

GARLAND



Spring 1991

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Garland

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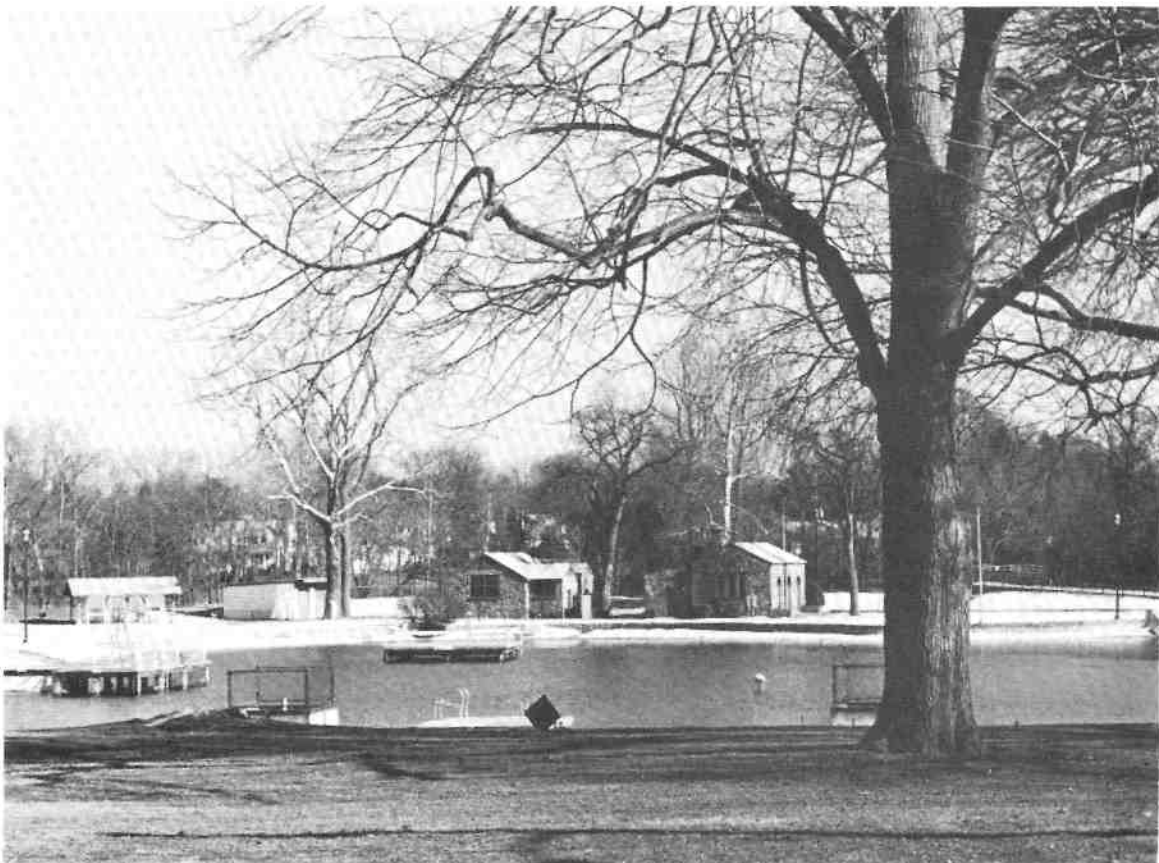
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A Lifeguard's Journal

by Colleen F. Halley

It was warm, the sun holding my hand
Like a small child. Laughter spilled over
Like red cherry wine, staining the many faces
With smiles. The children danced in the water, splashing,
Their heads buoys dancing in and out of boat wake.
I watched as they tried to run in the water; their twig legs
Could not tread. Mother and Grandmother sat on the beach
Under the blue and white striped umbrella, chattering,
Busier than the gulls fed from the fisherman's dock.
The familiar 2 o'clock breeze arrived, blowing sand,
Clawing at the umbrella and the infant's playpen,
A salty whisper, "Wake up, it's time to go."
Mother called the children from the water and Grandmother
Bent like an old aluminum can, hobbled to the parking lot,
Her walker sinking in the sand. Mother dragged sandy children
And two rusty beach chairs after Grandmother,
Dropping a flip-flop and a red toy shovel along the way.



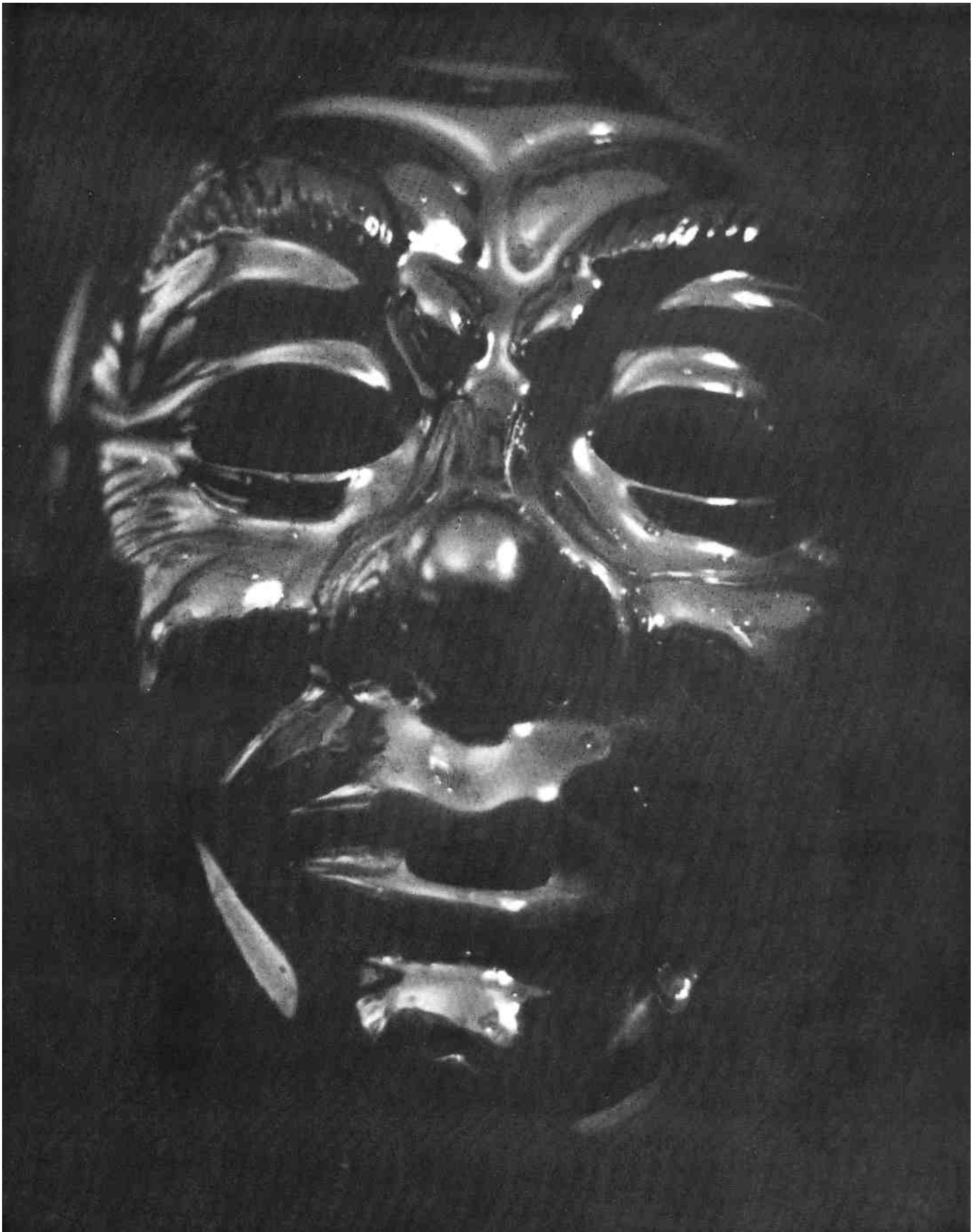
Kaptree Bay

by Doug Davidson

I stopped on Ocean Avenue to hear
the Alberton boys' choir practice singing
Handel's sweet Messiah on the boardwalk.
Their grave director's flitting arm invoked
the brightest few sopranos' quavering highs
before the older altos started singing,
and everyone sang chorus after chorus,
their napes all shaven— all in cotton shirts.
Seagulls twittered on the beach behind them.
I heard the stern director reprimand
a lanky boy who cringed in the back row,
who'd screeched and yelled above the harmony,
whose shrieking did not complement the group.
They tittered as the boy shrugged timidly.
His job was not to sing but scream the loudest.

I rambled to the pier from where they sang
and smelled the pineboards drying in the sun
and bluefish baking in a fisher's bucket.
The fisher shouted that he had just hooked
a bass so big he thought his rod would snap,
and hollering, he reeled his frantic catch
until the giant swung above the surf,
but thrashing its jaw free, it splashed back down.
The crowd that came to watch groaned, disappointed.

I watched the fishers cast and reel a while,
then trekked back to the boardwalk in the heat
and roamed into Kate's Sundries quietly
and browsed through photographs of Kaptree Bay.
Two girls were giggling by the magazines.
They padded by my aisle in bikinis.
One craned her neck to see me as they passed.
She wore hoop earrings and a yellow anklet.
I mumbled a hello and feigned a wave.
She smiled, but her friend pulled her outside.
And thinking they had somewhere else to go,
I watched them plod down past the dunes unfollowed
and tread along the rollers south to Hastings.
I thought of lurching off in their pursuit
and bumbling some attempt at their attention
but wandered off down Elkton Street instead
and wondered if by chasing I'd have known her.
Shriek, bellow, shout, scream loud all men.
Don't murmur when she hurries by again.



Zimbobalina

by Julianna Baggott

Yolanda Varnelle and I were touching tongues for ten seconds. With our eyes squinched up tight like fists we counted out loud, "UN...TOH...TWEE...HOR..." Our shoes were muddy with murky creek water, jars were filled with a witch's brew of tadpoles, tongues ached from stretching to the other's tip, and the spell was almost done.

It was summer, a wet summer in Arbutus where nothing seemed to dry. The same clothes hung on the line for days at a time and the bed sheets kept a hot dampness throughout the day. The creek's surface had a thin covering of grease like the skin that forms on sitting soup. And it seemed to steam swirling rainbow colors in the sun.

"Now you listen here-ah, Jess'ca, you have got to eat this spider leg or else the spell won't never work." Yolanda was a little older than I was and she'd already started to grow breasts, even though so far they looked like two outie belly buttons only higher up. The wetness of Arbutis clung to her skin making it shine in the sun like patent leather. I wasn't allowed to play with her ever since we got caught by the sales girl down at the Rexall, looking at a penis in the dirty magazine racks and I had to go home and tell my grandmother who told her mama who told her daddy. But we stole away to play with each other anyhow. She was the only person I ever knew who understood magic and she'd promised to teach it all to me. The spider leg, still alive, wriggled in her hand without its body.

"I don't know. Can't we just say, 'fer pretends' and fake swallowing it? Nobody'll know."

"They'll know, Jess'ca." She smiled slowly as she pointed out the edge of the park near the

train tracks where she figured the witches stood back and watched.

I pinched the spider leg like a thin piece of thread and put it in my mouth. I guess it got lost in my spit, because I never really felt it go down.

Yolanda's father whistled from their back door and young Varnelles throughout the neighborhood dropped their games for dinner. Yolanda grabbed her witch's brew and began to run as tadpoles slammed up against the side of the jar in tidal waves. She shouted out directions over her shoulder, "Now you jus jump on yo' left foot three times, say yo' wish to the spirits and spin round one time fast." She disappeared into the map of backyards, dodging vegetable gardens, jumping over the Twardus' ceramic lawn elf, and grabbing a handful of leaves with her long arms spraying them behind her like green confetti.

I put my hand over my heart as if to pledge allegiance and hopped on the opposite leg. Holding my hands closer together than ever before in church, I whispered like she taught me, "Oh spirits of Zimb... uh, Zimba... No, it was Zimbob something. Anyways, spirits, please don't let her slip away like Aunt Ruthie says. Don't let me have to live with Aunt Ruthie." I spun around one time fast.

I didn't feel good about how the spell went, and I walked up the street slowly. Willie Goodman was sitting on his front step rocking back and forth to the sound of his transistor radio. I called to him and waved, but he didn't look up. Yolanda told me he was "artistic" (which means sick in the head). My grandmother told me it was a problem from birth and that he didn't speak at all.

Mr. Twardus was putting a garbage bag of aluminum cans into the trunk of his car while

his wife, folded into thirds: stomach over top of thighs over top of shins, trimmed the edges of the grass beside the walkway of their front door. He slammed the lid to the car and called to me earnestly with a fast flip of his palm. "Still recycling Calhoun?"

"Yes, Sir."

He pulled keys out of his pocket and with a fist shook them at me saying gruffly, "Good job, good job. It's the way of the future, Calhoun." He marched to the car.

From Yolanda's house I heard a lot of voices yelling and the front door slam shut behind one of her tall brothers who grabbed a bicycle from the pile in the front yard and pumped his legs towards town. I concentrated on avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk until I got to the gravel of our driveway. Most of our neighbors on the street were new young couples without children or dogs, who were constantly adding on out back — patios or swimming pools with tall fences.

The outside of our house bleached light blue by the sun looked almost gray. The porch seemed to slope downward into a valley in the center of the front door. Both sides of the house leaned into each other as if the basement were rotting out. The porch had a plastic covered couch that rocked and swung above the rusty springs. No one ever sat on it.

