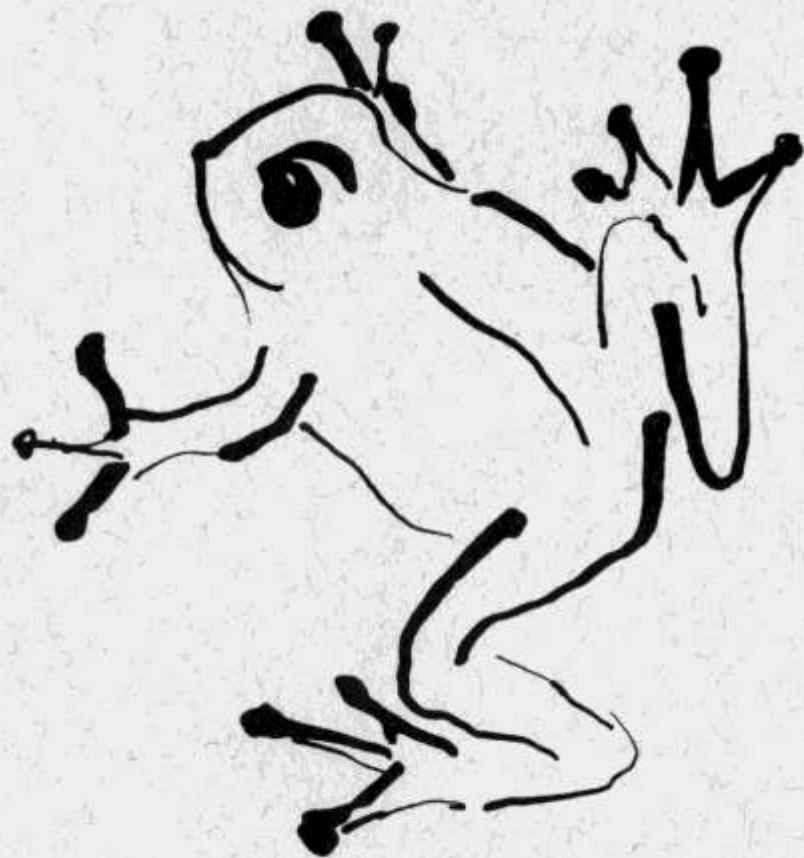


Druid's Cave



druid's cave

spring 1994

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Poetry

The Flight of Our Better Angels
Mohomodou Houssouba

Pray, have the better angels flown away
into the deep of night
through the crack of a dawn
coming too late
in the middle of a daydream
as noon draws near?

Night, I fault you of being too much with us
like a dim wall
raised in our dream—
while in a nightmare,
the hapless voice soars:
"O my God, my God!"

Then to awake into this world,
our dream strewn all over
like a flight of kites
caught in a whirlwind.
This world that is so much with us,
yet so far out— outside!

O, have the better angels flown away?
Have I heard soar into the dark
the voice that fills my throat:
"Come night!"
We're too hollow for the light
even in our full-ness of buried shells...

to depart for the journey!
Light, stand ahead of this dark:
I need you on my way.
Don't fail me now—

I can't hear the voice that's filled my throat
all life long.
Shed yourself far out on my footsteps.

The road shall not mislead
even if this night never ends.
If not you, who?
—The voice that once filled my throat
now faints beneath the rustle of leaves,
like footsteps drowning
as the stream closes behind the wader.

samantha anne
cr prouty

her tattered dress
hung like rags
but flowed like silk.
her hair twisted into
tight dirty curls
but crowned as a halo.
nothing she found in that pool
ever satisfied her for long
and before we knew it
she was gone.

Silvering
Katie Peterson

She held the curtain in the bedroom
aside as the bench in the apple
orchard slid into memory. Under
this bench, snow the color
of her hair covered her dear one's
ashes, which soothed the soil.

The last time snow silvered the
orchard, moonlight shone through
the window, shading the face near
hers the same color. The curved
line of her own body glowed
like the ice coated tree
branches that tangled around
the waning moon. That warm palm
melted the goosebumps
that fingertips cast with a breezy

touch. Pulling the curtains
aside, she moonlit a path to
the bed. The unfamiliar coldness
of sheets encompassed her
in a familiar cascade of goosebumps.

Her Voice Returns as a Storm— II
Max Gullas

This time, you danced
on my roof and clapped
your hands— a restlessness
that held me breathless. Your hair
on the windows was not the rain but a
portrait of grey and white paint. You
dragged your shawl over the
eaves— each note sadly stretched, as if sung
with a southern drawl. Angry and curious.

I reached through the ceiling
to touch you. You rise to the sky,
dragging the storm behind you
in the shawl. Day pulled
like a page into darkness. Raindrops
on my arm. My hand searching
the sky. I scatter the stars and
toss the moon across the night.

Playing With Fire
Jeff Pregmon

Many days she would take a crimson rose
down to the bay, and wait for the high tide
to come up so she could dangle her toes
in the cold water. Whenever she tried
to throw her flower away, a warm wind
would blow it back. If she dropped the bud
in the waves, the current showed that she sinned.
She would walk barefoot for so long that
blood would trickle out of small cuts.
On the dirt alongside the dock she laid her matchsticks
in the order that they burned. It would hurt
to give back her rock, but that cannot fix
why she bleeds a crimson fire with the stone
on the bottom while her flower floats alone.

Prayers for a Sister Without a Name
Greg Fasking

A child with golden curls and tired knees
bows his head in the baby's room with
blue walls. Prayers for a sister fly
from fingertips. Palms press together
tightly, turning white at the edges.

Out of range for such small prayers, a
woman pulls her knees to her breasts, and
lying on her side, shakes her body
free of tears while her husband, the child's
father, lists reasons she needn't cry.

The child's mother returns alone, in
the station wagon driven by her
husband. "Mommy's body rejected
your baby sister," the father said
locking the bedroom door behind him.

They forgot to name the child's sister
before they buried her beyond
his understanding. The child wondered
if his father's body had also
rejected its soft pale-blue children.

Charlie
Jason Swarts

I spin
in a vertigo
of solipsism
questioning
the existence
of cheese.

The Answering Machine
Jason Swarts

I called God
the other day,
He was out.
I got his answering machine.
* CLICK *
"This is God. I'm
not in right now, but
please leave your message
at the tone."
I tried again
a week later;
He's still out.
Damn.

THE BEE, COW, AND DOG ON FILM

-or-

MEMORIES OF A FLYSWATTER, TRAIN, AND CAR ON FILM

Jason Swarts

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

* WHAP *.

Trunkata

Trunkata

Trunkata

FwhoooFwhoo FwhoooFwhooooooo

MMMMooooooooooooo!

* THUNK *

putt-a putt-a putt-a putt-a putt-a

putt-a

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

TH-THUMP !!

TH-THUMP !! (yipe)

wwwhhrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

* CLICK *.

A Fiber Too Worn

Stacey Klein

— for Bela Weisz, a tailor, who survived the holocaust by sewing uniforms for the SS men in Dachau.

In fifty years
you have told
of your life in
that European camp
few times, but enough.
The way you
escaped the barrack,
the ditch, the poison.
The way you
frenetically guided
fine regulation thread
in and out
grommets of brass buttons,
medals of honor, wool
collars, black
and white stripes.
You measured days in
stitches while darning
holes, repairing loose seams,
ignoring red stains.

Now, in your living-room chair
in Rochester, you hem
pant legs, patch
elbows of sweaters.
You take too many
pills to calm the

muscle that beats
 beneath your chest,
 sewn together too
 many times. Each pulse
 stretches the stitches,
 tearing holes in fiber
 too worn to mend.

nine hundred seconds, according to warhol
 Sharon Koffler

do not trust anyone,
 when they
 step on your
 fifteen
 minutes. it's your time,
 said warhol
 as
 the paint splattered
 and what
 does he know?
 hidden behind his
 easel and soup
 cans, waiting for the colors
 to
 dry.

i'm waiting for the
 nine hundred
 seconds.
 actually i'm just
 waiting for
 one.

Death Spoke to Me in my Mother's voice.
Albert Church

Albert.

To the left at
an arms length as
if waiting to be stroked.

Once seen,
It shrunk
made its way between the legs
of the passing crowd
and finally fused with a random shadow.

Papercut
Brendan P. Ratliff

And I opened:
my finger cut the paper
and the letters
poured out soaked

traces of her summer's
sweaty fingers and moist
eyes lay in smudges

(somewhere in the back
ground a tape
played the voice against
confusion)

And I dried
the tears on my finger
but the trails still
furrow beneath
my eyes

to the corners of my mouth
where the salt dissolves
in the moisture of my
tongue
(the monologue ends:
a clean hiss drips
from the speakers)

And I wait
now
till my next paper
cut
dries as I listen

to the gentleness
of the clean hiss behind

her voice delivers the tears
in salt packets
to my tongue
so I may taste
the confusion of letters

rearranged thoughts
reach the lone

lines-s.

Long Poetry

EYELASH LOVE

John Firefly

And I love
 eyelash love.
 Trying so continually
 ta whip the dirt
 smut filth from
 the beautiful slash ugly,
 clearing my metaphysical
 vision with a dream,
 a seem seem
 sa la beam,
 incantation
 of
 who I am,
 so eyelash love,
 eyelash love is
 who I am,
 and I don't jus'
 see it,
 I see within it,
 I see without it,
 I see above it,
 I see below it,
 I see around it,
 I see through it,
 but most of all
 I see of it,
 and it screams
 in my dreams,
 I am a nightmare
 you may ride
 out of reality,
 an my nightmare

shit is your
 beautiful slash ugly
 poetry, in the
 cold white snow
 steaming,
 an the steam
 remains in
 this pOem,
 and
 if you take the
 letters of "this",
 change them
 around,
 you can git
 shit, from the
 cold white snow
 steaming,
 such a
 proud
 dark
 God,
 steaming
 mysterious
 even from a
 nightmare
 you may
 ride
 anytime,
 once I saw
 a hippopotamus
 on tv, his
 asshole just
 above the
 water, camera
 did zoom in
 on his rear,
 green shit
 poured from
 his asshole,
 an his tail
 said swish
 swish slinging
 green shit,

he was marking
 his territory
 so that any
 other male
 hippopotamus
 would know
 this was
 his space,
 his time,
 his home,
 his pOem,
 it may
 be read,
 interpreted,
 translated,
 but not
 taken over without
 a fight, for his
 shit is here, this
 is his shit an there
 are two ways ta
 spell this, an
 either way this
 is still his shit,
 his green born
 fresh new shit,
 leaving an
 unmistakable
 smell of him,
 one whiff
 an this shit
 and all other
 words become unspecific,
 lit tul scrib ling rit tuls
 always asking
 more than what is said,
 and a poet is a hippopotamus
 going towards his territory edge,
 leaving green shit hoping to
 be smelt,
 like meat
 prepared for a most
 holy feast, an yet

it always seemed ta
 be some shit
 nobody wanted
 until
 the God
 of their soul
 devoured it,
 this shit
 shit this
 shit a priori
 and eyelash
 love, trying
 ta see it
 clearly,
 beautiful slash ugly,
 an these two
 words of eyelash,
 and all words
 are the same,
 an my six
 senses beyond,
 beautiful slash ugly,
 beyond where
 I am going,
 beyond as I
 sit on sofa
 an weird radio
 station plays the
 music background
 of the movie
 King Kong,
 While old cat
 tries ta climb
 into my lap,
 I push her
 away an she
 tries ta claw
 into my corduroy
 pants, but I
 push her off
 before I
 feel
 too much

of the pain
 of her claws,
 but all she
 wanted ta do
 was warm
 herself
 an warm me,
 but eyelash love
 an beautiful slash ugly,
 I feel beyond
 as the old cat
 stalks away screaming
 meeeeeeeeeeeow,
 high pitch melancholy
 screech mourning
 the warm lap that
 could have been
 of beyond,
 having just felt
 eyelash love,
 an while all
 the blinking closing
 eyes for sleep sweet
 dreams go on in
 the midst of all
 the blinking closing
 sleeping dreaming
 eyes, if you
 look close, even
 in the dreaming
 sleeping
 an dying,
 you will,
 find some
 winking
 flirtatiously
 eyelash
 love,
 an the world sways
 with their hips,
 beautiful slash ugly,
 an the world sways
 with their lips,

beautiful slash ugly,
 eyelashlove,
 lovelasheye,
 lasheyelove,
 eyelovelash,
 eye
 love
 lash
 eye
 lash
 lash
 eye
 love
 love
 eye
 love
 lash,
 eyelash love.

