


Spring 1987

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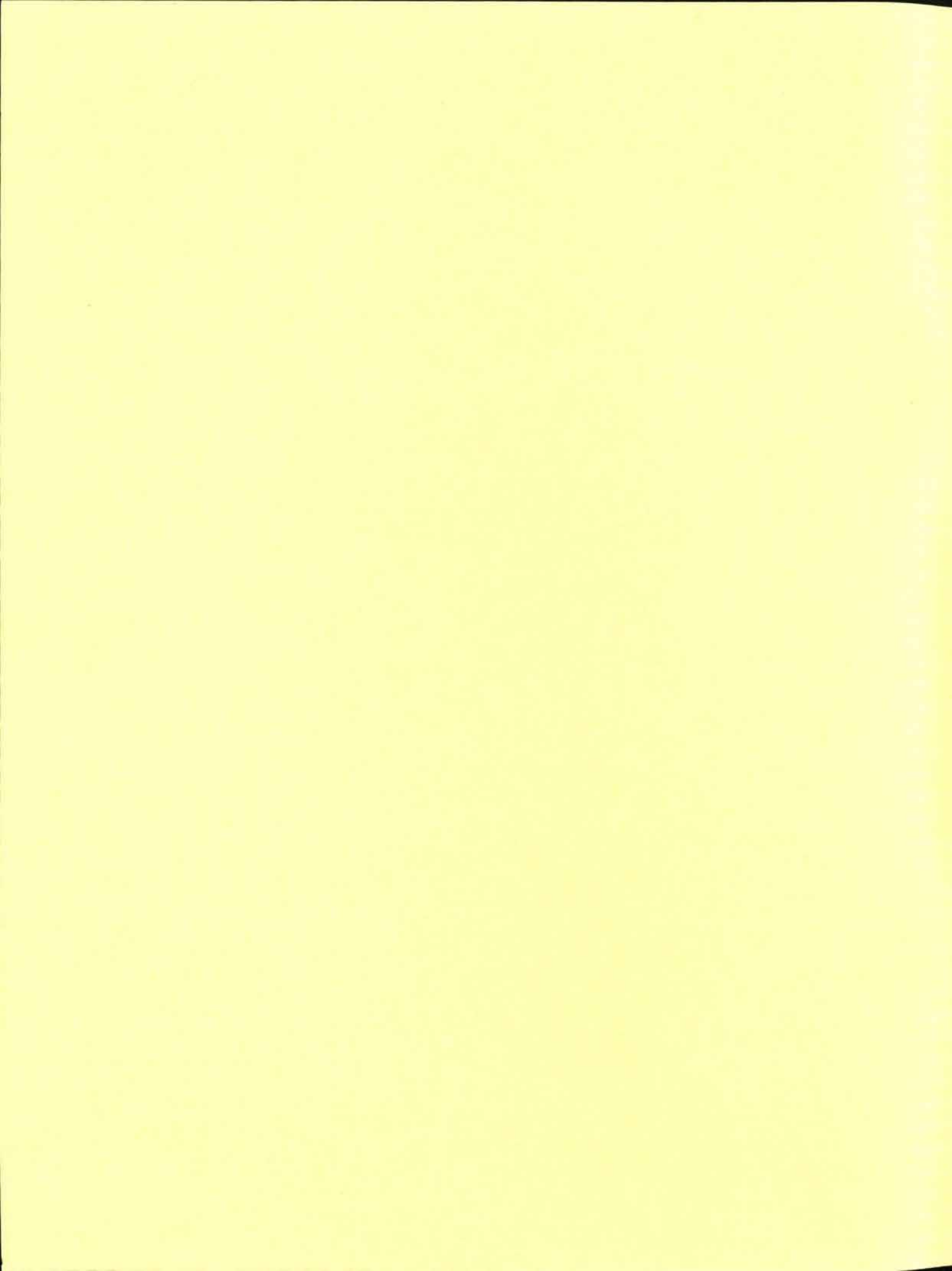
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# **Et Cetera**

**Marshall University**  
**Spring 1987**



# **Et Cetera**

**The Marshall University Literary Magazine**

**Spring 1987**

**1986--87**

**Marshall University**

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**1986-87**  
**Et Cetera**  
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## From the editors:

### MY BLURB:

Building a magazine like ET CETERA is a difficult architectural prospect, which utilizes many talents. I would like to personally thank Dr. William P. Sullivan, without whose intelligence, interest, and love of literature I would not be in the English Department; Dr. Rainey Duke, for the tea and cookies; Dr. Shirley A. Lumpkin, who can make secondar<sub>y</sub> worlds real and vital, and who listens compassionately; Dr. Richard Spilman, for his patience, and the excellent writing example he set; our staff, for their insolence, dedication to duty, and their stylish clothes (right, Ma<sub>r</sub>y?); and importantly, to TMW, for his essential guidance when I was not to be found.

-Michael F. Titus

There are a few things to be said: to all the professors who let me speak to their classes, I apologize; to all the writers who submitted work, I still think allusion could work; to Jane Wells and Andrew Campbell, you should have a bunch of love, money and anything else you want. I owe much to John Harvey, fortunately, he settled for \$200.00 in small, unmarked bills. Thanks to M.F.T. for being intelligent, witty, and bearable. To M.S.: you are a legend. To R.S. & A.E.: stay off the couch.

It's time to congratulate the winners, console the losers, strike up the band, and throw another cowboy on the fire. Git along little dogies.

Sylvia-Bitch-Goddess: thanks for words d<sub>r</sub>y and riderless, and remember there are no mortal muses.

-Timothy M. Wellman

## The Snake Burial

Ed Anders flipped hamburgers on the barbecue grill and drew his hand back from the quick spurt of flame caused by dripping grease. They were nearly done; their satisfying sizzle drowned the conversation of his wife Phyllis and their guests the Millers, who sat several yards away at the picnic table. Ed knew what they were talking about--rising garbage fees--always something. As he bent to pick up a dropped napkin, he spotted the snake gliding noiselessly between his feet. A garter. Harmless, he thought, and decided not to scare the women with it. "You hungry, coo?" he muttered as it slithered on its way, barely parting the blades of Ed's lawn. He placed thick slices of cheese on the seared meat to melt.

"Ed! EEEEDD! A snake!" Phyllis screamed and stood on a lawn chair, powerless to move anything except her vocal chords. Ed sighed--he was afraid this might happen. Phyllis' screams caused Edna Miller to drop her glass of iced tea and rush into the Anders' back door, peering through the screen, wide-eyed and mute. The men smiled at each other.

Calmly, Ed laid his spatula on a plate covered with hamburger juice and sauntered over to Phyllis. She could only point. The snake had stopped, its quicksilver tongue flicking in and out, in and out, listening.

"Good Lord, Phyllis, it's only a garter snake. Completely harmless. Come down from there." Gene Miller, coo, came over to look and chuckled softly.

"I will not come down from this chair until you kill that snake. I will not." Ed knew from her voice that Phyllis' word on this matter was final. She would stay in the chair through the night if he didn't do something with the snake.

Meanwhile, the snake resumed its journey through the Anders' backyard toward the hill on the other side of their hurricane fence. There were many insects here, attracted by cooking food and human smells, but though the snake was incapable of conscious fear, its instinct for survival was somehow heightened.

"See? It's leaving." Ed begged his wife to come down.

"I said kill it. If you don't, it will come back. And it may bring more with it."

This irrationality caused both men to laugh. Ed caught up with the snake and with a swooping motion picked the toothless garter up, holding him with a thumb and forefinger by the head and looking into its lidless eyes. Phyllis screamed again, swearing she'd kill him if he brought "that slimy thing" near her.

He spoke to it. "Now listen, little guy," he said, stroking the black and yellow-striped scales. "If I let you go, you won't scurry up into those hills and come back tonight with a few buddies to wreak havoc on the whole neighborhood, will you? Nah, I don't think so." He turned his attention to his wife. "Besides, these snakes are pretty beneficial. They eat insects and rodents, I think. Look at him--he's a handsome devil," he said and held the snake over his head, watching the tail swing pendulum-like.

Phyllis glared at him, spoke softly and slowly, emphasized each word. "You kill that snake, Ed Anders."

Ed carried the snake to Gene who instinctively withdrew a step, caught himself, then tentatively patted the tail. "It really is harmless, Phyllis," the neighbor agreed, knowing this was what Ed wanted him to say. Gene's wife yelped from her haven inside the back door as her husband touched the snake.

The cookout could not continue as long as this interloper was in the backyard. Ed negotiated. "OK if I just take it up into the hill and let it go? No need to kill the thing." Phyllis only frowned, and Ed saw her anger begin to melt into tears.

He gave in. "All right. I'll kill it. You go inside."

Phyllis stepped gingerly from her perch and backed into the house to join her neighbor, never removing her eyes from the vile being dangling helplessly in her husband's grasp. She turned and bolted the last few feet to the house.

Ed handed the offender to Gene and strode to his garage. He returned, a shiny unused garden hoe in hand, and found Gene stepping on the garter. "Drop it?" he asked, not waiting for an answer. "Watch out." Ed raised the hoe and paused, deciding upon the most effective point to sever the snake from its life. The garter did not move, only flicked its tongue in and out, in and out, listening. A flash as the hoe caught sunlight and the single snake became two: a tiny, motionless, toy-like head, and a long rope that whipped about savagely in involuntary protest.

"You coming to bed?" Phyllis yawned after she finished putting away the cookout dishes.

Ed did not answer immediately. He crumpled his beer can and moved unsteadily toward the back door. "I'll be back in a little while. I'm just going to get rid of that snake. If I leave it in the garbage, you'll be griping about the smell before the trash men come Wednesday." The screen slammed shut behind him, and Phyllis shuddered reflexively.

The night air raised quick chill bumps on the sunburn Ed had gotten during the cookout (he hadn't noticed until now). He rummaged through the metal trash container behind the garage, feeling disgust as he picked through papers soaked with sticky watermelon drippings and paper plates with remnants of hamburgers and potato salad. Just beneath this layer of party crash, he reached the rolled morning newspaper that contained the defeated snake.

He had decided to bury the snake atop the hill behind his property, and the full moon enabled him to find the path easily. Ed had explored this small wooded area just once before, shortly after he and Phyllis had moved into their new split-level, one of the first inhabitants of the subdivision. He had liked the idea of moving away from the city, often joked to his office buddies about living on the "frontier." He had climbed the hill and found a quiet clearing on top where he could see the entire development below him. It was in this clearing that Ed elected to bury the snake.

He reached it, huffing and running with perspiration despite the relative briskness of the night, and sagged onto a rock to rest and remove his shirt. At first, Ed thought he'd just dump the snake and go home. This was far enough from the house, he reasoned and tossed the paper on the ground before him. It unfurled, revealing the head still unblinking and the long stiffened body, stuck to the paper by its own dried copper blood. The sight startled Ed--those eyes that could not close. Ed laughed uncomfortably and apologized, "Sorry, buddy, but you heard Phyllis."

The moon bathed the hilltop in blue-greyness, and Ed gradually became aware of the stillness in the clearing. It was ringed with elms and sycamores and scented by honeysuckle. The branches floated easily on soft night breezes. As his breathing slowed, he was struck by the persistent fragrance, a smell that often blew from the hill, one that he'd occasionally notice as he'd leave for work some mornings. But here it didn't subside with the wind's whim. Ed drank it now that he wasn't struggling for air. It was this sweetness as much as anything that made him decide to go ahead and bury the snake. He wanted nothing so foul it.

He rose, shaking off the lingering effects of the afternoon's beer, and leaned his shovel into the earth. It was clay, thicker digging



than he had expected, but he made clean strokes into the ground. After deepening the hole to about 18 inches, Ed rewrapped the garter snake and stuffed the paper into its grave. "Ashes to ashes," he muttered, and pushed the dirt pile over the hole by hand, then patted the mound smooth with the back of the shovel before thrusting its blade in the dirt.

He sat beside the hole to rest again before returning. Tilting his head way back, he tried to find the Big Dipper, the only constellation he could remember from his Boy Scout days, but he couldn't. The thousands of specks in the cloudless sky made him dizzy, and he lay back on the ground, tiny twigs causing tiny pains on his bare back and legs until they gave under the pressure and snapped. The trees surrounding the clearing framed Ed's view of the night sky as if he were looking at it from the bottom of a hole.

The view exhilarated him, and the pleasant coolness of the earth and vegetation on his skin made him feel keenly alive. He rolled onto his side, propped his head on his hand and started to speak to the snake's burial mound. Nothing came out. He guessed he had nothing to say after all, so he rolled on over onto his stomach, his belly lying flat on the loose dirt covering the dead snake. He knew how ridiculous he must look, wallowing nearly naked like a child in the dirt and grass, but it felt so good, so cool and

fresh. On his stomach he peered through the greenery at ground level. "So this is what it looks like, huh little buddy?" he asked aloud. What the hell, he thought, and began wriggling forward, belly down, across the ground, small clods entering his shorts as he rooted through the grass and dirt. He scraped his soft chest and legs, but didn't care. The wind freshened and caressed his back as he performed this strange ritual with a smile on his face.

