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* Indicates Freshman Writing
I always wanted to be a writer—a famous writer. I knew, of course, that I could never compare with Shakespeare, but I would settle for being remembered as a Steinbeck, a Hemingway, or a Faulkner. A Nobel prize or two, a few Pulitzers, and every one of my books being the featured selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club would satisfy me. After all, I’m a realist.

But now I sadly realize that I will never be a famous writer. Never will I be compared with Steinbeck, Hemingway, or Faulkner. No one of great importance will ever read my books—look at who’s reading this now. It makes me want to cry.

You see, my first novel received its forty-third rejection slip from a publisher today. It was another mimeographed form letter with a blank space after the word “Dear”. This time, they didn’t even bother to fill in my name:

Thank you for submitting the enclosed material for our consideration, but we have found it unsuitable for our purposes at this time.

They hated it. Again.

But what could I have possibly done wrong? I always used the possessive case of a pronoun to modify a gerund. All of my copulative verbs linked a subject with an adjective or a predicate nominative. And I never let my participles dangle.

With a tear in my eye and revenge on my mind, I reached for the battered manila envelope containing my manuscript. There was 43¢ postage due. Choking back the tears of failure, I withdrew the black,
simulated leatherette binder which held 309 pages of my undying dedication. I turned to the first chapter and read:

_It wasn’t a pretty day in the little town. The rain pounded down upon the earth like thick globs of snot blown from the slime-green sky. Worms oozed from the murky cracks of the slippery sidewalks, only to have their jelly-like guts crushed underfoot or splattered by muddy automobile tires. The puke-like smell of wet, matted dog fur filled the air. No, it wasn’t a pretty day in the little town. It wasn’t a pretty day at all._

I was sick—from rejection, of course. Perhaps my description was lacking. Maybe I spelled some words wrong. Or perhaps I left out a period somewhere.

Nonetheless, they didn’t want my book—but what do publishers know? Nobody wanted _Jonathon Livingston Seagull_. Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe had to publish their own books. And wasn’t _Peyton Place_ rejected twelve times? By God, if rejection is a sign of greatness, then I must have written a classic!

To hell with Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Faulkner—Shakespeare, move over!

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**THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS BREAK**

JoAnn Gocking

On the first day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Oh it’s wonderful you have all this time free!”

On the second day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Take your jacket to the cleaners. Pick these things up at the store. And by the way, you’ll have to do your own laundry.”

On the third day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Take your brother to the doctor. Drop this package off at Grandma’s. Oh, and don’t forget, you’re picking up the tree.”

On the fourth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Please help me bake these cookies. Did you fill the car with gas? Pick
Melinda up at school. Go meet the bus with Uncle Lee.”

On the fifth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Would you mind? Run the vacuum. Clean the bathroom. And please, please, turn off the damn T.V.!”

On the sixth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Would you wrap this gift for Daddy? Call Aunt Liz and say we’re coming. Could you drop me at the hairdresser’s? Take your brother to the ballgame. And don’t forget to turn the oven on at three.”

On the seventh day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Will you help me move the sofa? Get your Grandpa some more eggnog. Help the children with their stockings. Get a present for the paper boy. Please hang these strings of popcorn on the tree.”

On the eighth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “We need extra chairs for dinner. Could you get a quart of milk? Will you put on some Christmas music? Oh, you’re sleeping on the sofa—we need your room for Aunt Marie.”

On the ninth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “You’ve got to help me clean the house. Take these chairs back to Grandma’s. Did you write your thank-you’s yet? Could you go and shovel snow for your Aunt Bea?”

On the tenth day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “Will you exchange this shirt for Michael? Mail that letter to your roommate. We’re going to Aunt Flo’s for dinner and I told Louise you’d babysit her three.”

On the eleventh day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “You mean you haven’t cleaned your room yet? Why, you’re going back tomorrow! Will you help the kids take down that blasted tree?”

On the last day of Christmas break, my mother said to me, “My how time has flown! Why, it seems like you just got here! It’s so wonderful you had all that time free!”
together
we watched the snow
fall
slowly
leaving streaks of grey,
then white.
no laurel crowns requested
no trophy of timeless glory—
rewarded only by gathering dewdrop years
meandering down a frosted sugarplum pane.
There once was a sphere in the land of cubes.

It was a rarity, of course, but not uncommon. As you can well imagine, however, it was quite a shame on his family. Not that it would be fair to say that an overt social stigma was attached to the family for this deed, but undoubtedly it led to whisperings about the background of a family that could introduce such a rounded oddity into a world of squared perfection. And these whispers had their effect.

The sphere early on was shadowed with guilt for violating the symmetry of his more angular fellows. At home he would receive such caustic admonishings as: “Now, you behave or I’ll flatten your rounded hide,” or “There are places for such as you.” He didn’t know if there really were such places but remarks such as these, though generally rare, also had their effects. For the most part his family tried not to blame him for their social eclipse. It was not his fault, after all.

Outside, however, there were no such mediating motivations. He was taunted unmercifully by his six-sided contemporaries and befriended by no one. Why should they? With his awkward shape he could play none of their games such as “Pyramid Building.” He did have one edge, though, and that was his ability to roll, but this just made them hate him all the more.

Quite naturally he came to be a loner, even taking a perverse pride in his difference. Maybe they were right, he decided, when they jeered that his thoughts ran around in circles. And so he grew used to being alone; though he never became content being so. He went for long journeys to enjoy his one advantage over his angular race—that of mobility. But the loneliness grew as did an inner determination to succeed despite his difference.

And he tried. Tried hard and long to fit a sphere into a world designed by cubes for cubes. The rejections were unending but at least he had built up some immunity to the insults of others. It was the little
things more than any other that defeated him—rolling about helplessly in a square seat on the subway, bouncing down escalators while cubes rode on immobile. But even these hardships he might have faced if not for the ultimate rejection.

There had been one cube he had been attached to (even though he was a sphere he had adopted the values of what was considered beauty in his society), and she had not turned away, at first. Would that she had! But she gave him the first companionship he had ever known. And so when social pressures forced her to abandon her ideals of the equality of all despite their shape and leave him, he finally broke.

He knew where to go. Those “places for such as you” with which he had been threatened so long ago did exist, he knew now. There was only one and he had found its location and buried the knowledge hoping he would never need it but fearing he might.

The sign on the building said: “Want a straight and level course through life? We will square you up.” He struggled with himself only briefly. To be normal like everyone else was more than he could really believe. It would mean losing a part of himself, argued the hardened individualist side of him, but he suppressed the arguments in a sudden burst of passion. To be like everyone else! To have the wealth of his world finally opened to him! And the companionship of his fellows he had longed for would be his! And maybe even the one cube . . . ? He went inside.

They put him in a great stamping machine, like a printing press, which stamped, crushed, and molded him. And when he came out he had six sides like all the other cubes and perfect geometric symmetry. And he went out into his world and became one of the faceless building blocks of society and did what everyone else did and enjoyed what everyone else enjoyed, and sometimes he almost managed to forget that he had once been different.
MISS FRIGIDAIRE

Kevin Cook

Miss Frigidaire, your shoulders are too cold to touch, and now I see your eyes are ice. You've frozen care, and now that I have told too much, I'm trapped inside your cold device.

Had I seen through your play at heat, Complete with neat analyses, Seen past warm touch to cold concrete, I could have known the touch could freeze.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the touch of ice from fire. Sometimes I'm sure I'll never learn Disgust can follow from a torturous desire, And ice can freeze what fire couldn't burn.

Miss Frigidaire, you think that you don't care— It doesn't matter how I play the cards you've dealt. But I'm the one who doesn't care, Miss Frigidaire, And I won't play them. I won't try to make you melt.
ODE ON INTIMACY

Karen Kovacik

Come closer, my friend; I want so much to reach you,
But when you are here, I motion you home.
My glance sweeps your soul and though I beseech you
To know what I'm knowing I still am alone.

You tug at my heartstrings
(I feel they are broken)
You say all the "right things,"
(Which are best left unspoken)
Your eyes filled with kindness you offer your hand,
Of course, that's your own form of subtle demand.

A tortuous trail of silence, then scorn,
Beginning at duskfall and lasting till morn,
I attempt to elude but I'm still so unsure—
The twistings and trystings leave me insecure.
Dear Abby,

Well, I never thought I'd be writing to dear Abby, but I have a problem I just can't seem to solve by myself. About a year ago my son, Humpty, had a terrible accident. He was sitting on a high wall watching girls one afternoon when all of a sudden he lost his balance and fell. I know he shouldn't have been sitting on high walls, but with peer pressure as it is today I guess he had no choice. Besides it is not like he's one of a rotten dozen, he's a Grade A boy.

Anyway, he fell and cracked his head open and broke almost every frail bone in his body. A milk man was making an egg delivery, and saw the accident. He acted quickly and scraped Humpty off the ground and rushed him to the emergency room of the King Medical Clinic.

Kings, doctors and nurses worked very hard putting the broken pieces of Humpty's scrambled head back together. I thought they did a wonderful job of caring for him, although my wife stated she thought the nurses looked more like horses than trained medical personnel.

Doctor E. G. Benedict was the specialist called in for the case and he was very optimistic. He made sure everything was hard-boiled before it came in contact with Humpty to avoid infection.

Before we knew it, Humpty was home and seemed to be in perfect health. He acted just like he always did with one exception. Every day after school, Humpty returns to that same high wall and sits watching not girls, but boys.

Abby, I can't begin to explain how upset my wife and I are. We've tried everything we can think of, from skilled doctors to the hardware
man who suggested we fry him. We've threatened, lectured, loved, and hated, and now I appeal to you for help. Please, Abby what do we try next?

Eggleton Dumpty

Dear EggDum,

Your case is very interesting and frankly I do not know what to say. I have been in contact with my experts and none can offer any suggestions that you have not already tried. I did however forward your letter to Anita Bryant; perhaps she will be of help. In the meantime, I'd try to keep him away from the other children and discourage a teaching profession. We must Save the Children.

At.

WREATHS

Nathan Harter

Beyond the tranquil lawn and shady trees,
Beyond the regimented rows of stone
Whose beaten faces bear the names and dates
Of countless dead, beyond the copper plates
And marble crosses—far beyond all these—
A smattering of scattered wreaths lie blown.
Beyond the peaceful plots those flowers rot . . .
For money sold, for quiet-conscience bought.
ONE

Elizabeth Chace

i am standing with One
but i see two faces
i once thought that
i could trust One
but Two proved me wrong
two faces
one ugly and distorted.
the other
i once thought was my friend
one image in mind
cruelly split
i no longer see One
i see Judas
Okay. I'm going to go over all this in my head and see if I'm going nuts or what. If any creatures can hear me—hello.

