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ON BREAD AND FICTION:

THREE SHORT STORIES

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

ON BREAD AND FICTION:

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Three short stories, ON BREAD AND FICTION, RED, FOR SHORT, and SCANT RATIONS, are included. The first is a metafiction about the teaching of creative writing; the second is a fictional case study involving a therapist and a seven-year old girl; and the third is a story about a dialysis patient and his sister.

ON BREAD AND FICTION

My first grammar and composition books (those shiny crackling tomes that somehow never looked from the outside as though they contained any beauty, pity, or sex on the inside) always promised that fiction, like matter, could be broken down into its essential ingredients. Thus if one could isolate character, point of view, plot, setting, theme, tone, symbol, diction (and I was always careful to check the footnotes for special high altitude directions), one could blend, fold, and finally create fiction.

I am reminded of a time at recess in the ninth grade when a girlfriend of mine, an early Atomist, confessed that as a child she had never known how bread was made, and believed for years that each crumb in the loaf was stuck to each of the other crumbs by laborers in a bread factory. "With tweezers?" I asked her. "Well, yes!" she said. "How else could they do it?"

I felt sorry for her, knowing that while her delusion persisted, she must have been continually awed by the magnificence and intricacy of bread. She must have wondered why they didn't display loaves of bread in the museums next to the Fabergé eggs. She must have been horrified when she found out that bread was nothing more than a mass of bloated fungi. "Were you horrified?" I asked her.

"You're kidding!" She recoiled in horror. "Is yeast really a fungus? A fungus? Really? Yuck!"

To save her any further disappointment, I told her that I wasn't

sure. I told her that I had read somewhere that yeast was a type of fungus, but that I had probably got the idea out of a pulp magazine and that most of what one reads, no matter where, is bound to be at least fifty percent piffle.

I hope she was comforted.

I, however, was not comforted. Even now, almost twenty years after our conversation in the playground, I wonder. Is bread anything like fiction? Is fiction anything like bread?

The word "fiction" comes from the Latin fictio, a "shaping or counterfeiting," and one of the so-called elements of such counterfeiting is character. (I can't help but think of George Washington's picture on the dollar bill, and I am convinced that even if the dollar bill is real, George Washington—his wig and that cherry tree—is a counterfeit.) But before one can blend and fold character into a fiction, one must first ask the question: what is character?

One instinct of the aspiring scholar who is confronted with the necessity of having to answer such a question is to delve back through history, back through literature, in order to come up with the quintessential, paradigmatic, prototypical character. And so, being a lazy scholar, and not wanting to have to go so far back that even the years themselves diminish instead of add up, I decided to begin with God, who presumably is eternal. John says,

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made (John 1:1-3).

It seems to me that John's thesis, or antithesis, is as good a place as any to begin a discussion of character since, according to

John, character and the Word are one and the same thing. Furthermore, John's statement has survived the test of time. All the greatest characters, real or counterfeit, are made of words, and without words it is conceivable that neither God nor George Washington could have withstood the oral distortions that occur, even in word games, when a whispered secret is passed around the room.

God, then, is the quintessential character as far as the elements of fiction are concerned. God is the only character I can think of who can wriggle free (except, alas, for his unfortunate personal pronoun) of the other elemental trappings that grace fiction. Does God have a setting? Is he not immune from point of view? Is there a plot to which he is subject? Does he require style, tone, diction, or symbol?

Is he not the "ox" in oxymoron? Yes, I think he is. The Great Presence in the Void, or, according to the delusional system of my friend, God is the First Crumb to which all the others are stuck.

The problem for the young writer who wishes to play God, to create a character, is that stripped of setting, point of view, plot, etc., a character is worse than naked--he is nothing.

(It is odd, in light of this fact, that so many elements of fiction have been superimposed on God by man. We build houses for him, we eat the body and drink the blood of his son, we tell stories about him--the Bible, for example--we say that he is merciful or vengeful, is symbolized by the cross, the fish, the fire or flood--thus "fools rush in where angels fear to tread.")

What, then, is the recipe for character?

Let's begin with a vague presence (a woman, so as to break God's tiresome monopoly). Who is she?

Someone raises her hand. "Oh, I know! She's five foot eleven with blonde hair--long blonde hair--and blue eyes. Her name is Margaret. She's a model!"

Instantly, the imagination snaps shut like a compact, leaving a little cloud of pink powder.

"O.K.," I say, groping for the nearest blunt instrument, "and I suppose she's in love with a tall dark-haired man, about six foot two with gray eyes and muscles that ripple like swamp water under the green alligator appliqued on his tennis shirt?"

Another hand waves frantically in the air. "Oh yes! Let's call him Steve! He's a race car driver! A doctor! A detective--no, a lawyer!"

My stomach heaves. "All right." I take up the chalk. "We'll call him Stephen." I write their names in my most florid script on the blackboard. "Margaret and Stephen."

Already, I know that I would never entrust the management of the firmament to a blonde, nor would I ever allow a billboard clothes horse to graze in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I sigh. I dismiss the class.

On Tuesday, I notice that the janitor has not erased the names of our protagonists. I reach up with my naked hand to swipe them away, but something intervenes. It is the voice of God, "SHE IS SAVED!" (we've all heard God's booming voice) and I see Mephistopheles turn on his cloven hooves, his codpiece pointed straight at Faust.

"You've got the wrong Margaret, God," I whimper. "Besides, these two deserve to die." I wipe out Stephen.

Then, suddenly, I see Stephen on the bottom of a lake, floating,

stomach down, under the cloth top of a blue convertible. His left arm, sticking out from the driver's side, makes the ghastly gesture of a turn. An orange carp idles by, kisses the arm up and down its muscled length, wags for a moment before the rear view mirror, and is gone.

Good Heavens! I think. Here is plot! Setting! Even perhaps (the orange carp) symbol!

I turn to face Margaret's name. "Well?" I say (knowing that whatever she says might just be the start of a point of view). "Well? Did you know this guy Stephen or not?"

Then I see a young woman adrift in a battered old fishing boat. Adrift, almost crossed out by oars in their oarlocks that intersect just below her chin. She does have blonde hair, beautiful and thick and long, but from my vantage, all I can see is the mid-section of the frizzy braid; the rest is hidden under her half-buttoned denim jacket. She does not speak, but she is thinking, and I can hear her. She is thinking about sleep and anger. About how Stephen loved to stretch out his anger, to dry it so taut it could sing. He loved the sound of it, she thinks, like cloth ripping between her legs; the pressure of it, like knuckles in the small of his back, forcing him out of a bar into the street. He loved the sharp whack of his tennis racket against the ball, the sound of her father at midnight, pounding on the anvil. Stephen drove to attenuate his anger, his fingers grazing the gums of the plastic steering wheel, twirling the red radio dial like a little sword in a sexy, love-singing liquor. He accelerated until he could feel the car cutting smooth along the dotted line of highway around the lake. Cutting smooth, like a maniac snipping out his victim's

heart. The faster he went, the more relaxed and methodical he became until after a while, he knew everything. He understood.

So when the brakes closed on the air, and the blue spread of color on the hood seemed to fuse momentarily with the sky, he almost mistook the horror of the cold sinking and the slow light-quenching for a kind of sleep.

"Well?" But she sits there crossed out by the oars, thinking thoughts that even I can't hear. "Well?" She lifts her eyes. Her eyes are blue.

"Well," she says, "if I could have sent one kiss through the windshield, through the mottled leaf-camouflage that scanned his lips from the trees, lips half-mouthing the steely highway music of heart-break and first love. One kiss unlike all my other kisses that broke always on the glass in front of him and drooled their insect juices into the wiper blades."

"He was your brother?"

"Yes." She bends down into the boat and picks up a rusty can, crushed in on itself and covered with dried moss. "Yes, he was my brother. Mrs. Peasley saw him. She owns the place on South Shore Road, with the colonial mailbox that matches the colonial birdhouse that matches her colonial house and boathouse. She told the Lake Patrol that all she saw was a flash of blue go sailing off her launching dock so fast it skipped a few times on the water before it sank.

"They dredged for two days. Mrs. Peasley called the Iron Works to come out and put up a wrought iron gate with an automatic opener and eight ornamental fleur de lis. She told the reporters she knew the victim's father. She had ordered her wedding band re-sized by Dad

a few summers back, and she said she was sorry he had such a speed demon for a son. She said she hoped the gate would be a future deterrent. The gate, she said, reminded her of her girlhood in Louisiana. She had been Cotton Queen. In the news, they reprinted the Chamber of Commerce geological survey map. One of the artists drew Stephen's car on it some half league down where the foot of Paintbrush Mountain would be if there weren't a lake. They figured the car was sunk between two granite shelves, leeward of where Mr. Graber disappeared in his iceboat two years before."

I drew a circle around Margaret's name and the chalk smudge that had once been Stephen's. In the corner, perhaps near Mrs. Peasley's launching dock (the circle reminded me of the shore's perimeter), I wrote "Save," so the janitor wouldn't erase the board overnight. I closed the windows; I locked the door. I went home.

The next day, I apologized to the young writers assembled in my class. "Stephen," I said, "is dead. I'm sorry. The janitor must have erased him by mistake." At the time, I didn't feel the least compunction about my lie because, like Peter, I was doomed to repeat it. We spent the first part of the morning talking about faulty pronoun references (I thought of God, the Great Antecedent) and then I continued my lecture on the Elements of Fiction.

"Yesterday," I said, "we proposed two characters: Margaret, an attractive blonde; and Stephen, a handsome well-muscled brunette. I wrote their names here, but unfortunately, as I have already said, one of them was erased last night by the janitor. Of course I wrote them only as an illustration, and when I ask you to write your own stories, you may choose any names you like for your protagonists."

"I think I'll resurrect old Stephen," someone said. "He was such a fox."

"Do so, by all means. But remember that E. M. Forster says that characters are of two sorts, round and flat. The round ones can turn and roll, I suppose; the flat ones can't. The round ones have facets, like a gem; the flat ones are like pennies placed on the railroad tracks. Characters may also be dynamic or static. The former change; the latter don't. But as when you stand on the bridge looking down at the river and have the sensation that it is the bridge, and not the river, that moves, such dynamism or stasis is dependent on your point of view.

"As for point of view, there are two basic types: first person "I" and third person "he" or "she." Regarding the first person type, a narrator may tell either his own story or that of someone else; the "I" may be a main character or an observer. Regarding the second type, the story written in the third person, the narrator may be omniscient (again, I thought of God) or limited; he may also be opinionated or objective."

"But what about plot and setting?" someone said. "Aren't they elements of fiction?"

"Yes. Plot is simply what happens. Setting is where it happens. Of course, there are other elements in fiction. There is diction, which has to do with the words you choose to write your story; there is style, which has to do with the manner in which the words are combined; and there are other fictional devices, such as symbol, allusion, metaphor, etc.—but these are the condiments of fiction. The theme dressings."

"But how does one actually go about writing a story?" (Who that cheeky little voice belonged to, I don't know. She piped up from the back.)

"Well," I said, "all you have to do is to think of a few characters, a plot, a setting, and a point of view. Then, simply stick them together and there you are! Simple!"

"Oh," she squeaked.

That night, I tried not to think of Margaret. I even hoped half-heartedly that whoever it was in the class would go ahead and resurrect Stephen, turn him into an advertising copy writer or a slick surgeon about to have an affair. I slept badly. Maybe it was too much coffee, or that potted meat sandwich. I remembered how Mr. Higgins (philosophy and religion) had been eying Miss Beck (music) in the faculty lounge. When he got up before sixth period, he held his scriptures and grade-book down in front of him as though he were trying to cover up an erection. Speaking of affairs.

