

MSS
Spring 1990



MSS

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*I try to catch every sentence, every
word you and I say, and quickly
lock all these sentences and words
away in my literary storehouse
because they might come in handy.*

-from The Seagull, Act II.
Anton Chekov, 1860-1904

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This issue of MSS was printed on recycled paper to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of Earth Day.

Had a dog once.

Had a dog once. Damn thing ran away. Probably hit by a car. Dead on some road. Don't really care. Just pretend he's still here. Fill his dish each morning. Never eats much. Always end up throwing most of it away. Call him. "Butch!" Damn dog never comes when I call. Sometimes I can hear him breathing in his sleep next to my chair. Reading the paper. Don't let him out much. Not in this weather. Just long enough to do his thing, then in again. Too damn cold for both of us. Such a big house. Go for walks in the halls. That's enough exercise either of us needs. Can almost hear him padding along at my side. So quiet. Nothing much to do. Too damn old. Both of us. Used to take him hunting. Never got anything. Damn near shot myself once. Just time alone that's all we wanted. Now there's plenty of that. Old. That's what it is. Damn dog never really got old. Never knew the loneliness, that's for sure. Probably too stupid anyway. Old. Elderly? Malarkey. Old. That's what it is. Sitting here idly. Getting mail is excitement enough. Visitors? Hell no. Friends are all gone. Mostly dead, but some's moved away. Old. That's what it is. Damn dog anyway. Never comes when I call.

200 Years Later

Listen.

Silence fills the streets today.
Lightening falls no more from man-made skies.
It strikes, it strikes, it strikes again
At last to strike no more
To sever from these weary bones
These still unwearied souls.

Hush, my baby,
Let this silence wring my heart of terror
And let me hear the thunder cease its roar.

Will my breast not console your cries?
Do you long for stronger arms and hands than mine?
Do you sense a loss in gained fraternity:
Our brothers' warm embrace?
Do you weep to see this bloody womb
Receive again so many?
Do you wonder when tomorrow comes
Whether we will all walk side by side?
Tomorrow, you'll decide.

I fear the stillness of the air
Drawn in my trembling breast
Where now you rest you grief and shame
In dreams and hopes tomorrow bears
For still remains upon these hands
The stain of Robespierre.

Lament no more, dear Mother France,
Your Abel's blood cried not in vain;
Freedom's roots are in your graves;
The veil is rent, the wall is razed
And there is dancing in the streets today.

Falling

Swaying precariously above that deadly chasm,
Grasping onto three, maybe four threads,
Of my once solid reason.
I look down, and the bottom creeps closer
And closer to my soul.
How She must be laughing now, that wicked
Sorceress of my Heart;
And I thought I could cheat her from the harvest
She reaps best.
So long I have avoided plummeting into the chasm.
But when I see the jewel that blankets the bottom,
There is no point in resistance.

Decisions, Decisions

I stare at the box that holds the tube of Crest. Tartar control. Tartar. Tar Tar. Double Tar. Tar Tar must be twice as bad as regular tar. I try to decide if it's important to me to control my Tar Tar. There is a non-Tar Tar control variety as well, for those folks willing to throw caution to the wind and let Tar Tar overrun their teeth like an invading horde.

Beneath the Crest is Colgate. Colgate is good too. Colgate has the seal of the American Dental Association. This is a crucial detail which I must take into consideration before making any rash decisions.

My other choices are Aqua-Fresh and Close-Up. What to do.

I'm going to have to make a decision. What is it she says? "It's like living with a slug! Why can't you ever make up your mind!" Exclamation point!

No that's not it. She never said that.

Crest would be good. I could control Tar Tar and fight cavities simultaneously. This could be a valuable time-saving technique in the Fast-Paced 90s.

There's always Colgate, though. Nine out of ten doctors stranded on a desert island prescribe Colgate when that little itch should be telling them something. No, that was something else.

Close-Up. If I used Close-Up I could fall in love again and a beautiful woman would kiss me while we fell into a pile of leaves.

Yes. Yes, this appeals to me. I reach out to clutch the aphrodisiac. On the protective box that shields the tube from harm is a photograph of a woman smiling. It is a close-up photograph. Close-Up. Oh, I get it. I open the box and slowly remove the tube. I squeeze it and it retains its shape. I uncap the tube and squeeze a worm onto my finger. It is a red worm. No, this will not do. It's a trick. This toothpaste is red and I do not want red teeth. People would think I was a vampire with blood on my teeth. Even if they saw me in the daytime.

I return the tube to its home and start over. Okay. Crest. Good. Colgate. Good. Close-Up. Not so good. Aqua-Fresh.

I know of Aqua-Fresh. I do not understand the concept of Aqua-Fresh. It is three, three, three toothpastes in one. However, I know no one with three mouths. I know that cows have four stomachs, but you cannot brush stomachs and besides, cows do not use toothpaste. At least—not while anyone is looking.

I squeeze this tube and the serpent is striped, red, white and green. Nonsense.

I put the tube back and notice that I have two fairly large globs of toothpaste on my finger. What to do. I could wipe them off on my coat. Or I could eat them. Never. I have one mouth with white teeth, and I have grown used to this. I could wipe them on the shelf. But a store employee may spot me and report me to the authorities. I will leave them on my finger for the time being. They are not hurting anyone.

Now, where was I? Toothpaste. Toothpaste. I simply must have toothpaste. She has always complained about my halitosis. I must remedy this. I have narrowed my choices down to two. Crest and Colgate. But which one? How does she ever make these decisions?

A-Ha! A childhood memory returns to me, and I pull a coin out of my pocket. On one side is the profile of a dead leader, on the other, a bird of prey in an unnatural pose. I will toss the coin into the air. If the profile comes up, I will choose one brand. If the bird comes up, I will choose the other. Perfect!

Now. If the head comes up, I will purchase Crest.

No. Colgate.

No, Crest.

Colgate.

Crest.

Oh, dear.

I can't decide which toothpaste to assign to the face of the coin. I must be rational about this. Which brand would the dead man have preferred, Crest or Colgate? Well, from what I have read, he probably used neither, his teeth being made of wood. I briefly consider moving to the furniture polish aisle.

This is a problem. To err at this juncture could be disastrous. But I must decide soon and that stockboy is staring at me.

I pull out a second coin, identical to the first. I will toss this one into the air. If the head comes up, I will assign one brand

of toothpaste to the head of the first coin, tails, the other brand. Okay. Heads—Crest—no, Colgate—Crest—Colgate— I am unable to choose. This grows frustrating.

I consider pulling out another coin to settle the matter when the stockboy approaches me. "You okay, man?" He looks nervous. Long hair, uncombed. Drugs, obviously. Still, maybe he can help me.

I take a deep breath, let it out. "I'm trying to decide which toothpaste to buy."

The boy looks relieved. "Oh, zat all. Hunh. Well, I dunno, man, I usually get Crest. I mean, that's what my mom always gets." The boy looks sheepish now, embarrassed to admit dependence on his mommy. "It's no big deal, man. Crest, Colgate, all that shit's the same."

"But it isn't! If it was the same, my choice would be easy! But it isn't!" My frustration's starting to show, I can see. The boy is tweaking his earring between thumb and forefinger, a half-smirk, half-frown on his pale, pimpled face.

"Hey, man, don't freak out or anything. You were flippin' a coin, right? Didn't that work?"

"Welll, I couldn't decide whether the head of the coin should stand for Crest or Colgate."

The boy's face is a silent, "Ohhhh, I see. . ." He looks down, purses his lips, furrows his brow. "Crest," he finally says, "Definitely Crest. I mean, what else could it be? Y'know? It's gotta be Crest." He looks at me, head cocked to one side, eyebrows raised, then returns to his duties.

And a weight is lifted from me. The boy is right. How could I have missed it? With a sigh of relief, I toss the coin.

It comes up heads. Crest it is. Oh, thank God! I did it! I showed her.

I smile as I reach for the tube of Crest, the symbol of my victory.

The smile nose-dives into my pancreas as I remember that there are two varieties of Crest, regular and Tar Tar control. I have not yet resolved that conflict. Do I want Tar Tar? Does she want Tar Tar? For that matter, what the hell is Tar Tar?

I am close to weeping. I had it. I had it! My vision of her as I came home, successful in my quest, a look of shock and surprise on her face, vanishes. It is replaced by a nightmare:

another tirade, another tearful apology, another night of silence.

A hand is on my shoulder. It is the boy. He looks concerned. "You all right, man? Somethin' wrong?"

I am unable to speak. Everything blurs as I point to the shelf and a low moan escapes me.

"Aw, shit. Dave. Dave! C'mere, man, gimme a hand."

"What the hell, man. This guy okay?"

"Dunno. Let's get him in back. I think he needs to sit down."

I allow myself to be led. My eyes are squeezed tightly shut, my feet move without me. I am lowered into a hard chair. I hear whimpering, and realize it is my own. This is not good. This is about the worst yet. I realize I must try to collect myself, but I can't. So close. . .

The boy is asking me for my phone number. I manage to mumble it out. She'll be here soon. The other boy is wiping the toothpaste off my finger with a damp cloth. I suppose there's nothing I can do about that.

I try to think up some kind of story, something to save myself. I was confused, I didn't have enough money. . . No. She won't believe me, whatever I say.

She's here now, standing in the doorway. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't have to. She'll say more than enough when we get home.

I rise and follow her out of the store. The boy pats me on the side and says, "Take it easy, man." I try to let my eyes show my gratitude, too scared to speak. We walk out to the car. It is cold and windy. I shove my hands deep into my coat pockets. Find something, a box. The boy. . . I pull it out.

I stare at the box that holds the tube of Crest. Tar Tar control.

Henpecked

Standing in an empty bathtub looking out the window
the old and tired—yet fully dressed—man is alone
except for the neighborhood regulars: soap, towel, sham
poo, toothbrush.

To this audience he plays his fury like a trombone:

"Go in the bathroom
she says.

Bridge group is coming
she says.

I say

Stupid old cackling hens running in circles
squawking their fucking heads off.

I hope their heads do come off.

Pop—clean off and

Smack! Hit the ceiling.

But her bleeding head would say
come out of there and
clean up this mess.

No thanks.

If only their heads would

Pop off when they go home.

She's already home but

one head wouldn't be much.

Take her by the hair and

pitch her in the yard.

Good for the grass

I say.

Get some use out of her

I say.

Chop up her body and spread it all over the backyard.

Get some grass to grow.

Grass don't squawk.

I'd like a nice lawn 'stead of a henhouse.
A henhouse in the living room.
Hens playing cards.
It ain't right.
It ain't right to keep a rooster out a henhouse.
Damn chickens."

Wildest Dream

I know I'm unlovable
Your eyes tell me
With their pitiful stare
Into my pitiful life
Full of emptiness
And void of fulfillment
My life is but a simple thing
Given by god as a prank
To one forgotten soul
You love each other
And hold me outside your world
Safely tucked in my world
Away from tainting your life
I'll be content
with my melancholy lament
And my unsupported goal
And wildest dream
To someday be loved

Ashes

Ashes sit cold and still, not breathing in the silence
Though heavy logs lie upon them waiting for a match

Sunrise From A Window

As crisp and brittle as
A dry leaf
Fallen from a forgotten autumn lies
There, upon the ground
A limb dips toward it as if reaching
Dew runs down its length
On a spiraling, reckless course
Until finding its end
It drops.
Drop
By drop
Drop
by drop
Bathing the dry leaf
Which lies in dust
Whose tapered ends rise up to thank
The dawn for its gift
And like it
The day too comes on,
Wet gold dripping
Drop
By drop
Upon the dark blue of the horizon
Sending out ripples of color
In ever widening circles

To Reach The Shore

The grey marble of the sun rose slowly just giving enough light for him to see where the bow of the boat was going.

The air smelled stale—humid air with a stench of rotting fish. As weedbeds passed by under the boat, the air smelled of freshly cut damp grass. The ancient aluminum boat creaked and rattled as the oars were lifted, swung, dipped into the water and pushed.