I don't know how in the hell you can except a guy to work for a living, drive a cab on the weekends, not go crazy living with a battle-ax like Thelma, and still talk to alien creatures from outer space. I mean, it seems to me the outerspace creatures should go after those science-fiction writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Mr. Spock. But no, they got to come right to yours truly like magnets, or bills. So don't even let 'em tell you Jimmy McQueen isn't the best damn screw-packer, cab driver, and alien creature talk-toer on Earth, or in Indianapolis at least.

I guess I should start at the beginning, which was just this morning, which goes to show you how fast a calm, peaceful life can turn into a real mess.

Little Jimmy put an ice cube down my back to wake me up, which is better than a cockroach but not much, and Thelma started hollering at me it was already twenty after seven and I was never going to make it to work in time, and the john had backed up. Just like any other morning. So I rolled out of bed and tried to get my feet into my slippers. I was a little surprised when one of the slippers I couldn't quite get my foot into turned around and bit me, but then I remembered that the cat never had fit onto my foot and liked to have an excuse for biting me, so he always slept by the bed. Thelma hollered again and little Jimmy fired a piece of scrambled egg into my eye as I stumbled into the bathroom. The kid had good control.

“All right already!” I yelled out at Thelma, showing her who was boss.

Some guys take a brisk shower to wake them up in the morning, but I just step on the linoleum in the bathroom. The floor must be made out of the same stuff they put inside thermos bottles, because it absorbs all the cold on the south side of town and then waits for me to come in barefooted. The bathroom floor and the cat teamed up against me a long time ago.

And there's something wrong with the bathroom mirror, because the guy in it is about forty pounds overweight, only has seven or eight
teeth left, and most of his crew-cut is falling out at the same time as his
tattoos fade away. He’s getting real old, and he looks kind of like Andy
Devine would have if you took away most of his hair and twenty of his
teeth. Most mirrors look like that, though, so I don’t let it bother me.
Personally, I look a lot like Robert Redford, and the only thing I’ve got in
common with the ugly guy in the mirror is we’ve both got bulging eyes
from the linoleum.

Well, I made it through shaving and getting dressed, and got out to
the kitchen in time for some of Thelma’s bacon, eggs, and coffee, all
soaked in Mrs. McQueen’s famous-recipe, industrial grease.

Wasn’t anything worth reading in the paper. Something about a
war in Africa, and a busload of old ladies getting kidnapped out in
California, but the Reds had a day off, and the Foreman-Clay (I always
call him Clay) fight wasn’t for another week.

I kissed Thelma goodbye, one of the great mixed blessings of all
time, and jumped in the car at sixteen till eight, just enough time to get to
work if those downtown stock brokers would just get their behinds in
gear and do thirty miles an hour.

The guy on the radio said it was three minutes till eight as I was
pulling up next to the executive parking lot at the warehouse, so I did
what I always do when I’m going to be late—whizzed my old fire-engine
red ’66 Olds 98 into the President’s parking space (with the big number
one on it), jumped out, and then moseyed up past the security guard into
the employees entrance and got punched in at 7:59. Smart, huh? Then I
took my time going back out to the car, since the prez never shows up
before nine-thirty, eased her back out into traffic for a block, pulled into
the blue-collar lot back on Shelby street, and over the bottomless
chuckholes into my #44 space.

I straightened up my ID badge with the picture that looks like a
Polish refugee onto my shirt pocket and wandered back past the
overgrown traintracks to the entrance, taking my own sweet time like I
always do when I’m punched in on their own sweet time. The security
cop, a skinny Mexican kid from Cuba named Davey, looked right at the
dumb badge like he did every day, not even recognizing me after he’d
been two years on the job. I could have been Frank Nitty, but if I had that
badge on I could have grabbed every screw in the place.
Now—about the place I work. It's called Hardware Supply Co., Inc., and we fill orders from all over the world for nuts, bolts, pop rivets, flat, split, internal and external lockwashers, and, most of all, screws. Caps screws, wood screws, drive screws, tapping screws “A” and “B”, brass screws, zinc screws, cad screws, copper; aluminum, brass, bronze, and even nylon screws—you name ‘em, we got ‘em. In fact, believe it or not, our slogan is “The House of a Million Screws.” No fooling. It’s right on the building and all the official paper and all the trucks, in big red letters—“Hardware Supply Co., Inc., THE HOUSE OF A MILLION SCREWS.” But don’t ever rib the execs about it, because they don’t get it. (You know, it just so happens that there’s another establishment just down the road a few blocks with the very same motto. Har-de-har.)

I’m a packer, which doesn’t mean I play football. Beat you to it. When we have an order for, say, 10,000 ½-14 x 4 (half-inch screw width, fourteen thread count, four inch long) flat head drive screws, Zeke brings me a big metal tray full of them and I pack ‘em in boxes of anywhere from ten to a hundred. Those fl. hd. dr. screws would go a hundred in a number two box.

Then I go find the labels on the shelf by the west wall, get my sponge, and put a label on the tops of all the boxes, and then get my stamp pad and box of little rubber numbers and letters that fit on the blank stamper. You wouldn’t believe how long it takes to find a one, a slash, a two, a dash, another one, a four, a times, and another four in that box full of tiny little stamps, and you have to remember to put them all in backwards so they come out forwards on the label. I always get the threes backwards, which is to say forwards on the stamper but wrong on the label. Then if the screws are plated with any metal, I get out my brass or cad or zinc or alum stamp and stamp that on the labels. The labels already have the number of items, company name, and “House of a Million Screws” on them, so all I do then is count the boxes (a hundred in this case, unless there were 10,002 in the batch, and then I have to use an extra partial box for the two left over) and put that down on my daily packing record, before Zeke carts off the boxes to the shipping desk.

See, it’s not all that easy, is it? And when you do it twenty-three years, it gets a lot tougher. But there’s variety in it, which is the best thing
about my job. Why, one day you’ll pack all screws, and the next day you’ll do nothing but nuts and bolts.

So anyway, I’d just gotten my radio plugged in, my label sponge all filled up with water, and my Boraxo can opened up this morning when this thing you’re not going to believe happened. Zeke had just brought over a trayful of oily ¾-15 x 2½ hex head cap screws and taken his first break, since he’d already been at work fifteen minutes. I was just standing there at my bench (I always work standing up, because Geneva always comes in early and takes my chair over to shipping) putting on my gloves, when one of those cap screws looked up and said, “Hey there, Jimmy, don’t you think it’s about time you got to work?”

The Lord’s truth. I’m not lying. I was about as flabbergasted as when Parnelli Jones blew an engine and lost the 500, and fifty bucks of mine, on the last lap a few years back—or even more. I said, “Huh? Who said that?”

“You’re looking right at me, Jim boy, so I guess you know who it was,” the thing said, looking just like any other cap screw except for a mouth that looked like a grease smudge and two tiny little eyes. “Next thing you’ll say is ‘What are you?’ so I’ll tell you right now that I’m what you might consider a guardian angel, or something like that. My name is Gbshaw, and I’m from the planet Odannibuoy, which is in the fifth orbit out from Rigel.”

“Zeke! C’mere!” I yelled. “They’re giving you a raise.” (I wanted him to come quick) I wasn’t about to talk to this thing by myself.

“He can’t hear you,” the thing said.

“The hell he can’t, I saw him turn on his hearing aid not five minutes ago.”

“He can’t hear you because I don’t want him to, and because he doesn’t really exist.”

“Tell him that,” I said, and went to get him. Except that in two steps, I almost fell into a thirty-foot deep alligator pit, right in the middle of the warehouse floor, which had never been a part of Hardware Supply before. It went all the way around my bench like a moat, about five feet away in every direction. They looked like hungry alligators. I turned back around.

“Did you do that?”
The little grease smudge wiggled around into a smile, and the thing said, "Yep. So don’t go running off when I’m talking to you. It’s not polite, and the next thing might not be alligators."

“What would it be?” Dumb question.

“How about a dozen of Thelma?” Scary answer.

It stretched a little and rolled over across some of the other screws.

“How about moving me up onto the bench, ol’ buddy, so I’m not so cramped? These non-sentient cap screws are so inflexible as to hurt my back when I associate with them.”

I picked it up real slow and careful; and covered it in both my hands so I could have a minute to think. I wasn’t really too scared, since twenty-three years of working in a warehouse sort of stiffens up your mind, but I’d heard some bad things about alien monsters.

The Boraxo can said, “Okay, smart guy, lemme go or the alligators will sprout wings and come up after you.”

I opened up my hands to see if I still had him and he hopped to to the top of the bench. “Jimmy boy, I really wish you wouldn’t do dumb things like that. I’m not gonna hurt you, and we’ll just have a nice little talk. So don’t force me to end our relationship before I have to ol’ pal.”

“How’d you make the hand cleaner can talk?”

It giggled. “Hee-hee... easy! I just pulled a transference and took it over, leaving this body unoccupied. But I’m much more comfortable here in this hex head c/s. Ready to talk?”

“I can hear alligator stomachs growling.”

“Oh, sorry. SEX!”

The pit disappeared.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Don’t you know?” The thing sounded surprised. “That’s the magic word in your world.”

“It is?”

“Naww. Hell, Jimmy, I was just pullin’ your leg. My race doesn’t need magic words, but I wanted to see your facial capillaries fill up.”

I looked around for Geneva or Larry or somebody, mainly so they wouldn’t see me talking to my work. But it was like everybody else had gone on break at the same time, leaving me all alone on the whole first floor, except for—it. So I just sucked in all my gut and belly and asked it the question.

“Are you gonna kill me; and take over the world?”

It flipped over and giggled like the leprechaun in the Lucky Charms commercial, like I was a real mallethead.
“Hoooo boy, Jimmy—have you got a lot to learn. Sit down on the edge of the bench here, while I tell you what I’ve been trying to get into your thick skull all morning.”

Now, I know my skull isn’t so thick that they didn’t make me head packer on the first floor, but I didn’t say anything but a little ‘Sheeeeit’ to let him know I didn’t put much stock in any of this stuff. He rubbed his threads together and got set to tell me what looked like a long story.

“Well, Jimmy, it’s a looong story. But I’ll cut it down to the bare bones, since I know you’re as long on attention span as your are on brains.”

He settled back. “Y’see, I come from Rigel Five, like I said, and my race is a group of beings you’d have to call ‘Projectors.’ We’re a metallic people, so we can’t move around too much, but we do have the most advanced mental powers in the Galaxy.