Ed wasn't sure how long he floundered in the clearing. At length he realized he must get home and shower before going to bed. Mondays were grueling at the office. Hopefully, Phyllis would already be asleep, and he wouldn't have to explain. He stood and brushed what dirt he could from his chest. Reaching for his shirt, Ed noticed that he was beginning to itch. He knelt and looked closely at the ground around the snake's grave. Funny, he hadn't paid any attention before; it was sprinkled with poison ivy. Ed had always been terribly allergic to the stuff. Too late now, he laughed. Spreading his shirt over the burial mound, he turned and found his way down the root-cluttered path home. He could only wash and wait for the rash to come.

**Paul Martin**

## Peripherally Yours

So I'm twenty-seven now and live mostly on wine and aspirin. My brother was right, we do grow up and start looking for things that make us feel good because everything else makes us feel bad, how could he have been so wise at nineteen? He's thirty-one now and doesn't touch a drop of speed or marijuana or condoms, he can't stand anything artificial. I, on the other hand, survive on what is artificial. Like love for instance, I couldn't live without it. Sometimes I sit alone in a bar, which isn't a very intelligent thing for a woman to do but I never said I was intelligent, did I? And, anyway, I sit there, usually at a corner table, and listen to the threads of conversation unraveling at the tables around me. Groups of three or four or more are the easiest, young couples in love speak quietly, but the groups are proud of their talk and go at it voraciously like fat puppies wriggling for a nice nipple. If the group is male, and it usually is, I learn a lot about women, God, are we really that amusing? If the group is female, as it is on occasion, I learn a lot more about women, and yes, we really are that amusing. That's one kind of love I can't live without, the kind that salts the air in make-believe bars where kids just learning to drink spend their weekends saying things that sound right and won't make sense in a couple of years. She said it was against her principles, one of the guys says, and the choral of laughs is almost as loud as the rock and roll pounding above my head. Then she pulled her top down and asked me what was wrong with being a fucking gentleman, and I told her that's exactly what I was **trying** to be. I usually lose interest after the fifth or sixth fit of beery laughter, but I know the love is there and I can go home knowing that the whole world or at least a small part of town is in good shape.

My first divorce was easy but with another one on the way, like a second tremor after the danger was supposed to be over, I'm beginning to think that I should try to be a little more difficult about these things. Mom says it's not divorce that's easy, it's me, and I've always tried to not listen to my mother. Are you listening to me? she asks about ten or eleven times a day and I nod from behind the newspaper but she doesn't see me and goes on with: you never listen to me, you didn't listen twenty years ago and you're not listening now, but one day you'll wise up and stop acting like your daddy, put that goddamn newspaper down. I can't help but flinch when she mentions daddy and I don't put the goddamn newspaper down because I need it, I desperately need it, to hide behind, I don't want her to see me cry. This is the second time I've come back to her, **crawling** back to her as she likes to remind the neighbors, and I swear it'll be the last. Of course I swore that the first time too, but I mean it this time, I'd rather die or sleep with roaches than come back again. My agent swears that those last two hundred pages are going to blow some publisher away and we'll be signing papers anyday now, but the only papers I've seen so far were in my husband's lawyer's office and I didn't put my name on any of them. It says here you're a writer, Mrs. Auburn, the lawyer said, and wiped the lenses of his glasses like it was a very important thing to be doing. Yes, I am, I told him, and hated myself for sounding anything less than proud of the fact. I saw my husband's face turn red too and I knew he was hurting for me, and it took every gut within me to keep from throwing my arms around him and smothering him with kisses of thanks. Published anything lately? the lawyer asked, and it was then that I decided my mother was right. I left the office with the attorney in mid-sentence and my husband in mid-life and the air of October had never felt so damn good.

Now it's almost Thanksgiving and I'm a very healthy difficult person. Or so my husband says, my mother smiles proudly. She thinks she's worked a miracle in a month, so does Scott, I'm not all that sure. It's not easy being difficult, but I'm trying and I can probably drag this divorce out for at least a year, maybe longer if I don't think about it. That is, I'll drag it out as long as Scott, wonderful Scott, doesn't threaten to drag me to court, God knows I couldn't stand having to tell a bunch of lies to some judge who would probably take one look at me and say, you're lying, get the hell out of my courtroom. I can't lie, there's no love in lying, and the truth is I have no reason to fight Scott on any of the conditions we both agreed on. But that damn lawyer, why did he have to ask me if I'd published anything lately? It's all his fault, now I have to fight our mutual agreements and make up reasons to demand more from my loving husband than he should ever have to give. I can't be outdone by some hired ex-Yalie who's being paid, and paid well, to delve into my personal life and question matters that he doesn't know anything about and has no business questioning. My mother says that getting a divorce gives him the right to dig up and question anything he damn well pleases and this whole mess is all my fault anyway. I don't have the guts, or balls as my brother used to remind me, to fight her on that one.

How long are you going to stonewall this thing? Scott asks a week before Thanksgiving, and my mother answers for me.

As long as she has to, mom says, and sits down with a righteous pop on the chair across from the couch where my husband and I occupy each end.

He looks from my mother to me and I don't meet his stare. Danni? he asks, like he wants to make sure I'm really there.

Yes? I sound weak, what else is there to say? Scott smells like the aftershave I bought him for his birthday and I still don't like the sweetness of it. His black hair is a lot shorter now, so short that it doesn't look black anymore, just a dull metal color that isn't long enough to catch any light. I want to ask him why he had it cut so short but the question wouldn't seem as important to him as it does to me.

Why are you doing this? he asks, sincerely puzzled, and I feel sorry for him.

Because she has to, mom announces, and rubs the top of her head with oily fingers, I can almost smell the bacon grease over Scott's aftershave. My mother spends most of the day cooking although I don't know why because neither one of us particularly likes to eat, and what's even more mysterious is how she can spend so much time producing so little. She gets up at seven every morning to have toast, fried eggs, and coffee by nine. Lunch preparations begin around ten-thirty and the sandwiches are ready by one. Dinner, I won't even mention. She is a short, round stuffed-bear-like woman with soft round knees that fold over and grab loose soil in their creases when she putters about with her shrubs in the front yard. When I look at her, I see a little figure that would look good on some young girl's bed or in some kid's arms at Disneyland, I wonder if daddy won her by shooting a metal duck. Daddy, I don't want to think about him.

Scott is getting obviously irritated. Mom has a way of obviously irritating a lot of people. May I speak to Dannielle alone please? he asks, and I know for sure he's angry because that's the only time he calls me Dannielle. He stares hard at my mother, it's his get-the-hell-out-of-here-or-I'll-throw-a-lamp look and mom says something about needing to check on the stew anyway. When she's safely rattling pans and lids in the kitchen, Scott turns to me and

I look directly into the short thin lines that jut out from the corners of his eyes like little lose tributaries spilled over the banks. I want to run my tongue over each one and tell him which one is the Mississippi and which one is the Snake and which one is the Ohio just like I used to do when we were in bed and he'd laugh harder with each river I called off.

Why are you looking at me like that? he asks suddenly, and I guess I must be letting my desire show.

Like what? I ask, and glance toward the carpet.

Like you're in a daze.

I'm not in a daze, I'm fine, really.

Danni, look, I don't understand what's going on. Ever since you walked out of Roger's office a month ago you've been impossible to deal with, what's wrong?

Nothing's wrong. I don't know what you're talking about.

Do you want this divorce or don't you?

Well, of course I do, don't you?

Yes, of course. It's what we both want, isn't it?

Yes.

Okay.

Okay.

Mom's rattles have stopped and Scott and I both know she's got her ear cocked toward the doorway where our voices drift from the living room. He scoots closer to me on the couch and lowers his voice. Why are you stalling, Danni? he asks.

Why does he have to ask me that, hell, I don't know the answer to that question, why does he have to ask it? I just shake my head slowly and don't offer a verbal answer.

Don't you have anything to say? he asks, and his words sound thin and strained.

I glance toward the kitchen where mom's silence is overbearing and remember the first time I met Scott. It was at a New Year's Eve party my agent threw in honor of both the beginning of a year and my closing a deal on a story with a much sought magazine. We drank and danced and Scott said he'd never kissed an honest to God author before, then lightly brushed my forehead with his rum lips and I'd never felt so happy about my first divorce. I got home as mom was baking biscuits out of the oven and, still a bit loose on champagne, I told her about the most wonderful man in the world. She cracked an egg against the side of a hot skillet, dropped the shell on the floor, said shit, then added, he's too old for you.

Danni? I hear the most wonderful man in the world's voice again. Danni, I asked if you had anything to say. Are you listening to me?

Yes, of course I am, I say, glancing directly into his eyes for the first time today. They're gray and brown and auburn and full of something like pain. I just don't know what to tell you, I say to him, and he takes a deep breath.

Tell me why you won't sign the papers.

Is that all you want from me? A signature?

That's all it takes.

As if on cue, mom glides back into the room as though somebody had yelled, mom, come quick! She clutches a dish towel in both damp hands, scrubbing intently between her fingers, and announces that dinner is ready.

I'm not staying, Scott announces back, and lifts himself lightly from the couch like a man who's just made a profound point. At the door, he turns to me and his lips part but no words come out. Mom and the towel are stone-like, a statue-in-waiting, and I hope she stays stiff till he's gone. He shakes his head slowly, walks out, and the dish towel wavers after him like a red flag behind a bull's ass.

2.

In the morning, mom's floppy cotton skirt whips about in the warm (too warm for November) breeze. I watch her from a bed-

room window, she treats her shrubs the way she used to treat me when I was too young to remember what it felt like. Gently and patiently, like they're fine crystal or eggs, she fondles the tiny limbs and strokes the thin blades the way I think she used to stroke my hair and make sure my tiny limbs were covered and warm and unscratched. She lays a thin plastic blanket over a waning bush and I see her lips move carefully, as though each word is a life-giving breath to the little green thing that will be brown and indifferent by April. As she bends down, the skirt lifts lightly and, underneath, her bare knees feel the ground, catch the soil, and I wonder casually if she wishes she hadn't packed all those pedal pushers away in the attic. And I wonder too if she thought about daddy as she hoisted those scuffed cardboard boxes up the squeaky pull-down stairs and stacked them on the left (summer stuff on the left was the rule) the way daddy always did every October. Jesus, daddy, I don't blame you. And believe it or not, neither does mom. She knows what I know, that there was nothing else to do, but God, daddy, I miss you, you and your worthless little life behind the newspaper and the soft voice that nobody really tried to hear and the anger you never let out. Not very often anyway, and deep in her head and soul and skin, mom is sorry for all those crazy accusations, can't you see? She's a sorrowful woman, just look at the dirt on her knees. Daddy, I love you, but I love her too, she wasn't the one who bought the rifle, and there she is now in the front yard fondling her bushes and trying desperately to keep them from going rabbit hunting and coming back dead in the back of a pick-up truck. Or maybe I'm the one who's desperate.

Mom stays on her knees in front of the lilac but turns her head toward the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. My brother's car - I remember when he used to make fun of four-doors, none of that corny family shit for me, he'd say, and now he spends every sunny Saturday afternoon washing and shining and admiring his oyster-white sedan. Mom gives him a quick wave with soiled fingers and turns back to the shrub, it's a baby that needs constant attention. Aaron seeps out of the car, pulls his three-year-old son out after him, and carries him on his shoulders across the yard to where mom kneels. Through the open window, I hear them exchange hello's and how's-grandma's-baby and give-granny-a-kiss-Stevie-go-on-give-her-a-big-kiss. Stevie seems indifferent and squirmy like a young roo, and mom and Aaron watch him struggle for the ground and worm away through the grass when his daddy sets him there.

He's growing faster than my lilac, mom says, and Aaron smiles after the boy the way mom smiles at her plant.

I don't feel like being a family today. I feel like keeping out of sight behind an open window within earshot of my mother's and brother's voices, just close enough to catch quick glances of them through the milky white sheers that hump and go flat with the breeze. It's safe here, nobody knows it's where I am, except maybe mom, she has a way of knowing where I am and what I'm doing and thinking and feeling even when I'm not so sure myself. But I pretend I'm invisible, a piece of air, shapeless and untouchable, thin and quick enough to suck up their words and swirl around their ears like a big noise in a dream that won't be remembered in the morning.

