

COE REVIEW



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Poetry

Song for Doug Shepherd

James Nulick

You left the TV on to confuse us,
two pieces of toast bursting up
from red hot filament wires to
cool in the phosphor dot serenity of
the 8x21 Airstream trailer.

You got into the 1969 Chevelle Malibu
and cranked the engine over, that
396 4 bolt main you were so proud of.
the seat felt good underneath your flesh,
worn well like your favorite pair of Levis,
soft-lipped velveteen kisses whispering ‘touch me.’

I had just talked to you
seventy two hours before, your eyes
bleary and a little pink, but no
traces of what you were thinking
registered in your shy side-glances.

there was a special place you had
picked out, it couldn’t be just any
place, and you even pointed it
out to your brother as he had sat shotgun
a week earlier.

I can see you in the car now,
rolling up the windows and cranking the
system up as loud as you dared,
your cheeks wet with hatred and defeat
and sadness as you suddenly realized that the
stereo would not survive.

We tagged you ‘Doggie Fresh’
cause you liked that bebop skin
synsonic howling from the Blaupunkt,
rattling the doorpanels,
saying, yes, this system cost me
four years of my life. And how you
were proud of it!

you, the tone deaf who lived in a
6x9 coaxial world where pulse and
heartbeat matched syncopated rhythms,
green liquid crystal display flowing in
the veins of your underbelly.

so you returned to your special
place because we all return to where we
were born, and your vision blurred
as your foot opened up the secondary ports
of the 4 barrel Holley, you
screaming as your legs tensed and
your jaw locked, elbows clicked solid
as the radials disintegrated from the heat

What does a concrete embankment look like
as you are zooming towards it doing
128 miles per hour?
(the concrete refracting a thousand points
of light as headlights search out little
snatches of mica and quartzite embedded
deep within, your reflection a helpless insect
hermetically sealed in a clear envelope
of translucent amber.)

and then the rebirth as
metal, asphalt, concrete and flesh mesh together
into a baker's yeast of crimson transcendence,
you reaching out as metal buckles and whines
in a scherzo quick, final, and deliberate,
the floorpan a metallic accordion
that snaps and fractures your legs in an instant
as you fly through the windshield, the roof
bending backwards and down to separate
your waist from your torso, skull thudding
just so against astroturf of concrete and
splitting open to reveal your final thought,
did I unplug the toaster?

So the tow truck came and pulled

away pieces of you that I had loved,
your face in our swimming pool earlier
that summer, fingers that had held the
tongs turning the steaks over at the
Sunday barbecue, arms that wrapped
around my shoulders when we said grace.
the tow truck driver was a professional
caretaker, hooking up to your anodized
casket with his Jerr-Dan flatbed and
hauling it away to file, index, inspect and destroy.

you always said you would move
mountains but you didn't move that
embankment on bit, now did you?

of course your funeral was a closed
casket ceremony, there wasn't enough
of you in there to run my fingers
through and say, 'this was Doug,
our friend and brother,' your
high school mugshot grinning up at us
from atop its perch on the altar,
surrounded by carnations and tulips
that you couldn't smell.

I cried til my nose swelled but it
didn't help much, you were still lying
in microfragments on the humming
asphalt of a dizzy freeway, rain carrying
bits of you deep down into the throat of
the grille marked City Waterworks and Sewage,
your mama snuffling in the front pew,
clutching your cap and tassel to her
wet breast.

Now as I drink cola from and
aluminum can I wonder if part of
you is with me, in the fabric of the
bauxite, me sucking sugarsweet water and
slicing the tip of my tongue open on the
tab, wondering if I can still hold part

of you against my fingerpads, wondering if you
are in a better place, wondering if
you ever heard me say I love you.

James on James

James Nulick

You are so very far away from me
perhaps three thousand miles
or so
when I wake up at three in the morning
it is you I think of, the afterimage of
your face wrings balling wire
around my skull, warm and taut thin metal
rubbing up slick against
sebaceous glands, wading pools
for shafts of black hypo hairroot.
Then your name comes and my
upper lip trembles for purchase
with the lower one, the pulse
beating in my ears because I want
so very badly to hold you in
my arms, warm wet dough meshing,
your dime-sized nipples hard against my own,
breath on neck
tightening and shrinking muscles.

That night when your mother slapped
you and you held back impotent tears
for fear of losing face --
phosphor dots from the Sony
reflecting in your eyes,
I wanted to take you in my
arms and protect you,
Madonna comforting child on the
sweat-sour cushions of a worn sofa.

But now you are gone and we
are so very far apart. Once,
while in line at the bank,
I thought I saw you, your back to me,
and my heart quickened til I thought I
would collapse. You were three thousand
miles away though, and I knew this.

The monthly letter from you insulates me
from my own self hatred, barbed wire
wound and pulled tight against pulsing
jugular, my hand in yours, I and I,
and I open the envelope carefully and
pray for restored sight but there are
no pictures.

If I ever see you again
I shall nibble on the skin of your
sweet chest, thin veil of flesh
that covers your pumping heart,
white porcelain and flowing blue calligraphy,
a taut canvas etched with razor-thin baby blue
veins that fork and cross and form the Y
of a thousand yesses.

Your mom will want us
to go grocery shopping with her
as she always does because she
is afraid of being alone.

And we will sit in the back seat
of her metallic gray Monte Carlo,
you and I,
taillights of the car in front of us
flowing angry crimson, a silent judgment.

And we will be sitting close together
in that back seat, you and I
in the safety of the darkness --
knee pressed against knee, we
will hold hands, fingers slick with
sweat, and your mom, too busy with
her driving, won't even notice.

Blue Lizard and Joker

Scott Rettberg

Light glint off the back of a lizard
Was the last thing Joker
Saw before his execution
They forced him to drink poison
Fed him to the vulture
On sand of Navaho Desert

Was it his just desert
He was kin of the lizard
Theft made him a vulture
No angel was he, Joker
It's true that he spread poison
Ruthless in execution

The family rules meant execution
For any mule who'd dare desert
Blood is thicker than poison
There was the tatoo of Blue Lizard
On the right shoulder of Joker
Before he met the vulture

They smiled down like vulture
When they did the execution
The boys held a grudge against Joker
Who was convulsing in the desert
Up to his mouth crawled the lizard
Liked the scent of poison

Reptile licked the lips of poison
While on throat dined the vulture
Vapors feed Blue Lizard
There are no stays of execution
No tombstones in the desert
Just the shredded corpse of Joker

Sun warms carrion: Joker
His days were filled with poison
When moon claws cacti in the desert

Yellow bones are left by vulture
From the grounds of execution
Away scurries the lizard

From Joker's shoulder is gone blue lizard
Sand storm wipes away the poison execution
Desert desperado in the belly of the vulture

A Waitress Quits

Scott Rettberg

The dancer in the leather jacket who had a clove cigarette hangin out of her electric ruby red shade number five lips was standin next to the off-ramp of I-90 as a Mercedes passed thinkin bout the time she lost her virginity to a lumberjack from Minnesota who told her it was a new step from up North very popular in the Paul Bunyan bars and smilin she needed a drink she was freezin and an arctic wind was makin her fingers numb she passed the time by thinkin of letters she would have to send to leaders of third world nations she wanted to be a queen of some Banana Republic not an out-of-work ballerina who was sick of waitin tables at that cheezy roadside truck-stop hot vittles and cold showers slingin hash for teamsters whose hands kept touchin the wrong biscuits go back in your cab and make your own gravy buddy they didn't even know she could pirouette it's just the way it happens here's your fuckin eggs sunny-side up you stinkin bastard and your coffee in your lap you illiterate bum this isn't the way it's supposed to be by now twenty-seven years old and the special is meatloaf and grits wipin chicken a la king sauce off on her apron screw that she's goin to Swan Lake Robert Redford's gonna take her there dancin with Barishnokov at parties at the Kirov an eighteen wheeler zooms by huge wheels spatter slush in her hair the damn cigarette goes out she spits on the ground and sticks out her thumb and starts walkin.

Squid at the Chicago Aquarium

Ann Struthers

Sit there in the water,
stare at me with that unblinking eye.
I stare back and tell you
it's a matter of education, of scientific
knowledge for the inlanders,
that you should pulse
there in your watery cage.

But your eye knows.
We cage to prove our two-handed
superiority.
So we diminish
momentarily that cage which we all
carry around on our backs,
like a snail's cage,
or like the auger-shell mollusk
whose cage grows so heavy
that the creature, dragging it in the sand,
dies of exhaustion.

The Mother of Icarus

Ann Struthers

If I had enough feathers, some good string
and pure beeswax, I could fashion wings,
to escape the wicked king of Crete,
fly over the walls of the labyrinth
over Peter Breugel's green sea
and the great ship with bellied sails,
above the farmer keeping his eyes on the share
and the fisherman, nodding off in the warm afternoon.
I wouldn't let Icarus fly too close
to the sun, but keep him beside me.
I'd give him a lucky feather
so he would remember.

On the Beach Under the Sun

David Sumner

Surrounded by women and aging men,
I suck in my soft belly to hide
my weakness from the tourists.
And a woman I could desire watches
me, like a Nazi guard, from behind her
sunglasses; she analyzes like a
butcher; she sketches like my father,
the painter, looking like one who lives for
science. When I stand tall,
I look years younger, but I can't do it
for long. When I lie down with my stomach
skyward, I look better than I did in school.
And I know so much more now: I know my way
around a woman, and I can make idle conversa-
tion with total strangers, and I can sleep un-
der the warm sun unguarded by others from my
clan. Sometimes when I awaken, I am the only
one left on the beach. It's like I'm in
prison, lying in my cell, watching my lies,
denouncing the laws that I cannot live by, en-
vying young men and their young bodies: pale,
tanned, lean, hard, bouncing against others,
dying in wars and car accidents. They are not
alive, and I am not dead. I open my older eyes
in hopes that the sun has changed me... it
hasn't. And so I think of how I can use what
I know to invent what I need.

The Uprooted Baskets at Ridgeview Junior High

(for Jim Herrman)

Richard Alan Bunch

Saturday mornings those mouth-shaped hoops
would be there, overnight, still, open
to hold the air as though to suspend us.
Our bikes were parked like a private
audience, a source of solitudinous cheers.

First warm-ups: jumpers, sky hooks,
butterflies in slow motion. Soon we'd
get our "eye", take sides and strides
in sync, a half-court show. Fakes,
dribbles, pivots, dunks: the swishing end
always the same: pure ice cream.

But those plays are gone. Perhaps
we had outgrown that stage. Only cement
patches remain, skeletons of another season,
containing moves only now to be imagined.



Inside Out

G. O. Clark

Tethered to her house,
by a long orange extension cord,
the woman next door aims her whining,
electric leaf blower at the scattered
leaves and debris, meticulously cleaning
every nook and cranny, as if inside
were outside, and her dinner
guests soon to arrive.

At the Oriental Restaurant

Janet McCann

tiny lanterns delicate as linnets,
paper tigers, carved disks like red suns
rising over the teakwood tables. Damasks,
quiet voices, click of chopsticks,
swish of fabric, velvets, taffetas.
Heart-shaped faces, inquiring, offering.

Then the Ladies': sandalwood
and cinnabar, jade dragons
around a mirror.

Somehow a wrong turn, I stumble
into a kitchen! Burst of glare, metal
noises, fierce orientals with no shirts, fryings,
steam, smoke, hisses! Spices erupt, nose burns,
membranes sting, eyes fill. A shout.

Half-escorted, half pushed
thru almost invisible door.

Damasks. Peace.

Trampoline

David Starkey

Backyard, next door: she's got him pinned.
She bounces up and slams him down;
he smiles. Her world, if rough, is warm,
and the new buzz buzzing, whirling deep
inside is fine. The minutes grind.
He's nine, and she's in junior high.
What she needs, he's now realizing,
he will supply.

I sympathize,
for I was once the neighbor's kid
a boy, like him, who fell beneath
a strong-legged older girl -- and lived.
A system of signs I had devised
to impress -- a tip of the cap, a wink,
a wave -- she never understood.
The muscle I showed -- rolling my sleeves
up, following her down the block -- she laughed
off. I ached for the stray occasions
when, playing tag, she'd throw me hard
to the damp and scratchy grass. I'd squirm
and gasp and wish she'd always lash
me down, that time would stretch
beyond the strain of early spring.

And how easy, now, it is to say
that that green horniness is best
which stays pickled, stored, forgotten.
The fruit de la vigne left to ripen
naturally, alas, does just that.
My mid-age bouncing (forty - God!)
means nil, takes place mostly inside
my head. Divorce left me inept
and cold. I rake the leaves. And my sons,
snatched young, are some other man's boys.

The Body

Pam Sirens

We saw it
 dragged up from the river
 lying soft and pale
in a greasy pool
a Hefty bag around its head
the cops said
it was shot five times

we joked about
the bloated flesh
waterlogged like fishbait
as we weaved in and out
of the weekend crowd
brushing against sweaty bodies
in the humid night

we saw it
and things are not the same for us now

at dinner
uneasy silence
as our forks spear
the same thought
whose daddy was it
that didn't come home for days?

ceiling fan spins
and shreds the shroud of heat
that winds itself about the house

what's that shadow
across your face?
no, I didn't hear a noise
there's no one at the door

lets have a drink
lets have sex
lets try to forget

we saw it

we saw it
and things are not the same

since it came
to live with us

Song of the Shirt

Heather Suzan Haley

The rickety storefront hums
With rhythm and rage
And a chorus of aliens within.
Spools hover over their heads like bats
And it's a strain to see their Singers.
Hunkered down by cocoons of thread
All God's children got rhythm.
They croon a while...
"Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home,
Your house is on fire, your children are alone."
The sweat-shops of America pay a nickel a sleeve
And ten bucks for a whole godamn neighborhood.
The boss whistles while they work
But he is a slave
To his wardrobe of harmony.
The boss disguises his face
With no fear of conviction
As another generation
Dresses for work.