“About eleven million years ago, we came into sentience, gradually, as a great mass of still-molten iron compounds beneath the surface of our planet. We probably would have evolved into an iron-based animate race, you understand, if we could have worked our way to the outside. But we found ourselves just below the crust, and that crust had a disproportionately high concentration of one metal. It had a very large amount of zinc in it. Unfortunately, because of the way we’d evolved, our negligible physical but amazin’ mental powers are unable to do a damn thing to penetrate zinc, so we were trapped for all of nine million years, shielded from anything beyond the planet’s surface. You following this?”


“It’s not bull. You want the alligators back?” He sounded offended.

“I believe you,” I said. “I’m listening.”

“So, around two million years ago, there was this massive upheaval in the mantle, which forced some of the lower crust up through the upper crust, and hosanna boom de-ay, we were up above the zinc. We owed our freedom to a giant Odannibuoyquake.

“Through the period of our captivity, we’d had nine million years to evolve into almost entirely psychic beings. And it sure didn’t take us long to find out that we could vacate the premises and skip out interplanetary distances with just our personas., Now, is that class, or is that class?”
I wasn’t all that impressed. “Great, but so what?”

“So what? So eventually a bunch of my colleagues and myself found this cheap little planet, inhabited by a race of microscopic white grubs with no external senses. You.”

“Who, me?”

“You. The human race.”

I don’t mind telling you, I was insulted. Now, I didn’t understand most of what he was saying, but I was pretty sure that he’s just called the human race a bunch of grubs, and I didn’t have to listen to that kind of stuff.

“Don’t go callin’ us grubs,” I told him. “Grubs are little worms. We’re people with arms and legs and brains and bodies.”

“You think you are,” the thing went on, with no sign of slowing down. “I’ll admit you have bodies, tiny ones. But nothing else to speak of, or with. Without us, you would be in this great gray state of existence with absolutely no sensory input except a little bitty sensitivity to light. Don’t you see? That’s what’s so great about you! We have these fantastic minds all contained in energy waves, but we can only take shape in things that are close to our original substance, and those things are inanimate and boring. But each one of you presents a blank slate where we can create whatever kind of world we want, and share it with you guys, and you’re all the better for it.”

“You mean you aliens made up everything in the whole word, and it’s all fake?”

“No, it’s real, all right, if you mean is it concrete and tangible, like anything on any other planet. It’s all made of real matter. But we can change it any time we want to. And I’m your personal Projector, and I’ve created everything you can perceive. You’re lucky you got me, too, because I came right out and chewed the fat with you before . . . . well, uh, before I had to move on, if you know what I mean.”

I knew I didn’t like the sound of that, so I changed the subject.

I said, “I’m leaving on break, and don’t try to stop me. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” I took a few steps toward the back stairs that led to the snack bar on the second floor, watching out for deadly alligator pits, but there wasn’t anything but old grease on the floor. Figured if I got a twinkie and talked to somebody for a while, maybe all the screws would keep quiet when I got back to work.

The second floor snack bar is like an oasis in one of those Rudolph of Arabia movies. All the rest of the warehouse is hot as hell, smoky as a
factory, and there's grease all over everything. Everything. The water fountain looks like an oil well. But the snack bar is clean. It's all air-conditioned and wood-paneled, and when you open the slick wooden doors there's a "whoosh" as a little of the cool air goes out and gets a heart attack from the heat everywhere else.

The windows are big and clean, since that Puerto Rican kid windexes them every day, while all the other windows in the building are painted over gray. Coming in the door is like coming in from a wino alleyway into Mary Tyler Moore's kitchen, and the snack bar is where all the execs drink coffee when they're not checking up on us. I always feel kind of lousy when I go in there in my gym shoes and overalls and they can see me in the reflection off their shoes.

I'd never, ever, seen the snack bar empty, but there was nobody in the place when I finally got there, watching out for alligators all the way. I sat down in one of the yellow plastic chairs and watched the linoleum for signs of pits.

After awhile I came up with a dime and a nickel and went over to the machine for a coke. The thing never worked right, and you always had to give it a left jab to get it going, so I did.

"Take it easy, for cryin' out loud," it hollered through the coin return. "I'm coming—why'd you have to press "no ice" and foul things up?"

After my head bounced off the ceiling I noticed I was spread out all over the floor. I wasn't drunk. Wasn't crazy. I was being followed around by a cap screw that could turn itself into a coke machine.

"Gyaaddammit!"

"Leave my brother out of it," it said. "Here's your coke so now sit down and let me finish my story."

The coke machine wanted to finish his story. I sat down.

"As I was saying... you're lucky I'm your Projector. You can understand that after a period of time it gets kind of boring arranging the life of one of you guys, so we have to terminate the partner we've been with and take up with another one, or even go off somewhere else in the Galaxy. Now, most of us don't say word one to our hosts before we uh... send them back to their natural habitat, but I think you deserve better than that, Jim ol' buddy, and I figured you were tough enough to take it like a man. Or a grub, as the case may be."

"Fun-ny."

"No offense."
"But what about Thelma? And the kids?"

"Jimbo, haven't you seen by now that they're just figments of my imagination? They're part of the illusion I've created just for you. Look—if not for me you couldn't see, couldn't feel or hear, or anything. After about a half hour without me, your perception of life would revert to just a big empty expanse of dark grey, a little like being the third cell from the left on the toe of a poison ivy plant. I created all of 'reality' for you, and you oughtta thanks me.'

"Poison ivies don't thank coke machies." I was proud of that quick retort.

He gurgled his syrup. "Well, a coke machine isn't the right place for me, anyway, because the metal is too refined. I can occupy the substance of any mental but zinc, but give me a good old ferrous screw any day. Come on back downstairs, and we'll finish our little talk before I have to recharge."

"No way." Sure I was going back down there so he could try turning me back into a grub. I didn't feel like a grub, but I wasn't taking any chances.

That was until some alligators came in the other door of the snack bar, ate up the candy machine, and started moseying up to me like they were out for a stroll in the park. They herded me all the way back down to my bench and then waited around me in a circle. Never knew alligators could climb stairs so good.

The ¾-15 x 2½ alien monster was waiting. I decided that this must be the Ultimate Screw.

It wiggled its grease stain around in an understanding smile. "Now, Jimmy, I don't want you to take this too hard. You've been a good host, I've learned a lot, and really enjoyed being with you these forty-two years. I'd give you a gold watch, but grubs don't have any arms."

He was all heart.

He started to roll over, and said, "Sooo, I'll see you . . ."

"Wait! Wait a minute!" I was maybe a little upset.

He looked back, real reassuring. "It's okay, take it easy. You've got a while left to go. Y'see, we have to store up radiant energy for a little while before we can transport any great distance or make a major change on any plane or reality. Now, there's no place to run or hide, and I'm indestructible, so why don't you just accept reality and enjoy your
last few minutes? Do yourself a favor. It’s not such a tragedy—being a microscopic bug isn’t so bad, you just don’t have so many distractions. So just relax, don’t do any work, and I’ll come back and chat a little more before I cut out the painless way. I’m known as a prodigious talker; you know. See ya soon.”

“Wait! What about these alligators?”

“Aw, they can’t hurt you.” And then the little mouth and eyes were gone, and all of a sudden there were people working over at the loading dock and at the shipping desk, while the monster cap screw was nestled in my shirt pocket.

I yelled out to Larry down at shipping to come down and help me with the gators, which were just lolling around like St. Bernards. He came up closer to hear me and stepped right on a scaly green tail but didn’t notice anything unusual. I paid him the five bucks I owed him for the Bears exhibition game, and he went back to boxing bolts.

I gave the gators a long look, while they kept turning their heads sideways to see me better. And smiling. “Nice gator…” One of them came up and licked my hand. I could feel his teeth, and smell the worst case of bad breath in the continental United States, but he seemed really friendly.

They all lolled out of the way when I stepped real easy around them, then I wandered back to the stairs. Thought I’d go talk to Charley up on the fourth floor about the whole thing, since he’s about the smartest guy at Hardware Supply, and his brother went to college for a year. Didn’t know what I was going to say to him when I found him, since I wasn’t even sure I believed anything that had been going on, but I wanted to talk to somebody who wasn’t an alien creature or an alligator.

Charley works in plating up there on four, and he’s always hard to find in all the smoke and soot, in between all the big boiling pots. Took about five minutes to find him. He was way up in the scaffolding, trying to get one of about a million chains that are up there back in its track. I climbed up the metal ladder, which was hot as a radiator boilover, and joined him up there. I think this was around the time I beginning to feel awful worried.

He was grunting and groaning with that big chain, all covered with smoke and oil, but you could never say about Charley Waterman that he wasn’t always a big, friendly type of guy. Anyhow, I owed him money
from the Bears game, too, so he was specially glad to see me.

“Jimmy!” he yells, with a big smile on his face. He clapped me on the shoulder with one of those big ham hands of his and about knocked me off the platform, then grabbed me and straightened me up real fast like a punching bag, all of which was what knocked that cap screw out of my shirt pocket. Both of us watched it fall.

“Awww, DOGCRAP!” Charley yelled, his favorite expression. “If the foreman sees that, he’s gonna wanna kick my ass! What did ya have to have that in yer pocket for, Jimmy?”

It bounced off the edge of the vat of hot copper, right into the vat full of boiling zinc. And you know, that set me to remembering what the creature said about his people and zinc—that it was their only weakness. Guess falling in that vat won’t kill the thing, but it’ll sure put it out of commission for a million years or so.

Of course, that’s if you believe all this stuff that talking ¾-15 x 2½ cap screw had to say. I was going to ask Charley what he thought about the whole thing, except that a minute ago Charley disappeared, along with everything else.

EMILY IN PLATO’S CAVE

For H—

Sherry Gamble

“The truth must dazzle gradually
or every man be blind.” —Emily Dickinson

Shadow chained to shadow
In cavernous ignorance
If catapulted into sun
(Unequivocal bright light)

Night’s unlearning—their yearning
Turns to blindness—their blight.
Saints and poets—philosophers only
Are spared unimpeded sight.
DEATH OF A GOD

Elizabeth Chace

My mind cannot comprehend
the things you are telling me
The joy I once felt has faded
For in my mind
I made you a god
of perfection and beauty
One that would never hurt me
But it would have been best,
Not to see you again
For before my own eyes
You killed the god
I made you.
On a peaceful summer's day in the placid village of Gloversville, New York, all hell broke loose. Posters had been up for two weeks, announcing the arrival of a group of female wrestlers. The villagers had never even heard of lady wrestlers, so they were dubiously awaiting the Tigresses (as the wrestlers were called). It was like a circus sideshow to the townfolk. These women were going to be freaks, for how many real women in the year 1919 went travelling around the country? For two weeks the men in the town had been saying, “First they have lady wrestlers. The next thing you know, hell will freeze over!” But hell did not freeze over; it just broke loose.

