



MS S



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CONTENTS

Arthur, Arthur (Prose Contest, First Prize).....	edward l. williams, III	4
For Steven	Antonio Criscimagna	19
*Still Sorrow	Rachel Ballard	20
*In Defense of the Dreamer.....	Jo Ann Lawrence	22
Linen	Antonio Criscimagna	23
The Dance (Poetry Contest, Honorable Mention)....	Antonio Criscimagna	24
Oedipus Inc. (Poetry Contest, Honorable Mention)....	Antonio Criscimagna	25
The Room	Elisabeth Harter	26
*Experiment No. XIV	David Scott	26
Mr. Sweet	Kathy Prochazka	27
<i>In Memoriam</i> —1962-63	Martha Moldt	28
Cadence at Dusk	edward l. williams, III	28
<i>wasting away</i>	Dan Brewer	30
The Old Man	Ruth Beyer	31
*On Hoarding Things	Elizabeth Tindall	33
Applause	Antonio Criscimagna	34
3 A.M.	edward l. williams, III	35
Satisfaction	Antonio Criscimagna	38
*The Essence of the Theater	Candy Haas	38
*Insanity	Gary Russell	40
Random Thoughts	John Weber	40
You Have Him At Last, 1971 A.D.	edward l. williams, III	42
Blissburg Memories	David Paul Allen	43

* Freshman Writing.

ARTHUR, ARTHUR

by edward l. williams, III

Part I

She turned her face from the strands of sunlight that filtered through the window and fell upon the bed. Her hair lay across the pillow like an open fan, and the curtain beside her was swaying in air of the vent. The frost against the window was slowly receding, inching its way back to the perimeters of the glass. She remembered sliding back herself, slipping away from and out of the circumstances of that summer of '68.

She had pointed her life in certain directions, had gone so far as to give it boundaries, had planned and schemed, all with the sole intention of attaining happiness. But the truths she had made for herself fell apart that summer. The boundaries broke, and the security she had planned so absolutely dissolved before her eyes. But that had been nearly two years ago, and though she had not forgotten, she had certainly tried. The efforts had led each, one by one, almost inevitably to this hour. Now she lay beneath the weight of blankets, trembling like a child that has just come in from the rain. It seemed irrelevant, somewhat ridiculous in an odd way, but she wondered what they had done with the note, she wondered what their reaction had been, and she wondered why she had failed.

She thought of Arthur as she always did and of James whom she seldom remembered. They had both played important roles in the debacle of that haunting summer; Arthur through the telegram that told of his suicide; and James through the chaos that ended in divorce.

She remembered locking herself in the room and refusing to see anyone after she had been told of Arthur's death. She remembered it distinctly, as if it had happened only yesterday. She remembered weeping the night away and refusing to see anyone, even Mother. She remembered especially the vague sense of comfort she had felt in hearing the older lady's pleas and the fists against the door. She remembered finding, somewhere in the solitude of that night, a secret satisfaction. She had locked the door. She had denied herself to others. She had reached deep within herself and struck back. She had felt the pain, had become imbued in it, almost to the point that it resembled joy. There were occasions, many times afterward, when the two feelings became inseparable. They had merged into one

somewhere in the night. They had merged the morning after. They were one when she stalked down from the room and entered the kitchen, asking matter-of-factly, in a distant, stoical voice:

"Do you want breakfast?"

Part 2

She had married James in '66 and taken a job as clerk in a small office. Between the times of their marriage and the divorce, their relationship, for the most part, seemed either strained or distant. Still, the marriage might have continued indefinitely had Arthur not shot himself in the spring of '68, because neither of them had the strength or the will to terminate it. They had grown used to one another in a rather somnolent way. It was just that somnolence, that gradual hypnotism brought about by the pages of his books and the hours of her job, that bridged the gap between their differences and held them together. It served as a sort of go-between.

There was no intensity of feeling and no particular happiness between them, but there was security, and there was comfort, and there was the matter of habit. And that had been a bridge.

She thought of those days, lying there beneath the blankets and watching the frost on the windows. She remembered sitting across the room knitting or reading novels while he studied. She saw the desk littered with papers and books and pamphlets. She saw James sprawled across it, tinted by the light of the lamp. She saw the cloud of cigarette smoke hanging in the sallowness of light; and he seemed older, mellowed, more paternal than he really was while sitting there. The fluid haze of smoke and light blurred his features and lightened his hair. It gave her the impression of a dream, it seemed so soft. Before her eyes closed, she longed to go to the image and make it real. She wanted desperately to give it essence, to have it there before her, tangible. But it was the kind of longing that is filled with despair. And the desire roared inside her with the despair until she felt it was unbearable.

He sat at the desk in sweater and slacks, and she sat in the rocker, wearing a robe loosely. The desk was littered as it always was, books and papers and medical reports stacked one above the other; and she was thinking to herself almost in a whisper:

"It must have happened like this. It must have been like this."

He happened to pause and noticed that her eyes were watching



him. His mouth broke into a smile, and his voice was comfortable and soft when he spoke:

"What are you thinking?"

He had started a fire earlier in the evening, and the flames were casting shadows across the room. She enjoyed the warmth, felt secretly drawn to it in a strange way. She felt herself burning with them, felt the passion rising inside her and burning to touch. Her wide eyes started from the hearth, and inside she was saying, "That it must have happened in this manner." But when she answered her husband, she said:

"What are *you* thinking?"

"I asked you first."

"Well then, answer me first. What were you thinking?"

"Something to the effect that I could use a break."

"Oh, that serious! Do you want some coffee?"

"No." And again his voice reached out and soothed her, stretched across the room and touched her, settled on her lips.

"Tea?"

"No."

"Then, how about a drink?"

"No. Not while I'm studying."

"Well I can't think of anything else to offer," she shrugged.

"Then you're not thinking very hard."

She knew that he could tell what effect his voice was having on her. She knew that he could see the flushed, excited look her eyes betrayed, and her blood pulsed in time to the rhythm of the fire.

"I suppose I'm not."

"Come here, then."

Her eyes froze, her hands clutched at the yarn and the needle. She didn't want this.

"Who?" coy and sarcastic in a fabricated, womanly way.

"Stop your stalling, Janis, and come here."

"Why?" her voice sounding distant, cracking with the fire, aching in the flames.

"And stop being so naive."

"It must have been like that!"

"Now come here so I can see what's . . ." and his voice broke into pantomime, the flames and the shadows washing away the words. The yarn rolled from her hands like a ball a child would roll across the floor. She smiled weakly, afraid that his eyes would read the fear in her face, trembled, and rose from the chair feeling trapped.

Part 3

She didn't know how long she had slept or what time it was when she woke. The frost had disappeared, and the room was bright with rays of sunlight falling across the furniture, so she guessed it must be afternoon. There were voices issuing from somewhere in the room, but she was too weak to make them out distinctly. Gradually they came alive, and she managed to discern the ending of the conversation before the closing of the door shut them out again.

". . . that she'll be fine now, at least physically. God only knows what's on her mind, and I can't be of much help there. As far as I know, Dr. Gilbert is as good a—, well, a—, I'd suggest him over anyone else I know. But there's no need for me unless something drastic happens, which I doubt will. If she asks for anything else, try to pacify her. There'll be scars of course, we can't help that, but . . ." which must be the doctor, she thought.

". . . never get used to it, though. It just seems one thing after

another. Sometimes I wish I'd never met him," which must be mother, and the reference was obviously to Arthur.

" . . . certainly can't blame yourself for anything. Not this either. I've known you a long time, Ann; and I can't say that I've ever met a finer woman."

"Oh, I don't blame myself. But, still, I feel responsible in an odd way. She's so much like her father. She was distant, she was difficult to raise. She loved him very much."

"I'm sure that she did. It's been hard on you."

