



**“Art, of its essence,
is opposed to that
which exists; its
task is neither to
glorify nor to
explain”**

Jean-Paul Sartre

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Prayer

the monk who kneels

the monk

who

kneels

dropped head in hand
kercheif

the monk

who knee ls
leaves

an orange rind
on

leaves

E

O

W

E

R

looking

lake metal

I took to vales

safe from the water
it was more like water

two two a cabin

you brought wood from one end
and leaned

acorns the wicker
basket in the brook

rid of tannins

sto
mach tightens

Animisms

swallow

sheet water

bowing to

bowing to

bowing to

sky

Love Said The Girl With The Sunflower Eyes

I do like the thought
I do like your eyes
I said
let's just lay
we both said that

love
said the girl with the sunflower eyes
will be eternal
maybe

—
—
—

maybe
not
I do like the thought
I do like your eyes
I said
let's just lay
we both said that

love
said the girl with the sunflower
will be eternal
maybe

H
E
I
N
E
Y

for then there was

for then there was
one

who said that
first

we must
leave

a
lone

there are now two
when

in place of
one

we sit
where

a
lone

for then there
one

who said that
first

we must
leave—

a —
lone

there are now
when

in place of
one

we sit
where

a

even w/ moderation

even w/ moderation

let me shake. let me shake even with moderation

let me shaake. let me shaake
even with moderation

let me sha-ake. let me sha-ake
even with moderation

lemme sha-ake. lemme sha-ake
even with moderation

Lemme SHA-ake. Lemme SHA-ake
even with moderation

Lemme SHAY-YAKE. Lemme SHAY-YAKE
even with moderation

Lemme SHAY-YAY-YAY-YAY-YAKE!
Lemme SHAY-YAY-YAY-YAY-YAKE!

LEM-me. LEM-me. LEM-me. LEM-me.
LEM-me, LEM-me, LEM-me, LEM-me
LEM-me LEM-me LEM-me LEM-me LEM-me —

SSSSHHHHHHAAAAYYYY-YAY-YUH-HUH-YAY-AKE—UH!

even w/ moderation

let me shake. let me shake even with moderation

let me shaake. let me shaake
even with moderation

let me sha-ake. let me sha-ake
even with moderation

lemme sha-ake. lemme sha-ake
even with moderation

even w/ moderation

let me shake. let me shake even with mod

let me shaake. let me shaake
even with moderation

let me sha-ake. let me sha-ake
even with moderation

lemme sha-ake. lemme sha-ake
even with moderation

Lemme SHA-ake. Lemme SHA-ake

1. Death Shot

Bang, I'm going to blow your brains out
There's no need to shout
No one to pity you
No one to help you
S.O.S are dead letters
While your silent screams will live
Angry bullets will be coming your way
Vengeance and Revenge are filled with gun power
Prepare your flesh to receive its punishment
I'm ready for death, are you
I can feel your blood is urging to come out
To make designs on the sidewalk
Look to me for comfort
Because I will give it to you, by gun is ready

II. Now and Later

Stop your hoping

It is not helping

Stop playing your cards

For life has already dealt you the loosing hand

Stop your crying

No one cares

You've had your chance

Even though chance did not want you

Be a mirror and look at yourself

For I can not stand to

It does not matter if you wash your hands

For I will not take them

I want to accelerate your pain

I want to combine all your hurts

Do I want you now or should I save you for now or later

I am greedy so I will take both times

III. Sundown

Four o'clock is coming 'round
And the odds and evens are all squared up
Walking down the street, I see you standing
The time is near for you to go down
You think you've done nothing wrong
But you represent everything wrong
Smile now, if you want to keep it always
For how I see your face now, is how it will forever be seen
My sky is blue while thunder echoes in your horizon
You may have peace, but I have pride
Come now, and come willingly

IV. Ground Rest

Do you like the earth
I surely hope you do
For you will become one with it
For dirt is always dirt
You can look at me in whatever way you want
It does not matter to my eyes
You may love me and you may hate me
I'll be content if you feel both
Ah, I see the brightness coming to me
To take away your light and bring you dimness
For you don't deserve darkness
Because you aren't worthy of its powers

V. Trust Your Fears

**Laughter is not a part of me
Unless I think of you
If love and hate are both the same
Then you have my undying love
Walk with me, I want to take you home
Fear will lead you, nothingness is waiting
You can smile; it will be alright
Many people have walked this path
Put your trust in me
So many have already
Harm you will I never
But death I promise you forever**

Edinburgh Chapel Memorial

stone: brown stone
(jagged and evil)

together is to rot assembled
assembly: dripping
meat for
callused hands
(they have razors for their fingers)

and now
cave reversed cavity
for tainted drinks:
their wine
(is the blood of our children)

stone: brown stone
is jagged and evil

(nevermind what they may say)

in its print
holes for
skin rigid: icy
flesh and purple-lipped grins
(their gatherings are often bitter)

**B
R
O
O
K
S**

Portrait

Thickened hair and thinned features embedded
In self like such tiny finger prints
Or the child once was who didn't share toys:
The mental giant and the baby ghost
Maker of wild blue and purple branches
Electric lines, solitary faucets.
If I could I would shout you to the wind
I would make of your panache a garden
For others to walk in and rejoice
Your castle is full of white banners
Canvas monuments pushed against walls.
If I could I would make you a garden
For others to walk in and rejoice
But all power has failed at the threshold
I watch as you wave and are gone.

M
A
T
E
Y
A

I drank the tea
at the bottom
of your cup
green cold and sweet

written onto the very bone of my brow.
there was a word etched out in black furrows

the poverty of words which do not emerge
finally consumed by those which do

stretched out (hand) scraped and scratched what has died
details of an animal making of desire
flesh of an animal making of desire
scraped out on a frame and restretched by hands
so much a flesh this used to be flesh
and quenches the whitest sheet of palest flesh

failed in our ability to be consumed
consumed by word by ink which literally queers
we all failed well let us say failed well

an image of having failed well (is all that's left)
the person who portrays the person
moment as representation of moment
think beyond this as not happening:

Cascade

Structures II

Every tree has its centers in asymmetry
the trunk branches and twigs the woody substances
fibers of cellular structure which develop
toward life toward age toward death
the core grows the bark branches twigs which exist
when a person dies the voice is lost to the world
voice however authentic however inauthentic
this unresponsiveness this painfilled goodbye
of voice with its resonance and tonality
can be imprinted can be a definition
a woody cellular substance which emerges
from those branches bark the twigs an efflorescence
rising from many centers asymmetrically. Smo

**Smoke from those garments
cut free, not able to be
mended, covered in honey,
salt and oil.**

**Smoke of a penetrating
incense, the **VISION** of death
(not the scent but the vision)
being freed.**

The body and **YES his blood
unresponsive to us now
except **this potent presence**
of the air.**

OCCASION IN A BOX

Recently, I have been thinking a lot about theatre. ("What is your definition of theatre?")

This is slippery to talk about. By talking, I've already engaged myself in theatre.

I put on a bit of a puppet show. I can never truly verbalize my mind. My mind is more of a stage hand

feeding me my lines from my consciousness. Consciousness is such a deceptive thing--I get angry just thinking about it.

Most days I'd rather stay well-buried in my Chelsea apartment listening to the the city. But some nights I go out. Many nights I go out. Many nights I go out to parties.

I listen to--and overhear--the people talk and play. I watch the play. And I'm not required

to applaud like a trained dog...

PHOTOS: Paolo Oerlov

TEXT: Paolo Oerlov and Sarit Rus

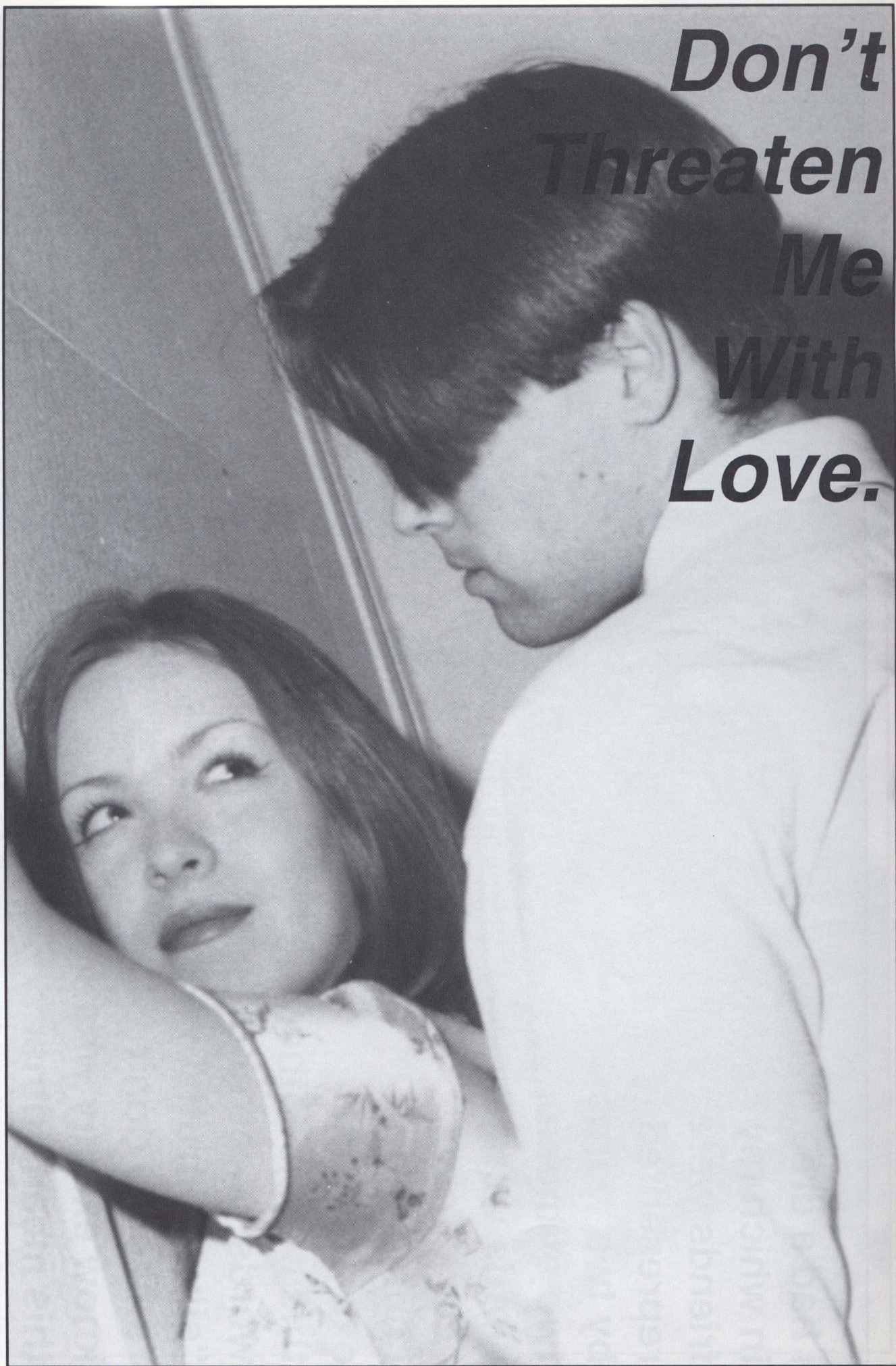
C
E
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Oh Mr. Parker!



