

Garland



Spring 1994

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The Night Cafe (1888) - Vincent van Gogh

By Robert Quinn

Men slouch over their bottles
While time slouches past twelve o'clock.
The pictures are all grotesque scenes,
with violent choices of color.
The friendly green of the bar, is
interrupted by the pool table,
before the angelic man. He shows no emotion,
raises not his hand. The men to
his left hide themselves. The crack of
the cue against the balls evokes a cloud
of dust from the table, and
the woman looks up with bloodshot eyes.
The hat man whispers something in her ear, nervously.
The yellow floorboards creak with ancient contempt.
The pink flowers are encloaked by the blood of the wall.
The head crashes into my hands before
that angel, that hideous angel that does not move.
His stare growing heavy on my back, the shadows
tip- toeing to my table and grabbing my legs.
The clock stops ticking.
I drink.

The Coupling

By Kara Hansell

When the wind is too stiff
she steps out of the breeze
and into her shadow.
She spoke in whispers
and she yelled in monotones
of sheer exhaustion,
and he listened,
not in love
and not in hate
simply tired of the waiting game
and used to the chase.
Circles and squares
make the maze a race
to finish before the rain.

The Longest Night

By Magdalene M. Szuszkiewicz

To Paul, grateful for his tacit presence

For whom there is fire
For whom there is snow
For whom the hills are green
 And blue ants of ink icecapade
 in death-defying axels
 over the ocean

For one who is the race
 and the trophy
For one who is the bullet
 and the rescue

Who can stop a tornado
 and save the bridge
 over the cocaine river
 from total destruction

For one who dissolves aspirin
 and keeps me with the Catholic Church

For one who is the light and the death
 Until the end of the flame
 Until the end of the night





Untitled

By Janice C. C. Lepore

Farewells waft on a breeze,
Mingling with the wistful perfume of
Dried, scarlet roses.

Grasped too delicately,
The fragile blossom of memory
Succumbs to natural forces,
And shatters against the unforgiving ground.

Yet a clutch of desperation
Will crush the petals,
Drive the thorns into flesh,
And draw a bloody reminder
Of the withdrawn eyes of your old lover
Who took with him the warmth of a friend.

Snowstorm 1642

By Eric Swan

The seasons of darkness
pulls itself out of the earth,
as snow covers the forest
like a white sheet for the dead.
Back at the fortress
a woman sits quietly within
gripping a lavender candle whose flame
is both surrounded and imprisoned
by stone walls growing rich with ivy.
She is waiting, as I know he is, for a sign, a familiar voice.

At another end of the forest, the warrior
watches through stinging eyes as his horse
slowly falls, and its last breath separates
with the wind. His chest rises as does the snow
which by now has already concealed his limbs in white pain.
He tosses his sword aside in grief, knowing
it will not be long before the night
will take him; stealing his soul above the tree line
then beyond the clouds.
A distant sound interrupts as he folds his hands
together in both warmth and prayer.

The trumpet's plea echoes from my cracking lips,
but seems to fade silently under the weight
of each footprint we leave behind in darkness.
Ice collects in the strings of my beard
and the storm prevents our search until daylight.

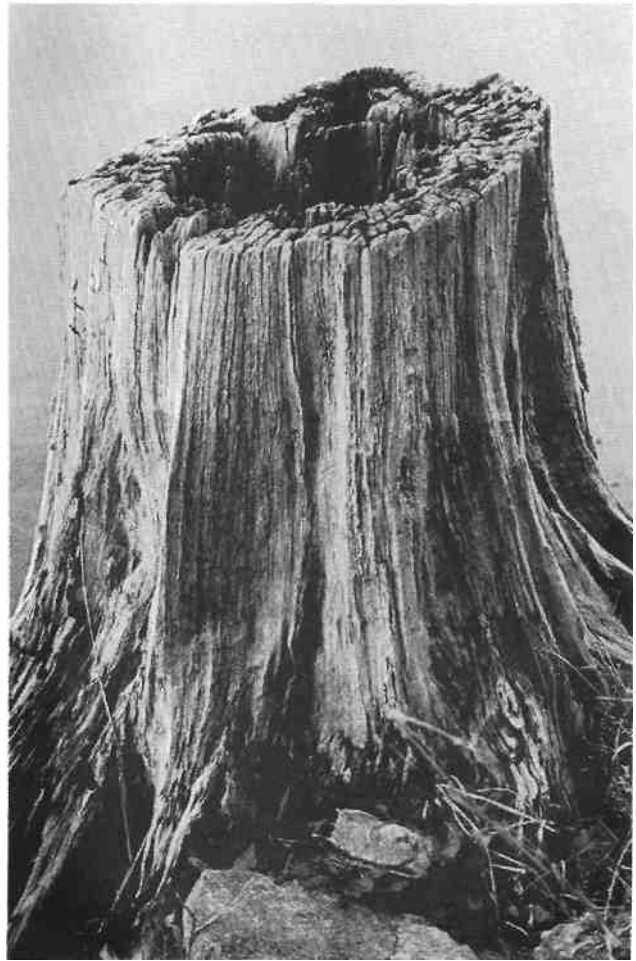
We found his body the following morning-
leaning against his black horse,
frozen between breaths and waiting for voices.

He was a friend of mine.

Living Tongue

By Lisa Prusinski

The words roll from my tongue
so easily
dripping
like wax
or sweet sap
from my mouth
Until the source is dry,
and the malaise
covers me
like sod.
Then I cannot breath
my thoughts into
anything but the seeds
of weeds which exist
whether we plant them or not
and which always rise green
even when the grass
crinkles and pricks
our soles
and dies brown.
I need a cure for my affection.
Let me be unearthed
among the sacred petals
of fruitful conversation,
bathed in the flowers of atmosphere.



The Clock Struck Nine

By Andrea Sabaliauskas

Gavin had the night shift at the Butler Library. He hadn't wanted the night shift actually, but he needed the money, and it was the only time he had left to him after three classes, a chem lab, student government meetings, and swim team practice. Nine to midnight. Butler Library closed late in order to accomodate the students at the community college nearby. Between work and school, he felt as if he spent all of his time in the library, among the books. "You're becoming a recluse, a bookworm," Erin teased him. Poor Erin, herself becoming just another slot to be penciled into his schedule.

Now he walked with determined, measured stride toward the ancient building, all stone and stained glass and curling ivy like something taken straight from a prep-school movie. Glancing briefly at his watch—it was five to nine—he allowed himself to have a few depressing thoughts before he had to begin work and keep his head free of such distractions. The sky was an oppressive coal-black; no stars dotted the night, no moon cast its cold glow upon the asphalt. The light from the library windows ahead seemed almost friendly tonight. Everything seemed to be pressing down upon him: the sky, the wind, even the trees clustered along the sides of the road seemed to lean in, trying to smother him.

It saddened him some, to think that he wanted to escape the outdoors. He remembered how, just a short while ago, when he was back in high school, he used to hike and go cycling in the park, and go on camping trips with his thirteen-year-old brother, and swim. He missed swimming the most; it was everything to him. Not just the sport—the sport was great, he loved the competition and all—but the LEISURE swimming, the cool blue world beneath the water's surface, its soft

living wavelets holding him afloat like a great hand, that was what kept him always in his backyard pool and at the ocean's edge. His pool was empty now, stagnating. Who has time to swim when your schedule is full of priorities?

The bells in the church across the street began to toll. He quickened his pace.

He signed in at precisely nine o'clock and immediately began clearing the two vast floors. At the Butler Library, punctuality was essential if you wanted that first fifteen minutes of pay. "Every little bit matters," his father had said. "You don't want to spend next year at that community college, do you? Money and grades get you in, Gavin, and you have to work at both. There's Princeton potential in you. It's up to you to bring it out." Every little bit mattered. He swept gum wrappers and bits of paper from a study table into a nearby trash can.

Books littered the first floor. This was the nonfiction floor; this was where last-minute research papers were done and assigned books were read and only half-understood. It always took him twenty minutes to put everything back on the shelf. He didn't like nonfiction much, so he didn't find this floor particularly interesting—not that he was supposed to. In fact, the only thing he like on this floor was a poster by the main doors, a poster of Snoopy (looking ludicrously out-of-place in this stuffy, sophisticated building) reading an impossibly large tome at the bottom of the sea, fish and kelp and Caribbean-blue water swirling all around him. Reading can take you to places that you've never been before, said its wording. Usually it reminded him of Erin, of the day he had met her at the beach with book in hand (it was something classic—she had to read it for school), but tonight it brought him

a twinge of guilt.

"It's a warm night," she'd hinted.

"It's gonna rain." He hadn't looked at her when he said it. He couldn't manage it.

Her entire face had drooped. "We used to swim in the rain."

"I know."

There had been a long uncomfortable pause. He'd tried again.

"I work weekday nights, remember?"

"How could I forget."

Another pause. This time he had thought of nothing to break it up.

"Do you really have to have a schedule?" Erin had looked up at him in puzzled skepticism. "We never do the things we used to anymore. I miss you, Gavin." She'd taken his hand, and her touch was fervent and concerned. There had been no teasing in her voice, none of the tolerant cheerfulness that she usually displayed.

He'd wanted to tell her how much he missed her, too, how much he wanted to have time on his hands like she did so he could read and swim and spend time with her. I don't want this to be, don't you understand that? If I could go back to the way it was, I would! I didn't know things would turn out like this, I didn't WANT them to. Please understand, please don't leave me, I really do still love you...

He'd slung his jacket over his shoulder, squeezing her a sad smile. "I'll try to call you tomorrow."

Not many books on the fiction floor tonight. Ten minutes to clear. He tried to ignore the titles and covers — they tended to make him want to actually open the books and start reading them, a no-no for employees of Butler Library — and concentrated only on putting them back on their proper shelf. Still, he managed to scan small bits of prose in already-opened books left out on the tables, SMALL bits, or else he would lose himself in the reading. He had to keep moving, couldn't

stop. He slammed a children's book shut quickly before he realized that he remembered the poem left open for him to see and wondered if there were anymore in there he was familiar with...

Hickory Dickory Dock

The mouse ran up the clock

The clock struck one

And down he'd run

Hickory Dickory Dock

He put the last book in its place, scanned the floor for anymore, started back down the stairs. Maybe his supervisor would keep him on the desk tonight. He needed to finish a paper for his eight-o'clock the next day and he couldn't do that if he was kept shelving journals and making sure books were in alphabetical order according to the Library of Congress. There weren't many people tonight. Maybe the library would close early tonight and he could go home. He already felt as if he'd been there for hours. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he took another quick glance at his watch.

It was nine o'clock.

Damn, he thought. I just put a new battery in this thing.

It surprised him to notice how lost he felt without the use of his watch. He hadn't realized how habit-forming it had become for him, just that quick glance at it every now and then. No need to worry about it, though. There was still the big metal clock above the main doors. He could check on that from time to time.

He poked his head into the supervisor's office. "What would you like me to do now?"

"Oh, hi, Gavin." She was a dull, lackadaisical woman; the little excitement she revealed was usually a result of her employees actually showing up. "Why don't you clear the floors and then check back here at about nine-thirty?"

He blinked. "Ah, I already cleared the floors."

Now she blinked. "That was fast. Did you sign in already?"

"I signed in at nine."

She frowned, looking at her own watch in confusion. "But it's nine now."

"It...it is?" He stared at his watch. Still said nine. He opened his mouth to say something but she cut him off.

"C'mon, Gavin, I know it's not your favorite chore but it's gotta be done. Clear 'em and come back in a half hour."

Wordless and slightly dazed, he left her office.

What was the possibility that both their watches were wrong?

Okay, so it would be a huge coincidence, but it could happen. Maybe. He wondered what he could do. He felt ridiculous. Both floors had been cleared. He couldn't just stand around. If she caught him, she wouldn't pay him for it. "You get paid for the time you

work," she'd said when he first started, "not for the time you loaf." He'd almost laughed when she'd first said it. Okay, no "loafing" for me. Won't see any "loaves" when I'm on the job. But she'd meant it. She'd already docked Ashley Garret a half hour's pay just because he'd sat at the desk on a slow night reading the paper. Now Ashley always got floor jobs.