The Truth Hurts

Heather Suzan Haley

Why do straight men expect women to enjoy giving head when they can't even image a cock in their own mouth without gagging? And why do they expect women to enjoy butt-fucking though they are reviled by the mere thought of just such penetration? And how can any man stick his dick in a child, and take pleasure in robbing that child of its innocence?

A man with a gun
Tried to get the truth out of me,
Tear drops falling onto the confession
Until I finally told him what he wanted to hear;
That I was running around
With some girl half my age,
And that it made me feel like living again.
The man with the gun
Wouldn't take no for an answer.
I am always molested
By big, strong men.
My father and the other men in my life
Were actual size
But they got away with it.
If they could see
The size of my phantom penis,
Theirs' would all shrivel up and blow away.
I told him how I kept running,
Running and driving,
Driving a big Mack truck, in fact,
And always with my eyes shut.
There were even times when I was
Barefoot and in my pajamas.

The truth is
The seduction was not my fault.
I guess that's why it's called seduction.
They may squeeze your breasts
Like they were purring lemons
But to be proud of one's own tits
Is truly a feat.

Rape is not my fault either.
His, hers or mine,
As long as I keep my mouth shut.
For the truth emerges
From a big mouth
When you least expect it.
But then I wouldn't
Know the truth
If it hit me in the face,
And neither would he.

She Angles the Mirror so They can see Themselves Fuck.

Robert Nagler

He watches her reflection undress. Laughing, they throw off the bed clothes to see themselves better. They embrace, turn, twist, turn on the bed, aware of the witness. The mirror glares back flaws. She sees her stomach protrudes. Her cunt is a large hairy cut. He thinks he looks older in this mirror. A cock is wearing an old man, he thinks. The mirror chides: awkward, awkward. What they imagined graceful looks clumsy: penetration, brutal, like stabbing. They stop. They sit on the edge of the bed. Looking at the mirror, he discovers a flaw in the silvering. The mirror is sick, he says. Trying to hard, she quotes from a comic book: the mirror is sick with futures. Silence. The glass forces study. They see themselves through each other's eyes, mirror eyes. Their nakedness reflects everything they like about each other's body. Inaction binds, binds. At last, she gets up, turns the mirror away. They lie down, hold one another. They try to forget the mirror's pictures. Reflections remain. They fuck in the reflection of the turned-away mirror.

Apparent Jaundice

Thomas Kretz

She has a chart of many
colors colliding with pills

Her skin a sallow yellow
casting a pall on roses
beside the electric bed
a hue of grave condition

Wrists overripe bananas
a hundred weeks in the sun
then in refrigerator
to await a cold steel knife

Reeks with postpartum weakness
oozes desire for dying

After secret abortion
in a Honduran jungle
could only be infectious
sum of injections of guilt.

Under Cover

Tim Flanagan

The rain sounds like meat
sizzling in a frying pan
but (how can this be?)
meat sizzling in a pan
does not sound like rain.
Everyone remain calm:
I will get to the bottom.

There is no good answer.
It's time I switched towns.
My loved ones now know
my address and have given
my physical description.
I must continue to live
and pay close attention.

The night makes noises
no court order will stop,
so I put up with and forget.
I cannot discover what it is
I need to get off my chest.
Words, rising from books
make me anxious and afraid.

Since I quit drinking
I have become very choosy
and today defenestrated
my color television set.
I want to make a lot of money
and don't care about myself.
I wish I were a woman

so that I could be a whore.

Prayer To November

Tim Flanagan

Show yourself, Angel of November,
that I might speak to you, make you
official as the rotting pumpkin chunks
cluttering your gutters and sidewalks.

You have pushed the stars too close.
You are strange; you must explain to me
the hectoring language of your crows,
put simple words to the clacking of limbs.

You dropped an empty nest at my feet,
but I love now (you are rude);
I contemplate the dream of immortality.
Come close now; whisper me my desire.

Angel, how is it I know you?
My lover's skin reeks not like burnt leaves,
the sky sparkles not like polished chert,
and the full moon refuses my toast.

Angel, you hurl down slabs of icy wind
to shatter windows when doors are slammed.
I do not know myself but I know this:
nothing is on the verge of taking my place.

Watching Mr. X

Troy Headrick

From my upstairs bedroom window,
I look down on his bleak house.
He has no curtains, or else he refuses to draw them
which confirms my suspicion --
he wants me to watch his miserable life
as it shuffles by
from room to room.
I oblige these last wishes of his,
knowing that no one else cares enough
to be his witness.

I daily see him in his various forms of
bathrobed despair.
In the mornings he sips black coffee, sits
at his kitchen table, stares blankly.
It takes him forever to move; he practices
an eternal lethargy over biscuits.
When he does muster the strength,
his activity becomes symbolic --
figurative life.
His day passed this way until night.
After dark, he keeps his lights on forever.
He moves in front of the TV and watches all-night reruns
of old movies.
He's memorized all their plots; he laughs at all
the right times,
and cries during the 6 a.m.
credits.

Scenes from a One-Way Play

Troy Headrick

These:

the bus driver's eyes in the rear-view.

He looks tired.

He looks piggy fat.

A black man in the next seat,
a very old black man.

Out of his dark face
walks the sharecropper, the blues
singer, the insomniac, the pink-rimmed eyes
full of sweet pain, the fear,
the anger,
the love.

His eyes ask me
questions; his nose answers
my mind.

That old black man wants to hurt me, or forget me,
or just plain eat me;
his gold teeth show it.

And yes the land is outside
these bus windows -- hills, trees, a train
running parallel with us, but losing ground
on us.

It all runs away.

It all changes:

pretty soon there'll be a desert
or and ocean? Fields full
of cardinals pecking insects off
a sea of white flowers?

Should I expect
the ultimate mirage?

Is this the narcotic-dream
they call

Greyhound?

I've left the driving to them, but have they
driven me insane?

Another small town and we pick up
another wino.

He's sitting behind me.

I can hear his swallows, smell his
fumes. (He's somewhat flammable but
all liquid; he'll put himself out if he
catches fire.)

This drinking on board is against
all the federal statutes, but he doesn't know
statutes from
statutes. He doesn't even
care.

Just then somebody coughed from the very
back seat.

It's from too many cigarettes or too many
bus rides.

I don't know which, I couldn't
tell you.

More eyes in the rearview.

More coughs from behind.

More land through the tinted.

Nightfall.

Curtainfall.

Walking Across a Farm Yard

Elmer Suderman

Nothing squishes quite
like fresh, warm chicken shit
between bare toes.

The First Time

Lucinda Mason

“Fatty!”

Four? Five? Six years old??

Crying, she runs from the playground
to parents tanning near.

“Daddy, daddy, those niggers
just called me a name.”

Whatever Happened to the Hippies?

Fran Muir

Twenty five years later,
Living in Suburbia,
Remember how we sought the “simple” life
In calico, wandering barefoot
Through apple orchards.

All we hippies have gone to the Suburbia
Of comfortable houses and
A steady income.
The simple life
Was too hard for us.

We drive new cars now, are two-income families,
Aerobically toned to stylish standards.

Stored in this Suburbia attic, I have kept the dream,
As old-fashioned now as the life it tried to fake.



Fiction

Las Montanas

David Wright

Juan pushes his stringy hair behind his ears and looks down the canyon at cliff swallows buzzing loops in the humid air, then lifts a smoking joint to lips and thinks of what to do with these two young gringos he has stopped at gunpoint on the steep mountain trail that meanders by a hidden patch of marijuana grown for a profit from the middleman in Juarez over a thousand miles to the north, where the problems of the border patrol are not his concern -- not like these sweaty gringos with their bright packs carried on their backs like the loaded mules driven slowly up the raged canyon faces that reflect the midday sun beating down for the good of the people and the plants the federales would love to find for their own dealings with their own middlemen north or east or wherever they go after they bury their victims in some rocky grave, or if not so mean in some prison growing moss and decay and slimy mold between the toes of peons too poor to buy a cake of soap or a bottle of beer or even a whore once a month like the richer ones with the nice prison apartments paid for by amigos free in the marijuana mountains holding gringos who meant to go for a hike in the Mexican mountains--the trees and bird and waterfalls pictured so nicely in tourist brochures printed for Aeromexico and the government and the rest of the people who despise Americanos with swollen heads and pasty sneers and money that helps pay the rent and keep a poor country afloat.

Juan raises the oiled barrel of his Enfield .303 and pokes it at the tall brown-bearded one with the thin arms and large eyes staring through glasses too strong to see the finer things of life but strong enough to realize that shit, something has gone wrong with the fantasy in his mind and the pictures must have been fakes, Jesus Christ wouldn't it be nice to be home on a boring afternoon watching Wild Wild West reruns or tossing a frisbee and thinking about backpacking in the hills of Mexico, practicing Spanish with young señoritas hip-swishing through villages and tossing back warm shots of tequila in aged adobe cantinas with gap-toothed unshaven old men laughing and singing songs of lost loves and the days of Villa, instead of suddenly here in the heat with a miffed paisano who might shoot him for the coins in his pocket rather than let him go his own way and accept the fact that the fantasy was nicer than this if only the son of a bitch would stop yelling silencio and point that thing elsewhere, even at Joe but not at me Christ it might go off and justify the cautioning words of two parents who saw their son venturing off to a land from which he never returns.

Juan swings the gun barrel toward the somewhat smaller blond who feels bored and peeved and sure of his release like an American criminal

saying why are you wasting my time I'll be out in an hour, keeping up the tough front in a psychological game played by instinct not by knowledge except the knowledge don't let the dogs smell your fear or by god they'll tear your balls off, trying to get comfortable without removing his pack, leaning against a tree crawling with ants full of their own wanderings fore and aft in search of food and grit and dead comrades to carry dutifully homeward, ignoring the ants and the heat and the gun barrel with the uncanny power of sending chills down his spine while trying to think of a way out of here, if only we'd come last week or next month or maybe some money would pay off this bastard, unaware of Juan's glance down the trail.

So where was Rodriguez the jefe when a decision had to be made? He had let the last ones go, the smiling Australian and his wife, but the ones before were still rotting away over the hill in a cave home for bats and maybe for these "Americanos?" he asks, watching them nod their heads and squirm as he sucks on the thin-rolled paper holding dope leaves dried stems up on racks cut and molded by machete and cord like everything else in camp, a bush-shack affair serving three men, Rodriguez, Rico, and Juan, the first a colonel's son, the second a street urchin, the third a son of a whore and a sailor. Now here Juan stands holding two intruders who brought themselves to his land and his mercy, both mumbling and swatting the air of "Jejenes," he says, "jejenes," smacking his arm and looking at the pinpoint of blood left by the death of the insect that makes its way by biting the men and the mules who travel the hill.

Joe begins thinking of his girl's short curly hair and too-heavy butt and her way of making love only in the dark although she scampered nude in the river and once streaked a drive-in back in the days when streaking was in, and he thinks of how she almost tied in with the trip but stayed home at his urging for he secretly had visions of dark-skinned women wanting a blond American lean and alone in the Mexican mountains, but up till now about all they have seen are poor farmers and Indians in white cotton shirts and pants or dresses of pink purple and blue breast-feeding infants who shit on the floor of the trains or the sidewalks of towns, staring at him out of boredom or curiosity as to what brought him onto a third-class chicken and piglet train or into one of the stucco villages where tourists are seldom seen. And it's true that he's enjoyed the people and scenery in spite of depending on Mike for the language and worrying about travel schedules and change from the hands of people who may or may not be honest, but now he's here with a man who holds a gun, speaks no English, and smokes a joint without making an offer to guests who might have accepted had the state of their bowels been less loose and queasy as a slow-moving fear surrounded their hearts and the thin taste of bile crowded their throats.

A noise on the trail “Ah-h-h, Rico, mi amigo, you finally return and what did you bring your friend, your hombre?” Juan says, leaning his rifle against a log and ignoring his two charges who would run if they could but he knows better unwrapping paper from two dozen tortillas fresh the day before yesterday, then cupping one he spoons on clumps of chorizo and egg making a burrito which he stuffs in his mouth chewing thickly as he gestures to Rico to keep making more, talking around the wad in his mouth he points to the gringos, mumbling, shaking his rifle as well as his head.

Rico thin and adolescent first unshoulders a knapsack then unshoulders his rifle. Sitting next to Juan on a log polished from many nights by the fire he folds chorizo and egg and chews open-mouthed while the grease from the meat runs down an arm that he wipes on the trousers bought one year before after selling a crop and doing the town with Juan and Rodriguez who filled him with mescal and lost his share they said in an all-night poker game in the back of Sanchez’s bar, and now he too watches the gringos.

Mike strokes his beard and chews his fingernails planning a move, something subtle and harmless like well it’s been nice but we have to be going, or maybe if we’re not back by tomorrow every cop in the country will be here looking for us; though if we’re tight with the cops we’d tell in a minute, and then what’s this talk about some Rodriguez fellow maybe that’s the line to take Mike thinks slowly moving and glancing at Joe who also moves as two gun barrels swing slowly around. “Uh, senior, a misunderstanding, I mean, yea Rodriguez es un amigo, es nuestro amigo tambien,” realizing that Rodriguez might be someone they’re hiding from, shit why didn’t I think of that before? “What did you say?” Joe asks watching Juan get up slowly and still chewing come over. “I said Rodriguez was a friend of ours, maybe it’ll work.” But before he can take a step Juan is there with the gun barrel’s hard O on his forehead, pushing him down to the ground, his head up against the tree trunk: “Rodriguez es un amigo?” and the steel bruises bone until Juan suddenly backs away, snorts a deep-throated grimace and hawks a scrofulous wad into the dirt at Mike’s feet, then returns to the log where he kicks the ashes, sits and shrugs. Mike draws a breath and fights tears of fear and anger and from a childhood habit turns to thoughts of better times where nothing was as good as it seemed but it was better than this, the future’s promise of one good woman, infants with family features, the odor of lilac and no where to go but up. Joe sits angry resisting his fear and wondering how to club these fuckers and get the hell out, moving on to yet another thrill, blazing the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails, stories in assorted magazines, a continuum of women and wild lore spread amongst friends sharing good times and glory.