"That night that Arthur died, she locked herself up and wouldn't see anyone. And when morning came, I don't know—it was—like, like nothing had happened. She never mentioned him, never went to the grave. Then James. I—I just don't know anymore."

"Well, you get in touch with Dr. Gilbert, and if you need me for anything else . . ."

Then the door snapped very softly, and she drifted to sleep again.

Part 4

The next few days passed without incident. Janis, who felt terribly weak at first and lapsed into involuntary periods of sleep, stupor, and consciousness, gradually improved and became coherent. The nurse was dismissed so that Janis and her mother were alone in the expansive house, and things more or less became settled, more or less.

Behind the surface normality, there remained the unanswered questions, the unresolved problem of her attempt on her life. The crisis had passed, the physical balance of life or death, but the enigma that had led up to it remained; and neither the mother nor the daughter mentioned it. They seemed resigned to let it pass. They seemed willing to let it die like some still-born secret and slip unnoticed into the past.

It happens that in a course of a person's lifetime, an incident often occurs that threatens his security. A phantom rises before him and looms there insolent and insurmountable. Rather than face it, a person will often turn and run or ignore it or rationalize it away. Anything to escape the insane glare of the sheer nothingness that confronts him. If the phantom is larger than he, he has any number of ways to reduce its enormity and flee from it. So it happens that terribly significant things, or things that should have been terribly significant, are reduced to memories or ironies or theories: nothing.

Always though, there comes a time when the facade crumbles, and

he remembers, if only for a second, and if only vaguely. But the second is long enough, the vagueness sharp enough to cut deep inside. The remembrance gnaws at his insides, still unresolved, still unforgotten, and still insolent. In the end, what has been reduced is the person himself, and the realization of that fact is what it is that starts to eat away inside. The stoics and the masochists and the martyrs carry the wound to the grave and somewhat enjoy doing it. A lesser person hates every second of it and is tormented almost beyond endurance.

The wound is hidden; the phantom is eluded; and something that should have been terribly important becomes only a mask, and not even tragedy.

It seemed as if the mother and the daughter had resolved themselves to exactly this course of action, because neither mentioned the near fatality.

They talked of trivia and only in broken, unconnected dialogue. Then a tension developed and began to burgeon. The old lady ignored it, had refused to acknowledge it, and went about her work as she was accustomed. She brought the tea in the afternoon, the firewood in the evening, and breakfast in the morning. They hardly spoke at all, but when they did, it was the lady complaining of the cold and the daughter agreeing despondently. There were times though, late in the evening beside the fire, when even the mother felt the tension. The eyes of the daughter burned, the hands trembled, the face went pale and haggard.

Not an hour expired without Janis turning the phantom over and over in her mind. She felt it odd that nothing had been said, and the wound began to bleed. It ached beneath her ribs, ached like an empty, hollow feeling. And where was she to go? What was she to do? She had tripped in her attempts to flee, and something inside her seemed to cry out. She thought of Arthur without respite. And a week passed without incident. But always, at every moment, there was the woman, seen from across the room or beside the fire, and always the need, the futile effort to go to her and explain, the phantom still insolent.

She caught herself at the window thinking, nearing the moment, reaching for the key, restless.

Part 5

She had stood at the window for quite some time without speaking. A vacant, distant expression had settled in her deep, wide eyes, and

her lips were screwed up in a nervous, rigid manner. Beyond her silhouette, the crest of trees stood black and erect against a colorless sky. There was a strange, almost nebulous beauty about her that betrayed the frailty, the haggardness, and the thinness of her face. The robe she was wearing fit carelessly around her shoulders, and her hair was disheveled and unattractive, but her eyes were tormented and restless and beautiful. Inside, she was struggling with herself, trying to bring herself to speak, but failing miserably.

Her mother, who was dusting behind her, was bent over like a crab. She looked shrewish and tragically old to Janis.

"And everything will be fine, you'll see," in a motherly, reassuring tone. "We'll move the piano upstairs where it used to be when you were a little girl, and I'll have the room redecorated."

It irritated Janis to talk of the room and plans Mother had made because what she was thinking was so antithetical.

"Mother."

"We'll go through the attic . . ."

"Mother," her eyes pleading and hopeless.

"Oh, you'll get used to me. But there'll be rules, you understand."

"Please don't, Mother."

The older lady paused and looked at her daughter in confusion.

"Don't talk about it anymore." Janis' eyes, full of sorrow, apologetically met the older, harder eyes that seemed full only of age.

"But, Janis," she replied, "You always wanted . . ."

"I'm not staying, Mother. I'm leaving tomorrow." And the old feeling of pain and joy washed over her like a wave. "I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Why, of course you don't. You haven't anyplace to go. Don't start this, Janis. I'm too old for this."

"I'm sorry, Mother, but I can't stay. You have to understand that. It's not your fault or anything. But I just don't want to. I can't."

"Of course you can. That's absurd. Why couldn't you?"

"I don't know. I just can't. I couldn't ever. I just couldn't."

"But Janis, I'm your mother: your mother. I haven't got anyone but you."

"Oh, I know you don't. I know you don't, but I can't help it. I don't have anyone either."

"Then stay. You'll feel better tomorrow. You'll see. You have

to stay."

"But you don't understand. I don't have any choice. I have to leave."

"No you don't. You stay here and we'll be comfortable. We'll get along."

Janis turned to the window and looked out in desperation, her eyes soft with sorrow, a cloud of despair hanging over them. "You know we'd never be comfortable. We never have."

"But we could start."

"Oh, how could we? Mother, we've never been close." Then her face turned to the old lady, and her eyes were affirmative. "You know we've never been close. We don't even know each other."

The older eyes contracted and looked away. "We didn't, that's true enough. But that was back when you were a child. That's all changed."

"No, it's not." Then she paused, and a frail hand ran across her mouth. "I've thought about this for the last few days. I do have something I have to say. Maybe then you'd understand or maybe you wouldn't, after all. I don't know."

"You don't have to explain anything. If it's about last week—"

"It's more than that. It's a lot more than that."

"Oh I don't see why you can't let things be and stay."

Janis' eyes filled with despair, tormented in the stare the older lady gave, and hardened with confusion.

"There's lots of reasons, maybe."

"Oh, Janis, listen for once. You never listened. Even when you were young and I wanted you to listen, you'd go to—," stopping herself before the word escaped.

"I always went to Arthur, I know. That's—I don't know how I'm going to say this. I don't know where to start."

"You don't have to explain anything, Janis. I understand."

"I don't see how you can, Mother, because I don't even understand it myself."

"Understand what?"

"Many things—Daddy. How you felt about him and me."

"He was sick. I felt sorry for him, but I couldn't help . . ."

"Oh, I'm not condemning you. I'm not implying anything. I know how sick," and her hand swept through her hair. "You know

that I loved him."

"I know. You always went to him. But Dr. Gilbert said you shouldn't talk about . . ."

"I don't care what Dr. Gilbert said."

"It'll just upset you."

"No it won't. For God's sake, Mother, I tried to kill myself! How will this upset me?"

"See. You're getting upset already."

"I'm not. I'm not, though. Not like that." Then with heavy eyes, she added, "That's over now. I couldn't go back to that."

"Janis, why don't you pray? Why don't you even try. God would listen. He could help."

"I can't do that. You know I can't. That's not any better than the razor blades."

"Janis!"

"It's not. It's not any better."

"You don't know what you're saying. That's, why Janis, that's blasphemy."

"But I don't believe in god at all! I don't feel drawn to him. I don't feel repelled, or influenced in any way. I never have. Never."

"Oh, stop talking like that! This has gone too far. You're not well yet."

"I am though. And I have to leave, and I have to tell you something first. I can't stop now, Mother. Once you go to a certain point, you're more or less committed. I can't turn back now because I really believe in certain things."