Steven Robert, get down from that fence! Aaron shouts, and his forehead wrinkles up like a stern father but he makes no move toward the child. Stevie remains standing on the bottom rail of the wood fence and my brother turns back to mom, his dark blonde hair catching the weak sun and appearing almost as light as his fair and boyish face. Daddy lives in Aaron's thinness, his shoulders and hips and fingers are hard but gentle, and, with his back to the sun, it's daddy's silhouette that stands tall and shaky in the dying front yard. My quick glances have turned into long stares and I don't care anymore if they see me, who cares? I wish it were

late enough for a glass of claret.

Where's sis? Aaron asks, and mom brushes some dead leaves from under the bush.

Inside, she tells him without looking up.

Working on a new piece?

Piece of what?

Mom likes to play dumb about my work. She never reads anything I write, at least she says she doesn't, and deep in her heart, I know she still longs for me to give up this foolishness and get a real job. No man will **have me** till I get a real job. But Aaron, thank Christ, will defend me.

Come on, mom, he says scoldingly, you know what I mean. Is Danni working on a new story? Or novel maybe?

Novel? mom scoffs, pulls off a dead twig and tosses it aside. Lord knows she's had enough of a life to write a book about, she says, and laughs softly.

Ah, give her a break, mom, Aaron retorts, and glances toward Stevie who's back on the ground and fingering something that looks dirty and lifeless from up here.

So what's she doing in there? Aaron tries again. She's up, isn't she? Yes, unless she went back to bed. I heard her in the bathroom taking aspirin earlier, must be her time of the month. You know how she gets when she's like that.

Jesus Christ, I mumble, thanks a lot, mom. Let's say it a little louder so the man next door will be sure to know how I am when I'm **like that**. I step away from the window, lean against the cool wall, and see myself fifteen years ago - a skinny, shy kid fearful of God and mom and oral book reports and somebody finding out about the secret I carried between my legs for the first time. And somebody did find out, somebody I just had to tell who just had to tell somebody else and so on and so on, until one day before the week was up, I got a call from Sherry somebody who had a very patient grown-up voice and liked to sound dramatic. She called me up when I was twelve (she was twelve too, not a friend really, not somebody I should be remembering right now) and, anyway, she called me up when I was twelve and asked me how it felt to be a woman. Oh shit. (Oh shit is what I **may** have thought at the time if I'd been twenty-seven or not a Pentacostal, but I wasn't twenty-seven and truly believed that some big white airy hand would reach down and jerk the shit out of my head if I dared let it in there. I was a Pentacostal and we didn't believe in shit). So I didn't say anything at first, just let my breath form wet fog on the mouthpiece, watched it cloud around the little holes, and resisted the urge to lick my initials into it. Finally, I think I said, huh? and she said again, how does it feel to be a woman? I realize now that I should've cleared my throat, spoken firmly into the receiver, and said, hell, Sherry, can't I bleed without the whole fucking female population making such a big deal out of it, who told you anyway? But I didn't say that, I didn't say much of anything, just turned red and mumbled something about it feeling okay.

Okay. I don't know why I'm remembering something that happened fifteen years ago, and even after all this time, I still don't understand the question. I wonder what Sherry's doing now - I bet she takes care of old people somewhere, wears white spongy shoes and support hose, and breathes heavily when she walks, Sherry was fat and had permanently blushed cheeks. The purple-pink splotches looked like they'd been dropped on her face by Jackson Pollock, they were round and thick in the middle then sprayed outward toward her eyes and nose and mouth like spilled paint. I think she was self-conscious about her indelible stain because she never mentioned it and no one else ever mentioned it around her. Then she asked me how it felt to be a woman and I wanted to scream, listen, Miss Pink Chubby Cheeks, mind your own business and don't ask stupid questions that I don't understand. That would've been the right thing to say.

I usually end up thinking of the right thing to say after something else has already been said, and, standing here beside the open window, I can think of a million wrong things to shout down to the yard below where my mother and brother discuss the weather and shrubbery and my period. But saying nothing is easier and I'm getting tired of being difficult.

Put that down, Steven! I step back to the window as Aaron shouts in his son's direction and mom tosses dried leaves in the other. I swear, Aaron goes on, that boy would pick up anything that didn't move faster than him.

Just like his daddy if I remember right, mom says, and grins slightly at some picture that must be in her mind. A picture of Aaron at ten bringing home dead lizards in a shoe box or scooping muddy rocks out of the creek bed and hurling them at sparrows and swallows and crows. I think he hit one once.

Aaron smiles too, he has pictures of his own, probably things I never knew about, and then he gazes off toward his son, a little boy with something quiet in his hands.

Of course now, Danni never was like that, mom says, and I almost wish a car would go by and drown out what I was really like. She just sat around and read all the time, stayed in her room, too much like her daddy I guess.

Come here, Stevie, Aaron says softly. He wants to skip the part about daddy. The boy spreads his fingers, something falls to the grass, and he runs to Aaron like a little wind-up doll with one short leg. His father scoops him up and squeezes him until Stevie protests and Aaron sets him down beside mom. She leans over, nuzzles her face in his neck and asks him if he thinks the flowers are pretty. Stevie shakes his head no and giggles, and mom's mouth says, just like your daddy, but her eyes say, you've got to like the flowers.

I glance at my watch, twelve-thirty, still too early to call it a day and relax for the evening. I could go back to bed until happy hour but mom would announce that it was the cramps and I don't feel like getting into a debate about my biological functions. I don't feel like getting into much of anything today and the breeze through the window feels more like November now. It's the same kind of breeze that used to whine across the empty space on the carport after we sold daddy's car and the same kind that lifted Scott's hair from his collar and dropped it loose and stringy against his neck. It's the kind of air that feels good in your nose and gets caught in your throat like hot spaghetti or apologies. It carries mom's voice into the curtains and I hear her say that it's time to go in. Come on, Stevie, she says, let's go inside and see about lunch, are you hungry? Stevie screams an emphatic, no! and points up to the window just as I step aside. Danni! he shouts, and I don't move until mom says, no, honey, it was just the curtains, and the storm door closes with a yes.

3.

Yes, I know it's too big, mom says, but it's the size I've always bought and probably always will. She brushes melted margarine and hot drippings up the sides and over the breast of the huge bird (Jesus, twenty-two pounds) and shoves it back into the oven. The strong scents of candied sauces and celery and potato peelings are overcome when the turkey juices fill the room with sweet, thick, buttery air. I suck it in and want to cry. This kind of love is a little too much, it's not artificial enough. The holiday foods belong to those people sketched in old books, the ones who sit in black and white and now yellow with age, holding hands around a well-worn table that swells in the center of the room, their heads bent, eyes closed, on the bottom of the page a little boy caught in the act of peeking. I want to say, shit, mom, this is no Hallmark family, it's not right to eat food that doesn't belong to us, but what's the

use? She'd just tell me to shut up and be thankful.

From the living room, the sounds of Aaron and his wife and Stevie and football and the squeaky yapping of a toy dog are unbearable. My nose and ears feel too good, too saturated to be real, it's scary. I need a way out. My way comes, I hear a car engine tum off and know it's Scott. A bit warm in here, I tell mom, and she says something like what do you expect with the oven on. Without getting a jacket, I step out the kitchen door and close it firmly behind me, Scott is walking up the drive. He looks gray. Or clear maybe, just empty. His steel-blue sweater and faded jeans look like a factory worker's uniform, they blend in with the salty, fat snow clouds behind him. He stuffs his hands into the warm tightness of his jeans' pockets and smiles weakly at me. How are you, Danni? he asks.

Okay, I tell him, and shove my own hands into my pockets. The wind is thick with cold and the ground will be white before dinner's over. Scott stops a couple of feet in front of me then leans back against mom's car, always the first one under the carport's roof.

You look cold, he tells me, then smiles again and adds, good. But cold.

Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself.

Are you surprised that I showed up?

I would've been disappointed if you hadn't.

What I really want to say is I would've died if you hadn't, but I can't bring myself to admit to such need, not out loud anyway. After all, I'm still in difficulty-training and we hard-assed people must not appear needy. If mom had heard me use the word disappointed, I'm sure I'd be doing chin-ups on the shower-curtain bar right now. It's like he knows I'm thinking about mom.

I can't believe your mother invited me, he says, and withdraws his hands slowly from his pockets. He folds his arms across his stomach and looks down at me, waiting.

She likes you, Scott, I tell him, trying to sound convincing. Believe it or not, she really likes you. She's just not the type to show it.

I'm not quite sure what type she is. Don't end up like her, Danni.

You mean a widow?

My husband doesn't laugh. He hates it when I try to be funny when he's trying to be serious. I hate it too. It's easy for me, hard on him, I think that's supposed to be my ultimate goal.

I mean, Scott says annoyingly, don't end up a miserable, lonely middle-aged woman. You've got too much going for you.

I blush and look away. A few small snowflakes spray across the driveway and disappear underneath the cars. I can't tell one cloud from another now, they've all folded into each other, a few dark creases spit out the flakes. Daddy used to call them God's big cotton balls and swing me up onto his shoulders so I could try to reach one. Aaron would skid toward us on his bike, call me a silly damn kid, and pump away, his legs like little oil derricks up and down, up and down. It's too cold to be riding that bicycle, daddy would call after him, then add, and stop using that kind of language in front of your sister. Above daddy's head, I would cover my mouth with my mitten and giggle behind it, if only daddy knew what else I'd heard Aaron say.

Hope you're hungry, I say to Scott and smile up at him, an apology.

A bit, ht tells me, and I'm not sure I've been forgiven.

It's another twenty-two-pounder.

Leave it to your mom to do it up right. Or at least to just do it up, when will it be ready?

Not for another couple of hours.

The snow falls slowly and heavily now, and I picture it draping softly over the plastic coverings on mom's shrubbery, denting in between the branches with each minute of weight. I don't feel cold

anymore, and Scott looks full and colorful, no longer gray. He reaches out his hand and brushes my cheek with warm fingers, the lines on his face squeeze into a smile.

How about a drive before the roads get bad? he asks, and I know instantly that no matter what I say, the answer will be yes.

Mom may want some help in the kitchen, I tell him.

She never has before.

Where do you want to go?

Anywhere, I don't care.

Let me get a jacket.

You can have mine, it's in the car.

Scott wraps his hand around my arm and tugs gently in the direction of the driveway. Come on, he says, and I hear myself say, okay. The air in his car is still warm and smells like his aftershave, a little too sweet and close. His jacket around my shoulders, I lower the window a couple of inches and let the string of cold wind get tangled in my hair. He flips up the heater fan a notch and the warmth swirls around my ankles and drifts up my jeans to my knees. There's no sound except for the blending of cold and warm air, and I picture the car as my body, empty of everything but air, a space for heat and coldness to fight it out, I don't know which side I'm on. We don't speak for what seems like forever until he turns down a road that passes by an abandoned water-treatment plant and I ask him, what's down here?

A water-treatment plant, he says, then adds, it's closed.

I know, I tell him, and he glances toward me for the first time since the drive began.

There's no use in pretending. I know what's on his mind and he knows what's on my mind, and what the hell are we doing parked behind an old empty building like two teenagers on prom night? He turns off the engine and I roll up the window. The snow has all but stopped, only a few stray flakes sprinkle the windshield, and I wonder if Stevie is standing on the hassock with his hands and nose pressed against the glass in the living room. I want to press mine against the side window and try to count each flake before it hits the ground and I want to make love to my husband.

What are you thinking about? he asks, and I tell him the snow.

We may get stuck here.

Would that be so bad?

Why do you think I brought you here, Danni?

I don't know, wouldn't your place have been easier?

My place has a telephone and as soon as your mother looks out the window and sees that we're gone, it would start ringing.

I laugh, he's right about that, and I am now officially AWOL. He laughs too, pulls me toward him and says, besides, I thought you might like something different.

Right again, I **would** like something different but I can't keep my face from getting warm when I ask him if we're supposed to get into the back seat. The back seat? he says, can't we talk in the front seat just as well? Talk? I say, is that what you want to do, talk? Of course, he tells me, what else? I lift my head from his shoulder, see his mouth broaden into a grin, and smack him gently on his thigh. Don't tease me, I say, and he says, I'm not. I scoot away from him a few inches but leave my hand on his leg. So, what do you want to talk about? I ask.

Let's start with you.

What about me?

I'd like to know who you're trying to be, you or your mother.

I don't think I'm trying to be anybody.

Then what's wrong? Where did we go wrong?

How come I'm the one who has to answer all the questions? Because you never ask me any.

I take my hand off his leg and place it on my own. The snow has completely stopped now and I picture Stevie climbing down off the hassock, a disappointed little boy learning that wishes don't

come true. Mom must know by now that Scott and I have left, and I can hear her complaining to Aaron that his sister will never listen and never learn and lets people run over her like her daddy always did. And Aaron, God bless him, will make excuses for me. They probably just need some time to talk, he'll tell mom, and she'll wring a dish towel with fingers that smell like butter and onions and say that she didn't raise me to be so easy.