The floor of the boat was covered in green artificial turf that squashed underfoot and smelled of dead fish with spots of blood and fish scales littered here and there that caught the pale light. Along the sides of the boat were stacks of fishing poles. The tangled lines at the ends of the poles each had a brightly striped bobber with a pointy end.

The rowing stopped and with a crash, the oars were lifted and dropped in the bottom of the boat. The anchor was lifted with a grunt and heaved over the edge and the rope whizzed over the side of the boat.

The old man's frail hand shuffled through the pile of poles with great care. After he selected a pole, he reached under his seat and pulled out an Adams Dairy cottage cheese container with holes in the lid. He pulled out a thin, squirming redworm out of the sawdusty dirt. With a flick of the wrist, the line zinged into the air and plopped into the water with a quiet pop.

The man sat quietly, his body turned toward the side of the boat where the pole rested. He had a large forehead with a receding hairline that ended in a soft white puff of hair that blew in the breeze and landed in his eyes. The long forehead ended in a thin nose with a few curly hairs protruding out of the left nostril. The sparse eyebrows did little to cover the prominent wrinkles around his small, deeply set eyes. The eyes were tired, but gentle.

A dragonfly buzzed one sunburnt ear, but the man's bent frame sat attentive to the fishing pole and didn't even reach up to brush it away.

Humming "The Yellow Rose of Texas", he gently lifted up his pole to check to see if the bait was still there and then lowered it back into the water.

A large, sleek speedboat idled along behind the fishing boat, slicing up the water with its pointed bow. The speedboat cut its engines, floated up against the aluminum boat and hit it with a gentle clanging thud.

The old man sat quietly with his back to the other boat. He didn't turn around, but the humming stopped.

A middle-aged man with the beginnings of a brunette mustache reached out and grabbed the side of the fishing boat, pulling it to him until the boats thumped each other again. He gently lifted one leg over the side of the fishing boat and then half-hopped the rest of the way in. The boat rocked from side to side.

He went over to the old man and put a hand on his shoulder. The old man stiffened.

Willie jolted in the bed and his eyes wrenched open. In the dark, he could barely make out the foot of his bed. A bathrobe lay draped over the metal footboard of the bed. Turning his head to the left he saw the shadowy shape of his roommate sleeping in the next bed. As usual, ole Ferd snored like prop planes Willie flew in World War I. Through the crack at the bottom of the door, soft light poured in from the hallway as one of the night staff walked by in crepe soles that made a swishing noise on the slick floor.

What was the dream he's been having. Oh, yes, he remembered it now--the fishing boat on Wyland Pond. What had made him dream about that again after all this time?

He pulled up the fuzzy blue blanket and closed his eyes.

Rise and Shine boys! It's 8:00. Time for breakfast. Now, Mr. Francis, Sharon will be down in a few seconds to help you take your bath. Meanwhile, Mr. Turner, you wash up and get dressed so you can be out of the bathroom before Mr. Francis takes his bath.

"OOOOOOOHHHHH SHIT!!! Do I have to take my bath today?" Ferd mumbled into his pillow. "Can't I take my bath in private? Nobody can see me naked except my wife; oh yes, and that redhead that time in Manhattan.

"Now Mr. Francis, stop acting silly. Sharon will be down in a minute, be ready in the bathroom when she gets here."

Ferd sat up amidst the rumbled white sheets and swung his

legs over the edge of the bed. With one hand, he reached and pulled his walker toward him. He eased out of the bed and slowly walked to the bathroom where Willie was coming out.

"See you at breakfast," Willie said as he walked out the door.

As he walked down the sterile hallway, he glanced into different rooms and said good morning to several people.

The cafeteria was yellow with sunlight glancing off the white walls as twenty or twenty-five people sat at round tables nodding their heads and talking earnestly.

Willie got his breakfast and sat down at a table with a couple of women. One had a pink bathrobe with ruffles running down the front. The other had a green dress with a plastic zipper zipped up clear to her fleshy neck.

"And how are you beautiful ladies, this morning?" Willie asked.

Both women blushed visibly. "Why Willie, you old flirt. Always with the compliments aren't you?"

"Well with such beautiful breakfast companions as yourselves, how can I help but be flattering?" Willie said.

"Ah, cut the bullshit, Willie. Every woman in this place knows your moves by now," said Ferd, shuffling up to the table while a nurse carried a square tray.

"Have a seat, Ferd. I was just discussing with these lovely ladies what a beautiful day it was. A nice day for a walk. Would anyone care to join me for a walk this morning?" Willie said.

"Have you forgotten, Willie," one of the women said, "it's spring festival day. My daughter and her husband will be here in about a half-hour."

"Well...yes. Of course I haven't forgotten," Willie said, "is your family coming too, Ferd?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I suppose they'll come up here with all this bullshit about how young I'm looking and shit like that. Frank's still wasting his life away farming that damn land. Why you can't coax a weed to grow in that rotten soil, so why even try?"

He thumped his blue-veined hand down on the tabletop. "Investments. That's where it's all at. It's the only place you'll ever make any money. Investments. That's how I made my living—managing my own investment firm—a real man's job.

Not leaving the city to work on a farm.

Ferd scowled so his white eyebrows came together. "Sometimes I don't know where I went wrong with that boy."

"Is your family coming this year Willie?" one of the women asked.

"Oh, probably. They're real busy, you know. Real busy," Willie said, "Well, I'd better go and try to clean the room up before the families come."

Willie walked back into the room and slumped into the vinyl green chair in front of the window. He tried to remember the last time he had seen his son and daughter-in-law. It must have been last Christmas. Yes, that was it. They hadn't come for his birthday in February because Nick had had an important advertising campaign in Los Angeles and Carol had an appointment with a client.

Not that I don't understand, of course, I can't expect them to come running out here at every little whipstitch to satisfy me. They lead busy lives. But, still I do get lonely every once in awhile.

From the window, Willie could see cars pull up and brightly-dressed people stepping out of them. Balloons and tables were set up all over the lawn and a Dixieland band was playing under the old maple tree out front. The sun was shining brightly and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. He saw Ferd hobble out to the parking lot as a brunette heavy-set woman got out of the car and embraced him. Susan, Willie thought. He remembered all of Ferd's family even though he had only met them a couple of times.

Maybe today, they'll come, he thought. Especially since it's the spring festival. Nick said they'd write it down on the calendar and make it if they could. I'll move my chair over to the window so I can see them if they drive up. If they did come, I wouldn't want to make them wait.

The sun was going down and orange light was pounding fiercely on the west side of the building. Bright light permeated the room and shone on Willie's face waking him. His sweat-soaked face stuck to the green vinyl chair and his armpits ached from where his arms had been propped up on the window sill.

He felt a touch on his shoulder; he jumped and his head

snapped up.

"Hey, wake up, you old bastard," Ferd said. "You'll get cramps sleeping like that. Why didn't you come outside and sit with us for lunch?" He shuffled over to his bed and leaned up against the side, tapping the front legs of his walker on the floor.

"The band was pretty good for a bunch of young guys and they had a comedian afterwards," Ferd said.

"I guess I fell asleep. What time is it?" Willie asked.

"It's about 4:30. Susie and Dave were just getting ready to take me out to eat, wanna come?" Ferd asked.

"Hi, Susan. Hi, Dave. I saw you out the window earlier. No, I don't think I will. I'll just go down to the cafeteria in a few minutes and get something to eat."

"Okay. You just missed your chance. We're getting seafood. You know, all the rich meat with that artery-clogging butter all over it. MMMM! You're gonna miss it!" Ferd said.

"Well, I'm on a cholesterol-free diet now anyway, so I'll have to catch you next time, but thanks for asking," Willie said.

Ferd and his family left the room and Willie could hear their voices echo down the empty hallway. He looked out the window. His neck ached. All of the families were gone, and workmen in white uniforms were loading the tables into pickup trucks. The festival was over for another year.

Willie moved the chair back away from the window and sat on his bed. After a pause, he picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Yes, I'd like to make a collect call to Nicholas Turner. The number is two-one-three, eight-six-two, Four-one-five-five."

After a second, a female voice answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Carol, it's Willie, how are you?"

"Willie, how nice to hear from you. Did you want to talk to Nick? He's in the den, but I'll go get him. Just a second."

"Hello?"

"Hi, son, it's me."

"Oh, Hi Dad, how are you doing?"

"Fine. I just called to see how things were going."

"Things are going pretty good. We're getting ready to go to the symphony tonight, in fact, we'd better get going. Can I call you back?"

"Oh sure, I just wanted to say I'm sorry you missed the spring festival today."

"Was that today? Well, we've been awful busy lately. Carol's had a great influx of clients recently, and I, of course have been real busy with the business. Maybe we'll make it down next year. I've got to go, Dad, or we'll be really late; I'll call you later, okay?" Bye."

"Bye, Nick."

The humming dial tone replaced the voice on the other end.

Nick had always had that same matter-of-fact voice. He was so rational. That's what makes him so good at his business. He has a good head on his shoulders. He always knows the logical things to do.

"Dad, I know that it seems cruel now, but it's so much better. You can't live in that big house all by yourself now. There's just too much to do and we're afraid that you'll hurt yourself. What if you did get hurt? Carol and I live so far away, nobody would know something was wrong and get you help. We know this nice quiet place, just outside of St. Louis. It's a really nice place, and reasonable, too. There are lots of people your age. You need to meet some new people. You're alone too much.

Let's just go look at it. If you don't like it we'll find someplace you do like. We don't want you to stay in some place you don't like."

I do like it here, Willie thought. It's not that bad. The people are nice, the nurses are nice and the food is even pretty good. And it is reasonable. I can't really complain.

He walked over and turned the television on and sat down in the green vinyl chair. He flipped through the stations and finally stopped at one with a commercial on it. He turned around to put his slippers on when he heard a splash. He whirled around to face the biggest bass he had ever seen. A blonde man with thick arms pulled the bass into the dip net and threw it into the boat.

Willie stumbled over the chair as he hurriedly shut the television off. He stood for a moment shaking and then finally sat down.

That's the biggest bass I've ever seen. Maybe it's a county record. It could even be a state record. I can't wait until Marge sees this one. She'll throw a fit about having to clean this one.

Willie smiled to himself as bright sun glistened off the green bodies of the five fish in the bottom of the boat. He had already caught enough for a mess for them. Maybe he'd send one to Nick and Carol. They might like fresh fish.

I'll just catch a few more before I go in. If Marge has to get her hands dirty, I might as well make it worth her while.

In his mind's eye, he could see her standing over the sink, her hands wrist-deep in bloody, scaly water. Every once in a while, her soft hands would bring a white fillet out of the water and set it on a paper towel to dry before putting into the freezer bags and setting it in the icebox.

The first time he'd showed her how to clean fish, she'd gone into the house and thrown up. But, after he'd told her they were already dead and couldn't feel anything, she began helping him clean. He showed her how to make the first cut just behind the head of the fish and then continued down the spinal cord to the tail. Now they had an agreement, if he'd catch and scale them, she'd clean them.

He baited his hook and threw it back into the water. He thought he heard the motor running, but he ignored it and turned his attention back to his pole. Then, the boat pulled up alongside him and his son stepped into the fishing boat.

"Dad," he said, putting his hand on his shoulder, "I've got something to tell you. It's about Mom. Carol and I came home a few minutes ago and found Mom on the floor of the bedroom. We didn't know where you had gone, so we rushed her to the emergency room. She had a heart attack, Dad, she died instantly."

"Willie. Willie. Snap out of it, for Christ's sake! You're the biggest daydreamer I've ever known," Ferd's harsh voice said.

"Are you home already Ferd? Did you have a nice time?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't know how they can afford to take me to such fancy places when they ain't making nothing on that farm. We have a meeting in a few minutes to discuss what we're going to do for the family day picnic in July. We'd better get down to the cafeteria so we can get a good seat by the Morrison

twins," Ferd said.

"Okay, I guess I'll go. Maybe Nick and Carol can come to the picnic this summer, " Willie said.

The sun shone brightly across the surface of the lake. Wild geese broke away from the trees and flew squawking across the water, their wings almost touching the surface. Willie breathed heavily against the hot humid summer air. Water dripped in a steady rhythm off the raised anchor in the boat in the rhythm of his heart.