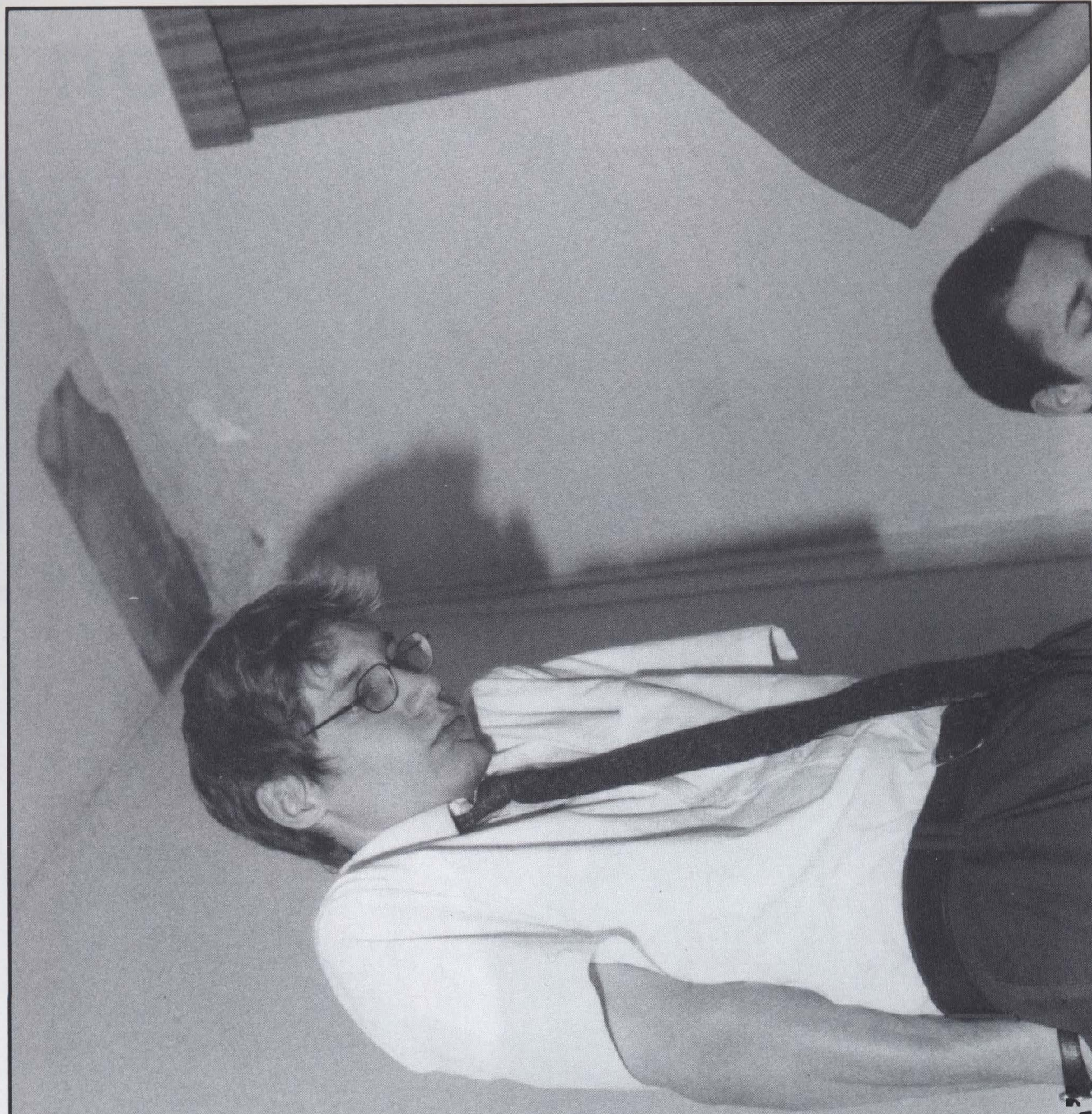
There is no God but you...

***Don't
Threaten
Me
With
Love.***

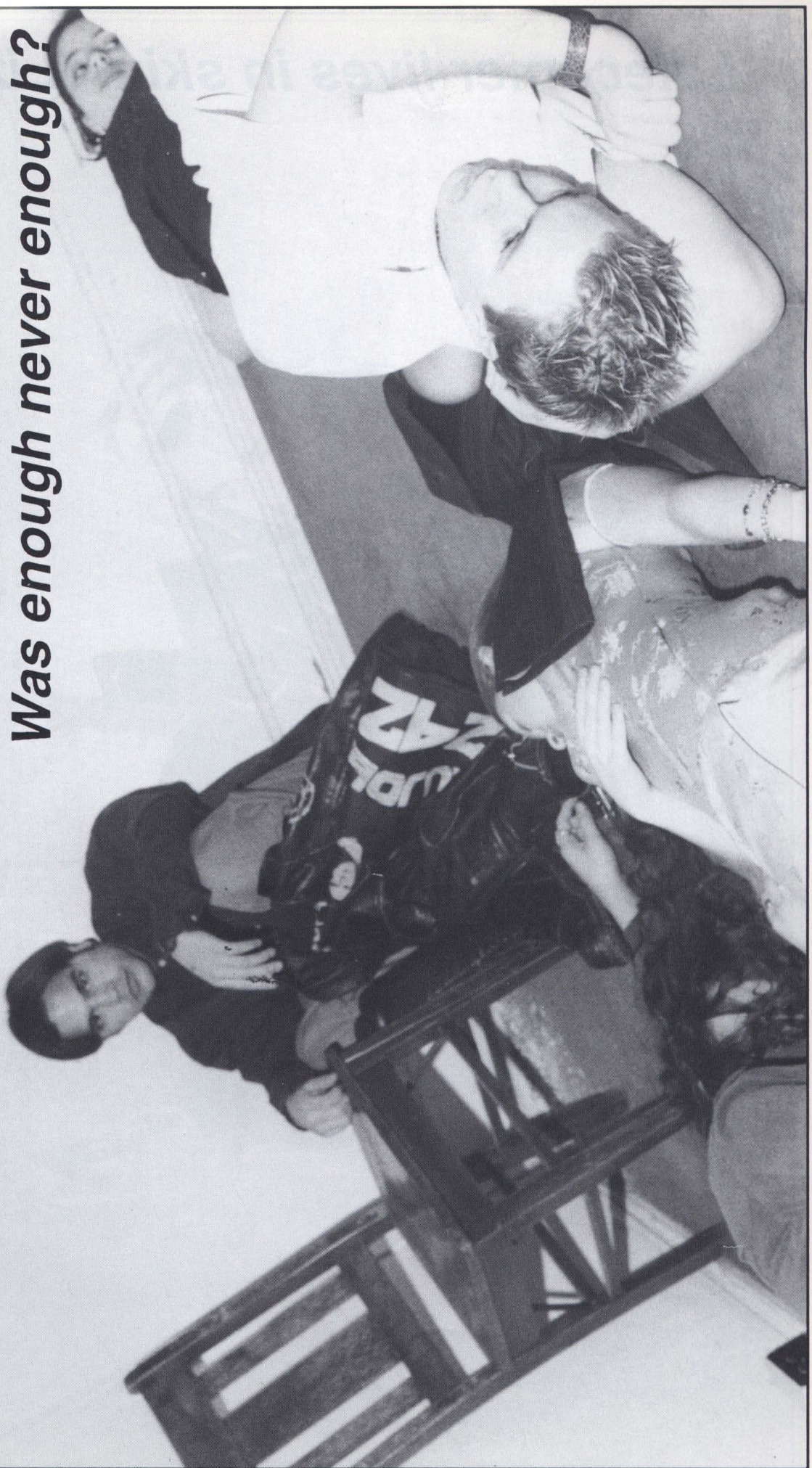


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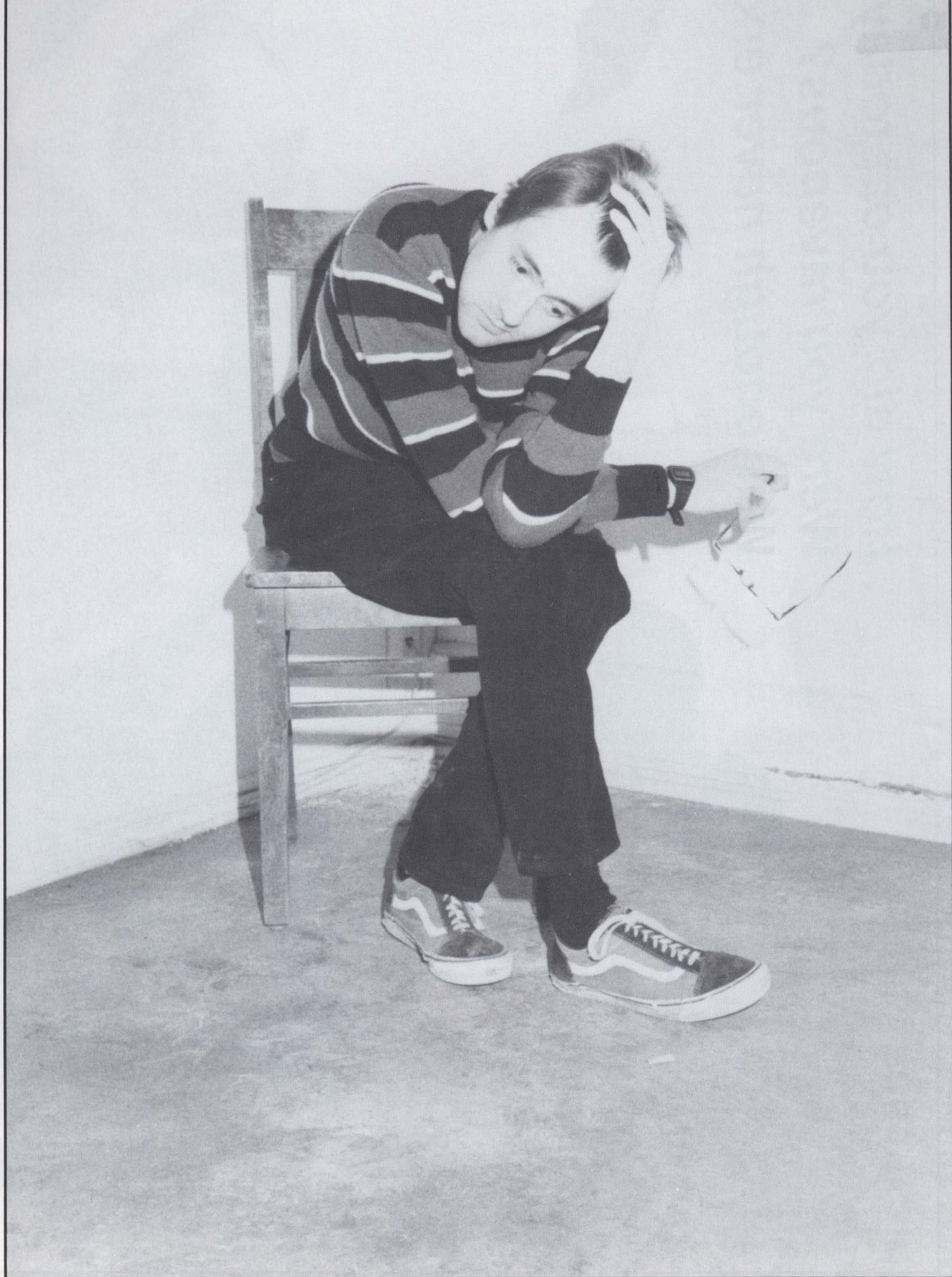
**i had a dream
in which my
friends were
represented
by two words
two of these
words were
“Dark Toy”
i don’t know
exactly what
this means other
words were “cod”
“silver” “truth”
“smack” i don’t
know exactly what
this means other
words were “cadence”**



***How did you eat today?
Were you ravenous?
Was enough never enough?***



Latecomer lives in skin. (Lizard)



Yes...

Well

Yes...

Right

now

i

could

be

anywhere

(else)



SKYLIGHT

Fred pushed his foot to the accelerator sharply, as if he owned the car and wasn't too worried about it.

"I'm more a realist myself," he said whimsically, "I'm seeing a lot of leaves, lots of water spots, some relieved birds and a nice round crack in the corner of the glass."
"Pragmatist."

"What?"

"Pragmatist, you're more of a pragmatist. Realist is something else." They glided to another red light. Across the street, a woman with short, jet black hair, hot pants, and a velour shirt stood waiting at a bus stop. She turned her sunglasses eyes to the driver side window and gave what Fred interpreted as a light smirk.

"I blame society," Fred said, glancing at the woman, then resuming, "Besides being so horrible to clean, they never let enough light in and they're bad for insulation. But there's this aura advertisers and Hollywood put in us about the sun's light. Like looking at it through a skylight will make you less indoors." They pulled away, the woman still smirking.

You know Trish and Ken?"

Ellen said into the vanity mirror, adjusting her eyeliner, "Remember I told you how much I admired their marriage?"

"Yea, sure. Couldn't ask for a better sister and brother-in-law." Fred's eyebrows approached each other as he said this.

"One reason is I can't believe they were ever reduced to talking about insulation and how hard it is to clean skylights. We sound like my parents." She snapped back the mirror and put her eyeliner away as she let out her breath.

"Oh, please! You'll never do it, and I know just what would happen; it'd be up there nice and clear for a few weeks, but then it'd get all coaked up with grime and leaves. You'd never say anything, but I'll get sick of looking at it, so eventually I'll have to go up there and clean it myself. Probably break my neck..." After crossing only two blocks, they hit another red light.

"But that's the problem, you'd never ask if I would clean it or not, you'd just go ahead and do it without me knowing. You don't think I'd do my share if you asked?"

"Christ, Ellen, that's not the point. What am I supposed to say:

'Hey, the skylight's dirty, can you get up there and clean it for me?'"

"Something like that, maybe a little less demeaning. It's green."

"I know," he said, tapping on the accelerator. "You really think that I could ask you that?"

"You should, it's not like I want you to do everything," she said with a touch of ice that he didn't notice.

"What do you think people will say if they see you up on the roof?"

"I thought you didn't care what people thought of us."

"It's different from having some hard times," he said pensively. "I'd agree with everyone thinking I'm a jerk for letting my wife clean something on the roof."

"This isn't the 1800s."

"Okay, fine," Fred said. "I'm an invalid and so I'm letting my wife go up on the roof and clean the skylight." He suddenly glared at a Gremlin in his rearview mirror that was menacing to tailgate. Fred thought he saw the driver laugh as the small white car turned right

and was lost from view.

"You don't have problems with me doing my share of the housework."
"So I have no reason not to let you up there," Fred said resoundingly.
"Right."

"Maybe you could put in a new roof while you're at it, no reason not to, right? Maybe set us up with a new antenna, hell, why not start enclosing the porch?" He checked his blind spot quickly and then eased onto the noisy highway.

"You act like you grew up in the '50s, you're being ridiculous."