Pulling open the front door gave the room a gust of air that sucked the curtains into the screens rattling the big lamp shades that cluttered the living room. I went to the kitchen to sip from a glass of juice I had left half full that morning. I traced my grandmother's clunky footsteps above as she wandered around her bedroom. The house smelled like old people to my friends; my grandmother's lilac powder and the pages of an old book. To me it was the smell of home, the only one I'd ever known. When my mother was in labor with me the nurse said it was going too quickly. She tried to slow it down by holding my mother's legs together. The nurse was young. There was

bleeding somewhere they didn't know about. I always lived with my grandmother in this old house.

It seemed with old people, age can affect them in two ways: either it makes them shrink in real close to their bones or it makes them puffy all over. There never seems to be a medium-sized grandmother. Yolanda's grandmother looked like a knotty crooked tree branch in a bathrobe and my grandmother was big even in her red wrists. The skin under her chin looked like she was storing eggs beneath her jawbone. Her face was white with small loose sacs of blue beneath her eyes. She looked mean in the mornings before she'd dress herself for lunch which she ate every day at the counter of Woolworth's - a BLT - with all of Arbutis' mailmen and older Woolworths' clerks. Lines from her sheets pressed into the sides of her face like she'd had nightmares that seemed to still be stuck to her. She climbed down the stairs cautiously, holding the rail and her pocketbook. Each step creaked with the sound of an old bass cricket. She was wearing swatches of pink on her cheeks, red on her lips, and a hat. I knew Aunt Ruthie would arrive soon.

I was sitting Indian style on the couch watching Grandmother fumble through her bag. "She'll be along just any second now, and I do believe I have forgotten something." She pushed a bobby pin deeper into her hat to attach it to her hair, then rubbed the small of her back. Her eyes stared nervously around the room for a minute as if it suddenly appeared different to her, as if someone had changed the wallpaper or the print of the sofa cushions, as if it weren't her home at all.

I heard Aunt Ruthie's car popping rocks on the gravel driveway. She drove a fake convertible with a peeling vinyl roof and rust spots. It looked like it had been attacked at a Great Adventure drive-thru safari. The car door slammed, one knock at the door and a shot inside. The curtains took a deep breath to the screens.

"Well, I'm here, let's go now." Ruthie was

always nervous. She had twin boys both named Charles. She called one Chippy and the other Chuck. They were a year older than I was, but I didn't really have to see them much. They played all of the sports and modeled too. Aunt Ruthie was wearing a matching pink shorts set that was too small and young for her and large light blue sunglasses. She was the kind of woman who had calligraphy initials on all of her shirt and brought saran wrap in her pocketbook to the United Church Women luncheons in case there were leftovers, including lemons left out from the tea. She sang at church and enjoyed pruning in the spring. As she waited for Grandmother to turn out all of the lights, Ruthie looked over all of the pictures on the dining room wall: tiny silver circle and square framed baby pictures of me in the hospital, smaller than a five pound bag of sugar, held by Grandmother with colored hair, and Chippy and Chuck in matching blue caps. Ruthie was there in a mini-wedding dress standing next to J.W. without a beard and about sixty pounds. Set off from the others on the far wall were foggy old pictures seemingly taken through a smoked glass mirror: Granddaddy in his high-back armchair, my mother looking up from the piano at a recital, daddy in a uniform with his jaw further out than his nose and their wedding, his hands around her waist staring out into the dining room at me. Ruthie flipped the curl of her hairdo.

"Jessica," she turned to me, "are you coming dear?"

I spotted a big black carpenter ant across the room and picked up one of Grandmother's bedroom slippers. "I dunno. Where you taking her?"

"We're going to Shady Brook so Mother can visit with some of her," she shouted towards the kitchen where Grandmother was turning off the stove again, "not so bullheaded friends."

Carpenter ants never seem to die. I swatted it once, pressing it into the carpet, and it bounced a few inches away, crawling furiously. I ran with

a bent back chasing it from swat to swat, until it lay limply, convulsing slightly. I watched it die.

"Get your shoes on, Jessica, quick, quick, quick like a bunny." She clapped her hands at me. Grandmother walked in rummaging through her purse. "And get a paper towel to clean up that bug."

My grandmother picked up her head and the folds of her chin opened to the cooler air, "LEAVE the body, Jessay. And don't clap your hands at my granddaughter like a reg'lar dog! I'm sick of those ants crawling round my house like they are proPRIEtors. From now on we will leave the corpses as a message to the others. They think they can crawl in my cupboards and eat at my food, not any longer."

"Mother, you are joking!"

"No, I am not. Twenty-four hours they'll stay where they are. He'll be an example to the others. They'll be sending more scouts out soon to look for this one, and they'll take off shakin'."

"Oh, hush now Mother. Next thing you know you'll be wanting to dip a pin in their blood and write 'Git Out Ants' by their bodies." She shook her head. Grandmother spruced up a curl at her cheek and walked out briskly to the car. "Get a paper towel like I told you Jessica, and your shoes. We're waiting, so don't dilly dally round, slow as molasses, HEAR?"

I got my sneakers and left the dead black ant, another dot in the design of the carpet.

The big city had begun to overflow and Arbutis was catching the run-off. The trees by the highway that led from our exit were lowered and townhouses grew up as quick as lizard licks. The police had shown off its eight new police cars in the Memorial Day Parade. Arbutis even had its own serial killer who went around killing neighborhood pets.

We drove by the construction site of the new shopping mall that Grandmother still refers to as the old glass factory. My father worked in the glass factory, and then left her: my mother swollen

with me. I looked for him by the bulldozers in the mud that were digging out the old pipes where the six screen movie theater was soon to be. I looked for the man with a jaw further out than his nose. I never stopped expecting to see him, even when I thought I had.

The car ride into the city made my eyes shoot up. On my street, my eyes caught the curb and rode with it until the stare was broken by a parked car. On the highway, lined by a shallow forest, I counted the white catapillar tents hanging full from the trees. The small points of distant buildings grew closer and larger until the car was full of shadows and the top of my head pressed against the closed window locking in the cold man-made air. I still tried to look up. I could no longer see the points of the buildings that hid in the sky, only their sides.

Ruthie was talking about bug spray like a TV commercial. We stopped at a light and young kids rushed to the car to spray windows clean. "Lock your doors!" Ruthie cried. She slammed her fist on the silver button lock and was mouthing, "Go 'way, go 'way," shooin' with her hand.

I had goosebumps on my bare arms and legs and rolled down my window. A young boy sat on the sidewalk with his elbows on his knees, spray bottle hanging between his legs touching his bright blue and orange sneakers. He had one square of paper towel. A fat woman in a sun dress was shouting behind him, waving her arms as the flowers on the dress danced. She held the paper towel roll. "C'MON!" she yelled. "GO ON!" He shook his head and she shoved him with her shoe. All the other boys had already collected their money and ran to the side of the street before the light changed green.

My grandmother glared at Ruthie. "Why didn't you pay 'em? It's hotter than hell out there today, and they washed your damn windows!"

"Listen Mother, soon as you stick your hand out of that window your wristwatch is gone. J.W. drives out this way to work every day. We

know better than to fall for their tricks. Probably damn crack people anyways. Won't catch me supporting none of their drugs!" J.W. was her husband who always had bits of food stuck to his beard.

"You have about as much sense as a doorbell, Ruthie. Ding dong ding dong! They way you go on, you just like the sound of your own voice!"

Ruthie didn't work except for Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Women's Center. She and Gladys Henchel led the menopause support group for slightly older women in the community. She'd tried to interest her mother earlier, but Grandmother didn't feel comfortable discussing sexual things in public, even if it was only waking up sweaty, swollen feet, and mood swings. They also didn't share the same view on the value of "group hugs".

Grandmother and I had our first sex talk after Yolanda and I got caught at the Rexall with pornographic material rolled up and torn at one corner and hidden behind my back like a bunch of flowers as we stood in the shadow of a sales girl named Sue who called us "filthy young-ins: white trash and her ratty nigger friend."

Her wrinkled hand waved me to the dining room table one afternoon well after I'd realized that the Rexall manager wouldn't really have stopped by my house and told my family about the incident if I hadn't. Grandmother pulled back the curtains as if checking the bright afternoon lawn for strangers who might be trying to eavesdrop on our conversation and then sat down beside me. "I hope you don't feel uncomfortable. This sort of talk makes people feel uncomfortable sometimes." She stood up and walked into the kitchen to make some coffee with old grounds used twice. She didn't like waste. "Well how do you feel?"

I felt fine, like I didn't need a talk. "Good."

"Well, it seems you're getting curious." I could see her passing back and forth through the

doorway, and some of her words were lost in the back wall. "Soon enough you'll realize...there ain't nothing uglier...man's...white naked body, an' nothing...better." I kicked my legs out, tapping the floor as she added something that I didn't hear at all.

She sat down again next to me rubbing her knees weak from weight and pushed up the curl at her ear. She bent forward, her fatty breasts supported by the table, and started out in a whisper. I didn't listen to every word she said. "Your body, Jessay, is gonna get rounded like a fruit and tender sometimes, too, like bruises." She skipped a lot of little facts, and I crossed my fingers one on top of the other until they were lined up like a little fan. "Like rusty water yo' gonna find your panties stained with a little spot of blood, dark blood, almost black at first. But that won't be for a good while yet." She looked behind her towards the squeaky noise of the curtain rods and the breeze. "Damn mice! Now listen, the Lord made you a

woman on purpose. We were both meant to be women 'cause of our strength. God trusted women with stomachs as full as the moon with his babies. Stretching our water and skin around it 'til it falls some and is pushed out of us screaming into the world that we hold for it." I imagined my mother with the rusty wet baby from the silver circled picture on the wall behind me; her face still, looking up, like a piano recital. She was cold. Grandmother had continued on. "Men and women fit together as tight, and warm, and full, and soft as the tongue in yo' own mouth." I felt my teeth and my roof and my gums. "The beautiful thing's in marriage, like yo' old granddaddy and me 'fore he died, where people have children and hold each other in a child. Sex without marriage and love is hateful and mean, Jessay. It's for people just acting ugly to each other. Men can lie SO well. And they can also leave."

She never said my daddy's name, but I heard it anyway. And like the stranger eavesdrop-



ping on the bright lawn by the window, I hoped he heard her too. I didn't want to hear any more and was swinging my feet, piling my fingers, and popping my mouth.

"Listen to me, Jessay, this is important." I stared at her. "Now you, you," she'd forgotten what to say, "don't sit on boys' laps. Alright! now, go on. Go on out and play."

"Don't forget about the coffee."

"What?"

"The coffee."

"Oh, yes, I know 'bout the coffee!" She was angry.

I waited alone in a quiet part of the nursing home that didn't smell bad. The room was filled with old people who smiled at me, forgot they smiled at me, and smiled at me again like a newcomer until I fell asleep sticking to the vinyl chair.

"She ain't my wife."

"Mr. Parker, she certainly is!"

"I'm not holding her hand. Tell her to stop winkin' at me and calling me sweet honey thing. She ain't my damn wife!"

The nurse's shoes squeaked as she wheeled him down the hallway, and I was wide awake. I walked down the maze of hallways peeking in open doors of the nursing floor. The smells got stronger: disinfectant and bowels. They were locked into their chairs, scrubbing their trays. Hands had begun to curl in toward their elbows like crabs. Pushing their tongues in and out, they rocked like infants that had never been anywhere else. Brown spots like tea stains spotted skin stretched over knuckled and thick blue veins. Arms and legs were dry as if the skin could rub off like red eraser. They didn't know the wetness of the heat outside. I wondered where all the men were and decided that all the women had been chosen to be women of God. They were survivors like a carpenter ant running furiously from swat to swat. The music was lovely and the women in pink moved quickly in the halls and with the patients.

An office door slammed. They were coming towards me. Ruthie running after her in short quick steps trying not to run. Her pink shorts were riding up into the creases where her thighs met her padded hips.

"It's inevitable Mother! I don't know why you refuse to face this."

"C'mon Jessay." She grabbed my arm. "I didn't even get a chance to visit my friends."

The car was silent until we pulled out of the parking lot. Ruthie started. "You put on two bras in the morning, let the food go bad in the 'fridgerata. You forget to lock the doors and lock yourself out. Can't keep yo' accounts straight an' look at Jessica. One day yo' gonna leave that stove on an' burn the place down, killin' the both of ya in the process!"

"Well I'm sorry I won't be 'round fer you to say 'I told you so' to."

"You nevah lissin to a word I say."

She had her good days and her bad days. I'd seen her throw her account book across the kitchen and hear her nervous laugh as she fumbled with her blouse buttons after I told her that she'd dressed herself out of order. This spring she suffocated our goldfish by leaving my school books on top of the mouth of the bowl after dusting the living room. She tried to call her dead sister, Peggy, on the phone and cried when I told her that she had died long before I was born. She was getting worse. I kept quiet with my hand pressing against the fast air outside the window.

In the tall grass by the creek, Yolanda and I had hidden Witch Hazel from my grandmother's glass bathroom cabinet. We needed human tears before we could start, and she pinched the soft skin on the inside of my upper arm.

"Oooowww! Look I jus' cain't cry, Yolanda. Let me pinch you one time hard. See if you can do it."

"Nah. I'm sure you could git watery eyed if you thought of somethin' real sad."

We pinched each other, thought of the

dead pets murdered by the serial killer, and pulled at our eyelashes until we had twenty-five tears. We mixed that and the astringent, Witch Hazel, along with a few pieces of hair that I had stolen from Ruthie's hairbrush when she made me comb out my braids, as stringy as celery, for church the week before. Aunt Ruthie had only stopped by to take her mother to the grocery store and to church on each of the three Sundays since the nursing home incident.