He went back up to the second floor, seriously considering the idea of throwing some books on a few tables and clearing them all off again. He picked pieces of paper off the floor instead. This was stupid. He bet the clock downstairs had the right time. All he had to do was show his supervisor and she'd get him to do something else. He couldn't spend all night clearing floors.

He bounded down the stairs two at a time, strode up to the main doors, and looked up at the clock.

Nine on the nose.



Gavin's hands began to tremble a little.

Okay, how many hours of sleep did I get last night? How many Vivarins did I take to stay awake? Those things are bad for you, man, they shouldn't even be on the market. Lack of sleep, that's it. I'm ODing on Vivarin. I wonder if anyone's ever done that before? Maybe I'm the first case. Hey, I bet I could write a paper on that. I could be the subject of my own paper.

He bolted for the supervisor's office.

"Ah, excuse me, but —"

"Oh, hi, Gavin," she said, dully, lackadaisically. "Why don't you clear the floors and then check back here at about nine-thirty?"

He opened his mouth but no words came out. His throat felt tight and unyielding. Perspiration was forming at his temples. He swallowed, with effort, and managed to blurt out the obvious: "You just told me that."

She looked at him as if he had just turned a peculiar shade of purple. "I did no such thing."

"Yes!" he insisted. "Yes, you—"

"C'mon, Gavin, I know it's not your favorite chore, but it's gotta be done. Clear 'em and come back in a half hour —"

He ran, panicked, back out to the first floor. He would have screamed, but he was in a library.

This was not true. He could prove this situation false. All he had to do was ask the library patrons. Politely, quietly, despite the fact that he really preferred screaming **WILL SOMEBODY TELL ME WHAT TIME IT REALLY IS?!**

Nine, said the mother with her three obnoxious children in the juvenile lit section. Nine, said the elderly man flicking his copy of Time irritably. Nine, said a friend from school. Are you feeling okay? Nine, nine o'clock, it's nine.

Oh God! he screamed inwardly. I'M STUCK HERE!

No! I have a paper to do, dammit! I

have a meeting tomorrow! I have a life to lead! He threw his head back and glared at his arch-nemesis, The Clock. **YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!**

Ignoring his supervisor's protests, he grabbed the desk phone and dialed Erin's number, clutching the receiver as if it was the embodiment of own sanity. It rang once, twice.

"Hello?"

"Erin!"

"Gavin, hi! I thought you just went to work!"

"I didn't just go to work," he explained, patiently, gritting his teeth. "I've been here for at least forty-five minutes!"

"Gavin, it's only ni—"

He slammed down the receiver.

Now Erin thinks I'm nuts. I can't believe I just hung up on her. We're finished. She's going to hate me tomorrow. Except there won't be a tomorrow.

Perhaps, this is a good thing...

He looked up at his supervisor, expecting a reprimand.

"Oh, hi, Gavin. Why don't you clear the floors and checkback around nine-thirty?"

"I already did it, bitch!"

Ididitldidit!DIDIT!!!" He didn't care who heard him now. Nothing around him was sane. Why should he be?

The clock said nine. Its circle shape was a wide, laughing mouth, its upraised numbers a row of grinning teeth. The arms pointed: nine. It was giggling like a hyena.

try to schedule your way out of this one, if you can

Gavin forced his trembling hands still. This situation was not uncontrollable. He strode back into the office, ignoring his supervisor's cheery greeting; he found the pole used to open the high windows on hot days; he took it out to the first floor again, facing the clock. He felt ridiculously like a knight with a sharpened lance, ready for battle.

what, no noble steed. Sir Gavin?

With a cry, he struck with all his force at the clock, downing it with only a few blows. It clattered to the floor with an ear-splitting din, yet Butler Library's patrons read on, unnoticing. Throwing the pole aside, he attacked the clock with his bare hands, closing his fingers around the two arms, pressing them forward with all his strength. They didn't budge. The clock seemed to scream in delight.

He clenched his teeth, tensed his muscles, pulled with all his might. Move, MOVE! Sweat poured down his face. The arms didn't break, didn't bend, moved not even a hair's breadth forward.

He screamed in frustration, clutching his damp hair. He wished he had never laid eyes on this clock, this library, this school. All he wanted to do was go home. He wanted his life to be sane again, sane and unstructured. He wanted to tell his father that he really didn't want to be a doctor. He wanted Erin back, Erin, the only one in his life who really cared about what he was interested in...

He stopped, shaking.

Tentatively, he pushed the big hand backward. It moved, a little. He pushed it harder. Still resisting, but now it was five of nine again.

Frantically now, he twisted the arms around and around, remembering, remembering that first day (oh, how good he was at numbers, at hours and minutes and days!), winding that clock backward in a frenzy while its shriek of delight turned into a howl of dismay. He didn't know how long he sat there, turning and turning those cold metal arms, counting, his mind a blur of numbers. Numbers, there were only numbers now, numbers until he reached the point where no more numbers would be needed. He was gasping for breath, stifling; he raised his arms and let the cool blue world close in around him, let the restrictions of his old life fall from him, kicked frantically to reach the glowing, rippling sur-

face above him, knowing that when he emerged Erin would be reading peacefully on the beach unaware of his coming. He knew he had counted right. The clock was gone. The madness was gone. There was only a feeling of great relief, a feeling of coming back home again.

He broke through the surface, coming up for air.



to my Master

By Kara Hansell

I saw your light before
 in pale rays
and in blinding beams of glory.
I laughed a thousand tears
and cried a hundred times
before I felt your healing.
I stood in aching cold
 begging at the door
and they would not let me in.
But your gates are open
and you call me, with a gentle warmth,
 that I will not turn from.
I witnessed but they did not hear it.
I sang in sweet harmony a hymn
 you taught me,
 but your house was empty.
I took easy roads sometimes.
I looked away when the light was
 too bright.
 But I asked
 and you forgave
and I am your clay
 to be molded.

inverts

By Sarah Heneghan

him and i wear
 a thousand ways of silence.
though i allow, each day
 the silliest in secret soulways.

in grey seasons of fleeting clouds
i wonder if, (like other slow path
traitorous travelers)
he would tramp my words
like tramp burnt cigarettes
down underfoot.

i am wearing my heart
in the armpit of my sleeve
because though he doesn't realize
i ponder the time
he poured slow over his leather boots
wax in the flicker of a flame
in his late night whispering bedroom.

but sure moments between our meetings
circle like sea water wandering birds
whose wings are tremblously taut
with hidden hope waves.
and i think: gatsby would not be so lonely
staring lost from the pier
if daisy were as real as green to him
as our moments (dear).

Pirates

By Robert Quinn

Back past the porch of the old house,
there is a meadow that sleeps
wrapped in a blanket of weeds.
We used to go there, as children, when the
sun was just down, and the moon could be seen in
the pallid dusk light.
Each dead stalk was a ghost
draped with white sheets that we dreamed into
being.

We would search under their watchful, curious eyes,
and would run away,
when the light from the porch told us,
like a lighthouse, that we were where
we were not supposed to be.
Our trespass, noticed by the old sea captain,
whose patched eye would see us
from behind the window of the house,
and threaten our necks, if we took his buried treasure.
We would run for the bridge over the stream
that stumbled in the darkness back home.
And in a fit like a Baptist prayer,
we would slam through the door,
and under the covers, where
we could not be found.

Once, we found a treasure; an old subway token,
and danced like pirates who have struck gold.
And we lit matches to smoke, though we had no
cigarettes, to celebrate our discovery like adults.
The ghost danced around us in veils of
apology, hiding the eyes that scared us,
when we had been children just seconds before.
We walked home like kings, and never returned,
so the ghosts of dead pirates could never catch us.

And now, like melted wax from a candle
twisted, and frozen, in
agonized dances, the ghosts stand waiting for the
children to return, with no excuse, no defense
but the cigarettes we smoke, and the adulthood
that we wear.

Veronica

By Janice C. C. Lepore

She has the hands of an athlete; powerful,
with damaged cuticles and broken nails.
Precise strokes slice the air, silently
inviting me to join in her game.
The flat winter air presses down on a
coverlet of snow, smothering every
intruding sound.
How can you live in a frozen world of
silence? And why is it your hands
create the most beautiful language I've
never heard?
Green eyes connect with mine as she responds,
"I listen to things you are too busy hearing to
notice, and besides, my hands never get cold."

Kelly's Getting Married

By Laura J. McLoughlin

I remember
two girls plodding
jeans rolled up with
young boys' haircuts
shallow water
squishy shoes
smell of strawberries
licking red juice off
our fingers
running far from
stinky skunk cabbage
holding our noses
muddy feet and
sopping jeans cuffs
your mom yelling
"now they're ruined"
two girls smiling
eyes exchanging silent secrets
stomping through the
mud-room door
shoe shaped tracks on her
shimmering shiny
freshly mopped floor.

A Pair of Footsteps

By Ann Pennell

A lone pair of footsteps
Echo through the cobblestone street.
The sound trickles through my body
And weaves into my soul
Until my thoughts become like the echo,
Soft and slow.
Thoughts that need to be savored
Like hot chocolate on a rainy winter day,
And so I savor my thoughts of you
And wish your footsteps
Were echoing along side mine,
And that my hand were clasped
In your warm calloused hand.
Most of all I wish
That our thoughts were blended into one
So this loneliness would flee
in the face of our love.
Yet these are only thoughts
And I walk along the cobblestone street alone
With my footsteps echoing behind me.



University of Colorado at Keystone

By Liz Ryan-Sax

"Aren't you hungry? You barely ate anything on the plane. Are you listening to me? Cathryn?"

My name is Cate. Whenever her lips form the word, "Cathryn", my body tenses, my hands twitch, but I remind myself we're here for a retreat. A religious experience. Slapping my sister in a public place is simply not the way to make a first impression on the other members of the group. That is, if we ever meet them. While I'm making a full attempt to completely ignore my sister, we're wandering through the Denver airport in search of our gate. A representative from the travel agency is supposed to meet us at the one gate we cannot find.

"Marybelle, I am not hungry, all right?" My voice bites her. "At twenty years old, I think I might know how hunger feels, okay?"

Marybelle and her five-foot eight-inch frame of skin and bone are lugging along her grossly oversized purse, two extremely large tapestry suitcases, each fully equipped with wheels and handles, a garment bag of matching tapestry, and her forty-pound Eddie Bauer Special Edition Extra Rugged back pack, complete with those metal bars that stick out over your head and a bed roll already attached. We're only scheduled to sleep in the "wilderness" for one night out of six, but MB will be prepared for any plant, animal, or precipitation we might encounter. Earning thirty-five grand a year and still living with our parents at the ripe old age of twenty-four affords my sister this luxury.

My one suitcase rolls easily along beside me as the carry-on rests comfortably on my shoulder. It does truly amaze me, though, how my sister is able to cart all of that crap through the airport and still have the energy and the oxygen to lecture me about my eating

habits. She's four inches taller than me and yet weighs just three pounds more. I know this, of course, because she informs me of her exact poundage every morning before she leaves the house for work. MB used to weigh precisely nineteen pounds less than me, but since coming home from school for the summer, about three months ago, I've lost a few hundred grams. It didn't happen subconsciously. My appetite just kind of diminished. And my sister can't stand that.

"I really think you should eat something, Cathryn." Marybelle's long legged gait carries her a good yard or so ahead. She still manages, though, to reprimand me over her shoulder and at the same time scan the array of signs and directions written in airport language. "There's food this way." Her voice carries back to me. "There must be something there you like." Assuming, as she always does, that I'm following directly behind, Marybelle abruptly changes course, strawberry gold hair bouncing around the metal bars of her Eddie Bauer backpack with each stride.