In the middle of the night, I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed, sweating profusely and gasping for breath. It could have been a bad dream, but the minute I sat up, the blurred images turned benign, scattered like children after the bell. In the dimness of my little Botticelli night light (a pink shell that I always keep plugged into the wall outlet), I saw the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. Margaret walked into the room, smoothed the end of the bed, and sat down.

"Never mind," she said. "We all have bad dreams. It will pass. Sometimes even I still have them, after all these years." She smiled at me. This time she had her hair braided in two braids, like an Indian. They came down nearly to her waist. She started to fold her legs in

under her, and I noticed that she was wearing combat boots.

"Margaret! Don't you dare put those filthy boots on my great aunt's afghan!"

"Sorry," she said. She smiled sheepishly, and I watched the shadows scatter and then pool again in the hollows of her cheeks. She had aged.

"Well," I apologized, "on second thought, go ahead. I suppose the afghan's due for another cleaning anyway."

"Gee," she said, "thanks." She brought her feet back up, shielding them from the afghan with the tattered hem of her bathrobe. "I guess they do look frightful. But it's such an ordeal to have to lace and unlace them."

"Never mind," I said. "I'm glad you're here. I think I must have eaten some bad potted meat."

"Warm milk with pepper. That's what I usually do. Father thought up the pepper part of it. It didn't matter if I had strep throat, menstrual cramps—even blood poisoning from a bad cut. He'd always boil up a pot."

"Doesn't boiled milk make you constipated?"

"I don't know. Does it? If it does, then that explains it. I was always constipated when I was sick. In the morning, after one of his nursing efforts, I'd find the pan in the sink, ringed with dried white scum. I guess I thought it was looking at the pan that made me constipated."

"Well," I said, "I don't usually have bad dreams. In fact I really don't know what I was dreaming. These days, I really sleep pretty soundly."

"Me too. I didn't used to though." She smiled again. "Isn't it amazing that people dream at all? Dreams disprove everything. They are so disjunctive, so evanescent, like dark shapes moving just under water."

"I know. When I woke up just now they darted away like a school of brightly colored fish. It's amazing."

"For years later, I couldn't sleep at night." Her smile faded. Her eyes were black daubs of shadow. "The air would catch, sputter, like Father's old Evenrude. In my dreams I would wade in my night-dress out to the rotted pilings where the boat was tethered. I would drag myself shivering into the boat and kneel before the engine, grown bald and oracular from a score of lake summers. I'd wind the cord, pull the choke, and press my ears to the rusted metal gills. All night I would strain to understand it, yanking the cord until my arm pained, hoping it would speak, surge to life. I finally dreamed my first dream word that way. First the engine said, 'giver-giver-turg-giver-turg-turg-giver.' Then, I thought it said, 'turg-shiver-turg-shiver-gate-shiver-gate.' I knew it was a word, if I could make it out, Stephen's last word coming from the engine. I woke up with the word on my lips, as though something fathoms down in my being had given up its dead."

I smiled at Margaret's imitation of the engine. "Did you find the word?"

"No. I don't know what the dream means."

"I'll find out for you. I'll try to find it for you tomorrow." I pulled the covers up around me. "What in the world are you doing here, anyway, in your nightgown and combat boots?"

"I don't know. I just got back from Paintbrush Mountain. I was up Jigger's Gulch, at the Silver Lake Mine."

"The old ghost mine?"

"Yeah, beautiful night. I sort of wish I'd worn a parka, though. I got pretty cold sitting on that old ore car. The moon was pouring through the rotted lathe in Buttercup Murphy's old foyer. You know, it must have been great to be a whore during the Silver Boom. I tried to imagine Buttercup's house the way it was—it looks like a spider web now in the moonlight. I tried to picture her all got up in her bustles and stays, with her snakeskin gloves they still have at the museum. I tried to imagine her receiving gentlemen, pulling the velvet curtains tight in the drawing room. I could almost see her drawers pinned to a clothesline out back, wafting to and fro in the night breeze."

"What were you doing there in the middle of the night? Are you still cold? Here." I pushed the quilt down to her.

"No. I'm fine now, thanks."

"Did you used to go there a lot when you were little?"

"Yes. All the time."

"All alone?"

"No, with—"

"With Stephen?" I interrupted her. I was afraid to hear her say his name.

"Yes, in fact—" Margaret suddenly got a look on her face that I could only describe as pure terror. She fell silent, then her face relaxed.

"Where's your father? Is he home?"

"Oh, no. Haven't you heard?" The look returned. "Actually, I've

got to go. I really must. I can't be seen roaming around in my bathrobe and I've got a good two hour walk before daylight." She got up.

"Wait, Margaret. Well, at least take a coat with you. There are plenty in the hall closet. All hand-me-downs. Take one, please." But she was gone, and I didn't think it would do any good to chase after her.

That morning, I went straight to the school library and looked for Margaret's word in the big Webster's. I looked up "give" and "tur" and "shiver" and "ter." Then I found it:

> tergiversate: 1. to turn one's back on; to become a renegade, an apostate. 2. to use subterfuge, evasion.
> tergiversation: 1. desertion of a cause, party, faith.

I didn't think it was a word that Margaret would ever use. Or Stephen, for that matter. I shut the dictionary and traced the ripples on the marbled surface of its cover. I was afraid.

"Don't be."

"Don't be what?" I looked up, and there she was, her long blonde hair pulled over to one side. She looked fresh, standing there before me in the library. Almost like a schoolgirl. Younger.

I opened up the dictionary and pointed to the word. She leaned over the big book, and her hair dusted the finger tabs.

"Tergiversation," she said softly. Then she let out a low tomboyish whistle. "Tergiversation. That's it. Father's old Evenrude. Stephen's last words coming from the engine. Tergiversation." She pronounced the word like a litany. "Tergiversation. Tergiversation."

"Tergiversation." We said the word almost at the same time, and it made a sort of chugging sound. Her face looked small and sad.

"Did he ever?" I asked, "I mean, did they ever find him?"

"No." The flourescent lights in the library sort of fizzled in her eyes. "But Father and I fished for him too. Father couldn't rest until he'd done his own dredging with his high-powered magnet and his five hundred feet of heavy duty fishing line. We putted out there on the third day. I packed a thermos of coffee and some Fig Newtons, and for warmth, under his tattered windbreaker, I made Father wear Stephen's orange lottery jacket. It took us a good hour to get there with only five horse power, past the docks like wooden tongues waiting for absolution, pine trees leaning alone or standing in clusters. We fished all morning. Mrs. Peasley came out once onto her launching dock with breakfast leavings for her swans and scrutinized us a long while, holding her hand bill-like above her eyes. I watched the light grow on Paintbrush Mountain, clotting the fall lines and spreading a bruise of shadow. Once, Father thought he spotted a flash of blue from Stephen's lottery car, but it was only an oil rainbow from the Evenrude. By noon, we'd caught a perfectly good philip's head screw driver, some cans, a trout hook, a rusty sailboat cleat, and a bottlecap, gooey with moss." She paused, and then she looked straight into my eyes. Almost accusingly, she said, "Tergiversation."

Mr. Higgins nudged me. "Say, didn't you hear the bell? You English people are all alike, lost in your dictionaries."

His voice was too cheerful. His face was red. I knew he had been screwing Miss Beck.

When I turned back to Margaret, she was gone. I spied a pair of blonde braids and followed them down the hall, but then I remembered that her hair had all been pulled over to one side, like the spout on a

watering can.

In my classroom, I noticed that her name was still there, next to the smear that was Stephen's, saved by my little circle. I looked for her face among those seated before me. She wasn't in the room. Only her name.

"I can't think of a plot," someone said.

"And I can't think of a setting," someone else said.

"I've got a plot and a setting," said another, "but I can't think of a point of view."

"I did resurrect old Steve, but he's a nerd, a spoiled little prig. I'm going to have him shot."

"I've got a Margaret, but I don't think she's a round character."

"Does she have big tits?"

"Not too big. Nice ones actually. She's a model."

"Then she's round. Make her fall in love with a stud who's got a big diction."

I sighed. The chairs screeched and scraped. The class came to order. "We have been discussing fiction, and by now you all know the elements of which it is comprised. What you write now is up to you. You have the power to create and destroy--and defile (I scowled at the wiseacre). I will collect your finished work next week, but now we must move on to Chapter Eight. The Essay, page 226."

The morning finally droned to a close. We slogged our way through various rhetorical modes. I argued, I persuaded, I described. Inwardly, I was full of dread. I kept hearing Margaret's word, tergiversation, over and over again. The word rolled and ebbed, surged and throbbed. I heard it in solo, in counterpoint, in fugue,

in chorus. It almost drowned my lecture, then it hung like a heavy magnet in my heart, a sucking rogation. Finally, the bell. A death knell. I dismissed the class. I heard the slap of books, human voices, titters, and whispers. A cough. I smelled wool. A torso brushed by covered with bright orange bands and some slogan I couldn't make out. They went out through the door, which gurgled like a syphon. Then I was alone.

Margaret walked in. She was all dressed up like a covergirl. Her eyes were shaded green and the pupils shimmered red in their centers like pimientos in a martini. Her lips were painted. Her hair was blowing. She sat down in the third desk on the window side, and she turned her head profile, lifting her face as though expecting a caress. She froze that way. She didn't move, except her hair. I heard her voice speaking from somewhere within me.

"There is no cure for the way I feel," she said, "not even milk and pepper. No pilgrimage, nothing will help. Not even if I find the woman I am looking for now."

"What woman? What about Stephen?"

"On the fourth day, we opened cards and piled them on the stump by the anvil. I pitched out the roses that had nodded off on their stems and sent a thank you note to Father's gem dealer. Mrs. Ready brought a casserole and a loaf of fresh baked bread, but I've never liked chicken, and the skin floating in juice under a confetti of chopped onion made me think of Stephen's goosepimpled corpse under a sprinkling of torn paper on Silver Lake."

"They never found him? I know, but maybe someday--someday."

"It's terrible not to really know death, not to see it, never to

say goodbye. I took Mrs. Ready's bread into the kitchen and put it on the butcher block. It looked odd, like a casket, like something one could mourn. I ran out of the house, back to the boat. I took everything out of it, the screw driver, the sail cleat, the tin cans—all the detritus we had dredged up out of the lake. I took it up Jigger Gulch, up to the silver mine, and I squashed it all under a rock, in a field of yarrow. Then, I started piling stones, one on top of the other, until I'd made a cairn. I picked lupin and marsh flower and columbine. I picked paintbrush, St. Johnswort, and fireweed. I turned that cairn into a flower cake. I practically cleared the field of yarrow. Then, when I had done, I didn't know what to do. I sat down on that rusted-out ore car and wept. And swore. I swore at the State Lottery, because if Stephen had never won, he would never have got that blue car. I swore at Father, because if Father had never told Stephen what he told him, then Stephen would never have got in that blue car and wound his anger so tight around the lake that it snapped. Snapped, like silver into the lost wax of a centrifuge."

"But what did your father tell him?"

"He told him that our mother wasn't his mother. It was Stephen's birthday. Stephen was eighteen, so Father just handed him the adoption papers. He tried to explain everything, but Stephen just read them, and then he took them out, shredded them, and threw them off the pilings into Silver Lake. Then he went around the house, got into his blue car, slammed the door—"

"Did you know?"

"Yes. I snooped through Father's files. I have always known."

"And so you fell in love with him."

"Yes."

"And never told him."

"No."

"And now?"