I jumped on my left foot three times and clasped my hands, "Oh, Spirits of Zimbob-"

"Zimbobalina" Yolanda pushed me along.

"I really want my Aunt Ruthie to" I paused, "keep stay in' outta my grandmother's business."

I spun around one time fast and Yolanda clapped her hands and giggled. "I thought you was gonna wish on her a broken leg. Why didn't ya?"

"I couldn't. She might mean well in tryin' to fergit it!"

"Yo're scared of yo' own magic!"

It was well after dinner and the darkness in the field and trees beyond the creek made the shadows seem to move. We were smacking our arms, missing mosquitoes. It was time to go inside. So no one would see us together she took the backyards, and I walked up the middle of our street. Everyone's windows, except ours, were shut so not to leak cool dry air into Arbutis. As I passed every house, in the lower front window, I could see the purple t.v. light illuminating a room. The sky was just as purple. More and more the neighbors were strangers on an empty street that peeked from cuts in the curtains of bedroom windows and met outside in clumps only when there was an accident at the intersection. I passed the spotlights that the street lights made for the frogs to gather like punk kids on Main Street. "Probably crack frogs," I thought and noticed Aunt Ruthie's car in the driveway. I passed the back window where Chippy and Chuck were

beating each other up in matching baseball uniforms. Aunt Ruthie walked out the front door. In passing she said politely, "Good evenin' Jessica." "Ev'nin'".

"Looks like it may rain." She stood smiling with one elbow on her vinyl roof. The flip of her hairdo needed to be pushed back. "Don't hes'tate to call if you need me fer anythin'."

"I won't." She drove away.

I walked through the house with my neck stretched out cautiously as if trying to sniff out the smell of something gone bad in a kitchen. Upstairs grandmother's bedroom door was open, and she was awake. "Hey there, Jessay." She patted the side of her bed, and I sat down.

Her bed was tall and my feet dangled. It began to rain softly just making Arbutis more wet, swimming pools greener, frog backs slicker, salt more heavy to rattle from its shakers. The sky was dark blue and the trees blocked it in black.

"I saw Aunt Ruthie leavin'."

"Yes, seems I called on the telephone."

She tightened her eyes pulling her eyebrows close together and squinted at her fingertips as if trying to read words on one of her fortune cookies at FungWah's without her glasses. "By the time she got here I didn't remember having called, an' she said I told her that yo' Mama had died in labor."

The rusty baby and cold mother, a man in a white uniform that may be at the front door or by a bulldozer in the wet night...I was more concerned about keeping what I had than the past. I shouted, "That's what SHE says you said. If you don't remember it maybe you never did it an' she's jus' tryin' to git you to feel crazy." I swallowed a lump of wet air.

Crickets like violins were rubbing their legs against their bodies, calling to each other. She squinted at her hands again touching each finger methodically. "It scares me. I think sometimes I can hear my husband clippin' hedges in the backyard an' my two girls pullin' at each other in their room. An' it makes me real tired." She breathed

out.

I bit the inside of my cheeks and said it anyway. "I hate her."

"I had my girls too late." She looked guilty. "I know what's happenin' to me. I'm bein' unmade."

She wiped the wrinkles out of her brow and into her hair. She laid her hand over mine, cupped like a conch shell and fell asleep.

I laid awake that night trying to memorize my room, everything I'd said and done that day, that week, Yolanda, Mr. Twardus, Chippy and Chuck, and Aunt Ruthie, too. I tried to recall everything grandmother had ever said to me, and already there was so much I'd forgotten.

I was rolled up in a ball and straightened my legs. The backs of my knees were sweaty and now cool. I concentrated on how that felt, the coolness. I was scared and went to the bathroom to make a lot of noise. I flushed, gargled, coughed, and let the toilet seat drop.

She woke up, "Honey, you alright?" I opened her whining door into the darkness and she added slowly, "When are you comin' back to bed, darlin'?"

"It's me, grandmother. I'm too scared to

sleep."

She turned on the light on the bedside table, and I stood sleepily in the dimness, my hair tangled on one side, a t-shirt that hung to my knees. She smiled, "Jessay, I thought fer a second.

"Jus' me."

I felt safe under her thin sheet listening to the puff of her lips that her breathing made and in the background the night sounds of Arbutis in the wet heat. I fell asleep missing her.

"Oh, Spirits of Zimba, Zim, Zimbob—"

"Zimbobalina" Yolanda helped me.

My hands were tingling I held them so tight. The nails were red. The lines across the knuckles were gray. I wished for nothing out loud, and Yolanda poked a rib. The sun was falling behind the trees. I really, really want to change like soft fruit as tender as bruises. I want to see rusty blood fall from myself and swell like the moon. I want to grow old only to crash down through my childhood and be unmade. Like her.

I spun around so fast that the wet air collected on my outstretched arms under the last dying streams of sunlight.

Bitter the Blue Smoke

by John Lucey

We took an old mayonnaise jar from the garage
And some olive oil from the kitchen.
Sitting on her bathroom floor, she stuffed the jar halfway with
Newspaper, and poured the olive oil until
In the linoleum grey of a night bathroom
The paper was the color of the walls.

She lit a match, held it before me
The stray sparks more like hairs than fire
Orange like a cartoon tiger
And as the flame threatened her fingertips
She let it fall past the rim
Til a blue puddle of air whipped across the damp paper
Then mixed with the amber and scream out of the jar.

A hand grabbed my neck
Palm closing around the short, sensitive hairs
And pulled my face to hers. Our teeth touched roughly
Clumsily
And she rolled me onto my back
Helpless
Clamping her legs around my waist,
Then reached for the toilet paper behind me
And dropped the sheets into the jar
Instantly ashes.

The fingertips are reddened with skin
Of winter
The past and all I think is
Hands have molded clay that hardens til cracked
And the holds that will not be filled
Are nothing
Beside the paleness of you
Your face, the muscles that dent
Like the crushed, turning paper.
The drops from above
Land on the skin
And roll off like words.

Grandpa

by Colleen Caine

I.

My Grandpa.
Your life: simple
Cornflakes for breakfast
Cards in the evening.

Photos hanging on the den wall
One for every year
Remind me of the time
Spent in the pineapple town.

II.

Every Fourth of July
You arrived in your
Kelly green suit.

I wore ribbons in my hair:
Red, white, and blue
In honor of your birthday.

You handed out sparklers,
Showing me how to write my name.

Our Magic Wands were safer than
the shooting rockets and quieter than
the black snakes that my brothers
brought to life.
We hated those things.

III.

And together we were fascinated
by the blue blobs, melting
and falling from the top
to the bottom of the Lava Lamp.
"It's a snowman," I said.
"No, it's a dolphin," you said.
You were right. You took me to the land
of mermaids and dolphins.

We played checkers.
You always let me win.
Everything had a different name to you:
the idiot box and the little man who sat
on your shoulder.
Together: Our world was magic.
The Kadidily House-our Fairy Kingdom,
And riding in the Ruby Cadillac
you let me talk to the truckers.

IV.

Sitting on the porch
Eating oranges in the Florida sun;
We caught salamanders
in a glass jar.

As I slid down the water slide
You waited with outstretched hands
At the bottom
Catching me as I splashed
into the aqua pool.

Tiptoeing into your room at dawn,
I patted Gretchen's velvet head;
Looking into her tootsie-roll brown eyes.
You woke,
Winked at me.
And smiled.
That morning
Riding on the back of the bicycle;
you let me ring the silver bell.
At night we listened to Amos and Andy
and laughed out loud.

V.

One dark summer I wouldn't go
from one island to the next.
I couldn't?
I didn't want to?

That was the last time I was the princess,
talked to the truckers and won at checkers.
Can this be my Good-bye to you?

VI.

Tall, dark undertaker
Greeting mourners at the door.
Blossoms and fragrances surround you,
Pale and cold lying there.
Different than before.
Folded hands.
Mine were too, tightly
around the paper Virgin in my hand.
We were praying for you and
I was the one crying.

Crying for the both of us
For the Kadidily House,
the cornflakes, the mermaids, and the little man
and for writing my name in sparklers
with my hands.



Chopsticks

by Jason Santalucia

Had a neighbor glanced out a window
Between laundry loads
Or Jane Connor's mother
Come home early from her job
As a waitress
That fall afternoon,
They would have seen me,
Red-faced and panting,
Running through scattering leaves,
Bullied by the thought of Jane Connor waiting
Beyond a sliding glass door left unlocked,
Through a kitchen,
Shoes just touching the tile,
And finally in a cool
Back bedroom
Papered in yellow and white.

I knew what it would be like,
I'd heard others talk.
Fireworks, they said,
Bursting balloons
And *hot fields ready to be plowed*.

But listen,
I'll tell you something.
As the square of light makes its way
Across that bedroom wall
From time to time,
Cooling to a blurry orange,
I see only two children playing,
Ignorant but unashamed
And laughing even,
At their awkwardness.
Learning,
The way one does
When fumbling with chopsticks,
To put food in the mouth
In a different way.

In Answer to Your Question

by Jason Santalucia

I can remember the first time
We were together,
In the tiny room you rented
On the second floor
And how I woke up
Late in the night
To the sound of white noise,
Hissing softly, almost inaudibly
From the television on the dresser.
Dim, blurred light
Spilling out into the air
And I remember looking at your face,
Asleep,
Your skin glowing in the static-
You looked perfect,
And that is why I was not there
In the morning.

Floating

by Jason Santalucia

I don't remember all of that day
But I do remember it was early spring
And warm already,
Except when a cloud would pass over,
Wiping its cold shadow across the stands
Of waving parents
And the field of brown grass
Where my brother stood hunched over,
Hands on knees, waiting for a pop-up.

Then I remember growing bored
And wandering away from the people,
Mother and father,
Down a small hill to a playground,
A square area bordered with railroad ties
And littered with wood chips
To cushion the falls of careless children.
The bald patch of dirt
At the bottom of the slide
Made a perfect battlefield
Or canvas
For scratchings of cars
Or rockets that would rise up
On pillars of blown white
And circle the world, and look down
From that floating silence,
Like staring out from a bubble,
Down onto a boy walking off alone,
And then there is something,
A man, a struggle—
So hard to see from this distance.
The only thing clear is later,
The wet, swollen face
And a small voice repeating frantically,
Nothing happened,
Nothing happened.



The Tale of Madame Althea

by Melissa Grossman

I Madame Althea's Seeing

I have two and a half eyes. My name is Madame Althea Honor. Always been referred to as Madame Althea — from the time the cord was cut. People have used my name for fun, thinking it odd, and me an oddity. No one seems to be able to separate the Madame from the Althea as if the omission of one improperly rights me proper.

My mother was a drunk. She was getting drunk the day I came. She grasped that the thin sour succor of a bottle of Mad Dog poured down her throat in a birthing time bordered on vicious. But she was in her own dust-cluttered bedroom, on her weight suffering bed, having the child of a man who no longer cared. The snow outside was rising up to peek in scornfully, and my ma'am lady flaunted the savior she borrowed from whinos with pain subdued spite. It would have to serve her and the insistent ripping child that would survive. She downed a couple bottles through the laboring hours, but drunken respite was snubbing her.

State folks who checked their noses in on Ma'am Lady, who came to see me, a fuzzy headed squall with a freaky name, were sure the dulling breath of mother's liquor must have inevitably reduced my brain. I was surely institutional material. But their clucking was for nothing. My problems with decimals and spelling contagious were never particular. I learned to use smart words in a finely tuned manner if it suited me. My Ma'am Lady was naturally the color of lazy grammar. After the Quaker man, she struggled to throw a more suitable voice till that appeared artless. She would pinch my arm purple if I loosed a "farmer mouth". Not my fault I don't got time to cross every damn T. But growing up I was

almost everyway normal, but that my mother was an alkie who named me Madame Althea during a tipsy mirage greeting my first cry, and that somewhere inside me is a half eye expanding the regular two.

It's a half eye, that's all. Not the normal third I read about in a book by a Doctor, man of the occult, named Nemiah. I wondered what he would say about my self-theory. Whether this claimer of a three A. M. world would call me a liar and a fool. It's a coinikydink I guess that my slurred mother named me what she did. For surely I at least move partially in the merging plane, and gave many years of my life to a man who told me I was heaven as he slowly pushed my head downward.

Edward and I fell together in a courthouse elevator during a severe storm. I was slapping my hands against the walls hiding in the darkness, groping for the emergency button, and accidentally clocked him on the cheek. He said "Hey!", and I apologized and explained that I was looking for the emergency button. He asked if I liked pushing buttons as he took hold of my frozen in the moment hands. I laughed, forgetting my brief, unconscious reading of his face as we boarded the elevator, but immediately feeling my insides stroll towards the poise of his voice in the thick neck of the dark.

I had been summoned to the courthouse that morning on a fraud charge instigated by a disgruntled neighbor. I was to answer for proclaiming myself psychic, told backwash, nothing nobody didn't already know. I had told her before I had taken payment of a T-bone steak from her grip and placed on the table in front of me, in front of her, between us, that Madame Althea tell no story, tell only what she can know. I took tokens, not money for payment. The woman nodded, reached into a sweater pocket for a crumpled

letter, and put it on top of the frost coating of plastic wrap around the steak. It was a love letter she had written not that long ago, but never sent. I didn't really read it, that would have served no purpose. The breath of the lead on the floral print paper whispered to me that it was a love letter, so I closed my eyes, cupped my hands to receive of its soul, and waited for the adding and subtracting images, voices, places, understandings that spread on the screen of the shuttered eyelids.