Anyway, these ladies arrived in Gloversville on a hot summer's day. There were eighteen of them. They were robust and red and hard. They looked almost like men—especially since they weren’t smiling.

The Tigresses rode into town in six automobiles. Their manager, a cigar-smoking roughneck named Mick Gannon, was driving the first car in the parade. As they drove down Main Street to the Gloversville Inn, the townfolk peered out of their windows, staring at them. One little boy ran out of his house, pointing and laughing at the big women. His mother promptly pulled him back into the house and slammed the door.

The ladies were undaunted by the cold and curious stares they were receiving. They were laughing and shoving each other and—oh, mercy! They were smoking cigars!

The good women of Gloversville swore that they would not allow their husbands and children to watch the lady wrestlers. Imagine—smoking cigars! And in public! The townswomen became more and more disgusted as they stared out their windows in fascination. Meanwhile, the men of Gloversville were gathered in the pool hall, for it was Saturday. Even they stopped playing in order to watch the procession of lady wrestlers. Amazingly enough, not one cat-call came from among the group of men. They were in awe of the wrestling women. (Indeed, some of them were downright afraid, although they never would have admitted it).

Mick Gannon and his Tigresses parked in front of the Gloversville
Inn. The lady wrestlers rolled out of their automobiles, throwing suitcases at one another and making rude remarks about each other's figures, pompadours, and hats. "Hey, Enid, your head looks like an ostrich with its head stuck in the ground!" "Aw, Myrtle, you're one to talk, you with your bats-in-the-belfry pompadour!"

Mick Gannon climbed out of his automobile. "Awright, girls, we ain't got all day to sit around and rib each other. We got a show this afternoon."

"Aw, Mick, we wasn't pickin' on you, honey!"
"Yeah, Mick, what's your beef?"
"We was just havin' fun!"

Despite the roughhousing and kidding, Mick Gannon and the Tigresses were genuinely fond of each other. They travelled all over New York state together, eating in the same restaurants and staying in the same hotels. The Tigresses and Mick had grown up in the city of New York, a city where street fights and prostitution were prevalent. Mick had rescued these women from the world of red lights and gang fights; he had offered them a way out. He was a great organizer, Mick Gannon, and from these eighteen women he had formed a united group. The Tigresses were the only lady wrestlers in New York state, and they always packed the auditorium everywhere they went. The women couldn't understand why people would pay to watch women wrestle, but Mick Gannon understood. He knew that people were attracted to freaks. He would stand in the back of auditoriums all across the state, smoking his cigar, watching the audience clap and cheer as the Tigresses threw each other on the floor. He was no dummy, Mick Gannon. He had made a lot of money because he understood people. And he understood people because he watched them very carefully.

"Come on, girls. Jeez—I gotta herd you ladies like a bunch of cows!" Mick Gannon waved at the group of men who were gawking at the Tigresses. The men did not even notice him. They were too engrossed in watching the lady wrestlers.

By the time Mick had turned around, a scuffle had erupted. Two women were clawing and screaming at each other. Before Mick could stop them, two more women had taken sides and joined in the fight. Before he knew it, the Civil War was being recreated before his eyes. Feathers were flying everywhere; skirts were pulled up and high-topped shoes were kicking out beneath them. Shrill voices were screeching
curses and flinging insults. The ladies could be heard all over town. This was too much for the people of Gloversville. They rushed out of their houses down to the Inn—they just had to see what was going on! There had never been a big fight in Gloversville before—nothing more than little boys pulling little girls' pigtails and such. This was a full-scale riot to these peaceful people. (By the way, this date, June 22, 1919, is marked in Gloversville history as the date of the first riot in town).

Mick Gannon rushed to the midst of the fight, shaking the women as he passed them... "Hey, listen—we don’t give previews to our shows!" he yelled. After much yelling and shaking, he finally got the wrestlers calmed down. "Now what's the problem with you girls?" he asked the two who had begun the whole business.

"Pauline said that I was fat!" a fat lady named Emma pouted.

"Listen, baby, that just means that there’s more of you to love," Mick said soothingly. He always pacified the women in this manner.

Mick rolled his eyes, saying to the townfolk, "Jeez, the things a man has to do to keep a woman happy!" The people laughed a little nervously. They knew that any man who could tame these eighteen Tigresses was a pretty powerful person.

"All right, ladies, let's rest up for our show. Now get into a single line and go into the hotel—quiet now!" The Tigresses meekly picked up their bags and filed into the hotel.

The Gloversville Inn had fifteen rooms in it. (Gloversville was not considered one of New York's prime attractions). Mick Gannon and the Tigresses inhabited ten of those fifteen rooms. Needless to say, the Inn was very noisy that day.

The Tigress' show was at five o'clock that afternoon. Every woman in Gloversville forbade her husband and children to go to the show, secretly hoping that her husband would forbid her to forbid him to go, and what's more, he would drag her along with him. This is precisely what happened. And while the wives continued to argue at their husbands, they were inwardly glad that they were being forced to go and watch the lady wrestlers. As a result, the entire town turned out to see the Tigresses. Each husband and wife argued through the entire show, but nevertheless, everyone did turn out. Mick Gannon was well pleased.

The lady wrestlers were amazing. They could pick each other up over their heads, flip each other, and scream marvelous curses at each
other. The men and children of Gloversville were enthralled. The women of the town, while arguing at their husbands, watched the show out of the corners of their eyes. While they loudly mouthed their disgust, they were really fascinated by the Tigresses—and even a little jealous. Just think—if they were as strong as those 'lady wrestlers, their husbands would obey their every wish! Ah, life could be so serene . . .

As the pace of the wrestlers' movements became faster and faster, the noise level from the women of Gloversville grew louder and louder. Children started crying because their ears hurt from the noise. This only served to add to the confusion. When it seemed as if everyone's eardrums would burst, one woman, imitating the wrestlers, threw her husband onto the floor. Taking her cue, all of the wives began flipping their husbands and screaming the same insults at them that the lady wrestlers used on each other. The downtrodden men of Gloversville looked up at their wives, who were glowering triumphantly down on them. (This date is also recorded in Gloversville history as the date of the first women's liberation uprising).

The bewildered Tigresses stopped throwing each other and watched the audience. Mick Gannon, who was standing behind the townfolk, shouted, “Come on, girls!” The Tigresses ran to the Inn, grabbed their suitcases, jumped into their automobiles, and sped home to New York City.

The husbands and wives did not speak to each other for a week and a day after the Tigresses had left. The men would gather in the pool hall each evening, discussing the Tigresses and the manner in which the lady wrestlers had affected their wives. They were extremely confused men at first, but eventually reached the conclusion that the Gloversville women were merely trying to be like the city women. Perhaps the good wives of Gloversville believed that all city women acted like the Tigresses.

When the Gloversville Town Council met the next week, they passed a law stating that from this day forth, female wrestlers would be prohibited from appearing in the city. And if you go to Gloversville today, you will find that that same law is still on the record. If you ask around, some oldtimer might be able to tell you this story. But if you never make it to Gloversville (as many don't), you now know why lady wrestlers aren't allowed in the city. (This story is God's truth, too—it's recorded in the minutes of the Town Council meeting on June 31, 1919!).
COMMING HOME

Roseanne Chamberlain

Coming home to broken houses,
Dying houses; friends that used to be
Old next to me
Are no more (where are the years?).

Coming home to broken booths,
Changing business; friends that used to be
Right next to me
Are now gone (where are the cheers?).

Coming home to stilted steeple
Filled with people; friends that used to be
Familiar next to me
Are not there (where are the dears?).

Ah, but coming home to this confusion
Brings illusions; friends that begot me
Their strength next to me
Are ever here (what need I fear?).
That our reciprocal belief in one another is a necessary and sufficient condition for our mutual existence was not the point. And the questions of whether you are or I am is a debate which I will leave for our computers. The indisputable fact remains: Oslek was becoming.

The morning after a violent electrical storm over the isolated mining community of Kann in the Kdesh Mountains, the innkeeper’s daughter found an abandoned infant in a stand of bushes on a hillock behind the inn. The innkeeper took the semi-moron (who was that way not by choice but from an intentional accident of birth) under his roof and raised him as one of his own. One of his own dogs. Oslek’s job in life was to clean filth and to wait on filth of the human variety. His purpose in life, however, was entertainment.

The most entertained of all was a sub-human named Vadim, whose only feelings of superiority came when he tormented those who were even less than he. Unfortunately, the only person fitting that description was Oslek. But Oslek had come to count Vadim as a friend. Vadim was always laughing at Oslek and Oslek liked happy people. But all this was about to change. For as I said, Oslek was becoming.

One night Oslek was leaning over the bar drumming his fingers and staring into one of the mugs of local brew on the tray before him. He had been feeling peculiar for several days, but had attributed it to excitement over the upcoming celebration. But now he wasn’t sure of his own identity, much less the validity of his rationalizations.

From somewhere to his left came the cry, “Hey Semonoff, where our beer?”

“Oslek, get your ass over to that table!” ordered the innkeeper looking up from the waitress he was fondling.

Oslek picked up the tray and headed towards the direction of the shout. But Vadim, who was constantly providing Oslek with ways in which to fulfill his purpose in life, had other ideas.

Vadim was sitting at the end of a long bench which faced an equally long table. He and his drinking buddies had had a rough day in the
shafts and now they wanted to see someone else get shafted. Now if you had been sitting on the west side of the third table back on the right, you would have witnessed what next happened.

Vadim, in a display of characteristic brilliance, interrupted Oslek's valiant ambulatory efforts with the aid of his right foot. The tray and mugs went flying. Oslek slid several feet along the wooden floor, his face depriving some boards of several splinters. Vadim and his buddies were seized by a severe attack of laughter.

Now usually at a moment like this one, Oslek would be laughing too and saying things like, "Clumsy Oslek," But as I keep reminding you, Oslek was becoming and wasn't laughing at all. He lifted himself up onto his elbows and was overwhelmed by an emotion previously unknown to him. Hatred.