Annie
Phoebe Hungerford

Daddy told
me i
was bumbling round
His Garden
the Summer
i was three
complaining
of boredom
and Blond
sisters who
could not
do anything

there
in the yard
behind ours
was another
little girl
Annie

due
to Proximity
 Cheese
 Pink crayolas
we became
fast
Friends

in our neighbor
hood
were many
evilBoys
nazis

in training
i swear

i have Sun
light-filtered
memories
of Daddy's Garden
and the Dog
pet Worms
and Carrots
flinging Mud
at evilBoys
and hiding
when came They
to retaliate
bearing stones
and sticks

when even
We drew
each other's blood
and went
home cussing
or crying
it never
felt malicious

then
one day
when She
was 8
and i
was 7
and worth
less Blond
was 6
one
of Them

raped

my Friend
and sent

her home
round
the block
with names
ringing
in Her ears
that neither
of Us knew
nor understood

i remember
those Boys
in Daddy's Garden
after
that
telling
how She
had done
some very
Bad Thing
but
not telling
what
It was

and listening
to Them
i began
to believe
She had
done Bad
and She
was Bad
and so i raised my voice against Her

i wanted Them
to like me
there were
so many
of Them
and They
were all
so Brave

and Strong
and They
knew Everything
and i
was nothing
a little girl

who wanted
to be
a Big Boy

maybe
then Daddy
would look
at me
instead
of my sister
with the Pretty
Blond hair

and so i raised my voice against Her
and when
i saw
Her standing
'gainst the fence
i turned
my back
and pretended
She wasn't there

i became
so good
at pretending
i failed to notice
when
She moved
away
until

one day
in sixth grade
Daddy
climbed out
of the car
at school

Ann
was sitting
curb
side waiting

Daddy
whispered
something
in Her ear
that made
Her smile
and wave
at us

i remember
that smile
i remember how it vanished
as She . . .
in the rising
mass
of children
a drop
in the blue
i saw
Her one
last time
one day
in ninth grade

when she
climbed in
to her
mother's car
while
i waited

had
i time
or courage
i might
have brought
myself
to her

but
how
do i
apologize

for what
i did
not do

for what
was not
my fault

for what
I do
not un-
derstand?

The privilege of politicizing my I
Patricia Webb

I.

first they used light

and so, she says
introduce yourself
tell us a little about yourself
we are so ever curious

what you've heard is not true
the voice was not true?

the voice was true, but it was not I
and what is I?

yes I is that
which?

all
then why was that I not your I? if I is all?
all is not my I
and your I, then, is shaped into where?

yes, there
and exactly where is there?

all
and how is it different?

no, it is the same
the same?

yes
as what?

as all your difference
that was his difference. ours is pure interest
curiosity?

yes.

the light is too harsh I cannot see
we are sorry, but it is not an avoidable consequence
it will not seep through

to what?

the true

we never said we wanted the true. we only wanted your
introduction

but then I must say I

yes?

and I is not true

your I is, you said it

no, all is not my I

what is your I?

what does it mean when I say that?

what?

I

yes, and how do you define yourself?

through colors

colors are words

colors are symbols, words are symbols, they are similar

Red is a word. Say the word

I

red

I

the light will become more severe

all is not as severe as the before

what before?

the before the I

but you will not say I?

no, I will not speak of your difference

it is his difference

and your traces?

no.

the light does not hurt

then we will try dark

the binary is disintegrating

into what?

all

we must ask you to say who you are

no, I will not speak of that fever

you know the consequences?

no, but I have never felt certainty

we know them

you administer them, you know them in that way only

no, we feel them

the light is not on your I

we only want to ask you to introduce yourself
what language must I use?

ours

I am, then, Anne
and who are you in your language?

I am plural
in what manner?

all
these words that you've used...
which?

these here, let me read them to you
they are my words?

yes

do words belong to the I?
you wrote these words
but who owns me?
these words you wrote were troubling to us. we will read them
"I will not spread my legs into those shiny metal stirrups"
those words?

yes.

those are the cause of the light?
why did you write this?
because I could
for whom was this meant?
all

who told you this?
who?

the light is not punishment
I will not say I
Who?

II.

they tried rain next

now, how do you define yourself?
with colors
your colors are no longer solid
yes, I am multiple
no, they are blurs on the blackness of the pavement
but see how they glimmer
no, we see that they run

they are the same

you must say I will not write that way again
the drain is alive with words

lift your head and see what I am suggesting
the water burns

is it too cold for you?

no, it is hot it burns

it is washing away your disgust
yes,

how?

it is wiping clean the surface of my face
yes, you can no longer hide

no, the water is concealing all

how?

the colors are blurring in the fresh sewer water
you will introduce yourself

the rats are dancing with red bow ties

tell us why you write, Anne

it is about the will to say what must be heard
who must hear you?

those who created those stirrups
so, you are condemning doctors?

no, only those who wield that weapon
doctors—You've admitted it

the colors haven't changed

next, the following lines were also written by you

the relationship between your sign and my signifier is
like the colors flowing toward the mice in mini skirts their
partners the rats
in what way?

uneven, the shortness of the connection is elongated by
the whisper of something different

different in what way?

that they are the same

you wrote these lines "perhaps the virgin is still alive and
gabriel has not yet raped her raping her of her voice"

Mary could not say I
are you a Christian?

God does not exist because evil exists and if evil exists
then God must have created it but your God must be good and
since He must be both in order to support the binary, He
does not exist.

so, you are an atheist?

no, that is what my student once told me in his paper
 you are teaching this?
 no
 to whom?
 no
 we will turn the water harder
 it is already much too soft for your intent
 and what was your intent in those words?
 to blur
 to blur what?
 all
 we are to that again?
 yes
 the water is harder now
 oh?
 you should be feeling it already
 I am feeling this blindness
 yes, yes, that is good what is this blindness
 my hair is in my eyes
 yes, it is wet
 and I cannot not see
 we do not wish you to see anything but the I we create
 I will not swallow that
 it is only a small pill
 I will not swallow that
 we will force you the water will wash it down
 I will vomit
 we will give you another
 and the rats will twirl on the I which is hidden in the
 colors streaming into their homes
 swallow
 and they will paint their gray surfaces with the magenta
 which once used to be red
 swallow your tongue will begin to feel heavy
 and the mother rat will serve tea to the neighbors as they
 admire the lovely design placed upon their walls
 we have ways of making this work
 and she will tell the tale of the day the colors seeped
 from above
 the water is slowly forcing the pill past your throat
 the day that joy was mixed with uncertainty
 it is disintegrating
 when they say the beautiful spread of the woman's blood

and heard the screams
 you will be quiet now
 and she was

III.

then they used rape

we will now ask you to remove your clothes
 my face has already been smoothed away
 we are not concerned with your face yet
 I once sat in this room and learned
 yes, now remove the blouse
 we learned about new ways of imagining our worlds
 the buttons...
 and the discourse we were taught questioned your assertions
 now, the pants
 you ripped up the pages
 the bra
 you erased all the ink
 the panties
 I remember what it was like to say that I
 the panties...
 I will always be able to say that I
 his hands will enter you
 and the rats...they heard the I...they will
 he will tear the flesh
 they will...say it
 and now he will insert his penis
 say it
 and he will rape you
 the mice
 wore
 mini
 skirts
 the mice
 wore
 mini skirts
 the mice wore mini
 SKIRTS
 and now we will read from your text

as he inserts the speculum

I wear a dress

I wear this dress

I will say my I

doctor, is she pure?

is she clean now?

will she swallow our I?

Prose Poetry

rubber lips /
Richard Blankenship

/ when these / pills / gave / me / rubber lips / gulp gulp / but now /
they're / ne-cessary / you see / necessary to stop / the shaking / pad
the inside of my skull / strap me in / for the day / cause i get up / late
and / slump / in the shower / till / my brain begins / to / congeal / then
/ i turn on / the tunes / have a pinchhit and / look / out the win-dow /
brush my teeth / fuck around / welcome back / college / when the glow
/ begins spreading / i grin / at the clouds / i say yeah / i'm still alive /
build me a hit / i take a lickin / keep on tickin / and it's such / a
beautiful / day / smoke curling / drink flowing / zeppelin pounding /
and mtv with / no sound / thank god / have a hit / good mor-ning / yes
/ life's stayed the same since i first came / to col-lege / many years ago
/ good morning / have a hit / let's do the time warp again / ah yes /
girls / there've been / girls / that came and went so to speak / beers /
hits / screwdrivers / mar-garitas / road trips / classes i didn't / bacardi
lots of bacardi / poems / lies / mul-ti / col / ored / fry-day / niiiights / / /
and quarters / quarters / in my sleep i hear the sound of quarters /
bouncing on the table / in my sleep i see faces / grinning grinning /
from across the table /

in my sleep i'm twenty one and midnight / it's close to midnight at the
table / in my sleep / and damn / but it's been / many and many /
bloodshot morning / since / i've seen / those faces / across a table /
since / smoked dope in the darkroom / cranked out that campus paper
/ since / had anything / to say / lot of mornings / blood / hangovers /
quarter pounders / / dead lynn's dead / shawn's old / julie's lonely /
and ed the ed / itor works in a ware house / we grew up / after all / in
college / me i'm still / in college / doing hits / killing time / because /
one calendar / looks much like / another / if you're buzzed and / faces /
the faces the / faces / the faces begin / blend-ding / too hits and / time /
hits'n'time / hits / / / wow / what a rush / someday / it'll get me / but
not today

/ rubber lips

archetype isle
Richard Blankenship

Suddenly, the wreck of the Professor came lurching out from between the huts.

"Gilligan!"

I dropped the load of firewood and scampered back, but he was on me already, fast as a spider, fingertips in my arm and eyes quick and shiny in the dark.

"Gilligan! Why do all those governments care about Herb? Herb is a plant! A plant, Gilligan!" He released me and darted away... into the palms.

I stared, shaken

Perfesser.

His days with Kerouac forgotten, the time in Tangiers with Burroughs... gone. All gone. Sometimes, in the daytime, I'd find him at the lagoon, in the sand, cupping sea water in his hands, beating two rocks together, he'd catch me looking at him and begin to smile.

"My lab, Gilligan!" he'd call hoarsely, head bobbing up and down. "My lab!"

Poor Professor.

The transmitter quit working for him a long time ago.

Life is Even More than Dream
Angella Sorokina

Houses in that town were red, protuberant, and sharp. They scratched my elbows, hit me, made me wake up to see the same houses around me, sharpening their corners on my arms. I could never catch the beginning of reality or the end of that dream. I thought, I'd better change the town.

In this new town were new dreams about me, how I ran away from the red-housed, sharp-elbowed town to find myself among green walls, to realize that I am again only dreaming this greenness. When in the morning I walked among green houses, I did not know if I existed at all or dreamt my existence.

