Dirty jokes?

MAN: No. Out of body experiences. Do you know what they are? (SHE SHRUGS) Maybe you've had one and you didn't realize. . . I'm not even sure myself, but I think it's the feeling of *watching* your own experience, even being able to leave it. Almost like a non-participant.

WOMAN: You mean like monitoring yourself—being overly self-conscious?

MAN: No. No, that *is* just being self-conscious. Seeing your own actions, but from your own viewpoint. What I mean is. . . well, feeling like *you*, the real essence of you, your conscious mind, leaves your body and observes you, well, whatever's left, from above—or from another viewpoint. (PAUSE) I'm not saying this very well, am I?

WOMAN: Now I'm beginning to think you're nuts! (SHE LAUGHS AND KISSES HIM) No, actually, I think I have felt what you're describing a few times. At least to some degree.

MAN: It is distinctly different from just being self-conscious, though. It feels a little like "deja vu," only it's relative to the present. There's a definite sensation of detachment.

WOMAN: Well, I think I know what you mean, but I think you have to realize that the "real essence"

you're talking about was real and really there before you sensed it. So where does "was I just here?" come in?

MAN: Hmmm. You've got me there. I think it's got something to do with intensity. Or focus. Or density of self-perception.

WOMAN: Density of self-perception? Listen to you! Since when are you so philosophical?

MAN: Gee, I don't know. Is this philosophy? I'm really just trying to define. . . to understand what I think I just experienced.

WOMAN: (MOCK-SERIOUSLY) Hmmm. . . zounds like vilozophy to me.

MAN: I guess so. Sartre?

WOMAN: No. s'philosophy! (SHE KISSES HIM AGAIN. HE STILL LOOKS LOST) Hey! Are you okay?

MAN: (COMING BACK TO HER) Oh. Yeah. Really. Yes, I'm fine. I just don't. . . (HE REALIZES HOW LONG THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON. HE SMILES AND KISSES HER) You know, you're pretty terrific to put up with me.

WOMAN: You're not bad yourself.

MAN: No, I mean it. You're really a very special lady. (HE KISSES HER ON THE CHEEK)

WOMAN: Gee whiz, do you really mean it? (SHE LAUGHS AND HUGS HIM) Thanks. You're right. I am special. Has anyone ever told you, you have incredibly good taste in women?

MAN: Yes, all my women tell me that.

WOMAN: I see. Where do you keep "all your women"?

MAN: Mostly, I "keep" them at the "Y." It's so much cheaper than the Bonaventure.

- WOMAN: Hmmm. . . Dom Perignon taste and a Ripple budget. And a philosopher, too. (DRAMATICALLY) Come and let me kiss the three of you! (ANOTHER GENTLE KISS. HE BREAKS AWAY, GONE AGAIN.) Don't tell me. You were just here again.
- MAN: No.
- WOMAN: Then who was it this time?
- MAN: No, no. It didn't happen again. I just can't get it off of my mind. What happened before.
- WOMAN: I'm beginning to think it's going to be on my mind for awhile, too.
- MAN: I know what part of it is. You know how most of the time we just do things naturally. Our life is planned. Preprogrammed. We almost automatically do what we have programmed ourselves to do. We aren't really involved. Everything is so, well. . .
- WOMAN: Impersonal? Unreal? Automatic?
- MAN: Yes! Everything! We're just machines. We program ourselves when we wake up in the morning, and decisions we *think* we make are made along printed circuits in our brains. We hardly participate. . . *And*. . . I think the reason we so rarely feel our own true essence is because we let it sleep almost all the time.
- WOMAN: I don't agree with that at all. You make it sound like we're all zombies blindly following some master plan. Personally, I think I *do* actively participate in my own life. For example, I think I want to kiss you! (SHE KISSES HIM SOMEWHAT ARROGANTLY)
- MAN: (BREAKING AWAY) Aha! Yes! But *why* did you kiss me just now?
- WOMAN: I take back what I said before about you not

being nuts.