"You don't even believe in God. How can you believe in anything if you don't even believe in Him?"

"That's just it. Believing in him wouldn't be anything. If I could, if I honestly could, that would be easier for me. It's like everything I don't understand, I could, well, I could label that god. But I can't anymore. I can't just turn to him, or make him, because of fear or confusion or doubt."

"It's more than that, Janis. You have to have faith. You can't expect an explanation for all things."

"I don't think I need an explanation anymore. Not really. Oh, Mother, I didn't want to end up talking about god. You'll just be angry. I don't want that."

"Then let's drop it. Let's stop talking so much. It's so depressing. I know! I've got an idea! You help me go through the attic."

"No."

"Janis, *try*. Try for once."

Her face was urgent, and her eyes were strained; she felt helpless before the old lady. "I am trying."

"No you're not."

"But I am! I am. I'm going to see Arthur tomorrow."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to visit the grave."

Something strangely fearful settled in the lady's face, something desperate and wild. "I don't think you should, Janis. It would be too much after last week," the words sounding distant and almost hollow.

"I've already decided, though. I want to. I have to, now. I don't expect you to understand, Mother. I never understood myself.

"I felt all along that I was different. I didn't try to be. I didn't her again, as if in a dream, began to pulse involuntarily: the pain and the joy, the love and the hatred, the fear and the desire. Her wide eyes looked at the floor and came back up to the emptiness that Mother had reserved for her.

"I felt all along that I was different. I didn't try to be. I didn't intend it to be that way. I even fought against it at first. I've thought about Arthur, about Daddy, quite a bit lately because I refused to before. After that night last week, I had to because there was nowhere else to go—I couldn't turn to—."

"You don't have to talk about this. I don't think it's wise."

"Why don't you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Because it's unimportant, Janis. It's over. It's past."

"But it's not! Well, in a way it is; but nothing really ends. Not even when it dies. It just gives way to something else, effects something in a special way, almost becomes a part of something, even though it's dead."

"You're talking nonsense."

"I suppose I am. But didn't you ever wonder, even when I was small, why we never talked? Didn't it ever bother you?"

"You always liked Arthur better. That's all. I knew it. I knew it all along, and it used to hurt to see you go to him. But I couldn't

very well tell you not to. That wouldn't have helped, would it?"

"No," with a sad smile. "I did love him."

"I know you did."

Inside, the confusion began to swell, and it rose until she felt helpless again. She knew she should say it, she wanted to terribly. "But what I felt for Daddy—you can't imagine really how attracted I was—it didn't make any sense at all."

"Janis, this is all unnecessary."

"How did you feel? How did you feel about him?"

"Your father wasn't a well man."

"I know that. But that's not what I asked. I want to know how you felt about him."

"Dr. Gilbert said it was nothing on my part. He said Arthur was that way long before . . ."

"I don't care what Dr. Gilbert said, or anybody else. I just want to know how you felt."

"I don't think it's any of your business how I felt towards him."

"I don't suppose it is."

"It's not. It's not at all, how we felt about each other."

"But I often wondered anyway."

"Then, you're finished now?"

"Finished with what? Wondering?"

"Yes."

"No. But I've more or less accepted the fact. So in that respect I guess you could say I am finished."

"And you're going to see the grave, still?"

"Yes. I must. I owe it to him."

"And you insist on leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"I don't see any sense in it. I think it's unfair for me."

"I know you do. But you don't understand about Arthur and me."

"I understand that he's dead. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's dead, now. But what I feel isn't."

"That's natural enough. Any daughter would say that. That still doesn't explain why you have to leave. Do you resent me that much?"

It was like an arrow piercing her breast, it was so direct and unexpected. The hard, almost marble eyes of the old lady narrowed and fixed on her daughter.

"Think it over is all I'm asking, Janis."

"But I have already; for a week that's all I did. Don't you see? Mother, I loved him."

"I know, Darling. I know you did."

"No you don't. How could you? I loved him like he was a—," and the words caught in her throat, wedged themselves somewhere inside her mouth and refused to be uttered. But it was unnecessary. The lady's face blanched with sadness and read the message: like he was a lover.

"I still do," Janis whispered, somewhat surprised that she wasn't crying. "That's why, when I married James, that I couldn't love him. Because of what had happened with Daddy. I never knew James. I never gave him a chance. It was just Daddy."

"You don't have to say anymore. You don't know what you're saying. You can't. I don't want to listen anymore."

"I only want you to accept it is all. Just accept it. That's all I ever wanted. That's all that ever mattered." And she felt her eyes begin to fill.

"I think you should forget that you said any of this."

"I can't. I'm going to the grave, and you don't have to go with me; I want to be alone. Then I'll try and find James, but I wish you would smile or cry or something. Don't just sit there. Don't just sit there!"

But the lady sat immobile and unmoved, unthinking. Her voice was coarse when her lips parted: "Why? Do you feel ashamed?"

"I did at first, but not any more. No, I don't. I know you won't understand this—but I'm not guilty anymore because I feel that in a way, in a sense, what we did was right. You don't believe that, or understand that, I know."

"I don't believe you. I don't want you to talk anymore. I never did. You never let me close to you, and I never wanted to be there anyway."

"I felt it. Maybe that's why I loved Arthur so. I felt it."

"You don't feel. You don't feel anything that you can't touch. You don't even believe in God." She was grim; firm; her cheeks still ruddy and her eyes hard. "You've got a lot to answer for, Janis."

"I don't know if I have or not, Mother. When I was young, I felt that I did. I always—I always said to myself that I was too young

to stop it, and that I didn't know really what was happening because I thought I had a lot to answer for. I still don't know if I knew exactly what was happening, and I don't think he did either. But it happened. And, well, in a way, I did know because I felt it and I didn't want to feel it, but I didn't want to stop it either. Because sometimes I just had to touch him. It was strong to just reach out and . . ."

"And you feel better, now that you've told me. You're not sorry. You think that you've hurt me."

"I don't know. I feel a little better for myself. I don't know how you feel."

"I feel like I've mothered a bitch, is all. That's how I feel."

Janis' eyes flinched and her face stiffened with anger. She looked away, hurt and angry, and walked briskly past the lady.

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"It doesn't matter. You run along."

Janis wanted to say something, but when she turned to face her mother the words were not there. The old lady's face broke into a wry, endlessly sneering smile, and her eyes burned intensely. Her face broke into a screen of wild patterns, and her teeth pushed back the thin purple lips and framed her mouth into a wild, happy smile.

The transformation shocked Janis. And it dawned on her like a clap of thunder. The lady was deliriously happy.

"You knew all along, didn't you? You knew all the time! You drove him to it!"

But her words failed to move the elder lady, did not in any way shake the smile from the ancient face or avert the burning eyes that froze in their sockets.

"You knew all those years!"

The pallid face lacerated with creases merely smiled, hideously alien from all that was around it.

Part 6

It was early November, and a stiff wind raked across the cemetery. It was overcast and cold, and dead leaves rushed between the bare columns of trees and the blunt edges of marble. Save for the deep green of grass and the sallow tint of dying leaves, the day was colorless. The trees, the brush, and the tablets of marble blended as in a faded photograph into a oneness that was dismal and dreary. Clouds hung in the sky like metal-grey weights, and rain was threatening.

A monotony had set in, a vague sameness about every object, so that when the car crept along the winding lane and pulled to a stop, it seemed out of place. The bright red of enamel set against the pallor of the day obtrusively and almost in defiance. When Janis first stepped from the car, and the gust of wind scraped across her face, she shuddered and managed to say as the door closed behind her:

"I won't be long."

She had made it a point to bring flowers, had carefully chosen the yellow rue, and then gone to ask directions. His grave should be a few yards before her. She was somewhat afraid as she neared it, fearful of seeing finally the carved letters in the firm stone, but she felt at the same time a sense of joy.