The miners were so caught up in their own amusement that they did not see Oslek approach the table and stand over Vadim. He had been laughing so hard that his face had acquired a nice rosy color and tears were rolling off his cheeks. "Boy you sure be . . ." he was saying as Oslek's fist met Vadim's teeth. The blow sent Vadim flying off the bench. He pulled a knife and was saying something, through blood and broken teeth, about killing the goddamn moron, when Oslek turned him into a glass of ale and drank him. He was so amused with his new found ability that he turned the remaining astonished customers into ale and became quite drunk. Before passing out, he mumbled, "What in the nine hells am I doing here," (emphasis on the here) and vanished.

Deep within the gravitational well of a G2 star is The Bleeding Lady and her paramour.

"He's back," says The Bleeding Lady. Hatred, Fear.

"He's back," says the Paramour, knowing a reply is not required.

"We've got to get him before he integrates," she says with desperation.

"You're still in love with him," sob the Paramour, in an unusual display of courage.

In way of reply, The Bleeding Lady's wrath causes the sun to go nova.

"Shit," she says as he and The Paramour phase out.

The bartender pointed to a table where a lone man sat fingering an empty glass. The figure picked up his drink and walked slowly over to the table. "He say you a matcher," he said.
“For a drink, I’ll be anything,” admitted Talo the empath. “Sit down, my friend.” The man looked reluctant but sat.

“See anybody you like?” asked Talo, taking three coins from his pocket.

“How ‘bout blonde with big bazooms?” the man ventured.

Talo threw the three coins six times and studied the resulting hexagram. “Has a boyfriend who would cause you much tissue damage.”

“What?”

“Would beat the shit out of you.”

“Oh,” came the brilliant reply.

Talo bit his lip and quickly read each of the establishment’s sordid customers. He found the match, but for the sake of showmanship began to toss the coins again. Not wanting a consultation for the Talo to be wasted, he posed his own question. He then threw the coins and wrote down the hexagram.

“Well?” said the man eagerly.

“How about the brunette with the medium bazooms?”

The man looked the brunette over and finally nodded his head.

“What I say?” asked the man.

So you know of my work, thought Talo. He gave the man the necessary words to break the ice. The man, obviously pleased, then got up and started for the brunette’s table.

“What about my drink?” demanded Talo.

“Finish mine, dad,” the man sneered.

No gratitude anymore, thought Talo, as he reached across the table for the mug. As he was downing what little was left, he remembered the question he had asked the oracle. “Will this boredom never end?” He studied the hexagram that he had written on a napkin.

which had an old yang in the fourth line, which changed it to the 52nd
hexagram,

_ken, the Mountain_

So a stranger is to end my ennui, he thought. A stranger in trouble though. Needing a "resting place" and "his mind is not at ease." But Ken indicates I've got to be decisive in my actions. Much rather be Hamlet than Othello. But if the I Ching says I must, I will.

He stood up with minimal difficulty and staggered out the door. In order to lessen the morning hangover, he decided to take the long cut through the warehouse district. A thunderstorm had just passed over the city and the air smelled of ozone. He was trying to avoid one of the deeper puddles when he heard the footfalls behind him. He wasn't worried; empaths could talk their way out of anything. He turned around with a big grin on his face and read the gang. He stopped grinning. Well, almost anything, he revised, realizing that these boys would be satisfied with nothing less than his blood. Maybe one of these is my stranger, he thought.

"You want to play, pretty daddy?" said the largest assailant.
"Well, actua..."
"Shut up, dad," he said, as he slammed Talo into a brick wall and put a knife to his throat.
"Hey Earl, save piece for me;" said one of Earl's buddies.
"I too, huh?" said another.
"Take easy," Earl said, as he took the blade away from Talo's throat. "You get turn."

Talo felt a slight trickle of blood running down his throat. But once again his attention was diverted from the trivial as Earl drove his knee into Talo's groin. He was too busy being doubled up with pain on the wet gravel to see what happened next. But he heard the cries of surprise and a sound similar to that made by squashing melons. When he was finally able to raise his head, he saw four of his attackers spread out on the pavement and the fifth limping away.

Someone started to lift him. "Be okay?" the lifter asked.
“Ugh?” asked Talo in return.

“Where be live?” the man asked, as he supported Talo.

All Talo could do was raise a finger and point in the general direction.

As they headed down the street, Talo saw a glimmer of light at the periphery of his vision.

The Man also saw a flash of light from the warehouse directly in front of them. And the sound of snapping tree trunks. Or was it thunder? But his speculations were drowned in a tidal wave of sensation. In its effort to interpret the barrage, his brain put supernovas behind this eyes and thermonuclear explosions within his ears. He dropped Talo to the pavement and slapped his hands over his ears. But this was fruitless. Finally he just screamed out in his anger and his fear. As the noise left his throat, the assault stopped and the warehouse disintegrated in a violent explosion.

‘Let’s go,” yelloed a somewhat recovered Talo through falling dust, “before the habali show up.”

Not arguing, The Man let Talo lead him away. This time it was Talo playing Good Samaritan, for The Man could neither hear nor see.

Her siddhi muh diminished from The Man’s retaliatory blast, The Bleeding Lady sits licking her wounds.

“I don’t see why you bother with him” cries The Paramour, taking advantage of her lover’s weakened condition. “I don’t see why you and I can’t just go . . . .”

The Bleeding Lady ends her sentence with a lightning bolt. The singed paramour bites her lip and begins her usual groveling, as she realizes that The Bleeding Lady has more power than she had suspected.

The cool October breeze off of Walker Lake blew through the hair of Kicking Bear and Short Bull. They were here with several hundred other Indians from many different tribes to see the Messiah. He appeared just before sundown and raised his arms to capture their attention. They built a huge bonfire before him, for it was growing dark and they wished to see him.

“All Indians must dance,” he began. “Everywhere keep dancing. When Great spirit comes this way, then all Indians go to mountains. High up away from Whites. All dead Indians come back and live again. you must not hurt anybody. Do right always.” He turned and left them to
learn the dance of the ghosts.

Later in his cabin, his father asked, “Do you think it will really work Jack?”

The Wanekia leaned back and absentmindedly drummed his fingers along the side of his stool. “Unlike the Whites,” he said, “the Indians are an isolated people. If enough of them truly believe what I have said, they they will indeed go to the reality I have prepared for them when they are divorced from the reality of the Whites at death.”

They had just finished breakfast and Talo was holding a steaming cup of Morning Thunder tea in both hands. “I never did thank you for helping me last night,” said a sorer but wiser Talo.

“That’s my name,” said a suspicious Talo.

“Yeah,” mumbled The Man, as he examined the little apartment and drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

“Wait a minute. Wasn’t that the name of the guy who . . . ,” began Talo, remembering parts of last night’s conversation. “So you got no name,” decided Talo. He paused a moment and then said, “What happened last night anyway?”

The Man shrugged his shoulders.

Talo quickly read him. It was a big light for you. Big noise. But why wasn’t I able to read that last night. Talo paused a moment and looked the stranger over carefully. This is my stranger, he thought. Uptight and needing a place to hangout. But the oracle didn’t say anything about lights and explosions. Well at least I’m not bored. Definitive action, the oracle said. Okay, my stranger, let’s go see Carter.

The nurse at the front desk seemed skeptical. She had only been
...working this ward for a year and didn’t know who Talo was. Had been. Of course, his attire didn’t help matters any.

“Listen, mister, we got a waiting list two kilobytes long. But you have to see the doctor today. No way, dad.”

“You listen, nursie,” Talo said, putting his empathic powers to use, “if you don’t want to run bedpans for the rest of your life, you’d better get on that phone and tell him the Wandering Minster’s here to see him.”

Having no choice, the nurse complied.

Dr. Clements burst through the doors and signalled the approaching security guard that he was not needed. “Where’ve you been, Talo!” he yelled, while picking him off the floor in a bear hug.

“Got a patient for you,” he said freeing an arm and going over his shoulder.

“Sure, my friend,” the doctor said, with his arm around Talo’s shoulders. “Bring him into my chamber of horrors.”

The Man didn’t like the sound of that, but followed anyway.

An hour later, the doctor returned, holding a clipboard with a computer printout attached to it.

“Even under deepest Probe, he can’t remember who he is,” said Carter.

“Just like the rest of us,” mumbled Talo.

“What?” Carter said, looking up from the clipboard.

“Nothing,” replied Talo. “What about the fireworks?”

“I had someone check your story out. That building really did explode.”

“I meant the lights and the...”

“Oh. The Probe can . . . . By the way, I wish you’d come back, Doctor. You’re still the best I’ve ever seen with the Probe.”

“You were talking about lights, I believe.”

“Okay, Talo, I won’t press the issue.” Carter paused to organize his thoughts. “His brain was bombarded by a level of stimulation which I never would have suspected could be experienced. Obviously it was not based in reality. Otherwise you would have suffered the same experience. Notwithstanding your eyewitness account, the same conclusion would have been reached. For had the stimulation been real, his receptor nerves would be fried and the receptors themselves permanently damaged.”

“The formation of adrenolutin would be the obvious, I checked that out. Shot him up with a massive dose of adrenaline, but got none of the
hallucinogen formed. As a matter of fact, his nervous pathways are just as textbook perfect as the rest of his body."

"You know," said Talo, "if I were still hanging out with that group of pseudo-intellectuals we used to party with . . . ."

"That reminds me," Carter interrupted. "I'm having a party tonight at my place and I need you for moral support."

"I'd rather not," said Talo. "Now as I was saying . . . ."

"Listen, my friend, they wouldn't frustrate you if you would change your attitude. Stop expecting them to converse on your level and just go as an observer. You might even enjoy yourself for once. Besides, if you don't come, I'll slap you with a bill for this afternoon's session that'll take a year's booze allowance to pay off."

Talo bit his lip and reluctantly conceded.

"Now as you were saying," prompted Carter.

"They'd probably say the whole thing was of a supernatural origin," said Talo with a smile.

"I'd say that he was under attack," said Carter, who wasn't smiling.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Has pain driven you into such a mindless state that you don't even question life anymore?"

"What I meant . . . ," began Talo.

"The hell you did."

"Okay. Just get off my back." He stood a while in thought. "Since it wasn't physiological stress, maybe another psychologically stressful situation will cause it to happen again."

"Another fight?" Carter suggested.

Talo shook his head and rubbed his bandaged throat.

"Fear would do it," the doctor ventured, "or sex."

"Aleah," Talo suggested.

"A flash of genius, my friend," the doctor said with a smile.

"So we think that if you were to have sex with an empath . . . ."

"You volunteering, old man?"

"Well actually," said a grinning Talo, "I had my daughter in mind."

"I think about it," said The Man, who was drumming his fingers on the sofa. "When we go to party?"
“Now, I suppose,” Talo said, looking at the wall clock.
“Got to take dump first,” The Man said, as he got up and headed for the floor’s communal bathroom.

