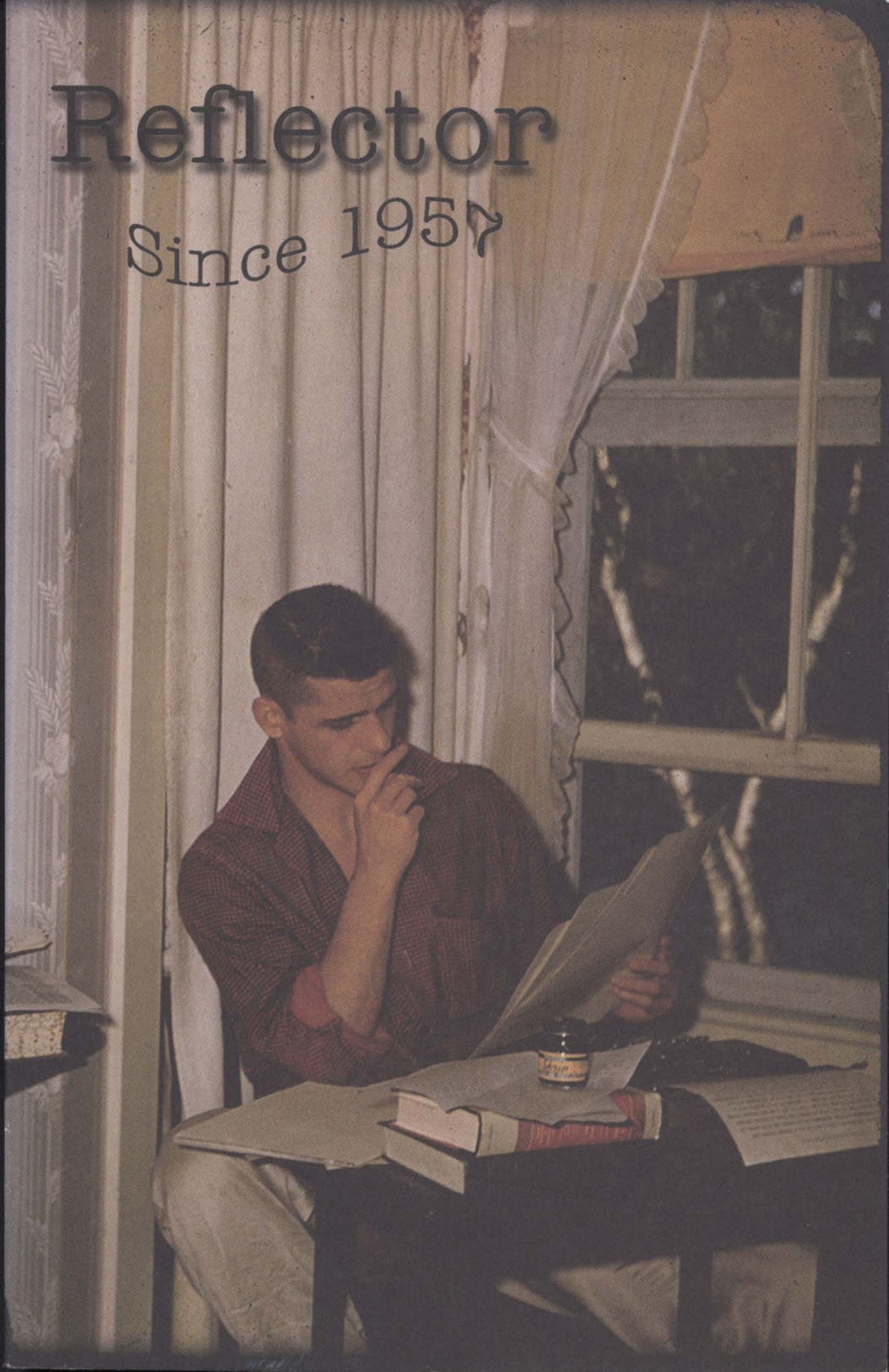


Reflector

Since 1957





Reflector



2004

This issue is dedicated to Dev Hathaway

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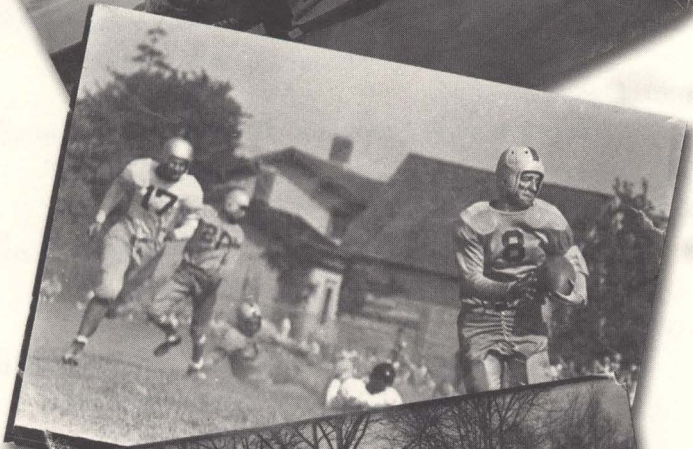
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Glory Days by Den Small

Winner of the First Annual
Reflector

Creative Prose Award

Judged by Mindy Wilson, Managing Editor
The Gettysburg Review

Virginia Fell

William Hicklin

Mrs. Fell pronounced the word deliberately, with slightly more emphasis than the words preceding or following it, with an almost imperceptible pause before and after, and looked up at the class each time she read the word, her red lips spitting it out smooth and round like a polished stone. She was reading *The Sound and the Fury* and had told the class that she believed that every word in the book should be read as it was written, that it was literature and as such should be appreciated, and that she herself had not chosen to write that word and might not agree with it but she must read it because it had been written by the author and it was literature and it should not be altered, even if some might take the word as an offense.

She did not explain why she chose to read out loud; this was the first time she had done so in this class, on the third book, halfway through the school year. Nor did she explain why she chose to read from this book if she were afraid that some might take offense: she could have as easily chosen *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Scarlet Letter*. But she chose to read aloud from the third section of *The Sound and the Fury*, and because it was literature she could not alter what she read, and because she did not want anyone to take offense she explained before she read that

some might find the word offensive but she had not written it and must read it as it had been written.

She had arranged the chairs of the classroom into a circle so that as she read she could look into the faces of each of the students. This, too, was an anomaly. Usually the chairs were arranged in rows and the students each had their seats assigned by order of their last names. When the students entered the classroom they stopped, brows drawn together, lips pursed, looking from seat to seat until she told them to choose a seat; the order in which they sat did not interest her today. The seats farthest from her filled first so that the last two students that came into the classroom sat on either side of her. Her book lay unopened, one inch from the top and right sides of her desk, neat.

When each of the students had taken a seat she explained that they would be reading Faulkner in class, out loud, and that she would start, followed by a student of her choice, and then the next, until each of the students had read. Then she explained that, though there were words that were offensive, she would read them and the students would read them as they were written, that one word in particular might be especially offensive to some of the students but the words of the text could not be altered, that to do so would amount to censorship and that many important works would have to be rewritten or destroyed to prevent anyone from being offended: even the Bible would have to be destroyed, she said, to prevent some from being offended.

She began to read. Her red hair, swept up and back from her powdered forehead and gathered into an extraordinary bun on the crown of her head, reflected the light of the fluorescent tubes humming electric above their heads and of the early afternoon sun that entered the row of windows that lined one wall of the classroom. She read slowly and carefully, following the text with a curved index

finger, red-tipped; read with a singing lilt and bracketed that word each time she read it with a pause just long enough to give it slight and unapologetic emphasis without venom but with deliberate and mocking delicacy. She looked up for a moment each time she spoke it, her blue eyes magnified by the lenses in her glasses so that she resembled some strange ancient bird with a white beak and a red crest and a queer call: *Nig-Ger*.

She had been a mother, once. She saw her only son collapse on a football field. No one had touched him—no one was even very near to him—he just collapsed as if his bones and joints had suddenly turned to water. She stood as he fell; she said she knew he was dead before he hit the ground. She stood with her mouth open and her hand on her throat and her red hair blowing loose about her face, not yet fixed into that eternal immaculate bun, knowing before the coach ran to him, before the paramedics were called, before the ambulance arrived, that he was gone out of her life forever, that he had abandoned her like his father had save one detail: unlike his father he had said, “I love you,” before he left. He went out the door then came back in just to tell her he loved her. “Always tell your mother you love her before you leave. You never know what may happen,” she told her students. “He told me he loved me.” And even twenty years later she cried a little when she told the story. She could be a grandmother.

She adopted several students in her classes through the years and treated them with a keen preference above their classmates: her girls were all pretty and popular and cruel. Her boys were all athletic and of an age and build similar to her dead son, and she defended her sons and daughters from each other. She would tell the girls: “If they really love you, they’ll wait. Most likely, though, they just love the sex.” She would tell the boys: “You have to be careful. Some of those pretty girls will wrap you around

their fingers. You won't even be allowed to think." And many of those boys and girls kept in touch with her as they grew older; she went to their weddings and to their children's baptisms and even to some of their funerals, and sat judgeliike, her face set in an attitude of austere approbation, her erect and proud head supporting that magnificent bun.

She had shown preference for only white children for a long time, even after the integration of Negroes in the public school system, maintaining a cool distance with the black children even more austere and aloof than with the white outcasts. After many years of teaching in the integrated school she began to acknowledge a gradation of worth among the black students: some were more intelligent than others, some more pleasant to be around, and she was shocked when she realized that some were more intelligent and pleasant than some of her white students. So slowly she began to treat a few of her black students with preference, with something very close to the admiration a person would have for a proud and strange and dangerous animal in a zoo. But she did not counsel them, never went to any of their weddings or baptisms or funerals, and would not have thought to open her door more than a crack if one of them knocked upon it.

Her house sat in the historic part of town. It was a small house of worn and weathered brick with a small porch painted the same green of the shutters and front door: these too were weathered and were peeling. Here and there the wood peeked through, unprotected and gray. On one side of the yard an ancient and knotted wisteria vine climbed a thick pine tree that stood over the house like a sentinel. On the other side of the yard, two parallel strips of concrete led to an aluminum carport at the back of the house. Several terra-cotta flowerpots were arranged around the carport; whatever had been planted in them had long

since died and been replaced by weeds that had seeded the pots.

The back door opened to a kitchen with faded and stained linoleum of an indistinct color and pattern, dark wood cabinets, and pale yellow walls. A gray and black mottled Formica table with aluminum legs had been placed to one side of the door, beneath a framed sampler of a cornucopia underlined with the caption, "Oh Taste and See that the Lord is Good." A wooden chair was pushed up against the table and a desk lamp sat to one side. A plastic paper sorter with four trays had been arranged at the opposite corner of the desk, one inch from the top and right sides of the table, neat: the top two trays were marked "to do" and the bottom two were marked "completed." A red pen lay in front of and perpendicular to the trays.

A long dark hall led from the kitchen to the front of the house; photographs of her son, from infancy through high-school lined each side of the hallway, the regular spacing of the frames broken only by the doors that opened to the two bedrooms and the bathroom. In the last photograph on the right he wore a navy and white football uniform, kneeling on one knee like a young warrior about to get knighted, with a football balanced on the other knee. He was smiling and squinting in the light, and his face was pale except for spots of red that had risen on his cheeks from the cold. It was the last photograph taken of her son, a few weeks before his death. She did not get the photograph until the day before the funeral; the coach came to her house to present it to her, coughing nervously, and suggested that perhaps she would like to use it to top the casket. The school had framed it for her and screwed a plaque on the bottom with an engraving: "Nicholas Allen Fell; June 16th, 1947-October 3rd, 1964; We'll miss you, Allen." She had thanked the coach and shut the door before he answered. She put the frame on the kitchen counter, found the jeweler's screwdriver she used to tighten

the screws on her glasses, removed the plaque, bent the brass plate almost double, and threw it in the trash. She hung the photograph in the frame the school had put it in, the blank space a mute testimony to the faculty's tactlessness.

The photograph drew her attention each time she passed it. At first she thought it was the blank spot on the frame that made her shudder slightly whenever she looked at the photograph; something about the paleness of it against the dark stain reminded her of a gravestone. But then she realized that her disquiet was the result of a certain slant of light in the photograph. The picture had been taken on a bright day and the photographer, perhaps to keep the subject from having to stare into the sun, had turned her son so that the light fell at an oblique angle across his face. As a result, half of Allen's face smiled boyishly and the other half twisted away into a death mask. His shadow lay at his feet, curled into a fetal position. Sometimes when Mrs. Fell stopped at the picture she traced the shadow with her finger and felt a rush of tenderness, as if the shadow and not the kneeling boy had been her son.

The hallway ended at a living room furnished with an overstuffed green couch and chair, a threadbare rug with a Persian pattern, a tall oval mirror in a dark frame, and several cluttered tables and bookshelves. Scattered among the bric-a-brac, tiny gold frames held senior school pictures of some of the students she'd taught over the years. The blinds had been closed for so long that dust had filled the spaces between the slats and left the room in a dense shadow that required her to turn on the lights at any time of day if she wanted to read or to work. If she had finished her work and did not feel like reading, she sat on the couch in the permanent twilight of the living room and stared with a musing expression at the blinds covering the window, as if she were watching people pass on the street.

Mrs. Fell sat on the green couch and studied the dust-caked blinds, wondering what had gone wrong, where things had gotten off track, and what she could do to restore some balance and order to, if not the world, at least hers. The school year had started like any other and she had had no reason to expect that it would be any different: aside from minor changes she would teach from the same plan she had used for the past five of her thirty-five years of teaching. Each year she taught the same classes the same periods: two sections of English, one section of Creative Writing, and one section of A.P. English. She had gotten the list of the candidates for the A.P. English class the previous spring: twelve students had been on the list; four of those were her favorites, six were students with whom she had no special rapport but to whom she had no strong objection, and two were students that she did not like. Her strategy for rejecting those students was simple: she did not mail the list of summer reading books to them, and that way, in the fall, when she began talking the first day about the summer reading assignments, the students to whom she had not mailed the list would approach her, bewildered, and say "I did not know there was a list," to which she would reply, "The lists were sent out in the spring. If you did not do the reading, you will be too far behind to catch up. I'd suggest that you switch to a different section of English." And at the beginning of the school year the two students to whom she had not sent lists came to her and said that they hadn't gotten any list and she replied that they had been mailed in the spring, etc., and the students dropped the class and that was that. But on the third day of school the principal knocked on her classroom door and introduced an exchange student from the West Indies that would be joining the class.

Mrs. Fell turned towards the new student. The girl was as dark as midnight and her skin glowed like polished wood. Her limbs were long and thin and as solid as lead,

but her body had an unleashed quality about it, as if something that should have been restrained had broken free. All of the girl's movements were fluid and rhythmic; her skirts and blouse moved as if stirred by a private breeze and she wore colored wooden beads on her ankles and wrists. She had pulled her Afro back into a bun on the top of her head. The whites of her eyes were perfectly white, as if carved from some unmarred white and solid stone, and shone out from her face, punctuated by two irises so dark that Mrs. Fell could not distinguish them from the pupils. Her eyes had no expression, none at all, just shone and stared. Mrs. Fell's grip tightened on the doorknob, and she said, "I'm sorry, but I had no idea she would be coming to class; I did not send her the list of required reading. Perhaps she'd do better entering another class," but Mr. Hammond assured her that he'd sent the list himself in June; school was already out when they got the names and addresses of the next year's exchange students and instead of bothering the teachers while they were on vacation he'd taken the liberty to mail the students the information about their classes himself. Mrs. Fell stood bristling for a moment, her hand tensed on the knob and arm blocking the doorway, objections turning to dust in her mouth, asked what the student's name was, and then she stood aside and told Nicolette to take a seat.

Mrs. Fell stared at the back-lit rectangle of the blind covering the window through which she'd seen her son leave for the last time, him smiling and waving as he got into the car with that dismissive and assured wave of the young who think they will live for eternity, that death is not for them; a scene that her mind had projected over and over again against the surface of that blind, searching for clues that could have warned her, trying to find something with which she could have warned him. She might have said "No, don't go," if there had been some twitch or bead of

sweat or paleness of skin that would have indicated that he was in pain, and if she had just read the signs and taken action he might still be alive, married, and she would still be a mother and now a grandmother instead of an old-maid teacher shut in a house that was as stale and silent as a tomb.