MAN: No, really. I think you kissed me just then because at this time of day, in this setting, at this moment in our relationship, our interaction—it's practically automatic. Now, if you kissed me while you were, let's say, performing brain surgery—that would be more of a conscious, personal decision.

WOMAN: I would kiss you a lot less often that way, that's for sure. Might be fun "scrubbing up" for a kiss, though. (PAUSES) Come to think of it, though, that's an interesting visual picture. Are you the patient? If you are, then maybe you could leave your "patient" body, I could leave my "surgeon" body, and we could meet someplace.

MAN: You're making fun of me.

WOMAN: You're just such a fun kinda guy!

MAN: Stop it! (PAUSE) Look, I know I spoiled the mood, but—

WOMAN: Not yet, you haven't! (SHE STARTS TO KISS HIM AGAIN)

MAN: (STRUGGLING AWAY) Mmmmmmm! (HE STANDS UP, WALKS A FEW STEPS AWAY, WITH HIS HANDS FORMING A "T") Time out! Hold it just a second. Okay. Now, a few minutes ago, in this room, you and I were alone. And then I distinctly felt another entity in the room. Was it another "me?"

WOMAN: (AFTER A SHORT PAUSE, AS IF SHE'S AFRAID SHE'S OPENING A CAN OF WORMS) Maybe it was God?

MAN: (THOUGHTFUL, BUT SKEPTICAL) Hmmm, I suppose that's possible.

WOMAN: If it seemed like it was you, maybe that has

something to do with your being created in the image and likeness of God.

- MAN: I really can't see God as being that short. Besides, I don't think he'd pick this particular image and likeness to emulate. (PAUSE) Although, it is some kind of image I can't quite grasp. It seems to disappear as soon as I try to focus on it. The more I think about it, the less clear it becomes.
- WOMAN: Now it *really* sounds like philosophy!
- MAN: I'm convinced it's me. The part of me that lived before my body and the part that will continue on forever.
- WOMAN: I'm sure there's a joke here somewhere, but I won't try it.
- MAN: My soul. Or my essence. Maybe my consciousness. . . .
- WOMAN: Maybe your imagination. . . .
- MAN: Yeah, maybe it is just my imagination. But still, I think it's something more. (PAUSE) Why don't we get reee-el comfortable again. Maybe it'll come back, whatever it is. (THEY BEGIN TO KISS AGAIN. AFTER AWHILE, HE BREAKS AWAY AGAIN) WAIT! STOP! DON'T GO! Who are you? What are you? (HE RISES)
- WOMAN: (TO "IT") And why are you picking on *me*? (TO MAN) Maybe it's the "essence" of my old boyfriend.
- MAN: It's gone again. (HE TURNS AND COMES BACK TO HER) Oh, I'm sorry, honey. This must be frustrating for you.
- WOMAN: Well, it's not too frustrating, but it does have me scared.
- MAN: Why?

- WOMAN: You never called me "honey" before. I hate that! Couldn't you call me "baby", "gorgeous", "sweetheart", or even "toots?"
- MAN: Toots? Forget it. . . Damn it, that's frustrating. I just wish I could catch it, whatever "it" is, long enough to understand it. I'm sure if I could just figure it out, I could use this feeling. Like a tool. But I just can't seem to hold onto the image. Maybe it's getting more accessible, though. It never happened twice in one night before.
- WOMAN: Is this where you tell me I'm a great kisser?
- MAN: (PAUSE) Do you realize I just had two glimpses of *me*. Or the spirit of me. Or maybe really a look at God.
- WOMAN: Don't make any deals with visions of God. I saw *Love and Death*. "Ivan, what happened?" "I got screwed!" Besides, how can it be God? I thought you said you felt like you watched through "it's" eyes. I'm confused again.
- MAN: Me, too. I guess maybe I'll never understand what this is all about. Or maybe one day it'll all just click into place and I'll just know.
- WOMAN: (SINGING) "I'll know when my love comes along. I'll know there and then. I'll know—"
- MAN: All right. All right. I'll stop. (SHE LOOKS SKEPTICAL) Really. Here. I'll prove it to you. (HE GRABS HER AND KISSES HER. SHE MAKES A YUMMY SOUND OR TWO, AND THEY RESUME KISSING. THIS TIME WHEN THEY STOP, SHE HAS A DAZED EXPRESSION ON HER FACE. SHE HOLDS IT FOR AT LEAST TEN SECONDS) Babe? Are you okay? . . . Gorgeous? . . . Sweetheart? . . . Toots? . . . (STILL NO RESPONSE) Here goes. . . HONEY?
- WOMAN: What a bizarre night!