Once I saw myself clearly from above, my Self walking among the corners. I thought, "thanks God, at least now I know that if I am above, I am definitely dreaming." But then, I watched my Below Self waking up and realized that my Above Self was only my Below Self's dream.

I was lost.

I went to the pub and ordered five shots. No remorse; anyway I did not know if they were real or not. Then five more. The chairs started moving, touching me with their corners, the signs became more protuberant, the tables, elastic. I was waking up, more and more sure that everything before that was really a dream.

Selves
Angella Sorokina

There are five of them and they are always fighting. One is a tramp. When she is taking her cross off so that it wouldn't stick into her or his mouth during their rolling around the bed, then the second one, who is a pious person, becomes furious. She tries to stop that rolling, or make the tramp throw up from disgust after that, and when the tramp is exhausted, the piety possesses her, humiliates, makes her cry, confess and pray desperately. The third one is scientific and smart, she appeals to their reason in these unreasonable hysterias, she wants them to read books and make discoveries instead of fighting between bed and sky. The fourth one, who is a Mother, seeing after a long day how their son is sleeping alone without having supper, throws books, crosses and pants at them, screaming what the hell have they been doing all day and what is all this fuss about if their son is hungry. They have one son in common.

During all this mess, the fifth one is watching them from above, writes about them, and thinks she is in control.

Sometimes they have parties together, get drunk, and peacefully merge.

A Tall Glass of Water
Robin Silbergeld

I

Hot, she sighed and wiped the sweat rolls dripping between her breasts, legs plastered to the vinyl seat with the vanilla ice cream cone, licking sweetly as she winked at him across the countertop.

The space between her thighs clenched and she wished she could spread them wide, sprawl out so none of her body folded in on itself, let the air conditioning surround her like an envelope of sweetness.

Beads rolled down her lip and she swallowed them, salty like the tears that pooled in the corners of her mouth where he had kissed her, smothered her with his heat. She licked the salt like a new day, the interruption of a fly buzzing in her ear whispering of impending madness, a claim to insanity like a rain check imprinted on her.

II

Wiping herself free of his stickiness, she pushed him off her. No one should have to endure the heat of his greedy hands on her breasts, begging for what they wouldn't get and would eventually take from her, steal from her snow white skin, marked with a razor and his love.

III

Pressed into the cold bathtub, white enamel calculating as a doctor's office, clinical and freshly gleaming from her own hands, the hands of a working girl kneading themselves in lime colored gloves, stinging saltily with Lysol to scrub it away, him away, from herself and everything around her.

She could never forget the heat that swelled her fingers and toes with shame, that clung to her breasts like a nightmare, that pulsed between her legs despite her resistance.

She wanted relief like a tall glass of water, lemonade, or ice cream from the stand, cooling her from the outside in.

Women in the Kitchen

Mary Leen

1.

Tonight I have the dream again. My parents are having another cocktail party. The groomed couples arrive, their crisp laughter shoots through our family room. One by one my father finds reasons to get each wife alone in the kitchen. No one notices.

Later, the guests prepare to leave and a husband holds his wife's coat, waiting for her hand to find the sleeve. She carefully pulls up the cuff of her blouse to show him the straight line at her wrist where my father, while in the kitchen, peeled her skin off her body. My father has left the skin on the hands and the head, but under their clothes the wives have no skin left. This husband reacts with mild disgust, as if his wife wore brown shoes with a black handbag. Everyone is calm and civilized. My father is an annoyance occasionally.

After happy good-byes, I hurry to my bedroom and try to shut the door. It sticks, seldom latches. I always hope for a lock in these dreams. But the door never closes, and again there's no lock. I push the door as far shut as possible, and sit quiet, hoping my father won't think to come upstairs.

2.

I watch a visiting poet read to a room of scholars. Her red dress and platinum blond hair seduce the suits. They see her stand still and recite powerful stories. From behind the podium, I see her smooth her hands over her hips, clasp her fingers behind her back, stroke her wrists, hold her belly— pet herself. And I fall in love.

The beautiful poet purrs to me; she can help me. Before I believe her, she must unbutton her dress and let me see the rose-cream skin I hope covers her shoulders. I must touch the moon-glimmer of her white arms, her long legs. She must show me she's never been in the kitchen with my father.

conversations kenneth burke never told me about
Kelly Lowe

these frightening sexual cattle calls where you audition the players one by one this one i'll rape and this one i'll take home to mommy and this one will make me a nice snack

The regular laws of emotional gravity seem not to apply here. Stuck as I am in your pocket inconsequential like lint balls lining your soul like scars or cigarette burns on a suicidal debutante: ugly as hell but essentially painless.

The motion of the self is apparent only in retrospect: a needless narcissism done with mirrors and a nice soundtrack, in theory. But your practice is weak: built upon a foundation of bloodless emotion and purchased sensitivity. Your touch is like water: essential but devalued.

and how i felt like some peg a child tries putting square peg in the hole: consequences of such actions seem insignificant

Tarot Cards: choice. Fine feelings of true absolution. Damn this typewriter doesn't work no more cigarettes eyes burn from keeping all these secrets all that's left now is the doing

How does one go about, exactly, this self-fashioning? Indeed we rush towards or shrink from said change. Can the postmodern subject approach the romantic? Do we have an obligation to try? Do we recognize it: difference? Justice?

exploited i was at the hands of a praying mantis eats ones own flesh and rapes its own lovers blindfold and blue smoke and smell of sweat dreams still come every night

motionless there skintight flash of girlwhite panties garters
 knees calves what do the street lamps mean? Quentin cries for
 Caddy's sins smell the blue fish dawn in big city junkies
 drooling on you standing spending two dollars to move
 station to station across the great divide stub out the flame of my
 familiar devices

jazz and booze and cigarettes and silence and streetlights
 illuminating the nighttime and trains in the distance calling
 one another with their long lonely alliterative whistles and
 pictures of war and love on the wall of the palace of desire
 pornographic pictures of dead generals lie in sweet Jesus ecstasy next
 to warm smelling sea breezes and wind...when will the hurricane
 come and when it comes will it come for me?

Prose

Means of Support

Greg Maier

Robert was wearing a baseball cap and a vomit stain on his shirt. The cap didn't show any loyalties to anything but the color black, and the bill was creased at a right angle from the hours of nervous bending—most often when he was asking somebody for a buck because they crossed an imaginary line and noticed him. Jim was noticing him, but this was okay. He was Robert's younger brother and worth more than a quick single.

The tavern didn't have a liquor license to serve its clientele, but the piece of paper behind the bar was a good enough forgery to pass inspection. Actually, it wasn't in the strictest sense a forgery since the license had been printed down state in a federally-controlled facility and had yet to be missed by the computers, but it had cost about the same. The owner worked the bar himself, fourteen hours a day, keeping the lights turned down to a perpetual dusk so he wouldn't have to look at anything too closely. Underneath the bar, he had a sawed-off Louisville Slugger with a piece of lead rod corked into the end lying next to a .38 revolver lying next to the phone, in that order. If asked nicely, for a few extra bucks he'd let a customer take a whiskey sour home in a go-cup.

The owner watched impassively from under thin eyebrows as Jim made his way to the table where his brother sat. The bar was uncrowded for nine at night. There were four other people: a couple of guys talking at a table ten yards away, an older, heavy woman wearing too much lipstick sitting up straight at the bar, and an equally old man with equally red lips next to her who was pointedly ignoring everything; even his beer looked neglected. Jim sat down.

"Thanks for coming out," said Robert. A glass of amber-colored alcohol was standing in a puddle of beer on the table. His voice was careful, and Jim felt relief that he'd gotten there early. There'd been times when they'd met that an argument had started on sight, as if planned. Jim was glad this wasn't one of them—Robert had been getting more wild and unpredictable lately. He'd come to

Jim's office the day before and made a scene in front of his secretary's desk. He'd cursed and knocked over a plant before Jim could drag him to a stairway, and had refused to leave until Jim agreed to meet him.

Jim studied his brother's face. "You look like you've been maced," he said.

"What? No 'Hello, what are you up to?' You pissed at me or something?" Robert gauged his brother, leaning forward slightly. Something in what he saw satisfied him and he slumped back. "Anyway, I look like this because I've been nursing the same drink for three hours. My eyes can't take it. They're used to soft focus, you know?"

"You must spend a lot of your time here."

"Stop looking around and shake your brother's hand."

Robert's hand trembled just slightly as he held it over the table. "Really. Glad you could make it."

After a moment Jim took his hand, surprised at the careful, weak grasp. When he released Robert's hand, he laid it on the table.

"This place is incredible," Jim said. "The bartender is actually wiping a glass with a dirty towel. I thought they only did that in the movies."

Robert ignored the comment. "What do you want to drink?"

"I don't want anything."

"I'll get you one anyway," Robert said, but didn't make a move to get up. "Louis, that's the owner, gets nervous when people come in and don't order anything. He'll think I'm making a drug buy."

Jim didn't figure Louis for the excitable type, but agreed to the drink anyway—a Coke. His brother waited a few more seconds, wanting to say something, before pushing himself up and heading for the bar.

Jim at a loss for what to do, ran a hand over the top stratum of varnish covering the table. He figured it had taken ten, twenty coats over three times as many years to get the table this shade of brown. There was nothing on the walls except for paneling and some framed photographs. The photos were in black and white and most of the subjects were wearing hats. Jim always associated poverty with the wearing of hats, though he wasn't able to say why. Most of the subjects were older, probably over forty at the time the photograph was taken. None of them looked very happy.

The two guys over at the other table sat with their profiles facing him. Their heads were turned slightly away from him and close to the table in the attitude of men worried about being overheard. They were drinking long necks, or, rather, they had long necks in front of them—holding them tightly across the label as if attempting

to warm them. Jim thought it was interesting that no one in the place seemed to be drinking except for the woman at the bar. She was knocking back shots.

Robert came back with a glass of beer. "He didn't have Coke, so I got you a Bud," he said, sliding the glass along the table. Jim stopped it with the side of his palm. He couldn't tell if his brother was lying about the drink. Robert had a habit of strange lies dating back to his years in college when he'd told his teachers that his parents had died in a plane crash and he was dropping out of school to take care of the estate. He'd resurfaced three years back without any visible means of support but his legs and the alcohol.

Robert took a careful sip from his drink. "You're probably not wondering too hard why I asked you to meet me."

"I can't give you any more money, Bobby."

"Got a girlfriend, huh?" asked Robert.

"What do you mean by that?" The tone was curious.

A smile flashed in Robert's eyes, then disappeared. "Nothing, really." He searched his pockets and brought out a pack of cigarettes. Leaning over to another table, he snagged an ashtray and began the process of lighting one up. He gestured to the pack. "I'm trying something new here. You should be happy. I'm experimenting." He lit one. "Not bad. Kind of like . . . I don't know like jumping over a leaf fire when you're a kid and catching some of the smoke." He took another puff. "I figured anything this bad for you had to be worth a shot."

"That's a nasty stain on your shirt."

He shrugged, not looking down. "A small accident. You wouldn't believe what dry cleaning costs nowadays, so I figured what the hell?" He put his cap on the table. Sitting there, it looked like a refuge for Eskimos. He said quietly, "Don't try to play mind games with me, Jimmy. I can still run laps around you. You might have learned a lot of things in life, but you still don't know how to survive. You don't know how to adapt. A wolf gets its leg stuck in a trap, he doesn't file for disability. No, he bites it off. He lives with it and it makes him stronger or he dies. You'd be surprised what an animal will do to survive. You don't know nothing about that, Jimmy."