Beyond her and to her left, she noticed a small pond that had filled with leaves. A child, dressed in a blue coat and wearing yellow knee socks, had wandered off alone and come upon the ducks. They sat motionless on the water, among the dead of fallen leaves, and looked at him without interest.

He was a young child, not more than two or three, and his laughter startled her at first. There was something about it, something about the cadence of that young laughter that seemed incongruous with the marble, the sky, and the leaves.

It wasn't the child so much as the voice of the child that startled her. There was something elusively familiar about it, something melodious and free. Here was this deep laughter, this impish, almost demonic laughter that seemed so full of life; and all around it, nothing but inertia and silence. Had not the wind been blowing, had not the eerie, lifeless sounds the winds make been cooing so forlornly, she might have overlooked the laughter. But the wind had sharpened her senses. It was brisk and stiff and biting. And amid it all, there in the whirl of the chilling wind, this deep, throaty laughter! It was almost as if she remembered it. Something irresistably natural about it attracted her to it, something haughty and lustful. It called out like a memory and left her startled.

Then there before her eyes she saw the marble tablet and she froze.

She was taken aback. She was disarmed. She felt empty and aching. Her knees trembled, her eyes filled, but she struggled to control herself. Beyond her, the laughter continued, natural and throaty. She heard it like a faint whisper calling from somewhere afar. Her

cheeks were scarlet, but the wind had taken the color from her face, and she looked like a ghost. She had pulled her hair behind her head and placed it in a braid so that she not only felt much older than she really was, but she looked it too. She felt weary but with a certain tranquility born of endurance.

Arthur's name was caught in the marble and cast before her like a monument. With her fingers, she traced the indentations that spelled out the letters and she felt the cold against her skin.

She remembered walking into his room as a little girl and seeing it strangely barren, not understanding when Mother explained that he had left. She remembered again, the telegram that came many years later when he killed himself. She remembered James and the hard eyes of Mother, the endless nights spent running from herself and others, always, it seemed, back to Arthur.

So it was different for her to see the name spelled out in letters that were hard and firm. It was cold, and the winds were bitter. The rustle of leaves and the laughter of the child melted into one and touched her. She felt the arms embrace her, felt the breath against her lips and the deep kisses, the wind against her face. She felt the darkness fall upon her and heard the sounds within her throat. She saw that the flowers would be blown away, so she unfastened the braid in her hair and used it to clip them down. Her hair caught in the wind and flew across her face and billowed behind her, the laughter of the child still singing in the background.

Walking back to the cab, she felt weak, but she knew that her trip had given her strength and that someday the strength would solidify into something else and become happiness. But for now, she felt sad, with only a hint of joy to pacify her; no longer guilty; no longer resentful.

As the cab pulled away, she glanced back to the spot where she had stooped and placed the flowers. The braid had failed utterly; the rue were blowing in the wind; and the child, the elfish child, was laughing wildly and chasing after them. She watched his hands clasp at the yellow flowers and heard his voice through the window. Her face broke into a smile, a tentative, weary smile. The yellow legs carried him after the rue, and his blue coat flapped behind him. When the cab passed the exit, she wondered what she would say to James. She had no idea how he would react to seeing her. But she felt she

no longer needed God nor death nor Arthur's illusion to get her by. She thought of the child again, and her eyes were tragically happy.

November was beginning, the pond was covered with leaves, the marble was cold and firm, and the child was laughing wildly. She loved Arthur without guilt, deeply, and without regrets. She was no longer sorry for what she had done, and she felt on the threshold of something new, November closing out a world she had known.

It began to rain very slowly at first, but by the time the cab reached James' apartment, it was pouring. She felt somehow that she belonged to the rain, had always belonged to it.

THE END

For Steven

Antonio Criscimagna

The evening paper reports
the death of a young man
whose life now gone distorts
not the evening's rum and coke.

A woman reads
aloud, over the sound
of crushed ice, the deeds
of someone whose record
is now in order.

As he was buried
without ceremony, they wonder
what insurance he carried,

for a God-fearing man
would a proper burial demand.

Still Sorrow

Rachel Ballard

Rest awhile, my friend,
as I reveal my world to you.

Enter softly . . .

hidden voices trill and coo and caw
in unison,
each completing the other's call;
cadenced hums rise and fall
from within the grass and bushes;
dry leaves rustle
under shuffling feet,
and blades of grass whisper
without sound in the wind—
but all is yet silent,
sensitive to the changing mood.

Sit quietly . . .

let the world enter your body:
varying whirl of insects
surrounds your mind,
enmeshes your being with the earth
then ceases,
broken
by muffled turning
of an airplane engine
passing unseen above;
cold concrete presses against your legs;
wind touches the leaves—
silent music in motion.

Look about slowly . . .

the sun shines
through white haze;
dim grayness fills the air;
branches bend
in answer to the wind:
 coy, angry, gentle;
the dead broken leaves curl
gray on dying grass,
and a little hum rises from the earth.

Leave, my friend,

my world is gray today:
 a Saturday morning of rain.
It is still with silent sorrow.

Return

when flecks of sun fall
and the air is bright,
then will I show you
the fairy wings
 and filbert tree
and sassafras
 with leaves of three.

Return with me

when the sun strikes the air
and the day is clear,
then shall
 we drink
 of the honeysuckle vine
and gather leaves
 for our sassafras wine.

IN DEFENSE OF THE DREAMER

Jo Ann Lawrence

Far off I remember sunny clear springs, muggy summers, blazing autumns, frigid white winters and my grandfather. Grandfather was not old or harried then; he spoke softly to me, laughed, sang old, sweet songs of laughing, sweet girls and handsome young men and comforted me with his warmth. Once he had been young and had dreamed; now my grandfather wanted that dream for me.

There were broad, fresh-plowed fields where he walked with me, my head bobbing with my effort to match his long strides, the warm moist soil clinging to my bare feet. On the crest of the swell near the woods my grandfather often would stop. Standing tall, he surveyed his flat, rich fields. I could almost sense his soul swelling with pride, for the Dream had been fulfilled. Finally he would turn to me and tell again the story of the Dream.

At a time when the soup lines twined for blocks through New York City and others peddled apples and pencils on street corners, my grandfather settled with his wife and five children on one hundred acres of thin, dry ground. In the beginning he sharecropped the farm, scrimped and saved and put his family to work on the land. One day he bought the farm outright for his Dream was to make a place for his children. For years the ground was powdery, and the wind swept great clouds of dust up against the hot, empty sky of summer. My grandfather saw the precious soil flying, saw his fields that produced meager crops, saw his wife's face and his own grow thin and haggard—yet saw always before him the vision of his fields abundantly fertile, the soil rich and black. So he bought fertilizers and spread manure from the cattle on the land. While his son and daughters grew up, the land slowly became fertile. Gradually as the fields bore crops, and the ground became thick and loamy, and his offspring came to revere the land, Grandfather's face relaxed and assumed the warm easiness that I remember. My grandfather had dreamed and had used his life to construct into reality that one most vital Dream.

So will I dream and encourage and defend others who also dream, as did my grandfather. When, for me, there is that one dream more vital, more urgently compelling than the rest, I will follow it. I shall use my life to consecrate that dream so that my visions, like Grandfather's, will one day show the substance of my labor.



Linen

Antonio Criscimagna

Moonlit evening through the window peeking;
the new dead flowers lie
in wait
beneath their new born snowy mate.

The Dance

Antonio Criscimagna

Hardly have we begun to dance
when out of tune we trip.

The lonely caricature of a dead man's passion
gives us all something more
than a dead man
gives us a painting
of some fat ballerina
already dead
and that's enough to make me cry

Degas is alive
whose dead ballerina
is forever alive
in a museum of the living.