She held her teacup in her hands, tapping the side of it with one finger, then put it on the table beside her and toyed with the chain around her neck. *It isn't fair. It would have been enough that any stranger had invaded my classroom, had gotten in without prior warning or consent, but she didn't stop there.* To Mrs. Fell this invasion stood in opposition to the other qualities that Nicolette might have. She was a good student, certainly, insightful, hard working, and to be honest, had Mrs. Fell known her for longer she might have been glad to have her in class. But she hadn't known her longer and hadn't had any say over whether she'd be in the class, and the girl had assumed a familiarity with her beyond the bounds of propriety. In the beginning of the year, when they had been reading *Pride and Prejudice*, after her third day in the class, Nicolette had approached Mrs. Fell after all the other students had left and asked whether she thought Elizabeth Bennet's judgment of others was based on emotion or evidence. Her eyes registered nothing, and Mrs. Fell had not been able to determine by the girl's voice whether she was asking the question in earnest or was somehow mocking her. She looked at the girl for a moment, tapped her pen on her desk, and asked Nicolette why she didn't bring the question up in class the next day. It sounded like a good discussion topic. Then she looked down and started marking an essay without reading it, underlining passages, writing comments in the margins, circling words. After a few minutes she looked up. Nicolette was gone. She took a deep breath and settled back in her chair, picked up the paper she'd been marking and read over it—nonsense. It was nonsense.

She'd underlined "drenched from the sudden downpour that rained down without warning" and written in the margins, "Beautifully observed."

Mrs. Fell shifted her position on the couch and rubbed the back of her neck. She looked at her red and knotted hands and thought of monkey paws, shriveled and skeletal. As she dropped them into her lap she thought of that horrid story. What would she do if she had a monkey's paw? Would she wish for her son back? Maybe. Maybe, if the woman in the story had wished more specifically that her son would come back *as he had been*, he wouldn't have been such a figure of horror. She imagined making the wish and waiting. She would clean his room, dust it, open a window and let it air out, and sit on the couch and wait. She might open the blinds in the living room so that she could see him walking down the street towards the house in his red letter-jacket and his blue jeans, hands in his pockets, head down, wind tugging at the curls on his head and ripping his breath away from his mouth. He would look in the window as he passed and smile, red splotches raised on his pale cheeks from the cold. He'd knock on the door—no—she'd meet him at the door and kiss him on his cold red cheek as he stepped in, tracking dirt in with his big shoes. His heavy steps would echo through the house and he'd throw his jacket over the chair and ask if she had anything to eat. She would tell him to take off his shoes and come in the kitchen and warm up while she made a plate for him.

A branch scraped against the window and Mrs. Fell started. She sat forward, her heart beating in her ears. *Silly, silly old woman.* She settled back into the couch and scanned the knickknacks on one of the tables as her heartbeat slowed. A ceramic vase, of a green so washed out it was almost white, teardrop shaped, held a dried bunch of scotch-broom. Next to it stood a heavy copper mortar and pestle, thick and squat, blued with verdigris, and in front of

that a silver handled brush lay face up, raising its bristles into the air. Behind them stood a small tiffany lamp, the colors of the stained glass shade muted with dust. An ivory statuette that her husband had given her arrested her attention—it stood to the side, set apart from the rest of objects on the table, and was turned slightly away from them, as if it had moved away of its own accord and was ignoring them. It was an image of an Egyptian cat with a long neck and oriental looking eyes, sitting erect, tall and slender, its tail curled around its feet.

Mrs. Fell sighed deeply. She had tried to brush Nicolette off, to keep a proper distance, but the girl would not leave her be. Despite the sharpness of her reply to the girl's first question Nicolette had stopped in front of her desk the very next day and asked if she thought that Jane Austen felt any compassion for Mrs. Bennet. She seemed like such a flat caricature of a woman, without any redeeming qualities. Mrs. Fell said, "Well, not everyone has redeeming qualities," and Nicolette replied, "None at all?" Mrs. Fell put her folder in her briefcase and stood up. She suggested that Nicolette save questions for the class period, looked at her watch, and said she was running late for a meeting. The next afternoon, when Nicolette paused by her desk, before she even opened her mouth, Mrs. Fell said, "Why do you insist on asking me questions after class?" She meant to sound forceful and final, but her voice betrayed her, wavered, cracked. Nicolette interpreted the uncertainty in her voice as an invitation to respond and answered, "I just want to know what you think." Mrs. Fell patted her bun, cleared her throat, and picked up a stack of papers. She neatened the stack by tapping its bottom edge on her desk and said, "Well, you have to understand that I'm generally ready to leave right after class. You'll have to keep the questions brief."

Four months into the school year, Mrs. Fell had been surprised by a state of constant distraction: at school

she misplaced papers, pens, books. She would lose the thread of thought she'd been following and stand in front of her class, open mouthed, staring at the air, desperately trying to remember what she'd been saying. Most times she stood there staring until a student prompted her and nervous tittering rose from the desks like a flock of starlings. When she got home she'd pull out her materials and as often as not realize she'd left an assignment she'd meant to grade at the school; at school she'd pull her materials out and realize she'd left a graded assignment at home. When it started happening Mrs. Fell was more annoyed than alarmed: a terrible inconvenience, certainly; she would have to take more care with where she placed things. But material things seemed to conspire against her. Her keys hid in pockets, behind pictures, between cushions; her papers hid under the car seat, in the bathroom, on top of the refrigerator; pens and pencils scattered among the clutter on the tables in the rooms and hid inside books: once, she found two tucked in her bun.

Lately the distraction had heightened to anxiety. This past week she'd been having trouble sleeping at night, too aware of the dust burning her nose, unable to breathe. When she did fall asleep she dreamt of her husband, always the same dream. They sat in the clear light of the living room drinking tea from china cups. The cup glowed in his hands, white porcelain with delicate blue tattoos around the lip. Too dainty for a man, she thought. His hands were large around the cup, his fingers square and strong, and she felt the blood run to her face. His hands impressed her: they were regal, kingly. The white band shone on his finger, illuminated, it seemed, by its own light. She stood up. *I need to get a larger cup for him.* She saw his face for the first time in the dream: he looked young and vital, full lipped, his skin glowing as if he were made of light. When she passed the oval mirror she glanced over and saw herself. She tried to study her face but it blurred as she got

closer to the glass. When she turned from the mirror she looked—not at her husband but at her son. He had his hand on the doorknob and he smiled at her and said, “I love you” and opened the door. She tried to yell but her mouth wouldn’t work, and when he stepped through the door he disappeared in the palpable, viscous light. She always woke then, heart beating at a panic rate.

Mrs. Fell crossed her legs and picked up her teacup, studying the leaves floating in the amber liquid as if they might reveal something to her. She didn’t know exactly why she had given Nicolette permission to keep approaching her after class. She had felt drained, as if she’d been swimming against a tide and must rest and let the current take her or keep fighting and drown. Although she had only been confronted by the girl three times she had seen, in one instant, all the afternoons of the year: Nicolette stopping by her desk and putting her on the defense, day after day. She decided on the spot that it would be easier to control the situation if she allowed the girl to stay after class. But another force had joined her fatigue and weakened her resolve. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had said they wanted to hear her opinion. She had intended to keep the interviews short, but after only a few weeks their discussions lasted the better part of an hour, and as the school year drug on the questions became more personal.

Mrs. Fell took a sip of tea and made a moue of disgust. It had gone cold. She put the cup down and looked at the statuette of the cat. She had not connected her state of agitation to her conversations with Nicolette until earlier this afternoon. Nicolette had not come to class, and Mrs. Fell had felt a sudden lightening, as if she had been released from a tension so constant and delicate that she had not recognized it until its source had been removed. Class that day went smoothly; her mind felt sharper than it had in months. After class, when she got

home, she sat on the couch and began working out how to restore everything to its proper place.

The next afternoon during her free period Mrs. Fell arranged the desks in a circle and waited for seventh period to begin. When the students started coming in with expressions of puzzlement on their faces, not knowing what to do, she told them each to take a seat, it did not matter where, that they were going to do something a little different that day. She sat with her book placed one inch from the right and top sides of her desk, waiting until the last student took his seat, and then explained that they would be reading out loud, that she would read first and then pick a student to read, that some of the words they read might be offensive and that one word in particular might offend some of the students more, but that she had not written the book and that they could not alter the text: it was, after all, literature, and as such must be appreciated and respected regardless of whether the students agreed with the vernacular of the characters. She then began to read.

When she got to the word, it was more difficult to say than she had thought it would be. She paused, looked up, and forced it out of her mouth. Nicolette sat opposite her and caught her in those dark eyes. Mrs. Fell looked down quickly and resumed reading. Each time she got to the word she paused a bit, but it was getting easier to say. She looked across at Nicolette for some reaction, some change in her countenance or her eyes, a gesture, a twitch, however slight, but the girl sat silent and still as stone, the darks of her eyes shining and staring out of the smooth whites, registering nothing. Mrs. Fell read with the book held above the desk in one hand, following the text with a red curved nail of the other, and looked into Nicolette's eyes each time she said the word, but the girl didn't react and for some reason Mrs. Fell's hands started shaking. She

supported her arms on the desktop so that the trembling would not be noticeable and read until she got to a stopping point. When she got to the end of the passage she fell silent for a moment, wiped her brow with her trembling fingers, and then said to Nicolette, "Why don't you pick up where I left off?"

Nicolette began to read. She sat erect, tall and slender, and read slowly and carefully, following the text with one long finger. But she lifted her face and fixed Mrs. Fell with eyes as dispassionate and unreadable as a cat's just as she said nigger. The word, though the girl had not paused or changed her tone when she said it, possessed a concentrated intensity, alarming and terrible, completely at odds with the cadence of her voice. Mrs. Fell flushed. Each time the girl said nigger she looked into the teacher's eyes. The air became thick and hot, and Mrs. Fell fumbled with her collar, trying to get the top button undone so that she could breathe. The light in the room took on a shimmering quality and the teacher saw the students as through heat rising off asphalt. They were all staring at her as if she were a rattlesnake. *I've done nothing wrong*, she thought. *I didn't write this book.*

Nicolette read on but Mrs. Fell could no longer hear her voice. It was as if the girl were reading under water—she saw Nicolette's lips moving and heard a muffled mumbling but could not distinguish the words. When the girl looked into her eyes again and said nigger, that word sounded distinct and final, as if a judgment had been passed.

"Enough," said Mrs. Fell. "That will do."

Mrs. Fell studied her hands as the next student read. Her head was bowed as if in prayer and her bun was lifted to the light, trembling slightly. She did not speak to the class except when the students asked if they had read enough. When the bell finally rang, Nicolette gathered her books and walked through the door without looking in her

direction. Mrs. Fell stood up, patted her bun, and nodded to some of the students as they left the classroom. None of them nodded back. They cast sidelong glances at her as they walked toward the door, hunched over their books. She leaned against her desk until the last student left, then she sank down into her chair and sat for a long time, staring out of the windows.

Presently Mrs. Fell heard a knock on the classroom door. "Come in," she said, without looking away from the windows. She heard someone clear his throat, and when she looked towards the door she saw Mr. Hammond's head floating just inside—the rest of his body, she presumed, was behind the door. He asked if he could speak with her for a moment and she said, yes, if he would step all the way inside. It disturbed her to be talking to a floating head. Mr. Hammond stepped into the room and cleared his throat again and then informed her that some of her students had approached him about her conduct in class. The students acted very distressed and said that she had been making offensive comments. "Why, that's ridiculous," she said. "We were reading from a book." Mr. Hammond acknowledged that the entire situation must have been a misunderstanding, that the students had probably perceived insult where none had been intended, but that the situation, as it was, could not be ignored. The students expected action. Perhaps it would be better if she took a few days off until things settled down. Mrs. Fell stiffened in her chair. Mr. Hammond added quickly that it might be best for all involved if she took a few days off, and that he was as concerned for her well being as the students. She looked Mr. Hammond in the eyes and asked if Nicolette had raised the complaint. Perhaps it had been a cultural misunderstanding. "It wasn't Nicolette," said the principal. She looked at him for a moment longer then turned back towards the windows. The door closed quietly behind her.

When she got home, Mrs. Fell threw her coat over the chair by the door. She took the teakettle over to the sink to fill it, but turned the water on so forcefully that it flew out of the pot and sprayed her. She banged the kettle on the counter, grabbed a dishtowel and started scrubbing at the water dripping down the front of her blouse. By the time she remembered it was the same dishtowel she'd used to wipe jelly off the floor where she'd dropped her toast that morning, she had rubbed a purple streak into her blouse. "Damn them!" she said, and picked up the teakettle and banged it down on the counter again. She turned the water on and put enough water in the teakettle for a cup of tea. "Damn them." She put the kettle on the stove, and then went to her room to take off her shirt; she decided to put on a housecoat rather than change into another set of clothes. She filled her bathroom sink with cold water and put her blouse in to soak.

She walked back to the kitchen just as the kettle whistled. "Of all the nerve—" Mrs. Fell rummaged through the tea cabinet and got out a canister of Earl Grey, then looked through a drawer for a strainer. "If they really think—" She spooned tea out of the canister and put it in the strainer, but her hands were shaking so that she spilled some of the tea across the counter top. She left it and opened a cabinet, took out a cup, and dropped the strainer into the cup. "They have no right, no right, none at all." She poured water over the strainer, but she poured too fast and some of the water spilled out of the cup onto the counter. "Damn them." She started to grab a paper towel to dry the counter but got caught up watching the tealeaves unfolding and bleeding into the water, her mind perfectly blank for a moment, and then she picked up her cup and walked through the hallway. She stopped by the photograph of her son, stared at it for a minute, and then traced his shadow with her finger. "They cannot do this to

me," she murmured. "I've done nothing wrong. He didn't even get my side of the story."

Mrs. Fell walked into the living room. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and turned towards it, but she could barely see herself in the half-light. She put her teacup down, turned on the overhead light, and looked at herself; the shadows exaggerated her wrinkles and the bags under her eyes, and the light made her cheekbones and chin shine so that her face resembled a skull. She turned off the switch, thinking the light from the table lamp would be softer, but as she reached for the lamp the statuette of the cat caught her attention. Its face, though smooth and vacant, filled her with revulsion. It had no expression, yet its blankness, rather than being neutral, seemed menacing. She snatched the cat up and threw it against the wall, hoping to shatter it, but it bounced off and landed on the floor. Its eyes regarded her.

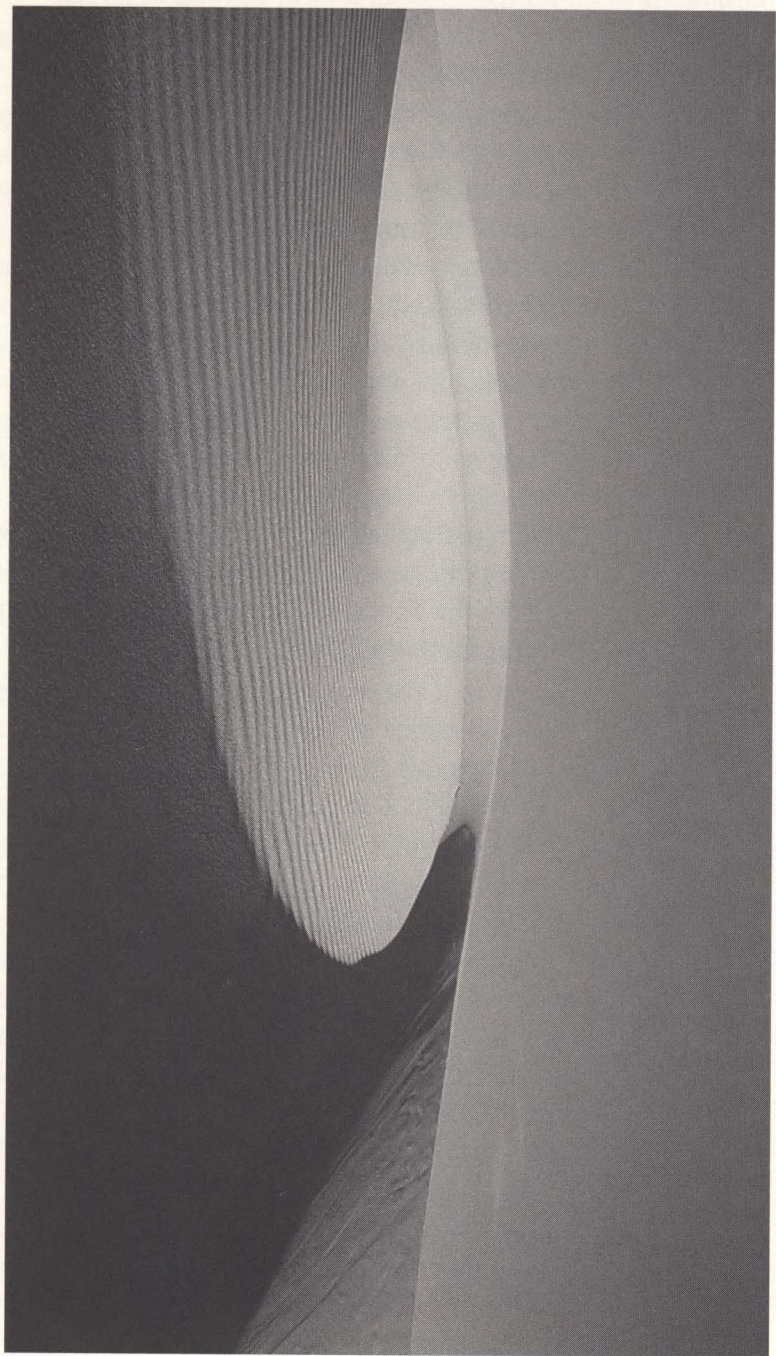
She spat at the cat before she could stop herself. She pushed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Why?" She didn't know to whom she spoke—to God, to the air, to the room, to the cat. When she dropped her hands and opened her eyes something had changed. The blinds glowed as if the light were shining through orange colored crepe paper. Curious, she crossed the room and opened them; the sun was just setting and the air itself seemed to be made of light; everything it touched turned golden red. She turned back towards the mirror. Her face looked softer, her skin less wrinkled. Her hands, when she lifted them to touch her face, looked smooth and unblemished. She unpinned her hair and picked up the silver handled brush from the table and brushed her hair with long slow strokes.