The beating stopped.

He looked and saw Marge standing on the shore of the lake. She was waving that white handkerchief she always used to call him in from the lake for lunch. Willie reeled in the bobber and laid it on the bottom of the boat. He gently laid the oars in the water with a splash.

With a smile he began rowing.

The Murderess

She works.
Day in, day out.
Sometimes in clean water.
Sometimes in the dirty water
from the day before.
It was the shirt she wore
that night.
That fateful night.
The night she killed
her lover

Before then, he was her lover.
Querido. Amante.
Lover.
The fight tore them apart.
They fought in front of the casa.
Screaming.
Emotions affecting the neighbors
watching carefully,
silently,
from their windows.
The fighting ceased.
She left.

It was late when she came back.
Two or three in the morning.
No one heard her come back.
Not the landlady,
who broke them up.
Not the neighbors,
who watched them fight.
Not her lover,
who hurt her more than before.

It was over quickly.
No noise.
He was sleeping on the sofa.
He never saw the knife
that so swiftly cut
through his flesh.
No noise.
She fled as quickly
and as quietly
as she had arrived.

It has been weeks.
Perhaps months.
Each day, she spends crying.
Lamenting his loss,
And each day she spends working.
Washing that shirt.
The stained shirt that defies cleaning.
No fluid,
solvent,
or soap,
can remove the blood of her lover
from that shirt.
But she washes it again. In vain.

Spaghetti

Spaghetti,
Spaghetti,
Wonderous feast
of noodles and steaming goop.
Made of what,
I'll never tell.
Surrounding my fork
and hanging down to my plate,
sticking to my chin as I
suck in the string-like noodle.
The pungent, racy juice of tomatoes
so red it looks like blood,
drips down,
to my white shirt
unguarded by a bib.
I know the mess is not complete
as I take my second bite.

a strange situation

the passion in me is a strange situation
sometimes it's a ball of fire
sometimes cold as ice—and just as sharp
it makes my eyes water
it makes my palms sweat
it makes my skin ache
laughing (hysterically)—crying (hysterically) it all goes
together
don't touch my passion
true it's strong but its very tender
it would be like touching an open sore—an OPEN
SORE
even something as harmless as air itself
can make it sting
so fragile
sometimes it's a friend and i recognize its novelty
most of the time it overtakes me and leaves me powerless to
its force its drive its control its inevitability
my every thought is consumed in my passion
my passion for passion
i wonder what its like not to think not to feel
the passion in me looks at things differently
everything happens for a reason
everything has its place in the gigantic mystical circle of
meaning
dissect
analyze
find beauty
define the pain
i wonder what its like to live without passion
would it take away my ability to feel and therefore take away
my doom
or would it take away my spirit and life—leaving me nothing
but doom
the passion in me—it's a strange situation

Out

Water drips all over the floor from my wet hair at three in the afternoon and I'm smoking my first cigarette of the day. Answering machine tells me that Ed wants to meet at the Billy Goat for brews and burgers. Letter from Mark; "school sucks, work sucks, everything is the same." I miss that dude, wish he could come up here and live with me so we could party like we did back in high school. Too bad he's stuck at home.

Hometown is a trip. After it rains you can walk out your door and smell the pollution from the Staley plant on the south end of town. The factory is several miles away but the sickly sweet old corn syrup smell seems like its coming from our backyard.

The apartment takes forever to clean up. I just throw away the dishes and remind myself to buy more. Cleaning is worth the effort though. Underneath the couch cushion I find ten bucks and a vial someone has lost last night at the party. I do a gummer before I hop in my ride for the trip downtown.

Driving south on Lakeshore I congratulate myself on my new car. Getting it was such a good scam. Ed owes Tom a couple grad for some blow that Tom had fronted him and Ed doesn't have the money. We steal a car downtown and drive it out to this small dealership just across the Wisconsin border. Ed gets out and tell the salesman that he wants to test drive that BMW sitting on the lot. Of course the guy has to let him drive it cause he'll make a big ass commission if Ed's not full of shit. So we leave one hot car at the dealership and take the BMW. We abandon it in an alley but not before we've stripped all the parts. The police find the frame and sell it at an auction. I buy the frame for a couple hundred put the thing back together and sell it. Bam, Ed has his money and I've got enough to buy myself a new Prelude.

Finding a parking place at 5:30 on a Friday downtown is a bitch. The whole city is down here tonight. The businessmen have stayed after a long week and the people who don't work

downtown are here to catch a show at the Blackstone or do the Mile because all the stores are open late on Friday. After driving in circles for the longest fifteen minutes of my life I grab a meter by the River down on Lower Wacker. Put everything in my trunk so nobody tries to T my stuff, search my pockets for some change-pennies, nickels, smokes, fuzz shit no quarters, hope I don't get towed.

Cheeseburgers at the Billy Goat Tavern rule. Thin and greasy with the cheese melted into them while they cook like a sponge soaks up water. Kaiser roll bun toasted and stacked high with fresh onions and pickle wedges, lots of fuckin' pickles. Only place in the world I'll drink Stroh's draft and enjoy it. Pictures on the wall of the dead and obscure that used to be someone.

Ed finally shows up at 6:00, always late. "Two more drafts and then two more in five minutes." Ed leaves for the bathroom and comes back with a runny nose.

We hop the El up to the Wrigley station on Clark. Skinhead kids on the train scowl at the overbuzzed businessmen heading back to the burbs. Ed and I are headed for the Kingston Mines to catch Rude Beat League's first set.

Ed runs into Seven Eleven for smokes. I cop a spot in line. Rastaman with natty dreads sells me a quarter and I roll some jays while I wait for Ed. Ed comes back and opens his jacket to show me that he T'd a bottle while he was getting smokes. "We'll need this for the cab ride downtown later."

Rude Beat plays "Redemption Song" first. My favorite Marley. We burn one in celebration. Bouncer tags us and we're out on the street. Ed opens the bottle and takes a jolt. "It's gonna be one of those nights." It always is.

We hoof it north a few blocks to the Metro. Ed and I crash the side door with a couple of skins. Bouncers chase the kids, Ed and I fade into the crowd. A couple of long islands later we're rockin' up front. We're ragin' by the stage when Ed spots Tom upstairs. Tom is popped, must be a special occasion. He tells

me to meet him at Exit after the show so he can introduce me to some girls that he'd met, says their hot. Ed wants to hit Clubland first. "Weak yuppie Club, Ed." Rock paper scissors says Ed wins, "Shit." We do some lines with Tom in the little boys room in between sets and Thrill Kill Kult starts the second set with "Do You Fear For Your Child."

Ed flails around like his body isn't held together very well and Tom is dancing so hard that he ruins his Armani jacket. The kids in the place are all wasted, too, and they go nuts. Bitch with a purple doo tries to stage dive and the bouncer kicks her ass. Tosses her back to the crowd. Stupid kid.

Ed gets the cabdriver stoned on the way downtown to Clubland. I work on the bottle. Ed has T'd us a bottle of cheap gin. "High school drink, Ed." "Free booze is the best booze." Ed wins.

Headlights flow by. Gin makes me think of home. Mark is house sitting for his dad that summer. Big old two story house with a weeping willow in the front yard and hardwood floors and a fireplace in the living room and a porch that goes all the way around the front and sides of the house. Every Sunday night that summer we all got together to have dinner and sit around shooting the shit. One night after dinner Mark says he's got an idea. Mark is like Ed; he's got that kind of attitude that makes you follow him cause you know that you'll have a good time. We all pile into my parents station wagon and Mark leads us out to the Wildcat Creek where we proceed to go skinny dipping. Seems like a really small town thing to do now but it was fun as hell then.

Cabdriver nearly gets us killed on the way to Clubland. The line at the door looks like an hour easy. I scam us a place in line with these two girls who I know from some party somewhere. Ed and I dash across the street for some eats. Ed starts talking shit about going up to Lake Geneva tomorrow to do some skiing. I know better. He's going to wake up in pain in the afternoon, take a handful of Tylenol, do a couple of bongs, take a shower and talk to my answering machine to find out what my plans are.

A dozen egg roles later we return. "We thought you guys

dogged us." We act offended. Ed tells me, "the chick with the black hair is kind of hot in an undead kind of way." Luckily she doesn't hear him. While I'm talking to the blonde Ed lifts her purse and takes fifty bucks. "She'll wake up hung over and think she spent it on booze and blow."

Clubland is weak for a Friday night. Ed's pissed. I'm not surprised. After an hour we bolt but not before Ed gets the blonde drunk enough not to notice the missing money. Of course he makes her pay for the drinks.

Exit is my favorite club. People dance in cages hung from the ceiling. The tunes are all over the place and the drinks are strong. If the bartender likes you he'll handcuff you to the bar and give you free drinks. Tom has already told the bouncer to let us in so there's no waiting in line. Bouncer owes Tom money so he does him the favor. Everybody owes Tom money, especially Ed.

Tom's already left Exit for after hours at the Smart Bar. Rock Paper Scissors, Ed loses, we stay. Tom's female friends are still here and it turns out that I know one of them. "Tom's got really bad taste, Ed."

"What the hell man? These girls are beautiful."

"Ed, they're fuckin' dumb."

"So what's your point?" Ed wins.

I walk with her to the El and get on. "My car is down by the Hancock. I'll take you to your car and you can follow me home." The bum in the back of the train gurgles at himself and falls against the window. Wonder where he'll wake up.

Kelly and I mash for awhile on the train. I think that's her name. Cobwebs are thick tonight.

She takes the left at Clark and Ontario, slows down to let me catch up after I hit the red light. I take a right and head for the lake. She said her place was in Riverside. I'm headed for Evanston.

It's way past four in the morning and I'm still out. No clue where the hell Ed went and Tom is probably in bed by now. I stop at a diner and grab some coffee before I put my buzz away for the evening.

I grab a seat at the end of the counter and light up my last smoke. The smoke from my cig curls around my face like a living creature. It blends with the air in this place adding to the smog that hovers just over my head. The light from the florescent bulbs makes the smoke that much more oppressive. It looks like the fog that hangs over cornfields on the drive south through Indiana in the middle of July just before sunset.

Three old men sitting near me are trying to figure out who shot the winning free throw in the '62 state finals. Guy in the middle looks way old. Skin is leathery and worn, eyes are as bloodshot as mine are. Guy on his left is wearing more polyester than John Travolta in Fever. Third dude looks scary as hell, crewcut, bulky, high cheekbones, biceps bigger than my neck. Must have been in the Marines.

It's way past four in the morning, hell it might be five I lost my watch at Exit. These three look like they're doing the ritual weekend thing. Go out, get blasted, try to sober up, go home and try not to wake up the wife. We're all going to feel like hell in the morning so we might as well get some food so we don't wake up hungry.

Homeward bound on the north Sheridan. The street cleaners are out. I drive by Novick's Kosher Deli and Charlie's Bar and Grill past St. Andrew's Park. The Barkery on Robinson smells like heaven. The sky in the east turns pink.

I toss my shoes in the corner by the door and get a glass of milk. Message on my machine from Tom, "sorry I dogged you guys at Exit tonight, but you know how it is business before pleasure." Front page of my morning Tribune reads, "Violence Continues in Drug Ravaged Columbia."

I fall into bed half dressed and start to drift immediately. Before I fall asleep I think about the night. The smell of the city, dirty and busy. A hard working smell especially after the rain. I look out my window past the tree line by the shore to see the sun coming over Lake Michigan. I feel transition that moment where the details fade. I think about home and Mark stuck there and wonder what the hell I'm going to do tomorrow.

Last thing I think about is water. I fade into a dream about being alone on an island with no way off. Think I'll head up to Lake Geneva tomorrow and do some sailing.