"Now? There is a woman somewhere. She is my mother. She adopted Stephen and then she gave birth to me. She loved Father, but he sent her away. She didn't take us with her." Margaret's hair was blowing.

I went to the board. I erased "Save." I erased the circle around her name. I erased Stephen again, and then I turned around. One arm, her legs, and part of her chin were gone. Still, her hair was blowing. I erased the "garet" in her name. Her face was gone. Only her hair, blowing. Only "Mar," the bitter root. I erased it, but still, I heard her voice.

"When I came down off the mountain, I was famished. The house was dark except for the back porchlight. I walked through the shop. Thick dust of diamond, carnelian, and malachite. Father wasn't home. I went into the kitchen and there was Mrs. Ready's loaf of bread on the butcher block. I ate it."

"And now?"

"It's romantic, I know, but sometimes I still go up there to the mine to keen. Every time I go, I put another stone on the mound, another crumb of earth. I know they are tailings. The silver is all mined out, bent into rings for weddings of dust. Father finally married Mrs. Ready after she had been sufficiently widowed. I suppose they are still happy. I don't know. I moved away. I teach school now, and model sometimes for extra money."

"You have beautiful long blonde hair," I say, as I lock the

windows and close the door. "But I wonder about your cairn. Does it really help to make a pile of stones, to add to it every year with another lichen-covered tailing? I get the feeling you think you can put him back together that way, atom by atom."

"God knows," she said. "God knows it doesn't really help. But after all, it is a kind of communion, isn't it?"

"God knows," I said. But my mind was on other things. I had no body to mourn. I was no tergiversator. I had no birthday mounds to tend to in a ghost town.

"You may think so," she said, and her voice was fading, "but it depends."

"Depends on what?"

"It depends on your point of view."

"Oh," I squeeked, remembering my lecture. Her voice was fading. I got a clean eraser and erased the smudge the janitor had left on the board. I wondered what would be left of her after next week, when I would read other stories that had started with her name, her long blonde hair, her love for a tall dark muscular man. John says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Did it? Perhaps it did. Perhaps I would find her again on the waxed back of a magazine, leaning seductively against a blue convertible, her hair blowing, her foot grazing some caption about style and the luxury of speed.

"Margaret?"

She didn't answer. No matter. After all, she was only a character, a counterfeit. Comprised of stones, little elements of fiction. Besides, there was still The Essay to think of. Chapter Eight. Afterwards, perhaps, I would go looking for her. She could be

stuck together somehow.

"Margaret?"

Then I heard her word, tergiversation, echoing down the empty halls, coming in with a puff of wind through the metal doors as I exited into the parking lot. I heard it again as I started the engine, then again, as I drove off towards my home. I wondered if Margaret would ever find that apostate, her mother, who had adopted Stephen and given birth to her. Could such a woman have loved them equally? She had turned her back on them. Could she have loved them at all? I heard her word, tergiversation, and I ran a stop light. Did she think I was that woman, her mother?

"Margaret?"

Still no answer.

"Margaret?"

Did she think I created her? I had other concerns now. The Essay, for instance. I had earlier posed the question, "Is bread anything like fiction? Is fiction anything like bread?" I thought of Mrs. Ready's loaf of bread, and remembered that Margaret had eaten it, eaten it because it was something one could mourn. I saw a flash of red, a stop sign, the bright orange centers of Margaret's eyes. I tried to compose her figure in my mind, but I could only think of disjointed figures of speech, her hair pulled over to one side like the spout on a watering can, the dark shape of her dream moving under water. I called her name once more, but heard only her word, tergiversation.

The Essay. I would compose the essay instead. I would say that fiction was not like bread. Fiction was composed of elements: plot,

setting, character, point of view. Theme, diction, style, symbol. I would point to the chapter headings in the book, cite important scholars—

"TERGIVERSATOR!" It was God—God's booming voice. I burned rubber into my driveway and cut the engine. I threw my briefcase onto the lawn and made a mad scramble for the house. (It's silly, I know, to think that one can run for cover from God.)

"Margaret? Please, Margaret, answer me. I promise—" I fumbled to lock the door behind me.

Then I saw the muddy cleat marks on the carpet.

"Margaret?"

I bent down to touch them. They were dry. I followed them on my hands and knees up to my bedroom and back, but I never found her.

That night, I tried to sleep in spite of caterwauling thunder and the sound of rain slapping the windows. At 3:00 a.m., I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed and remembered that I had left all my papers on the lawn. I waded out in my nightdress to the mailbox and found my sodden briefcase afloat in the flower bed. My composition book was waterlogged. I tried to flip through to Chapter Eight, but the pages came out in my hands. I dropped them into the gutter and they were carried away by the run-off down the street. I couldn't think of Margaret but I thought of the orange carp, kissing Stephen's arm up and down its muscled length. I thought that one may pile stone upon stone, glue crumb to crumb day after day in the dimly lit aisles of the bread factory, but that it was grief after all; some vague yearning turned image, some yeasty hunger, that grew into the fiction by which one lived.

God didn't say anything, but I knew. I was saved.

RED, FOR SHORT

Colorado is the name I give her here, partly to disguise her real identity and partly to allow myself to bask in the momentary indulgence of an archaic and grandiose wish. Every doctor beginning with Aesclepius has pandered to the fantasy that he can raise the dead, and I am no exception. One would think that being a woman, I would be less likely to fall prey to this particular hubris of my profession, since we women own most of the biological equipment of creation--whether we use it or not. Nevertheless, in giving in to the little thrill of renaming, I cannot help but suffer a twinge of preverbal awe or dread, what Harry Stack Sullivan calls an "uncanny emotion." There is so much blood and glory in a name, even a false one, that I cannot bring myself to call her Mary, or X, or Miss Q, or "my little obsessive compulsive" --as Anna Freud might do. Instead, I invoke the epic imperative.

Call her Colorado.

After all, it is geography that binds us finally, and we were both children who summered in a moraine on the western slope of the Rockies. Call her Colorado--or, all right, Red for short. Picture freckles, frizzy hair, and grape green eyes. Seven years old, about as tall as a mailbox with the flag up, and madly in love with a wooden horse.

Red was the first child of my homecoming--not to the western slope, since one can never return to the idylls of childhood, but to the Queen City on the eastern side. I had been back in the house a

month since I had ousted the last tenants, thrown the last of their detritus (an old tire, some spoiled towels) into the trash. For weeks I had sanded and drilled to make the downstairs into an office, bolting the game shelves to their lead sinkers, installing the doll house with its rubber family and furniture. My old life had haunted me since the move back into the upstairs, as though the dust particles of memory, settled into the vents seven summers before, had whooshed out again the minute I lit the furnace for winter. Really, I marveled at the old house, its ability to keep all suspended, countless tenants, lovers, neighbors; all the musings and moppings since 1887. Now, and after all my labors of twelve years before, the house looked a stately old Victorian, well kept, in a girdle of wrought iron, on a shaded semi-residential street.

In the bay window area, I set a table with my favorite smorgas-board for the psyche, the Board of Objects Game invented by Dr. Richard Gardner. On it, I loaded fistfuls of checker-sized animals, people, trucks, shapes, and trinkets; beside it, I placed a bright cloisonne box full of my grandmother's old lacquered poker chips. I put the overflow from the board into a child-sized humpbacked trunk labeled PRIZES, in my finest poster lettering, then stuffed it full of slinkeys, space men, ballerinas, jungle fauna, gumballs, popguns, and wriggling lizards. I placed two muslin-covered wingback chairs by the fireplace, as well as an odd-sized assortment of children's chairs, Momma Bear, Poppa Bear, Baby Bears--even one for that little interloper Goldilocks. Behind the television, installed in the closet wall, I rigged all of my audio and video equipment, hiding the ugly wiring and making easy viewing for family observers.

On the eve of Red's arrival, after I had swept up the last dust from my renovations, I collapsed in the Poppa Bear's chair with a glass of Jack Daniels and surveyed my little workshop. Through the sliding doors was the room that had once been my bedroom. Metamorphosed into a rolltop desk was the brass bed where I had once dreamed in cipher the lost chronicles of my own childhood. Silverware drawers that had once hidden my socks and underclothing were now filled with the office supplies and letterhead of my profession—was it an historical paraphraxis, I wondered, from slip to Freudian slip? The corner cupboard south of my framed diploma was crowded with books whose titles seemed to twinkle and titter behind their leaded glass at the irony of it all, like observers barely visible in the light behind a one-way mirror.

That the room had passed through these larval stages--from formal diningroom to bedroom to office—was a source of inspiration to me, and I toasted the house, "May we continue to accommodate such evolution of the heart's desire, from mouth, to genitals, to love's knowing compromise." Outside the snow was falling, wrapping the house tight as the gifts I used to rip out of their white butcher paper on Christmas. I dozed, perhaps, before mounting the stairs to bed.

That morning, it was Red who broke the ground, ducking under my first handshake with her mother, cutting the curled wisps of cold that trailed into the waiting room after her, and in fact I had to coax her hand out of her red coat pocket while she cocked her ankles and teetered defiantly on the rims of her galoshes.

One little parable from an early interview sticks in my mind. Apparently Red had so tormented her mother with questions about her appointment—would I look down her throat? shine lights in her eyes?

would I want to watch her play?—that her mother, in desperation, had parrotted the diagnosis given her (unwisely, I think) by Red's previous therapist. Several days later in my office, having never once looked at me, unless perhaps, like Perseus, she studied my reflection in the shiny convexity of her patent leather shoes, we had the following exchange:

R: You still don't know who I am but before you find out I'll tell you. I'm a borderline.

T: A borderline! Good heavens! Who told you that?

R: Mother. But the shrink told her.

T: What shrink? Did you go to a shrink?

R: Yes. He said he was my big playmate. He made me play games, but I'm very big for my age. I grew two more inches since he moved away.

T: Well, do you think I'm going to try to shrink you? (There was a long silence. After all, Red had practically never seen me, except smeared on the surface of her shoes.)

R: You can't shrink me, because I'm not me. I'm Abeneezer. A miner.

T: (This was the first I had heard of Abeneezer. Later, after much thought, I chose the pseudonym for its wheezy, old-timer cadence, like a man with a nose full of gold dust.) So you're Abeneezer? And here, all this time, when I thought I'd been talking to Red, I was actually talking to Abeneezer? Well well, can you tell me about yourself, Abeneezer? (No response. Only the red hair parted down the middle, like a book opened and abandoned face down on a table. I tried a different tack.) Well then, what about this business of your being a borderline?

R: A borderline is someone who has four corners. Someone who is not anywhere because they are four places at once.

T: Who told you that?

R: I found out for myself. We went once to the

borderline and I put one foot in Arizona, one foot in, uh, um, Utah, my right hand in New Mexico, and my left hand in Colorado. (From her strained gestures, it was clear that Red did not know left from right.)

T: Oh, I get it. You visited the Four Corners Monument, where the boundaries of four states meet in one spot. But tell me, how did you become the borderline?

R: By putting my hands and feet. I am the line. But the shrink tried to make me go home. He didn't like me being all different states at once.

T: Well, that's just about the best definition of a borderline I've ever heard. As far as I'm concerned, you can be the borderline as long as you want, and I'm never going to try to make you go home or choose only one state until you--and Abeneezer--are good and ready.

That day, out of the chest marked PRIZES, Red took a wriggling rubber centipede. When I asked her why she had chosen it, she told me she was planning to take it to the Four Corners, so it could become a borderline too, and be in a hundred states at once.