Scott puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me back toward him. He lays his head against the top of mine and I wonder if he can feel a pulse beating in my brain, does he know it's too fast? The windshield is outlined in frost, a perfect frame for our romantic little scene, there's only one thing missing. Romance.

Kind of romantic out here, isn't it? Scott says softly, and my nose bums with the threat of tears. I manage to mumble, uh-huh, and he squeezes me tightly, the tears come out. He doesn't know it until I take a deep sniff and then he lifts his hand to my cheek and rubs the dampness between his fingers. Why are we getting a divorce, Danni? he asks the way he may ask, why does it snow?

Beats the hell out of me, I blurt out, and start to laugh, I get caught in the middle of laughing and c\_r\_ying. My husband laughs too, quietly at first, then loudly and out of control, a series of coughs and sputters and we gasp for breath like two kids on a roller coaster. The wemess on my cheeks turns d\_r\_y and cold and I don't give a fuck because I'm in love and about to get laid in the back seat of a compact car with icy blue vinyl that'll stick to my ass like a popsicle to a warm tongue and nothing before will have ever felt so damn good.

At least nothing I want to remember. And the vinyl isn't so cold after all and it's not my ass that presses into it but my knees, Scott looks like a suffering shoetree beneath me. His head stuffs the corner of the back seat, his neck bends at an angle that hurts my eyes to see. Are you alright? I ask him, and he smiles a sideways smile and grunts, yeah. With my head nearly bobbing against the ceiling, I stare through the melting, frosty side window and choose a spot on the back of the old building to concentrate on. The spot goes up and down and I can't keep it in focus and why, God, why am I not enjoying this? The spot slows down and I wonder how many times Scott's telephone has rung, how many chunks of cele\_r\_y mom has chopped off the cutting board and let roll into the greasy strainer in the sink, a look of pain and disappointment on her face. The spot stops. My husband is quiet beneath me and I bring my eyes slowly down to his. His chest moves up and down heavily but I can't feel it and I can't hear the breath that pushes out and flares his nostrils, his mouth is closed. I don't know if he's satisfied, I know I'm not.

What's wrong, Danni? he asks, and I relax the muscles in my thighs. They ache.

Nothing, baby, I tell him, nothing's wrong.

You don't seem like you're into this.

Yes, I am, I really am, did I do something you didn't like?

No. You didn't do anything at all. I wouldn't mind a little help, you know.

What do you mean?

What do I mean? Danni, do you want to make love or not?

Of course I do, that's what we're doing, isn't it?

Well, I thought so at first, but then I seemed to lose you, you went away somewhere, just lost interest.

No, I didn't. I was looking at that wall, there's a spot on it that won't hold still and I just kept thinking that so many things are like that, they won't hold still and it won't even snow anymore.

Between my legs, I feel a dampness growing cold and a soft falling away, a gentle emptying of a filled space. Scott squirms to a straighter position and closes his eyes. The gray is coming back. He doesn't move, he looks dead, but the hair on his stomach prickles with a lively chill and I pull his sweater down to cover the bumps, to hide the vulnerability. The frost drips on the inside

of the window like the glass is c\_r\_ying and I don't think I want to anymore. My eyes are tired, and my legs and back and neck and I've lost my husband for the tenth or hundredth time in our three years together. But I don't want to move, Jesus, why am I so difficult? And why is it getting so cold in here when it's supposed to be hot and steamy and wet and wonderfully sweaty and slick, God, I don't want to move.

Scott opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling as the water begins to freeze on the window and the outside world becomes striped in gray and white. Maybe you should get dressed, he says, and I say, no.

You're cold, Danni. Put your pants on.

I'm not cold, are you?

No.

I'm sorry.

For what?

For making you unhappy. For disappointing you. For being so damn difficult to love. For..

Don't, Danni.

For being one hell of a first-class bitch, for getting you built up and...

Danni, stop it. Just stop.

Why? I'm only telling you what you already know, what you're too kind to just come out and say. Why don't you just say it sometime, why don't you hit me, why don't you fight with me now and push me off you and under you and force me to take you, why don't you make me?

The last words come out in a quiver and I have to hold my head back to keep my nose from dripping onto his sweater. The ceiling has little holes in it that don't move.

Is that what you really want, Danni? Scott asks, and I swallow hard before answering him.

I don't know, I tell him, I just don't know anything anymore.

Well, I'm pretty confused myself. I mean, here I am a forty-three-year-old man fucking my crazy wife in the back seat of my car when it's only thirty degrees outside, shit, I guess I'm crazy too.

I laugh, I can't help it, and below me his belly shakes and his face wrinkles into a grin and something stirs between my legs, I don't know if it's his cock or my nerves. He brings his hand up to my breast and fondles it beneath my sweatshirt, the grin softens into a smile and I know it's not my nerves. It's him and I shift my thighs to welcome him and the spot on the wall is blurry and slow, moving only when I want it to, a peaceful, quiet rhythm that closes my eyes and the stripes and the walls go away.

#### 4.

My eyes get used to the dimness easily. Along the right wall, the red and yellow lights above the bar illuminate beer names in soft colors and the bartender's face looks melon and smooth. He nods slightly and smiles as I walk by the bar stools and slide into a chair at a corner table near the back wall. My table. He knows it and holds up an empty wine glass as I settle my notebook and purse on the chair beside me. I nod and he fills the glass with house burgundy, he doesn't carry my favorite claret. The air in the bar is clear enough to smell like whiskey and somebody's aftershave, only two men on the stools blow cigarette smoke toward the doorway, and I wish I'd waited until later in the afternoon to come in. My breath is too clean and the music's too low and there aren't enough people to keep me safe and unnoticed in my corner.

The bartender (I don't know his name and he doesn't know mine) steps around the bar and carries the glass of wine to my table. I get his personal service on uncrowded days and it makes me feel awkward and shy. How are you today? he asks, setting down the glass on a small napkin in front of me. I tell him, okay, and he

says, good, good, and walks slowly back to the bar, picking up an empty beer bottle on the way. The notebook lies dead beside me and I don't feel like writing any life into it. Instead, I sip the wine and feel it slide life into me, a warm, numb life that soothes the ache of having lived through the last few days. The warmth reminds me that I'm still wearing my jacket and I squirm out of it without getting up. I drape it over my notebook and purse, hiding them from sight for good, and I don't know what I wanted to write in the first place.

Mom has started speaking to me again. Mostly about how it wasn't her fault that Scott and I had to eat cold yams and d<sub>r</sub>y turkey. I held it off as long as I could, she said, but the baby was hungry and I told your brother that if you didn't have enough sense to be home for Thanksgiving dinner, then I wasn't going to worry about it. Mom has an endlessly nagging way of letting me know she's not worrying about something, and she's been letting me know it all day. I sucked a long time on my aspirin this morning to keep from shouting out that life was wonderful when she was giving me the silent treatment, as wonderful as it could ever get anyway, and she didn't notice the control I managed to maintain. She doesn't notice the good things about me and as soon as I figure out what they are, I'm going to make it a point to tell her. The wine is warm, warmer than room temperature, and warmer than my . . . oh shit, I don't want to remember that again, his face, his hard face with lines of determination and come-for-me eyes and the gray light from the window that melted his black hair and iced the vinyl around his head so that I couldn't tell the seat from his ears and couldn't, Jesus, couldn't feel what he wanted me to feel, jerk like he wanted me to jerk, convulse and contract and Goddamn you, you wonhless, you lifeless bitch, you little eaten girl who loved and hated your lifeless daddy and was too drunk to go to his funeral, too consumed by your self to give a fuck about the gray skin and the hole so artfully hidden. The hole so creatively plugged.

I drain the glass and don't look toward the bar because I know the bartender is looking at me, waiting to catch my eye and hold up the wine bottle with a question on his face, a question he knows I'll nod to. Three or four more people have drifted in, two of them businessmen who sit at the table in front of me and glance my way too often. Too many people are waiting for my look. Scott waited too, grinning at me over his fork while mom cleared the rest of the dishes from the table in silence. And while Aaron and his wife retreated to the living room for the last pan of the second game, while Stevie played with our shoestrings and babbled about the snow we missed before dinner. Where were you? he asked, and the innocence on his small face was so big that I wanted to c<sub>r</sub>y, so real that I didn't know if I could handle it, I wished he'd c<sub>r</sub>y or something. We saw the snow too, Scott assured him, and still the same question, where were you? and Scott said, we went for a drive, then glanced at me and toward mom and I saw the frown on her face grow deeper, her lips were set and they looked plastic and purplish, the kind we wore on Halloween and sucked spit from as it collected in the gummy comers, then ate later when the wax turned crumbly and all the other candy was gone. Don't eat those, they'll make you sick, daddy used to say, and Aaron would roll his eyes upward and chew as loudly as he could while daddy shook his head and watched me with soft, weary eyes. My little girl won't eat that old waxy stuff, he'd say, and pull me onto his lap with the flaky purple lips still clenched in my fingers. And he was right, I never would, except for that one time, that one damn time when I wanted to be funny, I wanted to be older, I wanted to be bold and defiant like my big brother, and I looked my father square in the eye and shoved the hunk of gnawed wax into my mouth. Jesus, I wanted to die, I really wanted to die as soon as the first taste of plastic and dried saliva raked across my tongue and daddy's face

turned blank. He didn't have anything on it, no kind of look that said he was angry or disappointed or amused, not a frown or a smile or a scowl and all I could hear was Aaron's hysterical yapping, a hollow, strange sound that didn't fit with the nothingness of daddy's face. Daddy, I didn't mean to. I swear I didn't mean to, and if I could take back that tiny split second, that one little piece of time that it took me to get my hand to my mouth, God, I swear I would. I'd take it back, daddy, and would you take it back too? Would you take back the little piece of time it took for you to raise your own hand, I've got to know that you would. Oh shit, I've got to know it and I've got to get this headache to go away and I've got to stop talking to you because you're not listening and you don't care, you stopped caring after I stuck those candy lips in my mouth and made your face go away. Those Goddamn candy lips.

I lean over my jacket and fumble through my purse so that no one will see me laughing. They'll think I'm crazy or drunk at four o'clock in the afternoon, and I keep my head bent until I can keep my mouth straight and eyes d<sub>r</sub>y. Composed, I look up and Aaron is standing beside me. He looks like daddy. Except his face isn't blank, it smiles, and his hand rests on my shoulder like a savior. Haven't I seen you somewhere before? he asks, and I shrug off his hand and tell him to sit down. He removes his coat, lays it over mine, and motions for the bartender to bring two of whatever I had. I don't want to ask the obvious question, but he answers it anyway. Mom said you left with your notebook, he says, and I took a chance that this is where you came.

Am I that predictable? I ask, and he waits for the bartender to set down the glasses and leave before answering.

Only to me, he says, and winks.

Why aren't you working?

On Sunday?

Oh. I forgot.

Are you okay, sis? You look like you've been c<sub>r</sub>ying.

I haven't been crying, I've been laughing.

About what?

Wax lips.

Huh?

Candy wax lips. You know, the kind we used to wear on Halloween.

How many glasses of this have you had?

This is my second.

Are you sure?

For Christ's sake, Aaron, I can count to two.

Well, why are you thinking about wax lips? I mean, I wouldn't have thought about those in a million years.

That's because they didn't mean as much to you as they did to me.

No, I can't say wax lips have much significance in my life.

He laughs, sips the wine, and shakes his head slowly like somebody baffled to the point of humor. I find it hard to look directly at him and, instead, stare into the dead stillness of the glass, the burgundy doesn't move as I toy with the stem.

So what else did mom have to say? I ask, even though I really don't care.

Not much. She's still pissed off about Thanksgiving.

Yeah, I know.

Look, Danni, I know it's none of my business, but did you and Scott really have to miss the whole dinner?

You know what they say about time flying.

Were you really having that much fun?

Shit.

So what happened? Are still going through with the divorce? I don't know. I guess so.

You guess so? Danni, this is too serious for guessing.

Is it? Are you telling me what's serious in my life now? I'll tell

you what's serious. Wax lips, that's what's serious.

Oh shit, you've got to be drunk.

I'm not drunk now and I wasn't drunk the day daddy lost his face. I was eight-years-old and you laughed, you always laughed, and he just went blank because I ate those fucking lips right after he said his little girl would never do such a dirty thing, but I did, I did it just to spite him and now I swear I don't know why. God, Aaron, I just don't know why.

He holds his glass in a firm grip but doesn't drink from it. His eyes squint slightly and look deeply into mine like he doesn't know if I expect him to laugh or to explain his behavior of nineteen years ago or to just get up and walk away. I feel my cheeks get warm, warmer than the wine, and hope he doesn't notice the blush in the dim lights. He reaches across the table and puts his hand on top of mine. It feels thin and nervous but safer than my own, and I try to keep still underneath it.