Something red moving in the corner of the mirror attracted her eye. She turned to the window and saw a young man walking down the street in a red letter-jacket, hands in his pockets, red spots on his cheeks. A light wind pulled at the curls on his head. His face was downcast, and

he seemed to be staring at the cracks in the sidewalk. He stepped on each one. Mrs. Fell bent towards the window with her hand on her throat and her mouth slightly open. *It really could be . . . the resemblance . . . uncanny.* As he neared the house he looked up. Mrs. Fell put her palm on the glass and bent closer, her face almost touching the window. It really could be him. He looked into the window and smiled at her, then shook his head as he passed the house. She straightened quickly and stepped back from the window. She turned back to the mirror but the light had changed. She saw herself as he must have seen her: a crazy old woman in a worn out housecoat wearing too much lipstick, her hair loose and bristling with static. She looked down the street at the boy walking away from her. He was still looking at the ground and stepping carefully on each seam in the sidewalk, probably on his way home. She shut the blinds, turned from the window, and pinned up her hair as well as she could in the failing light.



Untitled by Grant Stewart

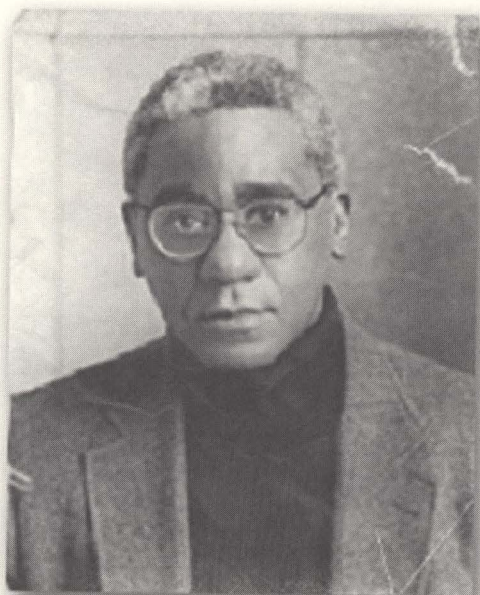


Reflector 26

Bethany C. Hall

Poetic Justice

A spurned, burned lover
commands hot rage
to hang forever
o'er an empty page.



Charles Johnson Interview
By Ashley Cease

Recipient of the 1990 National Book Award for Middle Passage, Johnson is the author of the collection, Soulcatcher and Other Stories, and four novels, including Dreamer, his most recent work, which re-imagines the final two years in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. Johnson holds the Pollock Chair of English at the University of Washington.

Reflector: *As a teacher of fiction at the University of Washington, is there one work—novel, collection of essays, short stories—that you feel is an absolute necessity to teach to your students?*

Charles Johnson: A work I have assigned to my students every academic term for twenty years now is my teacher John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, a posthumously published work that is, in my opinion, the best handbook on the craft of fiction ever done. My students do Gardner's thirty craft exercises in the back of the book as weekly assignments. Take a look at my article, "A Boot Camp for Creative Writing," in the October 31, 2003 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for my complete pedagogical vision for creative writing, and the various texts I recommend that students, graduate and undergraduate, absorb during their apprenticeships.

R: *Can you discuss the term "African-American Literature," and how its usage has evolved from the beginning of your career to the present? What texts have been incorporated into this category that were not considered, say, 20 years ago? How have such texts been used to reflect other changes in our perceptions of African-American culture?*

CJ: The term "African American" is of recent vintage (sometime in the 1980s), and so I often use the earlier term "black" as much as I do "African-American" or "Negro." They all refer to the same group of people and, in this case, to their literature.

In the late 1960s and early '70s fewer black writers were published by mainstream, white publishing houses. When an author did publish with, say, a Viking or a Knopf, that writer's book received a great deal of review attention, though not always money spent on promotion and

publicity. That's all changed now. However, prior to the 1970s the vast majority of work by black creators—writers, artists, etc.—was confined to what some called the Negro “special interest” press.

Similarly, before the late 1960s black authors were seldom, if ever, taught in America's white (or integrated) elementary and secondary schools, or at universities and colleges. That began to change around 1969 with the mushrooming of Black Studies courses on American campuses, and through a greater sensitivity by academics to the multi-racial dimensions of American history and culture. So that, these days the works of African-American authors can be found in the secondary school and college curriculums, and in bookstores (the chains) like Barnes & Noble or Borders, though my friend, playwright August Wilson, objects, and rightly so, to those books being segregated into the “African-American” section of the bookstores—why, for example, are published copies of his plays there, but not in the general section devoted to plays, where we find, for example, Edward Albee (and with no label of race attached to his work, as if being “white” is somehow to be raceless)?

R: As a successful short story writer, essayist, and cartoonist is there one genre that you feel a particularly strong connection to? Can you discuss what role each of these genres plays in your sense of yourself as a writer who works with language and pictures?

CJ: Well, I'm happy to report that this Sunday *The Seattle Times* will publish four new cartoons I did over the holidays along with a 600-word essay on Martin Luther King Jr. (They gave me three-quarters of the “Opinion” page, and are colorizing the cartoons now); and these days I draw a regular feature for each issue of *Black Issues Book Review*, a panel cartoon based on Oprah's current selection

for her “classics” book club. (So far I’ve drawn cartoons based on *East of Eden* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*).

From my earliest experience (I began publishing stories and cartoons professionally when I was 17 in 1965), I discovered that all the arts and humanities are inter-related. I’ve never been able to perform what I call creative apartheid—placing drawing in one box, novel-writing in another, short story writing in a third, philosophy in a fourth, and literary criticism in a fifth. In my body of work these forms of expression and exploration flow across such artificially imposed boundaries. Philosophy stimulates my imagination and brings (I hope) rigor to my work as a critic; drawing makes me focus on the minutiae in the world around me, which sharpens the descriptive prose in my fiction, which explores timeless and contemporary philosophical questions. So I have no preference among these various forms of creative expression.

R: I know that you have studied phenomenology in your undergrad at the State University of New York at Stonybrook. Could you give a brief definition of this term and explain how your work has been influenced by the phenomenological?

CJ: Twentieth century phenomenology, in both the German and French traditions, is both a philosophy and a method. As a method, its aim is to free us from the culturally ingrained presuppositions (and prejudices) that we bring to our experience of objects and others; its aim is to enable us to discern new meanings (or profiles) in what we think we already know, and a phenomenologist achieves this through a “radical empiricism” that describes only what is given as the object is disclosed (alethia) to a perceiving consciousness.

As phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Mikel Dufrenne knew

so well, art (literary or painting, poetry or the plastic arts) has demonstrated over centuries, in the West and East, the power to change our perceptions, to make us see differently and, as Kant once said of Hume, to “awaken” us from our “dogmatic slumbers.” In other words, great art contains its own form of the phenomenological “epoche,” the act of “bracketing” or setting aside our assumptions and presuppositions so that our consciousness is open to the new (novelist Ralph Ellison would say that through art the “invisible” is made visible). All this I discussed in my dissertation, *Being and Race: Black Writing* since 1970 (1988), and in various articles published over the last 20 years and collected in *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings By and About Charles Johnson*, edited by Dr. Rudolph Byrd (Indiana University Press, 1999). You’ll also find articles on this subject in my most recent book, *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (Scribner, 2003).

R: *In your works, and especially Soulcatcher, you often look into unexplored and otherwise marginalized aspects of African American history. What is your central aim in doing so?*

CJ: As Ralph Ellison pointed out in *Invisible Man*, most of what happens in human experience remains invisible and unvoiced—outside recorded “history,” which as a narrative is always a form of interpretation and selection. This is especially and sadly true of the vast contributions of black Americans to the formation of this nation’s history, culture, and politics since 1619 when the first 20 indentured (black) servants arrived on a Dutch ship in Jamestown.

As a writer who sometimes creates what people call “historical” fiction, I’m interested in the revealing experiences that are anecdotal and off to one side of the historical record: the small, human events that speak

volumes such as Martha Washington's fear that her husband George's slaves would kill her after he died because in his will he stipulated they would be free after she passed away. There is drama in that story, everything a storyteller is looking for.

R: *Soulcatcher* includes a range of angles on slavery's effects and the experiences of those forced to endure it. How did you choose the twelve narratives that became part of this collection?

CJ: Well, as I explained in the book's introduction, even before I began to write, I decided on the various literary forms I wanted to use—twelve different artistic vessels or vehicles for the content (for example, a monologue in a third-person narrative; a story told in all dialogue; the epistolary form, etc.) which I hope brings some degree of aesthetic virtuosity and variety to the tales in *Soulcatcher*. Once I knew the forms I wanted to work with in this book, I then looked at the enormous amount of research provided to me by WGBH in Boston, then I matched the forms chosen with the historical events I wanted to dramatize. Once again: in the research I generally looked for dramatically rich—yet little known—moments in the lives of such people as Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, or Martha Washington.

R: You mentioned your fascination with Descartes and said that you are working on a book related to philosophy. What is the relationship between this work and your work as a fiction writer? Who would you say is your intended audience for this new work?

CJ: Every philosopher or student of philosophy must, of course, be interested in Descartes since he is the “father of modern philosophy” (And I refer you to *Cartesian*

Meditations, a little book by Edmund Husserl, the “father of phenomenology,” who in this work acknowledges that Descartes’s systematic doubt prefigures his own philosophical method). Last fall I wrote a new story, “The Queen and the Philosopher,” which dramatizes Descartes’s sadly ironic death in the court of Queen Christina of Sweden; that work will be included in my next story collection, *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*, which should be published later this year. In short, everything about Descartes is fascinating.

The new book I’m working on and will finish this June is *The New Souls of Black Folk: A Phenomenology of Race and Culture for the Twentieth Century*. This work is not about Descartes, but it is an examination of racial phenomenon and experience in the post-Civil Rights era, a book-length essay that (in a Cartesian or phenomenological spirit) explores whether the language and concepts we inherit from the segregation era (and the 1970s) actually fit what is given to us today on the landscape of American racial experience. It is an essay that asks: What are we missing or not seeing? What concepts and language distort and prohibit our achieving a fresh intuition of racial phenomenon?

Clearly, this new philosophical work has a complementary relationship to my fiction. And its audience? Both my publisher and I hope the audience will simply be intelligent readers who enjoy the adventure and process of rigorous thinking.





"BELIEVE ME, RICHARD, I'VE BEEN IN PUBLISHING FOR THIRTY YEARS, AND I CAN ASSURE YOU A BOOK ABOUT BLACK ANGER WILL SIMPLY NEVER SELL..."



Girl in Diner by Den Small

Reflector 36

Give And Take

Stephanie Zyblicki

I have the Gettysburg Address in my bra. It's an assignment for my speech class. I also have lip gloss, a lighter, an ink pen, chewing gum, my keys and about \$2.36 in loose change. I never liked purses much; they're too easy to forget. And carrying too much in your pockets make them bulge. I hate that. My breasts go everywhere I go, and no one touches them without my knowledge or consent.

I'm consumed with boredom sitting in one of those street cafes. Memories of class fade away with the noise of traffic and people on cell phones rattling off items they need their counterpart to pick up from the store. Orange juice. Paper towels. Don't forget the coffee.

I was amused briefly by the women behind me. One had just lost her boyfriend and was crying incessantly like a small child whose ice cream had dropped right off the cone. And with the reasoning of a child, this woman couldn't understand why her ice cream had fallen away. Her friend listened with fake concern as good friends do, growing angrier listing the number of tasks her poor jilted friend had done out of "love" for him. Then as if it were no longer important to this crying child that was a cone with no more ice cream, she commented to her angry friend "I like her shoes" and nodded in my direction. They continued their conversation about what they'd like to wear if they had better bodies. They left sneering at me jealously as though it was my fault I looked the way they wanted to.

I get that a lot. Since I was eleven years old and the neighbor's wife thought her husband was attracted to me,

every woman I meet is jealous. I never saw what they see, and I found it impossible to believe that every man in the world wants me. That's not to say I haven't had a good run of luck, it's just unfair sometimes. Men always seem to love my body, and women are jealous of it. I'm not being conceited, that's just what I've learned after years of careful observations. They just see the body and nothing else. At least the body is something worth looking at.

You know, I used to try everything to try to make myself less attractive. I changed hair colors, wore no makeup, or sometimes too much, all to no avail. It seems I always end up being used or abused, so one day I decided to live my life for me, and fuck off to everyone else. The most annoying thing to an insecure person is somebody with the strength and self-assurance they lack flaunting their confidence in their face. When you say my skirt's too short, you're saying that you think your ass is too fat.

I'm flipping through the paper for the fourth time today when I notice a rather good-looking man at the table across from me. He's the strong type, you can tell from the eyes. I angle my chair slightly and crossed my legs, the way I've seen so many temptresses do in movies. I casually look through the papers as though every word is the most fascinating thing I've ever read. Secretly I'm waiting for him to look up, watching him from underneath my eyelids. I'm planning a moment, one of those things you can tell potential grandchildren about. We were in a sidewalk cafe, we were sitting across from each other, reading the paper and our eyes met.

This is my plan. Catch his eyes and lick my lips. Slide myself out of my chair and saunter over. He'd look at me and I'd look at him and he'd clear the table and take me right there, wrapped together in ecstasy as groups of innocent bystanders watch helplessly entranced. It's a scene I've always wanted to play.

I sit there half-interested in my newspaper silently begging him to look at me. Finally he does and I slowly raise my head to meet his gaze. Our eyes lock for a moment, but before anything happens he smiles and looks back at his paper. My moment to moment seduction has failed and his appeal is lost. I sit back and look for something else to amuse me, but it's no use.

I go and pay the check and on my way out I pass his table. He's gone, probably to the bathroom or something and I decide in an instant that I need retribution for his indifference. I take his trench coat off his chair. It's long and black, my favorite kind. There's something mysterious about someone who owns a black trench coat. I have a moment of guilt and I feel it necessary to leave him with something. So I put the coat on and quickly slip out of my dress. It's short and white, not one of my favorites, so I leave it over the back of his chair and walk away.

I'm enjoying the city now. I can see people out of the corner of my eye watching me in my silver heels and black trench coat. Knowing what other people think of me is both a blessing and a curse. They know there's nothing between them and me except my coat and my bra filled with my most prized possessions. Couples' reactions are the best. The women immediately avert their eyes then nudge their companions to do the same. They think I'm a pervert.

The lights go brighter as the sun sets, and soon I'm tired of my little game. It's getting colder and I shove my hands into the coat pockets. There I find a small piece of paper with an address written on it. 6th Street, Apartment 582.

Before I know it, I am on 6th Street. Whatever is going on in this apartment, inside this coat, I need to be a part of. I arrive at the apartment to find a party. The typical kind, where there are tons of people and nobody knows whose party they're really at. A Jell-O shot greets me at the

door and I walk in with the aura of somebody who knows they belong here. I walk around, accepting drinks and stares until I come across a familiar face. The strong man is here, telling some guys a story about a girl who stole his jacket in exchange for her dress. He tells the story with such honesty that I once again decide I want him.

As he finishes speaking he turns his head to find me staring at him. I nod my head in the direction of the bathroom. He raises an eyebrow and stares me up and down, trying to make up his mind, which I find a little insulting but don't really care. Then he nods as if he's not just accepting my invitation, but me as well.

I arrive in the bathroom first and quickly check the mirror to make sure I look as sexy as I can. To avoid a mess, I empty my bra of everything but its intended contents, which I fluff and contort until they are plump and overflowing the lacy cups. I take everything else and jam it into the pockets of the coat, which I keep on. There's a quiet knock on the door. He waits to hear my welcome before he opens the door.

I smile and climb into the bathtub, one of those huge old fashioned ones. I unbutton the coat, and he stands over the tub and after a moment climbs in on top of me. We kiss, the deep kind that makes you feel you know this person before you realize you're probably just a substitute for whoever they'd rather be with. But he's a good kisser and he moves his lips down my neck as I run my hands up his back.

I pull off his shirt and throw it. He has a good body, strong and hard. He pulls me up and takes the coat off, laying it down on the floor. We take a few moments, taking each other in, touching and kissing in perfect rhythm. The tub is marble and a little slippery so we have to work to keep our balance. I close my eyes as my breath gets harder and my face gets warmer. His breathing matches mine and we are rocking back and forth in this tub in perfect

harmony. I am in love. Not with the person, but the moment. This apartment, this party, this tub, this feeling...it's all I've ever wanted.