Shoe

You lay there
with the maw of a fish
Six eyes
sewn up with string
stare up at me
unblinking
resigned
tears running from the last two
and onto the floor

My foot hovers over you
toes pointed
like the head of a spear

I strike
Your mouth distends
as I choke you
gorge you
fill you with my foot
Your brow furrows with the strain
as you swallow

I wiggle my toes
and your face contorts
in a puppetshow of pain

I crouch
twist your tears into a knot
pull you tighter to me

I rise
seeking out your sibling
your mirror twin
equally helpless

I walk
each step crushing your back into the floor
My sock stifles your screams

Abraham Feldman and Pottery Man

Danny's face was streaked with dirt and he was crying. His eyes got all squinched up like little prunes. I had never seen a guy in the eighth grade cry before. Abraham just looked at him and snickered. None of us said anything because we didn't want Abraham to turn on us. Usually he went after big kids like Danny. But last weekend he had thrown firecrackers at some of my friends who were walking home from Rachel Hollander's birthday party. He stole their party favors, too—keychains with furry faces.

Abraham wasn't even supposed to be on school property, but the teachers were too afraid to ask him to leave. He was about six feet tall and carried a switchblade in the black pocket of his jeans. We heard that he was pretty old, about eighteen, and that he had gotten kicked out of high school for throwing a chair out the window. Danny should never have told the police that he saw Abraham near the newsstand the night before it burned down. Everyone knew Abraham would get him for ratting. It was just a matter of time before Danny would get it—this time "it" was having his face driven into second base during lunch. He couldn't even defend himself because Abraham jumped him from behind. No one dared get involved because Abraham would never forget a face.

After school that day I was sure that I'd see Abraham. To get home I had to walk past this sculpture made of cedar blocks. It was right by the Bixler Street playground and my friends and I would pretend it was a space station and play in it. Now it looked scary. There were lots of shadowy spaces where Abraham could be perched. As I got closer my knees felt shivery and my heart started to race. I put my head down and sprinted by. If Abraham was there I didn't want to see him.

Part of my biggest fear was that Abraham would follow me to the apartment. Ever since I hit fourth grade I went home alone and had my own key which I wore under my jacket on a silver chain. I had visions of Abraham chasing me up the back porch and to our door. I'd try to outrun him but he'd grab me from behind right when I almost had the key in the lock. I had reason to think he might be around because he had been seen on our

street. My best friend Mary, who lived two buildings down, said he actually came into their apartment one day to see her older sister, Cassandra. They listened to some loud bangy music and smoked a weird cigarette. Mary told her Mom and she was really mad. Cassandra got grounded and couldn't even come sit on the curb after dinner.

Abraham became such a terror in my mind that every time I was outside I'd feel panicky. I was sure that every person I met on the sidewalk was going to be Abraham. All I could think about at school was the walk home. I always felt pretty safe once I was in the school building, though. That was until that Friday morning in Mrs. Funk's room.

I was sitting at my desk working a long division problem when the principal came on the P.A. This had only happened once before the boiler burst and we got to go home early because the heat went out. But this announcement was different: "ABRAHAM FELDMAN, IF YOU ARE STILL IN THE BUILDING LEAVE IMMEDIATELY." Mrs. Funk went to the door and locked it from the inside. I sat at my desk focusing on the yellowy grains of the wood. The thought of Abraham in our halls, walking past my locker made me feel numb. What if he peeked in the window on our door and decided to come in? I don't know when he left but we went to lunch at the regular time. I couldn't eat.

I wasn't the only one so afraid of Abraham. My friend Gita lived across the street from him. He lived with his mother in a largish brownstone with a rickety porch that needed to be painted. I never actually met Mrs. Feldman but one day I was at the grocery store with Mom and I saw this slight woman pushing a cart by herself. Her face was tired looking and she had to be Mrs. Feldman. Gita had told me that one night Abraham was yelling at Mrs. Feldman so loudly that Gita's Dad could hear her screaming from across the street. He called the police but Abraham didn't get arrested. Gita was sure that Abraham knew her Dad was the one who called. She knew Abraham would get them back. She was so scared that she wouldn't even leave the lobby of her building. Her Mom changed her work hours so she could be home with Gita after school. I wished my Mom could do that but I knew she couldn't and I didn't want to ask. She'd just get all upset like the day when she came home and I hadn't

chained the door. So I kept my Abraham Feldman stories to myself or discussed him with my friends. It became morbid, like an obsession to assure myself that Abraham was going to get me.

Besides worrying about locking doors and that kind of stuff, Mom was always afraid that I was bored. She had to work and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Every Saturday she'd take me to the Blackstone Library and I'd check out tons of books. When I came home from school I could read, watch television or play with the cats. I didn't really mind being by myself because I could find things to do. What bothered me was that no one would be around to help me if Abraham got in. I'd call Mom at work a lot just to have time when someone could be listening if Abraham came. I would have gone over to my friends' apartment, but Mom wasn't too keen on that. Too many kids in our neighborhood got into trouble after school. Jeremy Brown started running with the bicycle stealing gang and his sister was caught shoplifting at Walgreen's. Mom wouldn't let me run around the city like that. Any of my after-school activities had to be planned. That's why I was in a pottery class at the Hyde Park Art Studio.

Every Thursday afternoon about five of us would walk with two major streets to cross. The walk was the worst because we had to go past alleys and backyard garages where Abraham might be hanging out. But once we got to the studio I felt secure. The pottery studio was in the basement of a red brick corner building. The cement walls were painted in a chunky cream color and bare lightbulbs with little cages hung from the ceiling. The windows were half windows because part of the room was underground. They had iron bars on them. I liked being in the basement because the sound of the creaking pottery wheels drowned out any other noises. even when it was raining outside or a bunch of police cars were going by we couldn't hear anything.

Mr. Sterchi let us do anything we wanted. He had real long hair tied back in a ponytail and would sit at his own wheel and work while we were left to our own devices. I was working on a pottery man with hair made of clay run through a cheese grater. Pottery Man was like Mr. Potato Head because his head and body were one big clump. He really didn't have a neck or

arms. On this particular Thursday he finally came out of the kiln and was ready to be taken home. I had mixed white and brown glaze together and it baked on him like a coat of toasted marshmallow. His hair looked like coconut shreds. He was going to be a surprise for my Mom. I couldn't wait to get home and give it to her. I could just see her finding a "special place" for him on the dining room table. I was so excited that I forgot about Abraham. Plus, Rachel's mother was walking us home because it had been getting dark early.

But by the end of class, Rachel's mother had not come. Mr. Sterchi told us to wait outside because he had to clean up. It was a fall afternoon and the streetlights had already come on. We stood in front of the studio waiting. The people walking by seemed to get scarier and scarier. One guy in a black trench coat came over to Rachel and asked her the way to the nearest bus stop. She talked to him and everything. I wouldn't have. My stomach began to burn. Where was Rachel's mother? The stores and buildings around us were locking up. No one seemed too interested in a bunch of kids hanging around the streets of Chicago near dinner time.

Finally, Rachel decided to start walking. What would I do now? I knew that Mom would be furious if I left without waiting for Rachel's mother. I took a ride home from school one day with a lady from our apartment building and got yelled at for about a week. And Mom was going to be mad enough that Rachel's mother didn't come like she said she would. I decided to stay. Rachel and the others crossed the street and headed toward home. I sat down on the curb and just watched them until all I could see was Rachel's red ski jacket. In the back of my mind I knew that Mom would worry when I didn't come home. I imagined her pulling up in our Dodge Colt and leaning over to open the passenger door. "Get inside, it's cold," she'd say. Then we'd drive home the long way past Woodlawn Park. But then I panicked. What if Mom wasn't home and a babysitter didn't have a car to come get me? What if the babysitter didn't even know where I was? What if Mom forgot? What if Abraham Feldman knew I was alone and found me outside the studio which was now closed?

I decided to make a run for it and catch up to the other kids. I tucked Pottery Man under my arm and ran across 52nd Street.

As I moved down the street, I began to see dangerous shapes down the alleys. The open dumpster looked like a person. An abandoned car with the wheels stolen looked like it might have someone sitting in it. The rattle of a barbed wire fence sounded like footsteps. At the intersection of Kenwood and Dorchester a car pulled up very slowly. I thought of the perverts who took little girls into their cars and drove off. I ran faster. Pottery Man thudded in my armpit. He thumped along with my pulse which was getting quicker and quicker. Come on. You're down two blocks. Keep going. The rises in the sidewalk were slowing me down. Faster. You're almost there. There's the school in the distance. Come on. Here's the Patton's house with the pretty stained glass window in the foyer. A figure flinched in the lobby of a brick three-flat. Just someone who lives there. Don't be silly. Nothing to be afraid of. Think of the apartment. Think of the apartment. Think of Mom. Come on...

"Where are running to?"

I didn't have to turn around to know who that voice belonged to.

"I asked you where you're going'."

I had no choice but to stop. I turned around and saw Abraham standing under an elm tree nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. In a swoop I realized that all of the houses on the street were dark.

"You. What's that you got hidden under yer arm?" Abraham demanded.

"Nothing. Jussa piece of, of pottery," I gasped. My voice sounded too high and my breathing seemed to have stopped.

"Pottery? I bet you got some money in there. Don't your Mommy give you money to make a phone call in case you get in trouble?" Abraham took a step from the shadow of the tree. He lifted the cigarette to his lips and I could see him wince as he sucked on it.

"Sorry," I said, making a motion to continue on my way. I tried to move but my feet felt like dead weights. I was going to die and I knew it.

"Don't leave yet. Did I tell you to leave? Geez." He stepped up closer. His eyes were heavy and dull like the ones of the shark in my book Monsters of the Deep. But the book and home seemed like something forgotten world. Pottery Man's clay hair

dug into my armpit like nails. Abraham was only a foot away from me now. I could smell the smoke on his denim jacket.

"Gimme that thing, " he said, pointing at Pottery Man.

"Really, it's nothing. It's for my Mom." My fingers had no feeling and my hands tingled. "You..."

Abraham slapped me with such force that I felt the backs of his knuckles on my skin. A stinging pain ran across my cheek and to the other side of my face. My eyes burned and I couldn't stop blinking.

"Listen kid. I'll give you one more chance to hand it over." Abraham clutched my arm so tightly that it almost snapped.

I don't remember what happened next, and I couldn't tell the policeman, but suddenly Pottery Man was on the ground in three big chunks. All I could think of was how his hair looked like fingernail clippings on the sidewalk. I looked up and saw thick blood coming out of Abraham's nose and dripping to his chin. His lips were all stretched out and puffy. I ran. I didn't know where I was going or why I ran. My head roared. I didn't feel the pavement and my jacket flew behind me like a pair of wings.

"Stop. Stop!!"

The dullness had spread through my entire body and I had no feeling. I couldn't remember what it was like to walk. I hurtled through the air.

"It's me! Stop!"

I rolled my head around like a doll and let my eyes focus.

"Stop! Stop!"

Mom's Dodge Colt pulled along beside me. I moved toward it in a haze.

"What are you doing? Gita's mother called and said she saw you running down the street by yourself. Where are the other kids?" Mom's voice drifted by around my head.

"Pottery Man. On the street. Abraham. He's coming. Keep moving. Run," I heard myself say.

"Abraham? Look, he's not... your face." Mom touched a spot on my cheek. "What happened to your face? Oh my God. Abraham Feldman did that..." Mom started crying. "Abraham Feldman hit my baby."

The police did not find Abraham that night. He must have

seen Mom's car after I started to run off. That's what they said anyways. I slept in Mom's bed that night and didn't have to go to school the next day. Mom took the day off. She called up Grandma in Florida and started crying again. Grandma wanted to talk to me and asked if I was alright. I said I didn't know. All I could see was Abraham stepping toward me with those dead shark eyes. Danny's eyes looked like little prunes when he was crying. Little puffy prunes.

The doorbell rang. Mom answered it and it was the policeman. She shut the door, unfastened the chain, and let him in.

Afternoon. I've got some news for you on your case, Ma'am," he said. "You might want her to , ah, leave..." I got up without being asked and went to my bedroom.

"Seems like Feldman met up with your daughter when he was waiting for a connection," the policeman said. I sat on my yellow ribcord listening to every word.

"A connection?" Mom asked.

Yes. We had a suspicion that he was working with a drug dealer in one of the southside gangs. Apparently he missed the connection when he ran off after your daughter hit him," the policeman said.