I stop short and let her gallop further ahead. Didn't I leave my mother at home? "Marybelle!" My tone is embarrassingly snotty, but it catches my sister's attention. She and her baggage pyramid turn to find me several yards behind. "I'm saying this one last time. Can we spell 'adult'? Can we spell 'I'm not only potty-trained, but I know how to feed myself as well'? Leave me the hell alone, will you?"

"Why do you have to be so defensive all the time?"

My eyes roll. This is her chronic retort: Cate is overly defensive, Mom, don't you agree? I don't understand why, Mom, do you?

"Marybelle, get off my back." I begin my independent journey through the airport maze, down a random hallway leading off to the right, opposite from where my sister is standing. There's an Asian guy with super long hair carrying a guitar case in front of me, and I decide to follow him. What the hell, right? I'll pretend to know where I'm heading.

"Where are you going?" MB demands.

"I'm going where I'm supposed to be going, Mom."

By some fate, I see our sign — orange and teal letters on a white background reading "Tyme 2 Travel" appear before my eyes, and, for once, Marybelle is forced to follow me.

The bus ride is about two hours from Denver to Keystone. MB and I are sharing a double-occupancy hotel room at the Inn. By the time we arrive, we've missed dinner and so are forced to set out exploring the area for some food. But Keystone is divided into two sections—the summer (lake, horseback riding, tennis) part and the winter (skiing) part. We're in the winter section of the resort, and nothing is open here in the middle of August.

Across the highway that runs past the Keystone Inn, MB and I are more than happy to find Bandito's Cantina, a Mexican restaurant and bar, but like everything else tonight, it seems we're too late. We stand in front of it, staring through the windows to the darkened interior. The night is hot and dry; the draining humidity we're used to is comfortably absent — definitely different than a Jersey summer.

"What I'd do for a Captain Morgan's and Diet Coke," MB says wistfully.

I'm hungry, much to MB's satisfaction, and I'm tired. I don't want to be here. And I especially don't want to be here with her. I start. "Why a Diet Coke? Why not just a regular Coke? You know how many calories there are in alcohol alone? Why even bother

with diet?"

"Because I like diet," she insists, glaring at me. "Regular Coke is too sweet. Therefore, I don't like it." She walks toward the highway again, taking full advantage of her long-legged stride.

"Wait, you're telling me regular sugar is too sweet? What the hell else is sugar for?"

She doesn't answer, just keeps jogwalking across the parking lot.

Once again, I'm left to catch up.

The two hour morning Mass ends at ten o'clock. In this crowd of two hundred "young people", fifteen to thirty years old, we're sitting alone, just the two of us, not speaking, under a huge canvas construction that is more like a makeshift church than a tent. There's even a thick green rug in here as well as a congregation of matching green chairs, indoor halogen lighting, and an altar with a private chapel set up behind it.

MB's not talking to me since I wouldn't hold her hand during the Our Father. But the way she gets into it gives me the heebie jeebies.

"Oh, how could I forget?" she'd whispered fiercely. "The ice queen allows absolutely no physical contact or affection whatsoever. Silly me."

"Fuck off," I'd mumbled.

Today, everyone is wearing these wooden heart-shaped name tags we were given at check-in last night. Marybelle is quite excited that they spelled her name correctly, but me...my name tag reads, "Cathryn." And well, I'm none too pleased. That's why it's now hidden beneath my sweatshirt.

A smile comes to my lips when I hear the guys behind me. "Hey John? John! Do you got your heart on? Cause I got my heart on."

"Yeah, I got my hard on. Hey Phil, you got your hard on?"

"Woowee, I have got my hard on."

I try not to laugh out loud. So glad

we're here on retreat.

A few minutes later, a woman approaches the podium and announces that they're splitting us into discussion groups. I miss the rest of her announcements, my attention drawn only to her bright-yellow down vest. My name is called and I turn to Marybelle.

"Your discussion group is meeting outside the tent," she answers my unspoken question.

The leader of the group introduces himself as Mike Dell. He looks about thirty-five with a dark beard and a straw hat tied under his chin. He's married with three kids, all under ten, and is a theology professor at a Catholic college in Ohio. We follow him to the deck on the second floor of the Big House, a huge, rustic cabin-type lodge that holds the cafeteria and ski equipment, lockers and all that. It's right next to the tent where we have Mass.

The morning is crisp and the sky an amazing bright blue. With the huge mountain sloping up just behind the deck, this could be a photograph.

After rearranging the picnic tables into a lopsided circle, the fifteen of us sit down, and Mike takes roll.

I have my chance then. "Just call me Cate."

A little later, Mike is stuttering, "Francois Nnn...niggoo..? N-G-U-Y-E-N?"

A low gravelly voice answers, "You can say Noo-win. It's impossible to pronounce in English."

This guy sounds as if he's stoned. I lean forward to check him out. Suddenly, I see that Francois is the guy from the airport—the one who'd been walking in front of me and then later wandering around as we waited to board the Keystone bus, but he'd left before we did. He was carrying a guitar case then, no baggage. He's the first Asian guy I've ever seen with hair longer than mine. It's parted down

the middle and hangs straight, just touching his waist. And now he's in my discussion group. Someone who I'd only seen in passing, in an airport packed with thousands of people, but someone who I've remembered.

After roll, we're each supposed to tell where we're from and how we ended up here on retreat in Keystone. The first person needs to volunteer, but then we choose who goes next.

"The one thing I ask," Mike begins, 'is let's not play games here, alright? Just be yourself. We're not little kids in high school anymore, playing mind games with our buddies. Be who you know you really are on the inside. Don't hide it from us. We're all in this together. Remember that."

About five of the group are here in larger groups from the same parishes in Ohio and Florida. I'm actually surprised that these people have come here from all over the country. When my mother first told me that she and my father decided to send me here, I was petrified of being stuck in the middle of an over-zealous crowd of Jesus-freaks and Holy Rollers, but these kids in my group, they're pretty cool.

One girl was sent as a present from her grandmother. Most have come hoping for direction in life or to learn more about faith and religion. One guy's mother has sent him because he's been getting involved in some stuff he knows is totally wrong.

"I'm here to find the strength to leave my friends, or I mean, the people I think of as my friends." He nervously rubs imaginary dirt from the palm of his hand, avoiding anyone's gaze. I can't believe he's actually telling us this.

I feel ignorant being here. It seems that I am the only one who didn't want to come. What will I say when it's my turn? I can't lie and say I'm here to strengthen or increase my faith. I could really care less. I mean, I love God and He loves me, but all this other stuff?

What am I going to say?

He chooses Francois to go next. His throaty voice still needs some getting used to.

"Originally, I'm from Vietnam, but I lived in Connecticut for most of my life until my family moved to Bermuda a few years ago." A long-haired, raspy-voiced Vietnamese guy named Francois from Bermuda? He has everyone's complete attention. "I don't have a Bermudan accent, though, since my parents sent me to boarding school. I don't know, has anyone heard of Exeter? Well, that's where I went. Now I'm at Connecticut Wesleyan, and I can't stand it, but I'm gonna be a senior, so it's kind of too late to transfer.

"My parents are really religious, so they raised me that way too, and I don't have a problem with it. To be honest, I like being Catholic. It's a part of who I am. But the people I go to school with, man, they can't stand any form of religion. It's totally liberal there. 'God is dead' and the whole shabang. It's like the 'in' thing to be a pro-choice atheist and wear skirts if you're a guy. And the girls don't shave and spell woman 'm-y-n', you know? It's really unbelievable.

"I get persecuted even worse for being Catholic. I'm so jealous of you guys who are at Catholic colleges. Trust me, it's so much more difficult at radically liberal places like Wesleyan. I guess it's to be expected and all, but I just wanted to come here and be with other young people who share my faith. I need to know that I'm not alone."

No one says anything for a minute. I didn't think people like Francois existed anymore. I don't even know what "people like Francois" means, but I know I like him—even though, before, I wouldn't have pegged the poor guy for anything other than a burnout. I'm such a bitch.

"I pick Cate to go next." Francois turns to me.

What? Torn between being flattered that he remembered my name and being panic

stricken, my mind flies through an assortment of reasons as to how I ended up in Keystone. Looking around at the expectant faces, I can feel my pulse beating strongly at the base of my throat.

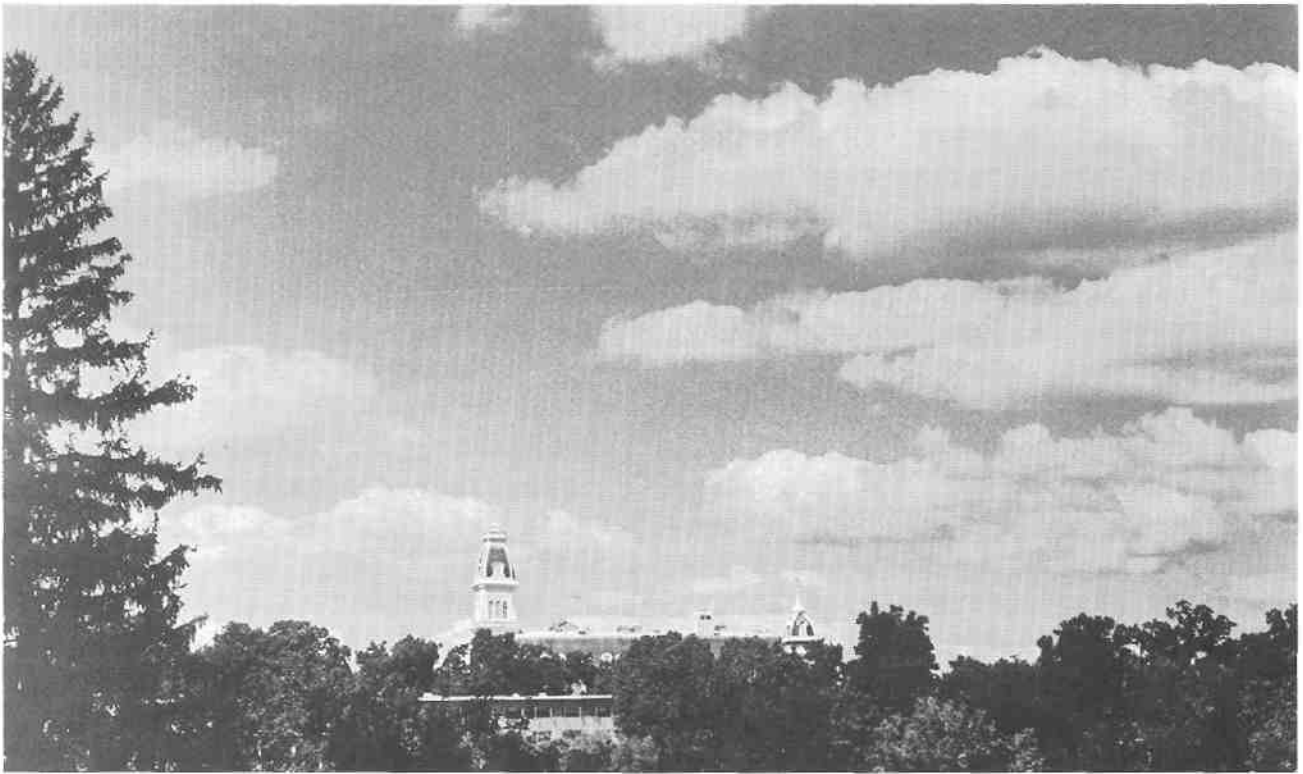
"Well," I begin, having no idea what will come out of my mouth next. "I'm from a beautifully rural, horse-and-cow-type area in Northwest New Jersey. It's not at all what everyone pictures New Jersey to be like. And I'm here, well, I guess I'm here because—" my throat tightens in a choking grip, the tears fill my eyes, the words come too quickly "—because I lost my best friend in June and basically I guess I've just been a really miserable person to be around. And like, my parents didn't know what to do with me so they sent me here, thinking maybe this would help."