I saw her writing the letter, smiling to herself cause she felt silly and uncomfortable writing mush. The man she was writing to wore shiny suits, white patent loafers, a florid repp tie, a big school ring with a red stone. They had met a couple of years before in a hotel lounge hosting a convention of pharmaceutical suppliers. They married. It was the first letter she had written to him, ever, though it wasn't the first time he had been away on a business trip. She wasn't writing because she missed him, but because she felt guilty, obligated, because she had felt alive and rapturous when her friend Martha had suddenly pressed her lips against hers, twined their tongues together, in the kitchen hot with August, hot with the steam rising from pots assaulting the meat of fruits in preparation to be canned. Then I feel fingers covering my closed eyes, hear the voices say no more, and ebb away from me. I open my eyes to a woman so mad a thin trickle of pinkish saliva cracks the corner of her mouth.

"I tell no stories," I said, "and I tell only what is told to me, what the paper lets me."

"You're full of shit," the woman spits. "How did you find out? Who told you? It's not in that letter. Who told you?"

"Well you didn't, your girlfriend didn't spill the beans, no breathing person spilled them. I explained to you that it ain't the way you might expect. Despite whatever you came to me for, I gave all I could from the paper marked by your hand. I told you it ain't, won't be, what you're wanting. You insisted. I tell no story about you or

anyone else. I felt your writing, the paper spoke to me, you heard what I saw. Don't you go complain. The only stories Madame Althea Honor tell are those whose by authors printed on covers, and then to children held in their mamas' laps at the library. No lie."

"I don't give a damn what you say. You're a liar, a conniving bitch, a fraud, an evil, an evil.. . Oh! You may not have said in bold words, plain English that you would be able to tell me if Dom's going to get the promotion or not. I need to know, so I can figure out how we're going to pay off the charges. I don't know how you found out what you did or what you are, but if I ever get wind that you spread that ..that...that you say anything to anyone I'm going to get my hairdresser to put the curse on you, she's Italian, and they have a special evil eye they can put on people. You wouldn't know that because you're an ignorant, money grubbing fraud. I'm taking my steak thank you."

"Don't worry. I won't tell nobody you're a Les-bi-an," I yelled after her as she was too steeped in her own angry thoughts to hear me, but apparently not, because she tried to have me charged with fraud and libel. Then, maybe she realized she couldn't skewer me without having certain parts of her past voiced to strangers whether or not it was believable coming from me. So, she stopped running from me, and ran on from herself.

I met Edward in the pitch of the elevator; we celebrated my victory in a hooded hour stuck between floors; we fell in love easily because we didn't know each other from Adam. I could mix up the chemistry he was missing; Edward built a life that housed all I could have wished someone to be. He was busy constructing for fourteen years, and I don't think he was finished fully when the foundation sunk. He had this offshooting relationship with me for all the right reasons that aren't ever right. I'm not sure he made himself out of love or out of boredom.

I never tried to get Edward to believe in

the workings of my half eye. How do you convincingly explain to someone that you read the mottled pasts of people by touching their handwriting? I didn't know, decided not to worry about it, and strangely enough I didn't encounter his handwriting and therefore his past for many years. Maybe he didn't believe me really, but didn't want to stretch that belief, and kept his pennings out of my sight. I didn't even see a business card, and the only affection cards I got were love messages he had telephoned to florists. I found out he wasn't a traveling auto parts salesman, but the owner of two auto parts stores; found out that he had a wife after she found out about me; he had once killed somebody's dog in front of their house, didn't tell them, didn't see if it was still alive, just continued on a hellbent drive through morning; learned all this from a grocery list that had fallen from his pants pocket. Times like that it didn't feel so good to not have a precious, completing finish to the half eye stunted by a drunken mother. Of course, in circumstances like this, I know nothing of what I was supposed to have, could have had, or what it would have brought. I feel like I know none whatsoever, except what it's like to have a hollowing somewhere inside, spend a lifetime trying to fill in what's missing and never discover why — drunken birth not enough.

My father died in Nam. His number hadn't come up in the draft, but he found my mother with one of his buddies, and they had a big ass fight; he volunteered, didn't even nod good-bye. Mother was already pregnant with me, but she didn't tell Connor, my father. But, with my mother's ways I'm anybody's guessed up child, anybody's my father. I like Connor's name, and that he stood up to her, not saying see ya, that he died in the jungle, not having to come back with a back breaking jungle bundle of sorrows. I chose him to be daddy.

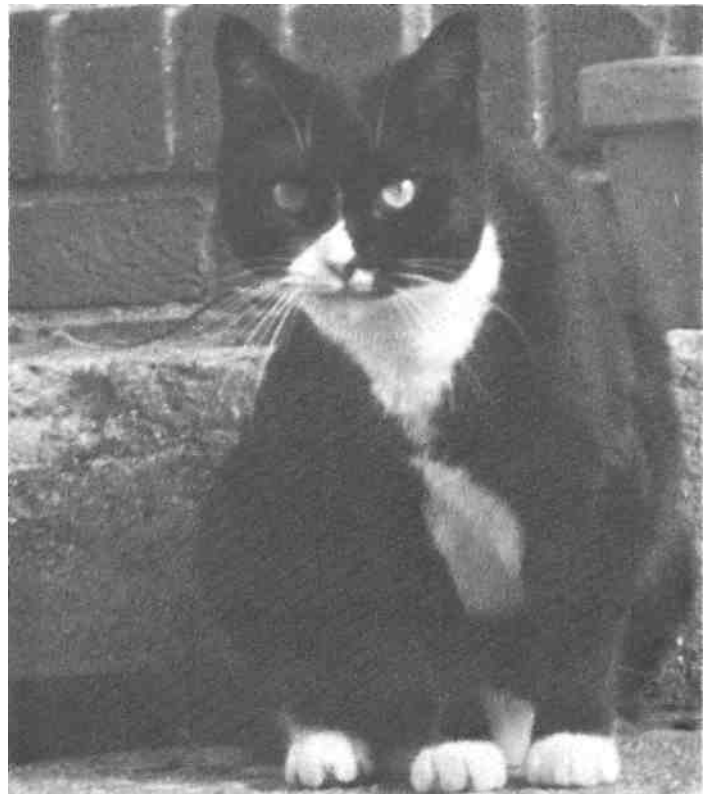
The second husband, the Quaker man who adopted me was soft and bitter like a peach stone. My ma'am lady caught him shortly after

having me when she was still chubby and a bit splotchy which humbled her cocksure vanity some. She kept her legs sinfully smooth, but wore sweet chemise dresses of pink, white cardigans and matching headbands, and moved away from the birthing room to a village that wasn't even flyshit on a map. Ludwig's Corners was nothing but horse farms and a hardware/feed store at the crossroads of Rt 401 and Rt 100 up the road from Eagle. There were a couple of farmer's watering holes, and the Black Angus — a warmly lit trough for the horsey people. The Quaker man was of one of the area's oldest families, the Honors; he made the mistake of thinking his old money and sobriety would steal the wildness in her system except for the times when he wanted to call on it. He began the ma'am lady business because some of her eye conjurings effected shyness in him so that he couldn't look at her sitting or standing; once they married she had some money and could buy piles of historical romances on Elizabeth, Anne Boleyn, Elinor, Guenivere, and so on. These affected her, so he teased with the lady part hitched behind the Ma'am she was courted with. I wished I was able to love her much like the Quaker man, Abel. But, it wasn't just a sense that told me her ways to me weren't real, that she was unreal. Once I learned to read I could put to use those cloth-bound diaries I had found when I was much younger. I wasn't much more than a baby when I rifled my juice sticky fingers through the clothes, charmeuse night dresses, vines of silk stockings, to the shoe boxes way in the back. Only one of them didn't have shoes in it, and gilded paper edges and peach taffeta cover were treasures to baby spirits. Ma'am lady heard from downstairs my burblings and coos, muffled her usually strongly present steps to a stealth, I was so stuffed with the flash of the gold I was starved of awareness of the drift of perfume closing in on me. She grabbed my baby wrist, squeezed the floury, doughy flesh, till I squealed the death call it a rabbit, and the pretty book I couldn't decipher dropped from my hands. I

whimpered, ma'am lady squeezed, smiled, advised me to stay out of her closet. Of course some time when I was older, I found where she had rehid the pretty book grown to books, remembered the vise of her hands and lips, and devoured them. It took many a reading to chew and swallow all my brain ate from her. Nothing in those books said she hated me, regretted me, wished me gone. Among the pages space was allowed to say that I had been born, albeit in a strange liquid ceremony, that the same ceremony was probably the cause of my appearance, and that I had a choice of parentage. Our bodies had once been connected, but I had shell, not the round mother. There wasn't any more guessing for me as to where I stood with her. I wasn't on the gold pages much at all. My babyhood had helped her get a man's name on a credit card in her wallet. The Quaker man had been moved by a young widow with a cute rosy bundle in a playpen in the kitchen of the Black Angus where she hostessed and dried water goblets. Not much, if anything.

She wasn't a good writer, no feeling, no spelling, no feeling. It didn't dawn on me at first that I heard and saw what was missing. That I saw the pink dresses stained because she wasn't nursing, the calculated humility straightened for the eyes of the Quaker man; the smile as she accepted his gift of a begonia plant and a 1 carat engagement ring; how she saw how he liked the look of me looking to her in hunger cradled stiffly. That I was half full of spirit-though fully aware of Ma'am Lady's past, came as an overwhelming shock, like realizing that the hand touched is ice cold, heavy with cold muscles, blood, bone, and spiritlessness. I was smelling the labor, me, the Mad Dog pinched sweat, the dust on the headboard, the blood sticky sheets. I was hearing the woman think spiteful bitch ... jagged rocks. . .ragged edge. . .sharp rocks...crazy...my God the pain...damp rocks ...Albert...more Mad Dog...rocks...nails.. .men....never again...pig shit...remember the keys...remember the azure water...the limey

sand settled on thighs like chalk...the spoon bills ...the water...never speak to him again...never think on him again...the hardest thing ever... burns like peroxide...when it's over...what to do...feeling so hard...cotton balls; she thought all this while she roared nothing like it? I gave the pain, popped out, took the pain. My abdomen was gritted so tight it screamed like wind breaking through loose panes, eyes gritted till they spilled, head so crammed it pushed against my brow. Since then many a person's past has pinned my sight, my ears, and my nose to its billboard, but none have reached me with its touch like Ma'am Lady's. I gave her pain, popped out, took her pain. Nothing much. She's in a home now, blank with Alzheimer's — don't know none about me now either. The Quaker man's long gone too — bad cooking and big bills broke the heart of a kind heritage and the back of old money. She's given more pain than she cursed off when I tore out her body.



Melissa Grossman

II

Purity Tempest Takes Root

I'm a cottony wisp of dandelion dipping through gold tassled fields whose thistles rub whiskers against gritty cheeks of my spring house. Like the whiskers of the farmers, the farm hands, who scratched the peach fuzz off my cheeks when we fell against mossy stones and ferns cushioning the damp, spongy earth sloping up the stream bank. They cooled my spring house which cooled me, and the one who husked my name from the ears of his lips, called me sweet. Sun dew collects colors in the scoop of my eyelashes. My spring house was in the village's unclaimed field. No one owned its title. That's where I caught the Font farmers, farm hands. I asked them, most, if they loved me. I couldn't help it. Answers came clear enough, clearer than the trickle that winds down from the village to my spring house, that washed the hands of the farmers' wives, the farm girls. Though not all maidens themselves, it was their hands that threw mossy stones, aimed thoroughly at my head. Their stones had marked my blackberry lined path. The Font women used my blackberry branches to scrape my face, cawing me a witch, beating me for witchery, staining my skin that's soft unlike theirs, cause they said I conjured at their men, that I conjured carnal sins for the sake of sin. They stole mossy stones from my spring house to break my different skin. I bruised the way they wanted, though it was the same as before, when the farmers and the farm hands spoke of love and Purity Tempest in the same breath, believing that I believed them. Though they thought I was dipping from one to another because I was hungry, and I was. With each new landing I hoped it would kill the dwelling on the last one. The moss on the breaking stones stolen from my spring house felt like a kiss if lavender water compared to the toothy rockpile growing heavier inside me.

III

Ruben

I'm sitting out back of my Uncle Oscar's restaurant, Puerto Sagua, right. Luis, his old rooster is pecking at my Sperry's, and Luis' bitches, Carmella, Carmenita, and Camilla are flapping around the seed-littered, weed-tufted, sand-scratched yard. His restaurant is near Southernmost Point in Old Key West. The carnival shaking the wooden wall of Duval street drifts lazily towards Uncle's and out to the teal green water lapping a blue glazed, gold-flecked night. The tail end of fried pork gets tangled with the bouganvillea and jasmine vines trailing up the porch leading to the kitchen; the black bean soup and conch fritters I'd scarfed earlier begins to pitch a tent against my lower abdomen. Uncle had invited me for spring break. He said I needed to shed the shaggy coat I grow at the American school in Pennsylvania, and be a Cuban.

Well, like I said, I'm out back soaking up the gooey limpid air Uncle calls a kiss from Cuba, the perfume of red bell flowers, orange saucer

flowers, purple star flowers, cobalt whisp flowers, dying algae, the salt water, the stars, the chicken shit, the pork grease, the happy puke of a drunk staggering from the party on Duval to the adjoining alley, a pile of dead mice the six-toed cats layer by the chicken coop, Cuba's wet kiss. Then I see her. It's a woman, an indigo ink spot against the lighter, glittery sky, and the way she's positioned I can't tell if she's just been spat out of the water, or jumped off the moon. She's either sitting or standing, and even my eyes blinking twenty thousand times a minute can't figure whether I'm seeing a dimensional person or a flat hologram hovering about twenty-five feet above me. Both arms are bent behind bracing her back that looks uncomfortably hollowed by a swollen stomach. Whap! Whap! I give both my cheeks a sound smack. She's still up there, and then I hear her begin this liquid moan, plaintive, that flows down towards me hot like lava.