Hit him? I didn't remember hitting anyone. But Pottery Man's body was on the ground in three huge chunks.

"How do you know? " Mom asked. "I mean how do you know that's why he was there and why can't you find him now?"

"We did find him. His body was strewn on the tracks of Illinois Central at Randolph Street."

Just like Pottery Man's, I thought. And then I started screaming.

Candles

If I had a candle big enough,
I'd keep it lit until
you were in my arms.
If I had a candle big enough,
I'd light it and put it in
the window so everyone knew
about my love for you.
If I had a candle big enough,
it would burn until you understood
the yearning I have for you.
If I had enough candles,
I would light one for each day
I dreamt of you,
each day I cried over you,
each day I waited for us to be
together.
If I had a candle big enough,
it would most certainly burn out,
for no candle would ever be,
could ever be big enough.
No number of candles would
go as high as the number of days
I wait.
So here I sit,
with my matches,
with no candles to light.

The Voice

The balmy voice of Summer spoke to us that evening,
And we heard Her over the laughter
Of a thousand wonderful memories.
Droplets of sweat from a just-finished
Softball game still lingered on my face:
I don't even remember who won.

Summer beckoned from the West, and we followed,
Toward the slowly sinking sun
Whose fire danced across the heavens
To a miraculous symphony of color.
We playfully dodged the swaying limbs
Of a writhing but peaceful grove,
And muddied our shoes leaping over
A silent brook—but we didn't care.
Before us lay a meadow of emerald grasses,
And beyond that were the railroad tracks,
That we had set out to visit.
Through the whispering field,
We raced and bounded and tackled
Each other, laughing as we ran,
Until the meadow ceased.

The endless iron road traveled forever
To the glowing horizon.
And there we sat, deep into the night,
Waiting for a train,
In love with Summer.

Recovery

Remember, said the other voice, our first meeting. It was not a request, and was not a command he had the option of refusing. Remember, he was told, but it was merely a warning of what was about to be done for him.

Passively, Thomas felt his consciousness being unsmoothed, the surface of a pond disturbed by the brush of a finger; when the rippling subsided, he found himself staring into memory.

The expressway spread itself thinly out before and behind him, and he had maintained a relatively slow pace compared to the cars streaking past. That day, he recalled, he had been in no hurry, letting the highway carry him past his exit and loop him around the city.

You'll probably have to relinquish your license, the doctor had told him just fifteen minutes previously, adding hastily (lest he should appear fatalistic), but that's not for a long time, maybe never. He reeled against the implications as the words rang in his mind. Without realizing he did it, he began fiddling with the heater knob to squelch a tiny murmuring that had appeared from somewhere.

As the sound intensified, it became recognizable as the sound of a voice, metronomically counting off numbers.
"32N1375...94J1974..."

The counting was sporadic, and it took him several minutes to realize the numbers corresponded to the license plates of surrounding cars.

"64E14991...32B1848..."

As for the voice doing the counting, it was clear that it did not come from the radio. He pressed one hand up to his ear, and smothered the other ear with his shoulder, but the voice was just as loud. Strange, Thomas had thought, I've just been doomed by medical science to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, if I'm lucky, and what do I do? I think about license plates.

The voice paused momentarily in its counting. "Work against restraint," it informed him.

"What?"

"Work against restraint, against the fear of some kamakazi bastard, Satan is some Gremlin, aching to grind you down on the freeway. Amazing how it works. Memorize license plates before they hit you, before your face is in the defroster, and you do not fear because you know who they are, and now they fear you for that knowledge."

The thoughts ou think during times of trauma, Thomas reflected, realizing he was carrying on a conversation with himself. What good does that do, since the cars are already past when their plates come into view?

The voice grew quiet.

Don't worry if you start talking to yourself, Thomas remembered thinking, only if you start answering. He then put the incident out of his mind, worrying instead at the sudden tingling that erupted along the underside of his left arm.

The next memory flowed smoothly, and just as uncontrollably, from the first. A week had passed since the day on the freeway. He had been lulled to sleep by a lazy Saturday afternoon, when he was jarred awake, terrified, by a scream that splintered the air. Bolting from the sofa, he tried to follow the sound, to track down the source, but got no closer no matter which direction he went. Upstairs, the kitchen, outside, it was everywhere... Then he stopped, and so did the shrieking, as he realized from where it had originated. The other voice panted hysterically in his mind.

Thomas felt his left arm twinge and numb completely, and his heart began to pound.

Linen shrouds wound around for burial, howled the second voice, tied down with darkness and boy did it suck!

Thomas tried to remember the words the doctor had said the previous week, something about how he should not be surprised if he found that he was doing unusual things, sleep-walking and such. It was normal for patients in your condition, he had said. It will pass as you accept it.

Too shaken to fall back asleep, Thomas returned inside and picked up the blanket he must have kicked across the room while he slept. As he touched it, the other voice blazed to life again, "Shrouds, burial clothes, encasing movement restricted

for so long..."

For three days following, he was unable to sleep—he would continually start to drift off, only to be torn awake by the screaming of the other voice. Finally, driven to the point of exhaustion, he went to bed on the fourth day, determined to sleep, screaming or no screaming. He slept.

He awoke at four the next morning, shivering against a bare mattress. From somewhere downstairs, there floated up to him a gruff rumbling. Instantly, he was on his feet and down in the kitchen.

The dirty mound of dishes that had been rising in the sink over the past week had been strewn, chipped and fragmented across the counter and floor. His sheets, blankets, mattress cover, pillowcases, had been ripped into thin strips, which were knotted together into one long strand. Uncoiling from the pile on the floor, the strand snaked slowly up into the sink drain as the garbage disposal clutched and gathered it in.

I did this in my sleep? Thomas wondered incredulously.

Enclosed, entombed—these words, not his own, came from the back of his thoughts—Sleep is coma again, having to itch, to stretch, but cannot...having to clear the throat, but being unable, throat sealing up with mucus, clouding lungs...Get up, prevent restraint, begin to move...

The garbage disposal buzzed, jammed.

I didn't do this at all, he knew, and for the first time was afraid.

The doctor, as usual, had been good at offering facts that were hollow of hope. "I know it's hard to grasp, and I know we've been over this before, but bear with me. Try to look at this objectively. You have the most severe form of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis known. Period. Most cases of your type end with at least partial paralysis. Now, I'm not suggesting you'll end up that way, but you have to come to terms with it. No matter how hard you fight, there will be some loss of movement."

"But in my whole arm? Already? I can't move it whatsoever," he had said. He was not about to mention the voice. What could he have said?

"Granted, that is unusual so early on. But I don't know what else to tell you besides stick with your therapy...would you like

me to link you up with a support group?"

"Sure, about as much as I'd like you to fist me for prostate cancer again," the second voice blurted out of Thomas' larynx, adding that hell was particularly nice this time of year, and he should really take some Wednesday off to visit. Thomas clanged the receiver down.

"What in the hell...?" he muttered.

He was depressing anyway, the second voice countered.

A series of loud crashes woke him the next morning, and Thomas found himself standing in the bathroom, ankle deep in water, his left hand pummeling the toilet with the stone statuette that used to be displayed beside the sink. Try as he might, he was unable to stop the arm he had been unable to move for the past week and a half. After the statue was reduced to powder, his arm dropped it, and waved to him in the mirror.

"Morning," announced the second voice.

Thomas looked toward the rubble, the water bleeding from the chinks and fissures in the toilet, then back up at his reflection.

His left arm motioned for him to walk out into the living room.

All over the house, plants, of which he had many, were uprooted, leaning in bowls with the soil poured out.

Might take them awhile to get used to their new freedom, the voice said. I'll be damned if they weren't resistant. Some of 'em I had to throw against the wall four or five times before all the dirt came off.

Pictures had been punched from the empty frames that still hung on the wall.

Got tired of looking at the same thing in that frame. Couldn't change the channel. But with the new and improved model, I can do this. The left hand, much as Thomas tried to hold it down, gripped a nearby can of spraypaint and wisked its contents across the wall within the frame. Isn't this great? Look, just move the sucker, and you can do it again, as many times as makes you happy.

Where there had once been statues, figurines, there were now piles of dust and fragments.

Paralysis cured, the voice told him.

Two more days passed, and Thomas felt his legs slipping outside of his control.

By the week's end, he could only move his right arm. The other voice plopped his body down in front of the television whenever it could wrest the remote control from him.

The left hand stabbed at the channel numbers as fast as it could. Hours at a time went by in such fashion, Thomas unable to divert his eyes from the blurring images on the screen.

"Inquiring minds like mine want to know, Tommy, want to know, want to have and want now, and this blunderbuss of a remote can't keep the pace," the other voice whispered, since it no longer had to shout. "Can't this damn thing go any faster?"

Thomas remained silent, partly because it took too great of an effort to speak anymore, but mostly because he was intent on gripping and ungripping the upholstery on the couch, trying his best to fight off the numbing feeling that started creeping up his right arm.

The memories slowly dissipated, and Thomas was again in the present. Through eyes not under his control, he was able to see the road unscrolling as his car raced down it; his hands moved independent of him on the steering wheel. He did not even try to move any part of his body, knowing full well from past attempts that it was futile.

He could not move, he could not speak, and, lately, he noticed that he could no longer feel sensations through his skin. All he was able to do was to think, to wonder, to remember, and now the other voice was infringing upon that as well.

Perhaps the most amazing thing was what the doctor had just told the other voice, thinking it to be Thomas: apparently, all traces of the disease had vanished from the body, and the threat of immobility or paralysis was no longer a concern. He heard the other voice slowly repeat aloud the license numbers of the passing cars.

Rich Schmaltz

Confusion

I asked myself
a question
The answer to which
I remembered shortly after
I forgot the question...

Or did I?

Meredith Dooley

Snow Science

They finally did find two snowflakes exactly alike.
I hope the scientist who spent his life
looking for that star-crossed pair
Took an early retirement.

Mosquito

This tiny vampire
needs the sun.
A brief surge of warmth
lured him from his crypt.
He thirsted for summer
moist heat
the blood of children.
Now that warmth is gone
and winter is his wooden stake
his garlic
his holy water.

He clings to the window
his last refuge from the cold
sucking in what life he can
from the chilled pane of glass.

He moves so slowly.

My finger finds him easily.
Gently
I crush him
and send him back to Hell.

I had to kill him
while I still could.
Soon his kind will rule the earth
drinking blood
breeding
until frost drives them back to their graves.

Rain

Rain falls drip

down drop

my body

Trickle-dripping from

my hair dropping to

my drip neck to

my back drop to

my legs to drip

drop the ground and

back drip again.

It drop falls

all drip day

drip

drop

drip

drop

drip

Soaking all

the world drop

As mud puddles drip

catch the drop feet

and drip faces
of youngsters
drip
at play.

The Revival

I went to the local Catholic church, "Our Lady of the Indecisive Disciple," after a long absence from church going. I'm not really too sure why I stopped going to church, but it probably has something to do with sheer laziness. I've also been very disillusioned about many things in life, and religion is a prime example.

I'm not sure why I came back to church either, except maybe for curiosity. I heard that "Our Lady" was doing some pretty radical things and had quite a few of the more conservative Catholics in an uproar. It doesn't take much to get a Catholic in an uproar. For Catholics, religion is a one hour a week experience and having this interrupted is pretty scary. If mass is over an hour long or something is different from the usual, people go crazy. If people stay longer than an hour they may have to think about what you're actually doing—whoa, what a concept. I even heard a rumor about some very conservative people who were so upset that they tried to phone the pope about the problems.

I really didn't know why every one was so upset. So what if the church didn't recite the "Apostles Creed"; it's just a bunch of words? "Our Lady" also had the liturgical dances, gospel singers, and (gasp) lay people saying the sermon. Ya, pretty radical stuff.

I walked over to church because it was an exceptionally beautiful day—the sun was shining; birds were chirping. I thought that the walk would put me in the right frame of mind for church—it didn't. Several times I hesitated and was about to turn back. I kept saying to myself, This is a real waste of my time. But in the end my curiosity (or guilt) won out. I had some compulsion that drove me on towards that church.