Jim didn't answer. He stared into his brother's bloodshot eyes and saw that they were hard and aware and dark with violence. Jim flinched first. Once, when they were both in high school, they'd had an argument over who would borrow their mother's car one night. Jim had flinched first then, too. He'd called his girlfriend to tell her

that he couldn't take her out, and the next day told their mother that Robert had threatened to hit him. She hadn't done anything. She'd told him to threaten him right back.

Jim said, "I do okay." He picked up his beer and took a sip. "Better than you from the look of things."

A uniformed cop came through the door, looked both ways as if checking for traffic, then took a seat on the edge of the bar. The older woman immediately started a conversation. Jim looked over, making no effort to show that he was listening in, while Robert sipped at his drink and pretended not to be annoyed. The older woman scooted over a few stools so she was next to the cop and began to tell him about when she was a young whore in the neighborhood. The cop lifted a finger to the bartender, who was already filling the glass. Jim and Robert were silent, listening, both wanting to ease the tension that had come through the conversation. The two guys at the other table rested their forearms on their armrests, but otherwise didn't move.

The woman told the cop that she'd been a favorite with the detectives—Vice, Homicide, whatever. She did them for free, of course, because everyone, even people who watched TV, knew that was the way it worked. (They used to compliment her on her tits. She had really nice tits back then, firm and easily excited. Now when someone looked at her, their eyes never strayed below the neck. Nice ass, too, and she kept better care of her hair.) Giving freebies never bothered her. A few of them even gave her the occasional ten. Some of the cops were kinky, though—she'd been handcuffed more often than a bad snitch, sometimes three, four times a day. Didn't bother her. Two or three would smack her around, but were nice enough not to get carried away. They knew she was on the job, just like them. Only two of the detectives ever bothered her. One was a Lou in Robbery: He'd tie her to the bed posts with clothesline, shit on her stomach, then hold her and cry for an hour while she tried not to puke from the smell. She heard he'd retired.

The other was a Homicide guy who liked to stick things up her ass—candlesticks, ball bearings, liquor bottles, his fist, his gun, whatever. He'd hold these things inside her while tapping her all over with a sap. Once in a while, he'd hurt her bad and she'd be off the street for a week, which pissed her off, but what could she do? He never actually stuck his dick inside her, but would come spontaneously all over the carpet. She'd heard he made captain.

The cop had listened to this without moving. Finally, he finished the last half of his beer and calmly walked back outside. The mood in the bar lightened by a shade.

The older woman moved back to her original stool and ordered another shot.

The owner said, "Thanks, Di."

She patted the thigh of the man who ignored everything. "No problem," she told the owner. "Just keep lining them up until I fall down." Her voice was more sober than it had been while relating her life story.

When Jim turned back to Robert, he was smiling. "See?" he told Jim. "She never whored a day in her life—she was a waitress in Detroit for thirty years. She can adapt if she has to, and make it look easy. You can't teach someone to do that."

"You did ask me here for money, didn't you?" asked Jim. "Don't get me wrong, it's a charming place, but you asked me here for money, right?"

"Well, yeah, but we shouldn't let that spoil the evening. How's mom?"

"Still dead, Bobby."

He laughed, a short bark of false surprise. "That's right. A couple of years ago, before Thanksgiving. Cancer or something."

"Breast cancer."

"Right. Right. Carried on the family tradition." He lit another cigarette and let it burn in the ashtray. "That makes, what? Three grandparents, four uncles, two aunts and one cousin?"

"And dad." Jim knew his brother was trying to bait him, but he'd made a promise before he entered the bar that he wouldn't get into a fight. They saw each other so rarely that Jim felt he could weather their meetings.

"Shit," said Robert. "Dad. I always forget about him." He shook his head. "You miss her? Mom?"

Jim thought about the answer before replying. He watched the smoke from the ashtray spiral toward the ceiling, which, he noticed now, hadn't been cleaned in so long that the stains looked like swirling gray thunderheads. He said, "Not really. The last year before she died, she'd call me up in the middle of the night and tell me she was going to kill herself. I'd drive over, and she'd be sitting in bed watching cable. Then she'd make me go and buy her cigarettes. Make her soup. She didn't even try to look upset once I got there." He reached over and stabbed out Robert's cigarette with quick little jabs. "She asked me for money, too."

"No doubt about it, she could be a bitch. She wouldn't even let me in when I came by to visit. Worried I'd steal the stereo or something."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Hell, no. I'm no junkie. Anyway, the damn thing was twenty years old." He drank the rest of his drink in a salute to his sensibilities. When he put the glass back down, his face was suffused with warmth. "If you're not going to give me a loan, at least buy me another round, huh? The owner is under the impression that I'm unreliable, tab-wise."

"No way, Robert. Buy your own drinks."

"You want me to get the DTs right here in front of you? You want a little entertainment?" He began to shake violently in his chair, knocking over his glass. His eyes got wide and he began flailing at Jim, repeating, "Shit shit shit shit shit!" Jim flinched and jumped up. Everyone, except for the man who ignored everything, looked over at them with different expressions of amusement. The owner slapped the bar to get their attention. He said loudly, "Cut it, drunk."

Robert, rubbing his face, let the act die out. "Whoooooo! That was a bad one." The two guys at the next table sniggered.

Jim nervously smoothed down his slacks. He leaned down and picked up his chair, which had tipped over when he'd stood. Robert's teeth were yellow in the dusk of the bar as he came over to help. Jim shrugged the hand off his shoulder. "Stay the hell away," he told him, pointing a finger at Robert's head. Robert backed off with his hands up. His grin widened to show his long incisors, then loosened.

"Jesus, bro," he said, falling into his seat. "Relax. Sit back down. Drink the rest of your beer. Me, I can't stand looking at the stuff."

"I'm not giving you any money, dammit!"

"Sit down, Jimmy."

There was something close to a threat in his voice. "I won't call you after tonight, okay? You win, right?"

Jim hesitated. He saw hate in his brother's eyes, but didn't understand it other than to recognize it as the expression that their father had worn for most of his life. He both did and did not want to know the reason for the look, and it was this uncertainty that made him carefully sit back down at the table, for lack of anything else to do.

"Then what do you want?" he asked.

Robert relaxed and put his feet up on the table. "How about that drink, Jimmy?"

Jim reached for his wallet, rising again. Robert held up a hand. "Now, you don't have to get it or anything," he said casually. "I can manage the trip. Just give me a twenty."

Jim put a five on the table.

Robert said, "C'mon, Jimmy. I got you a beer, the least you could do is buy me a whiskey. Hell, you have enough money in there for a small campfire."

"How much are the drinks in this place? You owe money?"

"You don't think I'll give you the change?" He was amused by the idea.

"Here," said Jim. He pulled a twenty out, taking back the five. Robert took the bill. He crumpled it in his hand and gave Jim a little salute. He went to the bar.

Jim didn't watch him go. He closed his eyes to the murmur of the bar—Robert's voice, the gentle knock of a glass being set down, the spinning of a fan somewhere, the mumbled conversation of the two guys at the other table. A police siren, maybe an ambulance, whooped outside and his eyes snapped open. The two at the other table glanced hurriedly away. A hand reached from behind him suddenly, slamming something down on the table with a shot.

"It's all there, Jimmy," said Robert happily. He sat and leaned back with the glass of whiskey resting on his chest, close to his mouth. A third of it was already gone, jagged pieces of ice stranded above the surface of the liquid.

Jim pocketed the money, not bothering to put it back in his wallet.

"Are you going to count it, or do you trust me?"

"No."

"You don't trust me?"

"I'm not going to count it."

Robert took a drink. He rested the glass back on his chest and played with one ear, pulling on it thoughtfully. "I'm confused," he said. "Does that mean you trust me?"

Jim tensed. "No."

"What? You think I'm going to hit you or something? Because you just admitted you don't trust me?" He laughed and made comical jabs at the air. The two guys at the other table sniggered.

"Those two friends of yours or what?" asked Jim, angry at himself for getting nervous in front of his brother.

"I'm not mad at you, Jimmy. I'm glad you said it." Bobbing his head, he took a little sip. "You're beginning to adapt, see? The importance of adapting is the only thing I remember from college. It's a very important thing, Jimmy. Morals don't mean nothing in a place like this. People'd do anything to get out, even chew off their own foot."

"What the hell are you talking about?" said Jim. "I don't want to get used to your world, Robert. I—"

He interrupted. "People have this amazing ability to adapt. The problem is being able to adapt fast enough. After that guy, Pol Pot, took over Cambodia, you could tell who was quick enough by counting who was alive at the end of the week. Same with Hitler and the Jews. Of course, the Jews and the Cambodians had obvious advantages. They'd already been pretty much screwed over, historically. Couldn't catch a break to save their lives."

"I don't think that's a very accurate comparison."

Robert slapped a hand on the table, spilling a small mount of his drink on his shirt. "Don't pull that condescending bullshit on me! This isn't a debate, Jimmy." He glared at him, then relaxed and brushed at his shirt. "Look what you made me do. Shut up and listen. First thing you have to learn is how to shut up and listen."

Jim opened his mouth, thought better of it and didn't say anything.

"Good." Robert was nodding slowly in satisfaction. "Good, Jimmy. What I'm telling you—listen to me, Jimmy—what I'm telling you is that you couldn't survive for one day in this place. Once, maybe, but not now. I've watched you over the last few years. When I first came to you for money, you gave it to me just to get rid of me for a few weeks. No fuss, no bother. Whole thing never took longer than a few minutes. You'd maybe ask me how it was going—you know, nervous talk. After that, I maybe had to whine a little, make up a story. Then . . . then you started to get off on it, just a little. That pissed me off."

Jim sat quietly with his hands folded in his lap, staring down at the table.

Robert shrugged to himself slightly. "I started to have to drag the money out of you. You'd give me those little looks, like, 'I can't believe how far you've sunk.' It got predictable." He finished his drink and put it on the table. "You started avoiding me. I had to track you down at your office and here you are, because you were afraid I'd start seriously embarrassing you. You didn't want anyone to know I was related to you, like it was some big deal. Stupid, Jimmy. Stupid."

"Stay the hell out of my life! Bobby," said Jim suddenly, clearly. He'd stood up.

"Sure, Jimmy," he said. "I'll be seeing you."

They stared at each other.

"I'm going," said Jim.

"You're gone."

Jim could feel his brother watch him leave, along with the owner and the two guys at the other table. The floor felt brittle beneath his feet, as if it could crumble under him if he didn't watch

his step. The older woman toasted herself and knocked back a shot. The man who ignored everything continued to ignore him, and Jim realized he'd never seen his face. As he pushed through the door, he heard the sound of a chair sliding on hardwood.

Outside, Jim let the night air wash his lungs clean. He rolled his neck as he walked toward his car halfway down the block, veering slightly on the sidewalk from the effort of doing the two things at once. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated on his Ford gleaming dully under the street lamp.

A voice, Robert's voice, said behind him, "Damn, Jimmy. I'm awful sorry about this, you know?"

Jim turned in time to catch a blur of motion coming from one of the guys who'd been at the other table. His arm went numb from the elbow down. The guy had been holding something. A moment later light exploded in his eyes. He was suddenly on the sidewalk.

"Hell," said Robert from far away. "These guys didn't even want any of the money. Got a real sweet tooth for this shit."

The blur came down again. Something snapped with a wet sound. Ribs, he thought. The meat of his thigh contracted violently. Jim brought an arm up to cover one side of his head.

The blur came down again, slow and casual.

Robert took his wallet, the change from the twenty and, shaking and grinning, his brother's shoes. They left Jim on the sidewalk, folded up like a fetus, for the paramedics.