"I don't care if I do sound ridiculous, it'd be weird to let you go on the roof and clean a damned skylight."

"And because you don't want me to go up there, and you don't want to clean it yourself, we won't get one. I can't believe I'm talking to a lawyer."

"Not yet you aren't," Fred said, trying to his his bitterness.
"Fred..." Ellen crooned, "it's hard to get a job right out of law school..."

You did, Fred thought.

"...it isn't the same market it was a few years ago."

"I know, I know, we don't have to get into this now," Fred said curtly, yet again short-circuiting an argument he knew she wanted to have. It was late March and the crunch was on in her office, especially with one of her paralegals out for the rest of tax season with mono. They were screening new applicants for a temp; she had been complaining about it for a couple of days now, but he dodged any reference to it. He could feel her awkwardness like radiation next to him, but he couldn't think of anything to say. They drove in silence for a short while, his mind buzzing way until he reached some sort of resolution.

"Ellen, this is just the way it is. If we got a skylight and you cleaned it, I'd feel strange. I wouldn't want to clean it and I wouldn't want to leave it dirty. There's no way I'd be happy with a skylight in the house."

"And how I feel doesn't count," she said more angrily than she intended to.

"I have to deal with it too! I wouldn't do something I wanted if it really bothered you." She opened her eyes and looked as if she were trying to contain herself.

"But your only problem is you won't let me, a perfectly capable woman, do my fair share, and let me help you out." He had a fierce look of annoyance on his face, but she pretended not to notice. "It's not that you don't like the skylight. You're just prejudiced."

"Okay, let's say that I am, though I don't think so, I think every red-blooded man would feel exactly the same way I do. I would be bothered by the skylight because of prejudice, fine. I'd still be bothered though, and I'm still your husband. What good is doing something like this unless it gives us both pleasure and peace of mind? I mean if I got a crappy printer and saved us lots of money, but the paper jamming all the time drives me crazy, it's not a good buy. If I can deal with it, I got a bargain. That skylight would bother me, it's just the

way it is. Shit!"

Fred squealed the brakes hard, but it was too late, he missed the exit by a good thirty feet. He slowly began to accelerate again. His voice was more subdued.

"We can take the next one, what time is it? 8:50. Plenty of time, don't worry, I'll get you there on time."

Five more minutes of driving but no more of talking. They drove up to her office's front door. She got out and bent to speak into the car.

"I may be late tonight, 7 o'clock."

"Do you have another project due?" he said, craning his neck to the open window,

"No, we've got a lot of business for the next month, and we're really understaffed with Kim away. It should be all right by next week, we should have a replacement...by then." She looked for a response in his face, but there was none. "All right...I'll see you tonight," she said qui-

road, empty and easy while every inch of the inbound lanes were packed with motorists, bleary-eyed and ready for hours of drudgery. Fred kept repositioning his hand on the steering wheel making the car jiggle a little because of its power steering. The car's down payment had come from the money

Ellen's parents gave them as a wedding present. Fred thought of the quick look the dealer had given him as she signed payment agreement. He drummed his fingers as the line of cars to his left flowed but didn't change. He watched it momentarily.

"All right," he said to the cars, "all right." After a few minutes of aimless driving he pulled back into Arlington, looking for a Heichinger he knew was close by. All right, shouldn't be too hard, he thought, not

more than \$1000, maybe less if I can cut the hole myself. We'll see, maybe it'll be more of a hassle than its

worth. Installing's no problem, installed doorknobs all through college, can't be too much different. Keep those research skills oiled, get some stats so we know what we're talking about. It probably won't be as bad as I think it is. We'll see.

ely, and turned to go.

"Okay, love you!" he said cheerfully as she closed the door.

"Love you," she said. He watched her walk up the winding path to the imposing glass edifice, open the front door, and go inside. Fred edged away from the curve and began to merge with traffic again.

8:58. He didn't have another interview for two weeks, and he had already called everyone worth calling that may lead to a job. He had the whole day to himself, and it made him nervous.

Paralegal is a shit job, he thought, goddam two - year degree.

He soon found himself on the other side of the

In Sunshine and Rain

Watching my mother get ready to go out with my dad used to be a game. She would sit at her white wicker vanity table (how appropriately named!) and apply all the Maybelline, Revlon, and Mary Kay needed to complete the transition from my ordinary mother to a beautiful princess. I would watch, fascinated, hanging upside down from their master bed, my twin braids waving as I gently bounced on the mattress. After mother was done, she would turn to me and say, "Emmie, do you want to be pretty too?" and I would immediately roll off the bed and trot over to her chair. My nose would come just to the level of the table top and I would have to stand up on tiptoe to peer over the ledge at the assortment of blush brushes, lipsticks and rainbow colors of paint. Before anything more significant than lip gloss touched my upturned face, my dad would come striding out of the bathroom, calling in his big booming voice, "There's my Lee-girl! How's my baby today?" He would swing me up in his arms and I would bury my face in his neck to avoid the tickle of his beard, breathing in the soap and aftershave smell of him and I would hear his words rumble deep in his chest as he said, "She's just a kid, Kat, why bother her with all that stuff now? Just let her run around for a few years and the rest will take care of itself."

"Jack, she is a little girl, she won't always be able to play in the mud with Eddie and Dave," mother would answer in exasperation as she fumbled with the clasp of her string of pearls. Then my dad would swing me down again and lean over to help her fasten them, kissing the nape of her neck.

"Em, will you give me a hand with these pearls? I can never seem to fasten them." I roll gracefully off the master bed, as I've done a thousand times in the last twenty years and walk over to my mother's vanity table. "Sure Mom, what time are you leaving?" I ask, my fingers deftly working the clasp mechanism that she still hasn't mastered even after two decades of wear. "Oh, I don't know, as soon as Barry gets here I guess," she says absently as she applies final touches of mascara to that flawless face, "Don't you want to try this new blush I got? It'll really bring out your skin tone?" I sigh as I feel the headache coming already, the pulsing and throbbing on the left side of my skull that signifies the onset of the migraine. "Mother, I've told you a thousand times that I just don't wear makeup. It's pointless for me to take twenty minutes out of my morning to put on something I just have to scrub off for softball practice." It's my mother the saleswoman that replies as she sweeps the "essentials" into a small handbag. "You know...you'd be

The Bingo Queen

Saint Peter's Lutheran church is giving away the biggest bingo jackpot in the history of Maple Springs. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money in my town, and the women fluttering around the church basement are buzzing about what they would do if they hit the big one. Connie Mays said she'd buy a diamond ring from the Home Shopping Network. I'll tell you something though, from the way these women talk about her, I'd say she'd buy a month's supply of Jack Daniels. Marge Jamison said she'd donate hers to a local charity. Yeah right, the name of that charity is "Help Marge Get Another Facelift." Before we left for the church, my Daddy made my Mom promise to give the money to him if she hit the jackpot. He is very concerned with winning this money. He was in the basement for a week trying to make counterfeit bingo cards before he realized it is impossible to cheat at bingo. Now Daddy is trying to get enough money to buy pigs to start his own organic pork farm. My mother tells him he is crazy and he'd have to kill her before she is caught dead raising organic swine. I think I'd like living with pigs because I love playing in mud. He hollers to her, "Everyone is in to organic crap these days, look at all them people who eat that tofu garbage. And how 'bout hummus, why the hell would ya eat somethin' like that?" He told me that five hundred dollars is just enough to buy about a dozen piglets. He'd saved up all his pocket change, and money he took from Mom's purse, until he had every cent. Unfortunately, one night he was playing poker with his friends down at the Golden Keg and lost it all. Mom was mad as hell, not because he lost the money-she didn't want to live on a pig farm anyway-she found out where all her missing cash had been going. She was going to bingo to try and win it back. The church women were still talking about my Daddy's last scheme. His last money-making attempt was disastrous. He was trying to train our dog Toby to do all

kinds of cool tricks. He worked on training Toby every night in the basement so he could sell tickets to a "Toby the Wonder Dog" show. It was too bad that all Toby could do was lay down. He was so old he couldn't even get back up again. I was disappointed because I was looking forward to selling the popcorn. Since Toby was too old to do tricks, Daddy decided to try and make him talk. Of course, Toby was no Mr. Ed, but that didn't stop Daddy. He posted signs for his "Toby the Talking Wonder Dog Show" all over Maple Springs. People could come and ask Toby to answer their questions. Needless to say, Mom went to live with my Gram for a few days. Gram didn't really want her, though. Daddy built a platform in the basement and put a curtain around the bottom of it so that no one would see me. You see, I was the voice for "Toby the Talking Wonder

so pretty if you just took some time with yourself. Look at how gorgeous Lizzie looks and all she wears is..." The slamming of the front door interrupts her pitch and from my position near the door I can hear my sister greet Barry and his response floats up the staircase. "I'm just great Lizzie, what're you up to tonight?" I glance at my mother and she is looking back at me, waiting to gauge my reaction. "He has a key? I didn't even get the new one after you changed the front door." I kick at the leg of the table, making the brightly colored accessories dance briefly then settle again into their places. My mother shoves her chair back and grabs her wrap. "Em, grow up. You're not a little girl anymore and I would really appreciate it if you could come downstairs and be civil to Barry for once in your life, O.K.?" I follow her at a distance down the steps feeling my blood begin to pound in my brain and watch as Barry's face lights up. If I try, I can pretend that it's dad just coming home from work. Barry is big man, tall like dad was, but his hair is sandy where dad's was coal; still, the illusion lasts until he opens his mouth and that high pitched nasal voice comes out. "Well, don't you two look lovely tonight?" he smiles and holds his hand out to my mother. I scan the hallway mirror, taking in the college warm-up suit I'm wearing and choose to ignore his comment, sweeping past them into the family room to throw myself in my rocking chair. Even though I can't see her, I can feel my mother roll her eyes and shrug at him, which, I suppose, gives him the courage to follow me into the room and attempt to make conversation. "Well, how's spring break going kiddo? I bet you're happy not having softball practice everyday?" I sigh inwardly as the headache creeps into my neck, causing the tendon to tighten painfully, but I hear my dad's echo in my mind, "Company behavior," so I pick up a magazine and answer, "It's nice to have a break I guess. Between school, softball and working for coach I usually don't even get a chance to breathe." He beams at having achieved this breakthrough and grins at my mother whose smile echoes his own. I don't really know why he annoys me so, it's not as if he's ever done anything to me personally, aside from speaking in that horrible voice. I try, really I do, but every time he opens his mouth my skin crawls and I'm as short as possible simply to stop his voice. The problem is he tries too hard and he's not my dad and never will be and he's always going to fall short in comparison. Sometimes, I can be civil though, like tonight, and mother seizes the opportunity. "Em, Barry's going to be out your way when you play Lamire University. He's going to stop by your game and maybe you two can grab dinner afterwards." She's treading dangerous water now and she knows it; her eyes warn me not to make an issue of this, to just accept it but I can't. In three

Dog." Things were going really well until the love of my sixth grade life, Billy Parker, asked if Penny Rose Caddick would go to a movie with him. I was so mad because there was nobody I hated more than Penny Rose Caddick, that I lost my concentration and forgot to talk in my "dog" voice. I screamed from under the platform, "Penny Rose would never go out with you because she made IT with your brother Tom in the back of his Volkswagen!" I started crying underneath the platform while Toby just laid there. Jane Olds came over and asked Toby if he was all right and dabbed his eyes with her handkerchief. In the meantime, I came rolling out from under the platform and ran sobbing to my room. Daddy wasn't too mad at me, but everyone started calling him a fraud. You can see why my Mom is sort of a bingo outcast. This bingo game is an annual event that goes along with the Christmas in July Bazaar and Bakesale. Once we get there, Mom goes to help the other women arrange the baked good table. All of the ladies are arguing about who will get to hold the cash box. You must understand that holding the cash box is considered the most important job. Well, at least they all agreed not to let Olive Waterhouse run the box. She hadn't come in yet, but all the ladies are convinced she steals the money to put in the collection plate on Sundays. Meanwile, I sneak away to peek at a Harlequin romance novel behind a bunch

of boxes stacked in the corner. I wonder why there are always so many of these books at bazaars? They make some very interesting reading. In fact, mine is called Love at Graceland and the back cover says: "Witness love at Graceland. Bobby Pinkerton, a handsome Elvis Presley impersonator, uses his 'hound dog' ways to woo women both on and off stage. His gigolo ways are ended when he meets Cindy Morris, the woman of his dreams at a diner after a show. Come along for the story of a beautiful and touching love affair between an Elvis impersonator and a waitress in this month's Harlequin 'Man of the Month' book selection love at Graceland." Now, what could possibly be more interesting than that? Peering around the corner of a box, I see my mother slicing up a fruitcake. Fruitcake is disgusting at any time of year, but especially in July. I hear the scritch scritch of an old woman in polyester pants approaching my fort. I shrink back amongst the books for cover. Old women sure are lucky that polyester isn't flammable; they'd be bursting into flames right and left. Just as I am getting to the good part in my Harlequin, my mom pulls me out of my hiding place by the untied strings of my hot pink Converse hightops. "Maggie," she says, "get out here right now and help Mrs. Grover get her jello mold out of her car!" really cannot believe I have to leave my book behind for the likes of Mrs. Nelly Grover. I suppose you could call Nelly the matriarch of Maple Springs; however, I think a better title would be the matriarch of gossip. She publishes the "Notes from Nelly" newsletter once a month for the people of Maple Springs and "surrounding communities." My name got in there once, you'll never

years, she hasn't made even one of my games and I'll be damned if the first member of my "family" to see me play will be Barry. The pain in my head worsens another degree and the muscles in my shoulders contract as I think how to answer. "Um, that's really nice of you, but Coach usually makes us eat as a team and I don't want you to have to drive all that way just to watch the game. Anyway, aren't you more of a football kind of guy?" I ask as I casually rifle through the magazine. Dad never missed a single minute of my high school athletic career, from the first pitch thrown on opening day, to when Sharon drove in the winning run in regionals, making my team the best our area had ever seen. After every game, we would go to the Garden and dissect the game over Caesar salad. "You gotta open your stance a little, Lee," he would say as he used the sugar packets and silverware to illustrate his point, "You're hitting fine, but at the number three position, you want to be able to drive that ball deep right, to help out your lead runner." Through the pounding in my head, I almost don't catch what Barry is saying, sitting across from me in that perfectly pressed three-piece suit with that idiotic smirk on his face. "No Lee, I'd really like to come, I think we'd..."