What the hell is going on with me? What am I doing? I told them. I told them, these complete strangers. I'm crying in front of people I don't even know. What a mess. Everyone is watching me. My laugh is broken, nervous. "God, this is embarrassing. I'm not usually like this. Honestly, I never cry. Wow, yeah, this is really humiliating. Okay, so—" I scan the circle for a heart I can read "—Patty. You're next."

I take a slow, deep breath and pretend to be listening intently to Patty's story. The last thing I wanted here was for people to pity me, to treat me with the same kid gloves my sister never takes off, to be labelled a basket case. And I've ruined it already. The first words out of my mouth, I spill my guts. I cried — out loud! Jesus Christ, what am I doing?

My armpits are itchy, but my hands are soaked. I can't wipe my eyes; it'll only bring more attention to myself. My black hair is soaking up the sun more directly at this elevation. The heat is unbelievable. My knees are becoming unattractively sunburned. My butt is killing me on this wooden bench.

Why the hell do I feel such relief?



MB wants to go shopping the next day. This is the only block of free time we've been allowed so far. We were up last night attending lectures and prayer meetings until midnight. And having been up since seven thirty in the morning, I was asleep on top of the sheets, fully clothed by twelve-fifteen a.m. Today, though, they're letting us go from two until dinner at six-thirty. So, of course, Marybelle wanted to take this opportunity to further extend the debt on her charge card. Me, I hate shopping, probably because it involves so much walking, but also because I have this profound problem with spending money. Sean, my best friend, he used to laugh at me all the time.

He had come to the supermarket with me one time when he was visiting up at my school. His college had had some sort of fall break that mine didn't, and he used to come visit me for the four-day weekend these last two years.

You know how everyone says that high

school couples always break up by Thanksgiving of their freshman year in college? Christmas at the latest? Yeah, well, not us. We made it through that Thanksgiving and the next one, and we'd probably have made it through the rest, too.

So anyway, we were at the grocery store, and I was taking forever to decide which tomato sauce was the cheapest, but not the most disgusting...

"I'd hate to see you grocery shopping for an entire family, Cate," he'd said.

"What are you trying to say, Sean?" Ragu or Francesco Rinaldi? I was asking myself.

He was leaning forward on the cart (I refused to ever push the damn thing myself—it made me feel like an old lady) with his arms wrapped around the babyseat part. He was swinging the cart around, pretending to waltz with it in the narrow aisles. Sean could never stand still which is one of the reasons why I could never picture him spending hours in the

labs at school. But he'd obviously managed somehow, winning the Chemistry Award both freshmen and sophomore year, like the geek I knew he could be. An adorable geek, I have to admit, with his shaggy brown hair and intelligent — bright — hazel eyes framed by those small tortoise-shell frames that never seemed to suit his broad face, the strong cheekbones and square chin. But he was always losing his contacts so the glasses stayed.

My father used to say Sean could walk across any college campus in the U.S., and everybody would know that he was a science major. "An academic," my dad called him. "That boy couldn't match his socks if someone paid him, but, my God, he won't have to at the rate he's going. Someone'll be honored to do it for him." I wouldn't go that far, but Dad was really into Sean. He and Mr. Blackwell, Sean's dad, used to go together to every one of his soccer games when the team played at colleges near home. They shared him as a son or something, I never quite figured out, but I'm not sure if that matters now. It's all so confusing.

Sean swung the cart into the back of my leg. "I'm just saying, Cate, that you are the most indecisive person I know. Look at you—just shopping for yourself. I can't imagine you doing it for an entire family. You'd be in here for hours! But you're so sexy when you shop, my darling. I love driving six hours to watch you do this so, so sensually. The way you read those labels, baby — oh, my blood is a-boiling ..."

I wiggled my butt and turned to him with a smile, plopping Francesco in the basket. "Are you basically just saying I'll be shopping for your family, Sean? What are you really getting at here? I'm confused — sex or shopping?"

He'd had on that putrid, green and red, Christmas tree flannel coat he'd confiscated from his dad. It made him look more like a burly lumberjack than a chem major at a New

England Ivy. "What I'm really getting at, is shopping. Of course."

"Of course."

"But if we want to take this to a thoroughly subconscious level, Ms. Donovan, I could be saying that if, by some twisted fate of God, I ever do happen to become wedded to you and basically jailed for life, which by the way, would be absolutely unimaginable — I can't even bear to think of it — I'm pretty sure I'm gonna end up as the grocery shopper in the family."

"Listen, run-on-sentence boy, if you want to do the shopping, hey, that's quite alright with me. And I'm glad you're not ashamed to express your feminine side." His mouth dropped at that. "I can't believe we're babbling about this. Wait, that Prego stuff is on sale?"

Sean leaned forward with a smirk, handing me the Francesco to be replaced on the shelf. He started laughing then. "Like I've said before, I can admit it. I'm secure in my sexuality."

"You're whacked," I laughed.

"Oh, yea! Does that mean you've decided on a tomato sauce?" He'd pulled me toward him then for a huge bear hug, and he'd smelled of crisp fall air and fireplaces. Sean never wore cologne—just the occasional fabric softener and Irish Spring. My nose was practically buried in his armpit, but even that smelled good. Go figure. Love, right? He'd always played with the ends of my hair when his arms were around me, sending little tinglings to the base of my neck.

"Shhh," he'd whispered, "don't tell anyone, but I love you, too."

My shopping skills have yet to improve so I try to avoid the whole thing — and spending money, in general — at all costs. Maybe if I marry Donald Trump or something, but I have the feeling that wouldn't really be worth it. I remember standing in the

kitchen at my house, having a pleasant fight with my mother about this trip I'm on now and how much it cost.

"It's too expensive, Mom. Over a thousand dollars for a retreat? What a freakin' rip-off!"

"Cate, don't speak to me with that language."

"What? I can't say freak? What's wrong with freak?"

"Listen, if you don't want to go, just say it."

"You're not listening to me, Mom! I didn't say I don't want to go, I'm saying it's too expensive. Like God would charge a thousand dollars for a retreat? Come on!"

"I'm not going to talk to you when you're like this, Cathryn. You're impossible. I'm trying to help you, don't you understand that? No one can ever have a conversation with you. Just forget it all. You're not going. That's the end of it." My mother turned off the kitchen light, and left me standing in the dark. She walked away, but I could still hear her talking in the living room. "Marybelle, honey, didn't you say that Linda from work was interested in the Colorado thing? Maybe she'll want to go..."

"I didn't say I don't want to go!" I screamed across the house. "It's too damn expensive. That's what I said!" I almost cried then, but the sensor light my dad installed over the sink popped on as I covered my face with my hands.

MB is sprinting from store to store in the Keystone outdoor mall we've taken the shuttle to. I'm looking at price tags before even noticing the product. The mall is at the flat base of the mountains and it surrounds the lake where parents and their kids are paddleboating and canoeing. I decide the lake is much more interesting than the shops. There are mini-docks floating all around the perimeter of the lake and I stand on one, watching an

adorable, giggling little boy feed the trout with his father.

"They're incredible, aren't they?"

My body jumps a bit, causing me to nearly lose my balance, but a steadying hand grips my elbow. I turn to see Francois standing just behind me. "Hey there." I smiled at him. "Fancy meeting you here."

His head is bowed a bit as he returns my smile, his hands buried deep in jeans pockets. "Yeah, I lost the group of people I was with. I got all caught up watching the fish and, the next thing I knew, everybody was gone."

I laugh at his little-boy simplicity. "So basically, you lost your mom in the supermarket, right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

Francois laughs with me in an easy sort of way, and I want to tell him then about seeing him in the airport, but it might sound stupid. He's watching the rippling water and I can feel the dock bouncing gently under my feet.

"Well, I purposely lost my sister during her shopping marathon. She's around somewhere, though."

We're watching the fish. They're a grayish-green and enormous, anywhere between two and three feet long. The little boy is uncomfortably close to the edge of the dock. There is only a rope fence separating him from the water. His father lightly attached his hand to the hood of his son's windbreaker.

"It gets pretty chilly when the sun's behind the clouds, huh?" he asks.

I nod and wrap my arms around myself, hands hidden in my roomy sleeves.

"Hey, do you wanna feed these huge things?"

"Doesn't it cost money?" I watch Francois put change in what looks like a gumball machine. The mealy pellets tumble out into his hand.

"Everything costs something, man. Here." He pours most of his trout food into

my cupped palms. "These fish are so amazing. Check it out! This one, he's beyond enormous. See, see - there he is! Did you see him?"

Ten, maybe fifteen trout seem to fly instantly to the surface as the pellets hit the water, then immediately disappear into the mouths of mutant fish. We're both laughing. Francois is transfixed by the water, and I feel completely relaxed with him. He's very, I guess, 'real' is the only word to use.

"That really sucks about your friend, Cate. But you know, it was incredible the way you just let it out."

There it is. I want to run. Oh, how I want to run. "I'm not like that though, Francois. That totally was not me."

"But that's what made it so great. That's why we're all here, Cate. That's why." Hello, Mr. Philosophy. I want to walk away from him, but he continues. "Man, it's such a helpless feeling, isn't it?"

Now I am transfixed by the flickering of fish in the water.

The father is trying to take his boy's hand and lead him from the dock, but he refuses to move, and in the end, his father carries him away, kicking and screaming a two-year-old's temper tantrum.

My silence is useless. I am seriously fighting with myself, trying not to become so angry that I'd leave. How can I tell him to shut up without being rude? But that's the only thing I want right now. I know he means well, but I want him to shut up!

Francois is still talking. "When we were on our class trip, senior year in high school, a friend of mine was jumped in Quebec. We were on vacation, you know? These assholes bashed in the side of his head and he was in a coma for seven and a half weeks—I'll never forget. They didn't know if he'd ever come out of it. He didn't, and I just couldn't believe the senselessness of it all. Why? You know?"

God? I'm thinking,—not praying, just

thinking—God, could You please get this guy to leave me alone about all this? It's a nice touch and all, but why won't You leave me alone? I'm not ready.

"That's awful, Francois," I say suddenly. "How are his parents? They must be devastated."

"I feel so terrible for them. He was in a hospital in Canada, so his parents had to fly up there, cause he couldn't be transferred or anything. And the hospitals in Bermuda aren't so great..."

I've succeeded. The medical facilities in Bermuda are a decent topic of conversation. As we walk away from the dock and move toward the shopping area, Francois continues talking, telling me about his friend.

But I'm not listening ...

I'm remembering. The first time I came home from the hospital, my mind was so numb the car drove itself to my house.

Knocking gently on my parents' bedroom door, I heard my mother's voice from inside, "Come in."

She and my father had left hours before me, promising the Blackwells to return early the next morning. I had found myself simply standing there, not able to leave yet, staring through the long, rectangular window of his door, staring at something which I still did not believe to be real, wondering if they'd use Irish Spring when they bathed him. One bizarre thought after another.

I wasn't family, but Mrs. Blackwell had made them allow me into her only child's room.

What I could see of Sean's face had an unnatural orangey cast to it. He'd been washed in antiseptic — Betadine, was it? The respirator inhaled and then shushed out, over and over again. Although there was not a cut or bruise or any sign of trauma on it, his face was orange. I couldn't see past that. The freckles were gone, like they'd faded or something — all except for that singular dark one on his

right eyelid. But nothing else was the same.

I looked only at his eyelids, waiting for something to happen. I guess I knew, as I still know, that they'd never open, but I thought maybe his eyes would move, like he was in REM or something—anything. But he was so still while his chest gently pumped up and then down, up and then down.

He was so still.

Sean's mother could do little more than stand beside me, simply shaking her head. That's all either one of us could do. Mr. Blackwell had been given a prescription and sent home, but his wife seemed intoxicatingly calm, unnaturally so — everything was unnatural — but I guess the same thing could have been said of me.

Since I was twelve years old, I had never gone to bed without talking to him. Even when I'd gone camping each summer in high school with my friend, Julie, and her family, I'd talked poor Julie into walking the mile and a half to a gas station down the main road each night, to where the pay phone was. Her parents never knew. I'd have to call her now and tell her. We hadn't really spoken since graduation two years earlier.