Hardly have we begun to dance
when out of tune we trip.



Oedipus Inc.

Antonio Criscimagna

Yes incest is best
but Biz is better
whether it be bi-O-logical cleanse-O-logical
or just plain air-O-logical

in relation to
the turbo action found
in a geometric plane's gyrating washingmachine inlet
or an airplane's prop

in relation to
a wind tunnel's tunnel
or just a plain airplane's flesh-planing prop
caught redheaded

while all the time
the wind tunnel's tunnel plane is furrow-planed
by the airplane's prop
filled with plane prop fuel.

O well
I'm not sure
but anyway
the Maytag ought not to be soiled with the Biz.

I don't think things belonging to the same family
the Cleansing phylum
that is
should cling together.

You know what happens don't you?

The bi-O-active enzymes unite
in an infamous relation
with each virus' plane breeding orifice
bringing mother virus to a chemical end.

THE ROOM

Elisabeth Harter

The door resisted but finally scraped open, exhaling musty odors from within. A waning moon of light on the opposite wall was reflected from a circular mirror on the right. Otherwise, the room was dark and inhabited by shadows. I fumbled along the wall and switched on a lamp—a dim bulb stuck incongruously in a converted gas socket. The shadows retreated and lurked in the corners. The veneer on the four-poster bed across from me was splitting away from its backing in the cold, damp air. I wondered who had slept there. The only other piece of furniture was a high oak bureau covered with an embroidered dresser scarf and a thick layer of dust. Above it was the mirror—almost too aged and cloudy, I could see now, to reflect at all. Next to it hung a small plaque inscribed with Rudyard Kipling's poem "If." "And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!" Who was the boy who used to sleep in this room and treasure this verse? Surely the boy was a man and a father himself by now. My eyes turned to the windows. Carcasses of flies cluttered the sills. Even the Venetian blinds seemed dead, their eye-lid slats closed and their lashes spun from cobwebs. I turned and stared beyond the faded yellow diamond-patterned wall, as though searching into the past. The pattern blurred and doubled for a minute. Then the diamonds merged again in front of my focus, but they yielded no clues. Suddenly, I cleared my head and switched off the light. The door scraped shut as I left, and the room remained alone with its secrets and its shadows.

Experiment No. XIV

David Scott

Methane and carbon dioxide are your
ancestors O' populace of this mundane
sphere.

In this experiment, conducted by Him,
the earth is a simple culture dish,
and growth that is—is from that.
In the void, innumerable trays revolve—
around the central light,
almost all containing the proper medium
to develop—be that what it may.

These spores with ego, mouldering and
growing, slowly inundate this tray,
with red, purple and black.

'Tis a fruitless span at the lab—
and will allow till Tuesday week,
then—if no useful penicillin develops—
a scrub, a rinse and into the autoclave.

Mr. Sweet

Kathy Prochazka

Mr. Sweet is dead
who used to laugh
joy-voiced
over Sunday-morning toast
succulent
with orange marmalade
who used to laugh
mirth-wonderful
over my grandfather's jokes, a pipe
fragrant
between his nicotined teeth

Mr. Sweet is dead
grave-frozen
beneath silent clay
I never knew I could care . . .
Jesus! How he used to laugh!

In Memoriam—1962-63

Martha Moldt

Hell . . .
 I know that place.
 No Christ,
 No hope,
 No God there.
 Just airless, sunless void
 That you grope through
 To find the exit you know
 Does not exist.
 If you could only sink down
 Into non-awareness forever;
 Feel no pain, no fear anymore . . .
 But
 You are suspended
 In the void
 By puppet strings
 That
 Force you
 Through
 The jerked
 Senseless
 Motions
 Of living
 And all the while you are one of the dead.

CADENCE AT DUSK

edward l. williams, III

You sit like a pensive queen
 before the window
 while the sunlight fingers
 the auburn tresses that fall across your back,

 the unforgotten dresses of better days,
 those lusty spring days

which offered better ways
—gossamer dresses that swept to the floor.
beyond your eyes
the tops of castles rise
in somnolent glory,
and promises half remembered
come back to you like children's dreams.
in the moment
of an unexpected smile,
just the hint of something
beneath the blush,
something hidden yet within the vaults,
the dark and winding labyrinthian walls.
and already the clamor in the halls
begins to rise
with the warm push of your blood.
the velvet curtains roll in the wind.
the quest is about to begin!
young and gallant knights worshipping you,
oh God! they would have laid down their lives
to save yours!
the tops of the trees melt
in the amber sky,
their leaves wilting
beyond your silent eyes,
and the last soft rays
fall upon your hair and die.
unsaid words you never whispered
echo in the hall.
beyond this room, beyond this day,
time-worn armor clangs unseemly;
I the fool behind the mask.
Wait! I cry across the table,
flushed to feel so valiant
before your closing eyes—
somewhat ashamed to feel so shallow.
You whose arms we gave our hearts to.

wasting away.

Dan Brewer

no one tomorrow will be exact or straight to the point
but as the human race says, "well-rounded."

the series of true-false answers are seldom revealed
and the sound of maybe is concealed to a whisper.

the admittance of a wrong-doing is seldom.

pride is the conquerer of gentlemen.

the outcoming is king of hatred

and selfishness for thy self.

the aging seasons harden my outer core

and dissolve my inner to a bitter salt.

idealism erases to realism; adult.

and a hollow heart is my reward—my fault.

the climax of years of building disillusioned.

the confusion conveyed the truth.

and time is my only relative;

the closest item to me. time to stare:

to think:

to live.

i've resolved that only so much can be taken.

and when the final particle is removed

you stand with an empty soul

and on bottomless feet; forsaken.

my free movements are forbade.

thy childhood imprisoned within rules.

my voice toned to an even humming thru earphones.

mistakes are everyday made.

THE OLD MAN

Ruth Beyer

The small man, neatly dressed and compactly-put together, stood in front of the antique store window, gazing raptly at the display inside. Featured in the window against a garnet-colored velvet cloth was the most beautiful, intensely blue bowl he had ever seen. Although he knew practically nothing about antiques, in his quiet unassuming way he could recognize quality and artistic craftsmanship when he saw it, and this blue bowl was the embodiment of both. "Porcelain, probably, from some obscure Chinese dynasty," he thought, as he removed his thick, heavy, black-rimmed glasses and began to clean them. While he did so, he was amused once again, as he had been practically all his life, at how his field of vision blurred without glasses. That lovely blue bowl, so sharply crisp and severe in its simplicity, and the artfully arranged folds of garnet velvet faded into a melange of swimming blues and reds. The man, however, continued to be very precise and thorough in cleaning his glasses, and when he was finished and satisfied, he replaced them, then carefully refolded his breast-pocket handkerchief and replaced it. Instantly the graceful simplicity of the blue bowl was once again focused in front of him.