Red Pike, borderline. Borderline of what? Diagnosticians are endlessly trying to repair the broken fenceline that ranges along the vast continuum from sick to well. For the sane, a decorative lattice or slatted wood; for the neurotic, woven or twisted metal; for the very sick, a single wire--electrified. But invariably a specimen of livestock, here or there, is bound to get out. Nevertheless, I must concede that Red exhibited many of the symptoms of the so-called borderline. Most striking were the following:

1. Chronic, intense anxiety, with occasional panic states. Red alternated between frantic, severely agitated body movements and an almost catatonic, paralyzed immobility. In the former anxiety state, Red whinnied an

> unintelligible stream of speech; and in the latter state she said nothing, only stared out of a face that was both stiff and expressionless, a face that seemed almost hardened into rigor mortis.
>
> 2. Fear of disintegration, of becoming another person or object (her horse), and fear of being annihilated by separation from others.
>
> 3. Excessive magical thinking, with loss of contact with reality so that Red often believed that her thoughts--say, her death wishes for her mother or father--had actually come true.
>
> 4. Various rituals, somatic concerns, obsessions, and phobias which served her fantasied reality and bespoke an unnatural self-absorption.

Red Pike, a borderline. I smiled again at the picture of her straddling four states at once, and I sighed thinking that, structurally, the mind is no more complicated than a three-tiered pastry caddy on a lazy susan, and that the psychologists who sample its wicked sugars are no more objective than the sweet tooth who snatches a long john from the middle shelf instead of a napoleon from the first shelf, or an apfel strudel from the third. The psychologist-equivalent of the guy who selects a long john would be, in my opinion, Wilhelm Reich--assuming, of course, that the cream filling inside were shot full of precious orgone and that the confection had not been identified previously as a UFO. Of course, the fancier of the napoleon would be Adler, with his will to power. The apfel strudel would go to Jung, whose psychology, comprised of layer upon layer of flaky paste trimmed into a square, would reveal here or there a culinary oddity, say, a raisin, of quaint background or gender, well-wrapped and with a look of puckered, pre-historic holiness--but with a core of apfel after all.

The game of matching pastries with psychologists is fatuous but

fun. When I think of Carl Rogers, for example, I think of apple pie, which is positively valued *except* in combination with motherhood. As for Rank, with apologies for the fact that it's hardly gourmet, I think of the fortune cookie. Who cannot help but re-experience the birth trauma when cracking through to one of those portentous and ambivalent messages? Fortune cookies are schizophrenogenic. I never open mine.

But where, one might ask while nosing among the confections, is Freud?

Perhaps he is the cart itself. Perhaps his topography, and the three-tiered trinity of id, ego, and superego, are the creaking gyre on which all the other sweets of psychic wisdom are displayed.

Red's mother, Mrs. Pike, was the only child of an upper-middle class family. Her father died the year of her birth, and her mother died when she was in her teens. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Pike had all the earmarks of an extremely phobic individual. Concealed in her imposing and athletic figure was a lonely little girl who, from earliest childhood, had lived in fear that her mother would die. Every argument with her mother carried its dread portent; every slight indisposition or temporary disappearance boded a threat that her mother's heart, weakened since birth by rheumatic fever, would run down or spring a fatal leak. Even though Mrs. Pike had been raised by her wealthy grandfather to expect a life at the side of a successful, upper class businessman, Mrs. Pike's fears made her dream of a man who would never leave her, a prop--like the one which held up the photograph of her dead father on her bedroom bureau--that could forever support the image of a love she had never received from her bereft

mother.

So when she met her husband, a reckless and indigent romantic brimming with easy grace and power, reader, she married him. I learned from my second interview with Red's mother that Mr. Pike and three of his four siblings were alcoholic. Red's father, in fact, was the only child in his family who had found, by genuine cleverness and charm, a way to escape the ghosts of his parents. He brought his wealthy and beautiful bride back to the poor main street of his home town, into his deceased parents' clapboard house, and he busied himself with good works. He raised funds for the blind; he joined this board; he was elected to that committee. But some deep-seated pride or fear exempted him from his wife's childhood world. When Mrs. Pike had tickets for the symphony, he got the tractor stuck in the cottonwood grove and refused to go; when she proposed bridge, or a theater outing, he somehow wound up having to repair a leak or build a fountain for the courthouse lawn. Like the child of unsuspected royalty whose curse is banished by a kiss, Mr. Pike was awakened and rescued by his marriage. With his wife's money, his natural kindness found an outlet. And so he became a forger of public spirit and achieved middle age without ever having to stop believing in magic. From his workshop issued all sorts of whimsical sculptures, wood carvings, weldings, and stonework. He invented birds, dragons, engines, and whirligigs.

To Red--at least until he "died"--he was a god. Every wish came true. "A dragon, please, Daddy?"--by sundown it was hanging over her bed expelling hot blue flames from a kerosene-soaked wick. "A banana split, Daddy, please?"--off they went right before dinner in the truck to get one.

Borderline? Why? Born of these two, with no sober extended family to sway the balance, Red was like one standing waist high in a riptide. To please her mother, she must fuse with her; to please her father, she must be the sorcerer's apprentice, the tinker's belle.

Now the horse. By the age of seven, Red had changed schools thrice. The second school was Mrs. Pike's choice, a private girls' school bursting with future owners of fur coats and ski resort condominiums. There, the playground games consisted of mock coming out parties and make believe dressage. Her father must have heard about how the girls linked their uniform belts together, put the buckles in their mouths, and rode tandem, horse before rider, over the seats of swing sets and across the cavaletti of white lines painted for hop scotch and four square on the pavement. He carved the horse from pine. Muzzle, nose, haw; forlock, cheek, throat. He fashioned ears of leather. Mane of horsehair, broomstick body, flaired nostril dug out with an awl. He gouged the eyes, chisseled the velvet lips. Noseband, chinstrap, browband. He split the leather reins and braided them. He welded a snaffle bit.

Red named him Graymallory, and took him--only once--to school.

To his second consultation with me, Mr. Pike brought a scrapbook full of photographs of his sculpture and practical jokery. I recognized, from his sheepish grin and his embarrassed gestures, that he was trying to win me over, to present himself as a man whose humor and child-like vision of the world were sufficient to banish any real troubles Red might be experiencing. "Do you sell them?" I asked him.

"No, they're just for fun."

One of the photos was of a beautiful hand-carved stick horse.

"Graymallory?" I asked him. "Red's horse?"

"Yes. I carved it for her. I made the bridle, too, and welded the bit myself. The mane is made from clippings off the tail of her mother's hunter."

"It's a beautiful horse. But don't you think Red is a little too old to be riding a stick horse?"

"Well, I never thought of it. I don't think so. She did take it to school once, but when I asked her what her girlfriends thought of it, she went into one of her marble moods."

"Marble—the stone? Is that what you call them?"

"Pink marble, really. I carve in pink marble. Here, I'll show you."

I watched, then, while Mr. Pike turned the pages of the photo album. I was stirred by his powerful arms and forearms, his hands so big they made the oversized album look like a volume from Collin's Miniature Library. He fumbled through the pictures until he came to a statue of a woman, but I feigned lack of interest. "Mr. Pike, we were speaking of Red's vacant, stony expressions, what you call her 'pink marble' moods. Do you think Red might have been embarrassed by the horse? After all, not many children have such an unusual toy, and perhaps Red was made to feel excluded by her girlfriends' envy of it."

Mr. Pike was silent, but in his eyes I saw a sadness, as though the spirit of love in which he had carved Graymallory had run away with him, was part of a dream in which Red was his jockey and Graymallory the talisman of his own abstinence and fairy tale ascendance. He took the book from me and closed it, bowing his head in a gesture of shy gallantry. "No good at school, maybe," he said, "but she hardly parts

with the thing at home. Not even wild horses could keep her away from Graymallory at home. I wouldn't be surprised to see her dappled and sprouting a mane one of these days."

"How long has it been since Red became so unusually attached to the horse?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Her mother knows. It's her mother worries about it. Maybe a year or so."

"Do you ride, Mr. Pike?"

"Heavens, no! Not that I mind my wife's hunting friends--I just prefer it when they stay on their horses!"

I laughed. "I suppose that's what you think of head shrinkers too --as long as they keep their voodoo to themselves?"

"Red's just high spirited, and maybe a little barnsour. She was too much for the shrink we first took her to. I can't recall his name just now, but the name sounds like that eggplant dish they serve at Dmitri's Cafe. Mouse Cake, I call it."

"You mean moussaka?"

"Something like that. It's the Blue Plate Special at Dmitri's, but I stick to the liver and onions."

"Where did Red learn the name 'Abeneezer?'"

"Abebeezer's our name for everyone who doesn't have a name. The egg man is Abeneezer; the postman is Abeneezer; the person who spills something, loses something, breaks something--they're all named Abeneezer. Abeneezer is the family scapegoat."

"Did you know that Red sometimes believes that she is Abeneezer? But in Red's mind, Abeneezer is a miner."

"A miner? Well, Abeneezer was also a baby mule dead last summer.

Mules, you know, I've always told Red, are a miner's best friend. The mare rejected it. We used a nose twitch and hoppled her legs to keep her still so the mule could nurse, but she broke loose one morning and kicked the little thing in the stomach. We had to put it down."

"Did Red see it happen?"

"Red didn't see it happen, but Red liked to go down to the stall nights and hold the formula bottle. She had tantrums when we'd try to pry her loose. Maybe there's something in it."

"What something?"

"Well, seems to me that's your job."

Watching Red on video, I was often hypnotized by the rhythmic distortions, frayed or particulate, that flickered over her torso like sheet lightning. I would hear my own voice or Red's briefly probing some dark horizon, sometimes making a jagged bolt for solid ground; I would watch her face warp or decompose, almost fearing that it was through the effort of my own concentration, reliving our hour in the evening after the morning session, that her image kept its precarious integrity.

It isn't easy to write a case history. Most of them read like auto repair manuals: "The patient had a bent chassis and a cracked block. He complained that his gears were stripped, even though at one time he had boasted a four-speed manual transmission with automatic overdrive." Is that really so different from the stuff one reads in psychology journals?

One colleague of mind commented on the similarity between case histories and the mystery stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but in

this case--The Borderline of the Baskervilles?--there was no script for a Sherlock. I am no wily sleuth, and there was no premeditated evil to unmask. Those evenings I felt more like Penelope, unraveling the threads of a tapestry woven that morning in my office, sorting through the colors, wrapping the skeins tight again, readying the shuttle for our next session. I thought I'd never get ahead, never finish waiting, never see the pattern emerge.

When Red arrived for her twenty-fifth session, she went straight to work on the blank piece of drafting paper I had brought in and clipped to an easel in the playroom. Seemingly unaware of my presence, she busied herself for five minutes or so. Then she backed away, two green crayons in her mouth and a fist full of colored ones stuck in her pocket. She put her free hand out in front of her, in the gesture of the artist trying to judge proportion, thumb up, eyes squinted, head cocked to one side. "I guess it's finished," she said.

"So you made a picture? Would you like to tell me about it?" I helped her tear it from its binding.

I laid it out on a table for the two of us to see. It was of a little girl with a triangular skirt and red hair, standing in a corral surrounded by three concentric snake fences. The pasture outside the corral was colored green. The inner snake fence was red, the outer ones blue. In the upper left was a reclining stick figure, colored black. Beside it was a saw horse.

"Is that you in the corral?"

"Yep."

"And is that your stick horse?"

"Yep. Graymallory."

"But why are you inside all those fences?"

"To keep me from getting out."

"And who is the black person?"

"A man."

"What is he doing there?"

"He's dead."

"Well, how did he die?"