"Excuse me. Uh, excuse me ma'am?," I say feeling weak.

From her direction I hear, "Oh my God

lord no wonder she got drunk, no wonder she couldn't think of me afterwards. I didn't know what having me put her through. No wonder she went half crazy. Lucky bitch got plastered. No time for this. Don't got no time for this sort of agony. God just yank the puppy and get it over with."

"Ma'am are you okay?"

"For Christ's sake mister this ain't no time for crossing up visioning. Not equipped for this, and you got to deliver my baby now."

"Uncle!"

"Alright asshole. You win. I call uncle. I scream uncle. Stop playing games, get your butt up in the air, get back to the present, and DELIVER MY BABY. I didn't go to my Lamaze classes, and I got to have some feelgoods. I'll chew, I'll swallow, I'll soak it through my eyeballs if I have to."

"Lady I don't know who you are, let alone what I'm seeing. I'll call an ambulance if you want. Can't do anything else, not a doctor. Go fly to someone else's yard if you don't like my offer. I'm sorry. What else can I do? I'm a boxer majoring in Chemistry, not a doctor. Uh, is that okay?"

"You were a doctor a week ago when I had my last visit, and there ain't any boxing anywhere but in my belly at this blessed moment. Something's gone crazy. Ruben Montoya you're my OB/GYN, get out of the vision." Against my wrists I'm reminded of the snap of some stretchy wrapping that rounds out to the fingertips, and I smelled sterilized rubber.

"You're crazy lady. If there's any vision it's the one you're bugging me with now. Might have been bad conch flesh. Bad beans. Bad something. Beat it or I'll swat you like a fly." Psheeeooo, went the wind, and my hair flattened across my brow and against my neck as if I were wearing a hat.

"You bastard, killing pregnant women is a serious offense against the Hippocratic Oath."

"Lady, your brain's lying to you. You probably aren't even pregnant. Say to yourself, I

love myself. I'm not pregnant. I love myself. I'll leave Ruben alone. I love myself. I'm going. I love myself.' Free therapy." My face felt suddenly cooled, as if rain was sprinkling it with water. Hey.

"That's spit, asshole, not rain. I'm not telling any story here. Say it. Take back your words."

Psheeeooo, again the breeze whistled, and this time my body was suddenly cool, as if my clothes were stripped. But then I was warmed again by an arm of the breeze extending from another direction, redressing me, but with looser and coarser garments. "What words? What do you want me to say?"

Her breathing was short and raspy, the moaning sharper than the rank of the puke drying its fumes in the alley. "Say oh say ... My name is Madame Althea. I have two and a half eyes. I tell no stories."

"Holy shit. Madame Althea tells no stories. There. How's that? That good enough for you?"

"Boy! What drugs are you gulping up at that American school?" Uncle Oscar howled with a torrent of curses and prayers, a seemingly formless voice from nowhere, but really from the poised yellow blade slicing a wedge of pie from the dark yard behind me.

"Uncle Oscar, dude, there was this pregnant lady in the sky right here, hovering above the chicken coop, talking all this gibberish —"

"I am not a dude. Boy. You're so high you've lost your mind and now you tell me spirits float above my chicken coop? Mother Mary have mercy, there never been any spirits floating beyond the kitchen of Oscar Montoya. This place was blessed with Holy Water before I opened it. Do you think me a fool?"

"Uncle Oscar —"

"Silence. Don't hurt my ears, my heart with one more of your doped up words. Get from my sight!" Blam! The kitchen door sucked up it's

spill of bright juice, and the yard was dark once again but for the dulcet night sky of twinkling confetti. All the sounds were frozen, frightened off by my uncle's fury. I'm alone. The woman in the sky? I'm completely alone and confused. My hands are sticky. Something warm and smoothly sticky clings to them for the rest of the night. Over and over I wash my hands, but the coating remains. Then in bed that night I can't sleep for thinking, "I, Ruben Montoya, a doctor?"

When I do fall asleep I dream heavily of women: a young pretty girl in a white dress whose skirt covered legs part ferns concealed in a field of dried corn stalks to meet a lover, a drunk woman in a pink dress who writes in a book — pen in one hand and shot glass in the other, and of the faceless voice of another who digs her eyes into a grocery list on her lap, smoke drifts up from the edges and blacken the walls. Her voices laps up against those walls, "spirits lodge in places where the visions rain freely. They lay at my feet, till I gather them into my arms where they can huddle. The spirits form themselves where they can coagulate beyond touch. **Anima.** Soul...breath...restores life. Newborns are lifeless till they take their first breath, their cry is for life. **Anima.** No breath...death . .. life is gone. Baby breathes in its own soul to be born. Spirits breathe their last breath, then breathe again their first one, born again on the other side. Madame Althea Honor, sometimes you breathe in too much. Ruben, your lungs haven't opened."

IV

Madeline's World Where

The Snow Buntings Laugh Like Children

I received her letter, but did not open it for sometime. I was always cautious with personal mail though, not greedy for its contents. My father's first and only letter collected dust in my grandparent's bird book for twelve months before I opened it. I could do that. It didn't matter for he had been dead to me since our falling out over my

marriage. A reconciliation between us wouldn't have cured the anurism that killed him. At least, I don't think so. In my heart he had been long dead and forgiven, and I didn't want anything to happen that would change that. So when Edward's mistress had the nerve to stink up my mailbox with an invitation, I was in no hurry to slit her free. And when I finally did it was worse than I imagined. I had to stuff it in the pocket of an old overcoat, praying the letter wouldn't fly out and follow me.

"Dear Madeleine," she wrote, "You've known about me longer than I've known about you, if you can swallow that. You likely think the worst you can about me. That's expected. I deeply regret the hurt my relationship with Edward has done to you, although to be true, him all-in-all I don't blush at an iota. As for an explanation on his part, that is relics you should dust off yourself."

"I've come to know you quite well in the past months, but in a way that's not easy for me to offer you an insight on the why's, how's, etc. Take it as best you can that ironically I feel close to you. Did you know that every day I poke my nose among the African Violets crowding my window sill, expecting a scent to greet me, of course finding only a bland, faint, uninteresting one, just as you do, every day."

That was all I could take. Who the hell did this woman think she was? The more I read, the deeper I felt myself submerged, so into the coat pocket it went for another few months.

The second attempt ended also disturbingly. "I saw you on the train soon after your life soaked me to the skin. A girl with a crew cut, black turtleneck, gray eyes lined with black, slashed Levi's, and a tape player balanced on the left shoulder, boarded and sat behind you. You watched her approach. Worry pinched your face. Once the train rocked to a start, you peeked over your shoulder, swiping at your coat, as if the lint brushed away was burning a hole through the cloth. But quickly, you took all of her in: white-blond hair, pewter eyes, one knee supporting her

chin, the other foot pressing against the back of the seat that supported yours, slightly rocking back and forth, focused on the gum and cigarette butts ground onto the train's floor. "Shit," the girl mumbled. You resumed your own business and thought about how you yourself never swore till your sons taught you phrases they'd picked up at Scout meetings, and then you just thought the words, not say them," or at least hardly ever, I finished for her. I was numbed. How did she know these things, how much? God, if Edward was responsible, I wasn't sure if I could make him pay dearly enough. If this woman knew a little, she knew as much as all. Or did she?

How could she not have found out that Edward was married to me, to me, had two boys by me, owned two stores, financed partially by my inheritance. All those years that I was nonexistent for them both. It didn't sound possible. But the details? These odd fragments she had uncovered and made into a whole being—no, not quite a whole being yet. At first it seemed to be, but a reglued porcelain plate retains goo lines between the pieces.

But I read on. She unrolled my life like it was a carpet she now possessed, shook it in the wind, and all the contents floated back my way.

It hadn't been easy for us in the early years of Edward's venture. He was stubborn and independent; hated taking a woman's money, he had to provide for his family with his own hands, his own business. I wondered if he had been prodded out of sleep that morning by the snow buntings whose migration had been duped by the perverse weather. Their childlike voices had found her early that day. (Did you hear them too, Madame Althea Honor?) The buntings had flocked together like shore birds on the eaves and pushed their high, tinkling, sweet natured, jaunty whistles through the Crayola night of melted cornflower, cool and languid, responsive to the curious burbling explorations spilling from the birds' throats, The red numbers of the digital clock pregulating a

statuette of the Virgin, gored 3:36 A.M. onto my eyelids until I acknowledged them.

That night, as on each night after I recite my prayers, I tied the rosary beads around Mary's waist, arranging the knot above the P.M. dot so the beads could be draped across the hollow, outstretched, porcelain palm. Then, I clicked off the lamp, roughed the pillows, pulled the sheets to my neck, curled my knees chin high, hugging them, and my thoughts ebbed, dimmed gradually. I imagined I'm floating in a speckled mug of warm, sweetened milk. (Are you floating with me Althea?)

As the birds continued to color the descent into morning, Edward kicked at the nest of sheets at the end of the bed, air whistling through the hair waving like sea grasses at the nostril edges. He used to ask me to trim them even. If he coughed, I would pull the sheets tighter on my side till secure that no limbs, or muscles, or expanses of backs would touch between us. We had had an argument, and hadn't been speaking to each other for weeks. If something had to be said, a note was posted on the refrigerator door. Not a "Dear Maddy" or a "Dear Edward," but a "—pick up some decaf and my prescription," "—the Chevy's leaking oil," or "—the vegetable bed needs to be turned over and mulched." (The grocery list you claim to be the way I materialized, the one with the heart drawn at the end, below McCormick brown gravy mix, it was my weak attempt at softening the hard feelings. I still don't understand how you learned so much from a few ordinary words.)

Lying there with the anger pushing us closer to the opposite walls, I focused on the repetitions of the calls reminiscent of laughter, found the patterns, the responses, waited for the twist or upheaval that would undermine the calm study. Breathing to relax, I followed the rest of the night's overblown sounds of pipes, foundation settlings, gnawing mice, blurred mumblings tumbling out of R.E.M., wind sobbing through the window frames, branches scratching the siding, suffocat-

Melissa Grossman

ing flies, trucks shifting gears on the turnpike. Reality swarmed around the breaking light struggling to conquer the drawn shades.

(Are you privy to the dream that prepared me for another morning without a wake-up by a goodbye kiss, Althea Honor. Has anyone just called you Althea? Answers don't come to me like they do to you. It was a kind of dream, wasn't it?) My grandparents' attic in Ohio, ten year old me flipping through an oversized book on North American birds; delighted by the bright colored plates, skimming the pages of birds with intriguing names. I adjust the book to rest more comfortably on my lap. A few pieces of yellowed paper and a square of wax paper fall to the floor. The papers were odd pages of a calendar my grandmother used to keep track of grandfather's hours at the

GM plant. December 1946, picture of a cardinal, the 21st and the 30th circled in red marker, no other notation. March 1947, shouldered by a blurb about robins: Wed., the 2nd, "NIGHTLIGHT IN KITCHEN," Fri., the 11th, "John worked two hours overtime," the same on the 14th, the 15th, the 24th, and the 26th; "Papa up today" on the 13th. June 1947, celebrated by flamingos: "John worked ten hours today," "eleven hours John worked today," "ten hours worked John," and so for all but five days out of that month.

September of that year was exhausting the same, but a Scarlet Tanager graced the flip side, and grandmother went to the hairdressers once a week. The front cover of a Christmas card had also been hidden between pages. Two cardinals, a brilliantly marked male, and his more demurely



colored mate perched on holly branches heavy with berries. Even among the mists of my doze I harvested more than berries from those branches. The male bird was drawn on the top perch with a solemn, lordly confidence, above the female who huddled into the leaves.

This dream remembered for me as well, before consciousness seized my nerves, that I had unfolded the sloppy square of wax paper. It was a decayed flower, pressed to be dried and preserved; it hadn't done so, but instead rotted among the damp smelling leaves of the book; it had crumbled beneath my tentative fingers though handled with delicacy. I felt sick, someone's history had been pillaged and violated. Someone had put that pressed full-blown blossom in the book for safe-keeping, as a treasure, a naive posterity, and I had destroyed it between breaths.

You wrote, "Mrs. Hoffman, you've asked yourself an astoundingly few number of times what made you decide to begin trashpicking for recyclables that day. I wish I could tell you why, that there was a new spell to make it plain. But my ways ain't what's expected. Nothing's plain, like nothing's just gray neither. Cause as far as I'm concerned, blue and red had to be mixed in an ornery way to reach the middling."

I might never have found the red nylon lace garters among the crushed beer cans, snotty tissues, coffee grinds, gooey cotton swabs, milk jugs, the sooty dust from Edward's electric razor, the sports sections of the *Pottstown Mercury*. In the garage, on my knees, gripping them, struggling to keep my grip, palms collecting sweat, fingertips sliding and groping; heart sliding up in my throat, lodging, absorbing all the moisture, drying my mouth as if I were chewing the garters to shreds. With a pair of tweezers, the garters were extracted from the leftovers, tossed onto Edward's pillow, and requested that the smell and residue of sex permeating them would burn a hole through the pillow to hell. Sitting in his recliner, waiting for him to come home, I thought about this man who

wasn't wholly mine, who liked the way dew-soaked mornings poke the odor of dung-enriched fields through to the back of his nose with a sharp, eye-moistening pang. Rounding the crest of a blind hill, recklessly airborne, for the thrill of charging at steaming valleys, chasing the confident early sun wading through the mist as if reaching through suds dishwater for a china bowl. He believed in eight hours of rest six days a week, the Republican party, Andrew Wyeth, instant coffee during Monday Night Football, Nathaniel Hawthorne was beloved, Walt Whitman was banned from the house. The waiting was more unbearable than childbirth.