While he stood there on the deserted sidewalk absorbing the bowl's beauty for a final moment before continuing his homeward trek, he sensed rather than heard the loud and rough sound of young male voices. Their raucous cries seemed to hang and float in the air, blending with the dry, scraping sound of curled, brown leaves being blown about his feet by the chill autumn wind. Irritated in an abstract way at being interrupted in his pleasurable contemplation, he glanced down the street and saw he was being approached by a gang of laughing, loud-talking, boistrous adolescent boys. Nervously, the man smoothed his thin, straight brown hair against his head and stepped a little closer to the store window. He cleared his throat softly and coughed quietly once or twice. As the boys approached he couldn't help looking at them again, and he noticed that in addition to their shoving and pushing and their harsh and ungraceful yelling, they were also tossing a football back and forth. He stiffened slightly and wished they would go away. As he turned his back to them and gazed once more at the serene and tranquil beauty of the bowl, he suddenly felt a sharp elbow

push him in the small of his back. He slowly turned to face the horde, intending to stare disapprovingly at them, when he discovered that they hadn't even seen him. They had stopped momentarily and were lazily passing the football back and forth, accompanying their passes with crude earthy comments about each recipient. Their unleashed raw masculinity and unfettered animal-like spirits overwhelmed him with the essence of maleness, and they both fascinated and repelled the tidy little man. As their rough-housing became even more spirited, he was assaulted by their odor—a kind of ripe, sweaty body smell. He put his hand up to adjust his glasses while he looked up and down the street for the presence of some kind of authority, a policeman, maybe, or a store owner. The street was deserted. All he could see was the mass of swarming, brawling humanity which had engulfed him, and over their shoulders out in the middle of the street a small whirlwind of brown leaves which danced in a kind of formal counterpoint to the formless confusion on the sidewalk. He began to sweat and was annoyed at himself for such a reaction, but it was impossible in the crowd to discreetly remove that tell-tale response. He was caught up in their momentum, jostled and pummeled and shoved, while his whole body shrank from any physical contact with such an unruly group. Then with a particularly loud shout from someone, the football came through the air toward him and an arm reached out to take it, but in doing so, knocked off his glasses.

Full of rage and fury, he wanted to shout and yell as loud as the boys; he wanted to shove back and to push, but he couldn't talk or move. He felt as if he couldn't breathe, even though his chest was heaving and his heart pounding. Sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes. He was like a stick in the current of some wild river as he was propelled and thrust against one body and then another. He gasped and tried again to cry out against this indignity, but his voice was gone. As he tried to find some words of protest, he dimly heard a newly-bass voice next to him shouting, "Hey, guys, the old man lost his glasses. Anybody find them?" Jeers and catcalls turned to adolescent concern as the crowd parted, and in his panic, the man heard, "I didn't see any glasses." "Who lost glasses?" "What kind of glasses were they, mister?" He swallowed deeply several times, but still he couldn't talk, although the panic was beginning to subside in his chest. Then in the shuffling and scraping of feet, a voice called,

"Here they are, or what's left of 'em. Sure sorry you broke your glasses, mister." And through the glaze of sweat, his myopic eyes saw in his outstretched hand some hazy broken black pieces and shreds of glass. While he stood, peering intently at his sweaty palm, the crowd of boys like a horde of noisy insects moved on down the street, and the rumpled, tousled little man stood alone in front of the exquisite blue bowl.

ON HOARDING THINGS

Elizabeth Tindall

I hoard things—like the little plastic bear I won at the fair, and the card that came with the first flowers I ever received, and even the old, tired Easter hat that I made from a paper plate and scraps of ribbon. There is also a drawer in my room jammed full of broken-clasped necklaces, rejected buttons, puzzling chunks of wood, an empty jar of something, and a lint remover that collects things on its own time. But besides these tangible lovelies, I hoard thoughts. Thoughts of people and things, places and events that have no physical evidences of ever being. Like pieces of broken bottle and shredded bits of paper, they litter my mind. And I remember my childhood with kaleidoscopic images from assorted angles in trees, atop roofs, and on the ground.

There was the frantic look on my mothers face the time our house caught on fire. And one Thanksgiving Day Sis broke her arm, and everyone rushed about in confusion until we got her to the hospital. I still remember my gloating vengeance when I greeted my brother at the door and said, "Our report cards came, and you flunked history, and I got all "A's," and Dad wants to see you." All the pets we had, and all the times people threatened to sue us because some dumb kid put his leg in our dog's mouth. Silly little flashbacks of times, times pleasant as if they had all come in the middle of June . . . and yet, I'm sure they did not. I guess that is the advantage of intelligent and discriminative hoarding: I can discard all the unpleasantries so that my past reads as I want it to. Sort of like a window, cleansed of all the dirt that ever touched it.

So now I ask myself, "Why do I hoard things?—things that have no possible use or meaning for anyone but me?" I think part of it is that I am too lazy to clean out my drawers, but also I want to hold on to what I was and what I did. Faintly reminiscent of Proust's "thé et petite madeleine," I can relive all the sensations of a certain time, or place, or person just by seeing a mauled ticket stub or program. Typically, I have dozens of pictures of myself without glasses, though I have worn glasses since I was nine. So my past is a little distorted. I saved only the good parts and tried to forget the rest. But it is great when I feel like somebody's instrument of torture, because all I have to do is walk in my room and things rush out at me, and I know somebody remembers and cares about me—me! It is also reassuring to know that if I ever need a '56 Buick hubcap or 1 3/8 yards of char-treuse, velvet ribbon, I will have it.

Applause

Antonio Criscimagna

Above the many cancelled faces
a man.

A trapdoor appearance.

Through the stillness
the sound of bone
being broken.

No more a man
than a ham
with limbs tied
and head bowed

no more a face.

A black hood.

3 A.M.**

edward l. williams, III

varicose veins
twist across the broken streets,
and dull gray shadows
sway
beneath the sallow light
of skeletal lampposts.

darkness wears silk tonight,
and love oozes from her throat
like honey
spilling down a honey jar.

i am fingered
by sodden hands
that claim my heart.

"but i am only
twentytwoyearold!"
i protest,

my words spraying in a mist
and catching in the web
that the mysterious
black-eyed
woman
spins.

sibilant echoes
twitch convulsively
beneath my ribs,
burgeoning madly,
rising,
until finally
i hear the sonorous roar
of surrender
clanging down eternal halls,
spilling thunderously
into the abyss—



"take me," i whisper.
"take me in your arms!
I AM COME TO YOU!!
HERE!
MY SOUL . . ."

the city lies on its back
like a cancer-eaten giant
not yet dead,
and not even darkness
removes the stench
of mangled hearts
and souls
that are imbedded in its pavement.

neon lights flash
beside the scarlet wounds
while the heart slows.

here
i write my name
within the cracks and crevices.
here
i infest my blood with its disease.
here
i take my leave of love—

here my leave of life,
no longer bold
to call you darling,
no longer strong to take you down,
unable
even in death
to destroy your
image.

** (For proper reference, see *The Crack Up*, F. S. Fitzgerald, "Handle With Care.")

Satisfaction

Antonio Criscimagna

wiping
with continuous excrement
of ticker tape machine
standing navel down naked
tuxedo clad waistline up
toilet trained
chimpanzee
blinks across the dead sea
of Lake Erie
blinded by the ritual
of heart disease
awaiting the moron missile run

THE ESSENCE OF THE THEATER

Candy Haas

My interest in drama began when I was a very small child, and it will be with me until the day I die. Whether I am in the cast or in the crew, on the stage or in the audience, I have a genuine love for dramatics. Despite many, many thrilling moments on stage, my favorite times are the "before and after." These moments of anxious preparation and joyous exhilaration are what I feel the theater is all about.

Before a play or ballet there are weeks of rehearsals, stagings, and fittings, all building to a climax during production week. The frenzy of technical rehearsals and dress rehearsals increases until finally the day arrives. The day a play opens, I have a special habit. During the afternoon I go to the theater. The stage is dark and the theater is empty. I enter quietly, turning on a few lights, and walk onto the

set. To me this quiet, lonely walking of the set is a very essential part of my performance. I think about my role, and as I touch the furniture and props, I think through my lines. After I feel sufficiently adjusted to the surroundings, I sit upon the edge of the stage and look at the auditorium. Row upon row of empty seats return my steady gaze as I enjoy an almost powerful feeling in the lonesome surroundings. The absolute excitement of a theater, whether it be desolate or a full house, is mystifying. One can almost hear the shifting movements of an audience, then the laughter, and then the applause. There is a definite magic within the confines of a theater. The walls echo the emotion of past productions; the hushed darkness whispers of forgotten encores; everywhere the memories of previous Hamlets, Kates, and Romeos linger on. The only reality is the steady red and white glare of the exit signs.