"He fell asleep."

"How can someone die from falling asleep?"

"Graymallory stepped on him."

"Can you tell me the story of how it happened?"

"Well, Graymallory and I were safe inside and then this man came along. He fed Graymallory bad water and he gave me a rotten carrot. But while we were eating, pretending to eat, he turned around and Graymallory jumped out and stepped on him. Then Graymallory and me climbed up into the sky on the white notes."

"The white notes?"

"Yes. The piano notes that go up to the sky. C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C." Red sang an ascending octave. "The white notes are safer."

"But you didn't draw that part. You drew yourself still stuck in the corral."

"It's not a corral. It's a merry-go-round. Besides, I drew the story before it happened."

"I see. But tell me about this black man. Is he an older man, or a younger man?"

"An older man."

"Like your father?"

"No, not my father. My father is a white man. My father is a good kind man. This man is black. A bad man, who feeds bad water to horses."

"What kind of bad water?"

"Bad, bad water. He tried to poison Graymallory, but Graymallory stepped on him because I couldn't touch him."

"Do you touch your father?"

"He's not my father. My father's a white man!"

Red flew into a rage. She ripped the picture off the desk and tore the black man out of it. Then she crumpled him and stomped on him with her patent leather shoes, the whole time shrieking, "He's a bad black water man, a bad, bad man, I hate hate hate him!" She dumped the Board of Objects Game off the table and sat down, holding her knees and rocking amidst the spilled animals and toys.

I got down on the floor, and as calmly and distinctly as I could, I told her that I thought the black man in her picture was the bad part of her father, the bad part she was angry with, and that no father was all good, all white, and that no little girl could always be expected to love her father all the time without ever being angry. I suggested that she had put Graymallory inside the snake fence with her because Graymallory was the good part of her father, the father who would protect and love and care for her, and I told her that her picture represented a wish that Graymallory, the good father, could kill the black man, the bad father.

"Graymallory will never let you ride him," she said.

"That might be so," I said, "but maybe if we can figure out why you are angry with your father, you won't have bad black men in your

pictures anymore who try to feed you a rotten carrot."

Red retrieved the crumpled picture and spread it out flat. I helped her patch the black man back on with some tape, and I told her that I would like to have the picture from her as a gift. She nodded. I asked her about the snake fences.

"They're to keep me from getting out and being Abeneezer."

"Who are you when you're Abeneezer?"

"I'm an old miner, and I live by myself in a mine."

"Do you think the snake fences could be like your mother, who protects you and keeps you safe?"

Red nodded. "But mother sometimes goes away. We had a little horse once who got out of the corral and got his foot caught in the hay wire."

"Does your mother go away?"

"Yes, and when she does I'm always Abeneezer."

"Is Abeneezer a girl miner or a boy miner?"

"A boy miner." Red stopped rocking. I gave her some kleenex and she blew her nose. "Do you have children?" she asked.

"No," I answered. I'm not married, and I have no children."

"Do you have parents?"

"Of course. Everybody must have parents. I have parents, but my father is dead now."

"Will he come back to life?"

"No. He is dead. Dead people can never, ever come back to life, but they stay alive inside you because you remember them as they were when they were alive."

"Can I take a prize?"

"Yes," I said. "The hour is almost up, and you have been a very brave girl today." I opened the trunk, and Red spent several minutes rummaging through the toys before she chose a wooden necklace, painted blue.

"Will you wear it home?" I asked.

"No! Miners don't wear necklaces. This necklace is for Graymallory, to make him look pretty and to scare away monsters."

"Is it a fence? It looks like the fence you drew in your picture, the fence that surrounds and protects you like your mother."

"No! It's a necklace. I will give it to you instead. You wear it."

"Do you think that if you give me the necklace, it will keep me from going away? I'm not going to leave you, Red. I will be here tomorrow when you come, and I don't need a magic necklace to help me be here tomorrow. You have already given me your picture, which pleases me very much. The necklace is for you."

"Maybe I will give it to my mother as a pretty surprise."

Red's father came to pick her up. I helped her on with her boots and watched as down the porch stairs she clung to her father's coat, walking as one entranced or asleep. Inside the playroom was her afterimage, deja vu, perhaps, of my own childhood fears and rages, or perhaps some memory of the house itself, one of its ghosts immolated in the fire of Red's hair as she never descended, only stepped out in her galoshes onto stairs that rose to meet her.

What's in a child's mind? What, if anything, could Red have heard of our conversation? It was impossible to know whether or not my

interpretation of her picture had made sense to her. When she thought of white or black, for instance, did she think of cowboy hats on television westerns? Did she think of brides and witches? Vanilla and licorice? Even after years of training, I could never adopt the imagery inspired by my teachers, real or vicarious, who spoke of the mind as, say, (the behaviorists) a computer in cauliflower drag or as, say, (the Jungians) a mandalla-shaped ciphon full of everything imaginable so that no matter how one flushed it, some exotic artifact (from deepest Africa, or the tomb of some Peloponnesian king) was likely to come bobbing back up. No, when I pictured the mind, I saw a trail cairn, high above timberline. There it was, a pile of inscrutable stones, a mound made by accretion, each stone part of a composite identity, otherness made self; each stone marking a way home.

I like to think that after the next Ragnarok the ragpickers who sort through the arcana of our shattered history will come upon these names: Adler, which means "eagle"; Jung, which means "young"; and Freud, which means "joy." Then, if these twilight archaeologists mistakenly presume that the names were affixed not by parents but by posterity, they will at least be correct in their assignment of allegoric significance.

Red's picture had set me wondering. I decided to request that her parents come for a further consultation.

I asked Mr. and Mrs. Pike if they would mind being taped during the session. They consented, and what follows is a transcription of our conversation.

T: Mr. Pike, do you drink? (The two of them looked at each other in surprise.)

Mr. P: No. I don't drink. I used to drink a bit, in the early days of our marriage, but it was so upsetting to everybody that I quit.

Mrs. P: That's not quite true. You drank heavily in the early days of our marriage, so much that I almost left you. (She turned to me.) I threatened to leave him. I did leave him, in fact, for a time during the pregnancy. I went to visit relatives. I told him that I would rather live alone as a single mother than with a drunk. (Mrs. P looked down, and her eyes darted from object to object around the room, as though she expected something to pop out from behind the doll house or from under a chair.) When I came back he joined A.A..

Mr. P: You see, I was drunk the day Red was born. I was drunk, so drunk, in fact, that I was afraid to pick her up and hold her. So I promised myself that I wouldn't drink anymore. I was afraid I would drop my tiny daughter.

T: Do you drink now? I ask because Red has expressed considerable fear of being alone with you. Did you ever drink when Mrs. Pike was away?

Mrs. P: Come to think of it, I have noticed that Red seems to be afraid of you. She wouldn't let you come tuck her into bed last night. She never kisses you goodnight anymore. Did you drink when I was away those four weekends last summer? You've been drinking again. I know it.

Mr. P: Well, I guess I did do a little experimenting with some wine last summer. (He turned to me.) You see, I hadn't had a drink for almost seven years, and I thought I'd just try and see if I could drink a little, socially, the way I used to. I guess I was afraid to drink with Red's mother, since she gets so hopped up about it, so I did my experimenting when she was away. (Mr. Pike bit his lower lip. He had the look of a child caught with an open book of matches. Mrs. Pike's face was gray with terror and rage.)

T: Mr. Pike, I hope you understand that no one is grilling you with these questions in order to eek a confession out of you. Alcoholism is a disease, and it is not unusual for the reformed alcoholic to have a relapse. I ask because Red, in her previous sessions with me, has given me reason to believe that you might have been drunk in her presence while Mrs. Pike was away. Have either of you ever explained what alcohol is, and what alcohol does to a person who drinks it?

Mr. P: There's never been any reason to explain alcohol or its effects to her. I wasn't drunk. All I've been doing is experimenting with a little wine.

T: Have you gone back to A.A.?

Mrs. P: I made him go back when Red was born. I think it helped.

T: (To Mr. Pike) Have you attended a meeting recently?

Mr. P: Recently? No, I don't see any reason for going. I'm through with my little experiments. I've learned that I'm not the kind of guy who can drink, even socially.

T: I recommend, nevertheless, that you return to Alcoholics Anonymous. I also suggest that you attempt to explain your drinking to Red. She does not understand why your behavior changed when she was alone with you those weekends. Instead, she has devised an elaborate fantasy explanation in which you are both the horse, which you carved for her and which she loves and can depend on, and also a man who is dead or asleep, who bribes her with poison. You must remember that all children believe in a kind of magical causality. If you were drunk in Red's presence, it is probable that she felt she was responsible, that her own thoughts and wishes made you drunk, or even killed you. (By this time, Mrs. Pike's anger and fear had found an outlet in tears. I offered her a kleenex.) I do not blame you for drinking, nor do I think that your drinking is the sole cause of Red's troubles, but I recommend that you look upon your drinking as a problem which you cannot be expected to control without

the support and assistance you will get from a group such as A.A.. It is important that you learn to overcome your denial, to speak about it without shame. Children will take the most extreme measures in order to love and understand their parents. Sometimes, they even go so far as to reinvent them.

Mr. P: (He spoke almost inaudibly.) I guess, in one sense, I did drop her after all.

When the session ended, I watched as, grudgingly, Mrs. Pike allowed her husband to help her on with her coat. I was once again struck by his arms and forearms, the shy determination with which he buttoned his wife's anger up against the cold. He held the door patiently, waiting until she had assembled her features into a righteous pout, and when he exited after her he winked at me, as though to include me in some conspiracy of their future reconciliation. I smiled back and later, from the window, I did see her take his hand.

Whether from some uncanny countertransference or from some distorted empathy, the cold terror of Red's weekends alone with her father comes clear to me, and the vision is like a thing from the depths of the sea, wrapping around my feet and spewing its black ink into all time and memory. I see her perched on the kitchen ladder, tightening the caps on the liquor bottles so the seals will match up, stealthily marking the level of the liquid with a black crayon. I see all the evil tools, the silver shot measure on a stem that turns into a spoon, the ice bucket with its lid that slides open and closed like the door of a bank vault or the rock in front of a robber's cache; two bottles, full of a liquid the color of cats' eyes, a squinting tawny color that smells metallic and raw, a little like soap; another bottle full of a blood-tainted water behind a label frothing with grapes and

goat-footed man. Late afternoon, the ladder put away, Red lingers in the hall astride Graymallory, waiting, knowing he will come, because she has long ago learned the exigencies of thirst. Finally, his footsteps, and then the sound of the sliding glass door on its aluminum track. Red doesn't flinch, she doesn't even grip the imaginary flanks with her knees. Instead she feels like the hunter who has outsmarted a prey too beautiful to kill. She hears the clicking of cupboards, and then of a glass; she hears the trickle of liquid, and feels the black dilation of Graymallory's nostrils, his leather ears laid back, his mouth champing a bit that he can never swallow. Then footsteps again, the glass door on its aluminum track, and when she is sure he is gone, Red tiptoes back to the broom closet for the kitchen ladder.

Up its rickety steps, she finds the disturbed seal, the bloated grimace of goat-footed man among the grapes, the black crayon mark high above the blood liquid, and under her she feels a powerful beast rearing on its haunches, pawing the air, lashing out at the empty space where once her allegiance to him had been.

I knew it would take time, that there would be an afternoon when she would see him slip a small bottle surreptitiously into his sock and disappear down to the barn. I knew there would no doubt be another afternoon when he would park the truck to get cigarettes and she would have to wait an hour for him to return, his kiss sweet and innocent and reeking of juniper. What I hoped was that somehow I could help her realize that she was not the scapegoat, that she didn't have to turn herself into a wheezing miner to escape his intoxicated sentimentality, nights when he would beg her to sit on his knee, force her to listen to him dredge through the tailings for the fools' gold of his own

narcissism.