Down in the valley in Sanchez's bar Rodriguez sits with his feet on a table, rolling his glass and watching the door as if waiting for someone he expects any minute knowing all the while there's only himself to chat with on a hot afternoon; but he finds himself boring and too drunk to be pleasant so he ponders the mountains as he zips up his fly left open since he last went to the bano and gazed into the urinal as his last two day's business flowed down the drain and out to the street, smelling the damp stink of a million before him who stood likewise one hand on the wall supporting their bleary eyes and haggard bones held together through a lifetime of going nowhere and returning the same. He ponders the mountains and thinks of checking on Rico and Juan those two worthless peasants how he lowers himself so to make a few pesos and them so thankless for all he has done, as if they had a thing before he employed them as hands of a gentleman farmer now returned to his table, drinking and waiting till night for the gathering of gamblers and whores and good family men who whistle and wink but seldom do more, not like Rodriguez the jefe who drops his feet to the floor and lays his head on the table with the softness of a mother laying abed her own infant: he'd show them how to win at cards, how to grab the best whore as his head lolls to the side and slumps in his chair.

The camp faces east and the two captives now freed of their packs watch shadows climb the far canyon wall as Rico feeds and waters the stock for a night like every night with iguanas lying heavy on thick leaf or rock, the night birds and parrots screeching and cawing in two-four time as the first bats flit in the dusk trying ever again in short-winged dance to smite a few jejenes of their own. Juan tilts high a half-empty liter of mescal and watching the blond he forces his tongue into the neck of the bottle to flip the worm, then sets down the bottle and walks to the gringos.

"Como se llama?" Juan says looking at Joe looking to Mike, "Jose," says Mike, and Juan's face stares puzzled as he squints trying to focus "Su pelo, si si, me le gusta," he says bending to touch the blond hair raising up fast as Joe butts him in the face and turns for the gun just ten feet away with thick rubber arms encircling his waist in a grip never ending while Mike sits too frightened to move. Rico steps over and stops the struggle by standing mute-faced his rifle already shouldered, Joe relaxing his muscles enough to sit down thinking what will this ape do to me now?

Tied to the tree hands behind backs Mike and Joe whisper thoughts of escape while Juan lies drunk by the fire and Rico imagines a life free and well-lived with a wife and a garden in a village near Mitla where sleep would come easy and guns would be scarce. He sees himself walking to

market each week with mangoes papayas and one or two chickens to trade for some flour and a little tobacco that he'll smoke in the door of his white-washed adobe while inside the odor of cooking rellenos combines with the voice of his singing esposa as she pinched the cheek of their newborn baby and gazes in love at the back of her hombre. A pop in the fire rouses his mind and looking again at the two tied before him he sees only strangers speaking the language and wearing the clothes of a place to the north where according Juan no one goes hungry and money is free. He laughs to himself for one year ago he might have believed it but now he knows better and looking can see they're flesh and blood men if they had all that money they wouldn't be here.

Down the canyon the river widens, grows thick then sprouts a few casas with rough stables and gardens where ten generations have lived and died by tending to business amidst the tangled bougainvillea that grows everywhere, even in the village on a wooden ramada shading the door of Sanchez's bar where Rodriguez has dozed waiting for dawn to lead up his burro and head back to camp taking supplies and tales of his prowess which he'll repeat every night by the fire. He cinches the packsaddle straightens his hat and feeling like hell starts walking upriver ignoring the people he meets on the way for he's thinking of kilos of crop tightly bound and ready for sale in Mexico City. Near one of the casas with thick bougainvillea an old man fished the water waiting for breakfast to offer itself, and seeing Rodriguez he calls out a greeting that must be returned as they've chatted before. "Hello Antonio," answers Rodriguez. "Como estas?"

"Fine fine," Antonio says. "Into the mountains again for more lizards?"

"Si, si, lagartos bring eighty pesos a pound now, soon I'll be rich and retire." Rodriguez laughs and waves, a good joke, lagartos! then heading uphill on the dust-thick trail he notices marks of lug-soled boots going one way.

Sunrise reveals Rico and Juan asleep by the log while Mike and Joe struggle no dinner no breakfast imagining fish salad chicken and a good bath and sleep on a bed of clean sheets where troubles are few and rope burns a nightmare, twisting and turning to pry off the knots and fly down the mountain no thought of return for packs cash or visas, but Juan's snoring stops and awakens Rico who sits up with a start as he does every day. Seeing the gringos he gets up to check them. Juan moans rolls over, sits up and spits words at Rico who stops where he stands then turns to the fire.

Joe and Mike listen intently for a word or a clue to the day's next event but soon all is a blur of hand-waving and slobber as Juan lays out a plan he thinks wise and just. He and Rico holding their rifles untie the gringos and motioning get them to hoist on their packs, then push them along a thin line of trail to the canyon's high rim where pausing to rest they see in the distance the mountain Malinche, named for the Indian mistress of the Spaniard Cortez who brought slaughter and ruin and took what he wanted from the people of the woman he held in the night. In the next canyon over the gringos move through the morning's long shadows and pause with exhaustion in a jungle of strangeness where the canyon's deep bottoms are quilted with sunlight and colorful birds perch in trees.

Rodriguez finds camp ghostly and silent and pauses to finger the lug prints everywhere there's no telling what's happened with those peons around no one guarding the crop or tending the mules. Walking into the foliage he kneels by a log and wiping his forehead imagines the scene as federales came in and hauled off his two companeros Rico and Juan who are probably going now to their graves, spitting his name and dying like cowards.

Juan angling away cuts Mike from the path and pushing him back waves the other two forward. Rico and Joe stumble ahead before sitting to wait as Rico wiped sweat from his face and looks to the sky. A rustling above with Mike's shouting and tearing burns through the brush to suck air from Joe's lungs. Starting in terror he heads up the trail until tripped from behind and dropped to the ground. More shouting and tearing end with a gunshot and Juan comes out of the brush slapping his chest, flushed in the face and dripping with sweat.

They continue descending the opposite side, Joe looking stunned and the other two plain as time and the landscape lose all perspective becoming in trade a green whirling madness where nothing's explained of history and life or purpose and future in a strong humid present smacking jejenes and looking for snakes and thinking of senioritas serving drinks in a bar while the world revolves with a welcome for heroes home from adventure with Mexican bandits high in the mountains look at that cave.

Far down in the canyon Antonio sloshes knee-deep in water, playing with grandchildren he keeps close at hand. Smiling and splashing they pause for a moment as an echo of gunshot tickles their ears. The small ones look up mouths hanging open and Antonio winks and kicks up more water: "Dos lagartos menos," shaking his head, "no es importante."

Pushed down the trail now freed of his pack Joe keeps kicking up dust for nearly two miles before chancing a glance back over his shoulder where a solitude sits trimmed at the edges by a brown line of trail invading the glade. His vision goes grey as if cleaned on a slate where the two villains vanish like a dream in the night, the packs a fair trade for freedom. And then Mike arrives with a face red and shaken, a sleeve torn at the shoulder, his eyes burning red. Both look through the silence then head down the trail, words rolling unfolding as they question their luck and believe they won't die, their eyes on a view of cloud-pocked blue and the ground's dusty mouth, on a leaf slowly turning as if caught in a breeze from the shadows.

Two Bodies

Derek Neff

It takes her a few minutes, but Julie realizes, finally, that her step-brother is killing himself. He is giggling and he has the medicine bottle in front of him on the bed. He is sitting cross-legged on her bed, the bottle stuck between his thighs. Every now and then he dips one of his skinny fingers in the smoke-orange bottle and takes out one or two of the bluish pills in it. He puts them in his mouth, chews them up with an amused grimace, and then swallows them. His swallows are visible and audible, even to Julie, who is sitting across the room on the chair next to her desk. A few minutes ago Paul came into her room saying he wanted to show her something. And here he is eating his father's heart pills.

"Won't that make you sick?" Julie asks, and Paul stops eating long enough to point and drowsily laugh at her.

"Sick isn't the word," he says.

Julie looks away from him embarrassedly, feeling ignorant.

"What is the word?" she asks.

Paul only laughs again. Then he picks up the whole bottle and tips its contents into his mouth. The last dozen or so pills remaining in the bottle slide between his clicking teeth and his mouth is puffed out from all of them and Julie starts to laugh too. She is only ten, and Paul is sixteen, so he must know what he is doing.

Paul says, "Watch," and then lies back on the bed. It is a little too short for him, and his legs stick out past the end. He giggles at her and then puts his index finger up to his mouth as if to say, to his laughing self, maybe, Be quiet. Julie smiles at Paul, he is a very pretty boy, or man, or whatever; his eyes are always bright and his smile uncovers a room's hidden brightnesses. Julie has had a crush on Paul since the day her mom introduced her to him during a big dinner at a nice restaurant two months before the wedding. Now he is her brother, even though she never knew him before that night and their parents aren't the same. He is in her room for the first time ever. Before, he has always been nice but quiet, not snobbish but not involved, either, with his family's business. Before, Julie thinks melodramatically, he had his own life to live; she's flattered that he now wants her to watch him with all those pills going through him. She thinks she notices a change in his skin color but she isn't sure. He looks yellowish and slanted.

After fifteen minutes his eyes are fully closed and his smile relaxes into a straight line, then a frown, but, somehow, he still looks happy. He looks thoughtful. She stares at him. Is he dead now? She does not get out of

the chair she is sitting in, but she leans forward and watches very closely to see if he is breathing or not. As far as she can tell he is not. His skin still seems to be turning colors. Julie is still smiling because she is sure Paul knows what he is doing. She knows that pills are bad but she is optimistic he'll wake up again. She even laughs out loud. No one hears, not even Paul, or at least he doesn't seem to hear. Both of their parents are at work. She thinks, only briefly but with a startling ambition she didn't know she had, of getting up to kiss him on the lips. Things could not be unreal or drastic enough to permit something like that, though. If she felt she could really get away with kissing him she would be truly scared.

After about five minutes she reaches over and turns on the radio that Paul's dad gave her when she moved into this house with him and his son; a song is on that she has heard so many times she can sing it without thinking about it. She hums and watches him. Then she gets out her math book and begins doing her homework. She hums and does her homework. When she is done she realized that almost twenty minutes have gone by, but she has actually and secretly been conscious of every silent minute. She looks at him again. He is turning the slight shade of blue that she has seen on silver-scaled fish in the freezer of the grocery store where she goes with her mom once a week to get food for all four of them to bring back to the strange new house that she has had to move into because her mom loves Paul's dad. Paul looks heavy; he is making a dent on her bed.

She thinks about what they might have for dinner tonight when everyone gets home. She thinks maybe she'll help her mom fix some Hamburger Helper, the kind with the noodles and cheesy cream. That's easy to fix. She can help fix that because it's simple and quick.

Then they are both downstairs watching TV. After school cartoons are on. A big man with a beard is hitting a sailor on the head with a big iron anvil. Birds fly around the sailor's head. The sailor walks like he's almost lighter than air and doesn't know what to do about his sudden lightness. His eyes are crossed; he looks vaguely euphoric. Paul laughs but Julie doesn't think he really thinks it's funny. "What did you think of that, huh?" he keeps saying from time to time, but Julie doesn't answer.

He keeps trying to talk about it with her when their parents are gone. He knows that Julie is interested. Paul is not smart but he is smart enough. He knows how to make people interested.

He'll come into her room when she's trying to do her afternoon homework and talk to her. He knows she'll give in. He says things like, "I can prove it really works." He says, "Without killing you, I can prove it's real. It won't even hurt." She just looks at him and tries as hard as she can

in the sloppy but resolute way that young girls have to not betray what she's thinking as he says, "Let me try it on you."

So one day he comes into her room and he has some things gathered in his arms. Julie looks up from her homework and then glances at the clock on the wall. It is a little after four. Her mother will be home from the bank where she works as a teller in a little over an hour. Paul's father should be home from the school where he teaches algebra in the next few minutes. Julie decides that not much can happen in the next few minutes so she smiles at Paul and listens to what he has to say.

"See?" is what he says, dropping his things onto her bed. He has brought thin white rope, about five feet long, looped up into itself, and a long thin rod of wood.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Nothing. Yet. But what I'll do is, I'll make a tight knot on your leg and it'll kill it and then I'll bring it back to life."

"How will you bring it back to life?" she asks, with a voice that is dry and unguardedly trembling.

"Don't be silly. Just trust me. Do you trust me?" She almost shrugs, makes a slight motion with her shoulders, but does nothing more. "I think you trust me. Before I go to bed tonight I'm gonna come in here and make that knot around your leg. And it won't hurt, either, I promise. I can make things not hurt."

That night, as promised, he comes back into her room. He smells good; he's just had a shower, he has his robe on and he smells soapy. He looks friendly, like a pal who has something great he wants to share. She sits up in her bed but keeps the covers over all of her body but her head and the ends of her feet. She is glad he came. When he loops the rope a couple of times around her right leg below the knee she is not even scared. He yanks on the rope and it jerks her whole body down a little. His hands are warm and confident. He sticks the skinny wooden rod between the rope loops and her leg and then he turns the rod around, twice, until he is shaking with the effort and can tighten no more.

"Ow," she says.

"Don't start lying," Paul says. "It doesn't hurt and you know it."

"It feels weird, though."

"You aren't getting any blood down there," he explains. He ties the last of the rope on either side of the wooden rod to keep it in place. Her leg whitening already. "Don't worry," he says, and gets up to leave the room.