Danni, he says, and I hear the weariness in his voice. Danni, why are you thinking about dad? Look how it upsets you.

Don't you ever think about him?

Well, sure, but I try not to dwell on it. Thar was ten years ago, give it up.

Give it up?

You know what I mean, let it go. You've got your own life to get straightened out.

Damn right about that.

I slip my hand out from under his and squeeze his fingers. It's the only way I have of letting him know I'm okay now. He leans back and eyes me curiously, not sure that I'm stable enough to keep up the conversation. I know he doesn't want to talk about daddy anymore. Neither do I.

Is Stevie at mom's? I ask, wanting to fall into the comfort of small talk.

Yeah. He wanted to see you.

How come?

No reason, sis, he just likes you.

I don't know why but I guess I'm glad.

Have you seen Scott since Thursday?

Yeah, a couple of times.

You two seem to be getting along pretty well.

We're friends.

But not friendly enough to stay married?

I don't know. He hasn't pressured me lately about signing any papers.

Well, that's encouraging.

Is it?

Yes, it is. Maybe if you weren't so snide, you'd realize it.

I don't mean to be snide, it just comes out that way.

Yeah, sure. I don't think you really care one way or the other about marriage, or about much of anything else.

Don't say that. I can't help it if I'm always on the outside.

What's that supposed to mean?

I mean I usually feel set apart, not really in touch with anybody. You know, like there's a film or something that I have to look through. Not a wall, just a film.

Are you talking to me through a film?

A thin one.

C'mon, Danni, be straight with me. Don't you feel close to me?

Yes, big brother, I guess I do.

Aaron's glass is empty and mine is almost full. I'm afraid to drink in front of him, afraid he won't believe anything I've said, as if anything I've said is believable, but I want him to take me seriously. I want him to know that I didn't mean to erase daddy's face or break his heart, that must be what happens when your heart cracks apart, it leaves a big gap, a big hole for your face to drain into.

I should be getting back to mom's, Aaron says, and reaches for

his coat. Do you want to come with me, sis?

No, not right now. I'd like to get some writing done if I can.

And you can't write at home?

Are you kidding?

Okay. Don't drink too much.

Aaron?

Yeah?

Why did you come?

He lays his jacket on the table and reaches for my hand again. He wraps mine in both of his and looks somewhere past my shoulder for several seconds. I wonder if he's trying to find a spot to concentrate on. Don't try it, I want to warn him, don't try it because it won't hold still, but he wouldn't understand and I wouldn't know how to make him.

Danni, he begins slowly, still looking beyond me, Danni, I came because, believe it or not, I care about what's been happening to you. You're going through a rough time and I don't know if you really know how to handle it.

He looks at me and I glance away. The businessmen are gone and more people are sitting or standing at the bar. They talk quietly and smoke and drink from beer bottles and don't look like they're going through a rough time. My brother is getting too close. He's starting to talk about caring and he's not laughing and he's right, I don't know how to handle it.

Do you understand? he asks.

Yes. Thanks.

My gratitude comes out weakly. Aaron knows it and smiles. He squeezes my hand then releases it and picks up his jacket. From a pocket, he pulls out a ten-dollar bill and lays it beside his empty glass. Will this cover mine? he asks, and I smile and shake my head no. Too bad, he says, and ruffles my hair the way he did years ago whenever I would fall and cry and he'd try to shut me up before mom or daddy found out he wasn't such a great babysitter. He wanted that five bucks a week. I watch him walk past the bar stools, nod at the bartender, and shove open one of the double doors.

For a moment I wish I'd gone with him. I wish I could get up, grab my things, toss the ten dollars toward the bartender, and run through the bar and out the door while everyone watched and thought, now there goes a woman who knows what she wants. But they wouldn't think that, they'd think, there goes a nut, glad I'm not on the road. I smile. So what if somebody sees me. They can smile back or look the other way or fuck off. I feel good here. Everybody's outside everybody else like the tip of a naked branch that's attached to the trunk but can't touch it. But the connection is there and I'm not a chain saw. Or an ax or a bolt of lightning. I look down at my glass, the wine is quiet and dark. It rests on a stem away from the base and neither would be pretty without the other.

Pamela Steed Hill



## The Rise And Fall Of Mort Zukofsky

Zukofsky, a lonely, middle-aged man from the East Side, coughed and the piece of steak he was chewing on flew from his mouth and landed nicely in a lady's shimp cocktail two tables away. He went over to apologize, but she was accepting no apologies. She swung wildly and caught Zukofsky firmly on the chin with a left uppercut and he hit the floor like a full set of Oxford English Dictionaries...

He was in dream-land now, walking on a dirt road. Around a corner, there was a sign: "Welcome To Verona. A Town Of Friendly People." Zukofsky walked on into town. The architecture was obviously from another time and from the fragmented voices of the people he heard in the street, they were speaking Italian. Zukofsky was from New York so he was familiar with Italian, and he could say, "Please don't shoot me, I'll have the money by Friday," like a native.

His feet were tired from the hard road, and his mouth was dirty with dirt; he decided to walk in the back yards of the houses. The soft grass felt good beneath his feet.

As he came into the yard of a very large house, he saw a young man falling down the trellis of a balcony. The young man hit the ground, got up, brushed himself off, then ran away. Zukofsky watched him run out of sight and didn't notice the large dog which had lovingly placed itself at his feet. He took one step and fell flat on his face; the dog yelped and ran away.

"Who's there?" said a female voice from the balcony. She spoke in perfect New York English.

Zukofsky watched as a very beautiful young woman came to the edge of the railing.

"Romeo. Is that you?" she said.

"No.... It's just me, Mort Zukofsky," he said, a bit awestruck by her beauty, but, nonetheless eager to meet her.

"Who?" she said.

"Mort. Mort Zukofsky."

"Oh. I thought you were someone else," she said and looked around. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm not quite sure," Zukofsky said in his lower East Side accent. "Some woman hit me in a restaurant in Manhattan, and now I'm dreaming."

"Oh, so you're the dreamer," she said.

"Yea, I'm dreaming all this. Silly isn't it," he said, walking closer to the balcony. He noticed if he looked up just the right way, he could see up her dress. "You're Juliet, I presume?"

"It's your dream.... Do you want to come up for coffee or something?"

"I'd love to."

Zukofsky shimmied up the trellis and in moments, he was sitting in one of the most beautiful bedrooms he had ever seen.

"I have a pot of coffee that's still hot. You take cream, sugar, or what?" she said, pouring the coffee into a fine china cup. "Hope you don't mind, it's Decaf. I've been getting too much caffeine lately."

"Decaf is fine, black, no sugar," Zukofsky said. "If you're Juliet, why don't you say 'thou' and 'thy' and things like that/ Or why don't you speak Italian? I'm confused. You sound like me."

"You're the one dreaming; don't ask me. Do you want me to say, 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One: two: why, then 'tis time to do it. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, Fie!'"

"That's Lady Macbeth, not Juliet," he said.

"Well, I was just using that as an example," Juliet said. She handed him the cup of coffee and poured one for herself. "I like 'Macbeth' better anyway. 'Romeo and Juliet' is too sentimental."

"How are you familiar with 'Macbeth'? Shakespeare wrote that

eleven years after he created you?"

"Yes, but I'm your creation now. Would you like a cookie?" she said slurping her coffee.

"That's not very lady-like."

"Sorry, I'm not used to entertaining men in my bedroom."

"What about Romeo?"

"He's just a kid," Juliet said.

"Yea, but you're supposed to love him; I've read the play many times."

"Not anymore. You've rewritten my part. I do what you want me to."

"Anything I want you to do?"

"Well, within reason," she said smiling.

"I guess oral sex is out of the question?" he said.

Juliet frowned. "Completely out of the question. Fictional characters don't give head," she said.

"Just asking."

Juliet crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside Zukofsky. They both remained silent for a few moments.

Zukofsky heard her whisper to herself: "O Mort, Mort! Wherefore art thou Mort?" She laughed.

They both turned and looked at each other and Zukofsky felt like comparing her to the sun, but that had been done before.

"You know, you look a lot like Jane Fonda," he said.

"I'm not into aerobics," Juliet said.

"No, the younger Jane Fonda, in her old movies."

"I haven't seen any of her movies; your dreams are more impressionistic than photographic," she said. "Pictures are fuzzy."

"You know about movies, though?" Zukofsky said.

"Only what you've dreamed into my character."

"Oh. Jane Fonda was beautiful once."

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" Juliet said.

"Yea. Absolutely. You're everything I ever dreamed of-but in a middle-ages sort of way, of course," he said.

"What's that mean?"

"Well, I mean you're wearing about a hundred layers of clothes. I can't see your body," Zukofsky said.

Suddenly there was a voice from the yard. "Juliet. Psst. It's me, Romeo."

"I'm busy now," Juliet said. "Come back later."

"You're too busy for your lovey-dovey? your honey-bunch?" Romeo said. Juliet remained on the bed with Zukofsky.

"Yes, I'm too busy. Come back later."

"How can you be too busy for me," Romeo said; his voice was starting to crack.

Juliet yelled. "Listen you great blooming twit, I said piss-off."

They listened to Romeo, crying as he walked away.

"You handled that well," Zukofsky said. "You have a way with people."

The rest of the afternoon, Zukofsky and Juliet spent talking and laughing. They played checkers (Zukofsky just happened to have a portable set in his jacket pocket), and poker, and talked about philosophy. Zukofsky tried to explain that Kant's theory of space and time rested on the assumption that Euclidean geometry was unqualifiedly true, and when mathematical science proved that assumption to be wrong, it meant that that part of Kant's philosophy was also wrong. For mathematics to be absolute, there would have to be an absolute god, and since there was no proof of god, Kant's philosophy rested, for the most part, on an unproven foundation. Juliet, who was catching on quick, argued that if the will or motive is governed by reason, then it is absolute and unconditional, and therefore, the proof of god's existence was not neces-

sary for Kant's Categorical Imperative to be valid. Zukofsky countered with the fact that **Formalism** had never been proven to work in the real world and that she was crazy for believing there was such a thing as **beings** without seeing the world is made up of individuals, not one clump of people called man. Juliet then said she thought Zukofsky was an existential ass-hole and poured a cup of coffee in his lap.

The sun was going down now, and a silent, cool breeze filled the room.

"Tis almost **night**. I would have thee gone--and yet no farther than a wanton's bird, that lets it hop a little from his hand, like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves, and with silken thread pluck it back again, so loving-jealous of his liberty," Juliet said.

"What's all that mean?" Zukofsky said.

"Beats me. Something about tying a string around your leg so you couldn't stray too far away from me."

"Sounds kinky," Zukofsky said. He remembered a line from high-school: "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast! Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!" Juliet was noticeably touched by the kind words.

"You know, you're kind of cute, in an ugly sort of way," she said.

"I've often been told that," he said. "It's getting kind of chilly, isn't it?" Zukofsky shivered, and Juliet got a wanton and lascivious sparkle in her eyes.

"We could get under the covers," she said.

"Great idea," Zukofsky said. "We should take some of our clothes off first, though."

"But wouldn't that defeat the purpose? I mean if we're cold, we should keep our clothes on," she said slyly.

"Believe me, I would be much warmer if you took **your** clothes off," he said.

Juliet smiled.

Zukofsky watched as, one by one, Juliet removed pieces of clothing. It took about twenty minutes for her to get undressed; and

since it was **his** dream, she did it teasingly. She pulled the covers down and climbed into bed. Now it was Zukofsky's tum to undress; it took less than twenty seconds, because he had conveniently dreamed zippers on all his clothes.

"Wait a minute. What am I doing? You're thirteen, or is it fourteen," he said.

"No. I'm eighteen. Shakespeare lied about my age. I think he was pedophilic," Juliet said.

Zukofsky got into bed and pulled the covers over their heads. "You mean he liked feet?"

"No. Children," she said.

"You're eighteen? You sure?" he said.

"It's your dream," she said. "I'm eighteen."

Juliet placed Zukofsky's hand on her breast and giggled. Zukofsky giggled back.

"Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; henceforth I never will be Mort Zukofsky," he said as he fell into her embrace . . .

Zukofsky woke up in the Manhattan restaurant, with a large man slapping him on the face.

"Are you all right, sir? You took a nasty blow," the man said.

Zukofsky opened his eyes wide and nodded his head. "I'm OK."

"He's OK everybody," the man said and the small circle of people went back to their tables.

Zukofsky got up, brushed himself off, and sat back down at his table. His steak was still warm. He felt like he had just fallen from Juliet's trellis.

He took one last bite of steak, then laid some money on the table and walked toward the door. As the doorman opened the door, Zukofsky heard a female voice behind him say, "Parting is such sweet sorrow." He didn't look back. Under his breath he whispered, "Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest."