I knew it would also take time--time far beyond her sessions with me, before Red could understand the symbiosis that bound her to her mother--a mother who, in order to gain immunity from her own phobias, engaged Red in a sort of dangerous game of peek-a-boo. Sometimes Mrs. Pike was warm and nurturing; sometimes she was like the mare who refused Abeneezer. Graymallory was more than a symbol of her father's love and steadfastness. More rippled down the powerful croup and gaskin of the horse than the transposed muscles of her father's arms. For Red, Graymallory was a transitional object, an object which she created to fill the expanding and contracting gap between her mother and herself. Graymallory's gait always matched her own; fringed with hair from her mother's hunter, the horse carried her over the dry or flooded fields of her dissolution to a place like the warm hay smelling barn where her mother went to curry and feed and blanket, where the packed earth was spread with a soft bedding of straw.

What I hoped for was that Red, through the transference, could establish ego boundaries strong enough to withstand the symbiotic demands placed upon her by her mother. When the soft bedding of straw became a place of terror where hooves lashed out at her in sleep and the sheets that hoppled her unlocked a nightmare of violence, I wanted her to hear a new voice--not the toothless whinnying scream of a newborn--but my voice, wrapped around the voices of her parents, hushing her cries, staunching her fear, taming the darkness, rocking her to sleep.

I was pleased when finally, after our 100th session, Red was able to leave Graymallory at home alone and return, after an absence of

almost nine months, to the third grade. I had arranged with her teacher for her to be excused from class to call her mother as often as she wished, and I asked Mrs. Pike to stay by the phone in order to reassure her that, yes, Graymallory was grazing contentedly on the carpet in her bedroom, and that, yes, she would bring him some oats, a lump of sugar.

That autumn, Red made steady progress. In spite of her sulks and rages, she began to achieve a certain amount of differentiation between herself and objects. Slowly, the other children at school became animated; she did not cry when, after crumpling a piece of construction paper and throwing it in the trash, or after breaking a toy, she would suddenly believe that she was a murderer, had destroyed something with a soul, a beating heart. One conversation that seemed to have a catalytic effect on our future sessions occurred when we were playing the Board of Objects Game, at her 142nd session. Red chose a blue cat's-eye marble, and told the following story:

> Red: This marble is Mr. Moon who lives in the sky. One night he was rolling around in the sky when suddenly he got turned inside out and landed in our back yard. He made a big hole. I woke up and rode Graymallory out into the back yard to see what happened. There was a big hole in the yard and it was bubbling inside, making a whish sound like the washing machine when it's full of soap. I looked up and there was no moon, not even part of him was up there, all of Mr. Moon was in the hole. I got scared, because Graymallory wanted to ride around him, so we rode around him, trotting (Red bounced the marble up and down around the checker board). We kept riding and riding, and then suddenly we got stuck and this metal thing came out and grabbed Graymallory and he became a merry-go-round like the horses that go around and round at the ferris wheel, and he kept going round and round until he was cantering and running and

I couldn't hold him and I fell off and he got swallowed into the hole and--(Red threw the marble across the room and began kicking her feet and stamping. Then she got up, galloped over to the marble, snatched it up and brought it back to the table). And then I went into the house and grabbed sugar cubes and took them out and dropped them into the hole and Mr. Moon exploded and one piece went way up into the sky and lots of things came out, and I got all wet and things kept falling on me, pennies and toys, and then everything landed on the ground, and I went to look for Graymallory, and I found him, but all of his legs were gone, except one. The end.

T: Does Graymallory have legs? I thought Graymallory was a stick horse.

Red: Graymallory has legs, but you can't see all of them. Here is one (she waved her foot at me) and here is one (she waved her other foot at me) but the other two are visible.

T: You mean invisible. But who is missing the legs--you or Graymallory?

Red: Graymallory--I mean me. Graymallory has legs, but they are invisible and Mr. Moon ate them. The end. Can I have a prize?

T: Yes. You get a prize (I handed her two laquered chips). Now it's my turn to tell a story about Mr. Moon.

(I understood Red's story to have meaning for her on many levels. First of all, I suspected that her recent experiences in public school had set her wondering again about the differences between the sexes, and I thought her story expressed considerable confusion of gender. I wondered whether the moon might symbolize a kind of vagina dentata, whether perhaps the fact that Red had lost Graymallory's leg into the well of the moon might represent her own concern with having no penis, as well as a fear that perhaps her mother, the exploding moon, had deprived her of it. Secondly, I suspected that her story expressed a more archaic fear, a fear that she would be annihilated or engulfed by her mother. Thirdly, I suspected that the death of Abeneezer the mule

was confused in Red's mind with her understanding of the events that had occurred on those weekends when she was alone with her father. The two deaths were no doubt amalgamated--the "death" of her father, in his intoxicated stupors, and the death of the baby mule. If Red felt that she was responsible for her father's behavior, that her oedipal feelings and her fear of seduction by him had somehow kicked him down, then her old miner persona provided refuge. Her father would not seduce a boy; a boy cannot have babies and thus cannot murder them. For Red, birth was synonymous with violent death. I did not know whether Red knew that mules can never have offspring, since they are hybrid, genetic dead ends; but I suspected that she did know, and I guessed that she had aligned herself with Abeneezer, the baby mule, out of a desire to be absolved of the crimes of gender. It was with this understanding of her story that I told mine.)

Once upon a time there was a beautiful moon. But this moon was not a boy moon. My moon was called Mrs. Moon, and she looked like this (I took a piece of paper and drew a crescent shape on it with a crayon). Have you seen Mrs. Moon when she looks like this?

Red: Yes. But then she goes away.

T: No, she doesn't go away. It's just that the light doesn't shine on her so you can't see her. Anyway, Mrs. Moon was a lady moon, so she didn't have a penis. She was a girl moon like you and your mother and me. But she fell in love one day with a comet who did have a penis and they got married (I drew a picture of Mr. Comet and Mrs. Moon in church). Then one day, they decided to make baby moons, so Mr. Moon put his penis into her and filled her full of moon mix and she grew and grew until she was very pregnant (I drew a full moon with a big smile). Then one night, she gave birth to a beautiful baby moon. She rolled it over and around to see it if was a girl moon or a boy moon, and sure enough, it was a girl moon. There was no penis.

Red: What happened to it? Did she eat it? She ate it! Then she ate the baby moon!

T: No, she did not eat the baby moon's penis. Little baby girl moons never have penises. They are born without them. No, she did not eat the baby girl moon. She was proud to have given birth to a baby girl moon, just like you.

Red: Graymallory and I have a penis. My father made it from a broom.

T: Does Abeneezer have a penis?

Red: Yes. Abeneezer has a penis but he keeps it hidden. He keeps it down in his mine with all of his gold money. If people find out about all of his money they will come down and kill him.

T: Will they kick him to death, like the mother horse did to her baby mule?

Red: No! They will never find him. He lives in a secret mine with his gold. Is that the end?

T: The end of Abeneezer or the end of the story?

Red: The end of the story. (Red became agitated and anxious. She began kicking her legs against the chair.)

T: No. That's just the beginning of the story. You see, Mrs. Moon was not like the mother mare. She loved her little girl moon very much, and Mr. Comet loved his little girl moon too. Mrs. Moon would never kick her little girl moon, and the little girl moon would never kick Mr. Comet, even though she was angry sometimes when he drank liquor and fell asleep.

Red: Is that the end?

T: No. That's just the beginning. You see, then the baby moon grew up and she fell in love with a comet who had a penis. She wanted to have lots of baby moons to love and take care of, so they made lots of little moons together in the same way until there was a whole galaxy. The end. Now I get a prize (I took two chips).

Red: Well, I am going to grow up to be a comet. I am going to grow lots of penises instead of little moons. Then Daddy will wake up and he will never drink liquor again.

T: Don't you want to grow up to make baby moons?

Red: No! I want to live by myself and have lots of money. I want to make baby horses!

For the next five sessions, Red was engrossed in a study of how babies were made. Over and over again, I explained all the procedures. I showed her pictures, we made drawings, told stories--finally she seemed satisfied with her lot as a little girl and reassured that if she were to grow up and make babies, she would not murder them. She even asked her father to carve her a new horse with a real penis, so that she could get married and make horse-babies. Around that time, she also insisted that I draw pictures of the moon. She was fascinated by the fact that when the moon was in its crescent phase, the part that was not showing was really still there. I hung Christmas ornaments from threads from the chandeliers, made a pretend sun out of a flashlight, and with the blinds drawn, we depicted all the changing phases of the moon. For her birthday, Mrs. Pike took her to the planetarium, and thereafter, Red was determined to become an astronaut. She learned the constellations by heart, memorized the gases on Saturn, the moons of Jupiter, the distance in light years to Betelgeuse and Arcturus. Gray-mallory made friends with Pegasus and grew his own wings.

To her third grade Show and Tell, Red took a mobile of the solar system, carved and welded by her father. Her classmates were enchanted by her speech, and for the first time, Red was proud of her father's sorcery, proud to be the daughter of a magician. She was welcomed by

her peers at public school, augmented by her father's artifice. On that day, I think, an old wound was healed. The derisive sneers of the girls from the private school—"Red has to have a real horse to ride. She's too good to put a belt in her mouth. Look at her stupid child's stickhorse."—stopped echoing in her memory. The merry-go-round whirling in her dream that sent her flying to pieces that day on the playground, the ridicule that created a constellation of shame, setting her farther apart than a star on the longest leg of a spiral galaxy—that merry-go-round stopped. Red simply stepped off, onto solid ground.

That Christmas we were to endure our first major separation. I had grown very attached to Red, and I must confess that I was facing a countertransference of extreme proportions. I tried my best to reassure Red of the fact that my absence was only temporary, that like the moon when it is dark, I would not disappear, I was still there, and would be there when she returned in January. I was pleased by the fact that Red did not regress. She seemed to take it all in stride. We made an Advent calendar together, and Red insisted that the child in the manger behind the last paper window was herself, and that I was the virgin, bending over her. I didn't interfere with her fantasy, although I heard the twin snakes of Aesclepius hissing hubris, felt the shadow of the caduceus pass menacingly over my head.

The week before Christmas, I had a most curious anniversary dream. My own father had died on that day several years before, but in my dream, my father was metamorphosed into Mr. Pike. I recognized the hands, the almost erotic reticence of his gait. I imagined his workshop, sparks dancing on the anvil, the whirring carnival of saws and

grinders. My father/Mr. Pike had come back to life. He said he knew there wasn't room for him in the house, but that he didn't mind sleeping out under the stars by the raspberry patch, didn't mind the white swirling snow. He asked if I would join him some night under the spot where the windmill was, where one of his perpetual motion machines was--the one that only worked for three days. He built me a mobile for the soul, carved a boat for me with welded metal wings that flew me to the moon. To thank him, I came to him one night in a cloak covered with flakes of sugar--but he was gone. I kneeled down in the angel-shaped depression his body had made in the snow, and a huge black stallion came up behind me. I felt the grass-sweet, hot breath of an animal, his nose softer than the shaved beard of a putting green. His muzzle on my neck, nibbling the dust on my collar. The hot breath on my neck.

My own orgasm woke me up and I sat up in bed, shuddering with desire, quaking with sweat and sex-soaked fear.