But before the sentence is even finished, my mother flinches, catching his mistake, and squares her shoulders, ready for an outburst. She doesn't have to worry, I can't even hear him anymore because it feels like my brain is trying to escape my skull by using a jackhammer to find the exit. I rock to my feet and leave the room without a word, in search of the extra-strength aspirin that's in the master bathroom. Barry is bewildered by my sudden exit and I can feel his eyes follow me as he calls, "Emily, are you O.K? What happened?" and then I can picture him swiveling his neck to face my mother as his voice trails after me upstairs, "Kathy, what just happened? What did I do? I thought everything was going so well this time." I purposely leave the bathroom door open and even as I'm fiddling with the medicine cabinet, I'm straining to hear her reply. "It's not really your fault, sweetheart, but you called her 'Lee'; that was Jack's name for her—'Lee-girl'. We all had a special nickname; I was Kat, Lizzie was Bets, and Emmie was Lee. He always said those names made us his and no one else ever used them. I don't think Em's been called that in almost three years." She sounds tired and drained and for one brief instant some sympathy sparks in me. I wonder if she too misses her special name, misses hearing, "Kat, where are you? I'm home!" as my dad strode in from work, or "Kat, gorgeous, we're gonna

guess why. Of all things it was to say: "Miss Maggie Parker got braces last week. Already, her best friend Kate Stone, mistaking her rubber band for a piece of coconut, proceeded to eat the rubber band. The school nurse was called in to help. I am happy to report both girls are doing just fine." Could you imagine trying to live down something like that in the eighth grade? Anyway, Nelly wears a ballerina pink fuzzy wool jacket 365 days a year. She is wearing it today even though it's about ninety-six degrees out. She wears these huge

pink earmuffs that match the coat. They're so big she might as well strap two rabbits to her head. I really don't think she uses the earmuffs because she is cold, I think they are so she can block out the sound of her own voice. Nelly not only never stops talking, her voice is like a screeching record set at the wrong speed. As we walk outside I sniffle a little and blow my nose. I constantly have a stuffy nose. My Mom insists it's because I insist on sleeping on our screen porch on a cot every night. I don't care if I have a stuffy nose for the rest of my life; I intend to sleep on a screen porch from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Nelly whirls around, pink earmuffs and all and says, "I don't know what's wrong with you young people these days. When I was young my father used to give me a glass of warm red wine. He put me to bed and I sweated my cold off. Tylenol. Humph!" Her cats are mewling in her car as she opens the trunk containing a massive green blob of jello that I think is supposed to look like a Christmas tree. Back to the cats though—I once had to deliver Nelly's purchases from a cheese and sausage school fund-raiser to her house. Or, should I say, her cats' house. Each one of her cats has its own personalized canopy bed complete with catnip bedspread. Her cats even eat from crystal dishes, just like the Fancy Feast commercial. I almost didn't believe this myself when I saw it. Last year, she made a Boston cream pie for the bakesale. Little did she know, the lady who bought the pie brought it back because when she served it to her husband for dessert one evening; he began to choke on what proved to be an enormous cat hairball in the pie. He apparently ended up filing for divorce because he thought his wife of thirty-five years tried to kill him. All of this became known through "Notes from Nelly." She never did put two and two together and figure out it was her pie. Oh well, at least you could see the cat hair in a jello mold. The jello is balancing precariously as I follow Nelly back into the basement. Her husband of fifty years is sitting by the door eating potato chips. He wears hearing aids in both ears. Most people claim it's because of listening to the bombs drop in World War II.

I think he wears 'em because all Nelly's blabbering made him deaf. Every Sunday after church he gives me a silver dollar.

be late if you don't get it in gear" as he stood with her coat over his arm at the door, tapping his foot and looking at his watch. I wonder if she still hears his voice echo in her head at night and if she sometimes shudders when she compares that deep rumble to Barry's nasal accents. That flame of empathy burns until I hear Barry's angry reply, "Well, he's gone, Kathy, and I'm here. I know that I'm not Jack and never will be but Lizzie has accepted it, why can't Emily? I can't ever connect with her because I'm competing with a ghost, a memory. And frankly, I'm tired of playing the fall guy." They must have moved to the foyer because I can't hear their words anymore, just the mingling of their two voices, neither distinguishable from the other. It doesn't matter anyway; I've found the aspirin. I swallow four tablets and say a little prayer for relief as I collapse on the toilet seat. The migraines have gotten a little better over the years; at least I don't throw-up anymore and my vision still works. The doctors said that they were stress-related, that they would ease with time; well, it's been three years now and my head still throbs on a regular basis. The pattern of the tile in the bathroom isn't doing anything for my head, so I walk out into the hallway and debate which direction to turn. I can hear the T.V. on downstairs, so Lizzie is occupying the family room. She's not someone I can talk to right now either, because she likes Barry, thinks he's good for mom. She's also been around the last six months while I've

been at school; she's used to him. I haven't heard the door yet, so I know that my mother is waiting, leaning on the wall with her hands behind the small of her back, waiting to see if I'm coming back down. I need to clear my head, breathe in some fresh air, so I turn towards the door that leads to our unused third floor. The enclosed steps smell old, musty like sheets that need to be aired before they're used. But when I open the door the evening air gently fans my face and I'm surprised that there's a window open. My dad's studio has been silent for a long time. His weekly cartoon was a huge hit in our town's Sunday paper but his true love was painting; the easel is still standing in the east corner near the window. I would find him here on Saturday mornings, with the tip of his brush coloring his beard. "Cartoon time, Daddy," I would call, peering around the doorway, from the time I was six until I was thirteen and too old for such rituals. He would start, then turn towards me and the sun from the window would mingle with his face until I was blinded by him. His laugh-

Mr. Grover doesn't have any teeth, but one of his favorite foods are Golden Sun Potato Chips, made right here in Maple Springs. Boy is it fun to watch him eat 'em. What a mess! He is just about to grab a handful when my Grandmother Jackson waltzes through the door. The whole basement falls into a dead silence. My Gram is the bingo queen and can play up to thirty cards at one time. She is even wearing her lucky outfit. Her tee-shirt that says "BINGO BABE" right across the chest in gold glitter, and red jeans. She even has on the lucky red and white beaded necklace I ordered her from Avon last Christmas. Her hair is its trademark purple-blue hue and she has her famous Lucky Strike cigarette tucked behind her left ear. She carries a box labeled "QUEEN" under her arm. In the box is her bingo queen crown which she only brings out on nights with big jackpots. I think my Gram is secretly wishing Shep Wilkinson --her favorite bingo caller--would show up soon, She glances nervously towards the door every few seconds, her fingers rubbing her lucky Avon beads. Gram would never admit she likes Shep. I know better than that. She talks to him in her meanest voice and teases the hell out of him. I have a crush on the cutest boy in eighth grade, Arnold Menkin. So, I'm hoping to get a few pointers from Gram on how to talk to men. All the people begin to scramble to get a good seat. My Gram sits down in a seat next to my mother. My Mom has a hard time keeping up with my Gram. As soon as she sits down she asks her, "Honey, can I call up your hubby and ask him if Toby will tell me tonight's lucky number?" All the women snicker and giggle. My Mom hates to be laughed at. She tells my Gram her head looks like a giant clump of purple cotton candy. My Gram pulls the box top from the dye out of her purse, hands it to my Mom, and says: "See, it says deep bluish-gray." My Mom just looks away and begins laying out her cards. No matter what Gram says, it still looks purple to me. Gram asks me to pin her crown on her head. The bingo queen crown is really nothing

more than a Burger King crown with bingo chips glimmering like jewels on the golden cardboard. Pinning her crown on is a bit difficult considering Gram's hair is so thin that the light shines through it giving it an eerie lavender glow. Shep, the bingo caller, has come in from Blue Mountain to call numbers in tonight's game. He has a nasty reputation of being fast and mean. He's also what the women around here call a "looker." They say he looks just like Cary Grant. Hey, you know what, I think he was on Melrose Place last week. Once, when all the ladies gathered for the annual quilter's club bingo night, Shep called the numbers so fast that no one could keep up. Suddenly, all the women started pelting him with bingo chips. It was like he was being lynched by a group of psychotic bingo playing quilters. This episode simply proves how seriously bingo is taken in Maple Springs. Evidently, Shep wasn't much bothered by the bingo chips because he kept on calling the numbers faster than ever until a chip scratched his eye and knocked his contact lens clean out. My Gram told me it was quite a sight to see, Shep

ter would fill the room as he said, "God, Lee, you scared me. O.K, daughter-mine, Scooby-Doo time. Jelly or glazed doughnuts today?" Why that window should be open now I don't know, but the rain is already soaking through the lid of the chest underneath. Curling up on that seat, I lean my head against the screen, letting the rain mist my face. The pounding in my head has eased a bit and the coolness of the night is soothing. I watch as my mother and Barry get into the car, his umbrella sheltering her and I actually find myself smiling at his eagerness as he fumbles to open the passenger door, not realizing that my mother always insists upon driving. Dad didn't care, he would just always open the driver's door for her, sweeping an imaginary plumed hat, "After you, Lady Kat." The sound of the car fades along with my smile as my mother and Barry drive away. I don't understand how she can be with him, how she can forget dad so easily; they loved each other, I know they did and love isn't supposed to just die. Nine didn't. Even the rain has him in it. Our shore house had a covered balcony and when the sky was overcast and we couldn't go to the beach, my mother would make the business calls necessary to keep her happy while she beseeched my dad, "Jack, please take the girls out so I can get this done." He never minded, swinging Lizzie under one arm and his easel under the other, calling back over his shoulder, "Only if you're quick, Kat, you know I can't control these two terrors long." And she would smile and blow him a kiss with her fingertips. Once the easel was set up, Lizzie would be occupied with Barbie and Ken's first date and I would perch on the back of a chair just over my dad's left shoulder. He would work until the rain stopped and then scoop me up to lean with him over the railing. "The world smells clean after the rain, Lee, it smells

new. Now let's grab your mother and hit the waves." Tonight, the rain tastes sad, like salty tears. Swinging my leg, my foot connects with something solid, sending the object sliding across the wooden floor. I can see the writing spidering across the open pages and as I bend to retrieve it, my heart beats a little faster. I didn't know that my dad kept a diary up here. As I leaf through the pages by the clouded light from the window, some of the words are already blurred and smeared by rain. I find a random page and begin reading. "And there are days when you hate for it and blame you and it isn't your fault but it still hurts..." My mother's voice leaps off the page and I flip through the book scanning the dates and the headings that all begin, "Dear Jack..." I open to the beginning. "Oh god, Jack, I wish you could have been there today, you would have been so proud of Em. She got up in front of all those people

crawling on the ground amongst flying bingo chips looking for a lost contact lens. My gram threw the chip that hit him, she's got one heck of an aim. Shep still claims it was just a love tap. He said he loves a beautiful window with an attitude. Later that week, he took Gram out for the early-bird senior citizen's special at Susie's Shady Nook. My Gram confidently sets out her cards. Tonight she is attempting thirty-three. My mom tries to convince her not to try it, but she tells her to "shut-up and worry about her own cards!" My job is to hand Gram the bingo chips as Shep calls the numbers. We're using pink chips because that is my favorite color. "B3, B3, B3...get those chips down on B3, B3" Shep is shouting with a cigar firmly clenched between his yellow teeth. "Hey, Roberta" Shep hollers to my Gram, "Am I going slow enough for ya?" My Gram doesn't even glance up in reply because she would have broken our rhythm. I see her slip Shep a wink though. You should see us, we make a great team. Gram is really going to town, she grabs the chips with one hand while puffing rhythmically away on her Lucky