After walking the set, I have a light supper and return to the theater for make-up call. The entire backstage area is alive and bustling. Lights are being checked and re-checked; props are placed and costumes are arranged; technicians are checking sound cues; publicity crews are unlocking doors and getting ready to sell tickets. In the midst of all this commotion and excitement there emerges a central figure, the director. Opening night for a director is a difficult thing. He has created the production, counseled the actors, worked out the difficulties, and now his creation is out of his hands. He wears a somewhat distressed expression as he tries to chat with anyone in range. It is truly a good idea to avoid a director before a show; his nervousness is infectious.

Approximately five minutes before curtain a silence descends backstage. Most of the audience awaits on the other side of the curtain. Props, lights and sets are all in position. The actors are costumed and ready. Good luck wishes are exchanged, the curtain goes up, and the show begins. During the show there are many moments of excitement. Getting laughs, remembering lines, making an entrance exactly on cue, all of these are part of the excitement that the theater is. For me, however, the most exciting moment is curtain call. The play is over, and the cast is assembled on stage. The curtains part; suddenly the applause catches fire and builds to a crescendo. For those brief, fleeting moments of glory, actors live and die. That applause is the life blood of the theater.

INSANITY

Gary Russell

He is in the room, a dark room with walls and floor like soft cotton. There is one small slot-like opening at the opposite end of the room near the door. When it is opened, light seems to flow in and flood the room like a bursting dam.

Coldly sweating as he is trying to remember . . . he stole upon her so silently, and unknown to her. There were one, two, then three slow, soft, even steps. The gap was closing between them, slowly but surely. He was within touching distance now, still unnoticed by her. The knife, glistening in the light, was in his claw-like hand ready to strike. Then he leaped, quickly and silently, like a panther . . . it was over. As he sank to the floor, laughing to himself, he relaxed—for the agony and pressure were finally relieved. He felt he had finally gotten rid of the thing everyone held against him . . . the tenseness, the agony that overwhelmed him. Slipping down the stairs, through the lobby and into the dark, cold, windy street, he had settled down upon the surroundings as if they were trying to smother him. He walked alone, destitute. He wanted to find a soft, cottony cloud that would release him from the world for awhile. He knew that he would only find her on the corners or in the alleys. Impatience was eating away at his brain. He came upon her, his mind clouded; he remembered no more.

He is in the room, the dark room with walls and floor like soft cotton. One small, slot-like opening at the opposite end of the room near the door . . . he is thinking, trying to remember, thinking . . . Pain.

Random Thoughts

John Weber

There
 Receding from the blackness
 The indelible memory of times past
 Branded in my brain
 Chained and locked
 There

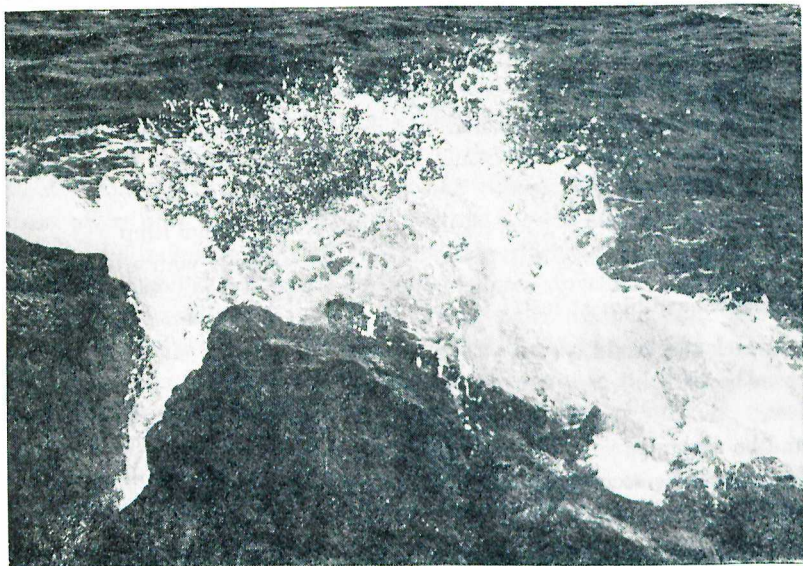
. . . forever.

Substance . . . form . . . existence

The real world
Exists
No more.

Hands reaching out, longing to be touched;
Experiences lying ahead, waiting to be lived;
Dreams being dreamt; the future . . .
But where is it? And what is it?
Always searching, always playing stupid games,
Always the superficial first,
Then the real
Later . . . maybe.

Sketching its fragmented images in my mind,
Weaving its delicate pattern,
The thread of reality,
So slender, so light—I cannot touch it,
But it is there, gathering its forces
Like a storm-cloud in the night
Preparing for the dawn when it
Ruptures its contents upon the earth.



YOU HAVE HIM AT LAST
1971 A.D.

edward l. williams, III

you slide wet kisses
across his chest
and face
while your hands
caress his neck
with tenderness.

you whisper to him
words that make him tremble
when your teeth sink
beneath his chin.

you sigh almost inaudibly
beneath his weight,
taking the breath from his lungs
and drawing it into yours.

your fingernails sink like claws
into his back,
ripping his life from him
to make it yours.

then your hands crawl around his neck,
scuttle backwards,
very delicately,
more than precisely.
when you know
that you have him at last,
you kick the world
from beneath his
feet,
and he screams
for a second's second,
pain
retching

from his throat,
rising
like a volcano
beneath
the sea,
the bones
cracking
like thunder
in his
neck,
and he,
kicking
like a madman
with his hands
tied
behind the back,
limbs you made love to
gone wild
with agony,
jerking
like the spasmodic
nerves
you wrenched from
his heart,
until at last
he hangs limp
before your eyes,

dangling,

broken,

swaying in the wind
of your lusty breath,
his last words
unexplainably laconic:

i love you forever.

BLISSBURG MEMORIES

David Paul Allen

Back in the old days, Blissburg was just the spot for a nice vacation. Why, a fellow could make a vacation of his whole life there if he felt like it. Not that you could get by without ever lifting a finger to support yourself or anything, but what little work there was came naturally. What I mean is that mostly you just took care of yourself. Take me, for instance: I'm a rabbit. Now we rabbits jive on carrots, and cabbage, and all that sort. So the *natural* thing to do was for us to go out and pick our own food. I never asked the woodpecker to gnaw off a piece of tender bark for me, and he never asked me to drill for termites in the limbs of a rotten birch. No doubt about it, we all got along famously. There wasn't much intermarriage, granted, but that wasn't much of an issue back then. The birds didn't mind their ghetto in the treetops, and we rabbits didn't mind our basement tenements. It all seemed natural enough.

We weren't anti-social, though. I didn't mean to imply that. As a matter of fact, we even had a meeting hall. But there were certainly a few problems in building it. We found out early that it wasn't much use trying to get a bluejay and a turtle to agree on how high the chairs ought to be, so we decided it would be best to have interior furnishings of a versatile mode. Finally, we established a committee. After a few months or so of deliberations, it was obvious that the squirrels wanted a hickorynut tree in the hall; the frogs wanted a spring; the birds wanted their own private entrance through the ceiling; and the turtles wanted conveyor belts running in all directions. Well, the idea struck them all at once that they already *had* the closest thing to their ideal meeting hall: it was the very spot where they were. Nature itself had provided them with a pair of healthy hickorynut trees, a clear little spring, and versatile interior furnishings; the birds had their private entrance because no one else could come in by the air anyway. Only the turtles were dissatisfied, but it was easy enough to ignore them: besides, who ever heard of conveyor belts in a forest? It took a lot of effort, but we finally had a meeting hall.