I had other similar dreams in the week before Christmas. I recognized in them my own identification with Red--a long forgotten oedipal passion that had been awakened by our sessions. I was horrified by the fusion of my father with Mr. Pike, but my conscious disapproval seemed only to heighten the erotic content of my successive dreams. Those nights before Christmas, I dreamed of shameless encounters with Santa Claus on the hearthrug. I would waken in what seemed like a tangle of white fur and red flannel, amidst a roomful of naked toys.

Maybe Red wasn't any different from the rest of us. Maybe she got scared and the scare stuck. Maybe having a wizard for a father, a father of unexpected sorcery, who stayed up nights like Saint Nicholas

glueing horse hair into Graymallory's mane, whittling each side of the horse to look out of a pupil shaped like a keyhole, maybe that scared her (I even dreamed once that I peeked surreptitiously into the nostril of Graymallory's nose, saw two hooved and shrouded beasts locked in love). God knows a man like Santa Claus is terror enough on Christmas Eve, after a dry run at the dry goods store with a dummy in a white beard, or after firewater and food offerings and an empty sock hung on the hearth. But imagine a madman on the roof in June or February, some deer-driving maniac with some scheme he wants to perpetrate in your living room in the middle of the night. It's terrifying. Christmas is a primal scene. In his essay on Christmas, Ernest Jones doesn't mention the origin of the sock tradition. Why the sock? One sock can only net one foot. What about the other foot? Was it cut off? Did it walk away? Even worse, for the lot of women, if the mysterious pneumatics of Christmas are meant to mimic sex: in the middle of the night, the limp sock becomes engorged, swelling with a veritable cornucopia of delights, but the instant she empties it in the morning, it stays flaccid again for a whole year, packed into the closet with the Christmas balls and the colored lights!

My father was long dead, but those nights I relived all the greed and eroticism of Christmas. My father was dead, but time doesn't stand still for the dead. Maybe for the living, for the eternity of a kiss, for those moments of being, those epiphanies, those shocked instants of recognition when one finally rips the wish out of its wrapping of fear—maybe then it does. In the case of the Christmas sock, a woman is justified in praying for time to stand still. Fortunately, love's poets have not had to gather love's flowers off the

century plant. Only I, who never had legs with feet the right size for the glass slippers proffered me, only I, nosing with my blunted shears among the blossoms of other children's dreams; only I had such prayers.

In a curious fashion, my prayers were answered. Time did stand still. I had been looking forward to a Christmas alone in the house, a time when I could putter and reflect, invite a few friends for mulled wine and eggnog. Instead, after Red's departure, the house was overrun with voices from the past. When I wasn't dreaming of embarrassing encounters with Red's father, I was fantasizing about my own mother—or Red's mother, since the two became increasingly confused in my imagination. Even my cat, a stray tom I befriended and castrated and named Winnicat—after the psychologist who first conceived the notion of the transitional object—even he was no comfort. I would sit with him on my lap, sipping the rum and eggnog I had intended for my guests, and I would suddenly be seized with a kind of abreaction. In one such seizure, Graymallory had become a cannibal horse. My father and I had tried to twitch and hopple him, but he jerked loose. I went down to the barn and saw the halter broken and swinging free on its rope. We searched all day, and that night I asked my mother if she would come down with me and scare him up with her low eerie horse whistle. She followed me out. I was wearing black patent leather shoes with no socks; a welded iron owl in the crabapple tree was pitted with shadows by the porchlight. Something was different about the north yard. The moon had bled into it, and just past the mailbox was the pit, deep and translucent. It was a pit of light, but it looked like the moon when it appears as a hole in the sky rather than as a

body, and a spiraling ring of steam rose from it. I tucked my nightgown up into my underwear and dove down into the moonlight. My mother followed. We went through swirls of white warm water, down to where the cone narrowed to the size of a horse's torso. The water felt cooler on my ankles. I became apprehensive, heard the sound of fizzing. I signalled my mother back up and told her that I was sure Graymallory was down there, but that if we entered the narrower chamber of water it would erupt. I took a lump of sugar, to show her, and pitched it in. I grabbed my mother's hand and we ran from the pit, from the hissing, until we were safe and could see. The moon erupted, too slow phosphorescent spurts that diffused into the dark sky. We waited, nightgowns stuck to our skin, watching the sky turn the white of milk, or the white of eyes. Spume kept coming out of the lawn, out of the roil of foaming grass. It threw bones up all over the yard. It coughed up a caduceus with live snakes, some sleigh bells, a pair of ragged ballet slippers. Volumes of Freud and Anna Freud, Bettelheim, Ekstein, and Klein arced down on their white trajectories, and bounced weightlessly at our feet. It was as though all history had been thrown up onto our lawn. Everywhere were beautiful coiled artifacts. Down by the pumphouse I found the photograph of my mother's deceased father amidst a heap of my old clothes--two dresses, one for me and one for my mother, both exactly alike.

Meanwhile, the sky had slowly emptied itself of things and my mother had gone in. The night was slowly absorbing the white milky wetness and the stars were coming back, sucking the phosphorescence into themselves. I wandered over the grounds, still looking for the cannibal horse, hoping he had not swallowed my mother or ascended

somehow into the sky. Then suddenly I saw it again, the moon, up there, just come out from a cloud. Everything that had darkened was suddenly laved again in moonlight. All the quaint bones and objects scattered on the lawn jumped into relief, irridescent, Daliesque, all the whimsical sputum of the moon.

But the cannibal, I knew, had escaped. Graymallory was a clever devil.

I did try to analyze my hallucinations; I did have moments of lucidity. On the day before Christmas Eve, I managed to answer some correspondence and tend to some bills, and as I sat in the office that had once been my bedroom, I was able to keep a tenuous hold on reality, although I had to remind myself that my letterhead--not my underwear--was piled in the drawer, and that the greeting cards strewn on the blotter were not the patchwork swatches in my old quilt. That day the snow fell steadily, and when I settled into the Poppa Bear's chair with Winnicat purring contentedly on my lap, I tried to rationalize the snow as a kind of dream screen, imagining that I was caught in one of Lewin's oral triads, eating, being eaten, and sleeping against the breast of Christmas.

Instead of wine, I mulled over the events that had made me choose my career. How could one ever follow the dictum of Socrates, "Know thyself," when the self was no more than the scattered motes of a prism, patches of light and color that one culled and sorted--or tried to--until they assumed a shape. As a child I wanted to be an orphan. I would lie under the clouds, as varied in their forms and meanings as the blotches on Rorschach cards, and I would simply wonder who I was,

how I got there, who my parents could be. ("Oh, but Red," I remember telling her, "there are no wild horses. Only feral horses--horses descended, horses with parents, with mothers and fathers. And there are no wild Abeneezers either.") This, perhaps, is my mother, I would think, and I would draw a circle of blue light around her to keep her in. And this man, inside this green corral, is my father--but he would always get out.

On Christmas Eve, I felt dazed and a little lonely. I fastened a string of lights around the window, and I lit a fire in the hearth. Downstairs, in darkness, was the toyland where Red and I had set the planets right in their orbits. I hope she dreamed, now, of sugar plums and listened without fear for the clatter of hooves on the roof. Below the playroom, under the house, were the boxes I had saved to open for the holiday. Nothing new, only the treasured mementos of my own childhood, stashed away until I had the distance and the wisdom to open them again, to see them in the healing grace of nostalgia and forgiveness.

In one of them, I hoped, was a wooden stickhorse, ears of leather, mane of horsehair. Broomstick body, flaired nostril dug out with an awl. A horse carved from pine. Muzzle, nose, haw; forelock, cheek, throat. I would look for it last, in a long narrow box. I would open it last, waiting, as Red waited, to open the last window on the paper Advent calendar, knowing that when I did open it, I would feel again the little thrill of renaming, and would call the little child swaddled in the straw by my own name.

SCANT RATIONS

"Herrick? Why do you always paint desolate farmhouses?" He looked at her, startled. "Remember that old Victorian clapboard, with the outhouse in the foreground?"

"Which one?"

"The farmhouse with the light on in the kitchen window. There was a road, a teetering one-holer with a slant roof?"

"Oh, that one. There wasn't a road. What do you mean, 'Why did I paint it?' I painted it, that's why. Why do miners pick the coal snot out of their noses? I don't know."

"What about the other one, the still life with the rusty old Coleman lamp and the pan and the pickaxe?"

"What about it?"

"I like it. I like to pretend that the Coleman from the still life is in your other painted house. It's what's lighting the kitchen window. Some old duffer's probably inside, eating beans and picking his nose."

"Yep. Beans keep him company. One tin and he can spend all night chasing after the barking rats with his pickaxe."

"Barking rats?"

"You know—farts!"

"Oh, Herrick! Why did you paint it?"

"Jesus, Morgan, don't you know how to let a guy alone?"

"O.K., O.K., sorry. Can I drive when we get to Huerfano County?"

"No."

"You ought to let me drive the jeep once. Can we pull over and put down the top? It won't rain till later."

"No."

Morgan unlaced her sandals and tucked her feet up next to the glove box so her toes curled around the hand grip on the front of the dash. She tried to think of it as another toy journey, no different from the little toy journeys they had made with matchbox cars in the dirt at the Estate. Beyond the dash, the mountains were no different from the little windrows in the roadside at the Main House, made by dragging out the tire ruts in summer for their little toy towns. Even then Herrick had driven a jeep, and Morgan knew that if he still loved her, it was because she didn't nag him about the future, accepting his eccentricities with curious childlike resignation.

As a child, she had pressed flowers. She took them from the fields in the spring and flattened them in the big books in the library at the Main House. She had ruined the dictionary with pink stains of saxifrage, blue smear of lupin, yellow smudge of marshflower. She pressed them in order to name them and in order to keep from losing them. It was in the same spirit, grown up, that she wanted to know Herrick just the way he was, to keep him always as in a kind of spring-time, never mind the colors bleeding a little into the blurred script of memory. Herrick was different because he had been adopted. He didn't collect living things. He painted in oils and rarely opened a big book unless it had pictures.

"Hey, Morgan, reach back there in the back seat. See the brown pack? Unzip the left side and grab that little bottle of pills."

Morgan felt the little triangle of sun slide down the red cotton of her shirt onto the bare patch of skin above her baggy jeans. "Can't reach it. Gotta unfasten this damn seatbelt." Morgan came back up, popped the clasp and disappeared again into the well behind the driver's seat. She fumbled for something too heavy for pills until she worked the zipper and found herself staring dead into the barrel of a handgun. "Jesus Christ, Herrick," she popped back up, "is it loaded?"

"You must always assume, Morgan, that every gun you see is loaded, cocked, and about to go off."

"Is this?"

"The bullet's not in the chamber. You unzipped the wrong compartment. Get the pills."

"What kind of gun is it?"

"A Walther semi-automatic pistol."

"Jesus Christ, scare the hell out of me." Morgan found the pills and zipped the pack back up, being careful to point the gun so that if it went off it would blow through the floor of the jeep. On her way up, she noticed another gun, a holstered revolver it looked like, stashed between the driver's seat and the drive shaft. It was pointed straight at the engine. She didn't ask.

Herrick lit a cigarette. "Whatever possessed you to wear that old ratty red shirt? Looks like the top to a pair of thermal underwear." His speech was gurgly and rocky from trying to work up enough saliva to swallow the pills.

"It is."

"Well?" He swallowed.

"Well, I like it. I figure if you're going to sweat, you may as

well sweat in something that soaks it up. I think it was Dad's old shirt."

"I wouldn't take you to a dog fight in it."