**Timothy M. Wellman**

## A Visit To My Mother

I feel like I've been born and raised in this seat. Amtrak is my new last name. I'll be able to get off the train and walk around the station in Chicago. The trip home is always twice as long. I wish that I had never gone to see my mother at all. I hadn't seen her since she and Dad were divorced when I was four, except in some old pictures. I had to wait until I finished high school, by orders of my all-knowing father. Of course it was for my own good. Everything he did was for my own good. Like making me bring home every guy I ever dated. I was surprised when he didn't dust me for fingerprints after my senior prom.

I knew who she was when I saw her. She looked like an older me, except her hair was more red than blonde. She was wearing a sweat shirt and a pair of old Levis. She ran towards me and hugged me hard and started crying. Then I started crying, and we both cried and laughed all the way to her farm in Windson, 70 miles outside of Minneapolis.

The farm house she rented was at least fifty years old, and the barns looked older. The white paint was flaking off the sides, but the lawn and flowers made a perfect country picture, like on a post card. She had the top floor closed off and the living room converted into her bedroom. The entire farm was surrounded by a wind break of trees, and outside of that corn fields on all sides.

We talked about everything. I felt like I had been her best friend all my life. She liked country music, and I liked rock. She wore cowboy boots, and I wore Reeboks. We were so different, but I still identified with every emotion she had. She cried watching soap operas, and me too.

We talked for hours and then went to Barger's. It was a community bar where little kids could go. Waylon Jennings blared from the juke box. Mom's friends expected us to show up about nine. They all wanted to meet me. She taught me to two-step and polka, and all of the farmers asked me to dance and play pool. I felt like I was in a movie, and couldn't quit laughing and dancing.

The last night's five vodka collins woke me up, as someone was coming in the front door. I could see him from the bed that Mom and I shared in the living room. I woke her up and she mumbled something about Thad getting a beer and some boat keys, and went back to sleep.

He walked over to the bed. He said my name, handed me a set of keys, and left with a Coors Light. He was tan and well-built. I didn't say a word. I watched his rear-end walk away and ran to the window to see him get into a baby blue Mercedes and drive down the gravel driveway to the main road. I wondered how old he was.

After Mom got up we ate breakfast and went to the lake and fished and waterskied all day on a new red and white Renkin. It was faster than Dad's boat ever was. Windson Lake was calm, and I could see plants that looked like squids swaying on the bottom near the wooden boat dock. We caught three northerns with a pole we found on Thad's boat, and later ate one for supper.

On Saturday we went to the town cafe for chicken salad sandwiches. The cafe reminded me of the inside of an old barber shop. Some dirty farmers in suspenders sat at the counter drinking coffee, eating caramel buns, and talking about winter wheat. Thad walked in and sat down with us. He was old, at least thirty-five, with thin wavy hair. His cut-off jeans had holes in the back, and I could tell that he wasn't wearing underwear. He was wearing a softball jersey.

I started to speak, but when I looked at him my mouth froze. He was so casual. I didn't hear a word he was saying. I just stared at him like some lunatic, until he stood up and said, "Bye, Lisa from the bed," meaning me. I was mortified. Everyone heard him.

Mom roared so hard that she spit her chicken salad all over the table. I blushed. "Oh don't be embarrassed Lisa," she said, "he's only kidding. He's so funny." I didn't think so.

Mom told me that he was the area's district attorney, and owned half of Windson, all 1200 people. He worked in and out of the Twin Cities, and threw his money around like he was going to die any day. She talked about him like he was the greatest man alive. I acted like I didn't care, but for some reason my stomach felt funny talking about him. He couldn't be so bad. Mom had known him for eight years. They seemed to be the best of friends, but why did she act like he was Mr. Wonderful.

After lunch we drive back to the docks to go skiing, and Thad was waiting there on his boat. Mom had invited him to come during lunch. I had been too busy staring to hear it. I didn't want him there, but I didn't say anything to Mom. He held out his hand to help me onto the boat, and I saw that he was wearing a wedding band. I could almost feel my chin hit my chest. I brushed off his wedded hand and got onto the boat myself.

Mom was in the water putting on her skis, and he stood in front of me and kissed me. I didn't move. I wanted to. I felt like a four-year-old girl getting molested by Auntie's favorite nephew. I remembered Mom and stepped around him. She was having trouble, and had her head under the water, trying to adjust the left ski. Thad spun me around and kissed me harder, this time shoving his tongue into my mouth. I pushed him away and told him to stop it. He did, just like that. I thought that maybe he didn't like my mouth or something. Anyway, he quit, and that's what I wanted.

I dove into the water and swam back to the dock. I climbed out and sat there for a few minutes wondering if I should leave my own mother on the boat with that maniac. I still had my Nike's on and I decided to walk home. She has known him long enough to realize what kind of man he is.

Mom was making bacon and eggs when the phone rang. It was Thad. He apologized about the boat incident, sounding like a defendant's lawyer, and wanted to take Mom and me to dinner in the Cities. I told him that we had other plans, and not to call me anymore. He had some nerve. I was staying away from this guy.

We spent the evening at home weeding the garden, watching TV, and later looking through all of the old pictures of me when I was little.

The next morning I walked down the driveway to get the mail. A station wagon passed me. It was Thad with his wife and two kids. My stomach started aching. I grabbed the mail and ran home with Krishna, Mom's doberman, on my heels. As I came in the front door, Mom rushed me in and said that Thad was picking us up for dinner in an hour. Shit, I couldn't go. I just saw him with his wife and kids. I was going to tell her that I was sick. I felt sick anyway.

What kind of an idiot did he think I was? Mom was dancing around acting like Cinderella going to the ball. I couldn't tell her, and dug out the ugliest, orange dress I owned. I didn't even put on makeup. I thought about not taking a bath, but before getting the mail I was playing around with Krishna, and smelled like dog breath. Besides, I didn't want to embarrass my mother at St. Paul's finest.

I knew Thad was staring at me. Just like he could tell when I was staring at him in the cafe. I felt like I was eating marbles. He and Mom chatted about the bar she managed, and the time Thad did this, and the time Thad did that. My hands were shaking. I dropped my fork on the floor.

When I looked up from under the table, Mom was on her way to the restroom. I started to get up and follow her, but Thad grabbed

my hand and kissed it. I reminded him that he was married and crazy, and told him to stop harassing me. He took chat like a feather in the face. "Sure little Lisa, I will do whatever you command of me," he said. I just sat there. Mom finally came back and touched me. I jumped. She said I looked sick, and I told her that I felt terrible. She asked Thad to take us home.

I went straight to bed, and for some reason fell asleep. I woke up a few hours later, and he was sitting on the couch. Didn't Mom ever lock the door? He was drunk. I could smell him from across the room. A few minutes later he fell over and passed out.

Why me? I couldn't go back to sleep with him there, so I went to the bathroom. When I got back he was gone. I didn't even hear his car. I lay in bed until Mom woke up and hugged me. She told me she was happy that I could be with her.

She was worried when I didn't eat all my breakfast, and asked me if anything was wrong. I didn't know what to say, so I told her that my allergies must be upsetting my stomach. I wanted to talk to her about it, but what was I supposed to say.

That afternoon we were laughing while we weeded the garden. The radishes and beans were coming up. I had almost forgotten Mr. Lawyer; maybe he'd figure that I was too young and silly to bother anymore. Mom was giggling on about me when I was a baby. How I used to lisp and run around naked. It was pretty funny.

The blue Mercedes came speeding down the driveway, and my belly took a dive. He was dressed for court, and almost looked handsome. He wanted us to go fishing with him later on his pontoon. Didn't he have people to save, and judges to bribe? He said he just got back from court, and even had clothes to change into in his car. How convenient. Mom went running inside to fix a picnic lunch, and Thad said that I had to go with him to get the gas. I told him to get it alone, and walked inside. He came in and changed into some shorts in the bathroom. He walked out and practically commanded me to get moving. I offered to stay and fix the lunch, but Mom wouldn't hear of that. Great.

I sat as close to the window as I could get, and I refused to look at him. He was smoking Marlboros, and didn't even roll down his window. I had to throw up. He made me sick enough without the revolting smell of his cigarettes. I wanted to get out and walk. He was humming and talking about appointments into a little cassette recorder. I suppose it made him feel important.

He stopped at his trailer. It was a new white and blue double-sided one situated right on the edge of the lake. He had sand brought in to make a beach beside the spot where he docked his boats. I could see the old wooden dock across the lake. He pointed me in the direction of the gas cans. I went inside first, hoping that he'd continue dictating and not notice.

Some shirts with monogrammed sleeves lay on the bed I hurried by to find the bathroom. It was like the bathroom at the back of a bus. I threw up the raisin bran that I had for breakfast, and rinsed my mouth out. He was going to know that I went inside if I didn't hurry. I was running for the front door, when I passed a picture of him and his family in the hallway. She was not very pretty. I heard him in the kitchen fixing a drink. That was the only way out. I had to pass him.

Before I could move, he pinned me against the wall. He played football in college and I could tell. He said that he wanted me. I wanted to scream, but who would hear me. What a cute plan, Thad. Law school paid off in one way. He began fumbling with my short buttons, and I started hitting him. Then he pushed me on the floor. I was still trying to hit him. He was on my legs so I couldn't kick.

"Lisa, I don't want to hurt you, but I am attracted to you."

"If you don't want to hurt me, then stop it. I hate you. You're married. I saw you with your wife and kids. What if they come home."

"They live in Garfield, 30 miles away."

He could tell I was tired of hitting him and he started laughing at me. Then he got up and walked out to the car. Another time. He was planning it already. I ran to the bathroom and puked again. I felt like barfing all over the floor, but out of this habit I was developing, hit the toilet.

I was afraid to stay home at night while Mom was at work. I locked all the doors, but that didn't help. I had the music up as loud as it would go while I did the dishes. I left a carving knife on the counter on purpose.

Thad walked into the kitchen. He must have had a key. I ran. He tackled me from behind and rolled me over on my back. He didn't even bother trying to kiss me, and had his hands on my waist trying to get my panties off. I was getting ready for bed and was just wearing panties and a t-shirt. I thought about the knife on the counter, but what kind of defense would I have against stabbing a district attorney? Besides I was totally pinned down. He slid them down far enough to do what he wanted. I thought about yelling, but he'd like that. His pants were already unzipped, he probably came in that way. His breath stunk like whisky, while he panted and pushed himself harder onto me.

A saw black curly hair and light skin when he arched up. I could hardly breath. He spit on his fingers as I closed my eyes. He shoved himself in me hard, and didn't stop thrusting in and out. I quit fighting, it wasn't any use. Five minutes later he went limp, and lay on me like a wet Kleenex. I felt a stinging wetness between my legs. He climbed off of me, pulled on his cut offs, and left.

I walked to the bathroom and ran the hottest water I could stand in the tub. I sat in the water and cried until I had a headache. I got out and lay in bed. Mom came home at about 4:00 and crawled into bed to snuggle me. I tried to tell her. I was scared, and didn't know what to say again.

In the morning, Mom drove me to the Cities to catch my train back to New Jersey. I tried not to think about it, and talked about all of the fun things we did. Then she said that I should send a thank you note to Thad for being so nice. I busted out crying. She thought I was crying because I had to leave, and invited me back next summer, or even for Christmas. I told her I'd try to come back, and I would miss her and write a lot.

The lady in front of me is smoking Marlboros, and the smell is making the nausea in my stomach worse. I haven't stopped crying since I got on the train, and people are staring at me. I don't care.

**Jeanne Stevenson**

## My Millions Of Bees Plan

You're stupid! I said you are STUPID! Dad doesn't listen to me. He just stares at his desk and expects me to shut up. I stick my tongue out at him and run upstairs really hard and fast. Then I run in my room and slam the door. Dad ignores me pretty good. My step monster would have listened all right. She would have made me GO to my room, and THINK about what I just said. She hears me all the time. She can probably hear the mice snoring at night.

I can see Jessica across the street under the tree we pounded nails into, and hung our dolls from last week. I hit my thumb with the brick, but I didn't cry because if my step monster found out she would probably laugh. Jessica's black. I'm not supposed to be talking to blacks. I yell out the window at her. JESSICA! JESSICA! She hears me and looks up. The step monster is at the store, so I can yell my loudest. Dad doesn't hear me yelling.

The step monster says Jessica is black as the ace of spades. She has big lips. My lips aren't big, but sometimes I pout them out and try to look black. One day I took some black and white shoe polish across the street. Jessica and me painted each other. I had to go home for dinner. The step monster saw me and screamed and called me a nigger. I had to go to the bath tub and get scrubbed and then go to bed without supper.

Jessica has a jar in her hand, and a Twinkie in her mouth. She yells, come down here, I got something. Maybe it's a Twinkie for me, but I doubt it. I sneak out, but I don't have to. I leave the screen door open on purpose.