The Principles of Hat-Stacking John Wallace

"If you mention hats, you'd better be wearing them," Sorkin always said. And I was. I watched Sorkin on the phone, at the rear of the diner, next to the hat stand. All eight hats from the stand were stacked on my head, perfectly balanced. I sat in a booth across from Sorkin's scrambled eggs.

The hat owners came over to me and took their hats as they left. I often asked them strange questions: "Why hat checks? What's the time? Is Chaviani the name? How now conformists?" I wanted to know the answers to stuff like this. But if I asked a saucy woman these questions, it was an easy way to avoid what she was most likely to ask. "Why do you wear my pillbox hat?" After my questions, they didn't say much at all. They took their hats and left.

Sorkin came back. "I'm upset," he said. "The juice bar's closed."

"That's upsetting," I said.

"It is."

"Yes, it is. That's true. What comes out of a juice bar closing? I mean, who's helped?"

"Damn right. Damn right, my friend. Some jerk closes a juice bar and it's the underage individuals taking the blow. I'll overthrow them."

"Who?"

"Whoever did it."

Sorkin left me with the bill so he could find out who closed his juice bar.

Why was Sorkin so passionate about a juice bar?

"A juice bar's a sacred place," he once told me somewhere. Though I've tried to remember where it was, I can't. Maybe it was by the hat check booth at the hotel in this town. We always sat in the lobby until the manager kicked us out, to get that hotel atmosphere. Women came in wearing furs. We didn't like the furs, but Sorkin

loved to watch the women and think how much better juice bar people were. I liked their hats, but if a woman wasn't wearing a hat, I didn't like her.

Well, back to the speech. Sorkin probably didn't say the juice bar equals a sacred place speech deal there. I bet it was somewhere else.

But what matters is Sorkin's juice bar speech, and not where he said it. It went: "If I go in to a juice bar, I find a sense of community. I find a menu loaded with smart drinks. I don't find the women from the hotel lobby. I don't find any clocks, just the watch on the bartender's wrist. I find a mirrored disco ball above the dance floor. You can take off your hat at a juice bar and be whatever. The people at the juice bar are smarter and more with it than the liquored sorts that pool together at drinking bars. At the juice bar, I've had conversations about a variety of topics such as—oh, I don't know—drapes and curtains and whatnot. It becomes a ritual. I walk into the juice bar prepared to enhance my mind. The light of the disco ball raises my consciousness. I flaunt my verbal wares with a series of monologues and eventually start a conversation. There are no hands clicking away, segmenting my life. I'm free until the owner announces it's three a.m. Later that night, after the juice bar is closed, I'm at a friend's apartment opening his curtains. Sacred, I tell you. The juice bar's sacred."

Of course, he'd walked out of the diner after he found out about the juice bar closing. He hadn't repeated his sacred juice bar speech. He only said it once. But when he said it, you better believe he meant it. And when the news came that the juice bar was closed, that speech came to mind. I wish I could remember where he said it. No matter.

Once, I went over to Sorkin's apartment deal. I call it a deal because it was more than an apartment. At home, I just had my room. The deal was spacious, sprawling. Big enough for lumber materials and hammers or for sculpting little statues with clay.

Sorkin smashed clocks on this day.

"Sorkin," I said. "You're smashing clocks."

"You better believe I'm smashing clocks."

"That's damaging to the clocks."

Sorkin swung his sledgehammer up into the air and slammed it down on a Westclox winding alarm thing.

"I'm venting."

"But, to smash a clock? I mean—to open a curtain, to get kicked off the wrestling team, but clock-smashing? That doesn't seem right."

"Dinko, can't I do something that at this moment seems to have no point? To me, it matters. To me, it's relevant. To me..." A timer dinged. "Gumbo time. Want some?"

How could I resist? I ate gumbo. Torn Westclox boxes, smashed chassis, hour hands, second hands, and gears were scattered all over the apartment. Well, it was good gumbo, so I didn't ask anymore questions. Maybe I should've.

Sometime later, I went to Sorkin's apartment and he wasn't there. Most times, I wouldn't have panicked. But, this was a different deal. We were first supposed to meet at the hotel lobby by the hat-check clerk's stand, but he'd stood me up. So, I just had to figure he was at his apartment and not the hotel lobby.

Why did the hotel check hats? Now, there's a thing to think on. One time I asked an employee, actually an ex-employee, and he said some stuff to me. He said the hotel ceilings were low. Chaviani, an opera star, had once stayed there. Actually, his name probably wasn't Chaviani, but that's an opera kind of name. The fact that he was an opera star isn't important. The fate of his hat is. Chaviani was a big man, six foot seven. He enjoyed wearing a tall cossack. It was imported from someplace and cost a pretty penny. When he returned from a sold-out show somewhere, he walked into the room with his cossack on. The hotel's ceilings were low, and Chaviani's cossack was cut in two by a ceiling fan. Angry about his severed cossack, he smashed up the room, then set fire to the curtains. The fire was put out before Chaviani got all crispy, but his manger had to cancel his remaining shows, since the smoke inhalation messed up his voice for a while. Other opera stars who showed up wearing cossacks had to check them at the front desk. One of them, possibly named Babillini, said he was discriminated against just because he was a cossack-wearing opera star.

So the hotel people decided to make everyone check in their hats and started the hat check booth.

Anyway, I planned to meet Sorkin there at the hat check booth, but I figured we'd gotten crossed up or some rinky-dink micer like that. So, I went to the diner.

He wasn't there, either. Nope. No Sorkin. At the time, Sorkin liked to conduct solo candlelight vigils at the door of what was once the juice bar. The juice bar had been turned into a service center for Westclox customers.

Customers could go in and get clocks fixed. Although Sorkin had been bashing clocks that one day, he didn't take them in for repair. He just vigiled. Of course, they might not have fixed them anyway since he willingly smashed them.

When vigiling, he didn't say anything. He lit candles and looked serious.

The only other place he liked to hang out was a curtain dealer. I checked, and Sorkin wasn't there either. I know there was a hat shop across the street from the curtain dealer. I didn't walk in because I knew I'd break down, mention hats, and end up wearing a hundred of them. I had no time for fun like that today. So, panicked, and not hat shop bound, I went to the police station to report Sorkin missing.

I was worried. I mean losing stuff is one thing, but losing Sorkin—that's another.

Once, I lost a watch, but that wasn't too big a deal, although it did cause some problems for my dad. I was always late for wrestling practice, and, luckily, it caused me to get kicked off the team.

I still don't have a watch. I usually get the time from the clock in the middle of town. Dad was angry when I lost my watch. He always wanted me to be in some sort of group where I'd blend in. He wanted me to join the school chorus so I could wear a red choir robe. He loved conformity, marching bands and high school wrestling. At a downtown shopping deal, dad would take notes on what most people were wearing—polo shirts, boat shoes, or whatever was in.

"Dinko," he'd say, "why don't you go with the flow. You see those boys wearing polo shirts? Polo shirts are an in thing. I wear them. I bought one for you. We'll wear them together. I'm older, but they're still good on me. We'll get you a weight set. You can toughen up, eat cheese-fries, letter in wrestling..." He went on and on like this.

For a while, he bought me big army boots and military parkas to try to put me in a military mood. The parka was no good; I didn't wear it, but I trudged all winter long in the boots. Trudging was good. I couldn't get to wrestling on time, wouldn't wear a chorus robe, and couldn't stay in step with the marching band, so the military was the only thing left. Dad thinks I'll be in the Army standing in line with a hundred other men wearing military green the summer after I graduate from high school. I doubt they would take a habitual hat-stacker.

Well, I walked into the police station.

A clerk sat behind one of those windows you can slide open when you want to talk. Her head was great—round and full. She had a puffy face. A coffee-maker blurred in the room behind her.

"I'd like to file a report," I said.

"Okay," she walked over to a shelf and grabbed a huge book. She came back and put it down in front of me. I could smell strong coffee. "You need to read this seven-hundred-and-forty page, eleven-

by-seventeen, wire-bound instructional manual on report-filing," she said. "Answer the essay questions at the end of each section, type them up double-spaced and write a report on the sentence rhythms the author used to construct this manual. Turn it in tomorrow and you can file a report."

"That's just not right. Oh no, who's going to stop this show? It's not right. I can't do all this stuff. Read seven-hundred-and-forty jumbo pages. One night? Come on. It's not realistic."

"Our procedures aren't realistic, bub. The procedural inspector on report-filing is ill, home-bound. So, we in the office have been funning your kind by making report-filing procedures extremely difficult."

"Why's there such discipline?" I yelled. "How come everything's gotta be in order or it gets closed down? Everything's gotta conform, stick to time and procedures?"

The woman slammed the jumbo manual down on my head. The carpet was rough. It smelled like take-out food. After that blow, everything was foggy for a while.

When my senses returned, everything was still black. I realized the manual was on my face, so I removed it. I looked up and saw the woman standing over me.

"I'll knock off your hat," I said. I stood up, took her hat, and put it on my head. I had made the mistake of mentioning a hat. The only worse place to pull such a boner was the hat shop. So I took a deep breath, put the manual under my arm-feeling it would come in handy to chuck at her if she got mean-and climbed through the office window. (Of course, I could've used the door, but this was more fun.) In the office, a side door led to the police equipment room.

In the room, three motorcycle helmets were lined up on a shelf. I put on two. Then I put on three detective bowlers—detectives still wore bowlers in this town- and about eight blue patrolmen's caps. Finally, I put the last helmet on top as a challenge to myself. I was an experienced hat-stacker. I mean, who wants complacency? Who wants everything easy? I needed a challenge.

The clerk came into the equipment room. She said, "You have to take tests, go to the academy and then join the force to wear those." I tipped my head towards her and the pile fell. The top one gave her a good crack on the head. It put her out cold.

I found myself in a place I'd never been before, as far as Sorkin's hat-wearing beliefs went. The police station was empty, except for myself and the unconscious clerk. I could wait for the force to come back and get their hats. When they got the hats, I could say things like, "Why be prompt? What's order? Where's Sorkin? What's

with the jumbo manual?" That would be fun, but I didn't have the time. I had to get through the whole manual so I could file a missing persons report.

I left the police station with the hats and helmets piled back on my head. I had to walk on my knees to get through the doorway. On the sidewalk, people nodded in approval at my talent for balancing hats while carrying a really big manual.

While walking, I saw Sorkin crossing a street. "Sorkin!" I yelled at him. "Sorkin!" I was happy. He wasn't missing anymore.

"Hi, hi, hi," he said, and started running. I chased him, lugging the manual, balancing helmets and hats. I followed him several blocks to a small courtyard.

He'd been at the courtyard by his apartment a few days before, making miniature clay statues of his favorite juice bar regulars. This followed the candlelight vigil and clock smashing.

Anyway, since Sorkin wasn't in the courtyard, I thought maybe he was ducked down on the second-floor walkway that circled around it. I walked up there, wanting to ask if he'd hit the diner with me. The walkway had a low ceiling and I stooped to avoid toppling the hats. I looked around, but I didn't find him.

One night I was walking around town, trying out a rather tall and varied stack of hats. I looked up at the clock in the town square. In the light of the clock face, I could see Sorkin walking around on the clock tower's ledge. It was around 12:30.

I yelled at Sorkin, "What are you doing?"

"Good things, good things, good things," he said and continued his work.

I asked him more questions, but he didn't give any answers.

He walked along the ledge. He tried to unscrew the bolt holding the clock hands with a large wrench. I knew Sorkin. I knew how Sorkin got me started wearing hat stacks. When it first happened, it was kind of annoying. There I was, at the diner, eating a bowl of clam chowder with a lot of those salty, round cracker things mixed in. I said, "Sorkin, last night I was watching this Western and everyone wore big ten-gallon hats."