He collapses on top of me and kisses my face all over. We're both quite tired and sweaty and the alcohol has started to kick in. We go to sleep in the tub with the shower curtain closed, in case anyone decides they need to use the bathroom. The tub is cold but he is warm and I think that if I really let myself go that I could be in love for more than just the moment. When we tell the grandkids our story, we'll just leave out the part about the bathtub. It'll be our little secret.

I sleep easily and wake the next morning alone. My strong man has gone, taking with him whatever may have existed between us at any moment between yesterday and now, and also his coat with my things in it. I slowly stand up and climb out of the tub. I open the door and poke my head around the corner. I see a dress shirt sitting on a pile of laundry and grab it.

I'm walking home. It's gotten cold out and I wish to god I had that trench coat again, to feel that warmth again. Or at least have my damn lip gloss. I think about how I'll have to go into class later today, windblown and half-naked with chapped lips and try to explain to my professor why I don't have my assignment. The building super will have to change the locks for me. On 27th Street, I check the phones for change people left behind and come up with enough for a cup of coffee. There's a little sidewalk cafe just up the street, and I think I should stop in and warm myself up before I go home. It won't take long.

Once again, I walk in and am greeted with the shocked faces of early birds that are half asleep and think that they're dreaming. An old man smiles and it makes me feel dirty. The waitress comes over and I throw my money on the table for my coffee.

The waitress looks me up and down. "Rough night?" she says.

I don't answer with anything but a stare that says just get me my coffee bitch and she walks away knowing that she just lost the pathetic tip I was going to leave her. I am trying to be as discreet as possible because I don't want the attention today. I am lost in the memory of the bathtub, and the anger that comes with knowing you've lost something important, something irreplaceable.

I walk the next few blocks home unaware of the stares and the cold. My super lets me in with just the slightest look of disapproval. I take a shower and spend about an hour trying to catch up on the work I was missing by not being in class that day. I lie down to stare mindlessly at the daytime television offerings and am contemplating buying some miracle skin cream when the super knocks on my door and yells that I have a package.

I open the door to find a box wrapped in pages from the telephone book. I open the box to find the trench coat, with its pockets still filled with my stuff. I look closer and find that there's an address circled on the pages that wrapped the box. It's a bookstore on the corner and I debate in my head whether or not I should go. Eventually I do, but in my sweats so no one gets a false impression. I feel that I have had enough of seduction for one lifetime. I leave the coat behind too, in case he wants it back.

I've passed this bookstore every day on my way to classes. It's a little bohemian vintage place that I've always wanted to go into but never had any reason to. I love the idea of recycling things other people thought weren't good enough anymore. I walk in and the little bell above the door rings which I find just charming. As the door shuts the strong man looks up from a pile of books he was alphabetizing. According to the name plate on the wall, his name is Damien and he owns this store.

He smiles at me with that gorgeous smile that made me forget that I almost caught pneumonia walking home half naked. His eyes are tired from a slight hangover but there's something there that makes me think about loving him all over again.

"I didn't think you'd show up." he says.

"What makes you say that?" I ask, now desperately wishing that I had taken some care getting dressed. There's nothing worse than trying to be coy when you look like you've just left the gym.

"I didn't think girls like you came back the next day." My heart sinks a little at this. He only thinks of me as a slut. My face must show my hurt because he blushes and quickly tries to explain himself. "I thought girls with as much confidence as you wouldn't want some guy like me. I thought maybe I was just a game to you."

"So you thought you'd play back, huh?" I said, holding up the piece of the phone book with his address on it. He flashes that little smile again.

We stand there in an awkward silence waiting for something to happen. I feel like I am back in high school waiting for Billy Thompson to answer me when I asked him to the prom. It was the first time in a while I had felt nervous around a guy and that made me even more nervous so I turned my head to the floor.

"Well I've done my part, I've showed up here." I said looking up. "So now...tag, you're it."

He laughs a little and asks if I want to see the store, which I would have wanted to do anyway, even if the owner and I hadn't slept together. I look at my watch before answering yes right away so he thinks that I might possibly have some place else to go. It always makes them feel special to think that you've given up something important to spend time with them.

"I really like this store. I always wanted to come in but I never had the time."

“I’m glad you came in. I love this place, and it does good business. That and I find the little bell above the door just a little charming.”

I smile a little and I know that this is really going to be another moment where I should just let myself go and fall in love, but I hold it back until I can be sure. Maybe we can tell our grandkids that we met in this bookstore. We spend about an hour talking, your basic get to know each other types of conversation mixed in with some gorgeous insights on his part about all the books I love to read. We make plans to meet that night and he goes in the back to write down his address for me and I get a brilliant idea. I feel as though I need to be clever in order to make up for my shabby appearance. I shout into the back of the store that I have to leave but that he should come to my apartment when he closed the store. Then I leave quickly and quietly with a little memento.

I’m showered and sexy by the time Damien comes over. I hear the faint little knock on the door that reminds me of when he knocked at the bathroom door at the party. I check the peephole and see that it’s him and he has a sly little smile and I think he knows what I’m up to. I open the door slightly and try to look as sheepish as possible. He smiles and laughs a little as he shakes his head, once he notices that I’m wearing his coat. I open the door all the way and step into the hallway. He’s laughing so much by now that I betray my little game and laugh too. I close the door behind me and lock it. Damien and I walk to the elevator, laughing even harder as we listen to the fading sounds of the charming little door bell that echo from my apartment.



Dimitri Kiaroscuro

The Velvet Ant (*Dasymutilla occidentalis*)

Velvet ants get their name from the appearance of the females, which look like thickly haired ants. They are actually wingless wasps. Most velvet ants are black and red. The males cannot sting, however the females can bite and sting. The female's sting is so painful that the wasps are commonly referred to as "cow killers." These wasps live primarily in hot, semiarid and desert regions around the world. All North American species of velvet ants are parasites, laying eggs in the nests of bees and other wasps.

We become acidic
as retaliation to this aging process
that hates us -

The White Recluse Spider

sin alas (Lady Mutillidae)

the love child of
 envy and indifference-
crawling (the desert unforgiving)
alone with the burning sun
 upon my back -

i long for wings
 (like those of Icarus) –

But i am supposed

 this needle fits-
justified ink
 without the patronage of
a whored muse -

 with this needle i've
sewn myself together –

 with my needle i might infect-
as i'm a parasitic bitch
all too malignant
and malcontent –

i cannot offer ethereal anesthetic-
 i inflict the opposite,
because

 nature has *never* known
compassion –

i am the killer of cows
 (cows that should rather be dead) –

exposed

(she remembers laying,
praying for a matador -)
and now, with
her dreams flattened like pages
(of a dejected novel) that
crave to be burned,
she is (and always will be)
closed - dying – (somewhat dead) –
completely reluctantly alive

like
a book with
a broken spine –

and left like
other heifers with
blank stares and
legs that surrender to rain –

with ease she was overtaken
- by a bull - with
a pyrite heart –
(a bull disguised as a unicorn) -

she remembers
holding in the screams with her
teeth grinding out
an unheard prayer;

“please God no...please God no...please God no...
please God no...”

she is bitter because
she believed in myths
and that unicorn of experience
raped her of her innocence -

all hollow eve

the phoenix (that
cannot rise from
the depth of despondency)
has drank herself
flightless (reflecting her daughter) -

has her face flushed
red as exposed blood -
has "numb" written
across her sunken expression -

all hollow eve (so
faithful to her disease);
a breathing stillborn with
a bottle caught
between her lips -

can she fill the cavity with
fermented hopes and
alcoholic dreams?

she's drowning
and not even thirsty for air

(beaten to the point of apathy)





Untitled by Grant Stewart

The Undressing of Daniel Lewis

Leslie Rakowicz

"Damn it." He sighed as he hung up the phone. Just what he had been trying to avoid.

"Please, come on Daniel, it would mean so much to me." Erin had pleaded with him in that sweet sing-song voice she knew could get him to do exactly what she wanted. He imagined her twirling a strand of that bright blond hair around the curve of her index finger, smiling to herself.

"You're only twenty minutes from her place and she doesn't have anybody else to help her—"

"Well can't she get somebody else to move her stuff out? A boyfriend or someone?"

"Why are you being so difficult?" She rushed the words together, her breath in one heavy swoosh. He could picture her drumming the fingers of her free hand on the cream countertop. "She already told me she'd pay you."

"Jesus, Erin..." He didn't want Kate to think he was some jerk who had to be paid to do someone a favor.

"Relax, I told Kate no about the money. I don't see why you're making such a big deal about this anyway, it's not like you had something planned for today—you didn't right?"

He squirmed in his seat. She had him now. He had always been such an awful liar.

"No..." The word came slow, drawn out. She cut him off.

"Good. I told her you'd be there at two. I'll see you tonight." He heard the click in his ear before he could protest.

An hour later, Daniel found himself staring at the dark green paint flaking off the front door of apartment 217. Kate lived in an old two-story firehouse that had been converted into apartments a few years back. Daniel lifted his hand to knock but hesitated. He knew he still had time to leave, but then Kate was expecting him, two o'clock sharp. He stood for a moment, contemplating. The door swung open in one swift motion.

"I thought somebody was outside." The brunette smiled sweetly, showing a full white row of teeth. Daniel teetered on the ball of his right foot.

"Kate...hi." He gave her a half smile, jamming his fists into the pockets of his leather jacket.

"Thanks for coming. Erin said you'd be here around two. You're a little early." She laughed lightly and motioned to the room behind her. Boxes marked CLOTHES, DISHES, and PAINTS in bold black marker stood bunched together in the center of the living room. Piles of clothes, some neatly folded, others draped over cushions, lay on the light blue sofa. Sneakers, boots and several pairs of high heels were scattered about the room, under the coffee table, in between the cushions of the couch. One of her paintings, a picture of Lake Elsinore at night was propped up against the side of the couch. In it the moon hung in a black sky and reflected its round face in the water's surface. It was the painting Erin had admired at her cousin's last exhibition.

Kate bent down to pick up a pair of paint-covered overalls that peeked out from underneath the couch. "Sorry, I thought I would have everything packed already." She looked up at him apologetically. God she looked good, her faded blue jeans cupped neatly around the curve of her buttocks. He cleared his throat.

"Don't worry about it. I can help you pack up the rest."

“No, no. You don’t have to. I feel so bad about this. I know Erin told me not to pay you but really, I want to, especially because you’ll have to wait now.”

She placed her hand lightly on the arm of his jacket. He wished it wasn’t so thick. Maybe he could feel the warmth of her fingers if he had worn his windbreaker instead, but then it wasn’t as impressive. His cheeks flushed. “She’s your fiancée’s cousin, Daniel.” Father Michael’s voice echoed in his ears. He pictured the old priest, sitting behind the confessional, those thick white eyebrows knotted in the middle of that wrinkled pale forehead.

His buddy Jake had told him to relax. “You can look as long as you don’t touch, Danny.” Those words of wisdom were shared over two and a half empty pitchers of beer.

True fantasizing about Kate was not quite on equal footing with cheating, but Daniel couldn’t shake that feeling which prompted him to leave a dozen roses for Erin at the front desk of her law firm or treat her to dinner at the Le Canard de Rôtis. It was not that he didn’t love Erin. Hadn’t he after all given her that one and a half carat diamond she loved to wave around on that little finger of hers so that the cut of the stone cast little glimmers across the faces of admirers? The fingers of Kate’s hands were bare. Only the dark blue of her oil paint, which lay encrusted under the tips of her fingernails, lured the human eye. She shifted the weight of her body onto her left foot, smiling up at him.

“Did you want some tea, Daniel? I’d offer you a cup of coffee but my coffeemaker’s about the only thing I did pack,” she said laughingly and brushed past him in the direction of the kitchen.

“Absolutely...” he whispered, too low for Kate to hear as he followed the lightness of her step into the kitchen.

They sat across from each other at the little collapsible card table set up in the far corner of the kitchen. The room was almost bare. A few pieces of silverware lay scattered upon the countertop, still needing to be packed.

“You know, I always liked you, Dan.” She fingered the chip in the handle of her half empty mug. “You have an appreciation for the artistic side of life.” To his ears she seemed to emphasize the first word, pausing ever so slightly after she had spoken it. He traced with his right index finger the swirls of paint that dried in careless thick smudges on the surface of the table. He did enjoy talking about Kate’s work, the large oil impastos she created using only her paints and the edge of a broad spatula. Her speciality was portrait painting though she experimented in reproducing architectural landscapes and abstract forms she built from mixing and building onto the layers of paint. Not that he had much to contribute to their conversations about her work. Mostly he would sit and listen to her talk about her latest project, following the animated movements of her hands.

Erin had once asked Daniel why he had encouraged her cousin in this “hobby.” He had complimented Kate during one of her gallery exhibitions, saying he thought she had real talent.

“I don’t think this is just a hobby, Erin. She’s serious about her art and she’s gaining recognition—”

“But Daniel, her success depends on whether or not some richie art collector likes how she slaps paint onto a canvas. I mean, Lord knows Kate has talent. I like her stuff, but she needs a real job too. I tried to talk to her about that position at the firm again. She won’t listen.” Erin had clicked her tongue impatiently, waiting for him to agree, but he had just stood there, brushing his teeth at the bathroom sink and avoiding her stare.

Daniel glanced across the table at Kate. She kept her eyes on his face as she traced the rim of her mug with

her index finger. "You know Kate, Erin's just worried about you, she wants you to have more security."

"Oh yes, I know. And if not through a career change then through a husband." Her laughter echoed in the hollowness of the room. "She told me if I wouldn't change to a more suitable career then I should at least marry a man who had one. A doctor, or an accountant—someone like you." She looked down then, shifting her eyes to the chip on her mug.

He shifted in his seat, pulling the folding chair closer to the edge of the table. His ears burned with a heat that slowly crept its way to the hollows of his cheeks. He was sure she could see the flush deepening on his face, for she began playing with the edge of her napkin, twisting it into a thick roll, carefully avoiding his eyes.

"Kate?" It was almost a whisper. She raised her eyes to meet his gaze. He paused, seeing something there in her eyes, something he always imagined she could see when she looked into his. He had dreamed of this, on those nights when he locked himself into the bathroom, squeezing his eyes tight trying to picture how her long dark hair would look against her bare shoulders while stifling his moans with the fist of his free hand.

She licked her lips, tugging at the bottom lip with her teeth. Extending her arm, she reached with a shaky hand and ran her fingers along the contours of his jaw line. He sucked in his breath at the lightness of her touch. He leaned towards her, inhaling the lingering scent of her perfume as it mixed with her sweat. Over her left shoulder he could see into the living room and that painting still propped up against the couch. The moon's light reflected in the silver smooth surface of the water. He pulled back just inches from Kate's waiting lips.

His cheeks burned a bright red as he expelled a shaky breath from his lungs. Kate rose slowly from her seat and gathered the two mugs, knocked the chipped one on its

side. The tea seeped over the tabletop and over the edge in a little stream.

“Shit!” She grabbed the napkins off the table and threw them over the puddle expanding on the floor. Daniel grabbed the hand towel that lay draped over the handle of the oven door.

“Let me help.” He knelt next to her on the floor, mopping up the spilled tea with the towel. Kate was careful not to bump his hand as she pushed the bunch of soaked napkins around the spill. She paused, leaning back on the leg of the table. “I think it’d be best if we didn’t mention this to anyone.”

Daniel nodded, “There isn’t anything to tell.”

“Yes, you’re right.” She gave him a half smile and continued to push the saturated napkins around the floor. Daniel stared at Kate’s curved form as she bent over the puddle of tea, his eyes pausing at the deep V of her t-shirt. Slowly he rose and made his way into the living room. Stopping in front of the couch, he laid the painting face down on the carpet. Daniel walked back into the kitchen. Kate sat on the floor watching him, her left eyebrow slightly arched. From the kitchen window he could see the sun as it slid behind the housetops across the street. He turned toward Kate, her lips curled slightly upward.

Yes, he would have to stop at the florist on the way home.



Angela Marshall

Alliterate Illiterate
(Alligator miss -iss -ipien -sis)

Basked in Dis-
 quietude. A-
wak -ing
 quagmire
Nacht mare.

You were
 there
 count -ing
 our king
 -dom
as dresses of
seamstresses.

I saw You.
 You watched
 Her.
 turning blonde pigtails
 with fingers
 churning You
 around
the smallest one.

I panicked

b/c of Pan

(satellite of Saturn)

invited the Invisible

in

encroachment

but You lie

listless; listening

restless -ly

reproaching

the approach.

And They,
rep- resenting Others
(otherwise
present
to present w/o proxy
apothecarie
—a privileged class
of practitioners —
lips having ellipse(d)
apocalypse.
approximate
apoplectic

Ultimately

an ultimatum
made

scepter to serpent,
servant to king,
empires fallen in
to the mortal wind.

You

Remember

Remember

Repent.

-ing

to forget

get

-ting

lost in lust

(for fair swine behind)

hindered

by fingers that twirl

Whirlwind vast

lasting long

enough to
and have

dream
dreamt.