After he's gone she takes all the covers off her body and watches her leg die. It is a silent and uneventful death. It is not even unpleasant. After a few minutes she goes to sleep.

He comes in a few hours later very quietly. She wakes up, hugs him. She is glad to see him, and, since she is not sure if anything is real right now, she risks being affectionate. He hugs her back, says, "That's a girl." He unties the rope. "Now your leg is dead. How does it feel?"

She tries to move it. She lifts up her whole leg with the muscles above her knee, but it is quite an effort, like lifting a weight. "It doesn't," she answers.

"It shouldn't." When the tourniquet is completely undone he takes out a long needle from his robe pocket and unhesitantly sticks it all the way in her right foot. It doesn't bleed. Julie watches but she says nothing. "Yep," he says. Then he keeps touching the leg until it begins to tingle in an almost painful rush. The discomfort is unlocalized; Julie tries to rub at the emerging itch but isn't sure where to touch. The leg flowers painfully back to life. "Things that come back to life always hurt more than when they die," Paul says.

In a few minutes her leg feels again. It tingles and tickles her with every breath and pulse of her body.

He leaves her in the room feeling sleepy but marvelously happy. Not even her mother has ever made her feel so privileged as Paul just made her feel by killing a part of her and then bringing it back.

Finally he agrees to kill her if she'll stop bugging him. Every time they get alone and she gets a chance she starts talking about being dead. Paul sees that all along this is what he wanted to hear. He can't argue with his own intentions. And he is happy to have someone to do all this with.

"First you kill me," he says. "So you know that I'm not up to anything. So you know that it doesn't hurt, cause would I do it if it hurt?"

"I've already seen you die," she says impatiently. "I believe you, I don't think you're trying to trick me or anything. You'd go to jail if you really killed me."

He pulls his bangs from his eyes and looks at her a long time. "Have you ever smoked a cigarette?" he asks.

She laughs at the question. "No."

"No? Have you ever drunk something that was too hot and it burnt your tongue?"

"Hot chocolate a few times in the morning before school, when I'm in a hurry and have to drink it down quick before the bus comes."

"Good."

“Why?”

“It means that you drank it and you knew what to expect from it: a burnt tongue. But you drank it anyway.” He sees that she doesn’t understand what he is saying. He lifts a hand in the air, sighs in frustration, then gives up trying to make her understand. “Now, I’m gonna lay down on your bed and then you’re gonna suffocate me.”

“How?”

“With a pillow. Suffocating is the best way to kill someone. Know why? Cause there’s no permanent damage in the body. It doesn’t hurt either, unless you panic. It’s hard not to panic. Just expect a little discomfort, for a second, like a burnt tongue from drinking your hot chocolate.”

She is skinny, Paul thinks. He says, “Put the pillow over my head and press real hard. It’s hard to suffocate yourself, that’s why I’ve only done it once or twice. But it’s always seemed to me it would be the easiest way if someone else was there to do it. When I try to do it I always chicken out and quit when I get to that panicky part where I need air and ’ll do anything to get it.”

“Quit talking so much, now, and let me try,” she says.

“So try.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Well, I’m not talking now. Just do it.”

She puts the pillow over his head.

“Harder. Press harder,” he says, his voice muffled but not yet straining.

She pushes harder. Several seconds go by.

“Harder,” Paul says from under her pressing.

She sits on the pillow and pushes down with all her might. Nearly a minute goes by. “Is that good?” she asks.

“Not really,” he says, but thinly.

“Should I quit?”

“Let’s wait a little and see.”

Julie keeps sitting on the pillow, waiting to hear either way.

“Nope,” Paul finally says. “Won’t work. Not that way.”

“Can I get up now?”

“Yeah. Get off me, it’s getting stuffy under here.”

She gets off and then stands beside the bed while he wipes the sweat from his reddened face.

“This is stupid,” Julie says. “Why don’t you just kill me? You’ve already done it lots, I haven’t.”

So they fill the bathtub up with lukewarm water the next afternoon, and Paul tells Julie to put her head in it.

“I’m scared,” she says.

“Now she’s scared,” he says to himself.

“Well.”

“Well, of course you’re scared. But I’m here.”

“Will you let me up if I change my mind?”

He hesitates. “You’ll change your mind.”

“No I won’t. I want this to happen.”

“You’re just a girl and you’ll change your mind, trust me. No. I won’t give you a choice. Once you’re in there you’re in there. But until then it’s your choice. Decide now.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Fine. See if I care.”

“You do.”

“You’re the one wants me to do it.”

“I do want you to. Only I’m scared.”

“Look. It’s easy. Just put your head down there. I’ll be with you the whole time. I won’t leave you. Remember how I brought your leg back to life? Isn’t it back to normal now? There’s nothing to be scared of. Just, think of it as an adventure.”

She breathes in and out very deliberately. “Okay.”

“And don’t breathe so much at the last minute like you’re doing,” he says. “You’ll just make it all last longer once you’re in there.”

“Let me up if I grab your arm, okay?” she says. “I won’t unless it really, really hurts, okay? I mean, I won’t do it, I won’t grab your arm. But if I do let me up.”

“Okay,” he finally says.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

She slowly puts her head under the water and, once she’s been in there a few seconds, she thinks, I could do this all day. She opens her eyes but the bathwater makes them feel heavy and like they’re bulging. She closes them and concentrates on not breathing, on how she is not breathing and on how it isn’t painful. She can feel Paul’s hand over her head, not really pushing on her yet, just there. Its being there makes her feel fearless.

Soon she can hear a noise, a rumbling noise like a toad burping from a deep well, coming from inside her. Her cheeks bulge out. How much longer until I drown? she thinks. Then her lungs seem to expand, to push at her other organs; nothing’s getting in there to make them push out but they do anyway. I can’t just not breathe, she thinks, her thoughts becoming

quicker and less discerning. She begins to hurt. This is what Paul warned her about. How can I just let this happen? she thinks. Paul's hand on her head is not firm. She thinks of touching his hand so that he'll stop but she knows he'll be mad and so she keeps braving it. I'll drown, she thinks, but I have to breathe. I have to breathe in. So she does. Water goes into her lungs and it feels like it feels when she drinks something too quickly and it goes down the wrong tube, which is what it's doing now. She goes into a fit of underwater coughing. Her eyes are wide open. She is shaking with panic and water keeps coming into her with every convulsive gasp. She touches the back of Paul's hand. Paul doesn't move his hand away. Her body feels heavy and marine. Her second to last thought is, I couldn't ever walk on land again. Now she stops moving around. She is breathing almost normally now, if a little more laboriously and fatally deeply.

Her last thought is, All my life I could've breathed water.

When she is still he gets up and wipes at his forehead. Then he takes Julie's head out of the water and sets her on the bathmat in front of the tub. Her hair is heavy and darker than usual. She groans a little when he sets her down, a deep inanimate groan that is only the residue of breath now escaping from her body like air bubbles to the oxygenated surface of a pond. He lets the bathwater go down the drain.

In another hour their parents will be home from work.

He thinks about how he broke his promise to her by keeping his hand on her head when she wanted him to stop. He knows she won't be mad at him after it's all over. She wanted this to happen. He thinks, Really, most people are flattered that you care enough about them to lie to them, at least in the long run.

She wakes up very cold. She cries, feels forgetful and disoriented. Her first thought is, Am I upside down? Then: It's bright. Paul is there with her, helping her to her feet.

"I'm up? I'm up?" she keeps asking. She leans on his shoulder as he takes her to her bedroom. She is gasping and shivering.

"I know, I know," he says. "I've been through this before. This is the hard part. Just stay with yourself here."

"Ahh," she moans, unable to keep from crying. Some water is dribbling out of her mouth and her cries sound like gargles. She secretly enjoys both Paul's attention and the unique reason for her suffering.

"Paul," she says, and kisses him on the cheek. "Cold, I'm cold."

Paul rubs her arms with his warm hands, trying to get her blood circulating normally again. "Sister," he says. "My sister."

Weeks pass. They kill each other several times, always after school when their parents are in no danger of coming in upon one of their corpses. Sometimes Paul drowns Julie, other times Julie drowns Paul (although she isn't very good at being insistent in her grip and he often has to think of another way to put himself under on his own). They never both die at once, Paul is afraid to try that, he is afraid he won't be able to bring both of them back.

It is Julie's idea to use the knife. Paul doesn't want to have anything to do with it. Once, during a fifth grade field trip to the blood bank at the local hospital, Paul got sick and had to be taken to a small room full of cots to lie down until he felt better. He doesn't want to cut himself up, he isn't that curious about things; but Julie, being a child, still is. She can't think about anything else, it seems. Paul is her best friend now, but all she wants to talk about is getting killed. And now, with the knife. Paul is not yet regretting having given the secret away to his ten year old step-sister, but he is beginning to wonder how he thought she could handle it well. She's just a girl, he thinks, a curious girl and now she has a knife.

She is nervous but anxious to cut herself open and look. "You're sure I'll be okay?" she asks him once more, her shirt pulled up around her breasts so her stomach is bare.

"Yes."

"It won't hurt?"

"Not at all. Not really."

She puts the point of the knife against a patch of soft paleness right above her navel. "Here goes."

Paul isn't looking. He hears her gasp when the knife is in and he grabs the sides of the chair he is sitting in to make sure he doesn't fall forward to the floor.

"Oh," Julie says, breathing fast and looking down at herself. She cuts through the layer of shimmering milky fat right under her skin and pulls back the flap to get a look inside. "You're right, it doesn't... it doesn't hurt at all. Feels weird, though."

"You don't have any nerves in your guts," he says. "Or hardly any, I don't know. The only way it could hurt was your skin getting cut. If it doesn't hurt now it won't."

Paul thinks about the first time he died. It was an accident. He electrocuted himself when he was five. He was playing with the television cord in his old home and, in yanking on the cord very hard near the socket, got a fatal dose of electricity sent through him. He remembers being shocked to death, how his mind had murmured drowsily, had even shut off for a

period, how he had passed out and shut down completely, how he had vaguely, vaguely, in the misty aboveness of death, willed himself to return. How he had been alone in the house, his dad outside watering the plants. How he would always feel after that, after the miracle of his resurrection: alone. He didn't know his own secrets. He just let himself return to himself. Oh, the misery of holding a secret into oneself.

He could do it to anything, but it was still only his. He often through the years made birds that had been run over in the road well again, sent the bird back to itself if it hadn't been gone long. And now Julie.

He still doesn't know how things happen. Death doesn't teach him anything. There is not strange experience, apart from the dying. There is just that hovering snatch of will left afterwards and he is able to apprehend it and give it back, either to himself or to Julie or to anything, really.

Julie has torn herself up inside. The knife is a kitchen knife, dull from use, and it is anything but precise. Paul thinks, The next time her mom uses that knife for cooking, if only she knew where it's been.

"You're getting like all kinds of germs inside your body even as we speak," he says to her.

"I feel weird," she says.

"Like what?"

"I'm bleeding, or something, really bad in here. I tore something. What's that I ripped?... C'mon, Paul, please look, I'm scared. What'd I rip? What is that?"

Paul glances over and swoons a little as he locates the place where she has harmed herself. "I don't know. Your kidney, maybe. On of your kidneys." It is a mess in there; it is not like the clean diagrams of the inside of the body he has seen in his freshman biology textbook.

"That smell," she says. "I'm gonna get sick."

"Just die. Die so you can be okay again. This'll heal up and be perfect again, I promise. But you need to die first."

Blood is getting all over, spilling down the sides of her chest and all over her bed. He will put all of it back in when she dies.

"I'm cold. It's really cold there." She feels a beam of ice burning obscurely into her.

Paul thinks about how he doesn't want to do this anymore. He is bored with it. He's not going to butcher himself like Julie is doing just so he can keep from being bored, that's ridiculous.

"I just... I just wanted to see," she says apologetically, looking up from the mess of herself to see Paul's irritation. She doesn't feel weak enough to die yet. She holds the knife in her hand, anxiously thinking of something else she can do with it before she goes under.

Thorne's Picture

Jim Meirose

Gas fumes boiled around Thorne's faded Pontiac as it strained to flood in the stop and go traffic. Thorne wiped his face again with his balled up workshirt and pumped the gas hard with a scarred steel boot. He'd thrown on the heater to help cool the engine. Noisy dash vents blew out dry hot air. It pushed past his hand and out the window, dragging his cigarette ashes along, then mixed with the fumes from the rusty white Caddy ahead. Thorne's radio was dead; no juice, no voices. There was nothing to do but watch the tall bushes drift by the sides of the two lane rough black road. All the traffic was heading toward Milton, just like every other afternoon. The opposite lane was empty. When Thorne looked at the black of the lane through the heat waved, he could see the formica table, and the bowl of spaghetti, and the veins in the hands she'd fill his plate with, when he finally got home. It got too hot then so he looked away.

Thorne flexed his fingers on the plastic wheel. Fine red cracks burned around his nails. The cracks were from handling dry brown boxes every day with fat Bobby and black Jimmy Jolly. They packed drugs into the boxes off a slow conveyor belt. The traffic stopped. Thorne pumped at the car ahead, and he grinned. Today Bobby'd said that Jolly's eyes looked just like "the ones on the trout Annie fried me last night." The Caddy started moving again. Jolly answered that the only reason Bobby didn't have horns was "'cause the damn lord ran short the day he picked out the devils." There'd been oily green paint on the rack next to Jolly. Jolly'd been wiping his hands.

Again the cars paused. Thorne kept pumping the pedal and scratched at his arm. He glanced at the pebbles spread along the shoulder on the other lane at the base of a wall of leaves. Jim Jolly told Bobby "...the lord's gonna catch up with you boy. You got kids?" and then ran his fingers through his tight grey hair. A shudder began inside the leaves. Thorne crushed the brake harder. Things were moving inside the bushes. The leaves pushed aside to show waving white hands. Two people stepped onto the road.