Jessica is standing under the murder-the-doll tree. Her Twinkie is gone now. Her forehead is shining like a bowling ball in the sun, and her hair is slicked back into a twisty ponytail. Jessica is sweating, right through her red sundress. Dressing like a nigger, my step monster would say. Some times Jessica wears her slippers outside. I did chat once, and the step monster cook my slippers away.

Jessica has bees buzzing around in her Vlasic pickle jar. At least a million honey bees. She was waiting for them to land on a flower, then she caught them with a baby food jar one at a time. Next she flicked them into the pickle jar.

I decide to help her until my step monster gets home. The pickle jar smells like rotted moth balls, and the bees don't like it. Some of the pollen is falling off the bees and sticking to the sides of the jar.

Jessica's brother wants to help, but I don't want him to. I hit him with my fist, and tell him that he's stupid. He gets mad at me and throws his G.I. Joe at me. What a jerk. He runs inside crying. Jessica is staring into the bee jar.

I have a plan for the bees I catch. The sun is getting hotter, and I start sweating, but not as bad as Jessica. She sweats more than anybody. Just like those damn niggers, my step monster says, sweating like pigs. I concentrate and try to sweat harder. Jessica can jump rope better than anyone on the block. She can even double dutch, better than the fourth graders. I am proud of her.

The millions of bees are hard to keep inside the jar whenever we sneak a new bee in. We need a new jar. I run inside my house and get a kitchen chair that I am not supposed to stand on, and put it up by the kitchen cabinets. I climb around on the counter till I get to the jar cabinet. A peanut butter jar will work fine. I jump off the counter and pretend I am flying out the front door and across the street. Wally Whitaker says he flew one time but he's a liar. I decide to fly back to my house and tell my Dad about how many bees I have. He is sitting at his desk staring at architect stuff like blue prints. I am catching all the bees in the world for my plan, I say. He just keeps staring. HEY DAD, I said I am catching all the bees in the WORLD! He nods. My dad is a genius, my seep monster says. He plans buildings in his head. I make plans in my head, like the bee plan. I need more bees. I go and leave the door open.

Jessica is eating another Twinkie, and I ask her for a bite. She

gives me some cream on her finger. The best part. Her weird brother comes out with a glass of Kool-aid, and I throw his G.I. Joe man back at him. He is never going to amount to anything. Maybe a job at a plant or a gas pumper. My step monster says he will go to prison some day for beating up his wife while he is drunk.

Any second she will be home, and I have to get busy. More bees, I need more bees. They like the Twip.kie smell and try to land on Jessica's finger. I try to get some of her brother's Kool-aid, and he won't give me a drink. You are going to HELL I say. He runs inside crying again. I don't care.

I have all the bees I need. All the bees in the world. My bees are swarming mad. The ones in the pickle jar are the maddest, because they were the prisoners the longest. I shake my jar up so they get the maddest. They buzz loud. My millions of bees plan is almost perfect. Jessica says I can have all her bees, if I give her fifty cents. I say okay, and now my plan is better.

I take all the bees in the world inside and Dad doesn't look. I am glad this time. He is mumbling numbers out loud, and I sing "Beat it" so he won't hear my bees. I put the bees on the floor of the pantry, unscrew the lids, kick the jars, and RUN. What a plan. I slam the pantry door before any bees escape. Trapped and waiting. The best plan I ever had. My step monster doesn't want bugs in the house, they can cause germs and diseases. Orkin sprays once a month. I hope the poison stuff doesn't kill the bees before SHE gets home.

I run next door to Bobby Laslo's house. He has carrot red hair, and freckles big as pennies all over his face. I can see the driveway from behind a yellow flower busy in his front yard. One day I kicked Bobby on the knee, and he spit on my face. He is in first grade. He was just mad because me and Jessica wouldn't let him in my club. Jessica's mom sent her to the Super America on the corner to get some Pepsi. I take my lunch money there and get Reese's cups on Monday mornings.

There's some pill bugs under this bush. I pick them up and pretend like they are my medicine. I can swallow them with the spit in my mouth. My step monster hates bugs, but God created everything for a purpose, and bugs have a place in this world. I take a stick and knock some flowers off the bush.

She's home. She has to carry all the groceries in by herself. le takes her five trips, and one time she dropped some loaves of bread out of the bag. She closes the car door and goes inside. I have to sneak in the back yard, and climb up on the central air blower. It kicks on and blows up my shorts. Jessica can't afford a central air blower. She is used to sweating and being hot. Last summer, we tied sheets over it and made a wind tent. I got spanked for that, because it burned up the engine inside the blower. I tried not to cry when she spanked me, but I did a little. I told her that I hated her guts.

I can see in the pantry window between the pink ruffly curtains, like the dresses she makes me wear to Sunday school. The bees are flying around everywhere. Some have landed on the shelves of soup cans and green beans. My plan is here, and it is about to happen, and I even get to see it.

I am ready for her. After the central air blower kicks off, I jump off it a few times. It kicks on again, and I stick my face over it and scream inside. AAAAAUUUUUAAAAA! She is probably coming in the pantry now. I climb back up. No, not yet. I better be quiet. The door swings open, and she comes in back first with an arm load of cans. The bees go wild. The cans go wild. She starts swinging her arms and jumping around and falling on the cans. The bees are mad at her. She finally runs out screaming, and I laugh, and go back under the yellow flower bush at Bobby Laslo's house.

Jeanne Stevenson

## slow dancing

we're in new york and i walk out of the bathroom in the old edison on west 47th and the first thing i see is joyce on her knees. below the opened push-out windows, one hand holds back (only slightly) the mud-green cunains, the other hand wraps around the cardboard tube of a toilet paper roll and presses it tight against the skin around her eye. what the hell are you . . . she cuts me off with a sssh, says come here, and i tiptoe across the coffee-stained carpet and all i can think of is the indented ring that will circle her eye when she pulls the tube away. look, she says, inching the curtain back and across the alley in another building i see two men in black bikini underwear slow dancing to diana ross or maybe it's roberta flack (the sirens below make it hard to tell) and joyce slacks off on the cardboard roll, looks up at me with a sincere west virginia grin, says, i told you this town was full of perverts, and all i can see is the little gray ring around her bright blue-contact eyes.

**Pamela Steed Hill**

## Potter Creek Suicide

If we could live those years again,  
knowing Daddy was what he was: a man,  
creating you and me, Vincent,  
not by heroic intervention, but by  
a simple act with a simple girl;  
not assigning the rain words like melancholy  
or lonely, but seeing it as it was, a simple cycle of condensation.

If I could have seen that town  
as an eyesore not quaint or historic as I too often describe it,  
but as a long scar on a forgettable mountain;  
and those half - Italians not as heroes  
(you remember them standing over the hissing stove  
passing around their browned photos of war),  
but as losers who never learned the ropes, maybe  
I could see you now, not as a white shell,  
a tired poet, a trapped bird,  
but as a man who blew his head off,  
and leave it at that;

not assigning spiritual reasons  
to a physical act of no more importance  
than the fact  
you used to eat four eggs for breakfast.

Terre Thomas

## 1969

Oh Twiggy,  
you were a sensation!  
Your round eyes snared us  
like pregnant spiders; and oh -  
those legs, like long tanned bones.  
We watched you glide  
like honey into Carson's chair,  
your hair spiked blonde;  
you were bangles and gold.

On Monday  
we rushed to Sears - three of us  
in Nancy's car, to get our ears pierced.  
The white counter blazing as we bore  
our drops of blood; heads held like saints  
while the gold dropped like weights  
on our young white throats.

From then on,  
we walked with our bellies sucked in,  
eyes focused on nothing.  
We were not surprised when roses arrived,  
oh no, Twiggy,  
we were cool and white sensations -

still able to keep red thoughts away -  
the bitten lip, Gertrude's rose,  
the apple Eve clawed open.

**Terre Thomas**

### First Place Poetry

### First Confession

They lead him immediately  
to the dark wood doors, his blonde curls  
freshly pasted into waves,  
his usual nonchalance stifled into solemn bravery.  
What sins has he to confess - my only son, just seven?  
What dead rituals to perform?

The old nun draws him to her black side;  
stem birddog, you! as if he were yours.  
Outside, I wait,  
hands clutching the mahogany pew, hushed sun  
falling through the stained glass  
into red and purple patches on my white knuckles.  
Ears still burning with  
the sharp swallow of the confessional door.

I gave my son, Mary whispers from white face.  
You will not have this one,  
I whisper back.

**Terre Thomas**





## Sylvia, I Too Lay Me Down For You

Reduced to typical,  
baying shadow etched on moon.  
Lonely hunters -  
we crouch as dogs  
by dark holes; waiting.

Our hearts hang hungry.  
Incessant drive that ticks in our sleek white wrists.  
We are a year older, nothing more.  
Our eyes pierce the night,  
desperate for soft movement.  
Long weaned, we strike as fast kings.  
A razor in the night,  
scarlet drips across frozen snow,  
and then the eerie howl that rips the night in two.

Our plump and pretty kisses  
hide shiny teeth;  
there is blood on our breath.  
O funny valentine, angel  
My lips rip your white neck red.

Nomads.  
We follow the noises of the night.  
Desperate chases over barren earth.  
The endless waiting, the chance for score,  
the hot empty roar in our bellies  
whispers the weak are to eat.  
We are a year older, nothing more.

Too late, I learned you were not to be played with.  
Old fool, aged queen,  
now I lay me down for you.  
The entangling heat, the disturbing loneliness.  
O funny one, valentine  
One flash of my weak white throat  
and your lips drip red.

Blonde feast.  
Yellow teeth.  
Hair and hide.  
Hair and hide.

Terre Thomas

## Marilynscape

There are no more landscapes or seascapes. Instead,  
there are Marilynscapes. The Statue of Liberty  
walked out into the New York Harbor until the ocean  
covered her torch, and the next day was replaced  
by Marilyn, skirts an open audition,  
hands protecting her crotch. Marilyn,  
Coney Island of Hollywood, roller coaster body,  
souvenir eyes, funhouse attic,  
candy apple lips gateway to the tunnel of love.  
Marilyn, robed virgin in the creche at St. Andrew's,  
surrounded by shepherds and hay. Marilyn,  
cardboard cut out in the supermarket,  
inspiration for starlets loading their shopping cart.  
Marilyn, innocent again, waking up in Kansas  
with Toto and nude feet. Marilyn windup, butterfly key  
stuck in her back. Marilyn jigsaw puzzle,  
Warhol masterpiece, 3-d bed sheet.  
Marilyn in King Kong's palm. Marilyn  
on the billboard off Highway 63, "Come sleep with me  
in The Last One Night Stand Cheap Motel.  
Color TV."

Everywhere across America there are goddesses.

Everywhere across America there are Marilyn  
in 24 hour laundramats, Marilyn in slips and curlers  
walking dogs, Marilyn in bed waking up to slop the hogs,  
Marilyn, frigid, fucking Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio,  
the photographer, the Fuller Brush salesman,  
anyone who won't take no. Marilyn rehearsing suicide  
for a joke. Marilyn spread out in magazines.  
Marilyn masquerading as Norma Jeane. Marilyn  
parading as Venus in the streets.  
Marilyn on the phone to the White House.  
Marilyn enshrined in double beds.  
Marilyn safely dead.

Erotic freaks, celluloid aphrodisiacs, adolescent nymphomaniacs,  
bombshell blondes, peroxide frauds, narcotic applause.  
A few desertscaapes.

Mary Sansom

## Larry's Cat

Larry is a bad boy. His mother is a slut.

Their cat is named Fluffy. While Larry and his family are at the beach my sister feeds the cat. Fluffy is fun to pet, but he makes me sneeze.

Larry said that Denny took my army men, but I know Larry did it. I'm mad.

Fluffy is a stupid name for a boy cat. I like the cat okay, except it has a stupid name and it makes me sick.

My sister isn't very smart. She has a stupid name for a girl--Virginia.

I went to West Virginia with Larry's family. It made me sick.

Maybe it was Larry's dad's car that made me sick or maybe it was West Virginia. Either one can.

My sister won't notice the key to Larry's house missing from her purse. It's full of junk. Mom told her to clean it out or she will get raped one night while she is looking for her keys in that junky purse. Larry's mother was raped. Dad said it was because she is a slut. Mom said that Larry's dad is a slime. One day when Larry and me were hiding in the closet where his dad keeps the Playboys we heard him say that he would like to rape my sister. He wasn't talking to anyone in particular and he wasn't wearing pants.

Larry's house is scary when no one is here. Here comes Fluffy. He always rolls on his back when I am around so I can tickle his belly. Larry's mom's meat hatchet goes clear through Fluffy's head.