- MAN: I know. I'm sorry. Come on, let me make it up to you. (HE STARTS TO KISS HER)
- WOMAN: No, wait a minute. Just now, I felt something really peculiar.
- MAN: Oh my God! It's an epidemic! (HE LOOKS AT THE EMPTY GLASSES ON THE COFFEE TABLE) Maybe we got a bad batch of Seven-up.
- WOMAN: No! This was real. I think. No! I'm sure this was not a hallucination and it was not my imagination. I *know* that I left my body, like you said.
- MAN: Cute. I get it. Show me how stupid I looked. Okay. I get your message.
- WOMAN: No! I'm serious! I really felt. . . removed. . . separate. I watched us kiss. Like a non-participant.
- MAN: Oh, you participated all right.
- WOMAN: I don't think I can describe it. I felt like I was the eye of a camera in a tiny Goodyear blimp, floating around the room, seeing everything. It was like I was watching a film. I don't know if I'd describe this the same way you described what you felt, but I. . . maybe it wasn't even the same thing. But it *was* real. My mind, or something, was really separate from my body.
- MAN: Are you sure you're not just imagining things? We have talked about this far too long, and, of course, we're very tired, and. . .
- WOMAN: Wait a minute! Don't make this seem like nothing. It's very important. If we could understand it, it might be the most important thing that's ever happened to us! Like you said before, maybe the rest of our time is spent on unreal, unimportant things. I know something about this experience is more real, more important than. . . (SHE TRAILS OFF)

MAN: All right. All right. Don't get upset. I understand. *Believe me*, I understand. Look, I know it's important, but we're not getting anywhere.

WOMAN: You're right. For once. I guess maybe we'll never know, or understand. . . And the more I think about it, the more confused I get.

MAN: Me too. Let's think about something else. (THEY START TO KISS AGAIN. THEY ARE IN EXACTLY THE SAME POSITION AS IN THE OPENING. AFTER AWHILE, COMPARABLE TO THE OPENING, VOICES CAN BE HEARD BY THE AUDIENCE, BUT NOT BY MAN AND WOMAN. THEY ARE THEIR OWN VOICES)

WOMAN'S VOICE: Look at that!

MAN'S VOICE: Yeah. . .

WOMAN'S VOICE: Huh! Physical manifestations of spiritual and emotional bonds.

MAN'S VOICE: It's kissing.

WOMAN'S VOICE: Shall we break it up?

MAN'S VOICE: Again? No. That would be cruel. Besides, he almost recognized me the last time.

WOMAN'S VOICE: Don't they look cute? Are they really just ashes?

MAN'S VOICE: Dust.

WOMAN'S VOICE: I thought it was ashes.

MAN'S VOICE: They do seem almost real don't they?

WOMAN'S VOICE: What do you mean by "real"?

MAN'S VOICE: I'm not sure. Never mind.

WOMAN'S VOICE: Look at that!

MAN'S VOICE: Yeah. . .

WOMAN'S VOICE: Should we follow their lead?

MAN'S VOICE: I thought you'd never ask!

(MAN AND WOMAN HAVE CONTINUED THEIR ACTIVITY, OB-
LIVIOUS TO THE VOICES. THERE ARE NOW TWO SETS OF
YUMMY SOUNDS AS THE LIGHTS FADE TO OUR PERCEPTION
OF BLACK)

CURTAIN