Sorkin told me if you mention hats, you'd better be wearing them.

My chowder was cold by the time I got all of them balanced. At the time, I didn't know that a ten gallon hat, if available, is a foundation, a starting point, for a hat stacker—that a derby shouldn't be put on top of a homburg, that a beret can be put on top of the whole pile. I used to practice balancing stacks of hats by the window in the front room at my house. It embarrassed dad because it wasn't

common. He always wanted to put on red leotards and wrestle by the window. When I practiced hat-stacking there, he'd come and pull the curtains shut.

When I wear a hat stack, I'm no one and everyone. I'm the cop, the cowboy, the opera-goer, the street sweeper, the old lady—but I'm all of them at once.

Now, I like to mention hats at the diner before I order. I mention them, put them on, and then order my chowder. That way, I can eat my chowder warm.

It was impossible for me to climb up to the ledge because of the complex hat stack I wore; it would've toppled. I watched Sorkin trying to remove the hands for a while. Eventually the strain of the hats took its toll on my neck. I was tired.

I went home and left Sorkin on the ledge, trench coat flapping about, working away on the clock hands.

When I came back through the town square for breakfast the next morning, the clock hands were gone. There was little doubt in my mind that Sorkin had removed them. The town seemed out of whack, disordered without the clock. My service at the diner was highly unusual. The waitresses juggled dishes and didn't wear their usual pink outfits. Instead, they wore evening gowns and hummed obscure show tunes.

I hadn't even planned on stacking hats there, but the service was so laid-back, I had plenty of time. "Bacon and eggs? My bacon and eggs?" I said, hoping to speed up the service.

I was able to order my lunch while I waited for my breakfast.

After lunch, I put the hats back on the stand and decided to go to Sorkin's apartment deal. I wanted to see what stuff he was doing with those big old clock hands. I'll admit it: I was curious.

Sorkin didn't answer the door when I knocked. The door wasn't locked, but I decided to go around back and climb in the window, since stuff like that was always more fun.

I climbed in through the window and there wasn't a hat to be found, or a Sorkin. The statues of the juice bar people weren't in the deal, and the big clock hands weren't, either. There wasn't anything there at all. It looked big and barren.

I went home to see if Sorkin had perhaps called and left a message. Dad greeted me at the door.

"Dinko," he said. "Do you want to bowl tonight? Everyone's got to wear the same shoes."

"When I go somewhere, I can wear as many hats as I want, depending on ceiling height, but I can't wear more than one pair of shoes."

"Darn. Thought I might get your interest with that."

Since I'd mentioned hats, I went to the closet and put on a hat stack. It consisted of alternating snap-brimmed businessman's hats and homburgs. As I walked around the house to see if the stack balanced, Dad followed me around, whipping the curtains shut in disgust. I left the house with the hats on.

I walked over to the curtain dealer, but they had a sign posted saying they were on vacation. I walked towards the diner. On my way there, members of the marching band walked by me out of uniform and out of step. The wrestling team played hopscotch on a sidewalk.

Sorkin still wasn't at the diner. I walked over to the Westclox service center to see if he was conducting a vigil.

The door to the center was boarded up like a dilapidated state attorney's office. The clock tower hands were attached to the boards. The clay statues of Sorkin's favorite juice bar goers were arranged in a semi-circle looking up at the hands. A statue Sorkin had made of himself was in the center of the circle. His statue didn't wear a hat.

It didn't need to.

Ungluck Meets Einstein Meets Ungluck Timothy Russell

(slices from Night of the Thief)

Symmetry.

That's what life is.

Symmetry.

Humans have two legs, two arms, two ears. They're built three-dimensionally around a central axis, a 2D axis that cuts like a plane through their bodies. I'm figuring it all out now. I've been reading. I know. Places like the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, where I slowly retire, display 2D cross-sections of the human body between glass.

The question remains, of course, for the onlookers: who consented (maybe checking the right box on the back of their driver's license) to having their body sliced like cheese and sandwiched in glass for the museum? (I always tell 'em game show losers.) "Poor guy," you can overhear sometimes, while people look at the little colored streets and ducts on the flat Rand McNally map of the body. "Whatta dude," the young grungers say. The various slices of the penis give the gender away.

Symmetry.

That's what life is.

Symmetry.

"Dr. Abbott! I'm lockin' things up!"

"Yeah, all right. Stay way from that weird skeleton. Dust something else. Make sure you get everything. Mayor Ossie's coming on Monday."

"Osborn?"

"Goodnight. Have a good weekend."

"No thanks."

It was late that night. It wasn't dark and stormy. I'd just finished not dusting the skeleton and was wheeling my supplies across the wing where Scooby lived ("Scooby" was my name for the 2D man). I stopped and noticed what Dr. Abbott, being the scientist he is, might call a "phenomenon." There was movement in the second frame.

Was Scooby's blood flowing? Maybe he'd tired of being a row of panes in a museum, a flat dead spectacle. Maybe he'd up and decided to put himself back together and get some payback. But when I moved closer to the glass I found that the movement was actually not "in" Scooby but was just above the surface of the glass. There was a thin flat thing, like a plane, or another pane, or a film of something hovering there. I know could see my wrinkly face reflecting off something. There was something there. It was about three by three feet. There were flat objects in it just above a horizontal line, and below this line the film was darker and brown. A quick fade. Sitting on the horizontal line (which looked very much like some kind of ground) and near the left edge of the plane was a square, about a half foot on each side, like an empty kitchen tile. Inside this square was a little flat creature: a little blobby shape with a flat heart and veins and organs and a head. It was picking up a tiny U-shaped object and pouring a flat liquid into its mouth; I watched the red liquid swirl and circulate in a spiral.

As stunned as I was to find myself starring right at what I guessed was a section of a 2D universe, I decided to approach this calmly, my first investigation as a scientist. How did this happen to appear in our universe? I wondered. How late had I been working? This was worse than the Scooby-revenge scenario. More observation seemed right. The plane was slightly curved back all the way around near its edge, and a light was coming from the very edge of it. I reached up and touched the edge light and the world flashed, and I felt a ripping, falling, then landing sensation.

Ungluck. Ungluck
Ungluck
Ungluck
Ungluck
Ungluck

I was looking at the line in front of me. How could I tell where one things stood out from another? Where things separated into objects? Colors, I guess, but I had a kind of depth perception as a two-dimensional creature, too. I mean, after all, three-dimensional beings (humans) see in 2D, right? From what I've read, and from my own observations, I've found that we just somehow break that flat world

into background and foreground and sky and ground and things and more things: we aren't too surprised when one object seems to magically bleed into another and come out the other side; we know the first has gone behind the second. It ain't so scary, I told my grandson once, it's just seeing things. And I can tell as I write this that I wasn't scared by what'd happened. I was too old to be scared. In a way, the whole thing was fun. An actual participant observation, and, finally, a real vacation. And a paid one, too.

So there I was, sitting in the house-one the square I'd mentioned before-of that flat creature. Wait! I did have two eyes; I must've, because it did. I hadn't looked close enough at the head of this thing when I was seeing the universe from the outside. Note for next time. And there was no width to anything, not even the creature: it was a line in front of me; but lines. In our 3D universe have width, and these didn't, so how could I see 'em? I don't know. Again, 3D beings don't really see 3D things, just 2D representations of them, and they manufacture 3D-ness somehow by having two eyes and a good brain for seeing. I, likewise, was seeing only in 1D, but somehow I could make things into 2D. Here's sort of what the universe, or at least this creature's room, looked like:

Only, well, you know, this line has width, but the 2D universe didn't. Sorry, sometime I ramble. The creature was asking me if I was okay.

Fine, you don't seem too startled to have a '3D someone' appear in your universe.

Happens all the time.

Really? Not in ours.

I was kidding. Actually, Mr. Ungluck, I brought you here. It's a rather complicated process, you know. Converting from 3D to 2D? Ever try? No, of course not. Anyway, I'm a scientist, one of several quite prominent and not very well liked in this country. What's

worse, I'm also a politician. But I regress. As I was saying, though, how I brought you here is difficult to complain, but suffice to be told that what I'm experiencing right now would be called, in several earth subcultures, a 'heavy trip'. The liquid you probably saw me drink and digest is hallucinogenic in nature and— say, at that point you could still see the inside of me, correct?

I . . . yes.

See anything abnormal? Odd? No?

I'm inclined to shake my head and there's no dimension to do it in. How do you say 'no' without words here?

You'd find it revolting and painful. You saw nothing cancerous?

I suppose you look healthy from the inside. I don't know. I'm a 3D janitor, not a 2D doctor. Maybe you should get a second 3D opinion.

Not necessarily. To continue, though, I've been meditating on being able to do this for some time now. However, I'm still unsure as to whether or not it worked or not.

Why?

Well, the liquid is so hallucinogenic that, while it does supposedly give one some kind of power to manipulate spatial dimensions, it also, unfortunately for objectiveness, often gives rise to bizarre delusions and illusions, etc. In conclusion, I really have no way of not knowing whether or not I'm not just imagining you or not—and language is a problem, two.

Well trust me- what's your name, by the way?

My name? Albert Einstein.

Einstein? You realize that-

Simply a coincidence, I insure you.

And how do you know about our culture and my name and—

That's also a coincidence.

Oh. Huh?

You were saying something to the defect of trusting you.

I was about to say that I think I'm real. I mean, I remember seeing you and your universe, or a part of it rather, floating over Scooby, and then I touched the edge of the part and there was this flash of light and then-

I'm sorry, but that doesn't help much. You'd be telling me that even if you were an allusion. I look at Ungluck a little closer and he seems to be bulging slightly, and changing colors.

Jesus, that makes it hard for me to convince you, doesn't it? Maybe we oughta change the subject. Tell me about this universe. I've been waiting for a chance to ask someone to do that.

Well, where should I start? Our planet, the sun from our second, is a circle; it has layers of rock and roll over a molten one, and we think there's an apple core somewhere down there. It has oceans we sometimes traverse for travel and sport and travel. Ungluck seems impatiently purple.

What?! No, tell me about this universe. How do you get past one another? It looks like you have to climb over each other to continue on your path. How would I get to the other side of this room right now?

We're very good at jumping. That's what your longer leg is for. Try, if you feel it up. He leaps over me, his head hits the ceiling of my house, and he lands awkwardly on my bed.

This is horrible. I'm startin' to miss my universe. And how the hell am I gonna get back? He climbs down and moves over to me. I swivel my head to the other side of my body to continue conversing. He looks like a surprise. You can move your head around to your back, or wait, not to your back, but to your other side, which makes some sense: symmetry—I have an arm back there too, don't I? I don't remember seeing that either.

Take a look for yourself. This is becoming quiet amazing. His body is now rolling in tiny waves. Which one of us is the reel?

There's an arm back there. Are we speaking in English?

No, of course not. We're speaking in the native language of my country, but it's being transported into English, your language, by my 4D hyper-supervisors, who like and unlike your realities for some odd season. A way in, it's not dislike the war movies on your planet where Nazis talk and plot, and then plot and be evil in English, but do so with German accents.

Oh. Uh, do you guys have museums here?

Yes, in fact, there's won't hear in this city. Do you have 1D cross-sections of your bodies? Need a janitor? Suddenly his upper eye disappears.

What's happening? Now everything does look like a line. I've lost my sense of depth perception! One of my eyes is gone!

Well, I would adventure that one of three things is happening write now: A) You are real, I'm losing my ability to keep you in this universe, and you're starting to slip into another one; B) you aren't real and this trip is getting mildly frightening, 'bad', if you will; or C) I can't think of a third extreme. His mouth has not disappeared yet.