Thorne saw eyes; they were on him. The bushes circled brown waves around a face on a girl; she moved toward him. She had sandals and came across the road, right up next to his window. A camera came up in her hands. It was yellow and white when it covered her face. She pressed on the camera and there was a click. It snapped at the tip of his nose. A red cheeked boy with an enormous belly under a white striped shirt was with her. The boy was smiling out perfect teeth. Thorne stared. They were moving quick, already stepping away, back toward the side of the road, where they

examined the camera with serious faces. The girl was cranking something on the camera she'd just used to take Thorne's picture.

They were standing right where he'd seen his wife, and her table, and the bowl of white and red, but that might just as well never have been. Thorne was looking at the girl in her blues and pinks and the boy in his new looking sneakers. The gap in the bushes where they'd forced their way through was a thin dark slit in the heavy leaves. The girl turned back and looked at Thorne. He hadn't moved; their eyes met. Thorne thought her eyes looked green.

"Thanks!" she called back. Then the two turned away. They pushed back through the slit. Twigs fell as they moved. They were gone. Thorne thought he might go after them but a horn ripped up from behind his car.

He jumped in his seat and snapped to the front. The Caddy was way up ahead. More horns blew, made him hit the gas. Too hard; the car flooded dead; silence. But why'd she taken his picture? Thorne heard more horns and tried the starter. It was too damn hot; no way. He'd have to wait five minutes at least. There was no shoulder to push the car off onto. Thorne looked down at the dashboard. He wouldn't watch the cars going around. They'd all be staring and frowning and gesturing. It wasn't something he needed to see.

He looked at the zero on his speedometer and listened to the horns that were starting to go around. She had taken his picture. He glanced over the bed of a passing black pickup; the wall of leaves was still empty. He turned back to the zero and picked at a crack in the dried out taped up seat. Had they taken his picture, or just anybody's picture? He saw a boy and girl in a darkroom under a tiny red bulb developing dozens of pictures; skinny women in t-shirts and itchy beards on sweaty drivers all grinning and frozen like they're watching the moon. One blaring loud horn echoed back from tall trees out beyond the bushes. Those trees were on land that belonged to the college. They'd looked like college kids, he thought. It must have to do with the college.

The Pontiac's temperature gauge was creeping toward cool. Thorne thought they might be working on a school project. That had to be it! She'd smiled and said "Thanks!" She'd probably be happy and get a mark. Her face looked good and the thanks had sounded like it was written across the bottom of a glossy new picture. The picture'd been signed with a fancy flourish and slash underneath and hung on a bright yellow wall. Like a gift; a gift picture of the girl and a thanks like that, that she'd give somebody special. Thorne looked at her there and thought of the boy and how he didn't look like a boy to be special or to go into bushes with a girl. He looked like a boy to be special to mama or granny in front of a bright bowl of oatmeal,

or spaghetti, maybe, but not to the girl in Thorne's picture. Tires rolled by and cars sighed. Thorne wondered how it'd be for him to be the boy. He should be the boy; she had picked Thorne out. She could have taken the driver ahead or the driver behind but she didn't. That red cheeked round new sneaker boy couldn't be special at all, not to her, no way. There were tires rolling by and engines but Thorne heard dead quiet and his head was still down. He kept looking at the zero. It was the color of frost. God she looked good on the cool yellow wall in the oval frost frame; and look! Thorne reached for a cigarette. There was more to see but a horn blasted inside his head instead. It exploded inside of his picture.

A passing red Lincoln had stopped beside Thorne. He snapped around, saw a black tattered top and dirty cigar stuck into a slot in a face full of blotches. Thorne floored his gas pedal and pawed at his key when the face turned to look him over. Thorne's key was turning and the blotches were swarming into a thick meaty frown. Thorne's starter cranked when a fist pounded a wheel and the guy's horn went off right there again. The blotched guy's eyes were just cracks in his face. There was anger there, at being delayed. Thorne looked away. His Pontiac started. White haze rolled up with the defroster's roar and Thorne sprang ahead; the Lincoln pulled back into line, behind. They were moving. Thorne felt dizzy; it was damn hot. His stomach moved and he remembered his dinner.

Thorne snuck a look in the mirror. A lump head was set low in the Lincoln. Thorne hoped he hadn't been seen looking back; you're not supposed to care, he thought. You're not supposed to be pushed. He thought of his wife again, and the dinner, as he looked in the mirror. The mirror had a frame, but no girl's picture. That picture was moving away, behind his wife, but there was no way Thorne could know it. The temp gauge moved back up toward hot and the car was bucking again. Thorne felt the car stalling, it felt different than before. It felt like something was gone. He thought his carburetor was shot and needed replacing. The bushes were gone and brick houses moved up once he was past the college. Bobby knew about carburetors; he'd ask Bobby tomorrow. Bobby'd squinted and sipped up his coffee today when Jolly'd told him "At least I got kids in college, man! What the hell do you have?" Thorne felt like something was gone all wrong; it was that feeling of being afraid but you look inside and can't find why, there's no reason. It was only a carburetor, he told himself, not the end of the world, and the spaghetti would probably be good tonight. He remembered then that he'd meant to light a cigarette sometime before. He pulled out the cigarette and glanced up into the mirror. The cigar guy was gone. He must have turned off. Thorne grinned and straightened and was glad to see it. There'd been something wrong while that guy'd been behind

him. Thorne lit up, and forgot the guy when he saw the lighter flame. The things before were gone already, and he was lucky. He was moving toward the dinner, to the woman where he belonged, and she never would find any space on her walls to hang anything like Thorne's picture.

Bobcat and Parrot

(from the novel, *The Cost of a Six-Pack*)

David Mouat

“He was a good old boy. That’s how folks from Worthville, Ken--”

“Turn it off,” I tell my daughter, but I do it for her.

--*tucky describe Larry Mahoney.* Mahoney, he’s that guy whose blood alcohol count was nearly 2.5 times the legal limit, when he crashed into a bus and burnt-toasted twenty four kids and three adults. Now, he’s up on nineteen counts of First Degree Murder. Larry boy did that on May 14, 1988, about a week ago, and the newscasters are still yiking about it.

On and on and on, don’t you get tired of Standard American English radio accent or, if it’s on Headline News or NBC TV, the perfect-haired, grim reaper, slick-Tom Bro-”kaw-kaw” face? I would rather be tortured with empty thoughts tinnitusing my ears and bell, than having to tolerate airwaves bombarding me into dupe-mouthed senselessness.

Daughter appreciates this nagging irritability I have with Larry Mahoney headlines, so that was merely an involuntary addiction (not a reaction) on her part, switching on the radio a moment ago. She’s the one who puts up with the clop-clop, clop-clop, mile-after-mile clop-clop, the tires clop-clop across the concrete freeway between Jamestown, North Dakota, and east and east and east (whoops, west) of there. If just one click-clack could sneak its way in, then I would crack down on her like a father can.

Maybe I can drive a ways, relieving her monotone migraine. No, I can’t! No, I won’t! The law says I can’t since the law caught me napping under my sleeping bag by the roadside after I had drunk 4 and two halves Old Milwaukee cans of beer and allegedly I was DWI so the law cuffed me and hauled me to Pennington County Jail in Rapid City, South Dakota, on Thursday night (9:30 P.M.) and booked and jailed me and on Friday morning they put rubber thongs on my bare feet and marched me into court where I pled *nolo contendere* (what does that mean?) before Judge O’Connor and Judge convicted me and sentenced me to thirty days suspended jail and \$250.00 fine plus court costs and suspended my driver’s license (what’s it doing in my wallet?) and the jailhouse witch mugshot me and fingerprinted me and that means I can’t drive and won’t drive because if the law catches me and tries jugging me I’m not going and that’s the end.

Guess I can’t come down on Daughter for something so insignificant as tuning in the radio and reminding me how this trip began Thursday, May

19, 1988, in Worland, Wyoming, with that same newscaster monotoning, "He was a good old boy."

I suppose, though, that before returning to Larry Mahoney, I best provide a little rounded characterization and a setting which is consistent with character and keeps the plot of this thing moving. Okay, my daughter is a "round head" Norwegian, just like me -- that fulfills Part One of the contract. #2: to the south and the west of us a bit, on the rolling, rolling, rolling North Dakota Great Plains, black-earthed prairie which, according to lore, housed buffalo seas, is the highest point in North Dakota; however, I can't make it out in the distance right yet, so let's pretend my daughter hops out of the car and from a quarter-mile off we concentrate on the top of her head: there you have it, the highest point in North Dakota is the top of a Norwegian's noggin. One more descriptive gem, then the setting is complete; this town through which we passed a ways back has this huge statue -- an idol, that is -- which, I understand, roundheads from both Dakotas pray to; anyhow, this great steel Guernsey goddess watching over Dakotans, she lactates comfort and immortality without cholesterol down to her people. Finally, my daughter, she's this eighteen-year-old who used to wear pigtails (and still does, metaphorically speaking, in her father's eyes), who's delivering her jailbird papa home to his family's wrath.

What else, before we can get on with this? Tone? Already have that: our clop-clop, clop-clop car ride and rolling, rolling, rolling prairie moving plot and the round-headed rounded characters who are ambidextrous enough to double for setting do the job of tone; I mean, you have been listening to the same old absurdist tune of the tone of what you've been reading, and, incidently and coincidentally, what you've been reading is also the dialogue of this piece. After all, I'm not about to share what I have to say to Daughter, during this trip home to see if my wife will kick me out on my ear; no, what I have to say to Daughter is strictly family business.

Larry Mahoney.

To hell with him!

I'm stuck on tone.

To unstick myself from tone, I can think of two perfect ways in which I interpret its meaning.

Instance #1 (for folks like me): what you do is go out in the prairie and nab this bobcat, say, then you dump him in this cage, and for a while this bobcat bangs his brain and gnashes his teeth against the cage bars, but once he's hamburgered what little sense he had in his brain out of his brain, the bobcat's perfectly bopped out and is about to make another movement (takes precisely 19.5 hours to get that brained); then what you do is open the cage and all the bobcat does is squat (by God, squatted, toothless now,

shivering, because of all the bonkering) -- I mean, you literally have to hook a log chain to this lunatic bobcat and drag him from the cage with a four-wheel-drive tractor, and when you do get him out and the chain's unhooked, all this ringered feline does is squat, cowering, all debrained and no life to him; yeah, sits... until (hard telling how long until until) ZOOM!, he's off; and, hell, you and I and especially the bobcat have no idea where he's headed, but his tracks might lead to the nearest 500-foot drop-off cliff; but, more than likely, the trail leads for the freeway, where our bobcat, spotting other Bobcats, decides to race them, but not in the know-how of freeway etiquette, pretty quick get gobbled up by a Cougar.

That's tone! Forget plot and character, there's no character or reasonable plot, once you've jailed a bobcat.

Case #2 (for parrot owners): what you do initially, you let the parrot out of the cage for precisely 19.5 hours. Go on, tell it on yourself, you're Master!

Which brings me quite naturally back to Larry Mahoney, whom I've never met, whom I hope never to meet. And now I can talk about him and almost make sense; in fact, I'm pretty much an almost-alive, living expert on the subject and can (and will) hurl generalities every which way, like a rutting buffalo pawing grass clumps out of the prairie, regarding good old boy Larry, because, take myself, I was caged 0.10 hours shy of the 19.5 in the tank, so I still have 6 minutes more of brain seep.

"...a good old boy." Simple. Easy. Larry Mahoney is a stereotype. Isn't even a bad guy, despite literaturists belittling him, saying some dense fuzzy, some rounded Joe, offers far richer character possibility. By God, take a stereotype, and standing beside you is your neighbor or your dearest friend. In my book, that's as complexly rich as I can take.

Anyway, Mahoney is (was) this fellow...take, for instance, me. All the time he wore this big-mouthed, innocent grin that said, "Hi, y'all." My God, you liked him, couldn't help yourself, what with that duck-billed DeKalb cap roosted atop his head and that fool bumpkin rushing right up on you and slapping your back. Cocked a bit, the hat, cocked naively, warmly arrogant. He'd show up at formal occasions in a two-day beard and in ragged, slightly-soiled Levi's, not to mention a western shirt with elbow holes and puddles under the pits. The ladies, snooting into their crystal snifters at *the idea, the nerve* of that "good old boy" vulgarizing their pretty party, nevertheless, loved Mahoney, the sexy rogue; the slick, neck-tied gentlemen, snorting their outrage for this Clint Eastwood tramp, secretly admired him, but would dang-sure kill him too, if they got the chance -- take good old boy Mahoney, these cologned dandies never stirred an ounce of romance in their ladies' libidos like a Mahoney can, so when Larry ran that

bus down, these smooth, rounded Southern Gentlemen (and their exquisite ladies), with the finally-chance-of-their-lives to oust the cube from their circle, nabbed him and hailed him. That was the end of Larry Mahoney.

Again, that's tone for you, without plot or character. Or mood, if you please, the mood of an entire country. Take a good old boy, alcoholic Larry Mahoney, he's Aids Epidemic, you squish the bug, even if you are *the* one of the ones who all along have been f-ing whichever rounded guy or gal who has the rounded hots for you. "Cheers," you say at your party, clinking your glass and heaving bourbon down the hatch. "By the way, have you had your blood Aids tested? Goody gumdrops, negative." Then you whisper to your neighbor so nobody unreasonably unrounded hears you using *Mahoney* language, "That rotten M. F. Mahoney will never mash another of us, let alone our twenty-four angels." Then, in this rounded rooster voice, having coooooolly spurred your way close to his wife or college daughter or high school son, you croon something roundedly urbane in her/his ear, while your wedding ring finger slithers its way down her/up his... and your knee rubs up to her/his....