*This situation calls for seven hundred years of wisdom*, thought Talo, as he took out his three coins and ragged copy of the I Ching. “What’s going to happen?” he asked. He threw the coins six times. *The 38th hexagram*, he noted. *K’uei, Disunion. With a change in line six.* He leafed through the pages until he came to the explanation. *Heaven and earth are separate and apart, but with a common will they seek the same object. Great indeed are the phenomena and the results of this condition of disunion and separation.* He paused a moment in thought and then looked at the meaning of the changing line. *The topmost line undivided shows its subject solitary amid the prevailing disunion.*

For some reason, Talo took this as an approval of his plan. He was about to look up the 54th hexagram, the one that the 38th changed into, when the man returned. Talo got his coat and started for the door. He did not suspect that the prophecy applied to himself and not to The Man.

Talo, drink in hand, had been cornered by a supercilious young graduate student and was obliged to listen to her insipid conversation. “So you see,” she was saying, “the part about the peach means that he’ll have to eat fruit to relieve the constipation characteristic of old age.” *Jesus Christ,* thought Talo, *No wonder I went to the Low Section. At least it’s real there. Hell, even the bullshit’s real.* He paused a moment and bit his lip. *What am I doing here anyway?*

He was reminded as he looked over the girl’s shoulder and saw The Man escape into one of the first floor bedrooms. The smiled at the springing of the trap. *Sorry my friend, but the Oracle gives you not time to procrastinate.*

Thinking that he was smiling at her witty dialogue, the girl graced him with another of her theories. All Talo could do was grab another drink off of a passing tray and hope that his plan would justify this torment.

The people were oppressing. He had to get away. Rest. Needed a place to rest. He slid into the dim room, put his head back against the door, and relished the moment of peace. But when he opened his eyes, he noticed a girl lying on the bed. With a sigh, he reached for the doornob. She got up then and said, “Don’t leave,” in a voice he was compelled to
obey. She left the bed and walked slowly over to him. Looking into her eyes made him want to weep. But then she began touching him in places and in ways he had never known he had wanted to be touched. By the time he realized that this was Aleah, the empath’s daughter, he was carried away on a wave of passion.

He was so busy making the beast with the two backs, that he was unaware of the thumbs pressing into his carotids. As he opened his eyes just before passing out, he realized that the woman beneath him was no longer Aleah but the Bleeding Lady. *Now how I know her name,* was his thought as he passed into darkness.

His perspective suddenly changed. When next he looked upon the scene, it was from a height of several feet above the bed. He watched as The Bleeding Lady deprived the last of his brain cells of precious oxygen. He was beginning to wonder how he could be witnessing things as he was, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder. He turned and saw The Bleeding Lady’s paramour floating with him.

_You’re dead,* she said. *Don’t be afraid. But you must follow me quickly, before she realizes what is happening._

Talo looked from The Paramour, to his dying body, and back again.

_Quickly,* said The Paramour fearfully.

With the equivalent of a shrug, The Man followed The Paramour out of the room, through the crowd, and out of the building. Talo saw a glimmer of light at the corner of his eye, but his alcohol clouded mind attributed it to a reflection off a wine glass. Soon The Paramour and The Man were moving off planet and through space.

*Where we go,* asked The Man, trying to start a conversation.

*To that phenomenon which manifest itself as Arcturus,* she replied.

_Uh... yeah,* said The Man, deciding against conversation.

He was filled with tranquility as he moved through the blackness. All of his old fears dissipated, clearing his mind completely for the first time in his life. He was even beginning to remember... . .

There were suddenly assaulted by a storm of meteors. The Paramour quickly phased out before The Bleeding Lady became aware of her presence also. The Man was merely wondering how a meteor could harm him if he were dead. With that thought he disappeared.

He was backed up to the stone wall by a mob of people. They looked
uncertain, but were being urged on by the wild eyed woman who was leading them. “Stone him!” she screamed, picking up a small, jagged stone in her left hand. “Kill the blasphemer!” she screeched, as the stone left her hand. It struck The Man in the temple and he fell to his knees. He wiped the blood from his eyes and looked pleadingly at The Bleeding Lady. “Why?” he sobbed. In way of reply, she hurled a larger stone.

He had been knocked off of his horse by the arrow of a Welsh longbowman. The weight of his armor pinned him helplessly to the ground. He heard footsteps coming towards him through the mud and began to say a prayer from childhood. Someone opened his faceplate. He saw The Bleeding Lady smile as she rammed her broadsword into his face.

She took another bite of the green apple she was holding and called him a fool for refusing knowledge. He was finally swayed by her argument. By listening, he lost his soul. But now he knew who she was.

He was sitting beneath a Bodhi tree, finally beginning to understand. The Bleeding Lady brought forth all of the treasurers of the world to tempt him. But having divorced himself from the mundane, he only blew her a kiss and returned for awhile to a state of nonbeing.

The advancing crowd had backed her up against the stone wall. When the angered crowd began picking up stones, she started to whimper. But then The Man pushed his way through the mob to the front. He turned to them and dispersed them with their own sins. He walked towards The Bleeding Lady, but she started screaming and ran down the narrow street.

She shifted to a shorter frequency and plowed through the crystal ball. He followed, the color of saffron. He finally caught up to her somewhere over the North Pole and began to sap her energy. As she passed from infrared into the radio region, she began to scream.

She was standing on a street corner with a small caliber pistol pointed at his midsection. He kissed her gently on the lips. She screamed
one last time and threw herself in front of a passing bus. The Paramour was driving.

He walked up the bus's three steps and took The Paramour by the hand saying, "Let me make you whole." She followed him off and stood with him over The Bleeding Lady. The thoroughly astonished passengers could only watch as The Man gently picked The Bleeding Lady up in his arms and the three beings vanished.

Being an orthodox iconoclast, Talo didn't like funerals. Especially the one he had just come from. He threw off his coat and went to the refrigerator to get a beer. As he sat down at the kitchen table, he noticed the hexagram that had approved his trap. Then he realized that he had never looked up the second hexagram. He pulled the I Ching from his pocket and read the interpretation of the 54th hexagram.

Kuei Mei, the Marrying Maiden. "Action will be evil and in no way advantageous." He sat back, closed his eyes, and indulged in a moment of self-pity. Not knowing what else to do, Talo took out his coins to consult the oracle. "What do I do now?" he sighed.

The eighth hexagram, Pi, Union, was forced with a moving line in the first position. "The subject is seeking union with its object," said the oracle. "There will be good fortune after initial difficulties. Yeah. I'd call death an initial difficulty, thought Talo. But what do you mean union? I never know what you mean. "What do you mean, damn you!" he yelled, as he threw the book across the kitchen. He cradled his head in his hands and did not notice as someone picked the book off the floor.

"Talo," the Man said gently.

"What!" Talo yelled, jumping up so violently that the table overturned. "Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed, when he saw who it was.

"That's quite correct, my friend."

"We just buried you this afternoon," continued Talo. "Look, I wouldn't have buried you if I'd known you weren't dead," he said, as he took a bottle of gin from one of the cabinets.

"Sit down Talo," The man said, as he uprighted a chair. "This isn't the body you buried. This form is just something I put together from some atoms that were cluttering up your living room."

Talo didn't feel the cactus needles as he gulped down the last of the gin.

"Here's someone I want you to meet," The Man said, producing
The Paramour.

Talo wasn’t sure if it was merely a result of the alcohol, but he could have sworn he was looking at himself. Not that he resembled the woman in front of him. But there was something that only his empathic powers allowed him to see that convinced him that he and the woman were the same being.

“Correct again, Dad,” The Man said, knowing the other’s thoughts. “The Bleeding Lady—my wife, mother, and soon to be my daughter—split you and submerged me in order to gain dominion. But she’s powerless now, Father. And she’s on her way to a new start, just as you will be when the two of you are one again. Maybe this time, she will be able to fulfill her own reality and not be swayed by that of these humans we serve.”

It was then that The Man, who was not a man, touched Talo’s forehead and took his essence from him. The body that had been called Talo slumped lifelessly back in the chair. Wanting to preserve her own identity, The Paramour began to phase out. But The Man took her hand and she was only able to follow him.

The Man stood watching Aleah as she slept. Now forming within her womb were The Bleeding Lady and the reunited paramour and Talo. *Sleep well, mother of God,* he thought. *In a different form I will enter your life again to help you raise our children. But now I am needed elsewhere.*

In an inn in the isolated community of Kann, are the innkeeper, two waitresses, forty-six miners, and Oslek. All but one recently resurrected from their involuntary alcoholic state.

Oslek was sprawled on the floor saying, “Clumsy Oslek.” The man who was sitting next to Vadim hit him and said, “You no cause to do that.” A dumbfounded Vadim then watched as he walked over to help Oslek up.

*One at a time,* Oslek thought. *One at a time.*
The more I work,  
the less I do.  
The more I drink,  
the less I'm blue.

The more I think,  
the less I know.  
The more I write,  
the less it shows.

The more I feel,  
the less I care.  
The more I risk,  
The less I dare.

The more I get,  
the less I try.  
The more I hurt,  
the less I cry.

The more I pay,  
the less I give.  
The more confused,  
The less I live.

The more I look,  
the less I see.  
The more I ask  
don't answer me.
The five-year old boy knew he was young and small. But, running without slowing and looking only at his tight legs, he pretended to be about thirty and six feet tall—men’s and children’s jeans looked about the same. This March day shone only two weeks after winter had gone, and still it was warm, blue, and big and his mind could not come to winter now. He watched his own red shoes slap down a hill until they ran into a marsh.

He soon would forget wet socks, however, for he left behind his yard and would try, again, to go past the western hills. His family had no neighbors in that direction, making it a mysterious country where maybe no man would live. Always warned and threatened by his parents and Cousin Jennifer, the boy feared that place on dark days but now could only run toward it. Something in this blue-backgrounded air, one which at ten a.m. attacked his throat in a nice way, made him feel no fear of distance. A long time before, he had tried to go up and over the first western hill. He had stopped and sat two-thirds the way up and noticed suddenly that his father was coming. His Dad spanked him that day and made him mad, but afterward described the dangers of going away and scared the boy to where he wanted another spanking. Now, the boy ran and thought of how they had laughed at his want, and this memory made him embarrassed. He did not slow, the air keeping his throat wet for longer than usual.

His toe kicked a mound and he fell. Still feeling good, he slapped dirt off his pants and looked back suddenly. He could almost picture his father—he too in jeans—long-legging it after him. For several minutes, he thought about that picture, held his hands clapped, and almost started back homeward. Then, however, he looked to the hilltop and realized he was no farther along than at age four. I’m older and taller, he thought. I should get a couple steps higher this year.

