With great effort he pulled himself up in bed and swung his feet over the side. His body reminded him of a beached whale he had seen once, the tremendous bulk fallen in on itself, dying on the beach. He felt his ribs caving into his stomach, which constantly dropped and dropped, sickening him.

"Does the diet here seem to be all right? Are you hungry between meals?"

And where will I go afterward, if I don't die here? Where will I go to die? The doctor was looking at him and he knew he had to say something, so he said that.

"Of course there's always the question of where I'll go when you folks here are through with me."

"Well we'll see about that. There are plenty of good rest homes until you feel like your old self again."

The old man laughed, because he couldn't remember his old self. There must have been one, somewhere, but it was lost now. The old self hadn't been dying, and he was. He had diabetes now, and he should have gone to see the doctor sooner. I have no one to blame, he thought, no one to blame but myself.

The doctor clutched his hands around the footboard and shoved himself into a straight, hopeful posture and almost smiled. He wore a gray suit and a dark blue tie with small designs in it and probably had a wife and children waiting for him at home. A long house, because these men made a lot of money. The old man paid him a lot of money, and he paid the hospital a lot of money, but neither this doctor nor any doctor nor any nurse in the whole hospital could tell him how to swim up out of the shaft. And he was willing to try it, because he'd always taken care of himself, but he just didn't know how.

"You seem in better spirits today, at any rate. Maybe our treatments are taking effect and you just don't know it yet."

He nodded and pulled back his lips hard over his gums, because he thought for a horrible minute he might cry, but he controlled it.

"Let's hope so," he said. "Let's hope so."

The Broken Record
Lucia Walton

As the front door swung open, a voice called down the stairs, "That you, Jenny?"

"Come on down, Mother, we've got company. Jack's in town and brought me home."

"Fine! I'll be down as soon as I finish dusting."

"Take off your coat, Jack, and come in the living room." Jenny shook snow from her dark page-boy and began stripping off her white gloves. The overhead light of the hall deepened the shadows that ridged her sharp cheekbones. Her thin face looked older than the square one of the young man with her, though they were of the
same age.

"Here, let me," he said, reaching to help her with her coat.

She glanced briefly at the thick, well-manicured hand on her shoulder with its heavy fraternity ring, thinking how different Jack's hands were from his brother's long supple ones. As she slipped out of the long coat, the muscles of her jaw tightened as though with pain. "I haven't been here for quite a while."

"That's right, you haven't." She waited while he hung their wraps in the hall closet, then walked before him to the next room.

"Cigarette?" he asked, reaching into his black-and-gray tweed pocket as he sat down beside her on the faded sofa.

"Thank you, yes."

Leaning toward her with a lighter, he searched her face anxiously. "Getting a little thin, aren't you?"

"Oh, I've lost some." She smiled and inhaled deeply. "Tell me about yourself."

"Not much to tell—just doing the same old things. How about you?"

"Well—as you know, I've come back here, and Mr. Putton luckily needed a new secretary. That's all."

"Are you going to stay here?"

"I don't know, Jack. Mother and Dad try so hard, and they've been wonderful. But you can't just go back and start all over again."

Stubbing out the half-smoked cigarette, she began to twist the loose gold rings that encircled her wedding finger.

"I guess not. Why don't you come down to Chicago and get a job? Things must be pretty dull up here."

"For some reason, I like it that way. There's something about a small town—"

"Don't bury yourself, Jenny." His rather prominent blue eyes narrowed when she blanched. Drumming on the arm of the sofa he looked about the room, thinking the tall girl beside him in her smart black dress out of place in its dated hominess. "You aren't the small-town secretary type."

"I didn't used to think so, but now—" she laughed uncertainly. "Now I don't seem to have the energy to do anything else. Once I couldn't wait until I was old enough to leave. Now I think I never will again."

"You ought to go back to modeling," Jack persisted. "You were getting somewhere, before you—gave it up."

"No," she answered quietly, her wide black brows lowering, "I don't think so. I think that would make it harder. Give me another cigarette, will you, Jack?"

His mouth tightened as he lit cigarettes for both of them. "You'll rot in this little hole-in-the-wall. Anyone would. No fun, no people, no excitement—"

"I don't want them any more!" Jenny sat up straight, her eyes blazing. "Maybe I want to rot. It's dull, it's routine. But it's
different. Like swimming, somehow. Here I can just let myself sink down in it and let it shut out everything else!” She sank back, breathing hard as though she had been running.

“Jenny, you can’t bury yourself with Joe! It isn’t right, it isn’t natural!”

“I don’t want to talk about it any more, Jack. How about some music?” With a forced smile, she stood up and crossed the room to a walnut console. “Radio, or records?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Jack watched her limber body as she knelt to open the false speaker, drew out an album, and straightened gracefully, her head bent over the phonograph. He walked to her quickly. “Jenny,” he whispered, sliding an arm around her waist. Her knuckles whitened against the record she held. “Marry me, Jenny. I’ll make you happy. Joe never would have, even if the accident hadn’t happened. He never was good enough for you.”

She snatched herself away from him as his lips moved against her hair. Her dark eyes burned through him with a strange wildness. “Not good enough!” she spat savagely through tight-clenched teeth. “Not good enough! And I suppose you are!”

He took a step backward, gazing as though hypnotized at her bloodless face slashed by long searing eyes. “I know it hasn’t been very long, Jenny, but I’ve always wanted you.” His tone was like the whining of a child trying to justify a poor report card to its father. “Joe was too old for you, too—”

“Get out of here! Get out!” Her body was taut, her breath short and rasping.

“Jenny—”

The record she still clutched snapped in the fierceness of her grasp. “I said, get out!” She stood for a moment looking at him as though the force of her stabbing, hating eyes would make him disappear. Then the pieces of the broken record dropped to the floor on either side of her, and she walked slowly out of the room. Motionless, Jack stared at the rinsed black semicircles that blotted the towered carpet, listening dully to the quick uneven clicking of her heels on the stairs.

**In a Coffee House**

William Backemeyer

“**PULL up a chair,” Jim said, grinning broadly.**

“Thanks, I will.”

“D’ya like *capuccino*?”

“No,” I said, “too much whipped cream and froth and stuff. Do they make it pretty good here?”

“Yeah, this place is authentic.”

I had just met Jim. Our mutual friend had introduced us, then had seen a long-lost pal in the far corner and had dashed off, leaving Jim and me confronted.