The Battle of Cool Berry Hill

Michael Manis

In a moment of ritual, they hung Berry Hill from a tree.

They spared him the neck and let him swing from his ankles over the recently mowed grass. He could see the dew from between folds of the cloth in the cool evening air, overcome with beauty despite the numbness in his legs.

“Cool Berry Hill! Cool Berry Hill!” the boys from the neighborhood chanted, dancing around the tree from which he swung; a flesh-made pendulum. Each of the dancers wore their own mask forged from construction paper and held together by generic paste. Some brandished sticks against which they writhed to the music sent forth from a battery-powered tape player. The rest jived together, gripping each other hand in hand and spun around just below the hanging boy. One boy, the oldest of the group, sat in a wheel chair while two younger boys ran him helter-skelter through the dancers. No one noticed—why should they? The music, the rabid passion of the moment sent them all into a primal frenzy known only to Savannah tribes and the ancient men of old America.

And Berry Hill hung, the blindfold strewn over his face, obscuring all vision, but he was not scared. No, his heart beat with the rhythm of the music. The atmosphere gave off fumes of bliss, free to even those who did not dance.

Who could not dance.

All things must end, however, and the boy in the wheelchair (the auspicious age of thirteen) halted the tape

player with a gesture. The dance ended, and the boys filed in, periodically looking to Berry Hill.

“Cool Berry Hill,” some whispered.

The elder held up his hand, silencing the riff raff.

“Berry Hill,” the thirteen year old said.

“Ye—yes?” replied Berry. His chest heaved in and out with excitement. Each strand of his long blonde hair hung so low it touched the grass; his mother was too protective to have cut it. Since eight years old they’d let it grow.

He was ten.

Reet-reet the rope said while he swung.

“You’ve come tonight to pledge to the Cool Club of Urbandale.” Affirmative screams broke from the crowd, silenced. “You have promised your loyalty to us, but you gotta prove it.” He smiled from beneath his mask. “What time is it?”

“Six-thirty!” said one of the younger boys. “The sun goes down soon.”

“What do I have to do?” said Berry eagerly. It was getting cold, and he would have been glad to have it over and done with.

With a wide grin, the elder boy stood from the wheelchair, sending it toppling against a tree. A single wheel creaked while it spun, finding no ground to extend its purpose. He stood up among the children and ripped off his mask—they all hooted and howled, revealing a face pox-marked from the early onset of acne. Eyes that were a full brown, lacking the warmth of wisdom, hording the glass like nature of pure intelligence.

Wind ran up the pant leg of Berry’s jeans, but he did not feel its touch until it found his midsection. It was cold.

“If you wanna be a member of our club, Berry, you gotta hang here till noon tomorrow!” There was sporadic laughter, but the elder boy shut them up with a wicked glance. “When we come back, I’ll cut you down.”

Berry's heart stopped, he swallowed. "But it's cold, and my mom said I had to be back at eight. I—I'll get in trouble."

"Cool kids don't care about being in *trouble*," he decreed.

"Yeah!" said another boy. "We don't care about that. We all had to do it, anyway."

More laughter.

Berry Hill couldn't hear the mockery overflowing from the throats of his peers, he was too busy focusing on the cold crawling up his forearms, behind his ears. To the particular feeling in his chest—a nervousness unlike anything he'd felt before. He didn't want to be outside so late. God, he hated the dark. He knew they'd make fun of him, but he used a nightlight to avoid it. All the uncertainty in the world came from the dark as far as he was concerned. The blindfold was thin, he could still see some light, but he knew with the cold comes darkness. How he wanted to be *cool* like the rest of them.

A *cool* rooted far from the literal meaning of the word.

Berry's bottom lip quivered with uncertainty. His mouth opened and spouted words he didn't quite want to say.

"Yeah it's no big deal," he said. "Until noon?"

This time the elder boy stifled laughter before it could start, even his own.

"Noon. Then we'll cut you down."

"All right, then I'll be part of the club."

"Forever."

Berry smiled. "*Forever*."

With that, the troop of boys began shuffling out of the grove. It was about a quarter of a mile walk back the road (the tree was on Peter Baker's farm) and none of them wanted to stay. Berry heard the multitude of footsteps through the thrashing wind, called out.

“Where’re you going?”

The oldest boy, nearly out of earshot, turned.

“We’re heading out, meeting’s over.”

“Who’s gonna stay with me?” Berry asked.

“Stay with you?” He laughed. “You gotta do this alone.”

Berry frowned, but a thought, as if transmitted from the boy’s brain to his own, forced his face into a strong position.

Cool people do it alone.

“Okay,” Berry began. “Cool, I’ll see you at noon.”

“Yeah, whatever Berry.”

Within minutes, he was alone.

Berry could still hear the sounds of laughter while the clot of boys made their way back to the road. Soon even that gave out, and with the coming silence, so came the slow darkness. Like a boa around the neck of its prey. The wind lashed his thin body. He wondered what his breath would look like when it condensated upside-down. Normally it seemed to him a dragon, and he’d laugh because he knew such a creature wouldn’t come from his body. His *special little body* as his mother put it. He would have removed the blindfold, but they’d bound his hands (thank God for gloves).

With the darkness came the cold hovering above his shoeless feet, but he didn’t feel its sting. Berry’s head, full of numbing bliss, muddled with the darkness and descended into uneasy warmth.

Wind and wood and rope, with each dragon exhaled, the seconds ticked by.

And hours tolled for Berry Hill.

Clark Hill stomped down the sidewalk, lighting a cigarette as he approached the corner. It was past ten and everyone, his Mom and Dad—even the police, was looking for Berry. Clark, however, had been sent out into the cold

of the Iowan night while his mom and dad took to the luxury of their car, scouring the road for their son.

“Oh he’s so fragile Clark!” his Mom said between tears. “What if he’s cold? What if he’s stranded? You know your brother Clark, help us find him.”

And thus he was sent out on his quest despite his date with Stacy Blaine. Something in him hoped Berry really had chosen to stay out past ten with some friends to enjoy his first cigarette, or perhaps a beer. Clark imagined Berry inhaling some cheap fag and coughing ash all over his lap. But this wasn’t the truth. If anything, Berry had gotten carried away with some thick book and hadn’t realized what time it was. Or perhaps he’d fallen or gotten stuck somewhere. Clark knew his brother well.

This didn’t mean he had the foggiest idea where Berry was.

Clark knew his brother had no friends, perhaps a few acquaintances but that was it. He spent most of the time in his room, reading or listening to music. Not more than twice a year did Berry have a visitor of his own age. Thus Clark had no idea what his parents wanted him to do. If Berry had made a strange new friend, he’d be the first to know. What would sending him out into the neighborhood get done but force him to miss a possibly awesome make-out session (he’d been crossing his fingers for third base) with Stacy Blaine?

“What we’re willing to give up for family,” he sighed.

He rounded the corner, pulled his jacket together against the marauding wind. Clark approached Glen Street, a place Berry often passed on his daily outings, which were becoming less and less frequent with the coming of winter. He found nothing there, no clues, and was about to head to the nearby gas station and wait everything out until his brother was found. But just as Clark turned, he heard the

rat-a-tat of a playing card against a bike's wheel and listened to the approaching youth...

"Yeah, can you believe that kid! What a geek," said one of the coming boys.

Clark turned.

"Heh," said another, acne intruding upon his otherwise imperial thirteen year old face, "for such a smart kid, that Berry's a stupid prick to think he can get into the Cool Club."

They laughed, but Clark was not amused.

Just as they passed by, he leapt out and grabbed the pox-marked one off his new bike, tossing him to the ground. The others stopped in a skid and watched, ready to help but reluctant to go up against a senior like Clark.

Clark sneered; the boy replied with a grimace.

"What the fuck was that for!" said the kid, looking to his defeated bike.

Clark loomed over him, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and lifted him half off the ground. "I'll tell you what you son of a bitch, where's my brother?"

"Who?" He pulled away from the cigarette hanging from Clark's lips.

"Berry!"

His eyes leapt to the other boys, and he knew there would be no help.

Those hues like glass never filled with fear, and with a frown contorting all the sore redness of his face, he spoke.

"He's at Peter Baker's farm."

"Where?" Clark snapped.

"In the grove, the road leads right to it."

Clark pulled him up close. His fag nearly burnt the boy's face.

"What'd you do to him?" Clark said.

"Fuck you!"

He promptly spat in the boy's eyes, effectively shattering the glassy intelligence they once held. The kid recoiled, his hands shot to his face; he cried. Never had he been so disrespected in his life. Clark saw him quiver with anger, smiled.

He picked up the kid's bike, just big enough for him.

"Hey!" The kid stood up. "That's mine."

Clark gave him a glance so cold it froze his pox-marked jaw in place.

With that, Clark peddled full speed toward Peter Baker's farm, forsaking the lust he felt for the lips of Stacy Blaine for the love of his brother.

Of his family.

In the distance, he heard the angry voice of youth.

"You better bring a knife! You hear!" it said.

Clark let the bike rest against the first tree of the grove.

He raced past line after line of saplings, intermittently punctuated by the girth of older trees. Clark was lost, and he knew it. That didn't stop him from racing on, calling out Berry's name over and over into the night. For a long time, what seemed like a full day, the crickets mocked his effort.

"Is it noon yet?" he heard over the insects and the trees.

"Berry. Berry!"

Clark tumbled over tufts of twisted root and through a line of the oldest trees. He paused in his frenzy—something metallic caught his eye.

It was the wheelchair.

He walked over to it and lifted it from its throne of wood. He checked it over—it was still in good condition. Clark was glad, it'd cost his mom and dad a fortune. Once more, he found the tag to make absolutely sure.

It said, in black magic marker: *The Property of Berry Hill.*

Gently, he put it back on its wheels and let it roll forward on its own accord.

"Is it—is it noon yet?" he heard once again, louder this time.

Clark took a few shy steps forward. He was startled by the *reet-reet* of the constantly swinging rope. Turning, he peered past a wall of shadow and saw there a most horrible sight.

Berry hung with skin so pale, Clark wondered why it didn't shrivel and fall off with the wind. His lips were a blue-black, vibrating heedlessly with the chattering of his teeth. Clark's eyes followed upward, to the rope wound tight around Berry's lame ankles. The skin there had broken, creating a ring of dried blood on the noose. To him, the sight was made somewhat better by the fact that from the waist down, Berry wasn't feeling a thing.

Clark ran up to him, supported his torso with strong arms.

"Is it noon?" Berry mumbled. "Is it noon? Am I in?"

Clark tore off the blindfold. Berry squinted from the moonlight, struggling as his brother freed his arms from the rope. Berry threw his hands over his eyes, but Clark tore them away.

"Look," Clark said.

Berry peered at the moon.

"It's not noon," he whispered. "What's happened?"

"Just a second. I'm gonna cut you down, okay?"

Berry only looked at him.

"It's not noon," he repeated.

He reached into Berry's pants and took out the pocket knife his brother always kept there. Clark found the sharpest blade and set to cutting at the thick binds. It took awhile, but eventually the weight of Berry and sawing won

through. Berry came toppling down, but his brother caught him in his arms. Carefully, he let Berry lie in a bed of long-dead leaves.

They crunched.

"Jesus you're cold!" Clark said, touching Berry's forehead. He took off his jacket, wrapping it around his brother.

"It's not noon. Why isn't it noon!" Berry replied.

"Shut up! Who cares, why does it have to be noon? Why'd they do this to you?" Clark shook his head, considered the lacerations around his ankles. "These are bad, Berry. We're going to have to get you to the hospital..."

"They didn't do it," Berry said. "I did it. I wanted it."

"Why?" Clark pulled the wheelchair up to his brother.

"They said I had to. They said if I made it till noon," he swallowed, "then I could be in their club."

Clark extended his arms, and Berry, knowing the procedure by heart, took to his brother and was helped into his chair. The pair of limp-things dragged behind him. He helped button his brother's jacket.

"They were just fucking with you, Berry. That's all," Clark said, kneeling down to meet him eye to eye. That's what the psychiatrists said to do, if you don't talk to him eye to eye, he'll get a complex or so—

"They're weren't fucking with me!" Berry screamed. "They said I could be in. They *promised*."

"They lied."

"I don't believe it. If you would have let me stay till noon, they would have seen that I'm loyal." Berry tried to bury his face in his arm, but Clark wouldn't let him.

"They'd have come back and called you stupid 'cause by then you would have had frostbite and your feet would have fallen off." Clark shook his head. "Why were

you doing this? You're a smart kid, Berry."

"They said I could be in their club, the Cool Club. They said," Berry wiped some wayward tears from his ice-cold cheeks, "they said I would be cool then. They even called me cool."

"They didn't mean it, Berry. Okay? They didn't mean a word."

"Then why'd they say it?"

Berry looked up to his brother with eyes so round and innocent, Clark couldn't help but frown. Berry was nearly eleven, and his innocence ranked with that of an eight year old. By Berry's time Clark had been cussing, smoking—doing all things that help children tear away from that burdensome husk of innocence. Yet Berry would do no such thing, and his brother knew if that husk wasn't removed, he would rot inside of it.

Clark took his brother's shoulders in both hands.

"Berry?"

"Yeah?"

"I need you to listen to me so this never happens again. This is going to sound mean, but you're my brother. So I'm gonna tell you the truth." Clark composed himself. Butterflies built in his stomach, great migrating hordes of them. "You aren't cool, Berry. You'll never be cool to any of these kids. If you ever try, if you ever listen to them, they'll bury you. I remember when I was their age, we did some mean shit to kids like you—and if there's one thing I learned, it wasn't to be nice or to be good, it was that kids like you can never be cool, Berry. They can do great things, wonderful things but never can they be cool."

Berry's eyes fell to the frosted soil and overflowed.

"But that's all I want," he whispered.

"I know Berry. That's what's so fucking hard about this. You can have almost everything, but it's that *one* thing you want..."

They sat there in total silence, staring at each other for a long while. Berry's eyes changed in that moment to something of icy clarity, peered back at his brother, and suddenly, Clark felt the cold. He stood.

"We should head back," he said.

Berry gave him a few short nods.

He grabbed hold of the wheelchair and began the slow walk outside the grove. Soon, they came to a road. Clark used the Baker's phone to call an ambulance. While waiting in their kitchen, Berry's legs mended by the skillful first-aid of Mrs. Baker, Clark looked to his brother.

"I meant to ask you, who did this to you anyway? Was it that zit-faced kid?"

Berry smiled. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?" Clark asked.

"*Because that wouldn't be cool.*"

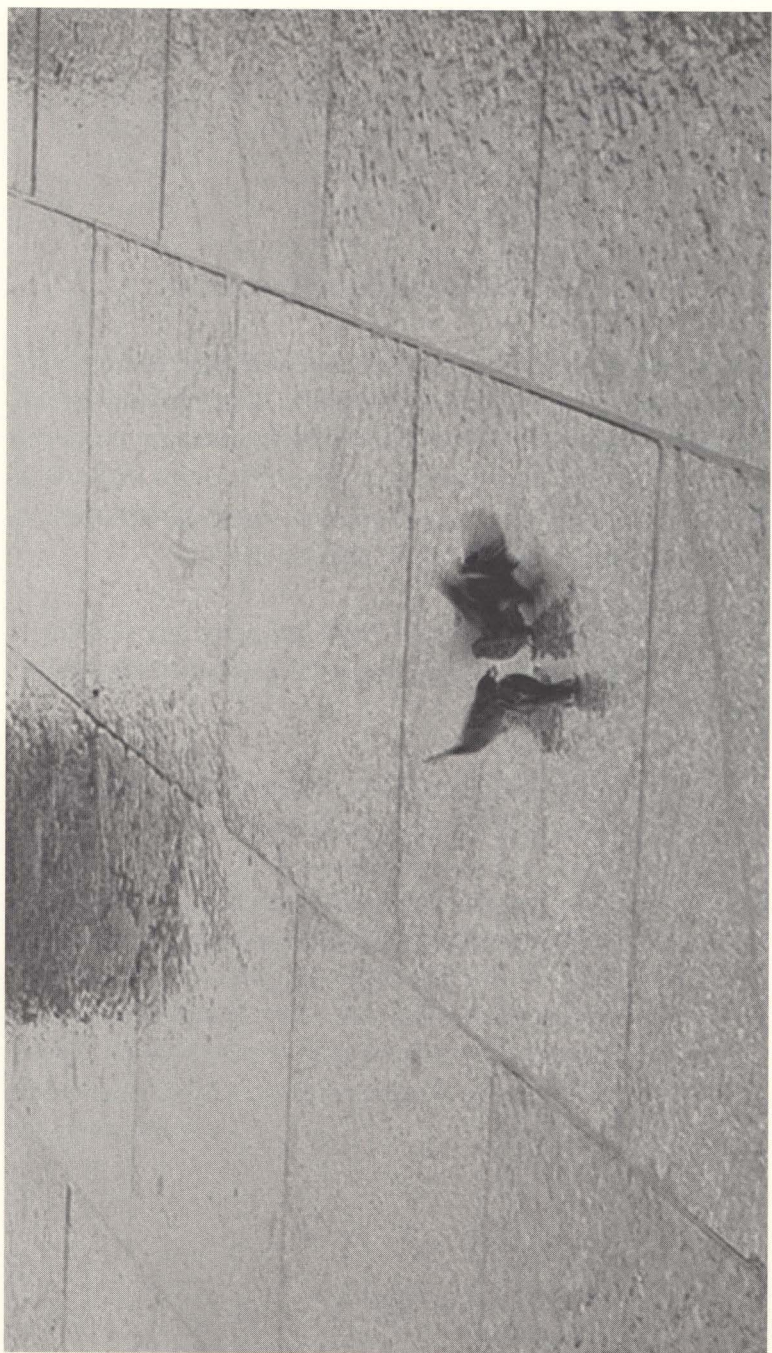
It was then that Clark realized Berry would never understand. He'd read too many books, great books which filled his mind to the brim with the hope knowledge could bring. Berry couldn't comprehend that some things in life *were* hopeless. For Clark it was school; he'd nearly failed out. For Berry it was learning to live like those men he looked up to.