And the boy made the hilltop easily, ran up and over another; he discovered how many big green and brown hills were in the west. After
more than an hour of counting proudly the distance behind him, moving some more, looking back again, he realized that the air had lost its watery taste. It had been fun going so far. Very satisfied, he escaped homeward excitedly—not really escaped, but pretend so—and the feeling thrilled him. Just as abruptly, however, he stopped atop the first hill eastward. He hadn’t done that very last western hill, discouragingly one of the tallest. God, he had gone way, way past last year's Going Away. Go up the last one, and then run home, he thought.

“I’m glad I came up this one too,” the boy mouthed when he gazed westward from the final hilltop. He saw a giant lake, brown at its near rocky levee, blue fifty feet out and beyond, then flaming white before the sky dropped into it. Land—hills, houses, and trees—surrounded the giant body out to the horizon.

But, the boy could not get to it. The eastern levee had pointed rocks bigger than he, and thin, spidery trees with no leaves but something extra dark about their tops. He needed to get closer to that big water, however, plus find out why the trees seemed different. Cautiously, he jogged to where the levee’s shorter brush pushed out visitors. To reach the lake’s shallow edge then, he would have had to either step through this foot brush or jump over it, then inch down the bank. But, he heard little noises, cracklings and perhaps live things giving off air, inside and they seemed of aggressive but defensive. To the boy, in fact, this entire eastern rim did not want his visit, and it worried him that trees and rocks could give him a human thought. Like people, this small wood could hurt his feelings.

Up in those treetops, the dark stuff he had spotted was alive; a reptilian clump that hypnotized him and hurried him through several moments of panicked thought. At last he saw that the black bundle was many, many snakes sleeping in the great sunlight. Another bundle waved in a treetop nearby. Suddenly, the boy felt as if he could make snakes by just looking at a new rock, a new plant. They slithered all around below; he now learned a rising rattling sound and its source. He stepped well back from the brush, for he knew not how fast these snakes could be, and, not once looking from their jerky animation nor closing his mouth, he trotted northward and hoped he could pass around them.
As he ran that way he noticed a meeting point at the northern foot of the last western hill and the levee. There was no grass, but soft amber mud at this lowest point, and a noisy branch of water crossed the mud and ducked beneath a grassy mound. He discovered: the stream covered over the mud at just this one spot and that the mud stretched all the way to the lake. He looked back along the great hill's north side and found a main body to this stream. The thaw had built it to a leaping white, but clear, stampede that somehow tapered, drenching the earth at its sides, took one last trickling turn across the mud, and burrowed underground. The small wild flow back upstream stole him from the almost still lake, for now.

Beside its widest rush, the stream had sprouted little mud volcanos that echoed a tiny plopping noise in each when the boy ran near. Further upstream, where the body twisted and seemed troubled in its aim, knee- and ankle-high fountains billowed. He had spotted more of these in the distant east and they had looked like fluttering gray claws. He ran to them now and watched for a moment only, for it was the comparatively lifeless and dirty mud bumps he wanted most.

He knelt beside one six-inch high mound for several minutes when, just as he had made snakes be on rocks, he looked and looked until something *did* work its way into the tubular mouth. It was dark, dark, moving up and down. It clicked. And when it began to rise, its body with the color and motion of an army tank, the boy saw that it was longer than the mound itself. He had seen one of these before, when his Dad had fished. But, that thing's pincers were soft and flimsy and, in fact, the whole creature was much smaller. Lifting from the volcano, today's creature looked almost metallic, its bumps however resembling those on plastic dinosaurs.

The boy kept three feet away and watched it crawl fast and slow, backward and forward, then around the mound. Between its long stretches of dark green, very slight stains of turquoise fascinated the child. At times he could not quite tell if this special color was really even there. Now, the creature seemed to be showing off as it worked to the limit its segmented tail and all its feelers. Then, it tried to scare him away, facing him squarely, rising and aiming its claws like big guns, and opening them. The boy, however, was five feet away and too much bigger, anyway—and he had to laugh at its threat. Then, it turned away, leaning forward, and its eight legs drove it speedily into the most furious
The five year old was laughing and sorry for it at once.

At the lake’s shore, he thought little more of the crawfish and soon remembered nothing; he took in only what was happening then. Flashes and flickers continued atop the water, going off by their own power. The one way out where the sky passed behind the lake were much bigger and brighter than the few that turned within the boy’s reach. He looked around and felt the giantism of the basin. he could see, barely, the snake-balls in the distant trees and he felt safe and knew he would be warned by their hisses before they could quite get to him. Looking back out to sea, he noticed that he had seen no life in this lake—only in trees and the skinny stream. Now the crawfish came back to his mind, and he wondered if there were great big ones in these greater waters. This thought pushed him, with a hand not urgent but of wisdom, a step and a half backward. He did not need to see life from this water, anyway. Its blue field of jumping and smooth swirls threw out what seemed almost too much beauty, but he did not know why he felt this happy guilt, a thrilling worry.

An hour later a wind fluttered the shore waves and the seated boy’s short-sleeves. It could not quite chill him, however. Dust rose amid bush gardens, against trees, and up the levee, catching and lifting his attention to the snake trees, now only half as dark as before. They might have been coming. He watched the ground within the levee, saw no snakes, and decided to stand ready in case they were sneaking up on him. He glanced about until his attention had to stop at an especially dark place in the near water. As the snakes’ approach seemed suddenly unimportant, and for a reason unknown to him, he watched this forest green hole, unoccupied in the water . . . until it filled gradually with golden, bigness, taking shape as a great hump—a golden fish his size. He saw no eyes or mouth to it but knew the fish was facing him. For an absorbing ten minutes, it floated still, letting slip bubbles the size of quarters and dimes and tiny pearls; they came apart atop the surface.

When the pretty visitor had dropped without animation into a place below the dark spot, had become an outline with dark contour, and had vanished, the five year-old felt excited suddenly and spoke aloud: “I gotta leave now.” Another thought of the snakes tingled his stomach and hurried him along the stream. And there it was ahead, his armored friend with claws, legging moundward, and neither friend would break stride. “You’re pretty neat,” the boy let it know as he jumped over it.
He found it fun to run back up the far west hill but then slowed down the rest of the way: looking back westward after each new hill, he saw that blue sea grow smaller until it was like a great toy. Soon, he was back from the place he had never been to the home where he had always lived and started worrying suddenly of his old life. He could have been in trouble. He thought hurriedly of both Cousin Jenny—left to care for him this Saturday—and all the things he had just seen. What was the neatest thing? He remembered the motionless fish that had sunk with the slowness of time. And, it looked like a giant one of Jenny’s goldfish, but hers were a little orange, not just golden. There was Jenny, upset at him, standing beside the house. He ran to her so he would look happy to see her, and this final burst burned him from nostrils to chest.

“Stay in bed now until your parents get back,” the blonde instructed him. Often, the boy liked his cousin’s prettiness, even though her hips were not quite as wide as movie stars’. Her face was to the feature as sexy and smart as any he had seen. But he did not like her angry. Then, she would frighten him and might as well have had any face.

After she had chided him and put him away to his first nap in a year, she stalked tensely from his bedroom and he plotted escape. Ten minutes later he knelt before his parents bedroom TV and, just as the picture swelled and shrank back to correct size, a hand from behind squeezed him under each armpit, and he began to come off the floor. Jenny cradled him degradingly, tilting her head as she glared at his face, returned him to his room, and stood him back by the bed.

“Okay. This time give me your clothes, everything.”

He frowned for a moment then walked, almost crying from confusion, to his dresser drawer. To sweep out his jumbled jeans, shorts, socks, and undershirts, he had to put almost his entire upper body inside the big drawer and squeeze together his arms like a claw of his crawfish friend. Spilling socks and little shirts, he toted the bundle toward her.

“Now, Billy. What the hell are you doing?”

“Here.” He tried to be nice about dropping the mess on her feet.

“I want the clothes you’re wearing.”

He had been looking no higher than her waist, but now glanced up twice at her sharp eyes and her half-smile. She turned a little red and rubbed her hand across her eyelids, then laughed through her nose.

“I don’t want to,” he whispered, looking down again.

She gave an intentional and impatient smack of her lips and said,
“C’mon. Get naked.”

He glared into her eyes and tilted his head, as if to say, “What are you trying to do!” Still, he almost cried.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you, Billy, but this will keep you from running all over the house when I say you have to be in bed.”

“But... I won’t go out of the yard anymore.”

“It’s too late for that now.”

He could not see why. “But—I think that—you are trying to embarrass me cause you saw me in the bathtub last night, and—”

“That was an accident. I popped in and popped right back out.”

“... Well then, turn around and cover your eyes.”

Again she smirked. She spun away, waited a couple minutes, heard “Okay,” turned and saw him—still in his jeans. “Is that all your clothes!” They went through it again and when she turned he was wrapped in a yellow blanket.

“Climb up on the bed and try to go to sleep.” Jennifer gathered his fallen clothes, began to drape them over a chair, but chose first to count them. “Your underpants are missing. Were you wearing underpants—” And he was already twisting impatiently beneath the covers; his right hand then presented his shorts like the flag of surrender and he heaved them toward her. They hit her on the forehead.

The boy could stand Jennifer’s red streaked glaring for only an instant before he turned away quickly, bouncing and pinning the cover’s satin lining against his face.

Even if he wanted to sleep, he knew, his heart pounded too hard—from constant worry of how she could treat him—for him even to shut his eyes. But, she did nothing. Even as he had turned twice to see her doings, she remained seated and her quieted stare fixed upon him. This was the way things would stay for awhile, and he worked out his most comfortable waking position, facing away still, his tiny cool body flatly huddled and relaxing slowly.

In a moment he heard giggling, maybe a distant girl or just the quiet snickering of Jenny. Remaining flat, he chose not and cared not to see. Then, he heard footsteps at his bedside and, his gaze darting suddenly among wall cracks and holes, braced for his cousin’s action. However, she tugged gently the blanket at his rear and secured its satin edge beneath his right hip. Laughing loudly, as if embarrassed, Jenny sat back down and had to announce, “Oh, Billy. Sometimes you do show your ass, don’t you?”
It took him a minute to get her remark, and his mouth fell open. His butt really had been showing! He was so embarrassed that he could hardly control a hundred tremors of his face, eyes, and eyebrows. He kind of said, "Shut up," held his position as tightly and stiffly as if he hung on a cliff's edge, and made damned sure he felt that blanket hem beneath his hip—that his butt was not showing again! ... God, in front of Jenny.