It took a whole bottle of Liquid Plumber and a coat hanger to get the garbage disposal unclogged. I found one of my army men. I knew Larry took them.

**Van Flesher**

## Revelation

'My Death'  
scrawled on the side of the monument company  
who was the soul who thought it fit  
to write these puzzling words  
for a decaying town to see?  
maybe a reader of Camus or Kafka  
a vindicator of the dark reactions  
or a youth with cigarette bums on his hands  
who wanted to see if the physical pain  
could rival his emotional torment  
'My Death'  
the words stand out against the white cement  
a pure concept yet an indistinct motive  
Who was driven to this stark confession?

Violet Chrome

## Autumn

When autumn came my older sisters  
spent all morning raking the  
leaves of our big yard a job they  
loved but said they hated so  
cool in their wind-breaking jackets they

told me and Joy to go play somewhere  
else but we restless intruders really  
wanted to help them the

faster they raked the more  
the pile would grow to body swallowing  
proportions and we could

jump into the leaves in our hair  
under our clothes tickling crispily  
against our skin and we two leaves now  
would fall through the air  
and roll and

a live mound of leaves rustled  
as we laughing crazily planned to  
stay still and hide waiting

to see if anyone would look  
for us or could even find  
us crouched and giggling and having to pee

we ran into the house and dared  
them to guess our hiding place the  
secret stuck in our hair  
and the smell they knew

we hated to have washed off

Gina Johnson

## Family Lumberjackin1

Everytime the maul hits  
My whole body is jarred  
Starting at my bony hands,  
up my shoulders  
down my back  
literally, lifting my feet  
off the ground  
like a cartoon.

I really can't aim  
Hardly hitting the same place more than once  
But the spirit of the thing  
keeps me at it  
In my frustration,  
I hope with each blow  
the log will split.

Dad seems to do it meticulously  
a rhythm he is passing on to brother  
The swing, pull, lift.  
And Papaw's style trembles slightly with age  
but he is still more effective than I.

And the gasoline-oil mixed smell  
from the chainsaw  
scents us all  
along with the hickory, oak, and sassafras  
whose sawdusts fill our lungs.

Wearing my Dad's long-john shirt and my cut-off  
sweat pants  
No gloves.  
Dad's thick monkey socks  
Asbury's hiking boots, though a size too big  
crammed with a whole size and a half of  
sentimentality  
to make them cozy.  
He was a woodsman also.

It all comes with the territory  
Country-grown  
and with trees all around  
and two fireplaces to feed.

Splitting  
Wood.

Lisa R. Graley

## Summer Sojourn

She wanders too far  
down the block  
on a tricycle,  
red and rusty,  
and her mother yells  
Athena.

She rides on her driveway  
and sings the Or. Pepper song,  
pedalling,  
sometimes in circles,  
and her mother shouts  
Athena.

She visits the girls  
with the Kool-Aid stand,  
cookies a dime, drinks the same,  
and her mother cries  
Athena.

Then raspberry lipped  
she pedals to the voice,  
takes her time-  
Athena.

Andy Evans

## Like Mother Like Son

I dreaded all discipline,  
and confinement all the more;  
exiled to a room of GI Joes, plastic robots,  
who seemed to smirk at my dilemma.  
I begged for the belt instead  
of your unerring punishment.  
It's because I love you, you said,  
it hurts me more than you.  
I sulked in dark solitude,  
wishing I were the incarcerator.

I dread them all--  
today's more than yesterday's,  
visits to Morning View Manor, Room 315.  
I did what I had to do.  
You begged me not to; I ignored your tears,  
destined to bask in anguish instead.  
A room of mechanical nurses, giggling candy strippers,  
do you even notice?  
At night tears come to me,  
an uncontrolling flood of sorrow, relief.  
It's because I love you and know  
it will be over soon.  
Eighty years you had beyond this room;  
I must have my tum now.

Mike Friel

## Pretiosa Amicitia

or  
Bootbead's Sister

Holes in your sweater  
some an inch in diameter  
and with runs  
hangs loosely  
Holding that ship-decorated-glazed-clay mug  
with instant coffee  
and sipping  
perhaps sensuously  
Those dark squinty eyes  
glinting over the rim  
trying to listen  
but going crazy inside and melting  
with the steaming coffee  
Your castle decorated like a log cabin  
Plaid rugs lying on the wooden floor  
Hand-sewn quilt thrown across the bed  
Bayberry scents its way  
through the oil fire of your lamp light.

And if I rub your back  
it is only to polish  
what is already nearly  
perfect.

Lisa R. Graley

### Second Place Poetry

#### The Caul

I still don't know if I believe it:  
that some people can foresee the future.  
Grandma swore Aunt Oelphie could.  
She's one of God's chosen children, Grandma said,  
born with a looking mask to see beyond.  
When Uncle Ralph fell to his death  
while working in Washington, O.C.,  
a wayward sparrow flew smack  
into Aunt Delphie's big picture window.  
She swore it was a sign.  
And when her daughter in Chicago  
went into labor during the seventh month,  
Aunt Oelphie claimed to feel the pangs  
at her home on the mountain near Durbin.  
But what makes me want to believe  
maybe God did give her the gift,  
is how she went to the hairdresser  
last January and cancelled her appointment.  
I won't be around next week, she told them.  
Six days later she had a new hairdo,  
but she didn't go to the Snip 'n' Curl.  
Instead, Marge went to Waugh's Funeral Home  
and gave her a final set.

Mike Friel



## Frosted Geranium

Donne  
made one little room an everywhere.  
Browning  
made the instant eternity.  
God  
put the whole being in one cell,  
and a universe in one petal of a  
red geranium.

A dark secret love did not destroy it,  
nor an invisible worm.  
It was blacked by frost last night.  
The whole is not less now;  
for life is in the roots  
that will hang withered  
in the cellar  
till summer.

Irene Orrick

## The Killing Frost

On December first,  
off-white,  
with time-worn faces  
whipped thin by winds,  
the Queen Anne's Lace  
wave beside the road.  
Like old ladies  
in ivoried shawls  
who have outlasted  
the frosts of fall and  
live on  
after friends  
have been long dead,  
they wave, timid  
at living still.

They are glad when  
midnight brings  
December second and  
killing frost.

Irene Orrick

## Twentieth Street Entry

Dirty Salvation Army kids  
walking pet beetles  
on button thread  
down their sidewalked front yard.

At 3:30 a.m., whining  
porch puppies sit on the steps  
that lead into wide open  
front doors of unfurnished apartments  
the Orkin man has  
never seen.

Drunks spend lifetimes  
pacing the Mad Dog alley  
and stepping on  
chirping crickets who  
make the night air  
more bearable.

Jeanne Stevenson

## Shoot Out At Woodmont Drive

Jeremy wanted a Daisy BB gun  
to shoot commies  
and sheriffs.  
He wrote it on his Christmas list,  
and Santa left it  
under our tree.

He severed icicles from the gutters,  
and blew leftover leaves  
clean off the poplar tree.  
John Wayne tossed snowballs  
into the sky,  
and shattered them across  
the sled trails in the back yard.

March came, and  
Jessie James lined his  
Campbell's soup cans on a split log  
for target practice.  
He hit the first can  
dead on: even dented it.  
Rambo's never been better.

He cocked and aimed for  
the second can.  
A robin landed on the log,  
so G.I. Joe shot it instead.  
He paced up to the  
bloodied bird,  
and watched it stare.  
Jeremy cried.

Jeanne Stevenson

## (Ulisi...)

Ulisi, "She Carries Me on Her Back,"  
walks along dusty garden rows  
barefoot  
and sweating in the sun,  
holding grandson's tender hand,  
points under a vining canopy  
of fuzzy leaves.  
Grandson obeys--  
darting like a thieving rabbit  
and plucks  
the first emerald cucumber  
from its parent vine.  
Smiling, black eyes squinting,  
shaggy mustangs's mane  
blowing in heated wind,  
he hands it up  
to Ulisi;  
she wipes the dust off,  
calloused, cinnamon hands  
gently rubbing  
on her faded blue calico shirt,  
and cuts the small fruit in two.  
They share, watery  
juice wetting their mouths,  
cooling their bellies,  
and when they laugh,  
seeds are stuck  
like flat pearls  
in their teeth.

Barbara A. Fisher

## Hole

There's a hole  
in the kitchen wall,  
next to the floor:  
I saw it today, while I scrubbed  
pots and pans.  
Use the right size for  
helpful house brownies  
(my German mother called them Tomtes)  
to slip through and work for me,  
I thought.  
That night,  
I left the supper dishes dirty--  
stacked on the counter,  
and a piece of German chocolate cake  
on the floor.  
(You have to pay the Tomtes for their help,  
and they are terribly fond of sweets.)

But, the next morning,  
all I saw were the dishes stacked,  
as dirty as I'd left them,  
and a fat mouse  
waddling from the empty cake plate  
to the hole in the wall.

Barbara A. Fisher

## Bingo

You know Bill  
that used to come on Tuesdays,  
back when you first came.  
Remember he started going to your aisle at the store,  
and always had that ball cap on,  
the blue one with the "A" on it.

B4

Well he's in the hospital now, you know,  
for something wrong with his blood,  
and he turned his damn bed over  
because they strapped him into it.  
That's right, they found him upside down,  
and one of the orderlies was so impressed  
that he started bringing Bill

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tobacco and those football cards  
so he could bet on the games  
and care about the scores.  
But somebody else, a hardass nurse,  
like that Ratchett in the Cuckoo's Nest,  
put him in a straightjacket,  
Bill in a straightjacket,  
and when that orderly came  
with more tobacco

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well Bill stretched his shoulders  
and ripped the damn straightjacket.  
That orderly laughed  
and brought back some other fellows  
and they slapped hands  
and laughed and brought Bill some magazines.  
I saw the magazines, all about football,  
when I visited him,  
and I read them to him  
because he was in another of those Jackets  
and didn't want to rip it until those boys came back.  
I told him I would play a card for him.

Andy Evans

## Standing On The Corner Of Elm

Early morning I go out  
cross Oak Park Avenue  
and wait with the others  
on the corner of Elm for the bus.

We're wrapped like cellophane  
from head to foot each of us looks alike,  
ankle-high boots, gloves, long quilted coats,  
knit hats pulled down to eyes,  
and a wool scarf over our faces.

Backs facing South we stand,  
penguins in the wind.

Anne Whitney Smith

## The Back Room

Once, a man I was seeing  
insisted we visit Carter Caves  
on his vacation.  
From Oak Park, Illinois, we traveled  
and turned off on the Carter Cave route,  
a windy road dense with fir trees.  
A log cabin came into view and inside,  
it was a gift shop, the shelves lined  
with Kentucky souvenirs;  
a small white-haired lady said,  
"The cave tours begin in two hours."  
As we looked out the door toward the caves,  
she called out, "There's a back room."  
On one wall gleaming with metal  
and flickering red and white lights  
stood four pin-ball machines;  
a five foot high wooden counter  
carved with leaves and flowers  
took up half the space on the other side.  
Chuck got a roll of quarters  
brought me an Alice Gray; himself, a can of beer;  
I learned how to play the pin-ball machines.  
We jiggled the machine--he showed me how to bump  
and what buttons to press to keep the balls going up  
to win 20,000 points before the balls  
went down the wrong hole;  
it became an obsession to see how far we could go,  
suspended in time and no tomorrow,  
we played on and on. Sometimes we won a free game.

Anne Whitney Smith

## Wergild

Tom and I work a jigsaw puzzle--typical rural  
Scene: house in a meadow, trees; a mural  
Postcard life that no one really lives lies shattered  
At our fingertips upon the table, a dead  
World wherein all philosophy, science, art,  
Once the focus of the living mind, are met  
On the intersecting plane of length and width,  
Granted these two dimensions to become a minor Earth.  
The fractured blue sky is repaired bit by bit.  
The great charm's to make the pieces fit  
Together, finally. We can't escape the fact that here  
Life is fleeting, vague, and dear.

Michael F. Titus

## Staff Meeting

Late p.m. Another day ends. I really want to know  
What life is all about. Rain turns to snow:  
A pure crystalline genesis of form, ions  
Leap like hearts in love. These transformations  
Happen so far away that dark and light are one.  
Snow begins a silent smart traffic to the tune  
Of Schubert's Impromptu #2 in A-flat major,  
Icing the earth (a wedding cake's the metaphor)  
In a translucency that builds to white . . . .  
Is this what becomes of the spirit?  
A ghostly A or B-sharp in an otherworldly script?  
Music the atomic language of God?  
A quanta, lento, blooming to prestissimo  
Of soul?  
    Inside, the winter oratorio  
Steeps like a cup of herbal tea, warm,  
Delicious. For a little while the Sturm  
Und Orang of life are buried by this cinnamon sound  
--will rise again, be put down.

Michael F. Titus