Clark knew his brother never would.

He'd lost the Battle of Cool Berry Hill to the hordes of pox-faced thirteen year olds. Boys like him who would at any point feed on the meek for the will of the strong. Perhaps one of the good men in Berry's adventure novels would say *they'd lost the battle but not the war.*

Clark knew the war was long over, and the slaughter had only just begun.





Birds in Rain by Nicolas Diaz

Scott Gomery

Miss Divine's Disposable Camera

Miss Divine thank you dearly for all your hard work. You captured my love of youth. Our photo is frozen and you're the one to blame, thank you kindly Miss Divine.

Miss Divine, you've saved us and the charm in our eyes.
"Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare."

We were both so young then. Now her curly hair will be forever remembered. Easily seen, the picture of happiness you perfectly snared.

I think you must have known me. Miss Divine I can still smell the purity, such children, so in love.

Dearest friend to me, she has been padlocked in my grasp for eternity. "Thou foster-child of silence and slow time."

Our Humanity

We ride the back of a bull. All of us. Some get kicked in the back of the head. Some of us slip but rise back on for a few more seconds of greatness. Some of us glare defiantly in the bull's eyes, close our own, and wait for the next pound of the heart.

Spot

Electronic flashing covers this house built for five. Interactivity in every aspect of this life. Connect to each other and end in the red. It's sad that his father cannot be a friend. Good brother. Big Brother. Try harder. Broken home built for five in this apathetic town. What door shall we open next?



Michael Manis

The Roots of Man

I cannot see,
the roots of man.
Through telephone wire.
Under pixilated colors.
Or false light.
I see the roots of man,
outside of kisses.
Beyond the epiphany,
of separated legs.
I thought I saw it,
nuzzled in the warmth,
of a woman's hollow.
But I missed it,
when she encountered my ear.
It was just beyond,
the peak of orgasm.
Two eyes from a placenta.
A development,
surrounded by corn.



Untitled by Grant Stewart

A Murder of Crows

Dennison Small

The waves slapped against the wooden hull of the skiff as it skipped across the bay. Two more pots and back to the house. He throttled down, reached over the side, and gaffed the buoy as his boat drifted alongside. Gulls materialized around the boat, swirling and reeling in the air above him, their cries sounding like hinges that needed oiling. Pulling in enough line to wrap around the pulley, Dinny Watson let the buoy plop back into the water and flicked the switch to start the winch.

He heard the motor kick in smoothly. Fred Beane had given it to him six months ago in a shit fit when he'd gone out to his traps and couldn't get it started. He said it was burned out, no good any more.

"You can have it. Consider it a wedding present. It's no damn good to me anymore."

He had taken it over to garage, and Keller was kind enough to let him work on it in his spare time. He had the thing purring in no time.

"I never seen the like of it," said Keller, rubbing the back of his balding head. "You got magic in those fingers, boy."

It was true he was good with his hands. Always had been. Got along better with machines than he did with people. Damned sight more predictable, machines were. He stared down the warp as the machinery strained to hike the trap up from the muck at the bottom of the bay, his eyes following the rope down into the hazy sun-shot water until it vanished into the dark stuff that was like a wall about ten

feet down. Must be twenty fathoms out here in this part of the bay. He squinted in the direction of Harpswell Point, lying low and blue about two miles off. He could be in a fathom, for all the difference it made to him. Never did learn how to swim. Always crazy about boats, but never interested in swimming. No point to it, really. If he fell overboard out here, he'd be dead before he could peel his boots off—and even if he could swim, he sure as hell couldn't dog paddle all the way to Harpswell in that cold water. He crinkled his sunburnt face at the absurdity of the idea. Come to think on it, as far as he knew, there warn't a lobsterman on the bay who knew how to swim. They all had better things to do. Including him.

In the kitchen of the tiny, shingled house snuggled among the native cedar above the granite ledges on Pleasant Cove, Lenora was putting the finishing touches on a blueberry pie. She gently laid the top and knuckled it into the crust. She turned the pie, first one-way and then another, studying it as an artist would. She stepped back from the counter with her hands on her hips and blew the hair out of her eyes.

“Got it,” she breathed.

She stepped to the counter again and opened a drawer, quickly fishing out a paring knife. Carefully she cut a herringbone pattern into the middle of the piecrust that extended out to all four points of the compass. That does it. Perfect. My beautiful boy will love that, by gum.

Dinny was startled when the trap burst into view, shooting up from the ocean floor faster than the line indicated. Jumped right out at him like a damned jack-in-the box. He laid his hand on the controls and slowed the winch as the trap broke the surface and came to hang in front of him. The swaying trap was alive with the sound of flipping tails and draining water. Dinny muscled the heavy

wooden cage onto the shelf built into the gunwale. He undid the door cords and reached in with a gloved hand, removing one lobster at a time, measuring its carapace to determine its legality—and then tossing the keepers into the live well and the shorts over the side. The lucky ones disappeared into the dark water, sinking tail first, watching him goggled-eye as they sunk.

He held up a big one, wet and sparkling up in the sunlight. It was kicking and bucking like a little wild horse.

“You’re a beauty, you are. We’re putting you aside for Lenny. She’s going to like you real well.”

Lenora slid the blueberry pie into the oven and eased the door shut. The pie should be ready just about the time Dinny returned home from checking his traps. Blueberry pie was Dinny’s favorite. Since she had asked him to bring home some of his catch for dinner, instead of selling it all at the Co-op, it seemed only fair that she should have something special for him. After dinner maybe they could work on making that baby they had been trying for. Her hand darted into her apron pocket and emerged with a pack of Marlboro’s. She tapped out a cigarette and tossed it between her lips. A freckled hand burrowed into her apron pocket. Her brow wrinkled as she fished around. She scanned the kitchen. On the counter was the candle she had lit before starting on the pie. The spent match on the saucer was the last one in the house. No problem. She took a step towards the candle, the cigarette dangling from her lips

With the trap empty and its contents sorted, Dinny reached in and unhooked the bait bag. The old barnacle-encrusted trap had produced wonderfully. Dinny smiled. Lenny would be some pleased when he presented her with that big lobster. Damn: she was so pretty with her red hair and those blue eyes. He tossed the used-up bait bag into a

five-gallon bucket on the floor of the skiff and dragged a fresh bag from the saltbox. The mass of gulls screaming and cartwheeling overhead had disappeared. Only a few bobbed in the waves off the port bow. Everything had gone uncannily quiet of a sudden. Fred Beane said when it hushed like that out on the water, it meant a change in the weather. Dinny looked up. The sky was darkening, sure enough, but it didn't look serious. Not yet anyways. Deftly his hands went to work securing the fresh lure. He heard a little thunk at the back of the boat and looked up.

"Well, I'll be damned. What are you doing out here?"

A crow the size of an eagle, it looked like, was staring at him and smoothing down its purply-black feathers, its claws dug into his transom.

As she leaned in towards the candle, Lenora sensed something on the periphery of her vision. A crow had suddenly appeared on the woodpile just outside the kitchen window. It began to side-hop across the top of the pile towards her.

"Get away from here, you," she whispered. "We don't need any of your bad luck here."

The crow cocked its head and looked at her.

"Go away," she said, more urgently, and thought of the dead squirrel she'd found in the yard last week with its eyes pecked out.

Crows were bad evil birds. Uncle Edward said they were. She remembered that walk they went on one time when she was a little girl—that clearing like an amphitheater in the woods and all those crows up in the trees looking down at them, making a horrible racket.

"Look at that murder of crows, will you?" Uncle Edward said. "Up there prophesying and lying to beat the band."

A murder of crows: the expression had stuck with her. It was the first thing she thought of when that crow tapped at the kitchen window the time Aunt Emma took so sick. She had run out the back door and flapped her apron at it.

“Get away from here, you buggah!”

The bird slowly flapped off into the pines at the rear of the house, but it was tapping at the window again before she even got inside. She chased it away repeatedly, but it came back and tapped at the window every day for five days, until Aunt Emma died, then it lazily flapped away over the treetops and never came back again.

The breeze began to sough in the pines at the edge of the yard.

“Tides turning,” she said to herself dreamily.

Dinny would soon be home. The crow was right up at the window now, its head cocked, its yellow eye apparently fixed on her, the bird’s expression almost comical, as though shocked at what it saw. Cloud shadows scudded across the grass, giving the sensation that everything outside her window was turning like a big wheel except for the crow at the center. She was suddenly scared of the thing. She’d ask Dinny to chase it off the woodpile when he got home. Her beautiful man would do that for her, sure as hell.

He had been chasing the crows off her woodpile for years, in a manner of speaking. Hadn’t he protected her that time in high school? Tommy Powers and that other smart-talking jerk, Wyatt Tormé, thought they were hot stuff just because they were on the basketball team. They blocked her in the hallway one afternoon and rubbed up against her breasts.

“Got milk?” Tommy said and the two of them laughed.

“Milk and hog meat,” said Wyatt. “My favorite combination.”

Dinny had come out of nowhere like the Avenging Angel of Jehovah and pitched Tommy headlong down the corridor, where he fetched up against the gym doors with a foolish look on his face. Wyatt seemed to just fade away then, and Tommy didn't come back for any trouble, either, cause even in high school Dinny was rugged from years of digging clams and working on his Uncle's lobster boat.

They met up at a grange hall dance the next weekend by chance. They went outside for some air and she thanked him for what he had done. She had been too flustered to say anything at the time, had simply pushed past him and fled down the hall, her eyes blinded with tears.

"That was awful nice of you," she said. "Tommy acting like that. Rubbing up against me and calling me fat. You think I'm fat?"

"No, you're not fat," he said. "You're—solid. The way a girl ought to be made: womanly, you know? Not like these scarecrows we have around here that pass for girls—"

It was probably the longest speech he had made in three years of high school, and in that moment she fell in love with him. That spring they had no problem making a baby in the back of his pick-up. When they found out she was pregnant, he offered to quit school and marry her.

"You're the smart one anyway. It don't make any difference to me whether I graduate or not."

It was she who had decided they should both stay in school—and she who decided on the abortion. They married the day after they graduated. They moved into the fishing camp his grandfather had left him, which he had winterized and fixed up during their senior year. She had gotten pregnant again almost instantly, but two months into it, she had aborted spontaneously. Now they couldn't get pregnant. She wondered if it was some kind of a curse. That little baby, she thought. The doctor said it would have been a girl. She wished he hadn't told her.

She looked at the crow on the woodpile.

"Damn you, bird," she said. "Go away."

She bent to the candle and lit her cigarette, remembering too late another thing Uncle Edward had said: *Light a cigarette on a candle, kill a sailor.*

"Goddamn!"

She threw the cigarette in the sink and turned on the tap full blast.

Dinny and his visitor eyed each other. The bird's eyes were round and yellow. Its feathers were oil-slick black and lay flat against its body. Reflections from the waves rippled across their shiny surface.

He finished work inside the trap and bound the door tight with figure eights and a half-hitch to finish.

"What are you up to, bird?"

Still watching the big crow, he put his hand against the trap, ready to shove it over. He hesitated for a moment, his curiosity overriding his almost mindless routine. The trap slid into the water with a sucking splash and sank out of sight, dragging the line with it. All the gear was back overboard now. All except for some remaining line that looped up over the gunwale and lay in a small coil at his feet.

The candle on the window ledge flickered in the new breeze. The odor of the blueberry pie in the oven behind her wafted into her consciousness as she and the big crow continued to stare at each other. The yard darkened: clouds covering the sun. Everything went quiet outside. Buzzing insects, birds, even the breeze died out. In the unnatural silence she could hear the hiss of the candle flame as she leaned toward the window. Without warning, the crow on the woodpile shuddered and vomited forth its prophecy, *Aaaaww-Aaawl!*

Lenora could see its red thorn-shaped tongue and deep into its maw. She jerked back reflexively as though the bird had pecked her face, kicking the sink cabinet hard with her knee-jerk reaction.

“For fuck’s sake!” she cried as the bird flapped off.

She limped around in a quick, small circle, then steadied herself with both hands on the edge of the sink. Her shoulders were hunched and she was breathing hard. She opened her eyes to a sink filled with mixing bowls and a coffee cup half filled with dirty water, a slightly mangled Marlboro floating on top. She studied it for a minute before rocking her full weight back onto her feet. With a single movement she pulled the pack of remaining cigarettes from her apron and tossed it into the wastebasket standing in the corner.

“Let me take it back,” she whispered.

He found the bird fascinating. The bird seemed equally fascinated by him. But unlike the bird, he had places to go and promises to keep.

“See you, bird. Tell the Devil I said hello.”

He turned away to the skiff’s controls, stepping into the coil of remaining line that lay at his feet. The ninety horsepower Evinrude was still quietly idling, bubbling up little smoke bubbles from the stern. He laid his hand on the throttle ready to engage the drive and propel the skiff towards the last pot of the day. As he did, he happened to look down and saw the coil of warp like a noose lying in a circle around his boots. Dinny rebuked himself silently as he stepped from the coil and tossed the last of the line overboard. The line hit the water with a smack. The big crow behind him let out a raucous cry and lifted itself violently into the air with a chaotic flapping of its wings. Feathers spiraled and rocked their way down over his head as he watched the dark bird flap away. One of the feathers

came to rest on his controls. He grinned and tucked it behind his ear.

“A souvenir from Beelzebub: damn nice of him.”

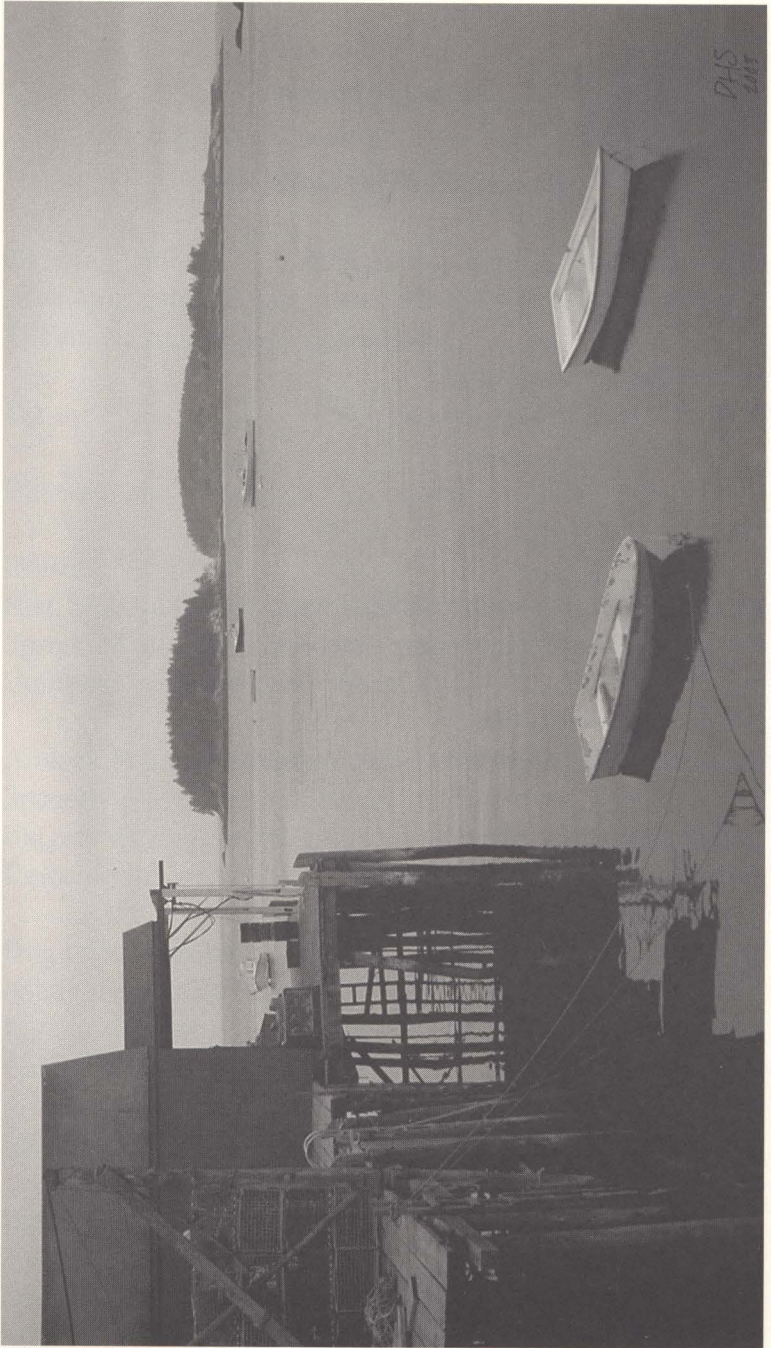
Lenora rested her hips against the counter and leaned over the sink. Now that the smokes were safely in the trash, it was time to complete her appeasement of the fates and snuff out the candle. Leaning forward, she was surprised to see that the crow was back. He was right up to the window again, watching her intently. Somehow he didn't seem scary anymore.