This tense position worked him, tired him, made breathing hard. At times he would rest much of his weight upon his right shoulder. But that shifting would leave less weight holding down that hem. Pressing down hard with his hip, the boy clenched his teeth and prayed Cousin Jenny would leave and that he could get a new position.

He kept thinking about how it had looked to her, and whether she still liked him or was still proud of him, and he stayed embarrassed, and he kept worrying, and he kept pressing. And there were the snakes. Without control, he flew down the hill toward them and screamed faintly, his feet beating the earth and whipping his legs about. The sun cast silver upon the snakes, which worked across the grass like slender waves. They would pop up and land like little explosives, going off by their own power.

Somehow, he had stopped short of them. But his feet seemed to want to skitter their way still. Suddenly, he chose to bound southward of them, and he could leap, but not run, in long-lasting jumps of fifteen feet. These snakes stopped to watch him, and could have gotten to him before he landed had they wanted to. Next, he was atop the levee and looking down the slopes. The lake was the same as earlier, but not only were the snakes gone, but the trees had disappeared, too. The snakes must take them down, he thought. He watched again the silver and black reptiles, which climbed toward him only partway and chose instead to swim within the foot grass once again. When he turned from them again, the boy discovered himself at the lakeside. And in seconds, as he had someway expected, a giant Something began to rise out in the lake's northern half. A golden rounded awesome thing as large as the far west hill broke water and poured splashing streams down its sides until it buoyed. It had a fish face, but behind it a giant segmented tail of golden also lifted the surface and broke clear, trailing and dropping spiralling waterfalls from its feelers. The thing rested, bobbing, facing the boy. From its eyes, the boy saw now, hung two lifeless, useless golden claws,
soft and wet. His heart pounded in suffocating awe as this monster imposed a fresh, fishy smell throughout the lakeside.

He remembered the stream, but wished he hadn't; the thought made him run accidentally in its direction and disallowed him to see the giant fish. At streamside, however, he saw a little golden fish of the same propositions legging about a green mound. Its claws were slender hard weapons and its eight legs tireless.

The boy knelt and dared touch it. Cleverly it reached up one claw without looking and squeezed his finger. It *almost* hurt, but . . . no, not quite. It squeezed him firmly, and in someway the boy got a human message from its small claw. It seemed to pump an extra life into him and this scared him.

He ran back toward the levee and Jenny lay there, waiting. Seeing her pulled a faint gasp from him. She was mad again and would punish him, but she was very, very beautiful now; without redness, she waited softly and quietly in white—the beautiful gown he had once seen her wearing? However, just as soon as he tried to recognize this white fabric beauty, it was gone, and Jenny had no clothes . . . maybe underwear, yes no . . . She stretched her first finger toward him and drew him to her with its movement. The snakes danced up to within inches of her toes, left, came back, and left again. The boy feared them but made not effort to pass around them, but instead ran straight to her and felt her hands tight upon his upper arms. Giving new heat, she pulled him upward along her slender limbs and body.

The punishment she gave the boy was unclear to him, but it made him tired and embarrassed and sleepy. Throughout his hazy work, he thought once or twice of the snakes, the giant fish that could come over the levee at any time, and even the little pincers of the stream fish, and he felt scared. However, they did not threaten Jenny, who must have been protecting him while she punished him.

When he awoke, Billy saw that three people hovered at his bedside, and while he knew that two were his parents, he looked only at Jenny. He looked up and down her body, tired to remember, *tried* to remember—what had she made him do?—and considered her scary, but magic. Unlike after most of his dreams, that strongest thought and
feeling faded very little as his thinking snapped clearer.

“You went away, didn’t you?” his Dad said, his tall forehead giving off light.

“Yeh, but I already got in trouble for it.” Billy pointed to Jenny, who smiled.

Not quite as pretty as Jenny, his Mom folded her arms and stepped to his pillow-side. “No more of that, okay?” she said.

He nodded, turned on his side to face them all, and felt great relief that he had gotten back from the second going away. For now, that trip was too much.

End

WHEN I AM GONE

Nathan Harter

When in the breeze of autumn’s sleepless evening
   You listen for the sound of something gone,
The whistling echo of a spirit winging
   Shall haunt you ’till the break of day and on.
Remember then the soft and subtle breathing;
   The sighs from long-sequestered passions drawn;
Recall the voice, the laughing and the singing;
   Remember me in vanguards of the dawn.

Then weep for what is past, for ghosts unwept,
   And catch the fleeting flourish of my wings,
For I shall be as one dead—mourned at best
Though by the winds of destiny unswept.
Who cares what faith in resurrection brings.
   If I could die forever at your breast?
O! Woe to those who have to write in verse,
For it is not an easy task to do;
And those condemned with such an ugly curse
Will quickly prove my declaration true!
The master of the sonnet was Shakespeare;
I gasp in wonderment to think of him,
For thoughts of writing sonnets dredge up fear—
Enough, in fact, to shake my ev’ry limb!
But now ’tis time to pen these last few lines,
Of which I am so very glad to do;
And as I terminate my final rhymes,
I leave this note of interest to you:

Although unique I found to write a sonnet,
Never again shall I spend hours on it!
I love you
I can say it now
that you’re no longer here.
But if I’d said it then
You would have flown
Or worse
You would have stayed
And laughed

Your gentleness was like a father
Not a lover
Your embrace was strong.
But in your heart you held her tight
And when you smiled at me
Her name was on your lips

But you never deceived me
And I thank you for that
The things I feel now
Are no fault but my own
For I knew all about her

But knowing doesn’t stop my pain
Or thinking of what might have been
If I had known you
in another place and time
So leave me in my misery
For a while
And let me say I love you
While I can
Quiet and dark in the little room with the grainy yellow wallpaper. The baby cries in the crib in the corner, wails. It is very late at night, and the baby has been crying for an hour, filling the room and the rest of the gray apartment with a high-pitched, sobbing howl.

The door bursts open as the father strides into the room and glares down into the light blue covers, yelling for quiet; he has been awake all night; he has to get up and go to work in two hours.

“Quiet!”

The baby cries and the father’s face crumples in the shadows, his eyes and teeth reflecting the gray moonlight from outside.

“Shut up! SHUT UP!”

He is shaking it by the arms, shoving the small figure in his hands back and forth against the wall.

“SHUT UP!”

The room is silent and the baby lies still, a trickle of blood meandering out of one ear down into the sky-blue blanket.

Who art in heaven

Two hundred people hold their breaths as the bearded gunmen scan them in their sights, laughing. There are terrified children aboard, and terrified adults. There is a great deal of praying. The terrorists force the pilot to circle the airport as they broadcast their demands. Their bomb has faulty wiring, so that when one of them holds it up to display it to the passengers, it explodes in his face. The plane splinters down into a cornfield and burns.

Hallowed be thy name

The spray-painted graffiti on the school building reads, “Fuck you,” and, below that, “God is dead.”
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done

The thin little woman is sixty-seven years old, and her hair is as white as the lace she keeps on the arms of her old chairs. She has two locks on her door, but the man says he is from the phone company, and she has been having trouble with her phone.

"Thank you, ma'am."

He holds her neck in one hand as he forces her to the floor.

Her brown-and-white cat runs into the bedroom, slipping under a chest of drawers to hide.

He rapes her and then pulls off his belt and strangles her with it, so that blood comes out of her neck in a small spray where the buckle punctured. After he is gone the cat comes out. It sniffs at her body lying in a tangle on a round green rug, then runs back into the bedroom to get away.

On earth, as it is in heaven

The mother seal tries to carry her pup, jumping and stumbling across the ice, hopelessly away from home out of the water. The men and children wave their clubs as they circle closer and closer, forcing the seals back in against each other. They bark, and the sound bounces off the clear blue sky, carrying hundreds of yards in the icy blue air. The barks of the pups are higher, almost like voices.

They have run out of space to retreat, and the men and children are on top of them. The mother seal holds one thin flipper over the pup's face, but both are broken by the first blow from a heavy black wooden stick. The pup crumbles to the ice as the next blow pops its body like a leather balloon, its blood dripping down from its mother's fur. She barks twice, shielding its body with hers, as all the heavy sticks at once rain down on her fur coat.

Give us this day our daily bread

The little girl's bare stomach bulges out for the heat of the Indian sun. She is lying in a ditch, unable to move. Her family is dead. She is thirteen years old and still sick from a miscarriage. The hunger gnaws at her body, tearing away internally until she allows her head to slide back into the stinking mud and water in the bottom of the ditch. Her teeth taste rotten in her empty mouth.
And forgive us our trespasses

He is syphilitic, and he cannot think anymore. The tissues in his spine and at the base of his brain have melted into a soft gray jelly. He has been in a state hospital for eight months. He sleeps in his excrement and isn’t aware of it. His most nearly conscious thoughts are wishes to die, but they come seldom. Occasionally he is fed, and occasionally he is not.
As we forgive those who trespass against us.

They know that one of them has a rifle with a blank in it, so they can never know whether or not any one of them actually took part in the killing. They take comfort in that while they take aim at the slight gray figure with the bag fixed over his head. The prison is silent. The reporters outside wait impatiently for the report of the guns.

They squeeze the triggers and their rifles push back on their shoulders. The figure dances for a moment, splotches of black popping up on the front of the plain gray cloth it wears. Then the blood comes—red faucets in the center of the shirt. The body smokes a little, and no one can force back a shaking of the spine when it wriggles against the wall and the hands clench and unclench in spasm.

The head is down, resting where the front of the chest had been. If the hood were off, the man would have his own blood in his mouth.

And lead us not into temptation

In the dark street away from the glare of the streetlights, a greasy rumpled fat man looks across at a black girl in a blonde wig and shorts that are just barely unbuttoned. He wipes the sweat on his head into a twenty-dollar bill in his pocket.

He walks deliberately across the street to her. She smiles kindly at his approach, gesturing him through a door and into a black stairway. He seizes her and pulls at her cut-off jeans and someone hits the back of his head with a section of pipe, tearing his scalp open and cracking his skull.

They roll him over, fishing in his pockets, whispering over him in the dark. The girl kicks him in the face when they find only twenty dollars. They leave him there and he spits up a little bit of vomit. A rat skitters across his hand, but he won't move until someone comes to find him in the morning.

But deliver us from evil

The tiny red screaming newborn sucks in great gulps of air, cold air, bright light. Its eyes are wide and its hands, tiny grasping soft skin, grope for the world, battling to be alive.

Amen.