"How about a smooch and some dinner," he asked as he always had at 5:46 P.M. Monday through Friday.

"There's a surprise for you upstairs. On our bed. I want you to have it now."

A sly half smile, eyes kindled with mischief and anticipation, I heard him unhook his suspenders and rip off his tie, jumping the stairs two at a time. He was whistling "Moonlight Bay" and the sunset was basting the sky the brazen aqua of dashboard madonnas, and burning the clouds to a chemical russet above the tree line. The neighbor kids were playing kick the can in the adjoining cul de sac. A game from my own childhood. Their laughter was surprisingly sweet, the tinny scrap of an aluminum can skidding across the asphalt was surprisingly distracting—birds of a different feather filling the same void. The commuter traffic on the turnpike had cooled as the sun fanned itself through the cruising clouds, deeper and deeper into the ground. The whistling of "Moonlight Bay," then silence, and I supposed the trusty ship had bellied up and sunk.

"What do you want me to say? I'm being honest when I tell you that this woman is the first, the only, but she's been there for me for some time." Suddenly he was standing in front of the toothy bottle blonde news anchor, facing his wife of thirty years, in perhaps the first honest conver-

sation we had had.

"How long?"

"Do you really want to torment yourself with my dirt? I think we need to skip over the details and discuss the consequences. I've been a bad boy, and I feel just terrible. You know, I'm apologizing to you, by being honest, that is. I mean I could have denied the whole affair and made up some story. But, you're my wife and you deserve better than to be lied to. Say something, Maddy, or at least look at me." His hands rubbed and groped the gruff of a five o'clock shadow.

"I deserved your fidelity. You've been lying to me for God knows how long, but the details might be too horrific. I devote thirty years to you, only you, I find out what an asshole you are, and you come to the conclusion that I deserve better. Get on the clue bus, Edward. Your apologies, your negotiating, mean shit to me compared to the pleasure I'd get hanging you by your testicles from the basement ceiling with that whore's slut gear stuffed up your nose. Has it slipped to the boys?"

"I might think they do. I might think they have every right to be in on their father's long time secret. Maybe I want to tell everybody I come across. You seem to be handling this with a disgusting amount of dignity. Throw up a lung and die, Edward. Crawl under a rock and die, Edward. I'm ashamed I married you, that we had children together, that I was so naive. You'll never understand."

I had broke down with the shakes, barely able to mouth the words for anguish was beginning to swallow my bottom lip down into its sobs. My mind was so full it was blank but for an image of a swirling technicolor pus of pink, red, yellow, and green I once had to swab out of my son Paul's infected knee. It was frightening to be a relic, surviving because something out of the torrent was pulling and grabbing, forcing me to buoyancy, to float, the dryness vivid in all directions. I was going to have to live with his betrayal im-

pacted in my thoughts like a piece of food caught between molars. (Tell me it wasn't you, Madame Althea.)

"Are you going to get out of that house?" Emma, a friend, asked amid the cackle of the outdated Eagle extension. I prayed no one was getting the benefit of a party line.

"Where am I going to go? The only job I've ever had was in Simpson's hardware in high-school. I've devoted my life to running the house. I'm not sure, but I think I'm going to go on here."

"You're kidding me. Seriously Maddy. Get on the clue bus. You're acting like a nobody, a housewife helpless without the security of an Electrolux and a Singer Sewing Machine. He's been with that tramp for twelve years, living like he was more married to her than to you. Get out there and strangle the tramp, strangle him. It pisses me off when you sell yourself short. Where's your self-respect? Do you know where she lives, what she looks like?"

Emma liked snooping the party line and had finagled some of the dirt Edward had refused to reveal.

"No. Don't want to know. Wouldn't know how to begin supporting myself, even enough to take care of the bills. The mortgage is almost paid off, but the property taxes..and we put in all new windows last spring. Those aren't paid off. I can't earn enough to support myself. I think it would be easier to go out to the lake, field stones in my pocket and sink myself. An open casket funeral please, Emma. Closed casket ones are too morbid. Oyster velvet lining, not too much make-up and nothing too fancy. My mother's ruby ring is yours."

"Oh for God's sake, you're giving up? You're gonna give up on a bum. Come live with me. Someone's got to protect you from yourself, or you'll be riddled with ulcers. Let's set fire to all Ed's underwear and pants. How about it?"

"I don't have an ulcer. You have an ulcer fetish."

Melissa Grossman

"Not yet."

"You'll give me one talking this way."

"I don't know what to say. Tell me how to help you."

"I understand, there is none."

"I'm thinking about replacing the kitchen furniture."

"Well, it would be on schedule. You change it every time one of your friends has a tragedy: Martha's daughter ran off with the convict from New Jersey, Imogene's son failed rehab twice, Olivia's son developed an attitude, was that what happened to him?"

"It was the nature of the attitude that had her distraught, but I can't recall the particulars. But as for my furniture, I keep getting duped by young men with long hair behind their ears. Either that or I'm just hard on furniture. It falls apart. I swear."

"I think that you have a well-adjusted, even-tempered life, and feel obligated to invent a problem."

"My friend's problems are my problems."

"They can't be, now somehow, not at all. Maybe I could come over and cry in your lap."

Later that day it was as if I had taken a shower in indifference, and had dried away the fullness that ennobled caring. Rights and wrongs and doubts about both had been captured by the water droplets on the way to their demise down the drain. People could say what they wanted, but I would stay in the house. And Edward would continue to pay the bills, holidays would be tackled as they came.

Listen to me, you, I'm fighting your draw all the way. There's no truth in your words though, that your survival is perhaps mine. You let him go completely, let go of the need, found other needs, erased him as the father of your girl, reached out to the enemy, offered your hand. You are perhaps the hardest to resist. What I had with Edward, what drew me to him, what we lacked, the uses of these questions belong with the dead water droplets.

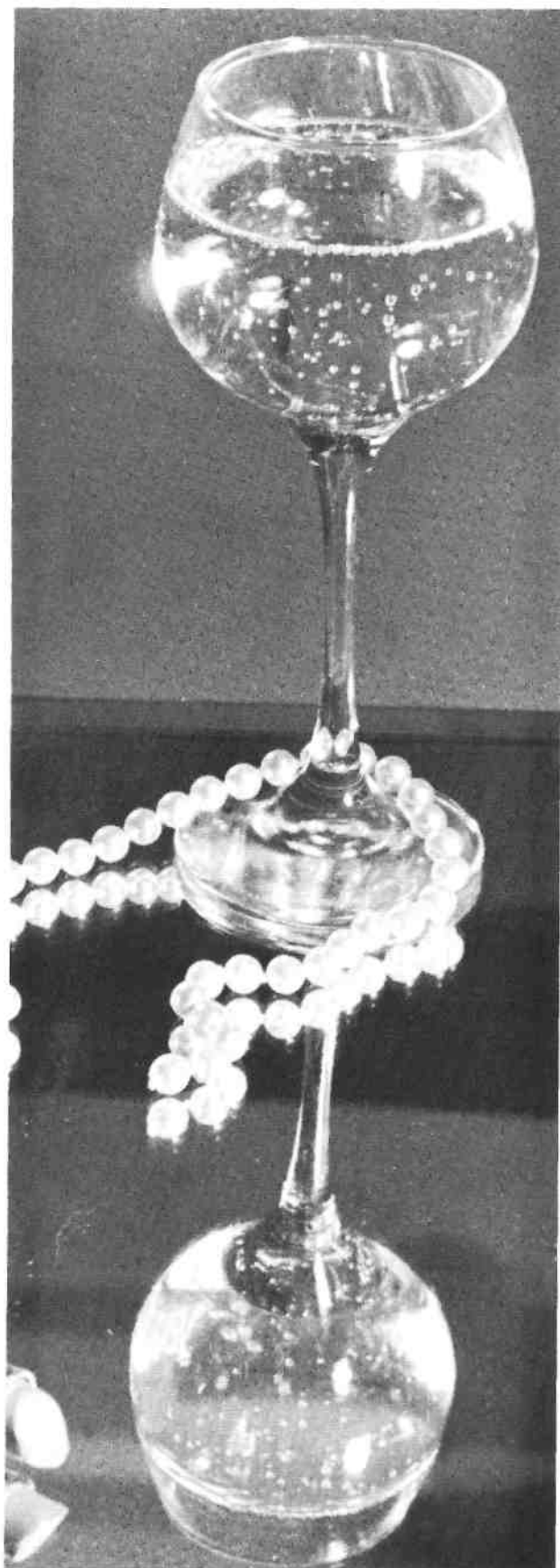
(The childhood taunts on your name—who didn't experience that or something like that, but I suppose everyone bleeds differently.

"Madams are people who don't wear underwear," "They drink champagne which makes them dance and pull down their pants. Black lace pants," yell the blood thirsty ones.

"Madams are dignified, real ladies. You said they don't wear underwear. Make up your stupid minds," cries the blood soaked one.

"Madame Althea Honor dances without underpants," the blood bathed ones scream across an echo strong playground.)

"I have a sense about you, Madeleine Hoffman," you wrote to me who wasn't far removed from the desire to drain every ounce of blood from your body, "that you wouldn't have said such things. You would have saved me, like a mother, unlike my own who wouldn't have thought about it." Your reach is strong and wide. I might accept your invitation, to come by the library some Wednesday, and hear you read to children.



Window of Power

by Jennifer Eibner

Somewhere, there is a room made of glass.

And in the room, a chair

On which I sit before

The omnipotent window.

And I watch.

And I control.

With my magic cleansing cloth,

I have the power,

And I laugh to watch those outside
scurry

When my spray bottle comes along.

But there are times when I stop,

My hand shaking so I can hardly pull the trigger.

And before me I cannot tell

Whether it is the world outside

I am trying to wash away

or the inside I am trying

to purify.

My fear is not of stones,

For the room is unbreakable,

Nor do I cringe from those outside

Looking in.

But I know that a day will come

When I take up my cloth to clean—

And when the tears have been

Wiped away, and with them,

The joy—

And when the glass is cleansed and

Waiting for my command—

And the people on the outside

Are prostrate before me—

When I smile in victory

To see them fallen,

I will take away the fabric

And find only a mirror.

Dancing

by Trish Robertson

And I can still see it—
The time you danced in your army boots
next to your workbench in the basement.
Sawdust made a halo around your body
as if you were an angel, the dead returned
with a message for the living.

Like this—
Your steps formulated, practiced, precise
in the uneven soles of your boots.

Like this—
And you tapped out the shuffle-hop-step
of your dance lessons years ago,
stirring the sawdust, the air.

This is one thing you truly gave me,
those minutes, the blankness in your eyes
as you danced,
the light of a single bulb hanging above the "basement disarray."

This is the one thing you gave me—
the blankness of one who has learned day after day
a thing he hates: the endless drilling,
This foot, that foot.



L' Epine
by Steven A. Everard

Blood
never runs
as cold
as that
stolen from
the thorn of
a single
rose.

**The "Original" Albrecht's Pharmacy
1943**

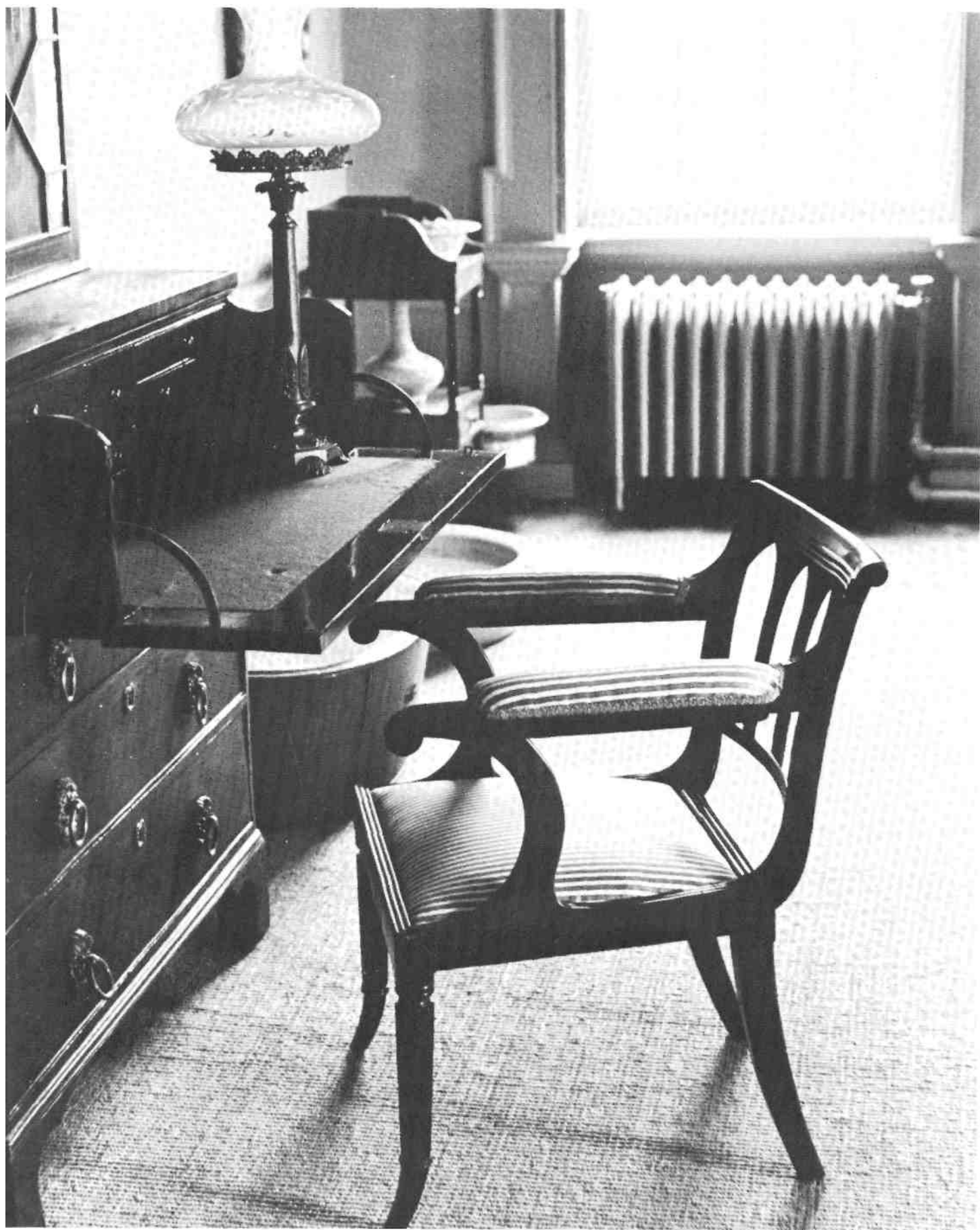
by Stephen Lathroum

I would not have recognized him
in that black and white world,
with his glistening soda-fountain counter
and his shining leather seats,
his rows of cheap, plastic sunglasses,
and his 10-cent copies of CLICK magazine
in metal wire racks;

him, standing on the dull, checkered floor,
so much a piece of furniture in the picture,
with his line-less face and his slick, black hair,
grinning the way I always remember

him, sitting in the new, beige chair — a Christmas gift —
its large, red bow unremoved
beneath him, and me scurrying off to fix
him his bourbon and water, thinking about
how many chairs I have seen collected
in the cool, wood-paneled basement like antique cars,
and how sometimes
I would sit with him in their safety, listening,
pleased, as he told me stories.