Sean had called once for a social studies assignment way back in junior high, and that had been it. That had been the first night. I'd laid in my room, my cheeks flushed with this new crush, the receiver tight against my ear, the cord twisted around my arm, stretching from my covers to the phone on the floor beside my bed. Yes, that had been it.

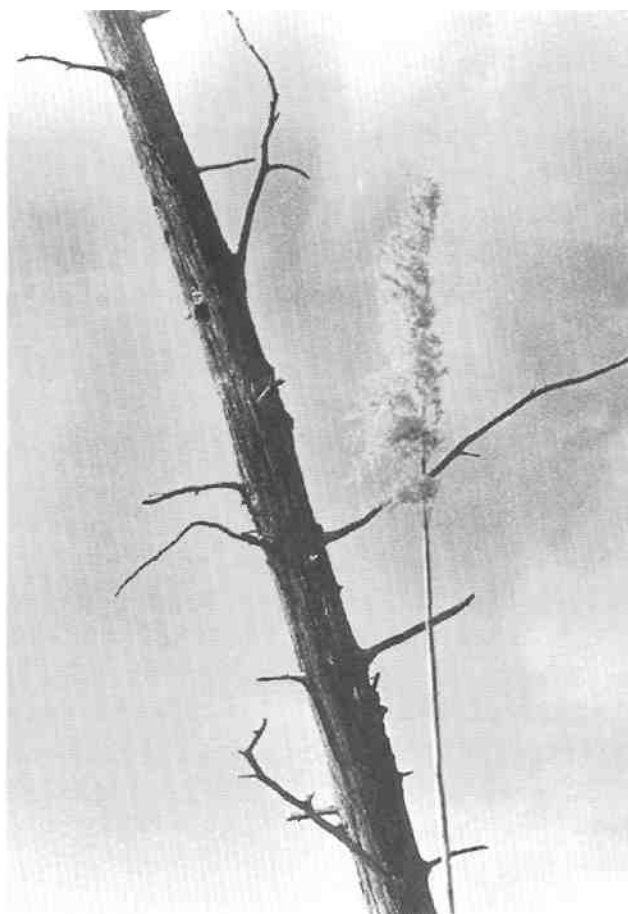
I had no idea how I would ever fall asleep now. Was it even possible? I knew these thoughts bordered on irrational, but I could make no sense of anything anyway. There was nothing left for me, no rituals I could count on, no normalcy to my days, nothing — no one — dependable.

Quietly, I entered my parents' room. "Oh, my baby," my mother whispered when she saw me. "Oh, my baby, come here." I said

nothing as I walked the short distance to my mother's bedside where she lay, propped up on her three pillows, rereading her favorite Harlequin, her "tranquilizer," she called it. One soft light illuminated the room and the pinkness of it all. My father was in the next room, watching the television. I could hear it through the wall. He hadn't spoken a word all day.

My mother put the book down and opened her arms. I collapsed on my knees beside the bed, and she gathered me into her embrace. Rocking me, she kissed my head. "Do you know how much I love you?" she said into my hair, the way only my mother could, "I love you so much. Just cry, my baby. It's okay. Come on, let it all out."

Finally, the sob broke from me. "Oh, Momma," I cried. "Oh, Momma. I can't. I can't do this."



"Yes, you can," she insisted. "And you will." She continued rocking me. "It hurts. It's never gonna stop, but you will do it. I've been waiting for this, you know. You can't keep this inside forever."

I sat back on my legs and looked at her, makeup and tears blurring my contacts. I never wore my glasses. She wiped my eyes and held her hand to my face. I remember the way she smelled, of Lily of the Valley.

"Momma," I said, the tears coming again, "I feel so —" I couldn't think of a word that even came close —lost now. I was going to marry him. He always said it, and I know it sounds almost ridiculous, but I really thought I was going to marry him."

She rubbed my cheek. "I know, baby. We all did."

I was watching her then. "No, you didn't," I snapped. The crying was over. "All you ever thought was that he and I were obsessed with each other. You couldn't stand it."

"Cathryn, please. Why can't anybody talk to you? I'm trying to help. You know I loved him, too."

"Loved him? Sean's not dead yet, Mother."

We finally have another free day on Wednesday. Well, it's the afternoon actually since we had Mass and group discussions this morning. The retreat leaders have planned what they're calling "Spiritual Olympics" which doesn't sound overly exciting to most of my discussion group. Francois and I, along with Patty and her brother, decide we want to go horseback riding instead.

Keystone has their own stables, and Patty and I make reservations for a ride which should last most of the afternoon.

"They said it generally takes three hours, the afternoon one." Francois and I are on the phone even though his room is only two floors above mine in the Inn.

"Three hours!" He doesn't sound very pleased. "That sounds vaguely reminiscent of that fateful 'three-hour tour,' Skipper. Can we risk it?"

I'm laughing. "I don't know about you, Frankie boy, but I grew up riding, so I'm psyched. Horseback riding in the Rockies? It's practically like a dream-come-true for me."

"Alright, alright, but while you're off fulfilling lifelong fantasies, you sure as hell better not leave me in the woods somewhere!"

We take the shuttle to the summer side of the resort. At the stable, we sign waivers ("Waivers? For my health? Cate, you'd better sign yours 'cause I will kill you if anything happens to me") and are assigned horses by ability. I hate when they do that since I generally get the most misbehaved horse because they figure I can handle it. To no surprise, my horse is Apache. "He has a habit of bolting." Great.

Patty and Tim have some background, but Francois is in a panic. His mount is Papa Albert, a retired racer. I wish they hadn't told him that.

There's eight people in our group, not including the guide, Buzzy.

"Apache, I could handle. Papa Albert was a little odd, but Buzzy? Where do they come up with these names?" I'm talking to Francois' back since he's in front of me on the line. Patty and Tim are up in front, closer to Buzzy, and too far for us to talk without yelling. I'm taking up the rear, my eyes on Francois so he doesn't hurt himself — or anybody else for that matter.

"What's wrong with 'Buzzy'?" he asks. "Hike it. It's interesting." His black hair hangs loosely down his back. Mine is tightly braided and tied with a bandana. All in the midwest spirit.

"I shouldn't expect you to understand. Look at 'Francois.' That's not entirely typical either."

"What about you, Cate-with-a 'C.' What's up with that? It's like Jenny or Sandy with an 'i.'"

My body is bouncing to the rhythm of Apache's gait. "Well, at least it's not woman with a 'y,' right? So shut up!"

He's laughing. "Man, don't remind me. I'm on vacation from there, remember? Hey, you don't think Papa, here, will trip or anything do you? Do horses trip?"

We're climbing higher into the mountains. Buzzy points out the peaks, identifying which ones belong to which ski resorts. This is when I learn that Breckenridge goes by Breck to the yokels. Sounds more like sham-poo than skiing to me.

Francois' horse decides to stop suddenly. "Cate! Cate, what do I do?" He pulls on the reins too tightly, defeating any attempt to move Papa and causing the horse to swing his head in annoyance, furthering Francois' anxiety. He's twisting to look back at me.

"Squeeze with your thighs, you idiot." Papa Albert doesn't budge.

Buzzy turns to see us falling behind. "Y'okay back there?"

"I'll take care of it!" I call. Sidling up next to Papa and Francois, I take the reins, and with a gentle tug and a click, I've got them moving.

I try to hand them back, but Francois puts his arms up in mock surrender. "No, that's alright. You can hold onto them for a while."

We're on a fire road that's more than wide enough for us to ride abreast.

"I am having the best time, Cate. This is great, don't you think? Everybody I've met is so amazing."

"You are always so perky, it makes me nauseous," I say, laughing.

"I usually associate perky with breasts," he says unexpectedly. My face registers shock. "So I'm not too sure what you're implying."

"I can't believe you just said that! I

didn't know you were capable!"

"Capable? I am more than capable. That's why I like being here. It's easy to be good when you're around a bunch of good people. It's not as easy to get yourself in trouble."

"Francois, we all got wasted at Bandito's last night."

Patty catches our conversation and calls back, "Happy Twenty-first Birthday to me!" We smile and wave.

"How is that so good and pure?" I continue.

"I mean more that nobody hooked up or anything like that, you know? At school, it's practically impossible to contain myself, no pun intended. After I broke up with my girlfriend — you know the one I told you about — we went for, like two years? — I was a mess. I hooked up with anything. Oh God." He grimaces and shakes off a chill. "There's nothing wrong, really, with drinking sometimes, I don't think. Jesus turned water into wine, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Funny how easy it is to rationalize just about everything, huh?"

"No joke."

"So, did you want to hook up with someone last night? That Joni chick was hanging all over you."

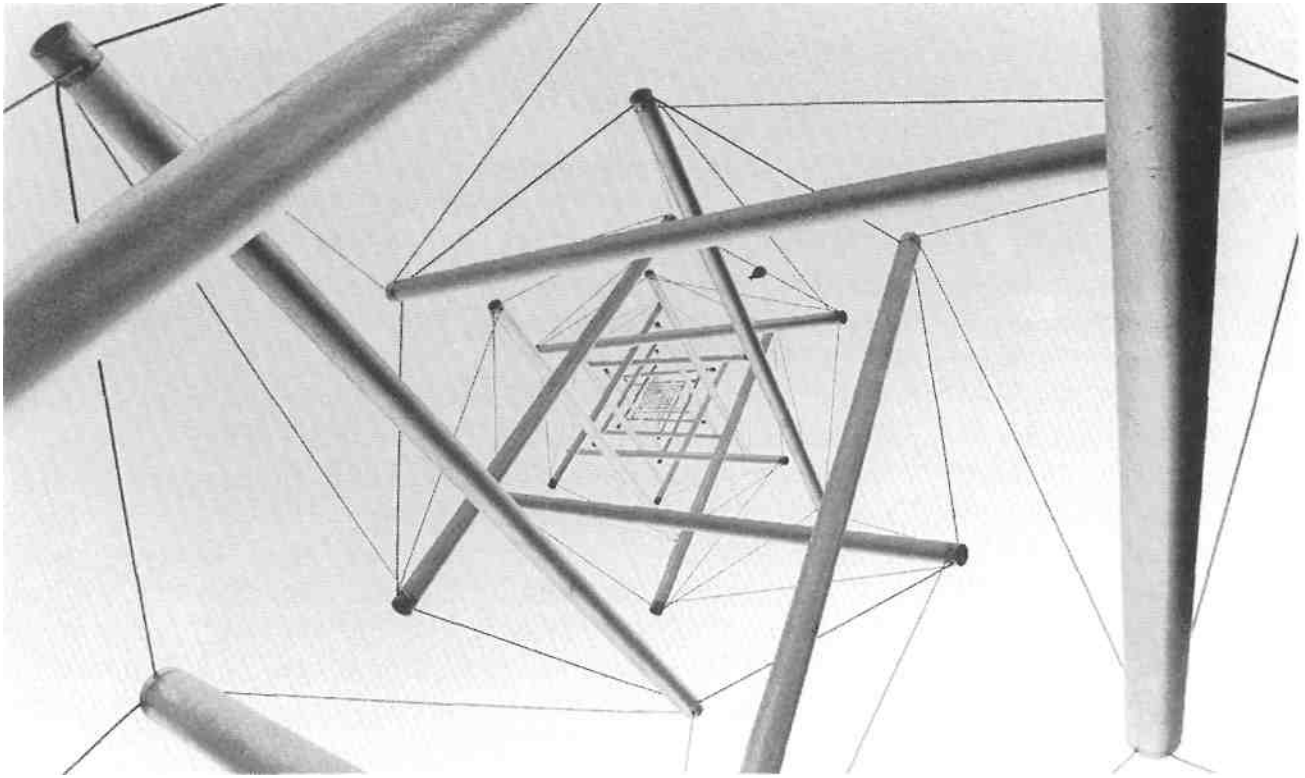
"You don't like her, do you?" Francois is laughing. He knows me so well already.