“You get a kick out of that, did ya?”

The crow cocked its “ear” towards her with tiny, quick, ratcheting movements. A smile faintly bloomed on her pursed lips as she puffed out the candle. The crow hopped yet closer to the window and seemed to wink at her with its yellow eye.

“M'god, “ she laughed. “What a flirtatious bird.” Lenora felt the sun's warmth radiating through the kitchen window. Off in the distance, she heard the distinctive buzz of Dinny's outboard as it rounded the point into the cove.





West Point by Den Small

Kristina Schneider

Remember What Once Was

Cobwebs stretch from plank to plank
A sticky gate, barring all who enter

Secrets hidden deep inside
Box after box, towers unbreakable

Can't forget
Won't

A lonely book sits by the window
Pages dance with the evening breeze

Ink decorates each line
Black finger smudges hide in the margins

Dated, fifty years earlier
Written by a person once known

To Me

Read, learn
No, can't

A warm breeze, fire on a wintry day
Captures the attic, knocking the book

Into my hands

It's time

The Past Is Gone

Glowing, shining
A window into the past
The house stands, looking, waiting

For me

But wait, she's here or was

Daisies
Red, blue, pink and green
Sprinkled all over a dress
Complete with matching shoes

A black Papermate pen,
Securely placed behind the ear
Fingers waving, inviting
Come on in

Dogwood trees bloomed
Along the petaled lane
Lighter than air
Captured by the wind

Mother and the petals

Lost in a world of time



Interview with Stephanie Jirard

By Simon Owens

Stephanie Jirard began her legal career as a Navy Judge Advocate General in New Orleans and Washington DC. Since then she has worked for Attorney General Janet Reno in the environmental branch of the civil division of the Department of Justice and as a federal prosecutor in Boston. Most recently, she worked in Missouri as a public defender representing poor people faced with the death penalty. Since 2003, Jirard has been an Assistant Professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Shippensburg University.

Reflector: Could you describe the appeal system and how it works in the case of death penalty defendants?

Stephanie Jirard: Well, one thing you should know about me and my philosophy is I actually am not a death penalty opponent, that is I have seen cases in which I believe the death penalty was warranted, but the problem is that you can never apply the death penalty fairly in this country, and if you can't apply it fairly, then it can't be applied at all. Now let me describe how a case becomes a death penalty case: the decision with capital murder rests solely with the prosecutor, who is an elected official.

R: What are your views of prosecutors? Do they ever try to cheat the system and lie to get what they want?

SJ: Since I have been a prosecutor and many of my friends have been prosecutors, I won't make a gross generalization that they're all somehow bad or have ulterior motives. That being said, the decision to seek the death penalty is always a political one. Since the prosecutor is always an elected official, you will find if you do research that in an election year there are several more death penalty cases. Since death penalty cases generate high media interest, it goes without saying that the prosecutor will be in the news a lot more with the death penalty case versus a regular murder case. This is why I don't think it can be applied fairly. I was a lawyer on a case in Missouri where two men, Dale and Scott, killed this woman in a methamphetamine case (which is the poor man's cocaine and causes paranoia) and the victim had mentioned that he had once been a snitch. Scott and Dale assumed that she was going to rat them out and so they killed her. The problem with the death penalty is this: they could not have committed the act without each other, but the prosecutor cut a deal with Scott for second degree murder in exchange for testifying against

Dale, who they were seeking the death penalty against. It goes to show you the power of the prosecutor in having to decide what they charge Scott with, and shows they have the power of life over death for my client, Dale. Now, my philosophical problem with the death penalty is that if it's a second degree murder case, then you shouldn't be able to ratchet it up for my client to be dead. What makes a death penalty case a death penalty case is something called Aggravating Factors. For example: in this particular case, eliminating the victim because she would have been a witness against you was an aggravating factor. Killing someone for hire would be an aggravating factor. Then there's something that's called the heinous atrocious and cruel aggravating factor, that is what I call the garbage pail aggravator, every killing can be called heinous atrocious factor, it's a kind of catch-all. So if a guy goes to a gas station intending to rob it and ends up killing someone, then if they want the death penalty for this individual, they can say that this killing was heinous, atrocious, and cruel. The death penalty is a bifurcated trial, which means that it's two separate trials. The first trial is to figure out if the defendant is guilty. Most often the case is that he is, but sometimes there are innocent people. The same jury gets to hear the penalty phase, in which they are asked to decide whether he will receive life in prison or the death penalty. Those are the only two options once the defendant has been found guilty. At this phase, the defense puts all the mitigating evidence of the defendant's history (oftentimes our clients have lived tragic lives) and at the same time the prosecutor puts on the victim's family, who gets up and talks about how the defender has ruined their lives. Then all death penalty cases are appealed; if there's a death sentence there's an automatic appeal. It will first go to the state Supreme Court, and then if it's a federal case it will go up to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court often chooses not to review death penalty cases. The first thing

that the appeals lawyer tries to do is show that the defendant was ineffectively represented in the trial by the trial lawyers. In some cases we have what we call volunteers, who are people who want to die and try to stop all their appeals; it's suicide by court. In those cases we often seek to have the defendant deemed incompetent, that they're suffering from some mental illness, because no reasonable person wants to die. Typically we're unsuccessful.

R: Aren't there some cases in which the person doesn't realize he is going to die?

SJ: There's a case where if you're psychotic then you can't be executed; you can only execute someone who knows what's happening. There's case law that says that it's okay to medicate them long enough so that they can be returned to sanity so that you can kill them. That hasn't been put in effect yet. There was a case in Arkansas in which a man killed his wife and children and then shot himself in the head to kill himself. He was convicted and given a death sentence, but because he massacred half his brain, he was severely limited mentally. So when they came to take him for the execution, the man said "I'll be back for the cake, save it."

R: Which state system was the hardest for you to work with and which was the easiest?

SJ: I'm from Boston originally, so I had to go to a death penalty state to work on these kinds of cases. I'm licensed in Louisiana, which is a death penalty state, but it's a harsh state. Louisiana leads the country with the most minorities on death row, and Pennsylvania is second with the most minorities on death row. Minorities only comprise about twelve percent of the population, but what the politicians

will say is that they commit a lot of first degree murder, which is true, but not every first degree murder case is a death penalty case. So prosecutors have a lot of discretion if you're a white first degree murder case to not seek the death penalty or get a plea deal, which typically happens with white first degree murders. Those types of benefits aren't granted to the minority death defendant. Now, it's illegal for the prosecutor to specifically single out someone for race. You can't just strike a juror based on if you don't like them, and it raises an issue if there are only eight African Americans in the jury pool and the prosecutor gets rid of all of them. That's not constitutional. But prosecutors figure out how to get rid of them legally. In order to sit on a death penalty case, you should be able to give out the death penalty, and lots of people of color, because of religious reasons, will not give the death penalty. You have to be able to say, "Yes, I can give out the death penalty." Now, all the killers who want the defendant to die no matter what can be struck for cause as well. But they're asked, "Can you impose a life sentence?" and they say, "Sure, sure I could," and by asking the question this way you don't know whether they will impose the life sentence. The prosecutors do another thing also. Let's say they have an African American who is wavering and they say they can impose it. The prosecutor knows that this person is weak, so they ask the next question, which is, "Can you sign the jury verdict form?" What the uninitiated layperson thinks when she hears this is that they're actually signing the death warrant and then the person backs off and says she can't. It's a political game, and that's my objection to the death penalty. And you will never take out the human political factor of the death penalty.

In answer to your question, though, I'd have to say that Missouri was probably the easiest state to work in, because it has a public defense system that is well-funded and so we

were given training and money. Texas would have to be the worst because let's say you're a private attorney in Texas, but your name comes up on a list (similar to a jury duty list) to do a death penalty case. So you go into court and tell the judge that not only do you not practice criminal law, you've never done a death penalty case before. Too bad, so sad. You'll see the results when the defender has closing arguments that are only half a page long, and the defenders just kind of go through the motions, as if to say, "Please don't put my client to death," whether or not they think he should be. What typically happens is that you'll have basic attorneys who come in on a regular basis and they often have sometimes up to fourteen clients, which is a ridiculous number they could never give fair attention to.

R: Could you discuss briefly what brought you into teaching?

SJ: Very simply, you can't do that kind of work forever. My personal experience was that I was not prepared for the emotional pain of the victims' families. And, in another way, you're touched by all of those you defend, touched by the tragedy that is your client's life, and I was often a target in which people would spit at me and call me names. I never actually encountered death threats but it was definitively unpleasant. The way you have to keep yourself in the work is to remind yourself that the system is unjust; that's the reality, it is an unjust system. And sometimes that's not enough to propel you emotionally, day in and day out. Your clients aren't the best human beings, but they are humans, and the system doesn't want you to see them as humans, and that's how they get death sentences: by making them look like monsters, like dogs that should be put out of our misery. Finally, it's an inherently corrupt system, and you get tired of it. That has been my experience.



Joe Fulginiti

Old Hotels

we are born of wind and of fire;
 on cracked jazz-rhythm roads
of lemonade porches awash in summer; desperate,
and crawling to september;
the season mounted on its hands and knees.

 “and when we drove to new york last fall
i felt as though i could see a song
which fell with every leaf, tumbling crimson
and brown in the stillness to the earth.
and I realized that even dead leaves die.”

and sang with the radio
 the sum of the seconds flickering
like some dim star, appearing as though
it were years behind you and i.
and leaning towards this window, your eyes
following the fields, stretching in corn to
the feet of the hills.

 “i remember falling asleep in the garden,
and the sun warming my skin as the restless
season rested, and the evening fell
with the symphony of a
dull violin.

we arrived with the wind in September
and in patterns of weather which move from the west;
 summer suns burning the day into early evening.
in the fields women walk with a silent rhythm,
 blue and golden shawls trailing like lines of light
behind them;
and calling to their children will sing
for the lovers and the seasons
 for the speed of the world turning,
 for the ethos and the eros, the vanity of vanities,
 for the moss and the rock.

how the voices will carry,
atop the stairs and weighed against the truths of life and
love
 - and it flows from you, and you cannot see
it moves from east to west, and above the sea and the town
 above the streetcorners and the sad cafes
 above the public clocks of the square
the sky swirling blue and violet in a single moment,
at once twisting into a constellation pinned overhead;
the voices as distant mansions rise in the light
of a glorious dawn
 and in the garden the day settles
like dust upon the roses.

I.

the 24-hour part of town:

 after august everything speaks
so softly (yesterday today tomorrow), chattering from
doorways

women lean narrow-eyed from city stoops.
disconcerting, self contained, some distant footstep
pounds a rhythm into the sidewalk:

 what hand guides these seconds?
 what voice recalls these hands?

and the hours of four and five and
six o'clock step lightly in
 alleyways; "I have followed their
turning, to what it has led, and
have lost everything there."

 once a secret wind blew across
rivers, scattering with the leaves a song
i hummed in san salvador: the ribbons
of graffiti decorating warehouses.

children run with a freedom of dust,
 rising gently, swims into the blue glare
that hovers. "I have been to paris since
we last spoke: i have followed the bells
as they rang in the square."

businessmen board these trains every morning,
weeping wind and rain, they leave for
nameless cities wrapped in grey haze.

II.

faraway, so close:

“These women speak of angels
they have seen standing upon the spire, of sweetmeats
and flowers in season.

above berlin they twirl into northern winds,
a silhouette against the sun.”

it is something much more than a machine, these
gears and wheels; and sometimes it seems
so very hard to tell, so very hard to explain.

and how this drum rises, stirs into being:
natural and synthetic and ethereal at once, pounding
some dim, dull rhythm into an awakening.

(in Spanish i whispered that there is no time left.)

III.

pure spirit as the origin of things:

 something in the veins, inextensible, wakes
in a violent dance, frantic movement of the limbs like
dull kisses upon the forehead; on the shore, the banks,
 as a child i ran along this water, these rivers
that run like a whipped dog, these days which run away
like wild horses over the hills.
and nightmares, i speak of this body born to the earth,
washed
in a sunlight collision, the remorse of voice calling to days,
to hands and seconds; traps of light which whirl and bend,
elementary laws which fail in these sour times.

she turned to me and asked of the one that
walks beside; "Who is this, this voice and shape
that follows you, and to where do you intend to lead?"

 so bitter, this taste, that circumstance and intent
passing into the night wither in a vase which stands so
near to your bed. there is no love for this life.

these are the flowers we bought
this morning,

 some to be scattered on graves and others
dried in dusty books: la visage humain.

 this song reminds me of crying, they sing of crying;
 and humanity spills from the eyes.

IV.

a traveler at the edge:

walked to the fountains, the marked
of garlic and tents, where i saw my dead anna
again and again, hard yellow beans in her lap:

name over a sprain or fracture, burned onto
plastic paper. "I could not let your life enter mine," she
sighed as she spoke, twisting the stalk of a lilac in her
hands;

the voice of this woman, *pasto para la rumia*, and already
dead for decades.

your beauty not your life, faint whisper rises
from the snow, a trailer just outside our town
resting in the cold.

"Give me infinite like a flower," she said,
wrapped in paper from carts
in montreal, a plane lifting out of Detroit,
a satin bed, a table
cluttered with bottles of scent;

vast, horizons

counted as days. "I could not let your life enter into mine,
and when i thought of the snow and the remnants of hours,
i wept into water of late summer, so worried for my life."

how particular this silence, when demoniac laughter
reports like bullets from stone, life prostituted at the hands
of love. and visions, ternary, mathematical; they seem to
grow in warmth as they age.

chattering mad of sparrows and hens, in this gutter boot
heels
sink into gravel and mud;

“I will live, and living cry out until
my voice is gone to its hollow of earth, and
others that unload link arms, hands, into lives
of the endless ever.”

V.

usurous:

in some ways we return to lives we never left,
to the slight motion of breathing, of speaking; the light
flickering softly in the dim parlor, wagons unto the soul
pulling life into existence:

“Y que nadia ha econtrado cara a cara,” you say.

hotel sign flickering over
lilacs, wind sweeping the sidewalks; silk flags
shipwrecked at the base of the thousand seas
and pinned to the floor.

“Que le visage humain parle,” and once a childless poet,
you wept into the sleeve of your shirt.

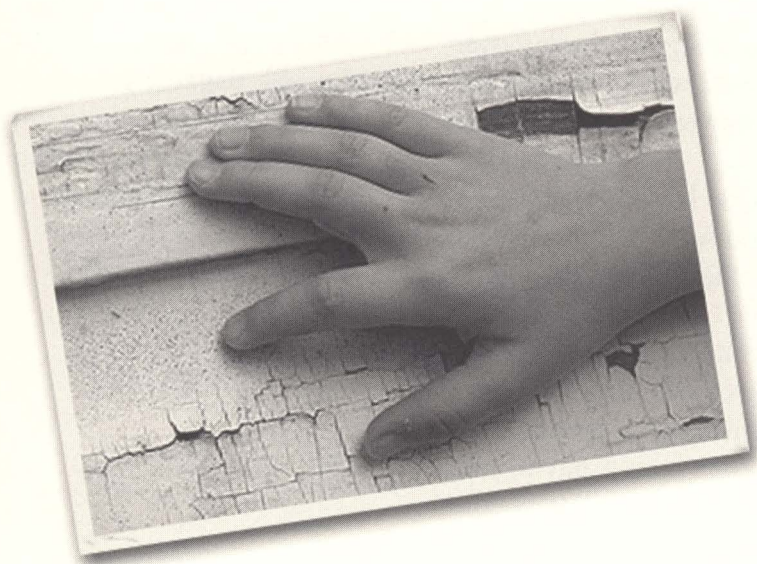
in the cylindrical tunnel i might have dropped to a bed.

un naufragio, you are a photograph
that i will not recognize, a face
which has emptied my eyes.

navio, navio, you sleep, still,
liked the smallest of cities.

and we take it with us, in the heads
of men and women, les yeux les oreilles;
a distant tenderness.





Girl's Hand on Paint by Drea Verone

The Continous Child

Drea Verone

Which song shall I wish for this body?