I'm not sure I'm liking this! What if I don't exist and I am just a figment of your imagination? You can see how that might upset me.

Of course, and there's a 53.865% probability of that being the case. But whether it's true or not, you still exist to some extent.

To some extent!? How can something exist to some extent?! You're a poor therapist, Einstein!

Mr. Ungluck is both bulging and rippling and glowing. The colors he's admitting now are quite beautiful. Hurray for science! The probability of my own existence, according to my recent calculations, is only slightly higher, if that makes you feel better: 59.433%, plus or minus 250% for error. In any hand, Mr. Ungluck, I've been thinking that I'm starting to think we might just be reflections of each other, that we need each other to exist: I would not exist were I not created by you, and you would never not exist were you created by me— or something like that. You'll have to pardon me. The headache is settling in. There's a theory in there sometimes, though.

But— I'm not so sure that—

I think we are the pleasure of all things— wait, is that right? Who am I?

What if— Ungluck's mouth vanishes with his second eye and his faceless body trembles for a moment before also blinking away—?

* Blink! *

The Cricket Jar J.T. Stella

A rainbow arched over the trailer court in the hazy Florida morning sky as a Ford pick-up turned right and headed south on Interstate 295. Unyielding winds grabbed remnants of last night's storm and towed them across the pavement to a temporary place where, for a moment, the helpless debris rested, until the next gust came and floated them over the ground again. The green '76 F150 exited 1-295 and headed east towards the supermarket. A radio commercial said a car dealership had captured the announcer and put him in an eight-foot glass jar, where he was to remain until they "liquidate their entire pre-owned stock." Edgar heard his mother say, Jesus Christ, Edgar! Will you roll that damn window up! You see I'm trying to do something here; he did. Edgar noticed his mother fingering the auburn-tinted curls dangling lifelessly behind her ear. Up ahead, a weathered billboard read THE PICKLED PIG- 22 MILES. The most inconsiderate... The commercial ended with echoing sounds of a huge lid being screwed onto the jar and the announcer's cries fading into silence. Edgar watched the loud yellow dashes come straight at him one after another, collecting under the oxidized hood. Turning onto the gravel road leading up to the store, the tired engine of the Ford pinged and pattered at the extra horsepower needed for the uphill climb. The cab bounced and swayed as the tires dipped into deep potholes left behind by eighteen-wheelers. Edgar's mother's large breasts swung back and forth with every motion; he tried not to notice. Watch the— goddamnit! The tires locked and skidded over stone, sliding the Ford into a Handicapped spot fifteen feet from the doors of the Pickled Pig. A banner reading BEST WHOLESALE PRICES IN THE WHOLE COUNTY stretched across the thick display windows. Under the sign, stock boys, cashiers, and customers scooted back and forth, gathering forgotten items, retrieving shopping carts and approving personal checks. Beatrice Fleabottom reached into her large black vinyl purse and pulled out a tube of "Quiet Rose"

colored lipstick and the mirror-half of a round, broken compact. Edgar watched his mother move the small mirror in a constellation-like pattern while positioning and repositioning her face in order to reflect its large features. She spoke into the mirror.

"Now don't you get out of this truck, ya hear?" she said. "They have boys to do that stuff, that's why they hire 'em." She puckered and relaxed her mouth several times before bringing the colored, tobacco-ridden nub to her lips, and for a minute was speechless. Silence. During these unusual periods, Edgar found that he enjoyed his mother's company; he connected to her, and she to him. Edgar scanned the parking lot, taking in all of the broken-down cars, towering weeds, and leaning telephone poles. It was easy for a stranger to think that this was a junkyard, rather than a supermarket, Edgar thought. Dingy sunshine leaked through a fracture in the clouds and poured over a small white bungalow on Lathrop Street. Edgar guessed whoever lived there must be pretty special.

"I'll only be a few minutes, so don't let the engine run," she said. "No sense wastin' gasoline like that when you don't have to." Edgar's eyes locked onto the hood ornament of a '75 Cadillac. He was somewhere else. He was with his father, wherever that was. They were talking and drinking beer in some quiet place.

"Waste, waste, waste, Edgar. That's all you do with yourself is waste—time, money, gasoline... your life..." She replaced the compact in her purse and glanced at Edgar, who was still someplace other than the parking lot of The Pig, "...it's a waste. Are you listenin' to me at all?" Hood ornament. "I swear you were switched at birth. Sometimes I seriously think you belong to somebody else, probably somebody as flighty and confused as you." She slammed the door and waddled across the loading zone, one hand clamped tight atop her pink wide-brimmed sun hat.

Edgar remembered his tenth birthday, when his father brought home the brand new Ford, saying that it was Edgar's present. He explained that when he was gone, Amanda (the truck) would be all Edgar's. Edgar didn't expect the burden so soon, though; he was used to splitting it with his father. And these monthly jaunts to The Pig were starting to take a toll on the old pick-up. Soon she would start to fall apart. Self-destruct. Ball joints would buckle the two front tires inward, the pit in the windshield would spider out, covering the entire passenger side, the muffler would finally free itself on The 295 and disappear into the reeds; she would become a loud, rickety old bitch. Edgar knew that. He feared that.

Edgar dug his buttocks into the seat cushion and stretched his legs across the floor to the passenger side. Last time, he had to wait over an hour before the boy with the blue apron came and took away the five cases of strawberry preserves. Edgar remembered looking up and seeing the pock-faced boy knocking at the window. He stood there wearing one of those baseball caps with the pig's nose glued on top of the bill. Edgar laughed at him; he wanted one of those hats.

The business arrangement between his mother and Stuart Beederbaum began almost a year ago, after Stu had tasted some of Beatrice's best work at a booth at the '91 County Fair. The paunchy old man said that her preserves were absolutely delicious, and by far the best in the county. Beatrice's chin sank; her eyes batted like an adolescent schoolgirl. Stu suggested that she label the product and sell it in his supermarket. He would act as her marketing manager and take care of all overhead expenses. He came up with a name and designed the label—a head sketch of an old woman wearing wire-rimmed glasses, her silver hair all up in a bun, looking pleasant and calm. She was not Beatrice. Stu said it was bad luck to put your picture on your own product when introducing it to the market, and that Beatrice should be thankful that his kind mother volunteered her own "pretty little face." Stu said not to worry about labels because it was, in fact, Beatrice who was inside each and every jar of Grandmother's Hush preserves. Edgar thought that was a good move on Stu's part.

Edgar noticed his mother standing near the floor-mat-activated glass doors, bending Stu's ear about this thing and that thing while employees tried to get his attention. Edgar knew it was hard to turn the old woman away though; she kind of grew on you, like mold.

Blue and silver garland hung from the eaves of the trailer and stuck to the wet siding. The small front yard was canopied by a blue piece of tarpaulin stretched over four unequal lengths of conduit. The neighborhood people called it a tent. Adults got to sit on the cheap plastic lawn furniture under the canopy while the kids sat on inverted buckets and milk crates, or Indian-style in the wet grass. Almost the whole block was there, stuffed in the small front yard like a can of worms. It seemed that if you opened the gate, bodies would go spilling out into the street and sidewalk and run down the gutter and disappear into the sewers never to be seen again. Edgar smiled at the thought of liquefying bodies rolling along the curb, picking up all the shit stuck in the cracks and lying loosely in their path, taking it with them as they melted away between the metal grates.

The sky wasn't dark and it wasn't light; it was a kind of charcoal color, the kind you might see lying in the catch tray of a Weber grill after months of neglect. Two little girls in pigtails darted over the matchboard, zig-zagging between chairs and chaise lounges. Edgar sat next to his mother on a short end table. One of the front legs sank into the moist ground, causing him to lean awkwardly to the right. Birthday cake was being distributed among the adults while the new fifty-year-old, Reynard Dorfbagel, opened gifts and spurted out a bunch of stray "thank-you's". When he got to the jar of Grandmother's Hush Blueberry Preserves and the painted walnut glued to a block of wood that had "electrical nut" printed on it, he looked over at Beatrice and smiled mockingly. From the other side of the table, Beverly Dorfbagel passed Edgar a piece of cake, which was quickly intercepted by Beatrice. Edgar reached out an expectant hand, but she put the cake down on the table in front of her, next to her own piece. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she whispered loudly. "You already had two whole plates of that hotch-potch. Really Edgar, do you have to make an absolute pig of yourself all the time?" People were beginning to turn their heads towards the familiar scene. "No son of Beatrice Fleabottom's is goin' to make a pig of hisself in front of all these people." The chatter halted as Edgar felt a rush of heat fill his cheeks and earlobes. He wondered if the person next to him could feel the heat throbbing from his face, as he welcomed the image of his mother melting away right in front of him, and thought of all the dirt and shit and scum she would have to pick up and take with her as she seeped down under the huge metal lid.

Beatrice was involved in a conversation about some woman named Edna who couldn't make it to the party. "Oh yes, that hat" she giggled, "that awful pink hat she wore when we went to the mall. She looked so silly and stupid, I just couldn't bring myself to tell her." A quiet new station wagon glided by; the bright and cheery faces inside contrasted the mood of the sky. Skeeter Garcia's wife commented on the premature darkness. The women went on talking as the two girls in pigtails asked Edgar if he would lift the upside-down rowboat behind the trailer so they could catch some frogs.

Beatrice cut her sentence short, "Where you headin' off to, Edgar?"

"Goin' to help the girls catch frogs," he answered unsurely. "Frogs?"

"You know the little green things... hop around," he demonstrated a bouncing motion with his right hand.

"Don't get smart with me Edgar, I know damn well what a frog is," she snapped. "Don't be gone for too long now, ya hear?" She returned her attention to the conversation and stabbed a fork into Edgar's piece of cake.

The girls collected the two buckets and took Edgar's hand, pulling him to the back of the trailer where the grass was even higher than the front. As he walked, Edgar noticed small puddles swelling around the soles of his shoes with a squishy sound, then disappearing back into the thick grass as he lifted his foot. High weeds caged an overturned rowboat laying alongside the tire, just under the bathroom window. Through the window, they could hear Reynard humming a familiar tune and wrestling with some pages of the newspaper; the girls giggled. Edgar looked around at the sickly trees trimming the edge of the backyard and grass blades drowned in the rising creek, climbing its way up to the trailer. The path he used to take down to the creek went only a few feet, then vanished under the creeping water. Edgar thought it was weird that the creek was now using the trail to get to him. It wanted him, he thought. And he wanted it.

The girls started to get anxious, so Edgar dug his fingers into the earth and lifted the old boat. A great surge of heat escaped along with several frightened frogs. The girls screamed, chasing the frogs, as they went bouncing into the woods. Edgar couldn't help but laugh at the spectacle, and cheer on the frogs as they sprang away aimlessly, with the soaking-wet pigtailed girls in pursuit.

As Edgar walked to the side of the trailer, he concentrated on the throbbing pulse in the air. He thought it was funny how some creatures are quiet all day, then scream all night. He was just around the corner from the party, on the side of the trailer that would have a hose, had the Dorfbagels had one. Edgar bent down and turned the key on the spigot. The water creeping up through the pipes sounded like a drum roll, and then a cymbal crash, splashing into his hands. He could hear the discussion about when the county was going to trim the tree branches hanging over the "Whispering Pines" sign at the entrance of the trailer park. He heard the mother of the two pigtailed girls think aloud to herself that it was about to rain and wondered where her children were, then asked Beatrice where she thought they could've gone. Edgar got up, dried his hands on the back of his thighs, and heard his mother's voice.