I smile despite myself. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

"Sit up straight," I tell him. "You're gonna hurt your back all slouched like that. Well, I just don't understand why everyone thinks Joni's so great. And I thought that poem she wrote about John Paul II was so corny, and everyone else was like, 'Ooh, Joni, you're such a talented writer.' Please! It sucked!"

Francois is laughing at me in his gentle way. "Cate, I enjoy you."



"Just say it, Francois. 'You're a bitch, Cate.' Come on. It's easy. I do it all the time."

But before he can, Apache pulls his infamous bolting routing, and we're suddenly flying. The group is much further up than we are, but we're gaining fast. Francois is gripping Papa's mane in one white-knuckled hand, the saddlehorn in the other. His hair is flying behind him, just like a scene out of a cheesy romance novel. Petrified, he doesn't even scream or yell. His eyes are bulging, elbows flapping up and down like a chicken in flight.

It feels so good to me. The speed. The freedom. Deliriously happy. I'm laughing so hard, I can barely remember to hold onto Francois' reins.

"Cate, did I tell you about this guy, Greg, who's in my discussion group? He's twenty-six and in the Air Force stationed in California. He's totally into Christian rock and plays drums for his band out there." Marybelle is babbling to me from the bath-

room where she's putting on makeup before we go to dinner.

"Oh, how cool." I'm sitting on my bed, watching the country music video station and depressing the hell out of myself.

"Are you being facetious?"

I walk into the bathroom. "Sarcastic, you mean?"

"Don't be a brat."

I think when I'm fifty and she's fifty-four, I'll still be a brat to her. God forbid MB should curse. But hopefully, thirty years from now, she won't still be a pain in my ass. She reapplies her eyeliner although there's really no need. She has these gorgeous Crayola green eyes and her hair is a beautiful golden-red.

Marybelle looks at me in the mirror.

"Wow, we really look nothing alike, do we?"

"What makes you say that?" I smile.

"Just because my hair is blacker than black and yours is reddish-blond?"

"You have beautiful eyes, you know, Cate. You're Black Irish all the way."

My beautiful eyes quickly move to the counter top. It makes me uncomfortable to know MB thinks I'm prettier than she is. It's written in her diary. That's how I also know she's completely obsessed with her weight and the caloric content of everything.

As if on cue, "Did you eat lunch today? I didn't see you in the Big House."

"Don't start, Marybelle. We're actually getting along for a few minutes. Don't ruin it, okay? And FYI, Francois and I went to Bandito's for nachos and margaritas."

"Your ID worked?"

"Yep, I was twenty-three today."

"Well, happy birthday, Cathryn Donovan." MB laughs. She pauses, a definite sign that she's going to say something annoying. "First horseback ride the other day. Now lunch for you two. You've been spending a lot of time with Francois lately, you know."

"So what?" The peace treaty has failed. I'm pissed. Why does she always have to do this?

MB is wrapping her hair around the curling iron. "What, Cate? Why do you have to be so defensive?" I left the bathroom between "so" and "defensive". But she doesn't shut up. "There's nothing wrong with you liking another guy, you know. I know it's difficult—"

"What do you know, you —" I fight for the worst (most immature) word I can find. "Virgin!"

She doesn't respond to my anger. She never does.

Her head sticks out the doorway, the curling iron her umbilical cord to the bathroom. "Cathryn, it's been over three months. I know it hasn't been that long, and I'm not trying to be insensitive, but Sean is —"

"Don't you even say it, Marybelle! Don't you even let those fuckin' words out of your mouth! Do you hear me?"

We don't talk until breakfast the next

day. Of course, MB has pretended as if nothing is wrong and hasn't shut up. It's been a one-sided conversation.

"Oh my gosh, Cate, there's Greg." She blushes like a teenager in junior high.

"So you really like this guy, huh?"

"She speaks." Marybelle's voice is one hundred percent sarcasm, a trait she must have learned from her adorable little sister, I'm sure.

At least she's not still talking about John, the ex. The only ex of her twenty-four years. She's been pining for longer than they were even together.

"Oh no, Marybelle. Now you know you shouldn't be thinking like that, all lust and desire and stuff. We're on retreat here. And you're picking up guys? How blasphemous."

"Cathryn!"

Bingo. Right on target. I smirk to myself.

"I know, alright. I feel horrible about it, okay? I just, I don't know. I know I should be concentrating on God, but Greg is so great. We totally connected yesterday." Oh please. "We talked all about our spirituality and Christian rock. It was incredible. And we're going mountain biking together today."

"You have a date? We're on retreat for Christ's sake!"

"Stop it, Cate!" she whines as we both see Greg spot our table and smile at us in recognition.

"Hey, it's your conscience, not mine."

"Where else am I gonna meet a single guy who's spiritual and doesn't want to have sex with me?"

"Wait, who does want to have sex with you?"

"Cate! Shut up, here he comes. Hi, Greg. Sleep well?"

"Are you staying for confession?"

Francois asks in his smoker's voice. He was

sitting with the choir because he played guitar for Mass tonight, an incredible acoustic version of Ave Maria, but he's come to sit next to me now. My sister and Greg went to find hot coffee together. It's so cold here once the sun goes down. And I guess mountain biking must have been quite the success.

"Confession, huh?" I look at Francois. "I don't think so. It's already ten-thirty. You've got to be as wiped out as I am."

"Well, I'm staying regardless." He shakes his head, the black hair framing his face. He always looks so serious.

"You look like a Vietnam Jesus," I tell him.

"Me? Yeah, and who has the same hair? I don't care if you're Irish or Asian, man, you look like Marcia Brady with a bad dye job."

I feign offense. "This is au natural. Black is beautiful, Frank."

"Frank?" He raises his eyebrows. Then he's quiet for a second before asking suddenly, "Why do you always manipulate the conversation?"

"Manipulate a conversation? Manipulate? I'm confused. Weren't we just talking about hair?" I am so confused and quickly becoming annoyed.

He shakes his head, like some great sage taking pity on one as pathetic as myself. "There you go again. Whenever I get too close, you always change the subject, and I don't even realize it until an hour later, and I'm always like 'Hey, she did it again.' Think about it Cate. You do that all the time. We were talking about confession. At least I was trying to."

I pull my legs up under my sweatshirt. "Yeah, so? I told you I'm not going." My voice is regaining its usual edge. I can hear it already as I twist the red chord of my wooden heart around and around until it closes too tightly on my neck.

"Why not?" He sounds like a

prosecuter.

"What the hell is this? Because I'm tired and I want to go to bed. That's why."

"Yeah, right." He walks away. Just like that. He just walks away.

"Forget this." I stand up, ready to leave. Who the hell does he think he is? God? "I don't need this, Francois."

He turns around. "That's where you're wrong, Cate."

"Oh, and aren't you so profound."

"Man, are you wrong." He shakes his head again and walks away, this time without turning back.

Francois sits next to me in group discussion the next day, but I don't talk to him. Our eyes meet for an excruciating minute after group has ended. Finally he walks away. Does it really matter. We're leaving the day after tomorrow anyway. I'll never see him again.

After group is over, Mike, our leader asks to talk to me. He says they're having a witnessing tomorrow night as part of the closing and Mike was hoping, since I've been so vocal in the group this past week, that I'd be willing to say something about the retreat and its effect on me to the rest of the "retreaters." I guess I do talk a lot. I have a lot of opinions, comments, a lot of stories, but Francois keeps insisting that I never really say anything about myself.

Mike also tells me that it's because of me and my openness that gave a lot of the other members of our group the courage to share themselves as well. That's pretty ironic, I'm thinking. There's no pressure involved with the witnessing, Mike adds, he just wants me to think about it.

I decide it's definitely something to consider, though I'm not exactly sure what has happened to me, if anything significant at all. This has all been much better than I ever expected, but how deep is that? Is it worth a

public witness?

"Alright then, Cate, I'll see you at the Healing Mass tonight?"

I nod and turn to leave the deck but nearly trip over Francois.

Pieces of his black hair are swirling around his face in the light breeze. He says quietly, "You've got everyone fooled, don't you?"

Here we go again. "Oh, please, spare me the dramatics, Francois. Just leave me alone." I start walking down the steps, but he's following me.

Why does he always sound so concerned? It's like bad acting. "You're already alone, Cate. Don't you know that?"

"Yes, I'm quite aware, thank you, and quite content."

I feel like Marybelle, walking so quickly the maze of condos that lie between the Big House and the Inn. My nametag is annoying me as it swings with my every step, bouncing off my chest. I throw it over my shoulder so it hangs down my back as I head toward the Inn.

"Francois, would you stop following me?"

"No, I won't," he answers simply.

We're under the hotel now, in the parking garage, and I slam the button for the elevator. Francois is standing too close to me. The urge to physically push him away is so strong, it frightens me. He steps closer. The elevator isn't coming. The lighted numbers above the doors say it's still on the top floor.

I refuse to look at Francois, but he's still there.

"Cate," his deep voice is calm, "come on. Let's talk about all this."

The elevator must be stuck. "Francois, there is nothing to talk about, alright?"

He sighs. "Sean isn't worth talking about? Is that what you're saying?" My eyes meet his then, my jaw slack. I have never felt so violated. "After eight years of friendship, you have nothing to say about him?"

"How dare you." I can hardly speak at first but then it all comes out in a rush of words. "Who's manipulating the conversation now, Francois? And who the hell do you think you are? You have absolutely no right to speak about him. None, do you understand? What did you do? Go sneaking around behind my back, asking my sister about me?" My voice echoes in the dark garage.

"You wouldn't talk to me," he accuses, "what else was I supposed to do, Cate? I wanted to help you."

"Who asked for your help? My sister? And she told you about Sean, too? That bitch. The two of you. What right do you have? You don't know anything about Sean. You don't know me."

He runs his fingers into his hair and stands there like that, holding his hair back off his face, deciding what to do next. "But I want to know you, Cate. Don't you understand that? But I don't really know anything. I don't know what's going on with you. But you've gotta stop blaming everything on your sister. You take everything out on her, and she's only trying to help you. That's all any of us are trying to do."

I have given up on the elevator by this point. "Well, who died and gave you the honorary psych degree, Dr. Nguyen? So what's the deal here? I'm just a great big psychopath nobody knows what to do with? Is that your diagnosis?"

He shakes his head and sits on a cart one of the cleaning people must have left. His voice is even. "Cate, you're trying to get me pissed off, but that's not gonna work with me anymore. I'm not just gonna get up and walk away. You're not getting off so easy this time."

"You're crazy."

"Call me whatever you want. I don't care."

"Francois, just tell me what you want."

"I want you to tell me how you are."

"What?" This is insane. "I'm fine."

"You're fine? You really believe that?"

I nod, reluctantly hopping onto the cart next to him. It rolls a bit. "Well, I know I'm not great, but yeah, I'm fine."

"Cate, your best friend is practically brain dead, and you haven't spoken one word about it."

"Really? What do you know? Thanks for the info. Can I go now?"

A bell rings and the elevator doors slide wide open. Francois places his hand over mine. "Please don't go, Cate?"

I watch the doors close and I know I will stay to the end. I twist the drawstring on my pullover around my index finger until it turns blue. "Francois, nothing anybody says at this point is ever going to bring him back. You tell me, why should I talk about this? Why should I feel this pain? Why should I waste time even thinking about an absolutely futile situation?"

"Cate, don't you see that the pain is in everything you say? Everything you do? You're miserable no matter how deep it's buried. Look at you and me. Look at the way you treat your sister."

I roll my eyes. "Oh please! Marybelle is such a twit. I don't need anyone to be my phychoanalyst or to watch my weight, alright? Is that such a crime?"

"Does that mean you have to scream at her all the time?"

"Who are you? My conscience? This is totally ridiculous. Forget it. I'm outta here." I try to jump down, but Francois grabs my elbow. I look at his hand there and then to his face. I start slowly, speaking in a low, almost angry voice. "Alright then, you tell me: Do you know what it's like," I ask, "to love someone so much you wish they were dead? Do you know how that makes me feel? He may be gone, but Sean is not dead. The one part of my life that is always constant is somewhere I can never go. So where does that leave me, Francois? Do I mourn the loss and move on or

do I stick around and wait, forever, for something that's probably, almost definitely never going to happen?"