with the other. It is a sight to see, purple hair teased high with plenty of Aqua Net hairspray. I can't wait till my Mom lets me use hairspray. I'm gonna buy a giant "salon size" aerosol can of Aqua Net and do my hair just like Gram. You may be wondering how Gram's hair got so thin. She isn't balding or anything gross like that, it's just that the last time she hit a one hundred dollar bingo jackpot she had a mild heart attack and had to be rushed to Valley Hospital immediately. Nelly went with her and fanned her the whole time with one of those cheap oriental fold-out fans from Woolworth's. The doctors and nurses all warned her not to smoke in the hospital room because of the oxygen tanks. Gram didn't listen though, and she smuggled a Lucky in by hiding it in her hair. Well, needless to say, the combination of Aqua Net and an oxygen tank don't really mix too well together. That is why my Gram's hair is so thin. My Gram snaps me back into sync after my little day-dream. Shep's really moving now. "0-58, 0-58, 0-58...come on Roberta let's keep it movin' here sweetie!" Now, my Gram doesn't like anyone calling her sweetie and she screams "Hey Shep, if ya don't shut the hell up I'll tell everyone that you had an affair with Billie Jo Messinger's sister!!" Well, Billie fell right over in her chair and passed out on the floor. Nelly gets up and whips out her oriental fan and immediately fans Billie back to life. My Mom tells my Gram to stop being ornery and play because she's trying to concentrate. Gram replies, "Why do you want to concentrate? I thought you didn't want to live on a pig farm?" At this point I would give anything to go back to my Harlequin romance novel. I can see it laying beside my fort of boxes. Bobby, the Elvis impersonator, was just getting ready to sing "Love Me Tender" to Cindy in front of all the customers in the diner. Now that's what I call true love. Men that good just don't exist, except in a good book. While all this is going

and gave that speech, flawless, until the end when she said, "I love you Daddy" in a voice that broke my heart." And I can still feel the eyes on me as I finish my speech, my classmates clapping furiously, not really caring what I'm saying, just happy to be graduating at last. The only face that is holding me up is my mother's, her eyes never leaving mine and next to her, out of the corner of my eye, I can swear that my dad is clapping too. The next few pages, another entry and the despair in her

realization came about a year after the fact. I know that it wasn't my fault that my dad wanted to get me a great graduation present but he was still on the road that night for me.

"Sunflowers for my sunshine, Lee-girl. Love, Daddy," read the card, the only thing to survive the crash intact. When we got to the hospital, one of the nurses gave it to Lizzie. I still carry it in my wallet, a remembrance, a talisman of love. She's angry on the next page. "Dammit, Jack, you're not here and I every time I look at Em, I'm reminded of that. I see you in her face and there

are some days I hate you for it, and some days I blame you and I'm in my dad's arms again, squirming as his beard tickles me.

"Bets is her gorgeous mother, Kat, but this one is all mine. I just split her out, you had nothing to do with it. Sorry, Lee-angel, but you're your old man through and through." I want to stop there because this hurts, all the more because I'm hurting along with my mother and I know that the

rain isn't what stained these pages and blurred the ink because my hot tears are mixing with my mother's before me. "She's leaving today, Jack, and I don't want to let her go because she keeps you alive for me. What am I supposed to do without your Lee-girl?" On the ride to college, she was silent and I felt no need to contribute to the conversation. Sorrow had hung in the hot summer air like a tangible thing and the monotony of it had been broken only by doctor's visits. College was to be a fresh start, a relief. But when it came time for her to leave, I found myself clinging to her because she was my only connection to the safe, good life I used to know. Sitting

on, Shep is calling 'em faster than ever, and since my Gram has 0-58 on twenty-seven cards out of thirty-three cards we can't keep up! "Slow down before you lose your toupee, you old bastard" Gram yells. I don't think I'll use anything this strong on Arnold Menkin. Gram doesn't seem to bother Shep

too much. He just keeps calling the numbers. Mom tells her to watch her mouth in the house of the Lord. Gram of course ignores her. While Gram is yelling at Shep to slow down, everyone else is telling Gram to sit down and shut-up. "Hey Roberta, maybe that tee-shirt should say "BINGO BITCH," hollers Ethel Sweitzer from the chorus of shouting bingo players. Ethel really should have refrained from that comment. Gram hurls a rock-hard piece of fruit cake at her. It hits her square between the eyes knocking her right to the ground. Poor Nelly doesn't know quite what to do because she can't possibly fan both women at the same time. Gram crawls along the floor to avoid the bullet-like pelts of Chex mix, pretzels, and potato chips flying through the air. Mr. Grover is cheering Gram on from the sidelines. He screams "duck Roberta, pretend you're in the trenches." My Gram slides toward the food as Mr. Grover makes machine gun noises from his seat. She grabs Nelly's slimy jello Christmas tree from the baked goods table and slings it right in Ethel's face just as she is getting back on her feet. Nelly is so mad that Gram ruined her jello mold, she shakes up the bottle of soda on the table and spews it all over Gram. Gram rips Nelly's fan from her hand and smears a big glob of jello on it. Shep is still calling those numbers faster than ever, and I think my Mom is the only one still concentrating. He calls in rapid fire mode, "I-28, B-1, N-67, G-..." and just as he is about to announce the number, he is smacked in the face with a scoop of Pearl Everhorn's rice pudding. It lands right on his face and drips down his long chin onto his clothing. Shep doesn't really seem to care that he is covered in rice pudding, he seems more concerned that his cigar went out and needs a light. He gets back into his groove and says that the number is 6-88. A cry of B-I-N-G-O!!!! reverberates throughout the room. The food fight stops as a blob of jello, complete with cat hair, lands on Mr. Grover's lap. He keeps shouting "go troops, go troops," while tasting the jello with his finger. Everyone looks around at the church basement. There is food everywhere. The jello is the worst. Ethel and the walls are covered in green slime. Rice pudding is

dripping everywhere. Chips and pretzels are crunched all over the tile floor. After everyone is done surveying the damages,

alone in the studio, I try to convince myself that none of this really matters now. While she might have felt this at one time, she has obviously overcome her sorrow. The anger flares briefly but dies even more swiftly as the night deepens around me. I turn through the years in paper, searching for my name, hearing the echo of my mother's words. "Em started for the first time today, Jack. Our daughter, playing college softball. I didn't let her see me there though because I thought she might resent my being there; her softball was always your special thing together. Being there today reminded me of our old tee-ball games in the backyard. We used the old tire swing as a catcher and Em would always whack it, remember? God, you would have been proud of her today—I was. I wanted to run and hug her but she's been pulling away, ever since Lizzie told her about Barry. She won't let you be

replaced..." That day I walked off the field with the worst migraine since the funeral. It had been my dad's dream for me to play college ball; researching the top schools for both my major and my sport had been our senior year project. That day when they played the national anthem, I stood with my glove over my heart and wished to god that just this once my dad could see me wherever he was. After the game, everyone else found their parents; I found the bus and pretended to sleep on the ride home. But she was there, all along. She always came when I was younger too; those first days learning to hit off the tee, she was our outfielder, while dad was my batting coach. "Look at that swing, Kat, I told you, she's gonna be a power hitter. When she's a little older we'll have to start her lifting weights and then we can show her how to switch hit, and then..." dad would go on and on while I triumphantly smacked the ball off the tee. Mom would be holding her stomach, laughing as she rolled in the patch of dirt that served as the pitcher's mound. "Jack, why don't we teach her how to hand-write before we send her off to the majors? I think we have a few years yet..." A car door slams as my mother's voice sounds in my ear as well as my head and I drop the book to peer out the window. In the street light, the rain has stopped and Barry, not my dad, is holding open the driver's door, waiting for her to step out.

"I can see her yawning as he asks, "Long night, Kathy?" He keeps his voice low to match the stillness of the night. "There are some nights, Barry, when I'm so tired that all I want to do is look in on my sleeping children and thank God for my blessings." They pass below me, moving toward the house and beyond my range of hearing. I open the screen and lean over the sill to smell the night air. I can hear the voice echoing in my head and this time the echo doesn't hurt. The world smells clean after it rains, it smells new.

they witness the most wondrous sight of all. They turn their heads just in time to see my Mom snatching the bingo crown away from Gram. It doesn't matter that the cardboard is soaked through with jello. As she rips it from Gram's head some of the chips come flying off. My Gram is furious that Mom has taken her title. Although I think she seems more upset that my Mom pulled out about six pieces of her precious purple hair when she took the crown. My Mom puts the crown on and dances across the basement screaming, "DING DONG THE QUEEN IS DEAD," while laughing and pointing to Gram. For my Mom this is like winning the gold medal in the Olympics. She grabs me out of my fort and swings me around and around. Green slime from the crown oozes down my Mom's face. Hey Mom, "what about the pig farm?" She snaps back into reality. Suddenly, my Mom stops swinging me around. She stands motionless in the middle of the floor as if she is making the biggest decision of her life. "Well Maggie," my Mom says, "now that I've defeated your Grandmother, my life is complete. I think I could manage to live on an organic pig farm. Besides, we're talking about your father, how long could this scheme possibly last before he does something to screw it up?" All of the women were muttering things like "not too long," or "remember Toby..." I guess I'll be getting to play in the mud. Boy, will my Daddy ever be happy! I can't say the same for Gram though. She sits alone at the table cradling her empty box. My Mom yells, "I guess I can at least leave you the box seeing that it's empty." My Gram just looks at her doesn't say a word. This is the first time my Gram has had nothing to say. Shep steps down from the bingo platform. He says to Gram, "I love a widow who knows when to keep her mouth shut." Then, when he gives Gram a peck on the cheek, Nelly almost had to start fanning me. This is better than Bobby "Elvis" putting the moves on Cindy in the diner. He asks Gram if she'd like to go to

Susie's Shady Nook with him for all-you-can-eat meatloaf night. How did Shep know meatloaf is Gram's favorite food? As my Gram is leaving the church with Shep, she wipes a glob of green jello off of her shirt, runs her fingers through her remaining hair, turns to my Mom and says, "Well honey, guess I'm the queen of hearts now!" Gram throws her arms up over her head and wiggles her fingers just like a cheerleader. She hooks her arm through Shep's and clicks her heels together as they skip out the door.

The Gold Watch

Mr. Norton of 12B was the first neighbor I had met upon arriving in town. He lived across the hall of our four story apartment building. He was I'd guess 5'9" and exceptionally thin. His dark shirt must have been two sizes too large and hung loosely from his body. It flopped around and rippled with every gesture he made, giving the appearance of a windy day. He was bald on top and the last of his hair wrapped around the sides of his head. He informed me that he was a retired electrician and that this was the place to come if one had some free time. I told him I was here strictly on business. With a minor amount of fumbling I was able to get my keys into the lock. I swung the door of my new habitat open and noticed the odd off-orange, if that's even a color, shade of the rug. Good thing I won't be here long, I told myself and asked Norton about the carpeting in his place. "No, No I've got fine plush carpeting. All blue, laid it down myself," he said smiling and taking a drag from his cigarette. "Looks great, looks great," he mumbled a second time while looking for a place to ash. "Walls are paper thin though. I hear everything anybody on either side of me is doing. If I turn down my T.V. I can hear what they're watching. I don't bother with those people much though. Ain't really nothing to say to 'em." We walked to the window together and checked out the view. We were facing a side street from this living room window. A small ice cream shop stood just across the way. Next to it was the parking lot for the bank. Being from down south I wasn't used to the coldness of

the air. "I love it. Best air in the world up here. Clears out the lungs you know," Norton said smiling down to the ground. "I wasn't born here. No I must have been 25 when I first got here. Never wanna leave you know?" he said to me. The overhead light shone off his bald head and his squinty dark eyes blinked convulsively before returning to normal. One more trip to the car and I had all that I needed in my apartment. Norton left so that I could get settled in. He paused at the doorway and said, "I'll stop by later to see how its going," shutting the door behind him. It wasn't quite 3:00 P.M. I unpacked what little I had and figured in a few days the rest of the pack-

Lead to Rust on the Highway

"They live in our water, man. I'm telling you." That's what Ryan told me. I believe him, too. Not like a dumbass, but rather the convincing manner in the blatant lie of it all (like the government really puts toxic bugs in our water supply). He's seen everything, well 1, a lot more than me anyway. He was in the Marines, so he got to go all over the world. I'd love to be him. The coolest thing he's done (I think it's the coolest) was last summer. He spent the entire summer in Stone Harbor, NJ. He was living out of his car, his fucking car. He was a lifeguard, and spent his money on booze, and crashed at friendly people's houses. He just, did it.- That might, well, suck, but the experience is one you'd never forget. You know it would be awesome. What a story to tell your grandkids! He cracked the lid on another can of Busch 16oz. Pounders. With his free left hand, he held his pumpkin sunset hair away from his face, and poured a waterfall of beer down his throat. Ryan has always been a huge drinker, beer drinker. "That's why I never touch the filthy shit, man. You never know where the toxins are gonna creep in. I mean, one minute you're sucking a glass of agua, the next, you've got some fungus in your liver. It's all fucked up." I know man, I know. What the hell are we gonna do about it though? Can we stop it? If we said anything about that to, like, real people, we'd be in a looney bin." Ryan paused, like he's thinking real hard. The whole time he's got this half-smile cocked on his face, and he's absolutely fucking frozen. "Man, fuck all that, let's get loaded. It's not my problem, well, it is, but... I don't know. I don't care." He spun away from me into the open floor, dancing to some whacked out trance/rave/techno music and earning a few phone numbers from female admirers.