"If they went off looking for little animals, they made a mistake taking Edgar along," she said. "I swear that boy is so stupid, he couldn't keep not even a goldfish alive for a single day. I remember once he asked for one of my jars to start a rock collection or some

damned thing. So I gave it to him, even though, well, you know how expensive those jars can get, but I gave him one anyway. Then, when he came back, he'd bottled up two crickets nice and tight. And I told that boy, 'Edgar,' I said, 'you have to poke holes in the top of that jar to give those critters some air.' Well, he never paid me no mind, and I swear that boy would come back with two fresh crickets every night, sit down, and watch em' die. And I told my husband, I said, 'Morton, you better do somethin' about your son because I think he's gone and lost his mind.' She paused for a moment to organize her thoughts. "And Edgar simply would not listen, and so I took the jar away from him after a week and never got him that dog I was going to, cause Lord knows what he would've done with that."

Edgar was paralyzed. He thought hard about his father, and about that damn truck he left him. He thought of working at the juniorate school, all the people he had met, all the floors he had mopped. He thought of his childhood, growing up in Whispering Pines, riding his bike, playing by the creek, silencing the crickets. That's when he knew what he had to do. Once again he had to stop himself short of going to see his father. He could handle this on his own, he thought. But he still knew what he had to do.

Edgar went into the backyard again; it was quiet. The life the girls had brought there a few minutes ago was gone. The happiness followed them into the woods, like they followed the frogs; always moving away from him, Edgar thought. It didn't take him long because he was so skilled at the art of capturing the tiny insects. When he snuck up, their sensors only caught him for a moment. When they thought the danger had passed, he was still there, motionless. He picked up one screamer and was looking for another when his mother called from the front.

Everyone was saying their good-byes while Beverly washed the dishes and listened to the radio. Guests filed out clumsily because of the soggy grass and high-heeled shoes. Edgar walked slowly to Amanda, as it started to rain. He picked up Beatrice at the front gate, waved good-bye and sped off to their trailer.

"Can you imagine," Beatrice said. "Edna Parks said she couldn't make it to the party because her son has the flu. Why, that's the oldest trick in the book." Edgar stayed silent. Beatrice lit a cigarette and looked at Edgar curiously, "I hope you remembered to say 'thank you.'"

The humidity inside the trailer hung in the air like thick cigar smoke. Beatrice went into her room to change and Edgar sat uneasily on the davenport in the front room. He looked across the room where a rapier, a cutlass, and a saber displayed themselves above the TV. A

vacant nail jutted out above his head where a dirk once hung. It was gone though. His father used it nine months and three days ago when he dragged it twice along each wrist. His father had left him there; by himself. Then, he remembered what he had to do.

"Sonofabitch!" Beatrice screamed. "Didn't I tell you to fix this goddamned widow. These shittin' curtains is soaked now!"

Edgar walked quickly into his bedroom without responding. Goddamn lazy bastard!

He sat on the edge of the bed, and thought today was definitely a two-cricket day, but he had to settle for what he had picked up earlier in the Dorfbagel's backyard. He locked the door and retrieved a well-used glass jar from underneath the dresser. He held the jar up to the light and shook it, disturbing the tiny dried corpses inside, then unscrewed the lid and dropped in the silenced insect, where it made a crunching sound among the detached legs and antennae. A feeling of satisfaction poured over Edgar like sunshine over the house on Lathrop Street, as he bottled the Jar up tightly.

Sister Virgilius and One of Those Things Your Mother Warned
You About
Kevin Jones

Sister Virgilius was a tiny person. To look at her still, beatific smile on, say, Parents' Day at Visitation School in Kewanee back in the sixties, might be to mistake her for one of the painted plaster statues that adorned just about every flat surface of her classroom. Except that as a Dominican, her robes weren't as colorful as those the statues wore. Nor, except for one brief moment at the end of her tenure at Visitation, did she writhe in agony worthy of a martyred saint.

With her tiny stature, nervous, bird-like movements, and a thin reedy voice that didn't carry much beyond the third row, Sister V, as certainly no one ever dared to call her to her face, would not, at first encounter, seem to be the sort of teacher who could instill fear, indeed command abject obedience, from a classroom of forty-three Catholic eighth graders, unruly, surly, sick of parroting back eight years of The Baltimore Catechism, and ready (or so we thought) for the world outside the always-closed windows of her classroom.

But Sister Virgilius had one sure way of bringing order to a class. It wasn't subtle, it wasn't pretty, but it was certainly— as certain as the damnation we would achieve if we didn't stop whatever it was we were doing and listen to Sister V— effective. Whenever we were loud, or whenever we didn't pay attention, or whenever she wanted to make a point— and this was often— that we would never forget, she would stand in the direct center of the front of the classroom (the exact spot where the archbishop sat when he came to let us kiss his ring during his farewell tour of the diocese schools), fold her hands into her sleeves, take a deep breath, and become very still. Then she would do it. Very slowly, very, very slowly, she would roll her eyes back up into her head. Nothing showed but whites— which as you probably realize, weren't very white at all, but somewhere between dirty gray and yellow and shot through here and there with red veins, looking for all the world like like an egg you had begun to

fry in bacon grease, but hadn't been paying much attention to, only to realize when it began to congeal, that it wasn't simply an egg, but rather a fairly well-developed embryo.

It worked. It always worked. It had worked for the last eight years, and for no one knew how many years before that, for nuns in those days were ageless, maybe immortal, probably older than God. We were reduced to an instant, whimpering, pleading silence, all of us, not just the good children who sat in the back of the room, but also those assigned to sit in the front as well— the hard guys, who would unfold their black plastic motorcycle jackets as soon as they were off the school grounds and sneak across the street to the bowling alley to play pool at lunch time; it worked for the tough girls who experimented with makeup, and who would steal a smoke with the janitor in his room beneath the school cafeteria at recess. Though you could never hear it, we were all shouting it; it was all around us in the room, just as real as the stigmata of Padre Pio, the trances of Teresa of Avila, the levitations of Joseph of Copertino, the fervent, fervent plea: Sister, we'll do whatever you want! Right now! Just bring your eyes back down!

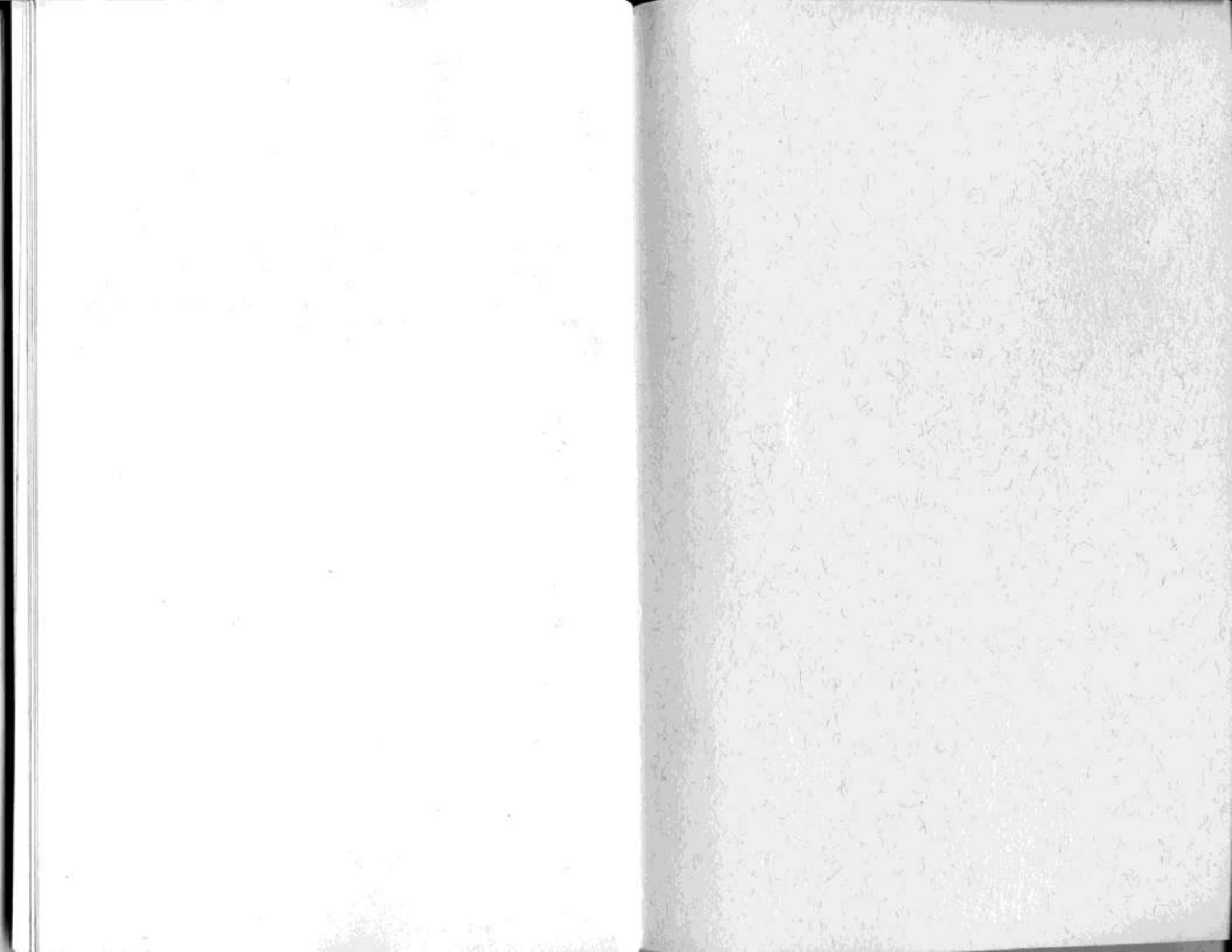
One day in the spring of our eighth grade year it happened. Your mother told you about it, though maybe you didn't pay any attention to her at the time: "If you keep doing those things with your eyes, one day they're going to freeze that way. Then what will you do?" Sister V didn't listen to her mother (though it would have been inconceivable that nuns had mothers in those days), and after years of eye-rolling, it finally caught up with her.

It had been a particularly bad bout of behavior disorder: a gang of Public School kids, Pagans, as the nuns liked to call them, out of school for some secular holiday, had been shouting blasphemies up at our windows from the front steps of the bowling alley across the street. Some of us were ready to go down and beat the crap out of them; others were simply ready to go down and join them. Whatever, it had been a major uproar, so much so that no one had really noticed, that even after order was re-established, Sister V still had her eyes rolled back in her head. We only began to realize that something was unusual when Sister began pounding herself in the temple with her fists. Her eyes had gotten stuck up in her head.

The room was in tumult. The children in the front of the room knelt and prayed aloud; those of us in the back shouted and laughed and threw things; Sister screamed and pounded. The school secretary came in and screamed and pounded, and so did the janitor, and

several of the other nuns. But Sister V's eyes wouldn't come back down. Finally Monsignor Burke had to be called, and he was very gentle as he led Sister Virgilius, pounding and screaming, away.

She didn't come back, and we had a lay teacher for the rest of the spring term. And as the parish had no high school, we joined the Pagans from across the street at the public high school. I lost touch with the church, and with the nuns, and with most of my classmates shortly after that. I remember hearing, years later, though, that Sister V's eyes never did come back down, and that she had to be placed in a home for nuns whose eyes had rolled back in their heads. I do remember being told that the story had a happy ending, though, that the doctors had taken a tiny chain-saw to her forehead and cut holes, so that if Sister would sort of squint and duck her head, she could see enough to get around on her own a little. I think I remember believing it at the time, but parochial school children were asked to believe a lot of strange things back then.



spring