And told me stories.



it is so long since my heart has been with yours

*shut by our mingling arms through
a darkness where new tights begin and
increase,*

*since your mind has walked into
my kiss as a stranger
into the streets and colours of a town—*

*that i have perhaps forgotten
how, always (from
these hurrying crudities
of blood and flesh) Love
coins His most gradual gesture,*

and whittles life away to eternity

*—after which our separating selves become museums
filled with skilfully stuffed memories.*

—e.e. cummings

A Most Gradual Gesture

by Stephen Lathroum

When I think of our times together, I remember coming to meet you at the train station and not being able to parallel park the old Camaro—the '68. It was summer then and the black interior smelled of trapped heat and worn leather. Sitting here, in the echoing quiet of the big station, my eyes closed, I can almost smell it; they way I know I can sometimes trace the heavy scent of your skin on the air—perhaps more in the periphery of my mind than my physical senses (but real!)—passing away even as I detect its faintness, before I can take any hold.

Your train was due in at 5:05 and as I came over the crest of the bridge on Monument Street, the high, round clock on the front face of the station read 4:47. Pennsylvania Station, Baltimore, was a three-tiered building with elaborate stone-carving rimming the rows of tall, opaque windows on all sides. At the joint of each tier, green metal overhangings sloped out, supported by several wrought-iron, ornate arches underneath, and ran completely around the station. To the left was an arc of pavement used for taxi service, a covered waiting area in the same green as the overhangings, two glass doors, two benches, and a few old streetlamps made of spired metalwork. Chiseled into the center of its front face was a ten-foot high worn, wooden door with tarnished brass handles and dim windows, beyond which could be made out a small foyer, another set of identical doors, and finally the vast air of the vaulted interior.

Inside, the train station was split into two areas. The front was smaller and separated from the other by the presence of a second level which ran the perimeter of the room about twenty feet above the floor with a thick, columned railing and no visible staircase. To the right was a small flower shop (the kind of unnamed shop found in every

train station in which more than three people cannot fit without growing frighteningly claustrophobic), and further on, in a smaller, obscured alcove, five ticket windows illuminated by a pale-blue fluorescence which did not extend beyond the black velvet line-rope just in front. To the left of the front doors was a newsstand and a tiny food grill around which a thick greasy smell hung on the air. Just along the left wall were a corridor leading to the restrooms and a glass, walk-in money machine.

Beyond the low ceiling of the second floor, the rest of the station opened full into its Gothic vastness, stretching out, a huge corridor of yellowed tile and dirty light. Directly in front of the entrance there was a square information desk over which a large, dark schedule board shifted and clacked its never-ending litany of arrivals, departures, destinations. Along the opposing walls were a series of doors—gates A through F—leading down to the twelve tracks. Facing were two rows of hard, wooden benches which creaked and moaned under the bustle and high wall of the wind rising from the platforms.

I circled the station twice—above the tracks which reached out to the horizon like long, thin fingers—before I spotted a parking space between a Jetta and a Honda Accord.

I had only had the Camaro for a few months—it had been my grandfather's. Having decided he could no longer drive it as a result of both his failing eyesight and his propensity for locking the keys inside, he turned it over to me. I had thought I'd learned the temperament of the old machine. I gave the car a full two minutes sitting there, the veins standing out on my forearms, my knuckles going white, the rear-end (surely beyond my sight) jack-knifed into the space. Slowly,

Stephen Lathroum

as I took my foot off the brake, its aged metal creaked at me. I rested my foot on the accelerator, getting the feel, the knowledge of it through the dark-grey flip-flop I was wearing. It felt as if I were trying to rest my hand on the surface of a lake, conscious of not disturbing the water. Still leaning out the window (its small, rear-view mirror looking lonely and useless in the center of the windshield), I tapped the accelerator as quickly and as sharply as a jeweler, moving my foot back to hover over the brake, waiting. The Camaro lurched backwards, its fist of an engine jerkily unclenching under the faded green hood, defying me. Faint and far way, tinny metal banged on metal.

The fist clenched again and the Camaro pitched forward (with a feeling that was like tumbling), as if I'd drifted into a hole. I slammed on the brake and released my tight grip on the steering wheel, cursed loudly, and looked up to see if anyone nearby had seen what had happened. The only people around were almost fifteen yards away in front of the tall, wooden station doors—a man and a woman, unloading their bags from a taxi and paying no attention to my indiscretion, the bang being lost against the grumbling cadence of the traffic on the street.

Both were young. He was carrying a brown suitcase in one hand, a small envelope with their tickets in the other. The words that passed between them, which I could not hear, were light, open, content. She moved a bit more quickly than he did, getting the door. I sat there in the skewed Camaro staring at the tickets in his hand realizing that their eyes would soon take in the fleeting back-scenes of the landscape and the cities, the subtle changes, the old Chevy pick-up on blocks in the backyard. I thought of our now distant plans to drive to California when we were in college. And then the couple passed beyond the doors of the station and I never thought of them again,

No longer paying attention to the fragile, precious thing under my accelerator, the engine unclenched, the Camaro sped out of the unclaimed

space, and I pulled its expansive body into the lane which the couples' taxi had just left.

Hearing your voice on the phone, disembodied on the line (and from the years since we've talked), these images—the Camaro, the station, the couple—passed across my mind before you'd even finished saying my name.

"Ahh, Tony, I wish you'd seen it, man," Matt was saying. It was the way he would always begin to tell a story, coming in after work on a Monday, his girlfriend, Chris, having been away the weekend before. And so I was not surprised to hear his voice coming from the kitchen, his first words slightly muffled as he talked down into the refrigerator looking for something to drink. I was sitting on the leather sofa in the living room of our Mt. Washington apartment idly thumbing through a magazine. Across from me, the burnt orange light of the October evening fell through the picture window in four bright squares to the wooden floor, lingering in one clean arc along the back of our rattan chair.

"Oh yeah?" I said. Matt came out of the kitchen carrying a couple of bottles of MYSTIC root beer and a large, plastic cup filled with ice. He plopped down in the rattan chair, a momentary shadow against the light. He put down what he was carrying and unthreaded the tie from his collar.

"Oh, you shoulda seen this," he said again, laughing now, though I couldn't see his face.

"Are you gonna tell me or what?" I asked. He poured both root beers into the cup and took a long drink before continuing.

"You know Paul? Short, blond hair Paul? We used to shoot hoops sometimes in school...?" he asked finally.

"Yeah. Tax attorney for Alex Brown. Yeah?" I said and Matt nodded vigorously.

"He gives me a call on Saturday to see what I was doing and if I wanted to go down to the

Stephen Lathroum

Sports Bar to watch the hoops game and have a few beers that night. Duke was playing UNLV. Chris was out in Philly visiting her Mom so I said it sounded awesome to me: a few beers, watch UNLV kick some ass, maybe scam on some women. .. " He gave a shrug with his shoulders which, when accompanied with the sly grin on his long, boyish face made him appear genuinely, yet disturbingly, innocent. It was the look of a mischievous (for that was the truly appropriate word) child and everyone who knew him knew the look as part of his earthy charm.

"I saw the note," I said smiling.

"Yeah. Sorry you couldn't make it." I shook my head as though to say I knew he was and that after his story I would tell him why I didn't show. "Anyway, we go down there and we're talking and watching the game and and drinking and before I knew it I was freakin' hammered. Man, I stood up to go take a leak and I was like 'shit!'" His smile turned to a feigned shocked-look. "Anyway, so I came back from the bathroom and Paul's talking to these two girls. Turns out, he'd asked one of them—Sheila, some girl who works in the restaurant downstairs from his office—to meet us downtown for a drink but he never mentioned this to me because he didn't think she'd show up. Well she not only shows up but she's freaking hot and she brings this friend of hers with her who is also hot." He moved up to the edge of the chair enjoying himself, the memory like a film playing in front of his eyes.

"You're a dog." I laughed and got up to go to the kitchen, turning on the overhead light as I went. The remains of the day were a few red embers behind the buildings across the street. Opening the refrigerator I said, "You want anything?" and as Matt shook his head I grabbed a Coke. "You dog," I said again, shaking my head but smiling.

Matt looked obviously pleased with himself as I returned to the living room. "Wait, just wait. I swear to God I am not lying. Paul's hitting

on this Sheila girl so I start talking with her friend, Colleen, right? So we're talking and Tony, man, I'm layin' on the moves. She's wearing this tight, short skirt—comes up to here—"He indicated a spot well above the knee"—with tight, black leggings on. White turtleneck. She has the best damn body—a great ass, *nice* boobs. Shit!" He slid back into the chair caught between the words and the recent memory. Then just as quickly he leaped up, grabbing his empty cup and moved off to the kitchen to refill his drink.

"I can't believe you," I said laughing thinking of Chris staying over just last Thursday, the noise of their love-making muffled through the wall, keeping me awake until two in the morning. And there was no story last Friday.

"We're talking about jobs— she works at some shop in Owings Mills Mall— just bullshit. I'm laying it on so thick. By this point I'm so rocked and so horny and she's got these great tits. She says she just broke up with her boyfriend because he lied to her—I mean c'mon! So she says 'I hate it when guys cheat on their girlfriends' and I looked at her and said 'Oh God, yeah so do I,'" He started to laugh hysterically. "Before I know it, we're back at her place and I'm doing her all night in every position I can think of. Aww, man!" He went on to describe Colleen's body, the things they did to each other, the mood, the scene, the exhaustion in detail as I half-listened, my mind drifting somehow, his words equally meaningless and exciting. Almost despite myself, I thought of the curve of your back, the taste of the water in the shower—flashing images, unbidden. For the barest instant, we are in that small, New York apartment, twelve floors up, and the air conditioning is stuck in low. Your friend, Christine, with whom were staying, had only left us one blanket, We are huddling beneath it, touching lightly and our gooseflesh does not hide us.

I shook the thoughts away, physically.

"So Paul knows not to give her my home phone number and I told her I can't give it out

Stephen Lathroum

because my roommate is a cop and it's 'crucial' that it's unlisted for his benefit. And she bought it!" He roared again with rich laughter. "I'm telling you, Tony. I played her like a violin and anytime I want to I... "

"How long have you and Chris been dating?" I asked a bit more violently than I really felt. He took the question in stride and was about to answer when I went on. "I'm just playing Devil's Advocate for a second, that's all. I mean, Christ, you hook up behind her back every chance you get. Why even bother going out with her?"

"Hey, I treat her really well. I send her flowers—roses—all the time. For our anniversary—three years last month, you remember—I took her to the Conservatory downtown and then to the Mechanic for "Phantom of the Opera," which I'd gotten excellent seats for months in advance. She knows I love her; when we're together she knows it." I started to say something, but he stopped me. "I screw around sometimes because it adds spice to the relationship." The mischievous boy smile was back and so I joined him laughing, but my smile was strained.

"Okay, " I said, "so you cheat on her like a dog now. So what happens if you guys end up getting married? What're you gonna do?"

"I've been sure for a while that Chris and I are gonna get married and after that day I won't ever cheat on her again. I know that."

My head was swimming with the absurdity of his words—even more so knowing that the thought of Chris' infidelity would never occur to him; that if she were to sleep with another man, he would completely erase her from his life. "But you do it now. There has to be some...basis. How do you know you wouldn't do it after you were married?"

Without missing a heartbeat, he answered, "Because then I would've stood in church and made my vows in front of God and I wouldn't cheat on her ever again." His face was a little too stolid, I thought.