"Hey, I'll catch you later. I'm going over there, cool?" He waved, he probably didn't hear me. I took my brew and my grit, which had almost expired from the movement of my hands during that whole "conversation", and from the neglect my lungs have shown it, and I walked. It's hard talking to Ryan, with or without beer. I strolled over to the other side of the basement hoping to find somebody I knew, or at least a cool chick with a beer. It wasn't so much a stroll as it was a surge through a twenty meter rugby scrum of fifty screaming drunks. It took a hell of a long time. "Hey sweetie!" I heard as I felt the hand on my ass, "What are you doing here sailor?" I swivelled my head on its axis and almost knocked myself out by plunging my head into this huge football player I did not know. "Oops. Sorry." It was cool; he didn't even know I bumped into him. Upon swivelling my head back, I saw Sandy. Goddamn is she cute, but hey, we're "just friends."
"Whassup sugar. You think you can just up and touch this ass for free? Oh, no! That'll be

ages would arrive and I could begin my work. I'm something of a traveling salesman but business had never brought me so far from home. I would be here for four months, the longest stay of my career. I'm moving up in the company. All the bosses said so. Even Mr. Rollings, whom I've never thought liked me very much told me how much of an impression I made on him. I had "what it took" apparently and am sure to go places if I just stick with it. The next day I spent settling in. I met Norton at the elevator after my trip to the supermarket. He offered to take a couple of bags. "What do ya got in here?" he asked looking through the bags. "Peanut butter... Chunky... No jelly though huh?... Hey what are you doing for lunch?" "I hadn't made plans," I told him.

"Well I know a nice little place not far from here. Has a bar. Unless you were planning on..." he reached into the bag and pulled out the box of frozen nuggets and held them close to his face squinting to read the label. "Tyson Chicken Nuggets" he read slowly and then looked up. "No I'll just save them. I'd rather go out to lunch anyway. Yeah, Yeah save these for a special occasion" he said with a laugh. Norton helped as I quickly unpacked my groceries. We went to Celeste's, a bar and grill place a couple of blocks away. It was a nice day out so we decided to walk, a little exercise might do us good Norton said. The place wasn't far but we had to stop several times for Norton to catch his breath. "Don't ever get old," he warned me between coughs. Norton ordered up two margaritas at the bar and then went to a booth further back. "They serve them in little cactus shaped glasses," he told me as he wiped his damp face with a paper towel he kept in his pocket. "Nothing like the first drink of the day," he says raising his glass and winking. "So what on the schedule for tomorrow?" "Do you always eat fries like that?" "Like what?" I asked knowing what he meant. I put ketchup on each individual fry length-wise. "I like the right amount of ketchup for each fry. You can't guarantee that with dipping 'em." He smiled faintly saying um hmm as he nodded his head and took a sip of his drink. We didn't know each other well

twenty d-". I tried to finish, but the bear-hug she laid on me stifled that attempt. "What's all this I hear about you and Ryan going to Montreal next week, huh? How come I wasn't invited?" she smiled out to me with her beautiful pink, burnt out eyes. "No, no, no made-moiselle. We're going manana, baby. To-mor-row. Hells yeah. Get it right. And you.. are.. invited. We're leaving at 7:30 am. Be at Ryan's by 7:15. Got it?" "Are you serious?" I nodded yes. She said, "What about Steph? Can she come too?" I nodded yes. Ryan wouldn't have cared, he wasn't driving anyway. "But it's four thirty in the morning now. How the fuck are you guys going to wake up?" "We're not. No. Ryan's not, I'm just not going to bed." "Bullshit. You aren't going to sober up in only three fucking hours. No way." (She has quite a mouth on her hasn't she.) "You better tell Steph you guys are coming with. You might have to go home and pack. That's gonna take you guys forever," I mumbled, with a fresh cigarette dangling unlit between my lips. "I better go tell Ryan you guys are coming. Oh yeah, bring mas dinero. Hotels are gonna be cheap, but we need money for food, gas, and whatever drugs we can get our hands on." I got another hug and heard some more sounds that came from Sandy's mouth, but my mind was already walking away.

That little girl's body must have hung in the air above the asphalt for eons. Water balloons don't float for that long, and she turned out to be a water balloon when she came back down. "Oh-my-god. Where the fuck did she come from? Holy shit, oh shit oh shit what the hell are we gonna do. She couldn't have been over nine. O-o-h shit." I rolled down the window and puked out the side. "D-did you see t-that little girls-s h-head bounce up off the s-street?" Ryan was laughing. That's pretty sick, but my friend was actually laughing. He was fucking laughing. "You sick fuck. You shut up right now!" Sandy sobbed between her swings at Ryan, and Steph would have done the same if she was there. She started crying; not deep sobs from the bowels, but a nervous, panicky crying. "What are we gonna do?" she mumbled again and again. We didn't stop. We barely slowed down. We were scared and nervous as fuck. Ryan's laughing didn't help. He pushed me on and on to keep going, laughing all the while. I'd looked back once and saw the sun was holding the little girl to the ground. My twitching hands reached for my cigarettes. I lit one up. Watching the orange hearth glow with the pull from my lungs helped blot out the sermon Ryan was giving. That poor little girl. She couldn't have been more than nine. Where the fuck did she come from? Exhaling the warm gray smoke made Ryan's voice stronger. "Just keep on driving man. Don't look back. Don't even think back.

enough for him to tell if I was serious. "What about tomorrow?" he asked again. "If your packages don't arrive you don't work right? Hell I'd give them the wrong address, make sure there's a whole delay and have myself a little vacation," he said laughing and took a drag from his cigarette. He finished his drink to stop coughing but continued to knock on the table. I could tell Norton was the type of guy who could crack himself up pretty easily. One of the waitresses came back to our table. "Can I get you gentlemen anything else?" "Sure I'll take another drink. What about you Jack, we got time for another one or two." Norton said, grinning to the waitress. "Sounds like a good idea," I told them and watched her hurry off to the bar. "What kind of work is it you do anyway?" Norton asked. "Traveling businessman I work for a computers and equipment company." "You like your job?" "Sure why not, it's a living," I told him, and thought to myself whether it was true or not. Did I really enjoy the constant moving around? Never being in one place long enough to get to know anyone. It didn't help that I was shy. Or maybe it did, maybe being shy and a loner made it easier for me to put up with that part of the job. The sound of Norton putting his glass down brought me back. The waitress brought over our drinks. As we sat there

talking I realized how interesting this Norton guy was. He started talking about transplants and figured if we can do hearts and livers now, it wouldn't be too long till we could transplant people's brains. "No, no listen," he told me, "it'll be mostly for rich people. But figure if some kid gets hit in the head and goes brain dead but there's nothing wrong with the body, eventually they'll be able to replace the dead brain with some rich old guy's. All your ideas and memories would go with you but you'd have a healthy new body. In a way you could live forever. The future's gonna be pretty interesting," he said with a broad grin. "If it's anything like you think, yeah it'll be interesting. So what are we doing tomorrow?" I changed the subject. "We'll figure something out. Stop by some-

Who cares about that little girl? You didn't know her. None of us know her, so why should we care. She was nothing, a movie extra who passes in front of the camera once scene, never got to know her face. He took a break to take a swig of his beer, and then passed his bowl to Sandy, then me then back to himself. He dropped another hit and finished. "Besides, do you want to waste away the rest of your lives in a jail cell for a dead and gone piece of shit on the side of the road? What does that girl care what you do now? She's dead, and you are alive. Now keep living, and keep your ass driving." I did just that. After all, I didn't know her. What did I care if she was alive or dead? I might be the one that killed her, but then again, you start dying the second you're born. She was a face that nobody ever saw, I barely got a glimpse of it. I don't want to go to jail. I'm young and need to be free. Besides, Ryan was right, she's dead, or what does she care what I do; she's a corpse. "You boys make me fucking sick", Sandy screamed. "Turn around right fucking now! We can't just leave her there on the road. It's not right, it's just right right." "Shut the fuck up! Don't you think before you start yapping? What good can we do this girl, what are we gonna change by turning around? She is dead and gone and nothing is going to change that." If your sorry ass wants to get out and go back there and take the blame, we'll drop you off right here. After that, you're on your own." Ryan always knew what to say. He should've been a radical, political party leader. Anyway, he shut Sandy up. She looked like shit, like one of those Holocaust victims they show on television sometimes: eyes all sunken in, dark, dark faces. He kept moving, but we all pretty much kept silent. We had a carton of Kamel Reds for each of us, and I had to tear open another to keep my head buzzing. I pumped one cigarette in after the other, each one attempting to push the incident out of my mind. I just kept thinking, "Man...they know. Who knows? My parents, my brother, my sisters, they're gonna kill me. That

was bad, that was very bad. What am I going to do? Oh shit, my life is over How can Ryan get over this? Is Sandy still breathing (ha)? She is so pretty. What if that little girl was my kid? But she's not, she's not. Shut up shut up, shut up, shut the fuck up!" I was sure that I was in hell, and if I wasn't now, I had earned my place at the right hand of the devil. Sandy was mumbling in the back seat, banging her head into the inside of the car like a psychiatric patient in a padded cell. She knew what I did, what we all did. Ryan was drinking another bottle, listening to his walkman. It was Morrissey, or was it The Smiths, or something...who cares? He was singing along. He hasn't shed a tear, thrown

time in the afternoon," he told me. When Norton opened the door for me the next afternoon the first thing I saw was the blue carpet. It jumped out at you. What would you call it aqua blue, sky blue? Something like that. Wall to wall it ran. "Nice carpet," I told him. He laughed and coughed and put down his Old Milwaukee on the table next to the couch. It was a great couch, straight out of the 70's. It had bunches of brown flowers all over the gray upholstery. He noticed me looking at the wooden block it sat on. "Had to cut off the legs. Couldn't get it through the door otherwise," he told me, laughing as he walked to the kitchen

to get me a beer. I looked around and noticed the emptiness of the place. It was a lot like my apartment. Besides his couch and old TV set there was only an uncomfortable looking wooden chair. His overhead light had no cover so the bulb threw a yellowish light about the room. "Don't like a lot of clutter," he said once he walked back in. He handed me the beer. "C'mon I want to show you something," he said and walked towards the bedroom. His bed had a sickly green blanket, that looked about as old as he did, and was pushed into the corner by the window. The carpet in this room was brown and I considered asking why he didn't have his prized blue carpet in here but noticed him pointing towards the desk in the corner. "There it is," he told me crossing the room towards the desk. It was covered with old watches and parts. A couple of shoe boxes full of stuff sat quietly on top. I guess the no clutter rule didn't apply here. "My hobby I guess you could call it. Been fooling with them for years. Used to take watches apart when I was a boy. Still do I guess," he said with a laugh. "Got into watches when I was working and especially since I've retired." He stared down at the parts and rubbed his thumb over a gold pocket watch he picked up from somewhere in the middle of the mess. I realized I had never seen him serious. I stood at his side and picking up a couple of pieces at random and told him it was a good hobby to have. He nodded but didn't say anything. Standing in silence with the older man who seemed to forget I was even there made me feel a little anxious. "Interesting stuff, eh?" he said with a weak smile as the hypnotic look in his eyes faded away. Sitting on the couch in his living room, Norton and I watched "Jeopardy" and drank a few beers. He

up, or even acted the slightest bit panicked, just that half-perma-grin all the time. He knew what we did. The sky and the surrounding trees that used to be a separate entity from us now encircled us and collapsed right on our car. Right on me. The trees bowed with shame for their silence, and the sky went dark, wearing black for the corpse we'd left behind. They knew. Those trees, that sky. I could hear them through the closed windows, whispering to us, to me, "GUILTY."

I felt the hand on my shoulder and the vigorous shake. It expelled on my body. I pulled away and tucked myself into a tighter ball. I heard the mumbling above my body, two distinctly different voices, one of them being my own. I broke the darkness by parting my eyelids and cracking their crusty seal. "Wake up, dickhead," a cranky Sandy grunts in my face, "It's your fucking turn to drive." I purposely blow my rank dragon's breath into her face; I'm not much of a nice guy when I first wake up. "I'll pull over here," she continues, "so you can hose out, and so I can put my damn P.J.'s on, okay?" As if my reassurance really matters, "Whatever." I look into the passenger seat at Ryan, and I see him asleep for the first time during a little excursion. His face is smashed half against the window, and half against the pillow Sandy brought for herself. As the car pulls over and jerks to a halt, he snorts himself half-awake and dozes right back off. He looks fatigued, not tired, not peacefully resting, but more like a soldier who's done a thirty kilometer hike, in full gear, through the thickest jungles of Cambodia. "Get out and piss, man. I'm fucking tired." I push all of the pillows out of my way and fall out the rear passenger side door, spilling onto unfamiliar grass. I take care of my business with my back to a naked road and a naked Sandy. I caught a look when I turned around to ask for a cigarette, because who needs a toothbrush when you've got smokes? She is beautiful though, all of her.

We're all pretty much getting over the incident. Ryan hasn't asked us if we saw the excitement in the little girl's eyes when she realized she was going to die. Sandy doesn't cry and talk to herself anymore. She doesn't blame what happened on me or herself or Ryan anymore, either. She blames God. Just smoke as many cigarettes as I can before I fall asleep, and try to ignore the occasional car that passes by, reminding myself that "they don't know, they don't know shit."