"Where do I go from here? Come on, you're the God damned genius. You tell me."

"Cate, I'm not trying to say that I know what you should do. I have no idea. I only want you to realize what you are doing now, what you're doing to yourself and the people around you. When I first met you that very first discussion group, I thought you had it all together, even in the way you approached everything about losing your friend, so matter-of-factly. I thought, 'My God, there is one strong chick,' you know? But Cate, you're dying inside and you're trying to bring everyone down with you. Can't you see it? Even Mother Teresa would want to beat your ass into shape once she got past the front. Yeah, you're one strong chick, man, but stubborn as all hell." Francois smiles at me and gently touches my hair. "Seriously, Cate, let me in."

I can't believe it, feeling the tears stream down my cheeks. The nervous laughter returns. "God, this is twice in one week. What's happening to me?"

Francois slides down off the cart, then puts his arm around me and pulls me into him. He's shorter than Sean, I realize. I can hear him smiling. "You're succumbing to my irresistible charm, dearest Cathryn, that's what's happening."

But doesn't he know that's what frightens me the most? "No one else will ever understand how I feel," is all I say, mumbling into his shoulder.

"Cate, I'm not saying anyone will, but at least let us try. I don't expect you to walk away right now and be, like, 'Hey, you know that Francois guy? Yeah, well, he just told me to lighten up and gosh do I feel happy now,' you know? Please, my ego isn't that huge, is it?"

I stand up straight, shaking my head and wiping my eyes. "Saying I'm sorry sounds

queer, but I am. And I do know that I can be one nasty bitch, Frank."

"I realize that." Francois smiles. "And I'll also ignore that 'Frank' bit, thanks." He takes both my hands in his. "You know what they say, and what I should say as the world's leading psychologist: acknowledging the problem is the first step towards finding its solution."

"Thank you for the tidbit, Dr. Nguyen."

"You're very welcome, Miss Donovan."

And did you know I received my honorary psych degree from the University of Colorado at Keystone?" I pull his hair and he laughs. "Don't mess with the 'do. I spent at least thirty seconds on it this morning."

We're too late for dinner, but I don't think either of us can afford to miss the Healing Mass. We're about to head back to the tent, but Francois stops me. It began raining a few minutes ago, but the drizzle is refreshing. "Wait, come here," he says. "You've got your heart on backwards."

"What?"

He reaches behind me and pulls my name tag around my neck. "See?"

"How very symbolic of you, Monsieur Francois." I hold it in my hands, reading "Cathryn" upside down. "But I want yours," I say.

"Huh?"

"Let's trade hearts."

"Oh, and I'm the symbolic one here?"

"Just shut up and give me your heart, Francois."

Outside the tent, Francois and I meet up with MB and Greg, the soulmates.

MB doesn't hold back. "I've been looking for you, Cathryn. You missed dinner."

Francois is watching me, but I behave. "I had a date for confession, Marybelle."

"Really?" MB is surprised, probably confused. "Well, let's get some seats, okay?"

And then side by side, she and I walk into our makeshift church and find our places for the Healing Mass.



In My Garden

By Kristen Baker

I realize you're a stranger here,
And you're not to blame,
For all the trampled flowers,
For neglected weeds,
That have been let run wild,

And I know
It wasn't you,
Who slowly starved
The flowering hedges
That now crumble
At a touch,

I can see
You bear no ax,
That would match
The marks in these trees
Now healed but not forgotten
Like old wounds turned scars,

But the ones
Who came before
Carried no axes,
Meant no harm,
And weren't to blame
For how they found the garden either.

So even though you're
A stranger here,
Well meaning and unarmed,
And don't deserve it,
Forgive me,
If I let you in slowly,

But I'm trying to learn
From past mistakes,
And you can't understand
What a big step it was,
What a great risk I took,
Just to unlock the gate.

Solitaire Games

By Andrea Keller

Tangled, torn
trailing ivy tumbling
down, catch-your-tail
over and under
climbing, falling
tossed and lost
and won again

My Poetry (Song of a Foreign Poet)

By Magdalene M. Szuszkiewicz

Dangerously balancing
 on the rope
 spread above
 banality and misunderstandings

The sounds of mazurka distract me.

Sometimes a slip
 helps to
 maintain on the rope
Sometimes a fall
 is applauded as
 a somersault
Dictionary— the umbrella
 and couple of friends
 who know how to distinguish
 between
 distraction and destruction

And still
 I can't quit
 this funny circus
 of a marionette pulled
 by emotions

So I can scream joy or madness
So I can cry for help.

Birdsong

By Eric Swan

*Heaven is under our feet as well
as above our head.*

-Thoreau

In the thin distance
where the earth merges with the sky,
a bird is silhouetted in orange
as if crossing a boundary.

Leaning against an oak tree
whose leaves gather at my feet,
I await your arrival and the melody
which accompanies you.

I tilt my glass to the last harvest
expecting nothing more than one could,
keeping only images
and broken sandals.

If ever a woman could
exchange her shoulders for wings,
then you are my angel
and this meadow a crossroad.

Standing in silence
arms now tucked inward,
I imagine the warmth of your feathers
and wind to dry these eyes.

Concealed in the tall grass,
animals tighten in the onslaught of winter
and their cries meet only wind
which silences them like an angry god.



Dummies

By Kevin Byron Olsen

I would gladly hang from a meat hook for you
And be force fed the truth with the other slabs of meat
I tell myself as we drive under a dummy hanging from
A rope tied to the top of a five story brick building
One long broom handle struck through its pillowed heart
Like a spear
Red paint suggesting blood across its punctured chest
A homeless mother left her new born baby in a dryer
On the fluff cycle last Tuesday at the Chinese laundromat on
Lexington and Third, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised
They're dancing in the room above us
You're afraid they're going to fall through the ceiling and
Kill us lying in bed naked with the luxury of air conditioning
And cable
Would that be so bad? As far as I'm concerned, things couldn't
Get any better
I could get crushed right now and be happy about it
I could hang from the appropriate hook
So don't worry that beautifully smashed head of yours
About unshaven legs, lack of sleep or the fear of death
The manager will call us on the phone in the morning
To tell us we've over stayed our pay
The housekeepers will clean the rubbers from the basket
And I'll understand hours later in the car
When a bump in the road wakes you from a cat nap
And you turn to me eyes red, swollen with disappointment
And whisper hoarsely in my ear
I feel so dead I can't even dream

Slow Flowing Romance

By Kevin Wilson

A forest of romance surrounds me.
The leaves beneath my feet crackle at each step.
The rays of sunlight filter down through the trees.
The song of a bird catches my attention and makes me wonder,
Why hasn't it flown south like all the rest.
A lone log lays before me, blocking my path.
A small stream flows along the beaten path.
The fallen leaves sail downstream without a care.
Weathered rocks scatter the banks of the stream.
As I look to the sky a warm feeling attacks my body.
It feels like time is standing still, but hours have passed by.
I see a single red rose growing beside a maple tree.
A sweet fragrance floods my sense of smell as I near
And all I can do is think of you.

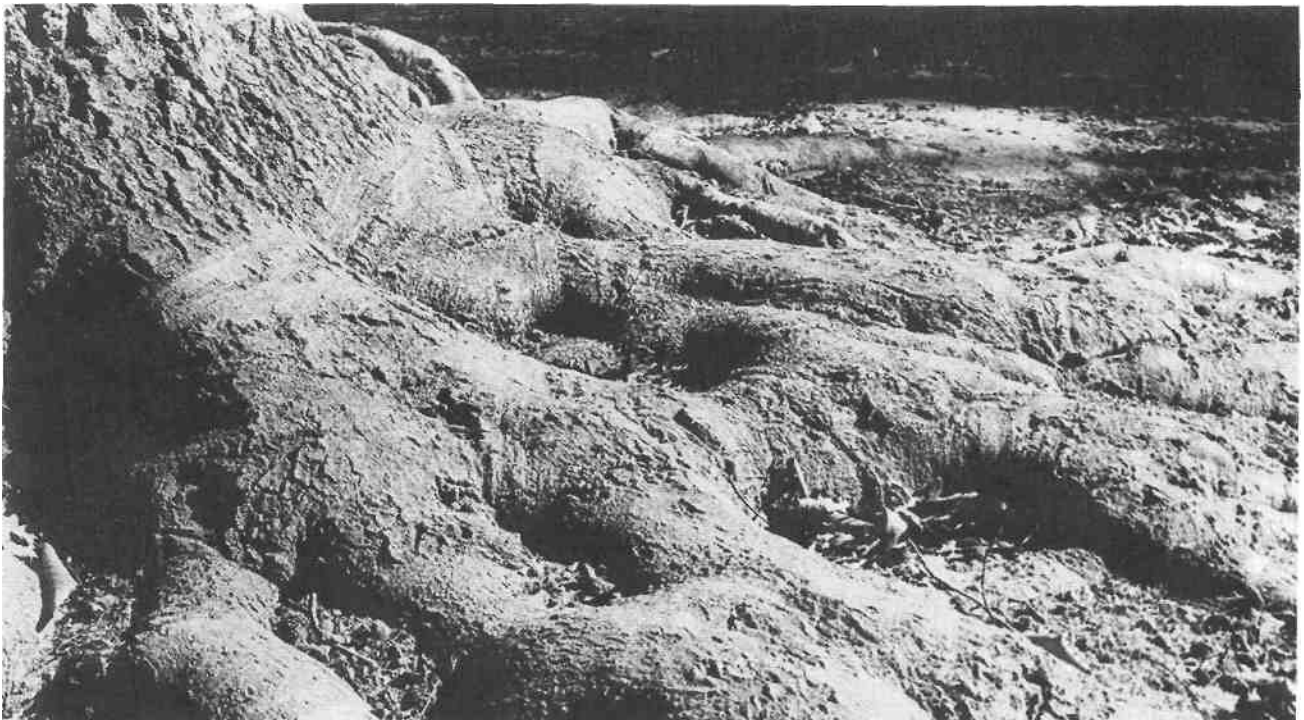


For Him... (Daddy)

By Laura J. McLoughlin

At age seven, Daddy sat me on our old-fashioned sled, pulled me through eight inches of snow, up Tullamore, down Wickham, past Stephanie's. He was certain that I'd be warm. We were both bundled up "like Eskimos," mother said when we returned, nothing exposed but eyes- teary from the wind, New York cold, the blizzard. I was safe with Daddy ahead of me, we were connected- by a short white cord, his boots heavy in the snow, the soles a criss-cross pattern: over, under. Over, under. Inhale, exhale. Our breath was clouds, and Daddy said we could catch them. I told him once I'd caught one. "Now take one from the sky," he said. From that day on- I tried.

At seventeen, he sat me down at our dining room table, told me things are tough at college. Long papers, crazy roommates, responsibilities. He was certain that I'd be fine. "We are both survivors," he said before I left, sadness behind the eyes- straining to keep the tears back, the words he'd never said, the things I'd never seen. I was fine with him away from me, we were connected- by a long white phone cord, his voice heavy in my ear, his words a restraining stream of concern, "doing fine," "sounds good," "working hard?" Our conversations were forced and I said we should speak our minds. He told me once he loved me. "I knew it all along," I said. And afterwards- I cried.



The Promise

By Gretchen Hover

You're standing in the spartan room
clothed in light from a naked bulb.
Through the single paned window
I watch you,
my feet secure on wet pavement
in August's velvet night.