Two days later, I was lying in bed watching Dianne get ready for work. She was standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror carefully putting mascara on her eyes. She was dressed only in a pair of silk underpants and a towel wrapped up on her head, from which a few strands of dark wet hair streamed down her back. She was a beautiful woman in any way I could conceive the word to mean. She was long and slender with a naturally playful sexuality revealing itself in the fine lines of her cheekbones and her nose, her wide smile, her high breasts. More subtly, it appeared in her movement, sure and gentle, a feminine elegance which was so important to her mother to instill in her, she would say sometimes. She had been taught to walk steadily with books propped on her head, her joints and chin connected to those obscure, out-dated societal strings. *Keep that chin up, up, up...* she would mimic as though she could not tell that she had learned the lessons so well she knew no other way.

After her time in preparatory schools and a Catholic, all-girl high school, she'd gone on to a co-ed college, her mother having passed away of heart failure at the end of Dianne's tenth-grade year. In college she'd discovered sex, its wonderfully open intimacy, the true beauty of her body—where it could take her. (Lying in bed one night, after making love she quietly told me about a time when she had seen a film, with a boyfriend, in which two women made love. It was an imported art film, she protested, and the scenes were warm, romantic, not like the trashy coupling of pornography—not for the sake of a man. "It was just so beautiful," she whispered into my neck, stumbling over the words. Watching the film, she'd cried, she said and then went back to her apartment and masturbated for the first time and onlytime in her life. Feeling terribly distant from her, I asked lamely if she'd ever had sex with another woman to which she softly said 'no' but with a barely discernible hint of wonder in the single syllable.)

In college Dianne also found her first true

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love in architecture. Ironically, that art, with its precision, its clarity (and, yes, even its kind of immortality, she has said) became her only true flaw, confining some measure of her freer expression within its thin, black lines and diagrams. And yet she not only took to its craft, transfixed, but excelled at it earning her bachelor's degree and then going on to get her master's in architectural design. Now, she was one of only four women architects working for the Rouse Company, a huge, Maryland firm responsible for several of the luxury hotels and shopping malls in town, most notably the Harborplace pavilions and the spectacular Georgetown Plaza, just outside Washington.

I had tried to tell her the night before about your phone call, about your asking me to meet you once again, really a simple invitation to dinner from an old friend in town for a few days. But, somehow, I knew she would not see it that way, mostly because I could not be as sure as I'd like that I could bring myself to *put* it that way.

So I had lain there quietly listening to the settling moans of the apartment, every now and then drifting to the precipice of sleep to be pulled back by the fall of her hand, the pressure of her beautifully rhythmic breathing. At one point, Dianne woke up knowing, she said, that I was awake and I told her that I was just worrying over a piece I could not get started for Baltimore Magazine which was due in a few days. "The words just won't come," I said and that was like a booming echo behind my eyelids, like the thud of the heavy, wooden doors in the vast eternal air of the train station.

Dianne had let her soft fingers dip down below my stomach. Wordlessly, she had rolled over, straddling my body, her hands flat against my chest, her hips gently moving. She leaned forward and kissed me, the warmth of her tongue tasting faintly of peppermint.

And now she was in the bathroom, drying her curly, brown hair vigorously with a towel. She came out of the bathroom, passing through a bar of

dusty sunlight, and sat down next to me on the bed, reaching across to the night stand where she found her watch and promptly put it on.

"Are you going to get out of bed today? Do any work, you lazy bum?" She played, kissing me on the forehead. My eyes instinctively darted to the Macintosh Se sitting blank-faced in the corner under a framed print of a Greek temple. Done in thin, black lines, she had rendered it perhaps more perfectly than it would've ever existed, perfect to scale, each arch and column a mirror-twin of the next. She had painstakingly done it in graduate school from the ragged measurements of a long-dead archaeologist and had given it to me for my birthday last year. In the bottom, right corner she'd written, in the same black ink, the words 'all my love for all time' and then signed her name. A flat, white block of light from the window reflected in the glass.

"Uhh. I guess so." I said, stretching wildly. "I've got so much shit to do."

"Well, why don't you go out to the kitchen and fix your loving girlfriend some breakfast while I finish getting dressed, hummm? I'm not going to the office today because I've got a meeting in Columbia at 10:00—" She quickly got up and walked over to the large, oak trunk at the base of the bed on top of which rested a thin, dark leather portfolio case and a pair of red-rimmed reading glasses. She put on the glasses, unzipped the case, and took out her appointment calendar, flipping to today. There was a slight pause as she scanned the writings. "—Uh, huh 10:00. So I should be out of here by 9:15...which leaves you an hour and a half to cook my a wonderful breakfast." She finished talking and looked up at me from her book. She was standing there, naked but for her underpants, seriously evaluating her day from the rim of her calendar, the red glasses sitting precariously on her nose. I found myself once again awed by her sexuality.

I rolled over to see if her time was right (I knew it was, of course) on the digital clock which

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was on the nightstand, but a magazine was draped over the digits and I couldn't read it. She dutifully put the calendar back in the case and zipped it back up. Then she went to the bathroom and, half-shutting the door, began to get dressed in the clothes she had hanging from the hook.

I watched her through the narrow opening of the door, the flashes of her skin, her hair, the white of her stockings, the gray of a skirt, the glint of jewelry. The pieces were scattered, kept only remotely coherent by my knowledge of the steps of her action which I could use to fill in the gaps as the space between the door and the wall shifted and changed like the turning of a kaleidoscope. I could hear her breath, the rustling of fabric, the dull bang of the toilet seat cover as she puts it down to sit on.

Dutifully, I put on a pair of sweats and went to the kitchen to fix breakfast.

That night, I told Dianne about your call, unexpectedly, the words settling in the silences like confetti.

"When is she coming here?" she asked flatly before I could even finish saying the words. I was oddly glad that she seemed to be making it

easier.

"Next week." I said. "She wanted to know if I could meet her at the train station, have dinner somewhere."

"Well, at least you told me before she got here," she shot back coldly (as if I'd seriously considered not telling her at all) and I felt I deserved that. There was another pause during which she got up from the table, taking her plate to the sink. Then she came back, sat down, and took a sip from her wine glass. I just sat staring at her, wanting to take her into the bedroom and make love to her, ignoring any words I'd just said. I wanted that to mean something. I stared at her, wanting to say I didn't want to see you.

"What?" she asked sharply, catching my eyes and startling me.

"I just wish you'd say something—anything. It's not a big deal."

"What do you want me to say? There's nothing I can say even if I wanted to which I don't. And don't you dare talk to me like you feel sorry for me or something because I hate that worse than anything."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I tried to speak as gently as I could, knowing that the

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tide of the conversation was causing the dull pain behind my eyes.

"I mean: would you please put yourself in my position and don't sit there expecting me to say something. An old girlfriend calls you out of the blue after two years—someone you've told me you were in love with all through college—and asks you if the two of you can get together while she's in town. Just look at it from my point of view. You probably didn't even have to think about it, did you? I'm glad if it makes you happy but it hurts and I'm sorry. But don't ask me to fucking say anything," she finished, looking away.

I felt small and petty. I hadn't had to think about it and, sitting with her, the block of table between Dianne and me, I wished I knew why I hadn't. I wished I knew why your words which did not say much compelled me in the way they did. Vaguely, like the smudge of a shadow in the corner of my eye, I thought of the Camaro, sold years ago.

I got up from the table and took my own plate to the sink.

"I just want you to please not make such a big deal about it, okay?" I said, my back to her. "We're just going to have dinner and talk about things that are going on in our lives. She's just in town for a few days. She's got business meetings...I don't know. I'm sorry. Yes, I'd like to see her, but that has nothing to do with what we have between you and me." I walked back to the table and sat down. I reached across to take her hand, but her response was faint. "Hey," I said, trying to be cute.

Her eyes darted up to mine and I immediately wished that they hadn't. "Did you tell her about me, about us?" she asked so bluntly that I felt the words more than heard them, like telepathy.

"Yes, I did." I replied as flatly serious as I could, trying to sound a bit indignant that she would even ask such a question. But that was a lie and I was sure she knew it was a lie, as if she'd asked the question knowing, just to see if I would

lie to her. The room—the world—grew infinitely small under that dull spark of her stare. "I did," I said again to hear myself say it. Then there was a silence.

"I guess I have to believe you," she said at last, then, "I won't be around while she's here." She excused herself and went to the bathroom while I cleared the rest of the dishes.

Dianne was true to her word. When I tried to call her last night to see if she would come over for awhile, she told me that she was in the middle of doing some work that had to be done by today. Her voice was high and sweet, a forced sense of disappointment (which she wanted me to know was false), but I said that it was okay and told her to call me when she finished. "I'll be totally swamped for the next few days," she told me. "But then maybe we can have dinner." We played the game for a few minutes and then she apologized "but I've really got a lot to do tonight." Your name never even came up.

And now I am back in the station, the hollow sound of my footsteps ringing out in the cold air as I walk up to the information counter to see if your train is coming in on time. The day outside is sharp and cold, the sky a fogged, silver lamp. The darkly carved stone of the city stands out against it in relief. The station has not changed since the last time I was here (and I notice that I do not notice it at all when I drive through the city unless I am thinking of you). It squats on the hill like a temple, taxi cabs swaying around it like dull-yellow paper lanterns.

This time I pulled my blue Nissan Sentra around off of Monument Street and found a parking space, the power steering working fluidly.

Your train is arriving in fifteen minutes and I walk back to sit on one of the high-backed, wooden benches outside of Gate B. Several people sit around waiting for their trains, their belongings gathered between their feet or on the bench beside them. They sit chattering, all bundled up against

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the constant draft of the station which blows up from the platforms.

Strangely, it had not occurred to me until just now that I haven't the first idea where we will go when I finally see you—I've spent too much time wondering if I will recognize your face.

The last time I was here, the Camaro illegally parked, its flashers on, I'd gotten into the station just as your train was coming in, I remember. Throngs of people were already off the train, making their way up the stairs, the draft escalating to near hurricane proportions in the vaulted corridor as the gate doors opened. Many people were greeted by their family and friends, others said their goodbyes. Everyone stood amidst the various bags and bundles, thick bars of yellow sunlight falling through the windows on top of them. When the tide began to trickle off I still had not seen you and so I made my way past a few of the

travelers (the sign on the door saying that only passengers were allowed down on the platform), taking two steps at a time, my hand on the cool metal railing. As I reached the platform, the train had closed its doors and begun to slowly move on. In the open air I stood there on the platform under the vast shadow of the station watching the tracks dwindle away, getting smaller into infinity. That day, too, I had no idea where we were going but I knew that, for a little while anyway, we would be going somewhere.

When I reached the main corridor of the station once more, I had planned to make sure whether or not I had the right train. Then behind me I heard the drumming echo of running footsteps getting closer and closer. I turned and there you were, duffel bag over your shoulder, a single flower in your hand. Your eyes, I remember, reminded me of the color of tea.



A View from a Window

by Allison Kelly

I needed this moment to collect my thoughts
Scattered like the crumpled revisions scuttling
Across the wood floor, stealing their
Scraping ride from the hot breath
Of the Philadelphia summer that
Oozes unrefreshingly through this window.

I can steal no comfort from the stifling air.

The city is alive with talk of the war.
I can see hope flickering across the
Faces of the people passing in the street below.
That hope would waver even more if
They knew that the man charged
To add another log to the fire,
With stirring words to burn
The frayed tie to England-

That man thinks of a farm and his bride.

Do the cannons roar?
Or is it the pounding of a
Nation's heart waiting to beat,
Holding its breath, existence, ideals
Flickering until my words breathe
New life to the cause?
I draw one last breath
Of boiling air from this window

And feel it set my soul on fire.

Fade Out Slowly

by Kevin Hannan

Somehow, the applause is just not enough.

There are a million plays about misery
You're well on your way to stardom
Some characters know better now
But the prima donna never learns
Always fatalistic...

And as you floated into your dressing room
It occurred to you that people are your props
The world is a backdrop, emotions are
Always in the subtext

And that you are one-dimensional
A tragic stage diva.

The thought could drive some to drink,
But you see no tears in your mirror
So you walk out for an encore
Only to find

An empty, hollow theater



Island

by Allison Kelly

Pivoting slowly on top of this hill,
I view my parent's property.
Gazing at the fields dotted with Christmas trees,
Imagination comes into focus on another time, another girl,
Sun bonnet trailing down her back. Chores done, she
Skips through high grass, stooping to select the
Prettiest wild flowers for her mother's table.
An exhilarating dash to that stand of trees and she
Rests in the mossy shade.
Brown hair blends with the strong bark of the tree she
Leans against. The heavy fragrance of
Nature and beauty lulls her into
Dreaming of her prince come to rescue her from the
Witch's castle. The muffled ringing of the dinner bell
Intrudes— her eyes flick open, bright with childish horror.
She gathers up her skirts and, riding the scented breeze, she
Races the setting sun home.

An ant marches over my sneaker.
Blinking into reality, my eyes rotate
Three hundred and sixty degrees. Past the fields,
Past the timeless woods bordering our land.
A hill looms in the distance, and the autumn wind
Delivers its putrid smell of
Waste. Coughing slightly, I turn from
"Mt. Trashmore" and face west.
A brown leaf flutters past my head and collapses
Sadly at my feet. Through the thin row of trees
Lining the street the sky is an abstract painting
Smeared with gold and orange and pink, the sun's
Dramatic exhibit to the world. But the sun must now
Share its canvas with the yellow glow
In the South, where a pair of formidable
Towers stand, no escape from these nuclear prisons except
By way of belching steam clouds that obliterate the sky.

As I turn to go, the roar of a car's engine
Interrupts my thoughts— another teenager racing down the
Feeble country road. My steps slow.
Light bursts into existence in the
Houses all around me, each electric twinkle
In competition with heaven's stars. Rabbits bound
Across my graveled path; I can almost hear their
Cries of "Where do I go? Where do I go?"
Bending, I pick a single blue flower and clutch it
Tightly in my hand as I trudge home.