I entered the church by a side door so that no one I knew would see me. Then I sat right in the middle of the church because I just wanted to fade into the crowd. I was desperately hoping that no one would say anything to me. I just wanted to get this over with and go home, and I definitely did not want to deal with any over zealous fanatics.

I was pretty early so I just sat there as inconspicuously as

I possibly could and watched the people come into the church (a person could watch every one come in because "Our Lady" is shaped like a semi circle. If positioned right, a person can see everything that happens in the church). I was certainly not praying or contemplating my immortal soul.

Then I noticed this small man coming into the church. I say small because he was only about five foot tall. He was dressed in black pants, shoes, and socks, with a bright red, button down, long sleeve dress shirt that looked like it would burn to the touch. His skin was as pale as a belly of a fish that sat in the sun all day and just as wrinkled, and he wore small, gold, metal frame glasses, and his neatly combed hair was as white as freshly fallen snow. He looked like a normal old man, but there was something about him—some power presence which forced me to watch him all the way into the church. My eyes followed him into church as he took his seat at the front of the church in the middle pew.

As the people filed into the church, no one sat around the old man. It was like he created some sort of vacuum around himself that no other people could enter.

I waited for the mass to start, expecting the old man to do something out of the ordinary, but he did nothing strange. He only sat there and stared straight ahead.

Well, finally one of the lectors came up to the podium and introduced himself, "Good morning and welcome to 'Our Lady of the Indecisive Disciple.' One of our traditions is to have everyone turn to your neighbors and greet each other." Reluctantly, I greeted a few people and luckily there was no one around me that I knew. Next, after the greeting time was over, the lector said, "And another tradition we have at 'Our Lady' is to find out if there are any visitors with us. If anyone is visiting, would you please stand." The only one to stand was the strange little man. The lector asked, "And what is your name, sir?"

"My name is George," the little man said very calmly.

"Well, George, where do you come from?"

"I have come back from the dead to serve as a warning to all you people."

There was a loud murmur through out the church which the lector broke by saying, "Oh—ah—well—our opening song is number 25 in the hymnal, 'Praise the Day.' Would you all rise

and join in."

Every one sang at a low disheartened tone. I could not help thinking that the old man was a plant in the church—planted to give emphasis to the priest's, Father Joe's, sermon.

Everything was going pretty normal until after the opening prayer. There was a baby who was to be baptized, and Father Joe asked the parents and godparents to bring the baby forward for the baptism. I thought, *Great, now this is going to take longer than usual.* But after the family had made their way up to the front of the church, George, the strange little man, stood up and said, "Father, I would like to speak to your congregation."

Father Joe was a pretty liberal priest, but anyone could tell that it was a tough decision for him. Finally, he said, "Yes, you may speak."

George stepped up to the podium and began, "You are all here witnessing a baptism—a sacrament which is supposed to save a person's soul. Save the soul from what, for what? Saving for a life time of misery and suffering only to die in pain and be unsure of the condition of the soul. You people act like baptism is some sort of guarantee for eternal life. But I know the truth. A person has to live a good life before baptism can do any good at all."

I was getting pretty upset. I didn't come to church to have some crazy old man preach to me about heaven and hell. I was giving serious thought to just getting up and leaving. George kept right on talking, "Do all of you feel so confident that the church and all these sacraments will actually save you from a life time of misery."

Father Joe answered, "God put us here; he gave us all a free will. No one said that life was going to be easy. Every one has to work their hardest to achieve their heavenly reward."

"What about Mrs. Jonas, who prated and prayed for her husband to stop drinking? He died under the influence of alcohol. But that is not the worst part. He also killed a young mother with her child. All Mrs. Jonas' prayers did nothing. Where was your God during all of this. Do you think that Mr. Jonas is sharing in the heavenly reward?"

"Every one has an opportunity to achieve heaven, and it is not our place to judge the actions of others," Father Joe

answered.

Meanwhile George just kept right on talking, "How can this innocent babe live a good life with all you hypocrites living around him. A child needs a good example among you people. He will end up rotting in the eternal fires just like the rest of you so called righteous people."

Many people were murmuring, but it didn't stop George. "Take for instance the parents of this babe. The mother of this child tried to prevent his birth by using birth control. How would this child feel if he learned that he was a mistake? And the father has been having an extramarital affair with Miss Watson, one of your communion ministers. And the godparents are just as bad as the parents. The godmother has had an abortion because she became pregnant after an extramarital affair. The godfather has been having a homosexual affair with your pious Father Joe here."

After George said that there was a strong uproar in the church, but he just kept going on accusing each person that he saw in the church and all of a sudden some men rushed to the front of the church and grabbed George. They carried him out kicking and screaming, "Sinners you will all be sorry! Heed my words: repent now or burn in the eternal fires of hell." I could hear George screaming as he was carried out the door.

The mass was broken up, and all the disillusioned people filed out of the church. I thought that the whole thing was a pretty stupid attention getter, but I felt sorry for that poor old man. He had to go through a lot of crap just for "Our Lady" 's radical style. I could not help wondering what George would have accused me of.

I didn't wonder too long about my worst sin, and I started out of the church. I looked down and saw a small pair of gold, metal frame glasses. The glasses must be George's so I picked them up to give to Father Joe, but I had a strange compulsion to put the glasses on. Looking through the lens all the people looked like they were very dirty, almost black.

SINNERS

It was incredible—I felt an incredible rush flow through my entire body, and I was totally out of breath. I staggered forward and braced myself against the nearest wall. I couldn't believe

or understand what was happening to me. It would be hard for me to do any real justice to the experience that I was having—it was better than any drug induced experience. Everything was so vivid, and all the people looked so weird. It was as if I could see the sins they had committed. Oh, I couldn't tell what they had exactly done, but I could see varying degrees of black on different people. All of the people had some black on them. It was like those science fiction movies that try to show what a black hole would look like—blackier than the black of the rest of the empty space around. And these people size black holes seemed to draw all the light into them.

I was in such a bad state, staggering and sweating, that I took off the glasses to wipe off my face. As soon as I took off the glasses the effect disappeared—everything was back to normal. *God, this is so weird*, I thought. As I stood there against the wall trying to catch my breath, I decided to experiment. I put the glasses back on, and I got the same effect. *Man, this is just to weird. I have to get out of here.*

I took off the glasses and thought about just throwing them on the floor of the church. But I decided to try to find the owner first. So I walked outside, and there was George across the street from the church on the street corner.

I walked over to George and said, "Here you go. I think these belong to you."

As I handed the glasses to George, he said, "No, they don't."

"But didn't they fall off of your face?"

"Yes, but they're not mine anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"You put the glasses on didn't you?"

"Ya, why?"

"I can see the change has come over you already."

"What?"

"The glasses have opened your eyes."

Wooo, we are now entering the Twilight Zone.

"You probably think that all of this is very weird. Well, so did I when I was chosen. You probably had the same experience as I did. I am getting to old for the mission so a younger person had to be chosen."

"Chosen?"

"Yes, you have been chosen to root out the evil in the world."

"But in the church back there you were saying that church and religion will not help a person. What is the sense of rooting out evil if there is no good?"

"I couldn't really tell you what I said in there. But just because I was condemning the church doesn't mean that there isn't good in the world."

"You said that you have come back from the dead?"

"Do I look dead to you? I am trying to tell you that when you have been chosen your life is not your own. You become an instrument for the mission. Your voice and actions will not be your own. You will not even be aware of what you do or say."

"This is stupid—I'm getting out of here. Here are your glasses."

"I've told you they're yours now. You have a mission."

"I have a life."

"Not any more you don't."

"You're a crazy old man. I'm out of here," I said as I walked away from George.

I could hear George talking as I walked away, "You cannot hide from your mission. You have been chosen."

As I walked quickly out of ear shot of George, I walked past this yard full of little trees and all kinds of under growth. I looked around, to see if anyone was looking, and not seeing anyone, I whipped the glasses as far as I could into the yard.

When I arrived back home it was a little after lunch, but I wasn't hungry; I was very tired. Basically my whole day had been ruined, so I decided to just go to sleep.

When I woke up from my nap, it was dark out already. Man, I must have crashed hard. I was very cold when I woke up, and I was fully dressed. Huh, I must have been sleep walking. I stumbled across the room and flipped on the light. Oh my God, I don't believe it! As I looked around the room there were the glasses on the nightstand by my bed, and then ran out to my car to get some tools.

When I came back in I placed the glasses down on the floor and smashed them into as many pieces as I could. I took some big wire cutter and cut the frames apart. Then I pushed all of the pieces into an envelope and then into a box which I taped-up.

After that I sat and waited, never taking my eyes off the box. When the garbage man came, I ran out and threw the box into the back of the truck. I stood there until I saw the garbage crushed inside. I breathed a sigh of relief as the truck pulled away, and I went back inside and went to sleep.

"Everything was going fine for a few days until I had a doctor appointment. My doctor told me that I might need glasses, so I went to get my eyes checked. I found out that I really did need glasses, so I went to the local "Eye Glass Emporium" with my prescription. The nice woman sized up my face and asked me if I wanted to try on some frames. I told her yes. She told me to browse while she looked for some newer styles. So after a minute in the back room she came out smiling, "Here is a new pair that we just got in. I think that they would look very nice on you.

"She placed these small, gold, metal framed glasses on the table in front of me. I looked at them closer, and I couldn't believe it—the glasses looked exactly like George's. They had the same glass and everything.

"Well, I completely freaked-out. I stood up screaming and threw the table over on the sales person. I ran out to my car and took off.

"The police caught me for reckless driving. I guess that I was pretty hysterical. So they took me right here to the country home. And that's what happened. So what's the verdict, Doc?"

The small doctor in the clean, white lab coat looked at me and smiled, "It just seems to be a little paranoia. Nothing a little counseling cannot clear up."

He looked at me and smiled again as he pulled small, gold, metal-framed glasses out of his lab coat and wiped them off with his handkerchief. I looked at them closely.

NO, NO, AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!

The Mind

Why do we act as if rocks are harder than faces?
With their granite brows
And jaws fixed in avid devotion to the active mind within,
The slipping lids, cold lips, and blue chin,
And the cheeks—a tint of gray slipping in.

Why do we act as if ice is colder than hands?
With their calloused skin
And knuckles white in avid devotion to the troubled mind,
The darkened spots, cracked nails—tales of time,
And the weakening grip—another sign.

But then again,
Why do we act as if flowers are sweeter than looks or
touches?
With their healing power,
The soft communication of both in avid devotion to the
mind's muse,
They consider; they accept; they refuse,
And each carries—each carries its silent clues.

Why do we act as if armies are greater than minds?
With their fine-tuned flexibility,
Changing and twisting in avid devotion to the power it deems,
Their comas, their seizures, their dreams,
And they contain the world—or so it seems.

What About Love?

I sit alone in my quiet room in the late evening and try to write a love poem to no one in particular because I have never really loved anyone.

The love I feel for you
Makes me feel so blue
Because I know that you
Don't have any love for me.
Why can't you see
What you are doing to me?

Blah! What a bunch of garbage. I guess that I really should consider what love is before I try to write a poem about it.

A knock on my door interrupts my thoughts. I have to get up from my desk because I locked the door to keep undesirables out.

"Hey dude! Is Jack Around?" Derick Border said.

Great, I think - an undesirable. I say, "No, I have no idea where he's at. What's up?"

"Well, I just laid Debby, and I really want to get basted. Yes, the great god of all V was with my this fine evening. Since Jack's out do you want to get basted with me?"

"No."

"Well, it looks like I'll have to partake of the great bowl myself. Can I light up in here?"

"Ya, I guess. Go over by the window and turn the fan on."

"Hey, everything's cool," Derick says as he turns the fan on and sits his greasy self on Jack's clean, well made bed. He looks like he hasn't showered in a week—his blonde hair is an oil packet mat, he has a scruffy beard, and he smells like a wet dog. Good thing he is sitting over by the window. I'll have to whip out the "Fresh Scent Lysol" after he leaves. I sit down on the cheap easy chair and look at Derick.

People like Derick really get under my skin. They just use people like crazy.