That's not you or I! Is it? Those suave, rounded characters are it. THEM. So, what we have now is tone.

Tell you how, after I preach at my daughter.

"When we get to Glendive, I don't want you gassing up at one of those stations which sell booze. I mean it, I never want you patronizing one. That's why I was jailed. I was paid and nearly out the door, when I grabbed this six-pack of Old Milwaukee (don't remember opening the cooler door) and sneaked it back to the cashier -- why, she treated it like a six quarts of oil purchase! That was in Sturgis, and all the way past Rapids, with six barrels of that six-pack loaded and aimed at my head, I screamed, 'Don't take your guns to town, Bill,' until, finally, I couldn't take beer being that close to me without guzzling it, so I pulled Olds off the exit at Box Elder, shut her down, tucked myself under my sleeping bag, went to it and landed in jail," I tell my daughter.

"Uh-uh, I won't," she promises.

Back to telling you. Ever been loosed from jail with 0.10 hours of scud between your ears? That's how it is with me, and, since what little is left there of me is unrelated to character, I therefore am not capable through my own volition of acting out a plausible plot for a coherent tale of the remainder of my life. Why, without Daughter driving, I wouldn't make it home. I don't know which direction is which, let alone a bobcat from a Bobcat. Say, I haven't an inkling of what tone is, except that maybe it has something to do with the social atmosphere of a nation -- this is good, that is evil, until that wind ups and changes -- yet, I hoof off about tone at the

mouth with exclamation marks at the ends of my convoluted diatribes: that's how badly I smooshed my hemispheres and shattered my molars in Pennington County Jail.

This here is a major crisis. I no longer have the capacity for meaningful existence, what's left? One antagonistic question, huh?, for a body which is strapped by virtue of its neck to a 0.10 brain. The bobcat which sticky-gooed his cage was better off than I; at least, he didn't have one marble left with which to bemoan his wretched condition.

Well, I'll tell you! I don't need your rounded-Joe Near- tears. I've had my fill of your tone, your character, your plot. Go ahead, hang out your stinking TV signs -- sponsored by Aspirin, Bufferin, No-more Sufferin', Bud, Miller Lite, Drinkin' Right, Right Guard, Ban Roll-on, and Heavenly Pits -- that intone, "Say not to..." I've had it with your faggy half-hour comedies and their teenage mini-jokers hee-hawing parents' and adults' worn-out mores; stick your sociologists and psychologists who leech and teach and preach the cult of self-concept to the extent that egos needs be larger than gods in your ears. I say no to your hospitals which have spread more surreptitiously than the viruses they would cure. Wouldn't you, through the marvels of medicine, just love to live forever! You could wheelbarrow your sagging jowls everywhere you go and you could fulfill your psychologists' or sociologists' prayers for Super Human Selves and go on in this world and you wouldn't have the bother of rearing children, to carry forward the notion of human immortality.

Don't need your pity. Got that!

Don't want you solving my major crisis: the welfare you rounded Joes dish out is lower than pity. What you say is the down payment for the cookie crumb you foil-wrap for my welfare support is for me to give up rights to myself. I can't solve how to fend for myself, so you say, Turn yourself over, boy; let go, we'll tend to your knitting, we'll handle your life, don't you battle no more, don't bother your 0.10 head fretting over curing your 0.10 headaches...we've got computer technicians who pump drugs into the 0.90 part to dissolve the pus from your head battering, then we will rewire that clean, whole empty 0.90, so's you can watch TV.

Don't want your pity.

About your old alky problem. Nothing to it at Spirit-Free. Piffle. We are Professionals with degrees in this sort of unrounded behavior. First, let's free you of those stereotype loved ones. That way, you and they don't have to get Your Selves caught up in the others' nettles; don't want your wife and daughters becoming co-dependents (nobody takes on loved ones' burdens - - this is TODAY, 1988!!), we want them free to earn the \$500.00 it takes to make Your Self Best. Understand, we don't want the negative influences

from love giving you the downers; you know, when somebody loves you, they make it hell on your conscience for not living up to love's expectations; and then, loving ones, naturally you retaliate, demand that you all work together, joying and snarling in this all-out battle against your debilitated behavior. But Spirit-Free, us, we're not mixing ourselves in your liquor problem; we'll analyze and chart your progress in relearning to value (you supply the value, we supply the chart); we'll provide a group therapy room in which all of you can share the positive (just the positive, mind you) values-building climate that just-like-you's dredge up from their values sewers. Most of all, don't you think one bit, because we are degreed THINKERS: for YOU. What thinking on your own did: you thought you were drilling for water, but you ended up oiled.

This is tone and plot and rounded character.

How so? First, let's you snap your finger and my major crisis is resolved. That will guarantee plot movement, and, necessarily, my character will change and you will have a multi-dimensional protagonist (with 0.10 past and 0.90 of a now).

Snap!

Ahh. Relief.

You rounded parrot owners win. Remember your own tale? Well, I'm your parrot let out of your jail.

"SQUAWK!"

0.10 hours more, and this bobcat story would end. But, you always let your bird out too soon. What you're hearing now is the "Polly wants a cracker" ditty copied from you.

Thank God. I couldn't have taken any more plot and character and crisis twists and stops and reversals; the 0.10 left of would have strangled in the complexity of the web being spun. Now, all will be smooth, this thing can gradually tone itself out in an acceptable denouement, this insubstantial beginning to the rest of my life.

Okay. Listen, as your parrot wobbles about the outside of the cage in unpredictable, abstract geometrical patterns and, sometimes, with a tug of his beak pulls his idiosyncratic progress along. You comprehend the message, since it's straight from your mouth.

"Used to be," I tell Daughter. I pause, to control this set of jitters I have from being freshly unpenned from Pennington County Jail and also to quell those snapping, popping nerve spasms I have from not sipping one beer since May 19, 1988, 7:30 P.M. (close as I can remember). TODAY is May 21, 1988. A.L.D.

Daughter -- this woman who is and always will be in pigtails -- doesn't impatiently stamp her feet at my pause which lasts nearly a mile.

This eighteen-year-old is in control. Long ago, she learned to wait out every last set of jitters or crises that happened into our lives.

“Used to be things were free and easy. Like, when I wrote, I scribbled ‘The’ and words gushed out free and easy. Like a bobbling spring, like the curlicuing journey a brook carves through the meadow to the river, finally filling the seas. I didn’t need to know where my tales were headed, because language was my admiral -- I never fretted my head over it. Used to be.

“Used to be, I said, ‘Hi,’ to whomever stepped in my path. Because I yapped that greeting, that person naturally opened up to me. Hell, we were both disarmed, on simplest terms, and our camaraderie, our liaison with the human race was automatic.

“Used to be that way. With everything. Used to....”

For the next *X* miles, my jittering turns to silent sobbing. My daughter doesn’t interrupt, even though she is with me in this, because, you see, this stereotype in pigtails has been all the places -- and then some -- I’ve ventured during my life; she’s mothering me through my muck and mire.

“Used to be. No more. Now, I’ve got to know where the story ends, before I will ever write again. I have to know whom I’m going to talk to before I will talk. That’s what jail did to me...in jail is the first my spirit’s ever been jailed.

“Gaze across the prairie. Go on, do it, I can’t. I’m terrified, babbling scared of what I might see. Do that for *me*. Now, tell me what.”

The depth of the gentle brown of Daughter’s eyes! They save me from having to, jaw-squared, face the dazzling freedom of the North Dakota/Montana rolling, rolling plains -- I can’t take such bigness no more. The eyes absorb the head-on cruelty that would be dealt a gawking, rounded parrot by such vastness of unfettered freedom. Reflected from her pupils and irises is what I used to see, without having to shade my eyes or concentrate upon what I was seeing: the secret solitude and *Mystery* of the light blue haze which shrouds the distant Dawson County, Montana, hills; the majesty and completeness of the solitary gnarled cedar outlined boldly against the sun-rimmed horizon; the lust-filled thrill of a mating meadowlark pair popping from the prairie into the sky. Only through my daughter’s vision do I -- parrot -- glimpse the brinkness of infinity and find, being Parrot, that I want back into my cage.

“Jesus, I can’t take it. Stop the car. I’m walking. Stop!”

“Dad.”

“Do it. Stop! I’m not going home.”

“DAD! You stop. Enough. All the way home, I’ve listened. I’m tired of it. On and on and on. Sick of it. Don’t you just get tired of it? We’re going home. Home. When we get there, we can discuss it. So, just shut up!”

Another master heard from. I hadn’t any idea that her voice was so forceful, so wont to be mimicked...*shut up, shut up, shut up.*

I do, and listen to the clop-clop of the road and the tires. The signs come, one by one, at me, mile after mile. Through Beach, North Dakota, they come at me. Come for me. All those squares, rectangles, circles, diamonds taunt me. All the subtle, great agreements society has made, to make motoring safe on our highways, and I’m tranced enough a parrot to figure out why I was jailed, even if I wasn’t driving, had no intentions on driving when I was arrested; I don’t need beer-can signs with red slashes through them posted by the roadside to figure this out.

Down the road we fly, in silence. Boring as hell, and my girl asks what’s on my mind.

“Nothing.”

“Quite unlike you, Dad.”

Silence.

“Want to talk, Dad?”

“What’s to talk about?”

Another couple miles, across the Montana border. Drives me nuts, clop-clop.

“Mind turning it on?”

My daughter loooo-ks at me.

“The radio.”

She does, to classical music.

“1420. That news station.”

She duzzz.

“He was a good old boy. That’s how folks from Worthville, Ken --”

Well, I’m about to listen to accent like I’ve never listened before. I needs be get it exact, for when I parrot my story for my wife.



Polaris

Mitch Garbois

Don't go over the Victory Bridge. It's just a strip of flypaper fluttering in the breeze over the river, speckled with failure. Escape over it is as impossible as saying the name of the river it spans, Apalachicola. Their poison drugs get in your vocal cords and you sputter AppleAppleApple ORANGE, and they laugh at you; it's their Victory.

They named it to lure us, and I've been sorely tempted. I see myself running across it, my hair flying out behind me, the tears in the knees of my jeans opening like grins, and on the other side, I'm free, not just of the Hospital and the whole Mental Hell System, but free like on a hit of mescaline where every step is with God.

They called me into Texas Team. I heard one of the nigger-bitch-ward-staff yell out, "Dexter Troutman, Team wants you!" but I stopped using that name a long time ago. When I was a kid I liked it; fishing in rushing streams, I was Troutman. Then I became trout, man. Not me.

"DEXTER TROUTMAN!" I hear louder, like right in my ear, a big yell, "TEAM!"

My ears are not in the greatest shape, from all those years I spent touring giant arenas with my band, so I reach into my pocket and get some toilet paper, which I start to stuff in my ear. But before I can do that, the nigger bitch grabs my arm so hard it feels like she will crush it in her grip, and she yanks me out of my seat like a sportsman yanking a fish and lock-steps me to the windowless room at the end of the hall. I don't even say, "You're hurting me," or threaten to call Patient Abuse; that's more fly paper. I just yell, "APPLE APPLE APPLE ORANGE!!!" because I feel like yelling something and also I want to fool them into thinking that when I go, I'm heading for the Victory Bridge.

They tell the patients that this thing is 'Treatment Team,' but I know better. They had me sign some papers. Don't worry. Instead of Dexter Troutman, I signed Doctor Fishbreath. I signed it messy, so they didn't realize I'd escaped compliance. Before I signed I looked at those papers very carefully, or at least pretended to. The poison drugs make my vision blurry, so I can't read much anymore, though I used to be a great reader. But I did see that at the top of the paper, in big letters, it said Tx TEAM. That's why they seemed so nervous to have me sign; they didn't want me to find out their true identity.

But why? Why did they bring these Texans to Florida to pose as Mental Hell Professionals? I wouldn't talk to them until I'd figured it out.

"Uncooperative," they said.

“Perseveres in returning to autistic behaviors,” said another, writing in my chart.

“RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!” I screamed, but didn’t make it out the door. The nigger-bitch-robot was on me. But it gained me the time I needed. In the Seclusion Room, sitting in my modified full lotus, a gate opened, like a gate on the dam at the head of the AppleApple, and memories gushed out. It was simple. Texans were mean, they had road gangs, they stretched their state so you could never get out of it, never escape, like you could never escape from here.

I had a sinking feeling, sinking into blackness, the blackness of their poison drugs, where you pitch into the void and your skin bucks and crawls, and your brain chafes hard.

I lunged at the steel door, slammed myself into it. I put my face up to the window and screamed, “APPLE APPLE APPLE ORANGE!!!”

The nigger bitches looked up from where they say gossiping in the chart room; they could hear me. One of them flipped on the intercom so that I could hear them. “Apple apple banana, your ass,” she said.

A psychologist said, “Have you ever thought that maybe he’s just telling us that he needs fresh fruit?” They ignored her as if she wasn’t there.

The thing about the Texas Team is that most of them don’t look like Texans. They don’t have the hats and boots, or talk with drawls. Only the social worker looks like a Texan; he wears his hair pasted down on his forehead. You have to watch them very carefully to know that they’re Texans. The Senior Psychologist disguises himself as a New York Jew. The Activities Director is an empty billboard. And then there’s the psychiatrist. It was very clever to get someone like her for the Texas Team. She is Vietnamese. They told me her name but I couldn’t grasp it; was she really called Doctor Tuna Fish, or were they working on me, a Troutman?

Dr. Tuna Fish’s English is indecipherable. I feel sorry for her because of her history. She’s famous; you’ve seen her picture. She’s the naked eight-year-old Vietnamese girl running down the road on fire, napalm on her back.