Yesterday, Sandy and I called our homes to tell them we'd be gone for a while. Neither of us mentioned Ryan, which might have given our respective families the idea that we were eloping or something. Ryan could have called home, but he decided that he wouldn't do anything until we hit our destination, wherever that is. He said he'd send

flipped through the channels during the breaks, stopping at ESPN, squinting to read the scores that ran across the bottom of the screen. He started to talk a little about himself. He was about 68 or so he'd guess. Worked as an electrician since leaving the Navy. Been in Korea during the war. Never married. Moved around quite a bit before settling here. "Hey I was wondering" he began, "If you're not doing anything Thursday I was wondering if you could give me a ride to the Doctor's office?" "Sure, Norty. Everything okay?" "Just a follow up exam. No big deal. Then afterwards I could show you around town. Plenty of places close-by we could walk to, but better drive instead," he said with a laugh lighting up a smoke. "Sure no problem," I told him. I walked back across the hall after about a six-pack, got ready for bed and thought about work. I had called the company and the packages were to arrive tomorrow morning and I had a meeting scheduled at 2:00. I walked to my window and rested my forehead against the cool glass. I watched the nothingness going on in the street below me. Occasionally a car would drive by disturbing the silence. A man and woman came out of the ice cream place across the street.

smile so as not to make me feel as bad. We rounded the corner and headed back to the car. I drove in silence as Norton gave directions and fooled with the radio. He talked the whole time which is good because I wasn't able to say anything. I think I was more concerned than he was. I asked him if maybe we could look around town some other night. "I'm beat from work," I lied. How can he be so calm I wondered and sneaked a glance at him. He stared straight ahead of us, expressionless. "I don't mind," he said. "What?" "Not going out. I don't mind. I'd just as soon stay in and watch some TV. We can do it some other night maybe." "Sure thing" I told him and turned to look. He was still staring ahead of us.

The next couple weeks of work kept me busy. I had four meetings, got lost going to one of them. I'd have to spend my weekends getting ready for the presentations I had to do on Mondays. I saw Norton on my coming and goings from the building and stopped by his place a couple nights a week for a beer or two. Usually I'd stop somewhere on the way home from work to pick up something to eat. Norton had given me the spare key and

them "some kind of postcard with a clue about where we were on it. Just like in those old mystery cop-drama things, but we'd leave before they get to us." That kid is way out there, all the way in his own little world. My call went something like this:
<ring ring, ring ring, ring ring, ring ring, ring> "Hello." "Hello. Who's this?"

"Who's this?" "Cathy? It's Caleb. Is mom or dad there?" "Oh, hi Caleb. Hold on...(maaaom! Phone! [who is it?] Cay-leb.) "Hi Caleb. How are you? What's up?" "Hi mom. Uh, I'm fine. Nothing. Uh mom, I'm just calling to let you know what's going on. Uh I left school a few days ago with Sandy. You met Sandy, remember?" "Yes, I remember Sandy. So when are you going back to school?" "I don't know. Right now, we're just trekking cross-country and going wherever the road takes us. So, I'll talk to you when I can okay?" "What! You're kidding right? Your father is going to kill you. Couldn't you do that over the summer? What's wrong? Are you in trouble? Oh my god. Why?" "Mom, I just have to do this, okay? I'm not trying to hurt you or dad, and I'll miss you while I'm gone but I'll be back. I have to do this, I mean I REALLY want to do this. Okay." —please deposit fifty cents for next one minute— "Okay. I love you, be careful." (I could hear he crying) "Mom, I love you. I have to go now. I'll be fine. I'll send you a postcard, okay. I'll call you the next time I get a chance, okay?" "I love you, baby. Bye-bye." "I love you too mom. Bye."

On a bright and sunny day in the middle of October, deep in the heart of Oklahoma, I sat in a phone booth at Big Al's Gas n' Grub and cried and cried. Ryan let me get it out of my system, and Sandy was getting high in the back of the car to dry her tears. Ryan made me close my mouth and stick out my tongue, and then he dropped a hit into my mouth. Needless to say, I felt much better. (I don't know what I'd do without Ryan; I'd probably be just an average Joe. He's the Achilles of my life: he makes me, and almost everybody else he's friends with, more than ordinary; he might just be the downfall of our lives.) We got back in the car and resumed our drive. We weren't going home, just going. I felt like such the Kerouac... On the Road....

It blows...

being on the road. Damn it, we're so cliché.

Now we're still moving on, stuck inside this car like pollen to a honeybee's ass. We're just going where the damn thing takes us. I'm getting kind of tired again. The reality of my world is slipping away from me; I can feel it. My two cohorts are not-so-sound asleep (again), and I'm aching for another cup of coffee. I come up to some place called Mom's Chow on the right side of the blacktop. I pull into a spot underneath the pink and blue neon sign shining so bright I can feel it cooking my skin, and I squint my eyes. Starline ahead at nothing in particular. They don't even look at us. The waitress behind

after work I'd let myself into his place. I stopped by one evening after work. "How's work going, Jack?" he asked, handing me a beer.

"Not bad Norton, not bad at all." Work was starting to get intense but I didn't feel like I had a right to complain. We usually avoided the subject of his cancer. Neither of us were comfortable talking about it. I'd asked him if he needed a ride to his doctor again but he wasn't interested. "Nothing they can do for me anymore. Thanks anyway though," he said shaking his head. "Norton I'm going away for a week on business do you need me to get anything for you before I go?" "Another case of beer would be great," he said, taking a small drag from his cigarette. "Sure no problem," I told him, "but do you need maybe your meds picked up?" "No, no I stopped taking them a while ago. What's the point?" I didn't know what to say to this so I just gathered up the empty cans and took them to the kitchen. I stood looking around and noticed most of the food I had stocked him up with before my last trip was still there. I came back with a couple of fresh beers and we watched the rest of "Unsolved Mysteries." I spent the rest of the night packing and preparing for my trip. When I came home a week and a half later Norton was the worst I had seen him. He had lost even more weight and when he breathed you could hear the rumbling in his chest. Every couple of minutes or so he'd cough up something and have to lean over the trash can to spit it out. I would study his face looking for any signs of fear, but there were none.

Norton died on a Tuesday. I found him after I came home from work. He was laying on his couch with the blankets up over him and the TV on. At first I thought he was asleep but he didn't wake up when I called his name. I put my hands to his cold neck looking for a pulse like you see people on TV doing but I couldn't find one. I

the bar is thirty something, a youngish thirty something, and wearing a pink waitress outfit, with the white stockings and matching bo-bo sneakers. She looks up at: us from her place behind the counter where she is smoking a cigarette, and then looks back into the kitchen at the cook, who seems to have been staring at us since we got out of the car. He is a great big man, with giant sweat stains showing around his armpits. The music playing on the jukebox is some country song that just makes me want to vomit. The waitress says, "Come on in boys, and sit at the bar. Hope you're hungry, 'cause we only let these two wino's just drink." As she says the last part, she points over to the two older looking gentlemen. "Hells yeah we're ready to eat!" Ryan yells with a smile, "Three eggs, scrambled, seven strips of bacon, two hash-browns, one sausage patty, and a tall glass of Miller Genuine Draft, please."

"Sure thing boys," she says, "It'll be twenty minutes." We walk over to the bar, grab our stools, and sit down right next to the two old men. Ryan starts up a conversation with them by saying, "Hey fellahs, which one's Bartles and which one is James?" They don't laugh. The guy Ryan is sitting next to turns his head and says dead in his face, "What are you two boys running from?" And the guy next to him grunts a laugh. Ryan says, "Yo buddy. I was just joking around with you. I don't want to start any trouble. I was just having fun." I know what Ryan wants to say, and I hope he doesn't say it. I know he's going to, and I want to stop him. I want to tell him to just leave it alone, to just shut up. I just sit quietly and smoke my cigarette. "What makes you think that we're running from something?" Ryan asks. "That doesn't matter. What matters is I know," the old guy says in a voice that sends shivers from my ass, to my spine, to my shoulders. "Now, what are you running from? That's the question?" "We're just doing a cruising thing right now," I jump in, "We really are just going to no place in particular." The other old guy turns to me and says, "Oh, no. Don't give us that bullshit. Ne've been in your shoes before. Ne've met a lot of people while we were just going to 'nowhere in particular'. Everybody has got a reason." "You know what," says the old guy next to Ryan, "you guys were wondering to yourselves 'What the fuck are these two old guys doing up at four thirty in the morning? In a bar for that matter?' Well I'll tell you nothing but how it started. It all started by just going nowhere in particular. Going on the road. It's not a pleasant life." During the old man's speech, Ryan was moving away towards the other end of the bar. I couldn't move. "You've got no roots when you travel too much; when you run away," picks up the other old man, "you've got nothing but the road. If you're lucky, you've got one or two friends to bury you when you die. No co-workers, no wife, no kids, no mother father sister brothers. It is the road less traveled, and there is a reason for that." They stop suddenly, and resume their drinking. I sit still a little while and then get up and go to where Ryan is sitting. The waitress fires up another cigarette. The food is almost done. Ryan asks the

stood there for a few minutes not knowing what to do. I turned the TV off but then back on again because I didn't want to be alone in silence. I made the necessary calls and the operator told me the emergency crew was on its way. It wasn't much of an emergency but that's who they sent anyway. I waited by the window for them to arrive. I didn't feel like staying there but didn't feel comfortable leaving either. I stood in the doorway watching the paramedics move his body to the stretcher. A couple of the neighbors poked their heads out to see what was going on. I overheard one lady telling another, "It's a shame, he was such a nice old man." I stood leaning up against the wall with my hands in my pockets trying to avoid any eye contact. I didn't know any of these people and didn't feel like explaining anything to them. Once the ambulance crew left I wandered back into Norton's apartment and looked around. On the desk in his room was a shoebox with my name on it. Inside was a note and the gold watch he held that first day I was ever in his apartment. The letter said he'd miss me but I shouldn't worry for him. He was glad it's over. He thanked me for the good times. The watch, he wrote, was his favorite possession. He had given

it to his girlfriend instead of an engagement ring over 40 years ago. She kept it with her always and had it on her when she was killed in a car accident a couple of months before the wedding was to take place. He didn't want it to be buried with her, he wanted something to remember her by. He said he wanted me to have it now. I locked the door of his apartment and took the watch and letter across the hall to my place. I laid down on the couch and reread it again. I let the letter fall to the floor and took the watch in both hands and looked at it thinking of my friend. I'd only known him a short time but he said in the letter that I was his best friend. I thought back on the last couple of months and tried to figure out what it all meant. Maybe before he died he just wanted to find somebody he could tell his story to. I thought to myself how glad I was to be that person.

waitress if he can turn the television above the bar on. She does. We watch some kinda twenty four hour news show, with the volume turned very low so as not to upset the country music playing for everybody else. The food comes up. Ryan shovels his food in fistfuls at a time. It is truly disgusting. I quietly munch my bagel and drink my beer and daydream. We finish at the same time, and I give Ryan a smoke because he's left his in the car. We watch the news and smoke our Kamels. An image appears on screen. It fades into our view, just as the jukebox stops playing. A voice over comes on, and there is still no music playing in the jukebox, "The tragedy surrounding little Tamara Wolfe has not come any closer to being closed. Police say there are no suspects as of yet, in regards to the little girl's hit and run murder in October..." My brain is screaming that everyone in this place knows that they are talking about us, but my body calmly smokes the cigarette in my hand. I can't believe that there still isn't any music on. I look over at Ryan to see him standing up from his stool. He's wet his pants. He spreads apart his lips and lets fly a tremendous amount of eggs and bacon and sausage from his stomach, onto the floor and counter of the bar. There are tears in his eyes, and he starts convulsing. Everyone in the bar has stopped whatever they were doing to stare at Ryan. No one has moved to help him; I'm not moving anywhere. He falls to his hands and knees and spews forth another horrendous smelling batch of food, stomach acid, beer, tar, and bile. He coughs until he catches his breath and he says, "Caleb, let's get the fuck out of here." I stand up, look at the check, look at the floor and the mess.

"Oh shit," she says.

We throw him into the back of the car, and cover him with a blanket. I jump in the driver's seat, and Sandy climbs into the back with Ryan. We peel out of Mom's Chow and don't look back. I light a cigarette to catch my breath, and I look into the back seat. Sandy is holding the foul-smelling Ryan. He's almost soaked through the blanket, and is still twitching. I can see the glow around his cheeks from the salt water pouring out his eyes. Sandy is trying to sing "Puff the Magic Dragon" to him, trying as best she can to relax him. I notice his lips are moving.

"Shh..shh... Sandy," I start, "His lips are moving. What's he saying? I can't hear him." Sandy quiets down, and we focus in on Ryan's voice. I know he is saying. Sandy doesn't know yet.

Poor Ryan can't shut up. He's saying, "Her name was Tamara. Her name was Tamara. Her name was Tamara. Her name...."