Anticipation runs through me,
I can barely see.
For a first time -
But I can't hesitate -
The clock will chime
And it will all be over.

The first girl that I asked at my high school was Marsha Reed. There was some kind of dance going on—homecoming. I was very curious about the whole thing because my friends told me that Marsha was scoping me out. I never had a girl show any interest in me before.

I finally got up the nerve to ask her out, and I couldn't believe it: she said yes. I was so excited; I had a date.

Well, we went out, and everything was pretty cool (I mean I didn't embarrass myself—I actually had a good time). But on the following weekend I asked Marsha to go out to a movie with me. She said, "Hey don't get any ideas. You're kind of cute, but all I wanted was to go to the dance. That's all."

DAMN

Derick says, "Hey do you have a light? I can't find mine."

"No. Check in Jack's top drawer. There might be one in there."

Derick scrounges through the drawer for a minute then says, "Hey here's one. This lighter is pretty cool - I might have to pilfer it." After a brief pause Derick says, "Hey, I really could use some tunes. You don't care if I put on some tunes?"

"No, go ahead," I say tiredly.

After he has rummaged through my albums for a minute, Derick says, "Oh dude, you have the new Aerosmith album. I really have to give this a hear."

"Ya, go ahead."

Infatuation taking hold
I have to have it
Before I grow old.
Don't have to worry.
About what comes next
When you're knee deep in sex.

About a year after that dance in high school and I was still pretty bitter at Marsha for using me.

My first concert was when I was 17 years old. I went up to Chicago, by myself, without my parents permission, to see Aerosmith. It was going to be great - I had pretty good seats.

I was setting right next to a cute girl with long sandy blonde hair, tight jeans, and a new Aerosmith concert tee. After the opening act (I cannot remember for the life of me who it was) finished, the cute girl looked over at me and said, "Hi, I'm Sherry. I really get into Aerosmith."

"Hi, I'm Mark. Aerosmith is the only reason why I came up here today."

"I really think Steve Tyler is soooooo cute."

"Well, I don't know about that, but his voice really kicks ass."

"Hey, it's pretty hot in here. do you want to sneak out to my car before Aerosmith comes on?"

"Ya, let's go."

When we got out to the car we talked for a little while longer about the band. Then all of a sudden she says, "Hey do you want to get high?"

"Sure."

After we smoked for awhile, we hopped in the back seat and had sex. While we were going at it she kept saying, "Oh, Steven. Oh, Steven do me. Oh, Steven you are so good." I really didn't care what she said because I just felt too good.

When we got back in the arena, the band was just opening up with "Back in the Saddle Again." I just stood there smiling and said, "Oh Steven you are soooooo good."

Derick puts on another album. White Snakes "Is It Love" comes out of the speakers. Derick says, "Ya, man, this is a boss tune."

Fire goddess,
Who turns me on—
You're close enough
To talk to
But too far away
For me to tell
You how I feel.

Chris had the most beautiful red hair that I ever saw in my life; I never was turned on by hair, but Chris' hair turned me on. I guess that she only had an ordinary head of hair; it was shoulder length and straight, but there was some thing about that intense red color. Chris' hair was like a Matador's red cape enticing a bull to charge.

I could not find the words to ask her out. Chris and I were pretty good friends; we teased each other a lot, but we always knew when to quit.

Chris and I were in third year high school art class together. The class always had a stereo going playing the latest rock music (White Snake's "Slide It In" was big at the time), and people were always talking and generally messing around: like starting clay fights and sniffing the paint in the back room.

One day Chris walked over to me with her face all red and full of tears, and she slapped me hard on the right side of my face. I just stood there dumbfounded and said, "What was that for."

"Don't give me that shit. You know damn well what that was for," Chris shrieked. Then she ran out of the room with the teacher in pursuit. I noticed three guys who were back in the corner; they were cracking up laughing. I walked over to them and asked, "What's so funny?"

The leader of the group said, "I guess your lover girl didn't like the present you gave her."

I was getting mad. I asked, "What present?"

"Oh, just some additions to her purse with a little love letter from you," the leader said giggling.

"What a pack of assholes," I said as I walked away.

Later, I found out that those same guys had got into Chris' purse, dyed one of her tampons red, put in a supposedly used condom, and placed a note on the top that said, "Dear Chris, I've been thinking real "hard" about you. Your lover, Mark." The letter was typed, but the signature looked a lot like mine.

Later, Chris found out the truth and she apologized for slapping me; I told her that it didn't matter. After that Chris and I never really talked to each other. I don't know why; I guess it made me so mad that she had so little trust in me.

Derick turns off the stereo and I ask, "What's up?"

"Man, I was thinking that I need some V for tonight."

"What about Debby?"

"Man, she is alright, but I can't be tied down to one V. Besides, she's pretty stupid, but V doesn't need to be too smart—just put out. Time for the mighty black book." Derick pulls a small book out of his soiled jean jacket (why anyone would put their hand in that grungy coat is beyond me). The book is no longer black but more off gray. Derick opens it up but the pages stick together.

"Yes, the mighty black V book has seen some hard times, but still lives on. Here we go. Jill—no way man. I was with her once. We were going pretty good. I got to feel her up but that was it. She told me that she liked sex, but not on the first date. Man, what kind of attitude is that. I mean, that is like a friend would treat me. I don't need a friend."

I need a lover
And not a friend,
Someone warm
Who I can depend
To be around
Just at the right
Time.

I thought Jean was great—she had the best body in the whole school, and she looked so hot in that tight, red cheerleading uniform. I thought there was nothing to lose so I asked her to the homecoming dance. She told me, "I think that you're a really nice guy, but I could never go out with you. We could never be anything but friends."

I thought: man, what kind of garbage is that. She doesn't even really know me.

Jean went to the dance with the big football captain, Jim. Eight and a half months later Jim Jr. was born. I guess that Jim was a better friend then me. In didn't laugh long and loud but I chuckled a little.

Now, Jean is divorced from Jim and is raising little Jim by herself. She works as a secretary for a local company, while her mother watches little Jim.

Derick continues to look through his black paper love connection. "Ah, yes, Hether. I shall call Hether." Derick dials the phone. "Hello Hether? What's up?... Hey, do you want to come down and party a little later?... No?... Why not?... Why can't you say?... No, just tell me... What?... That's crazy... I thought I meant something to you?" Derick bangs the receiver down. "What an ungrateful bitch."

"What's up?"

"Her ex-old man is here and she has to straighten things out with him. She should just tell him to go to hell and forget about it. Ha! I should go out there, straighten him out, and take the V."

Derick says, "Hey man, I heard that you and Sue broke up."

"Ya. But that was a while back."

"Man, I just heard a few days ago. Hey, man a couple hits and you forget all about that bitch."

"No, that's O.K. I'll get by."

"Better with a little help from your friends."

"You just don't quit—do you?"

Derick smiled a nasty, yellow smile—the kind of smile that would make the Colgate "Wisdom Tooth" guy fall over and die—"Ha! Never say die!"

We started out as good friends
I waited—anticipated
For something—anything—
Something special—magical
To happen and change my mind.
But nothing happened.
What do I do when my love
Isn't as deep as yours?

Some time ago Sue and I were having a little afternoon sex. In the heat of the moment she whispers in my ear, "Do you love me?"

I just froze up. I just laid there and didn't say anything. Finally, Sue asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking."

Sue sat up. She had a weird look on her face and said, "What's the problem? It's a simple question. You shouldn't have to think about it."

"No, it's not simple."

"Well, do you love me or not?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't what we are doing here show that we love each other?"

"No, that's not love. It's only physical desire or lust or something. I don't know," I said very softly.

Sue's face was contorting and turning a vivid shade of red. "You bastard! I don't mean anything to you! You were just using me!"

"No, it's not like that... I don't know... It's... I mean... I like you but... but..." She broke off, "But nothing! I don't want to hear anything from you—you asshole! I can't see how you can lay there and be so calm. I'm leaving."

She got dressed and slammed the door hard on her way out. I hadn't moved. "But I'm not being calm." I really wasn't being calm. Her question took me by surprise—I guess that I never really considered it before.

Sue hasn't spoken to me since then, but of course I have made no attempt to contact her either. The whole thing just

didn't seem worth the effort. I guess that I was just too disillusioned.

I look at Derick sitting back on Jack's bed listening to the music again. I know it is a mistake but I ask, "Hey, Derick, can I ask you something?"

"Ya, go ahead man," Derick says without looking up.

I ask, "do you know what love is?"

"Love, man. This is love," Derick says as he holds up his pipe.

"No, I mean love between a man and a woman," I say.

"Man, there is no love between a man and a woman—there is only sex," Derick says.

I ask, "Haven't you ever wondered what love would be like?"

"No, man, I see all these people that say they love each other, and then they wind up getting married. And marriage is a bunch of shit. I mean, look at my parents they're married, and they hate each other. The only thing that they have in common is me, and man, that's no joke."

Where is the love
That I can't see.
I don't understand
How it can be true
When you don't show
How you feel.

I wonder how my mom and dad stayed together for 24 years. It would have to be love that kept them together for so long. Wouldn't it?

I remember my mom telling me once, "I loved the old days when your father and I were first married. He used to do special things like bring me flowers and candy every week." Mom paused, then said, "That was before you were born."

Mom and Dad never have really argued, in fact, they really never say much of anything to each other. They never seem to show each other much emotion. But with all their lack of emotion they have managed to have six kids. I guess that they're just so used to each other. I think that they've followed

the same routine their entire married lives. Dad works at the tire plant for eight hours, then he comes home and works in the garage. Mom works all day in around the house. The only times that they spend together are in bed and going to church on Sundays.

At least Mom and Dad sleep together, Gram and Gramps sleep in separate beds. I remember when I did some painting for them, and I saw that their beds were on opposite sides of the room. It just doesn't figure. A person would get the impression that they hate each other, yet they had a bunch of kids. Where did they have sex—on the floor?

There is another knock on the] door. Oh, great. I exclaim loudly, "Come in!"

Hether, a short blonde with short, greasy hair and torn, faded jeans comes in and walks over to Derick. Oh, another undesirable. Hether says, "Derick, I'm sorry. I got sick of Bob so I just left him. I really am sorry."

"That's O.K. babe, come here."

They start kissing on Jack's bed, and I hear Derick say, "Man, why couldn't I have fallen in love with a nerd chick."

Hether says something that I cannot make out, and Derick says, "Of course I love you, babe. Hether's back is toward me, and Derick looks up, smiles, and gives me the old peace sign but not to mean peace—V.

I walk over to the desk and wad up the paper with my start of a love poem and pitch it into the garbage. Derick asks while Hether is sucking on his neck, "What's that man?"

"Oh, nothing but some junk," I say as I slide down on the cheap easy chair and drift off to sleep.

Sometime later: I am working on that love poem again, and there is that familiar knock on the door again.

Why does this always happen to me? "Come in."
Derick walks in carrying a brown paper sack that says 10th
Street liquors. "Dude, I heard the good news."
"What's that?"
"You've got yourself some fresh V."
"No, it's not like that."
"What's this V's name?"
"HER name is Sherry!"
"Do I know it?"
"No, I don't think you know HER."
"Well, I have to make a run to the liquor store. Tell Jack I
stopped by. Do you want any beverage?"
"No."

I am reborn again
In the fiery blood
Of some one else.
The blood was stolen
From a passing smile—
Just enough to fill
My heart (and soul).
Now I dream dreams
I never dreamed before.
My life has meaning—
At least for this moment—
And isn't the moment
Enough?

I met Sherry in one of my classes. Oh, I knew who she was
for a long time because she is a few years younger than me.
From the first time I saw her in the cafeteria I thought that she
was very cute. I found out what her name was from some
friends, but I never took it any farther. I just kind of admired her
from afar. Then destiny took over—she was in one of my
classes. I sat behind her and to the left in class, and all I could
do was stare at her during class. Then one day we just started
to talk—it was like magic. I could talk to her very easily about
things that interested both of us.

During the semester, I began to like Sherry more and

more—I actually never felt so strongly about any girl before. The whole thing was very strange because I never felt so strange before. I felt very happy and strangely optimistic.