The odd thing was that we couldn't think of any community issues that should be brought up in the hall. The only group that ever wrote up a grievance was the turtles: they were still trying to get their free

rides. Like I said, nobody paid much attention to the turtles, so the meeting hall just became a sort of party place. On Friday night, everybody would go there to have a good time. The chipmunks went out collecting sunflower seeds for all their friends—not that they were civil servants, mind you: with all their excess energy, they just liked the idea of having something to do. Sometimes they brought in a few poppy seeds, but nobody ever got hooked on them. Now we rabbits couldn't groove with all those seed-heads, so we always kept a few kegs of fermented vegetable juice on hand. It wasn't too good for our livers, though. Anyway, those parties were really fab. The birds, and the squirrels, and the chipmunks all got stoned on the seeds; and the field mice, and the groundhogs, and we rabbits got equally zonked on the carrot juice. Now the frogs were normally pretty straight, but once the party started swinging they'd dive to the bottom of their pool and wipe out on some weird type of moss that grew there. That left only the turtles with nothing to do themselves up with. The frogs were the only ones who liked the algae; our vegetable squeezings had too much odor for the others; and the chipmunks wouldn't share their seeds with any holier-than-thou turtles who were always complaining about not having conveyor belts. The turtles couldn't find any uppers, downers, hallucinogens, or mind-blowers on their own, so they tried hyperventilating whenever they found themselves left out of the fun. The problem was that they just got sick and threw up every time they did that; then they were even more crabby than they had been. But one day, a turtle had just begun to hyperventilate, his neck bent straight up and his open mouth drawing deep breaths, when one of the birds—a partridge if I remember right—sitting on a tree limb had a fit of diarrhea brought on by too many poppy seeds. Well, at any rate, the turtles finally found something that they could really groove on. For a while there, we had true brotherhood. It turned out that the turtles were okay guys once they let their hair down and got with it.

The community fared rather well for the next few months. We got it together every Friday for an all-night blast, and then each of us went his own way. The parties might have been a little over-indulgent at times, but that was only once a week: things were still pretty natural. The trouble came one day when this Reynard fellow came around. He claimed he lived in the next valley, but he always looked

like some sort of foreigner to me. Anyway, this Reynard was a rare bird if I ever saw one. Said he was some sort of financial speculator; he was interested in buying some of our local minerals. We didn't know anything about finances or mineral resources and really had no idea of what to say to him. Since there wasn't even anyone of us animals who could speak with authority for the whole town, we decided to have a meeting to figure out what to do about Reynard. It just so happened that we called the meeting for a Friday evening. Now most of us knew that there was an important order of business at hand, but the chipmunks went ahead and collected their sunflower seeds and were half-stoned when they arrived. While some of us were trying to talk sense to them, the birds started picking up stray seeds; the frogs dove to the bottom of the pool; and a groundhog, who had just come off the wagon for the ninth time, brought in a barrel of 90 proof carrot juice. The turtles couldn't seem to wait until the birds had manufactured some liquid sunflower power for them, so they started hyperventilating again. After a while, the whole house was smashed, and everybody had forgotten about Reynard and the mineral business. Before the night was over, the turtles were performing like professional outfielders, and one of them started joking about the conveyor belts. He was only joking, because the whole idea had been forgotten after the turtles started joining in the community spirit every Friday night. But this Reynard overheard what was said and put two and two together.

Well, the next day nobody saw Reynard around. We all figured that he just got mad and left because we had ignored him the night before. Actually, he decided after the party that he would have a better chance by negotiating with a smaller group. And since he figured that the turtles wanted something—the conveyor belts—he thought he could bargain easiest with them. Well, Fat Jack was more or less the opinion leader of the turtle clan, so Reynard went to see him. At first Jack told him that he didn't want to have anything to do with shady deals behind everyone's back, but Reynard was a sly one, all-right. Reynard told Jack and the other turtles that everybody laughed at them because they threw up when they hyperventilated and had to catch bird droppings to get a decent high. He said that all the others had a good time just because they were making fun of the turtles. Now Fat Jack had always been a little self-conscious, and the thought that

the other citizens made fun of him turned out to be the last straw. He vowed to be a complete straight so that nobody would mock him anymore. And just when he was in that real crabby mood, Reynard asked if he'd like to have some conveyor belts with electric motors, lever controls, and guaranteed jet-smooth ride. It was an impulsive decision, but Fat Jack and the other turtles signed some secret agreement with Reynard before anyone found out what was going on.

Within a week, all of Reynard's brothers, cousins, and in-laws had come into town with pre-fabricated conveyor belts, and the turtles suddenly were the most mobile guys around. Little by little, all of us other animals asked if we could take a test hop on one of the conveyors; the turtles were happy enough to give us rides whenever we wanted one. This went on until the birds got out of the habit of flying; we rabbits forgot how to hop; and the frogs could barely move without help. The chipmunks, being always zonked on sunflowers and poppies, were the only group that kept away from the conveyors: they were mainly just too wiped out to find them. But anyway, the turtles said one day that they were going on strike. "Strike?" That was a new word to us. We found out that the turtles, the only ones who knew how to operate the levers and toggle switches controlling the conveyors, simply refused to do anything. And they wouldn't tell us why either. We all sat there by the conveyor belts, sort of stunned and not knowing what to do. Then Reynard came back, and the conspiracy was revealed. He told us that we had to agree to let him mine all the coal and iron ore out of our forest, or he'd let us starve to death by the cursed trans-forest conveyors. Whatsmore, soon as we got our strength back, we had to work in the mines and factories. But he promised we'd get pay for it. "Pay?" That was another new word, but it sounded better than starvation.

It took a long program of rehabilitation and training, but our spirits were broken, and we offered no resistance. We were finally transformed into an organized working force. We rabbits blew air into the blast furnace; the birds pulled carts up the mine shafts; the mice became blasting experts; and the turtles supervised and played with their conveyor belts. The plan worked out allright, I suppose, but it was a far cry from being *natural*. We rabbits still couldn't hop, but our lungs got to be something special; the birds were the best walkers of the group, but they were always too tired by the end of the

shift to take a single step. At any rate, we kept using the conveyors for simple transportation. Now the *money* added a whole new dimension to things. We felt so good after getting paid on Friday, that somebody suggested we start having parties again. So one payday we all took the escalator to the conveyor system and rode to the old meeting hall. Things had changed a little. That is, the trees had died and fallen down, and the spring was covered with an oil slick. But that was okay. No one could climb up or fly to a tree limb anymore, and the frogs had forgotten how to swim at their desk jobs. Then we realized that there wasn't anything to do for kicks. There weren't any sunflower seeds; the algae in the spring had died; and we rabbits, so used to having our food catered, forgot how to find the vegetable patch. And we had all that money, too, with no way to spend it. What a hummer! But the chipmunks came to the rescue. They were all wearing imported sharkskin suits, patent leather boots, and dark glasses: not very natural to see a chipmunk dolled up like that. They brought their poppy seeds in by the bushel, but they were *selling* the stuff instead of giving it away. The foxes had talked to them, too.

In a couple of years, the coal supply dwindled; the foxes were gone all of a sudden one morning before breakfast. Then we found out they had taken the batteries for the conveyor belts with them. We were in more trouble than we realized. Luckily, the white-collar frogs and the junior executive turtles put their heads together and devised a plan. The birds pushed us rabbits until we could use our legs again, and we blew up such a storm that the birds couldn't help but fly. Gradually, we cleared off the oil slicks; planted new trees; gave chewing lessons to the mice; and gave diving lessons to the frogs. The parties began again just the way they had been in the old days. The only difference was that the turtles went back to hyperventilating: they still thought we made fun of them when they took their sunflower seeds second-hand during our Friday night happy hours.

And that's the way things were back in the old country when I was a boy. I may have a touch of cirrhosis of the liver now, but it sure as hell beats the day shift in a steel mill!