She’s a saint. Despite what we did to her, she’s come to help me. She’s also a prisoner of the Texas Team. Her discomfort is palpable. And no matter how much her relatives scrub her, as she sits hunched over in the metal tub, the napalm will never come entirely off. A jellied gasoline residue remains, a mild burning like an allergic rash, threatening to combust her clothes. Like a campfire smoldering, it can ignite at any time. In her little office, she drinks medicinal tea, and speaks to me in a secret code. I like her; she does not threaten or accuse me. The rest of the Texas Team look at her with impatience and disgust; she has not climbed onto their misanthropic

bandwagon. The words in her speech are short, little telegraphic tickles; I like them. I can dance with them, with her. Her system was shocked, her back charred, her breasts arrested. Her eyes know about the river, fly paper. She crossed, and that gave her power, pulsing within her thin frame, against her fragile skin, hardly enough sac to contain it. Power radiates from her, and envelopes me, within my prison.

The members of the Texas Team are looking at me like I'm a palmetto bug, a big cockroach. I slump down in my chair, spread my legs, look down at baggy green state-issue chinos. I think about putting my hand down my pants, just to show them that I always have access to pleasure. But then I think, "No, they'll add Mellaril on top of the Prolixin to make me impotent, and even if I cheek it, like I did before, they have ways to force you if they want to. They call it a side effect, but clearly, it's a front effect. And an affront. Kiss my ass, Texas Team; I'm the lone star!"

Dr. Tuna Fish says something. It takes a moment or two for it to register that she has said, "You're a great hero, sure to be victorious," like a message in a fortune cookie.

Thank you, Doctor. I see that you are on my side, that you too are trying to throw them off the track, off the scent. I go north, they go west, noses to the ground, confused dogs.

I look at the members of the Texas Team, making eye contact with each one, holding the eye contact, going all the way around the table. Then I say, "Where are your horses?" just to let them know that I know.

"Look, Troutman," says the New York Jew. His office is filled with travel magazines. On the side of his desk is a button he can push to summon the posse. He told me he fucked fourteen-year-old prostitutes in pre-Fidel Cuba, but now he's pot-bellied, not so tough.

"Troutman, Troutman, Troutman," he sighs.

"I know you," I say. "You're a failed guidance counselor from Brooklyn. You fondled little girls and had to flee. I saw you at the Greyhound Station, a battered carpetbag in your hand."

"Troutman," he says, "let me review this, and you tell me if it's accurate. Clydell Wheatworth goes to town for you. He brings you back Desetin Cream and a box of Luvs. You rub the Desetin on your scalp and put the diaper on your head, the tapes fastened to your cheeks. Is this accurate, or no? Why are you doing this, Troutman?"

"Names not Troutman, Tex," I say. "They call me Baby Driver. I got road rash, I got black toe-nails, but most of all I got a brain all chafed up from your damn Prolixin."

I'm in Dr. Tuna Fish's office. Nurse Angie's in there with her, writing notes in patients' charts. She says, "No prolixin shot today, Dexter,"

just to smooth me, but I know how to count days too, and I don't need smoothing.

The doctor says something. I let the words filter into my brain until I understand that she's said, "Lat's take a trip to Mount Rushmore."

"Yes," I reply, "there's something appealing about faces carved in rock."

I've overheard some of the nurses talking. Nurse Angie said, "I know it's hard to get American psychiatrists to work in the state hospitals anymore, but how do they expect the patients to understand her?"

Relax, Nurse Angie, if they'd let me I'd spend all day with the good Doctor. A few sentences back and forth, and then I find the groove. I understand her perfectly, not her words, but the meanings hidden behind them. Dr. Tuna Fish enjoys my company as well. Our pleasant intercourse helps her forget about the past, her burned village, her ravaged family, her combustible skin.

"Yes," I reply, "the Everglades. What do you think the mosquitoes will be like this time of year?"

I look down at my sneakers, black canvas on white rubber, cheap state versions of the Keds I had in school. In junior high, in blue ball point pen, I wrote my name along the rubber, with power phrases like "Boss," "Chop," and "Surf." Now, in black ball point, I've written, on the inside and outside rubber of each shoe, just one word: VICTORY. My entire strategy is to mislead them. When finally they discover my absence, one of them (probably Nurse Angie, that observant reporter) will remember all the little hints I've left littered around this ward. She'll say, "I'll bet he's gone to the Victory Bridge; remember his shoes?" By that time I'll be well on my way north to Georgia. I know just the little dirt road to take, over by the Forensic Unit. It goes through the woods to a little fish camp, then goes on, who knows how deep into the state. They'll go west, the sun in their eyes, while I follow Polaris, the polestar.

I look up from the Victory on my shoe, realizing that Dr. Tuna Fish has been talking and I haven't been listening. Dr. Tuna's eyes are wild; her mouth is working like she's got a fish bone caught in her throat. Then I see that her back has reignited; blue flames, like propane or kerosene flames, are boiling up onto her shoulders. I know what to do. I jump up and slide over the top on the desk, knocking patient charts and stray papers off, and grab her. I am going to smother the flames with my own body. I am going to absorb the residual napalm, I am going to expunge the pain of her past, I am going to obliterate our sins, and then we will go off to carve faces in the rich muck of the Everglades, faces that get erased as quickly as a child's footprint in the sand, to our mutual delight.

But then the mental-hell-robot-niggers are swarming into the room, like black ants on a rotting stump, and they have grabbed me and pulled me from the room.

Dr. Tuna Fish burns. The blue flames lick her with the love a parasite for its host. She's a maiden, naked to the forest, chased by a noble on horseback and his dogs. As I'm thrown on the cot in the danger box, they leap on her back and begin tearing her flesh.

Nurse Angie comes in with a hypodermic. "You do get a shot today," she says pleasantly.

I look at my fingertips and see blue liquid fire. I tried to save Dr. Tuna Fish from her burning anguish. The fire flared up, copter blades beat, a water buffalo let out a mighty bellow, and the Robots were on me like Cong in black silk pajamas, steaming from underground caverns.

The needle goes deep into my rump, deeper and deeper, exploring, laying a roadway. I've become a continent, Texas, endless ever expanding, drier than sand, unable to speak.

My fingertips sizzle with an almost inaudible hiss, and there's nothing else I can do. I extend my arms to touch the walls of my cell, The blue flames race down, across my chest, once muscular, now flat and bony, bones sticking out where they don't belong, displaced and rearranged by the psychoactive poisons, Then the walls catch, and before long the entire room is aflame, and I'm in the center of a conflagration.

I'm doing this for you, Dr. Tuna Fish, because of all you've done for me, because of all the horror in your life, because I would have gone to Nam too, if they'd made me. I still carry the magic 4-F; it means: For Florida. I'm going to shred it when I cross the Georgia line, throw the pieces high in the air, a confetti storm to sweep over the dam, falling into the AppleApple River, to float under the Victory Bridge like rose petals cast by a lover in a kimono, for them to see.

They'll point and say, "We must be on the right path."

They'll be west, I'll be north, lying contentedly in a ditch, eating boiled peanuts, the insects screaming like power lines, blue fire sizzling along the red clay as Dr. Tuna Fish approaches in the night. We will make love in orange ointment, crawdads scuttling out of the way, running down the culvert in the wake of our transcendence, lightning in the sky like varicose veins.

Her molten blue flesh, immersed in the ooze, hisses like serpents, while around us an orchestra, numerous an entire race, bang blocks together, nodding and smiling, deafening us.

A Brief Vacation

Kevin Phelan and Bill U'Ren

You should probably know, first off, that the French Toast Combo at Mother's is a pretty severe order. If you ask for it, you're looking at a commitment of no less than an hour.

First, you get the orange juice. No substitutions. Hey, that's just how it is at Mother's.

Second, a side of hash browns. Smothered, covered, down and dirty.

Third, corn. It doesn't go, but they give it to you with everything. That's their trademark. "You'd like some coffee? Okay, here's your corn."

Fourth, eggs. A pair. Call'em how you want'em.

And it goes on. Needless to say, you get some French Toast and a whole lot more.

\$3.45. A good price.

We ran into him just after his castration. He was still working at the beachside Mother's, the one with the greenhouse window.

Having driven all night from our house in Fuentes, Utah, we were more in the mood for the Combo than Jon's stories of his not so recent fame and the procedural techniques of castration.

"It's actually very simple," he began. "You'd be surprised."

We tried to feign interest, non-verbally, of course.

"What they do is take your dick, right?" Right.

"And they slit it down the side. Then they chop the balls and invert it. Like inside out and backwards, y'know."

"Really?" We both said, not sure if he meant castration or sex change, or even if there was a difference.

"Yeah. That, of course, is like a very simplistic explanation. But you get the picture."

"I think we do." I think we added.

One day I saw a piece on Fuentes in a Utah travel brochure. A busboy at Mother's had left it on my table with the morning paper.

"Fuentes: Get Away From It All."

When our landlord posted the eviction notice, it seemed like an appropriate time to make the move.

We were staying with a guy from our old neighborhood, Clay. He had a new place now, in Santa Monica, on the sixth floor of the Sea Castle. It's the big blue building to the left of the pier.

Clay wasn't expecting us until after 7:00. He'd just signed on as a researcher for "The Dating Game" and had to start training immediately, twelve-hour days for the entire week.

Despite a long stop in Vegas, we were still nearly five hours early. I'd planned on spending the extra time asleep at the 4th Street Beach, not at Mother's listening to Jon, I wanted to look at least semi-decent for Marianne's funeral.

It's sort of funny, but not really surprising, how a place like LA can go on after you're gone. A "for rent" sign, and somebody takes your apartment. A help wanted ad and come other guy's got your job. You don't even have to leave, you can just accidentally sleep late, and already the city's passed you by.

Jon had fallen behind long ago, and it was a little late to talk him out of the chase.

Fuentes was good because the rent was cheap and you could get a lot for your money. A whole house there costs about as much as a studio here. Not that we've got tons of furniture or anything, it's just that we wanted some space for once. In LA, you pay to be in LA.

Of course, earning money in Fuentes is a little more difficult. Utah really isn't rich enough to support high income labor like limo service, taxi drivers, full-time waiters, or part-time performers. The place just can't afford the things that aren't entirely essential.

So basically, you have to make money the long way. Get a job that pays by the hour and work as many days as you can until you've saved the rent. Then quit.

Once I quit three jobs in one afternoon.

Before Jon was castrated, we were working for Murray & Son, a ticket outlet in Culver City. That's how we met him.

We were standing in front of The Forum when he walked up looking for a pair of seats courtside. Now since we weren't getting nearly as much as the other scalpers, we were constantly trying to squeeze extra bucks out of guys like Jon. It was the only way to make the drive out to the arena worth

it. Beside, both Murray and his son were assholes, so skimming the cash wasn't much of a moral dilemma.

On top of that, we'd camped out in line for two days to get these Lakers tickets, and since it was the playoffs, I was sort of thinking about seeing the game myself.

That was when Jon came up sweating, asking if I knew where he could get some seats. He had a real good looking girl with him, too -- good looking in that obvious-evening-dress-athletic sort of way. I could tell that if he didn't come up with something on the floor, something where you could see Magic up close, she'd be walking.

At first, I wasn't gonna bother haggling with the guy, I didn't care too much about his problem. But then he pulled out five \$100 bills and said "please."

You just can't make money like that in Fuentes. Although once Carlos Santana sold out the high school gym, and we cleared enough to pay the phone bill.

We were trying to figure out Marianne and her bottle of sleeping pills.

We hadn't talked to her in a little while, but it still didn't strike us as something she'd do. I mean of all the ways to kill yourself, you'd think she could've picked something more interesting, something less typical. More than a hundred people must do that every day in Los Angeles.

LA is an easy place to hate, until you leave. You want to get out, and you say you can't stand it anymore, but then when you leave it's the little things that get you.

The late movie in Fuentes always began at 7:45. If there was a midnight show of *The Rocky Horror*, it would start at 9:30.

Not really important, probably even to trivial to mention, but it can still get you.

Somewhere after the hash browns and before the grits, I got the courage to ask Jon why he'd done it. If he was surprised, it was only because he thought we should've already known.

"For the money. The SC Med Center paid me a lot -- twenty eight hundred and sixty five dollars."

We both nodded, as if we had some background in this area and know that \$2865 was a good price. I thought about adding, "I know for a fact that guys in Utah are getting no more than nine- fifty." But I didn't.

Having been gone so long, we'd both forgotten that things like this really did happen, it was no big deal. Rent in LA is expensive.

"And I get free vibrators," Jon added as he dropped off the side of bacon. "Testing them is part of the study."

"That's pretty good," I hoped I didn't say.

"How long do you have to do these tests?" A safe question.

"The first six weeks are mandatory. Then for everything else, I get \$12 an hour."

"Oh."

"Pretty easy money," was what I was hoping he hadn't said after that.

I was playing skee-ball on the pier when Donna walked up. She was my old boss over at Romey T's.

"Romey T's 4 Fish."

Donna was wearing a new bathing suit and she'd just been waxed. She'd also had a couple inches added to her bustline. I didn't really notice any of this, though, until she told me.

For some reason, I still had a picture of Jon and Fionnula in my wallet. It was taken in Venice across from the Rose Cafe. She's standing there in this red dress and he's behind his favorite pair of dark sunglasses. They both look sort of happy.

When I was younger, and Jon was famous, I used to keep the picture opposite my driver's license so people could see it when they checked my ID. Now, it's sort of stuffed behind my Chevron card.

Fionnula, I guess you could say, got in a car crash. I mean, statistically, that's how she was ranked that year -- "Motor Vehicle Fatality." It's sort of a misleading figure, though. When Fionnula died, it wasn't what you'd call a typical accident.

She and Jon had been vacationing on his boat in Newport Harbor around Christmas. They did that a lot. She said it was the best way to escape "the bitter cold Los Angeles winter." Thinking about it now though, I can't say I ever remember it being any warmer there than it was downtown. If anything, the place always seemed colder.