I was very afraid to actually ask Sherry out on a date. But I thought about the whole thing over break, and I couldn't stop thinking about Sherry. I had to ask her out no matter what. I had a lot of respect for her, and I felt that she would never purposely crush my feelings.

When we all got back to school on the first day after break I was determined to ask her out right after class. Unfortunately, I turned very yellow and I couldn't do it. But the gods of love were smiling down upon me. As I was cowering away down the hall, I heard, "Hey, Mark, do you have some gum?"

I searched like crazy through my book bag and coat, but I couldn't find any gum. "Sorry, but I have some minties. Do you want one?"

"Ya, thanks."

"Hey, Sherry, would you want to go with me to scope a movie or something?"

"Ya, that sounds good to me. When do want to go?"

"Well, how about this weekend?"

"Ya, I can make it. Give me a call later."

Ever since then I have been in a constant daze. I just can't believe how strongly I feel about Sherry.

"What are you up to?" I ask Derick.

"Oh, I'm just hang'n out for Jack. Do you know where he's at?"

"I think he's getting a check cashed for this weekend."

"Ah, yes, money. Such a valuable commodity—like V. You always need it but there is never enough to go around."

Derick goes over to my fridge and looks in, "Hey man, what's with this bottle of wine."

"Oh, that's for a special occasion."

"Ah, saving it for the V, are we?"

I growled under my breath.

"What's up?" asks Derick.

"Nothing, I was just clearing my throat."

"Hey, man, what're doing tonight."

"Well, Sherry is coming over and..."

"Hey, great man. Me and Jack are plannin' a blow-out party. V always loves a party."

Derick goes over to the stereo and looks around. "Hey, man, what is this shit. 'Robbie Robertson, Jimmie Barnes, Marillion and 10,000 Maniacs. what is this soft shit. Man, if we're going to have a party in here, we're gonna need something that really rocks."

I half smiled at Derick, that's what you think.

A Memory Uncovered By Rain

Mist from the rain which has fallen
Coats the night
In a film-like membrane, which I must
Pass through
A street light high above towers as a sentinel
Maybe it knows what I am thinking of
Thinking of doing
Desperately craving the power to do
It glares at me like a disappointed father
Or an offended priest
It is you I think of
As my feet splash upon the wet pavement
You walk so clearly with me
Our stride moving as one
Together we walk
As we once did
Under a different moon

It is dark
And a chill wind tugs at us
Pushing us forward, and somehow, dragging us back
Trees and objects in the distance
Blend into the dark could
Surrounding us
Like twigs
On a foggy night
Sticking upright in damp mud.
Gravel crunches
As I step onto the curb before my house
I do not need to look for a light
In the kitchen window
To know that
No one is home.

A tired man
In a tiring life
I fall asleep committing the unforgivable

I tug and pull at your memory
Like an enraged lion on a piece of warm, bloody meat

If I could I would take you from God

But instead I awake and leaving my chair,
I go into the bedroom.

The Storms of Outside Do Come Within

As the funeral director made the final arrangements with the flowers, people trickled into the church, and found places on the pews. The service wasn't for another half hour, but many had already come, and many of the pews were already filled. Until the music began, a forced silence filled the sanctuary, and only hushed voices could be heard over the quiet. When the music did begin, many of those hushed voices relaxed, but strengthened in volume, as if they thought the soft, hollow notes of the pipe organ would conceal their voices or muffle them.

Jesse sat there in the very first pew, the one reserved for family. She was by herself on the long wooden bench, and she sat in the light from the window that streaked through Virgin Mary. The music from above filled her ears, but she could barely hear the notes over the thoughts that ran through her mind. The fight which broke out last summer between her dad and her grandfather filtered through her hazy thoughts.

Grandpa Emerson had invited Jesse and her father up for a week, and they weren't there even a day, when the two were at each other once again. Jesse searched for the reason of the argument as she sat on that gym-bleacher-hard pew, but she couldn't find it anywhere. Like the other fights, it was probably over a minor thing, and even the fights probably couldn't have recalled it. She only could remember that the fight entered yet another hibernation period when her grandfather had a horrible guttural coughing fit, which he got from too much smoking. Jesse was the only one of the two to stay the whole week; her dad lasted the afternoon.

Except when she occasionally, cautiously, looked back toward the entry way to watch for him, she sat quite still. She knew the chances were slim, but she was hoping he would at least come to the funeral. Jesse had called him last night at his new apartment once the arrangements had been finalized, and she nearly begged him to come. He had agree to be there, but now she was thinking that those were just words without any meaning.

Finally, Jesse caught sight of her Dad in the lobby that sits just outside the main church. He seemed uncomfortable, and

was anxiously searching the rows of benches for her when a man touched him on the elbow, whispered in his ear, and pointed at Jesse. Her father came forward in a rapid walk, and as he walked his shoulders hunched forward, forming a cave, protecting him from the sharp glares of the people in the pews.

There were no secrets in a town that size, and everyone was well aware of the tension between those two men. They had seen it all, heard it all, in the drugstore and in the bank. Everyone her grandfather's age believed that they knew where the problem lay, and they were certain it was Jason, Jesse's father. They could not be convinced otherwise. They sided with her grandfather.

When he had reached the front and he sat down quickly, hardly acknowledging Jesse. In his profile, Jesse could see the beads of nervous sweat on his receded forehead, and his eyes looked angry, not sympathetic or sad. Jesse knew that he had probably only come because of her.

During the funeral, Jesse heard the minister speaking, but after the first of many prayers, and psalms, and other such rituals she forgot about the service, about her grandfather, and about her father, too. She noticed the carvings of fruit and angels on the wood of the lectern and the pulpit, and she noticed how the shapes continued up to the ceiling, constantly intertwining, to the border that went all around the room. Each shape was different, and she noticed in places the border carvings showed Bible stories. There was one of the Last Supper, and another of Moses and the Red Sea, and above the lectern Christ was carved on the crucifix. The wood border seemed to bind the walls together, supporting them, making them strong.

When the choir began to sing, Jesse came back to the funeral, and she looked at her grandfather lying in the bronze casket, with the peach velvet upholstery, his gray head resting on a plump matching pillow. Because her father said he was too busy, Jesse had made arrangements with the funeral director, and she had picked that casket because its golden hue resembled the sunsets that her grandfather had loved.

She remembered that as a little girl she would look through his photo albums, and they would be filled with hundreds of sunset pictures, all taken from the same picture window of his house. Her grandfather never talked about them, but when her

grandmother was alive, she had told Jesse that her grandfather had always felt there was something special about a sunset, and as soon as he got a camera, he began taking pictures of them on days when something great happened. There was the sunset of the day her parents had married, of the day she was born, and, fitting Grandpa's sense of humor, even one of the day Nixon Resigned.

When the funeral was over, the funeral director came over to Jesse and her father, and ushered them out. When Jesse wheeled around out of the pew, she saw just how crowded the church was. Jason may not have liked his own father, but it was clear he was loved by others. There were many with red-stained cheeks, and a few women with velvet cloche hats crying to their embroidered handkerchiefs. Through their minds as they saw Jason walk down the aisle, went the episodes of argument that were so well known.

On the way to the graveyard, Jesse sat silently in the car with her dad. They had moved out of the parking lot and onto the road, and they were well through town before anyone spoke.

Nice service, huh, Dad," said Jesse, watching his face to see how he would answer. A voice was not enough, when it came to her father, because, even though he could disguise his voice, his face revealed too much.

His answer, Yeah...fine" came out uncaring, but the fluttering of his eyelids, and the bitten bottom lip, told something else. Jesse believed her father loved Grandpa Emerson in some way, but she couldn't understand why he refused to show it. He seemed to hold everything back like he was afraid that if the words or the emotions were allowed to begin spilling out he wouldn't be able to shove them back in fast enough, and they would all be out, for everyone to see. Grandpa Emerson was that way, too, like with the sunsets. He would let people see them, but he would never talk about them, never let anyone really understand them, or him. Jesse thought that was why they fought so much, because neither one ever understood the other.

A little while later, when they had reached the cemetery, Jesse stood by her father at the gravesite. It was bleak outside, as is customary for March, and even though it was late after-

noon, the sun was nowhere. The wind repeatedly whipped a strand of Jesse's hair into her face, and it blew on the poor flower arrangements of pink and green until they tipped over. The minister tried to speak many more kind words, but the wind carried them away, and they were lost. It didn't matter to Jesse; she was cold, and wanted to go, and the words were the same spoken at the church, only different in a way.

When the entire service was finally over, several members of the town came to give their condolences, saying what a fine man Reynold had been, and how he had been such an asset to the town, and so on, but to Jesse the words seemed pointless, seemed to have no meaning. They sounded cliché, and the more she heard, the more she wanted to go. The crowds would slip past her father with a condolence of pursed lips, and move right to Jesse, spilling themselves to her alone. She felt overwhelmed, and finally, able to escape the swarms, Jesse and her father drove back to the church in silence.

She picked up her car at the parking lot, and she decided to meet her father at Grandpa Emerson's house. As he drove away, she went into the church to pick up some of the flowers. There were many beautiful ones arranged with carnations, and roses, but to Jesse it seemed odd to have such life at something so full of death. Without the casket they seemed out of place positioned on the floor, framing an empty space, so, without really thinking, she arranged the ones she wasn't going to take farther about the large room. When her work was complete the room seemed transformed, it was more beautiful now, more pleasing to her; now that death had gone.

When Jesse got back to the house, she could smell the food her father was cooking in the kitchen. She went to the doorway, and leaned against the dark wood door frame, watching him. He stood by the stove, bent over, elbow on the counter-top, hip against the cabinets, spatula ready and waiting. His face was to the wall, hid from Jesse, but standing that way he looked worn out. She thought that maybe finally he was hurting, that he was upset, and she felt the need to go to him. But at her first, emotion-filled step, though, the green, cracked linoleum squeaked, and her father bolted upright, and attended the hamburgers frying in the pan.

"Oh good, you're finally home," spoke her father light-

heartedly. "I hope you're hungry, cause your grandpa's got about fifty pounds of frozen meat down in that freeze we're going to have to do something with."

Jesse, embarrassed and disappointed at the same time, sank into one of the old wobbly kitchen chairs, and softly replied to her father that she wasn't hungry. She was embarrassed because she had foolishly pretended that there was something, some expression, in her father; disappointed because there wasn't.

"Do you want any cheese on your burger?" questioned Jason, but not hearing a reply, he turned to her, and saw his daughter with her forehead resting against her propped-up fists, her eyes closed. He went to her and rubbed the middle of her back. After a few moments, he said to her, "Honey, I know you loved Grandpa, but everyone, well, everyone dies. You...you have to let him go."

"Grandpa?" Jesse said, confused, "You think this is about Grandpa?" Looking at him, she shook away from his touch and stood up. "This is about you, Dad! I'm upset at you! I don't see how you can be this way about your own father's death."

Her father looked away from her stare and escaped into the dining room, yelling, or rather emphatically stating over his shoulder, "He's my father, and I can be anyway I would like! Don't lecture me, Jessica, on my father, you have no idea how different we are."

"You're not different from him!" Jesse yelled, following him into the other room. "You're exactly the same! Neither of you would give in! Can't you for once let your guard down! Then you'd be different!"

The room became silent, and she saw her father standing at her grandfather's picture window, standing with his hands against the cold glass, and staring out into the evening western sky.

It was only for a moment, but Jesse thought that she saw the glint of a tear on her father's cheekbone, but when he turned away from the light it was gone again. He walked into the kitchen, brushing past her, his face down, and in clearing his throat, he quietly asked, "So...do you want cheese?"

Jesse walked over to the window. This is the one out of which her grandfather had picked so many sunsets. So many

great, important days. The sun hadn't been out from the clouds all day, today. Fitting, Jesse thought.

The outside seemed so still, but one glance at the darkening, swiftly-moving clouds, showed that it was cold, and a storm might be coming. They were safe, though, here in the space of Grandpa's sturdy walls, and they were protected by the storms outside. What supports were there for the storms inside, thought Jesse.