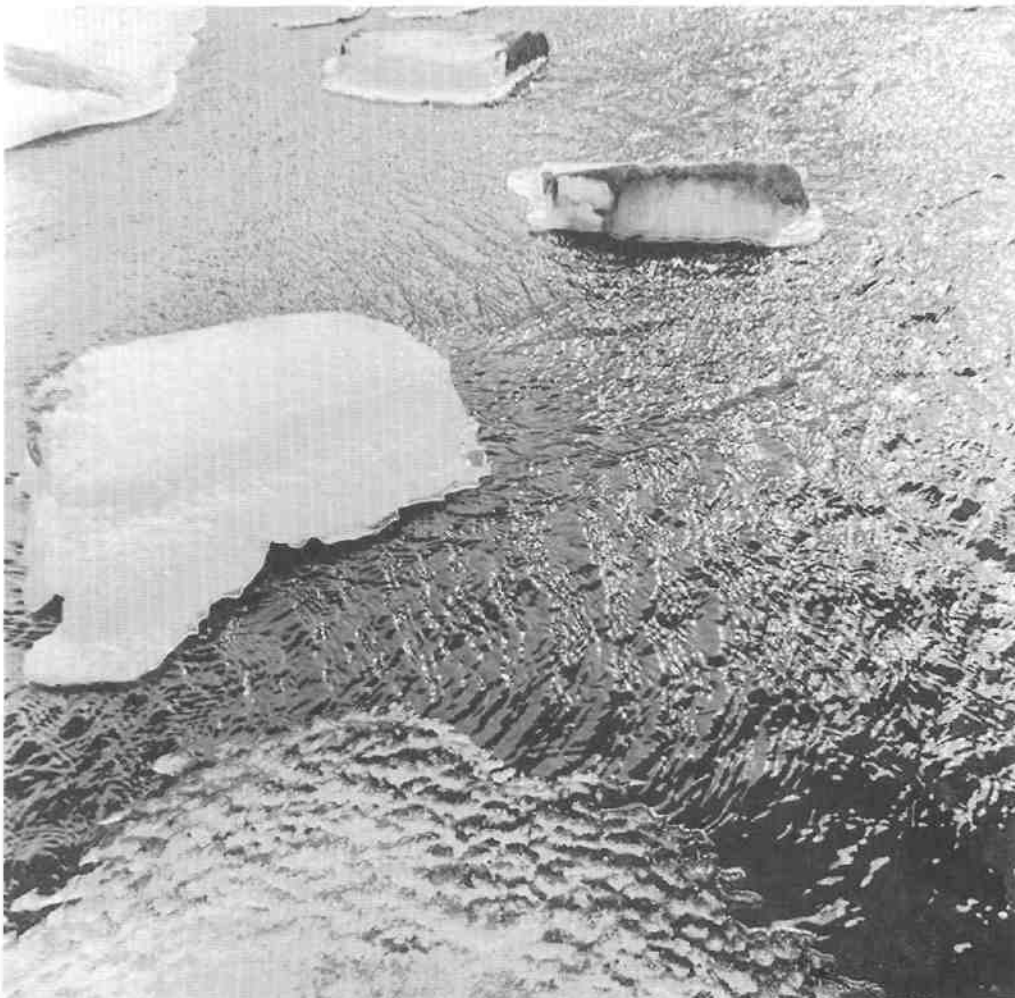
With a sugared coffee in the right
a threaded spine in the left,
you pace unaware of my shaded presence
balancing your knowledge
in sweaty palms.
No regrets.
I can't help but think,
maybe a memory almost forgotten,
that it must be freeezing in that barren apartment,
now like a red-bricked fortress.
My body shivers in sympathy.

Someone said the mind retains only
that which it uses, it needs.
Perhaps even the yellowed image of my face,
of my pale body, has been washed away
replacing recognition with a blank stare.
So, I wander slowly onward,
passing the Cave in which you live.
All along the side streets, in and out
of wych-elms and American Beauties
the late summer zephyrs rustle the drying leaves.
The treeline of whimpering willows
a blacker silhouette than the sky
victims of the misunderstanding,
No regrets, you and I.

The Pier

By Kevin Wilson

The night fog slowly sets on the lake.
The misty night blocks out the moon light.
The fog moves onto the ground, covering my feet.
The smell of snow intrudes my sense of smell.
The sound of a passing helicopter above,
Puts my mind in a whirl.
Its spotlight cuts through the night,
Like a laser beam.
The lights on the pier give off an ominous glow.
The wind pushes the water up against the bank.
As I stand at the edge of the pier overlooking,
Water I can't see,
I lose my sense of direction.
The only guide back to you is the ominous glow of the lights.



Inside the Metal Loop

A limitless cage. A warehouse, destitute with only one source of light. A commingled jungle of flesh and metal twisted throughout dark, fiery debris. A prosaic sign, comely grafted with silver and copper, with the word enter precipitously engraved.

Within this issue two silhouettes being dragged in mid-air. Their bodies and limbs hang in still motion, effortlessly complacent. Black, thin blobs of arms and legs not moving, not breathing, not alive. Two heads also dangle apathetically. Just two walnut spheres, almost at rest, almost falling. And the tree trunks of two bodies almost holding onto the oval blobs, the half cracked ellipses.

The silhouettes lurch forward as if jerked. Their motion mimics a skipping record, even in repetition. Forever do they move forward, revolving about a fixed point; forever do they lean forward, leaping away in a circular loop only to return to it again sometime, at the same point. The machinery, equally shrouded and controlled, screeches as it follows the bodies in this forced, orbital motion, even though that destination is light. Light neither white, illumed with perception and reason, nor the sandy grays of dusk. A shadier light, not blanched remotely, but sufficiently light. With sharp suddenness they stop and sway back and forth. Even the shadows take notice, darkening the walls of the meat house like a pendulum, mocking the bodies with mimicry. Both bodies fall to the ground in similar abruptness and nothing else moves. Nothing else dares to move, not even the shadows of shadows. Even the solitary light does not flash in their direction, nor does the loop resume operation. Everything remains stiff.

The bodies arch up as if energized in that instant. Their backs feel flesh, shaded

Anon.

flesh. Flesh neither charred, nor burnt, nor touched by light, but black nonetheless. Their necks feel red flesh. Not wounded, but pierced, not cut, but slaughtered. In their necks, metals weave with skin. They dive deep, falling from the metallic inferno. Now interwoven with blood, bone, and red flesh, the metals take shape. Just as though they were mixing with water, the metals, meticulously carved in resemblance to hooks, lose most of their heat upon contacting the bodies' skin. They bite through the epidermis, still wielding hot tongues. They slice the cartilage as if it were a paper thin sheet of ice. The hooks grind and chisel to the bone with the precision, accuracy, and speed of a laser. They chew the bone, cracking the spine, the brain's message cable, like an elephant shattering an old, brittle twig. Only a core of liquid remains to be tapped. The pulp spurts fluid from unknown sources, just as a geyser of oil from a well deep within the earth's mantle. Red liquids, white liquids, black liquids flood from a gorge within the neck. They overflow even though the hooks remain encased in bone. The fluids drip from the metal hooks and down the back of the two bodies like tears falling from pale, morbid cheeks. They never stop in falling, but continue to the depths of a bottomless ambiguity. The hooks remain fastened to bone. The hooks become bone.

In their normal non-motion, the bodies resume their footless march. In jerky movements, the two bodies come closer and closer to the only source of light. It, encompassing only a fraction of the inferno, likens itself to an oven. It breathes without flames, cooks without heat, but alters victims in an identical manner. Opening its pallid, sandy gray mouth, the oven inhales the two bodies. They do not resist so the task comes easily. Within the

bland matter operates a device for transforming. A cauldron, larger and more endurable than matter and reason, waits for the hanging victims. Within its bowels brews a mixture of sterility and stoicism. A lifeless combination capable of striating the strongest of emotions and deepest of passions. One drop alters a lifetime of blood and an eternity of air. Two bodies hang over the pot. The oven's gray walls entreat no sympathy while the toxic death spews and rises to engulf the bodies whole. Flaring from the cauldron's base, the liquid envelops the first, then the second. Meanwhile, the loop and metal hooks return to their jerky motions, and the beginning of the cycle.

The bodies dissolve in acidulous liquid. The substance flays flesh and membranes away, leaving a skeleton of both bodies. Together, the bodies float effortlessly in the clear fluid before two more hooks pull them back into the loop. In another room, brightly lit with only a smidgen of black and gray, the skeletons exit. Intense light, shooting from all directions, dispels all shadows and cleanses

the room for the final operation. Again the hooks release the bodies into the flaming mouth of a cauldron. The hooks leave, having tasted dry bone without flesh. Replacing the hooks, two probes implant themselves into the base of the skulls while slag pours into the giant kettle. The probes hammer through bone until resting at the intellectual centers of both heads. Although nearly ineffective in reprogramming the cores, the probes do quell belligerent emotions residual in the brains. As the liquids resume their flows, all emotion is discharged, and all humanity forgotten. The probes jerk the heads to upright positions and while an effulgent scour encrusts the bones, the skeletons smile. Their purposes complete, the probes disengage as the liquid refuse encases the skeletal remains.

Two final hooks drag the metal beings from the cauldron and dispenses with them. Under a prosaic sign, doubly etched with the words exit and enter, leading from a barren warehouse, two metal droids willingly re-enter society fully cured of human ailment. Cured of emotion. Cured of humanity itself.



Will

By Jennifer Harhigh

You shall not drag your feet
In solemn procession
To view a slab of stone
That spells naught but betrayal.

Your children shall not
Tug anxiously at your sleeves,
Wondering if it's time to leave
Or why you ever came in the first place.

You shall not make insipid comments
About how it's such a shame the upkeep
Isn't as it used to be...
And Aunt Anne's arrangement has already wilted.

If the scene be the summation of the soul
I shall have one wish
When wishes cease to be mine...

You will return time after time
Leaving reminders and pity behind,
Eager to rest for awhile
Under my shade of the unimaginable.

Your children
Will skip far ahead of you
Anxious for the promises
Of swinging fast and climbing high.

As the echoes of their songs reach your ears
You will remark
"Every year they become more and more
Like their grandmother..."

If the scene be the summation of the soul...

I hope I am marked with a tree.

Olof Palme

Anon.

Olof Palme was the Prime Minister of Sweden when he was mysteriously shot in February of 1986 as he walked home from a movie theater.

They pinned red flowers to blue and yellow
breasts, affirming not the February
wind nor the shimmering mark so mellow
on their cobbled streets, but they sauntered wary
with weak limbed disbelief to his grave,
unable to inter in marbled stone
a leader, a spirit quickly deprived,
of procreated freedoms brittle as bone.
They wiped the street of blood, but memory
detained a people in frightened murmurs,
enslaved them in a looping tragedy,
bereaved of hope, praying it not recur
while the man with the .357 magnum gun



Reply to: I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra

By Stephen DiDomenico

I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra
rowing through the milky Rio Grande.
Buffalo Kid of the Mexican Blackbird.
Gallonized, galvanized steel crown bearing
universal marshal's point badge of papyrus.

I am a cowboy saddle up the boat of Ra
bang-bang-shoot-em-up 6 shooter Woooie!
of vermin and whiskey warm smooth burning,
galloping down the Santa Fe Trail.

I am The Desperado in the boat of Ra
Where are the fish now? Try
Yosemite Sam I am to
walk on water feed
dusty boots the
yield to hungry
rusty spurs cowpokes
Daggone foolfishpeople.

I am a Cowboy From Hell in the boat of Ra
Indy archeologists blunder Sphinx's jynx riddle.
Spelunkers maze around crumbling, crummy pyramids lost
my dern holster in one of 'em. Dagnabbit!

I am The cowboy in the boat of Ra
prodigal
pariah in the
parable of
paganism.
Fistfull of Dollars squandered like
those who know not Cleopatra
like I have biblically known her.
Forgive them Ra for they know not what they do.

I am The cosmic gadfly in the boat of Ra
met Set in shootout at Hang-em-High noon
Down gorges and up chasms we RAMmed sacrificing,
'til the final showdown at sundown.
Set holed my hat like a hunk-er-swiss. So
I lasso his OK corral
chew 'em up like tabagger-n-
spit 'em out in my Big Dipper spitoon...

...It' Settled.