It was weird that none of us were too surprised when Tim Dickson's car skidded out of control that day at the Orange County Raceway. Fionnula

was crushed instantly as it flipped over the barrier and onto her lap. Jon had been standing in line at the concession stand waiting to get some root beers.

A friend of Clay's stopped by after work to see if anyone wanted to go out to Westwood for a movie. It turned out that she and Jon knew each other from the research place. Carlotta was her name, I think.

She was working on her Ph.D in some psychiatry field I'd never heard of. Right off, she asked Jon how he was feeling. We thought this was kind of strange, in front of all of us. Just out of nowhere. Jon was caught off-guard, too.

"Feeling pretty good."

It was a closed casket funeral, which was a good thing. And it was quick. I've never understood the point of open-casket funerals. You try to remember the person the way you want, but then all you can see is this pale, lifeless body, asleep in some cold church.

Jon had started off acting in a daytime soap opera, which he somehow parlayed into a big budget drama and eventually into a talk show spot against Carson. That, of course, failed. But he was big for a long time. Almost two seasons.

After the show got canceled he decided to take some time off with a little trip to Bermuda. When he got back, there was no work for him anywhere.

Six months, 3 girlfriends, and 4 agents later, he finally signed on to host the daytime version of "Tic Tac Dough."

It was two days before the debut taping when Fionnula was killed. After that, I guess he was unable to develop the appropriate game show host attitude.

Donna said that I was wrong about the sleeping pills. We were sitting at one of the picnic tables next to the Camera Obscura. She said I didn't know what I was talking about.

"That's got to be one of the worst ways to die. It just takes so damn long." I was willing to take her word for it, but she wanted to explain in detail.

"Your stomach starts to feel really sick because you've thrown all these pills down at once. You want to stick your finger down your throat, but you can't because you're supposed to be killing yourself.

“Then your legs get real numb,” Donna continued. “And there’s shit everywhere, and you’re awake the whole time. I mean, you can’t just fall asleep and wait for it to happen.”

I tried to imagine Marianne doing this, running around the apartment trying not to throw up, trying to die.

“It’s horrible. You really have to want to do it if you’re gonna make it through.”

There was a long silence after that, and for some reason I thought about asking Donna if she wanted to go ride the bumper cars.

“I gave up and got my stomach pumped.” She said.

I remember one time when Marianne was staying with us, I think it was Labor Day. We were living in a studio below the 405 offramp, next to a Builder’s Emporium.

The three of us were sitting on the floor, in the dark, talking about food stamps and unemployment checks. Our six months were up, and our electricity had just been cut. The phone and gas were set to go in another couple of days, and we were all pretty hungry.

Marianne stood up and said, “Looks like I’m gonna have to do something about this.”

Business was hitting the usual afternoon lag, so Jon brought over some more coffee and sat down. The whole time we’d been in there eating, no one recognized him.

Every time before, every day, at least somebody would spot him. Housewives, winos, whoever, I just remember that it used to happen at least once a day. Sometimes they’d ask for an autograph and sometimes they’d just laugh.

I realized that it was Marianne who had actually talked us into moving to LA in the first place. I don’t really think of her in that way, though, not as a person from LA. But then I guess she was the one who showed us around the city, helped us find an apartment, and got us both jobs.

Before we left, we tried to talk her into moving to Fuentes with us. I remember being fairly adamant about it. “Utah is the place of the future. No traffic, no smog, no crowds!” Sure I was quoting the brochure, but I meant it. “I’m serious,” I finally added, standing on a chair for emphasis.

Alright, maybe I was more drunk than serious, but I did want her to go with us, we both did.

I had come close to suicide once, ten years ago. Now though, I'm fairly certain it won't happen again. I made a deal with myself -- It's simple, if things ever got that bad, I'd just move and start all over.

I tried to explain the idea to Clay one night, but he never really understood it. "What're you saying? You'd like give up your place on the Westside and move to the Valley, or something?"

I explained it to Jon another time. We were getting shakes at the new Johnny Rocket's, and he was still stuck on Fionnula's death. He knew what I was saying, but he wasn't buying. "Whatever works for you, man."

I guess the only one who thought it wasn't such a bad idea was Marianne.

When the funeral was over, we went to Marianne's mother's house for lunch and more than a few drinks. Jon didn't show up, he couldn't get off work. But for some reason, he was the one on our minds.

How had he gotten there, castrated and working for 3 plus tips at Mother's?

Maybe it almost made sense, if you looked at it logically. Jon needed to live in LA. He always had to have something going on, bad or good, it didn't matter. The status quo was the only thing he feared.

But I didn't want to look at it logically. It would've been pointless and depressing. Better just sit here, a little shocked at how things have changed.

After the after-funeral party, Clay invited everyone to a taping of "The Dating Game." We continued drinking in some parking lot off of Hollywood Blvd. and then walked over to the studio.

All of us got seats down in front, behind camera 3. We settled in for two good hours of entertainment -- "The Dating Game" taped a whole week's worth of shows all in one night.

On the way home, we stopped for another beer. One glass turned into a couple pitchers each, and it wasn't long before we were all stumbling across the parking lot and through the PCH tunnel. It was dark, but I could still see that the walls were covered with graffiti. I read some of it out loud.

"Leticia y Luis forever"

"Go Raiders"

"The Lord watches over the Eastside Legendary Lovers"

It wasn't until we were at the water that I realized how much I wanted to swim. Nobody talked me out of the idea, as usual. In fact, they all offered to join in.

It was a warm night and the water felt good, even the salt in my mouth and the seaweed around my feet.

When we quit at the ticket agency, we talked Murray's son into hiring Marianne. Murray was letting him open up his own franchise in Reseda, so he said it would be no big deal, he had lots of positions available.

At the funeral, somebody said she'd only lasted there for a few weeks.

The next day, we slept in till around 3 when Clay woke us up with a Doors triple threat set on KLOS.

“You know the day destroys the night,
Night divides the day
Try to run, try to hide,
Break on through to the other side...”

We took off for a late breakfast with our last five bucks and headed towards the Apple Pan. The place is run by ex-cons, so you can get a lot for your money. The only problem is that it's hard to relax while you're eating. There's less than 20 seats in the place, so people just line up behind your chair, waiting for you to finish. The ex-cons won't serve anyone who's not at the counter.

On the way home, we talked about our situation, and our lack of finances. It was sort of clear. We needed to get some cash together and get back out to Fuentes. Maybe before it was too late. For some reason though, we weren't exactly falling all over each other to do it.

The UCLA job board didn't have the kind of jobs we wanted, or were even qualified for. Blueprinter, assistant secretary to the vice president, short order cook, marketing intern, cardiology nurse, part-time bookkeeper, word processor.

What we needed was an easy job that paid on the spot -- something that required no training and was immediately available. Jon offered to help us search, but we graciously declined.

A one-bedroom in the Sea Castle is a great place, but only for one. So Clay was asking around, too.

We'd stayed with him for almost two weeks, and I think out welcome was running a bit thin. Fortunately though, our visit had coincided with the May sweeps and ABC's decision to pick up "The Dating Game" for a pre-prime time slot.

Carlotta, the psychiatric Ph.D. friend of Clay's, came up with the winner. Sperm donation. All we had to do was pass a few blood tests and we could be on our way.

Three shots a week for 150 bucks, plus free lunch.

The doctor said that LA was the number one market for sperm donation. That didn't surprise either of us. To the guys in the waiting room it seemed like no big deal, they've been selling it for years. Paying for food with sperm, paying for drinks with sperm, paying for rent with sperm.

The longer you stayed, the longer you'd have to do something like that. Maybe we could use it to get out. That seemed reasonable.

A woman dressed like a nurse handed each of us a plastic container and pointer toward the two doors. I walked in and found what was pretty much a conventional bathroom -- toilet, sink, towel rack, and mirror. The back of the door was decorated by a large calendar, fastened to an old Dixie cup dispenser. A woman stood there in a red bikini holding a carburetor.

I unzipped my pants, cleaned off the toilet seat, and sat down. Right across from me was a hand-lettered sign saying, "please wash up before leaving." I looked down at my new tanline and then decided to undress completely.

It was a weird thing, but I thought about the seaside, and my father. He and Jon were both there, watching over me and my sand castle. Jon took the bucket and got some water for the moat. "That's good. Every castle needs a moat," my father said.

There was a knock on the door and I sat there silent. Another knock followed. "There are some magazines under the sink." Apparently I was taking a bit too long.

Every nude magazine you could possibly want was there below the two faucets, all the imaginable fetishes were covered. I started looking through some of them. Two women, three women, four women, five women, six women.

I left my plastic cup on the counter.

Afterwards, we were walking back down the hall, and I remembered the drive out here for some reason. There was one specific scene I kept seeing -- both of us in the car, eating cheeseburgers and cokes. It was around 4 a.m. and we were pulling out of the Circus Circus parking lot in Vegas, a place I've always considered the last stop on the way to or from LA. Driving out along 15 West from Utah, things can get pretty barren and lonely. There's really nothing there, and I guess if you think about it, maybe it's better that way.

Before we left, I stopped in the cafeteria and I spent my last three quarters on a fudgesicle at the vending machines. I saw some of the guys from the clinic across the room in the "Employees Only" line. It looked like they all had the same thing, green salad, tomato juice, soft-boiled egg, and a steak sandwich.

The nurse at the reception desk didn't even look up from her magazine as we walked right past her and out the front door.

Better off Dead

C.J. Marcy

When you grow up in a small suburb, people die. They're not actually dead, but as far as you're concerned they are. The reason for their deaths is that they disappear from your life and you don't see them for years. The scary part is when you're least expecting it they reappear. There is a place, The Tavern, where these spirits are exorcised.

Even though it's the only bar in town, the Tavern is not a place you want to go if underage. The cops watch it too closely. Anyway, it's a bigger thrill to see these ghosts as adults. By that time they have direction in their life, or have gotten lost between high school and now. They have a career or desperately lack one. They are either successful, or just can't seem to make it.

"That's him, man," Tony was sure.

"No way, man, I haven't seen him since eighty-one," John replied.

"Let's say hi."

"Are you kidding, no way."

Through the smoky haze John and Tony were watching their old friend Joe Padula. It was way back in third grade when Joe, Tony, and John would smoke cigarettes in Tony's backyard. Joe would supply the cigarettes by stealing them from the supermarket. Joe would quickly snag the True menthols after school and meet them at Tony's house.

"What would we say to him?" John asked.

"We'll just say hi and see if he remembers us," Tony answered.

Tony's backyard was enormous. It was a large, well groomed lawn, but also had overgrown bushes, trees, and weeds toward the back property line. By crawling under a maze of entangled bushes it was possible to reach an open space, a haven, in which they would smoke their cigs well away from the house. The first time they smoked they sat in the mud, but as time went by they brought things to sit on, things to eat, and once even brought a transistor radio. The radio had to be scrapped because it attracted Tony's little sisters.

"After this beer we'll go say hi, o.k.," Tony begged.

"Maybe."

Tennessee was playing Alabama for a bid to the NCAA tournament. Joe was sitting at the bar, alone, drinking a Linenkuegel. He wore a blue shirt buttoned to the top with a bolo dangling from his neck: he had on acid washed jeans and pair of snake skin boots. He watched the game intently as he drank his beer.

“Dude, that guy went crazy remember,” John recalled.

“I know, that’s why it would be so cool to say hi to him.”

“No way, he probably won’t want to talk to us.”

Joe and another delinquent by the name of Danny Grimsley were smoking dope in Joe’s basement in fifth grade. Some how they started his house on fire and burnt it to the ground. Joe’s dog was killed in the blaze. They got out, but as the fire ripped through the house he could hear his dog barking as it was engulfed by the smoke and flames. Joe was enraged that his dog, who was truly his best friend, had been taken from him. At the same time he had no one to blame but himself for the loss of his dog and wavered between feelings of anger and guilt.

After that happened he and Danny, who had been a documented psycho in the past, began a reign of terror. They began tormenting his sister Laura as well as small animals. It was said that they once took a cat, buried it up to its neck in the ground, and ran over its head with a lawn mower.

Their reign of terror ended one early spring day. It was the first day of the year warm enough for them to play outside. They had a whole winter of cabin fever stored up when Danny took out his fathers handgun. They were shooting at birds, tin cans, and an assortment of other things in his backyard. Danny’s little sister, Laura, rocketed out of the house and told them to put the gun back or she’d tell. Danny, in response, turned to Joe and whispered, “Watch this, man,” then fired three times. The first shot exploded her left shoulder as she dropped to the ground. The second shot sailed over her head and lodged into the side of the garage. He ran up to Laura as she wailed away with blood flowing out of her. Kneeling down, he put the barrel to her head, and pulled the trigger.

Joe had no reaction, he just stood there frozen by what he had just seen. Danny acted as nothing had happened and returned to picking off squirrels. Joe stared at the bloody mess that was once Laura until they were found.

“I heard he got put in a psychiatric hospital for three years and then was stuck in a Juvie home,” John said.

“Man, I wonder how that Grimsley kid is doing.”

“You would.”

“I bet Joe knows.”

The jukebox was pumping out an old Aerosmith tune while people were grouped at tables, stood socializing by the dart boards, or played the bowling machine. Joe sat on his bar stool with a sullen look on his face. It was as if he didn't want to be at the bar. It was like he came to the bar trying, but failing, to rejoin society.

“I'm gonna go say hi,” Tony threatened.

“O.K., John gave up, “but you lead the way.”

They settled their tab, grabbed their coats, and walked toward their old buddy. Tony's and John's senses were slowed by the beer and made the walk to Joe seem longer than it really was. They walked through the mass of people smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. Tony was getting nervous and couldn't think of an opening line to begin with Joe. At the last moment he had a change of heart and ducked out into the parking lot followed by John. This was one ghost better off dead.



"SCOTT"

Karla Tulora