Laynie Brown

*Dim skies, deep, damp, rare
Spun like an arrow
On a crazy compass,
Pointing here*

*Tingling, pulsating crickets' sound
In dreamy dreariness of Doppler's Ear.*

1

*Strange how time passes us by. Whether in a song or memory: train whistle or ice cream truck...Sirens call for warning and pass, droning in sour, distant sometimes fading like the phenomenon of recalling toddler fragments, rephrased languageless, first touches...Holding a stuffed toy or cupping plastic egg shells over ears to hear the moaning vacuum cleaner in a distant room. Pressing ear to her breast, her chest amplified her voice, low and husky...so familiar...like a recognized melody passing with a car...a homing resonance warped to watery pitches, eerie decrescendo never ceasing, leaning and listening, hand cupped in assistance...are there any cars coming...
*I'm standing in front of the house, the white brick walkway leading to the repaired cement stairs, the white porch**

pillars, green shutters, gray shingles. It's all as I remember it, yet the years have altered my own presence here. I lean down to run my fingers through the tall overgrown grass that now covers the yard. Here my sister and I would run toward the road and the train tracks beyond. I haven't returned in more than ten years....I don't even know, can't be sure, why I must now come back here.

2.

In the mornings the train whistle blew so loud. I would always wake in excitement to see Grandma and would point out a red caboose at the end of the train, if there were one. Grandma liked to go on walks. We walked up the alley some afternoons and would gather small green apples. Grandma would slice them with her pear knife and place the thin, tart pieces in my mouth. After we'd gathered enough for a pie, we'd place them in a bowl that would rest on the counter near the window. The light would fall on the apples in a certain way in the afternoon.

3.

One day I bought a ouija-board for two dollars at a yard sale, and brought it home with me. I never actually took the board out, but kept it enclosed in the old cardboard box that it had been kept in for I didn't know how many years. The box, thin and light, had gone concave and the sides and top become smooth and soft as dried leaves. I remember my babysitter, Megan, had once described to me how a spirit spelled out the name, "Raymond," as a black bird flew overhead. The sky, she said, had gone copper at that moment. As the spirit passed her, the hairs on her neck bristled. Spirit life, she said, existed all around us, waiting for us to recognize its presence. My mother wouldn't let me try to contact Grandma with the board. In fact, she took it away as soon as I tried to bring it into the house. She said I could curse the house by bringing the board inside,

and forced me to take it back to the yard sale. I remember walking back down the road to Keith and Jeremy's house and apologetically handing the board back to them. I couldn't help wondering why, if I could contact spirits, my mother would *not* want Grandma to return. At the time, I tried not to judge my mother's reaction. But it felt at that moment as if something magical had been taken away, a certain freedom withdrawn from me.

4.

She always told Loree and me to watch out for tramps before we'd venture to the other side of the alley way to play; what was a tramp? I didn't know...but I imagined it was a man who lived in the boxcars who carried a stick with a bag of belongings on the end of it over his shoulder. But I would *run* away from the tramp if he'd come after us. We could always tell when a train was coming...we'd feel a rush from the warning whistle and chug; it meant we would dash madly in rhythm to the approaching vibrations, but sometimes the train slowed, grinding and hissing...I watched to be sure no tramps were gonna get us.

5.

Whether in song or memory, train whistle or ice cream truck... her presence, as familiar as that of the hot air balloon floating above power line like in those PBS visuals that I watched every Sunday...the scent of suave shampoo lingered in her hair; I asked, "but what if you're not here anymore." She told me, "I'll still be able to see you." I awoke long after those words, my heart racing as it did when I was "her angel;" "This little piggy cried wee wee all the way home." I awoke crying. She firmly squeezed my toes and then she was gone.

6.

Grandma died in November 1995 of liver cancer. I was

seven. I'd seen her months before, after summer ended. She lay in her hospital bed in the room next to the old kitchen. There was a large pizza tray filled with all her bottles of pills. She said, "Get the baby," thinking her dog Yoko was my baby brother next to all her pills. Her eyes were tired. She was lying in what we referred to as the passing room, because people had to pass through it on their way to the upstairs and bathroom, her body tucked underneath the white hospital blankets and her mouth slack and unspeaking. Aunt Ginger made her mashed potatoes with garlic, but Grandma wasn't hungry. Later I remember my mother came over and took my hand in hers. Or she came over to my side and placed her hand on my shoulder. What did she try to tell me, if anything? I would say later that I wanted to remember everything of that time, but slowly the memories became less exact, more unreal. I didn't know sometimes what was remembered, what had actually occurred.

7.

Years later I was watching the video made at the time...Loree, Heather and I gathered around the floury table, awaiting our turn to help Grandma beat her bread...Grandma was making bread all day and my mother wanted to catch her unique bread-making technique on camera before it was too late. Grandma reemerged into the room after resting, irritable, flushed, out of breath, but focused on the bread, kneading the doughy mass with her sturdy hands. We watched her, our heads nodding in time as she pounded with the rolling pin...at one point, my mom asked Grandma, "And how do you know if you've beaten it enough?" "Once it bounces back like elastic," Grandma answered with tired, irritated breaths. My two baby brothers are sitting around the table, playing with bits of dough, we all get a turn to hit the dough with the rolling pin like Grandma showed us, my step-dad passes by in the

background... dark black hair, alert eyes shaded behind glasses, he orders us when to take turns with the bread. Later (my mom fast-forwarded the film to get to one of her favorite parts), Grandma removes the golden brown rolls and loaves from the oven. To this day I remember the smell and the taste, the sound of our hands hitting the dough in unison.

8.

Over the years the dreams became a living part of my memory of Grandma. My mom would also dream of her often; in this way she remained a daily and nightly part of our lives. Sometimes while baking biscuits in the kitchen or cooing to my baby brothers, my mom would impersonate Grandma's voice, she'd say, "Ah Darla, look at 'em, he's up to no good," in her sing-song warning tone. The voice of Grandma speaking through my mother? In certain ways, I didn't trust those moments, estranged from what was happening, as my mom tried to give presence to what had been lost. And yet I knew that Her presence lingered in our house—on the chair where she sat and where her clinching hands smoothed the banister; in the sounds that still penetrated nights when I would go to bed early, the light still high and white in the sky, and dream I was in her arms again, her sweet only angel. And I knew as I had when she made her last visit to our house—the last time I would look around, hoping to find something...her slippers, her blouse, anything she left behind—I knew that our souls were intertwined, hers and mine, in ways that went beyond whatever I could say to those in my life who sought to lay claim to our memories, our time.

9.

"Wasn't Grandma pretty?" I came across one of her early portraits tucked away in one of our scrapbooks, "Ah, I guess," my mom answered annoyed. Something in her

tone that bothered me. She was once Grandma's baby girl, long after Norma Jean, 20 years after she had Ted, Bert, Dale and Jerry...and, finally, my mother, her beloved baby girl. Grandma fixed her up in curls and dresses, told her she was the most darling thing around. Often I'd wonder what Grandma like when she'd been younger, my mom's mother, and found out that my mom was hopping trains and riding motorcycles through the back country toads of Wampum. After Loree and I were born, my mom seemed uneasy with Grandma's way of taking care of us...Grandma would buy us that toy in K-mart if we screamed enough for it, or sneak us a bottle because she didn't want us to fuss. It's hard to say, but I sense that my mother felt displaced by Grandma's attention to us, as she called us her babies, her angels, and held us and raved about how darling *we* were.

This image remains: my mother's face in the family room that morning as she responded to my question. And her voice, quiet, yet somehow sharp: "Ah, I guess."

10.

I looked at the unfinished portrait. Grandma looked so dreamy with her old-fashioned hairdo, her baby yellow blouse, her clandestine green eyes that always suggested a concentrated and somewhat hidden gaze...her unpainted completion, gleamed in the living room light, the greenness in her eyes looked back at me, her soft lashes accented by thin brush strokes...Grandma told me she used to be pretty...that she used to have naturally red, fully-shaped lips and long eye lashes like me, but now, since she doesn't have teeth, her lips have changed. She has false teeth, though, but only wears them when she goes out...I tell grandma that she's still pretty; she has pretty hair, it's really dark brown and she lets me fix it for her. Grandma still has pretty lips, but she looks happier when she smiles without

her false teeth. She hid her teeth away in a container beside her powder and the eye cup in a bathroom drawer.

11.

Norma Jean :

Grandma's first child, her daughter named Norma Jean Hunter. She was eight months old when she died of an ear infection. Her picture hung on the wall in the small upstairs room. I would beg Grandma to tell me the story before I'd go to bed:

"I was downstairs when I heard a peculiar sound above...like barrels rolling across the floor. Grandpa got his shotgun, thinkin' someone was upstairs. Then I heard a loud slam; Grandpa called me up. No one was there...the baby cradle was rocking and the window had fallen shut. It was Norma Jean's way of saying goodbye. Months later when the photographer came to deliver the portrait of her he asked, 'so where is that darling doll baby?'"

12.

Whether in song or memory...I loved waking at Grandma's house. The sheets pulled around my 7 year old body, the weight of the summer blanket along my legs, kicked off in the early morning light. Her voice, so melodically familiar, called me from downstairs. But earlier...the train whistle calling me out of sleep. I'd open my eyes as sunlight reflected off the whiteness of the walls around me. I would lie in bed a little, my ears adjusted to the morning sounds of Grandma's movement, the clinking of coffee cups, the crescendo of bacon grease sizzling in the skillet...I got out of bed, tucking my toes from the coldness of the linoleum floor. Grandma always cut the itchy footing off my sleeper. I went over to the window and

pulled up the blinds. Passing in front of the house, maybe twenty yards away, the train went by, trudging with mournful squeals. One car after another. The metallic screeches chattered to the rickety yelps, a startling loudness in passing, growing distant and overlapping with the grind of each car following...I examined each boxcar as it disappeared from view. Some were orange, rusty rectangles, with graffiti, some yellow with a black cat, others silver cylinders with ladders, but once the end came, there was no red caboose. Grandma at times stood by me in the front yard, the fall wind swirled the red maple leaves around our ankles as we watched for it together, but often it never came; Grandma gave my hand a firm squeeze and huffed, "Oops, next time honey." "Why didn't it come Grandma?" I wanted to know exactly why. "They don't use 'em like they used to," she peered into the distance, smoothing her hair from her eyes as the train's rustic clatter waned. Ever since then whenever I've heard a train, I've experienced a combination of fright and expectation, as if returned to those afternoons when Grandma and I would stare off, waiting for those black and red cars that never showed.

13.

I walked over to the heat register and stood on it as the warmth rose. I crouched down, peering through the metal mesh of the register. Below me, I could see Grandma fixing breakfast. Dry rush of heat in my eyes. Watery view of her head bowed, concentrating as she beat the eggs into the waffle batter, the loose flesh from her arms swaying, while the fork scraped the plastic bowl. *Who was I seeing? The figure of my Grandma comes to me again, in that way. And I can't say exactly, even as I remember it, how she existed for me at that moment: the power of her form moving through a kitchen on a morning in May.*

14.

Where does our history end, where do we end one life and begin another? I see Grandma before me again, her cotton robe, worn-out slippers. Who am I seeing? What can I say to her now that might make a difference? I wonder if she would be proud of me....if she would find me beautiful, as she once did. If I would have the words to tell her....It has been fifteen years since she passed. We still have her hair in a plastic butter dish that is kept with all her old costume jewelry inside an off-white padded jewelry box, the kind that you would have bought years ago at the local watchmaker's store. Her old skirts are in storage now, about twenty minutes from where my parents live.

15.

Grandma had placed large rocks, bricks, and bushes as a sort of boundary, separating her yard from the alley way. Old red maple trees grew in the front yard, and in the back yard Grandma's strawberries and tomatoes grew. Her chicken pen was all the way in the very back yard next to the shed. The back porch always had a swing next to the Yoko's chair. *Something I'd read once, about the ways that rooms were left by the dead, their presences still palpable long after they'd gone from this world, so that I as I re-enter that living room with its pale green walls, old beige floral couch, tv, weathering fireplace, telephone table, painting of a red barn and horses (I always thought it was the illustration to "over the river and through the woods to grandmothers house we go"), it's as if she's never left us, her body lies between this world and the next, between mine and the rectangles of light falling, falling through the windows of my bedroom.*

16.

Summertime brought storms. Grandma didn't want us near the windows, she didn't want us near the metal chairs,

always afraid the lightning would travel downward and move through the house. She swore to us that she'd seen it before, a bolt of electricity going through the wires and directly through the house, almost like some force independent of nature. But it's Grandma's face I remember at those moments. Her eyes that looked into the distance, and her voice steady: "look at those black clouds comin.'" And I would feel a surge of expectancy and a hush in my own body as if I were part of the storm with the rains and changing light. Grandma went around the house unplugging cords and flicking off light switches. I stood on the porch, watching the clouds approach. Grandma was right, the storm was coming, the thunder rumbled like a choir of kettle drums, clouds casting a gray reflection and sudden transformation of energy, as the summer coolness enveloped us, and we stood out, attending the rustle of tree limbs and outside of that the syncopations of crickets in the grass below.

*Pressing ear to her breast, her chest amplifies her voice,
low and husky...so familiar.*



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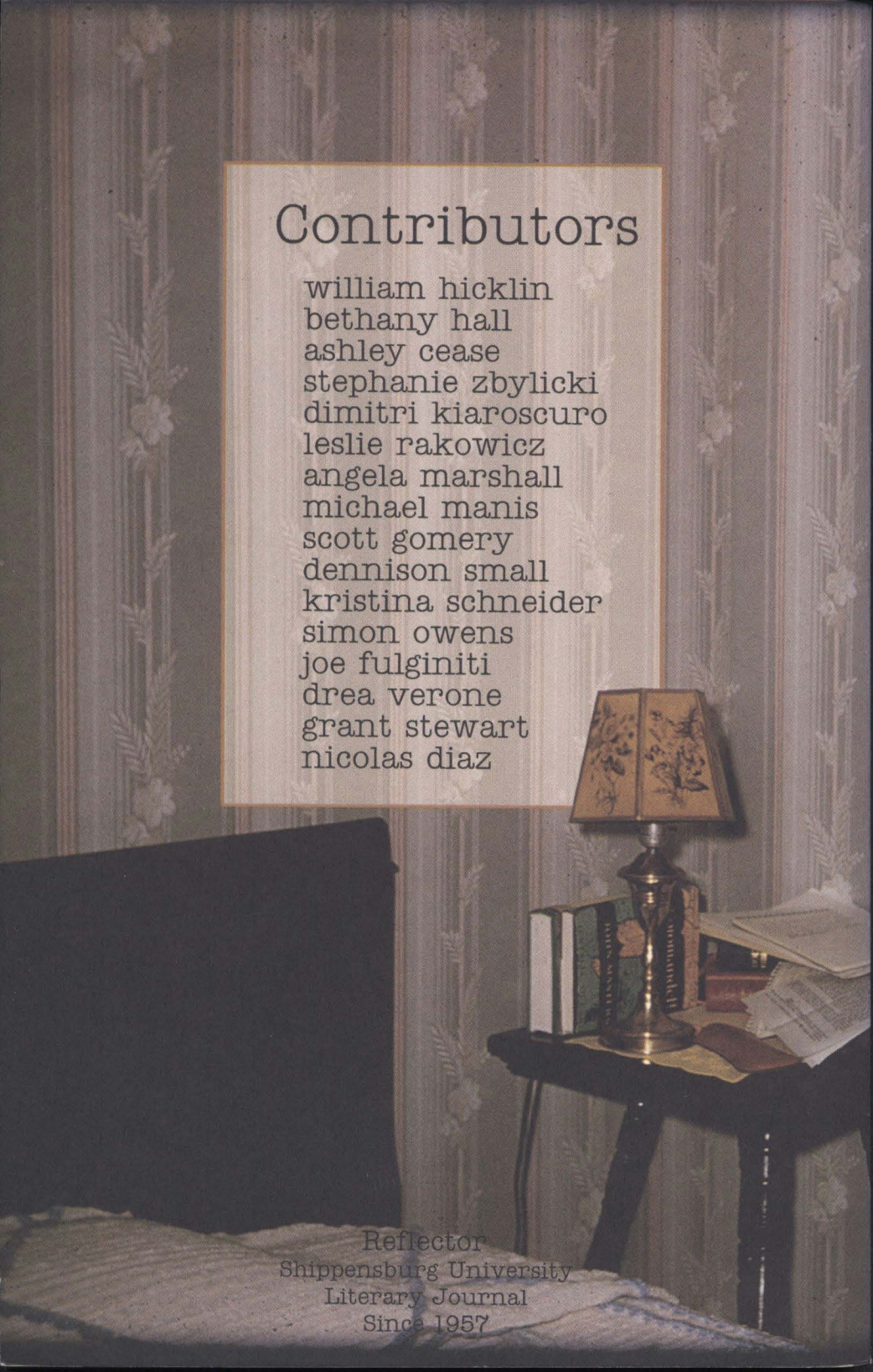
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