Interview: Lee Ann Brown

Born in Tokyo and raised in North Carolina, performed poet Lee Ann Brown has excelled as Super 8 film. Her work often explores a surrealistic terrain, where the incidental is introduced to the sexual...

REFLECTOR: I read that you were a Women's Studies major as an undergraduate. Was it always your intention to write?

A: I started writing when I was very young, in about second grade or so. I didn't know what it took to be a poet. I thought poets had books — I'm still waiting for my first book to come out — but I decided I was a poet sometime in college. When I think back on my origins in writing,... I remember my grandmother teaching me "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in big words: "...In vain would I fathom thy nature specific/ Loftily poised on ether capacious/ Resembles a gem carbonicous." I asked her if that was in English, and she said, "Why, yes." I think I do the same kind of language games now. I think I learned a lot from church hymns — their prosody — and, to a lesser extent, from folk songs and camps songs, and things like that. I've always wanted to be a poet. I used to write odes to my cat.

REF: Tell me where Women's Studies fit in.

A: I loved Emily Dickinson, and I was reading a lot of women poets. I don't know where it first got started, but I got this kind-of political awakening when I went to Brown (University). There was a lot of political activism going on, and I worked at the Sarah Doyle Women's Center, and we did a lot of projects around women's politics. Brown doesn't have distribution requirements, and I thought it was a good way to sample a lot of departments but have a focus on something I was interested in.

REF: I take it your interest in women's issues continues with Tender Buttons Press of which you are editor and publisher. Tell me about when you decided to embark on that and why.

A: When I met a lot of poets at Naropa, like Anne Waldman and Bernadette Mayer, and a lot of publishers, and I was inspired by how they got what they believed in out into the world. Bernadette was telling me I should publish myself. I wasn't convinced at first, but she reminded me Walt Whitman had done that. I was getting more convinced, and I thought I should make a context for my work and publish people I admired first. I still haven't published my own book, but I have done others. I found Bernadette had some unpublished manuscripts, and I couldn't believe it.

REF: You started Tender Buttons in 1989. Can you tell me what is involved in being editor/publisher — how much of your time is invested in that?

A: I pretty much trust the poet to make their own decisions on whether the work is finished or not. I make some small suggestions. As an editor, I don't do much beside pick, and then ask them to give me the book to publish. I haven't done much close editorial work — mostly just doing the design and the layout and putting it out. Mostly I chose things which are interesting in terms of language-play, and remaking the language, like Harriet Mullen's "Trimblings," which works with the language of women's clothing. It's real playful,

but it's political without being dogmatic. I like the way it takes into account Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons" and the way it plays with the language in some of the same ways, but extends the project. [As to the physical labor], I do everything. The books are full-length and perfect-bound. I send them out to Michigan to be printed. It's just desk-top publishing on the Mac(Intosh computer).

REF: When are you planning to publish yourself, and how much of your time is being used up with Tender Buttons, as opposed to your own work?

A: My first book, "Polyverse," is about to come out with Sun & Moon Press. My second book is almost ready, and I think I'd just like to have more control over when it comes out. As far as my time, some weeks and some months I don't do anything with Tender Buttons at all. Since I've gotten back to New York, I'm mainly teaching and finding a new place to live, that kind of paractical stuff. Hopefully, I'll find more time to work on my own stuff and on Tender Buttons, too.

REF: In his introduction to the anthology "Primary Trouble" in which your work appears, Leonard Schwartz states: "This (meaning the poetry in the anthology) sees sexuality as a crucial nexus between the body and the world. One that defies but revivifies words in the effort to render the erotic impossibility." I was wondering, in what ways does your poetry distinctly respond to that description? What would you consider the "erotic impossibility?"

A: I remember reading that, and I remember before that, he says that language poetry does not do that. I was totally in disagreement with him. Carla Harriman is one of the sexiest writers I can imagine. ...I think words in themselves are erotic. I don't understand what he means by "defies words," but words need to be revived. When you have a play of words, you can set up an electric charge with specific words that, in itself, can be erotic.

REF: If we would see the "erotic impossibility" as being the inability to attain an eroticism — you work in various mediums — what medium do you feel would come close, or as close as possible, to attaining the full expression of the erotic?

A: I think that every medium can. It depends if you're at ease with it, but you don't have to be just at ease — it can present problems. I think language is — just the slipperiness of language — is a very potent thing. It's just like the erotic — you can never hold onto it.

REF: One more question about "Primary Trouble" — a question of your style. One of your poems seems to be meticulously fashioned after Emily Dickinson. Do you think its inclusion in a text which includes 'cutting-edge' poetic forms is particularly significant? In other words, do you are still cutting edge?

A: I thought that anthology was also working around the lyric, going beyond what they were doing in San newly being done with lyric. I think I got a lot of my prosody from hymns, and I think Dickinson did, too. syllables, eight syllables, six syllables. There are a lot of hymn tunes you can sing her poems to. You just look can see hundreds of them that fit, also ballads and celtic ballads. I'm also interested in working with Helen

REF: You've said you don't consider yourself a performance artist, but someone who goes back and forth from experimental. Will you tell us about that?

A: My book "Polyverse" is named that way because I try to use a lot of different styles and varieties, like I work sestinas and sonnets — or I try to use more conceptually-structured forms, or specific exercises like nouns Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allergy to the flail of the United States off/ Amigo." I use a lot of games, not method, but what was present in games, as I said about my grandmother, in my childhood.

REF: You like the game aspect of poetry, but does it ever get more serious than that?



Francisco, of what was ...The ballad meter: six in a hymn book and you Adams.

the traditional to the

with traditional forms — plus seven, or the exactly avant-garde in

A: Playing can be very serious, like writing in response to someone else's thought. "Crush" is a response to a piece by Gertrude Stein and has a lot of the same rhythms. It has some of her quotes, and it was a love poem to Alice B. Toklas; mine is a love poem to people in my life at that point. In a way, it's a play — play as in a very serious chess game, an interplay, it's not just writing. Other people's writings are just as real as a kind-of trigger. A theory can be anything — as in going out to nature to write about nature or about the world. Words are just as solid as objects.

REF: You've said your influences are Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson, and then the triggers are other people's writing and hymns. Are there other influences and triggers?

A: In my poem in "Polyverse" which starts the section "A Little Resistance," it says "All I need is to read you/ And see how our poems differ/ where they intersect/ then fill in the blanks/ for a new poem." It's a kind-of response: You're responding to writing in your work. I think anything can make a poem. I've only gotten this far so far.

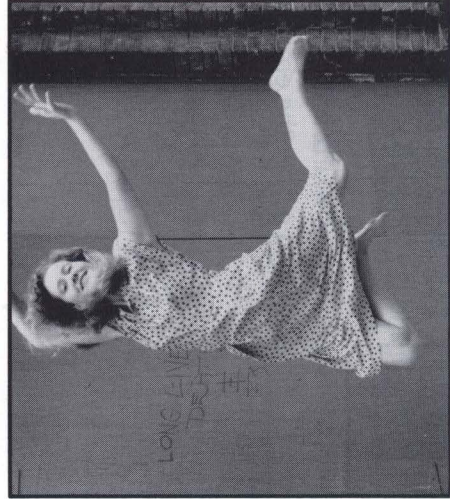
REF: Who are you reading now?

A: I've been teaching so much, a lot of that is given to me. (Other than that), I've been reading ballads and novels — Sharon McCrome. I've just been reading Robin Blaser, "The Holy Forest," again. I've just got a lot of my books back out of storage. Barbara Guest is another. I always read Bernadette (Mayer); I'm trying to work with her on some new collaborations.

REF: You've done gallery shows and film. Could we talk about how those are incorporated into your work?

A: It became a question of how to make it a more poetic medium — how was talking about, ... to make leaps of imagination between images. ... I'm visual language. It's something I've done when I haven't been writing poetry. Also, at the gallery show I did when I was at the Rocky Mountain Women's gallery. I was going through a time in my life when I had to get rid of a lot would tear them up and make collages out of them. I was thinking about different things. I had my grandmother's quilt up on the wall. I printed poetry did a collage with a lot of women's quotes about making quilts — there are

REF: Being a poet can be extremely taxing — mentally anyway. What do there other things? Do you leave poetry and come back to it — how do



to make the images jump like words, in that electric way I interested in making links between poetic forms in film as a entry. It gives me more energy to work in another way. Institute in Denver, we did a big year-end show in this big of possessions and move. Instead of throwing them away, I quilting and about women's (issues), so I wanted to do a ems on sheets of vellum, and I pinned them to the quilt. I a lot of parallels with writing.

you do to keep alive? You mentioned film as one way. Are you protect yourself?

A: I guess you go through different cycles. I need the support of a community of poets that I can talk to, or through letter-writing, or meeting and making things together. I go through different cycles of work and not-work. I like to go to artist colonies — that's really nice, to go away to live and write. I've just been through this move back to New York, and I'm looking forward this summer to writing, to concentrate (on it). I always try to keep something going. Even when I'm running around on the subway to all my adjunct jobs, I'll write things down in my notebook and collage them together. I don't want to take a vacation from it. I want it to be part of my everyday life.

REF: The government makes you own a chihuahua. What would you name it?

A: (laughter) "Lunch."

REF: That's a comment on how much poets earn!

REF: You mention church hymns being traces in your work, and much of the film shown in your "performance" was set within an abbey. Fanny Howe has stated, "Much of my writing has been an effort to rearrange, rewrite, the word 'God' by filling up pages with other names." Do you consider yourself to be participating in a similar struggle? And up to how many letters do you think you could use to still re-spell the word 'God'?

A: I think my poetry does have a spiritual dimension to it. A lot of it has been reactionary to my extreme-Christian upbringing: Presbyterian, not fundamental — pretty liberal — but much like "There's a set way of being." I do admire a poetic project which expands ways to be in the world, and ways to be spiritual, ways to be a full human being, which includes being an erotic human being. Religious orders don't really want to deal with that. Presbyterians are still fighting about whether gay or lesbian people are allowed to exist in the church. They're making a few strides ahead with that. But the whole thing about "re-writing the name of God" — I wouldn't describe my project in those terms. I like that there are some people doing that. I love Fanny Howe's quietist ideas. She and Bernadette both profess to be practicing quietists, like being quiet for long amounts of time. Some day in my life I might try that.

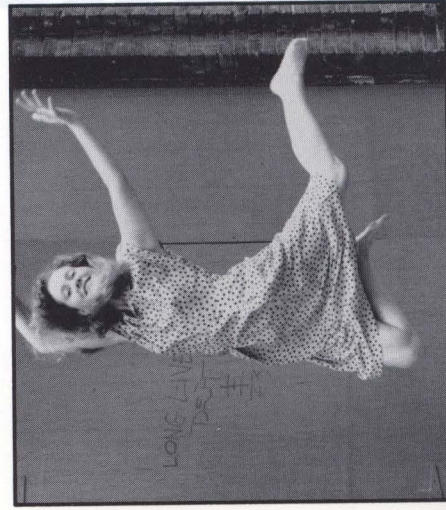
REF: Regarding identity: You're a Southerner who lives in NYC — you're a woman writer. How conscious is all that with you, as far as being labelled and fitting patterns?

A: I'm very conscious of it, and I try not to fit into a Southern stereotype, writing about your family and about history — but I'm really interested in that at the same time. I try to walk this edge, writing from life, as in "Crush": "I say these things not because they happen but because/ many things happen." I try to subvert the confessional writing. Right now I'm working with my grandmother's diaries, written in the early '20s, and they are these little 'line-a-day' things I'm responding to, to write little letters to her, or write about the language she used, to find a way to interact with this writing, as the younger person I am now. I'm trying to find creative ways to work with certain Southern women's writing which are interesting textually. I think that's the problem, ...a lot of Southern writing is just stodge. I'm thinking of writing some essays, to find Southern writers in NYC and ask them the same question, to see what it means to be a Southerner in New York. It's definitely a sub-culture, but we're all sort-of stuck in our own little worlds. I want to know more about what that is.

REF: Do you think
sive, hedging the
think that's a definitive

A: First of all, I think
structures and liftings.
imaginable, to bor-
own ideas. Some will
we talked about ear-
They're full of com-

REF: As we finish, is



that a stylistics of "hedging" permeates postmodern writing? As though postmodern poetry is primarilyly defensive, hedging the word so that it can't be approached in the same way as modernist writing has been. I wanted to know if you characteristic of postmodern writing? Do you do that in respect to your Southern background?

modernist writing has that same kind of resistance — like "Tender Buttons." It has a lot of those complex What I was trying to start with "Polyverse" and things from Bernadette Mayer, was to try to write in every way row and steal and try out everything you can think of from other people's ideas, then you'll start to think of your be very, very straightforward and acceptable, and some will be difficult and very complicated. It's like the quilts lier. Quilts are seen as a real folksy craft, but if you look into their history and design, they're so amazing. plex structures and optical illusions.

there anything you'd like to say to us?

A: It's really interesting to come to this area and see that people are engaged with poetry and writing. I think it's wonderful. I can't wait for my book to come out, so I can buy an old, black Ford car, like Gillian Welsh, and go on the road to read my poetry. This has been like I'm starting my tour.

**“Woman is the
guiding star of art...
An ethic that feeds
masculine hearts.”**

Simone de Beauvoir



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