Morgan grinned. "What does one wear to a dog fight? Saddle shoes? Yes? And maybe one of those felt circle skirts with pink poodles glued on?"

"Even pink poodles would look better than that dismal rag." Herrick jammed the gear shift into third and cornered around a pothole. "Damned highway. We haven't got the chance of a pin on a cribbage board. Road's ripped up worse than your goddamn shirt."

The sun was beginning to bake through the canvas jeep top. Morgan craned forward to get a glimpse of it, plumb over their heads. Dead noon. They were just entering Huerfano County, and there was a hot dry wind blowing down off the foot hills. She watched an orphan tumbleweed a little huerfano, blow up and stick against a snowfence, keeping its doily-like shadow exactly under it. She wondered if it was a blessing to have no roots, to wander, dried and hunched into a ball over the southern plains of Colorado. She wondered if Herrick ever wondered about his real parents. The mountains were beautiful today, deep blue and wrinkled like the loose skin on the flanks of beached and petrified buffalo. Morgan found her Indian, a mountain silhouette like a chief lying prone in all the glorious costumes of death, headress feathers--really fall lines--smoothed and fanned down towards the four corners of the earth, round-toed moccasins framed against the blue.

"They look pretty nice, don't you think, Herrick?" She pointed.

"Yep."

"Purple-Mountain-Majestic."

"Yep."

Morgan thought of the long ride from Denver to Trinidad, and of all the names of poverty and hardship: Ludlow, scene of a miners' strike and massacre; Walsenberg, Aguilar, Las Animas--all mining towns, hope black as the coal under them. She saw the clipped barred mesas, a cluster here or there of heat-drugged cows: white Charolais, brown Hereford, Black Angus. They passed a deserted wheatfield, each stalk of wheat blowing subtle as a candle-flame breathed by winds of speech over the family dinner table. "The wheat, you know, it's beautiful."

"Yep."

"Like the wheat in your painting. What's the secret to painting wheat?"

"It doesn't blow in one direction, so you can't paint it leaning in one direction. See out there? See the eddies and spirals?"

Morgan looked past Herrick to the east, and looking taught her what it meant to speak of a "prairie sea" stretching to the horizon, leagues and leagues of wheat, striations of green, gray, and yellow, blending all the swells and hollows in a gentle movement that suggested water instead of land.

Herrick downshifted; the jeep lurched and swerved. "Damn, this highway's got more holes than a whore. Morgan, get me another cigarette. There's a new pack in the glove compartment."

Morgan watched him unwrap his cigarettes. He always bought them in a hard pack, and he kept the hard pack in a leather case with a fancy lighter, this one a solid silver, turquoise-studded one. He threw the cellophane out the window and it hissed and slapped the canvas before it was gone. Then he put the pack neatly into the old

leather pouch, dropped his cigarette into the flame shielded by his cupped hand, and drove the jeep with his forearm until he got a good draw.

"Where'd you get that lighter?"

"Oh, a guy down in Raton was stuck off the highway last winter and I winched him out. Afterwards, he asked me how he could repay me, and we were sitting there smoking, and I noticed his lighter and I said, 'Well, if you want to repay me, you can just give me that lighter you got.' And he just looked up, blinked a couple of times, and handed it over."

"Sounds like you didn't give him much of a choice."

"No, I didn't. It's a damn fine lighter. I wanted it the minute I saw it."

"Do you still treasure that watch of Great-Grandfather McLeod?" The clouds reminded her of it, dark filigreed swirls rising over the Sangre de Cristos, inking an old initial across the sun.

"Yep. I have the watch and the stand. I told Mom she had to give it to me after that time in the mountains. You remember, the time I took Mark and Ian up Devil's Gulch and we stayed at The Estate."

"Tell me again. I forgot." But Morgan hadn't forgotten. There were some things that she never forgot. Once, at breakfast, he looked up from his newspaper, scrutinized her up and down and said, "You know, you'd make a great widow." Another time, he told her how he would die an old man all decked out in his Easter best on a big four-poster mahogany bed. "I'll just sign a few papers, make some choice parting remarks, and blow my brains out." He had it all planned.

"Well? Please tell me."

"Well, me and Mark and Ian--god what a couple of idiots. Old Ian, if you stuck an ice cream cone up his ass he could tell you what flavor--"

"Herrick!"

"Sorry. Anyway, the three of us came up in the jeep and camped out in the old Maid's Cabin. The two of them got waxed and while they were thigh slapping and chewing the fat and baying the lights off Prospect Mountain, I snuck out and headed the long way around to the Main House. There was nothing special about the night, no eerie music, no full moon, no scrotum-shrinking screams--just a typical star-studded night in the mountains. I felt like skulking around, so I went down past the wood house and the barn and skirted all the cabins from the pasture side. I wound up climbing up the rocks where we had the sack swing--remember that rock hollow you made us dig out and fill with water so you could have a spa for your dolls? Well, I almost stepped in the damn thing, Jeese-o. But I got to the Main House and suddenly got this queer feeling like I had to go in. A sort of magnetic attraction.

"Wasn't it all locked up for the winter?"

"Yep. Mom locked it up the week before, but I had the keys."

"Gee, scare the hell out of me."

"Well, I wasn't scared. I figured whoever was in there would be wishing he'd worn brown underwear because I had my .44 Magnum revolver pistol with the silencer screwed on the end and I figured, 'click'--I could drop him like yellow out of a fried egg--'click'--that's all the noise it makes."

"Burrr, Herrick, I hate all your damn guns."

"Well, somehow I knew I wasn't going to find any weirdo. I had this feeling--I'd had it for a long time--that I was going to meet the old man himself. Great-grandfather Theopholis."

"A ghost?"

"No. Him. Theopholis."

"But he's dead."

"Well, he wasn't that night."

Morgan scowled at him. "Aren't silencers illegal?"

"Yep."

"Isn't it illegal to have guns in the car?"

"Yep."

"Theopholis? Herrick, you couldn't have seen Theopholis. Mom's grandfather? Our great-grandfather? Jesus, Herrick, you never even met him. He was dead before we were born."

"Yep. But ever since I was a small boy, I've had the feeling that he was waiting for me, watching me. After a while, I learned to sense his presence. When Mom locked the house up that summer, I could feel his presence really strong. It was the last summer. Mom sold it that winter. Didn't you ever feel it?"

"Well, not really. I found a dime once in the road, 1909, and I guess I thought maybe it could have been his dime, maybe he dropped it or something, getting into his old Lincoln Touring Car."

"Well, I had been noticing strange things. I remember putting his picture in the bottom drawer of the old roll top in the living room, and then finding it, for no reason, laid on the keys of the player piano, under the dust cover. I just happened to lift the lid."

"But Herrick, anybody could have moved it. Maybe Mom, who knows?"

"No. I'm sure she didn't do it."

"What else happened?"

"Remember those goats we had that summer? Remember the one who hanged himself by his halter rope?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, it was about that time that I noticed I was sick."

The first raindrops, like cracked eggs, blatted on the dust-caked windshield. Herrick switched on the wipers and they made two brown crescent-shaped smears that completely obstructed their view of the road.

"Grab my army canteen out of the back seat." Herrick downshifted and stuck his head out of the side window to steer.

"You shouldn't have switched them on so soon. What if it doesn't really rain?"

Herrick took the canteen, pulled himself up by the roll bar and drenched the front window outside on the driver's side.

"What about my side? I still have to squint through the dead bugs and the mud."

"Here." He passed her the canteen. "But don't use it all. We might need it."

"Why would we need it?"

"Just don't use it all."

Morgan drenched her side, saved a quarter of it, and took a swig. "Want some?"

"No."

The thunderhead came out of nowhere. Morgan loved the Colorado weather. The sky could be blue and sunny, and then all of a sudden a

big rolling tumbleweed of a cloud would somersault in off the mountains and dump its contents on the prairie. "Gee, it's really going to come down!" They drove in silence, and Morgan watched the rest of the mud above the eyebrow-shaped swath of the wipers slowly dribble into the blades. The sudden darkness made her aware of the cozy gadgetry on the dash and the smell of leather which she always associated with her brother. Leather and flannel and denim--that was Herrick. He down-shifted again, and leaned forward to see better through the blur.

"Did you ever find Theopholis?"

"I'll tell you later. Shut up, I can't see through this toad-strangler anymore. Worse than a cow pissing on a salt lick."

"What?"

"I said, it's coming out of the clouds like shit through a goose."

"Herrick, for god's sake." Morgan zipped the rest of her window shut and brought her knees up to her chest on the seat. The rain went suddenly into hail, little pearl-shaped beads wrapped in the nacre of the storm, bouncing like dropped B-B's on the pavement. The mountains turned pointillist, and the steam started rising off the plains. "I think--"

"What?"

"It's like some old grandmother dropped a box of moth balls down the attic stairs." She was proud of her simile.

"What?"

"Never mind."

The din on the roof was too loud for further conversation, and it crescendoed until Morgan thought the hail would rip through the canvas top and stone them to death. Morgan remembered how she used to shake

the ripe crabapple tree in the driveway and stand all hunched over under it until they stopped falling. She relaxed her shoulders; the noise had stopped except for the squeaking sound the wipers made as the windows dried, and the sound like gravel—really hailstones—pelting harder into the fenders as Herrick downshifted back into high gear and lit another cigarette. They drove out of the hail, through hissing puddles that looked the same as heat mirage on the pavement. It was like dying. The sky relaxed like the bellows of a sick, wheezing lung. Her father had died like that, and afterwards the house was full of silence and the smell of fresh rain.

"Do you realize, Morgan, that in that tiny pack back there, I have enough supplies to keep alive for a week in the wilderness—except water? But I always carry water. Water enough for a few days."

"Really? Gee." Morgan didn't want to ask him how he could possibly last a week in the wilderness now, now that he'd need at least one good kidney, besides insulin, if he was going to survive a week. She remembered how he'd always had little duffle bags and army packs, always packed and ready to go. Her mother told her one time how she had taunted Herrick about his things. "Well, if you're all packed for a survival outing," she had said, "why not just go? Clear out the old cobwebs in your brain. It would be good for you." But Herrick never did go. He just stayed ready, and his favorite pasttime was to unpack and then pack again, rearranging something, or adding perhaps a Swiss Army Knife and some snake bite antidote. He loved little boxes and tins and gadgets, since in his past life or in his genes, he said, he was cut out to be an Army General. Herrick kept saccharin tablets in a brass hollowed-out bullet that fastened to a chain to his belt loop,

and he kept candy in the jeep tool box in case of insulin shock.

Thirst had been the first herald of his diabetes. Herrick was sixteen then, running up from the welding shop by the barn to drink out of the sprinkler. Morgan wondered what he must have thought as the thirst grew on him, the new unquenchable thirst, and she pictured him walking into the concentric slapping spray from the sprinkler, jamming it with his foot, drinking long and greedily from the clean arc of water, looking up anxiously as though to try to size up his thirst against the heat of a cloudless Denver summer day. He always wore cowboy boots, even in July, and Morgan pictured him walking out of the hissing range of water, letting the drops pepper the back of his leather vest without quickening his pace.

Morgan unzipped the jeep window and dangled her bare foot out of it. The sun was glittering on the washed granite in the pavement. She sneezed.

"Bless you."

Both of them watched the rainbow bloom and fade over Fisher's Peak. Herrick took the long way through town, over the brick-paved streets, past Victorian mansions built by coal barons and railroad royalty. Trinidad was set between Fisher's Peak and Simson's Rest, the latter sporting a neon "Trinidad" sign, the former so symetrically leveled that it was a peak in name only. By the time they turned up Colorado Avenue, the sky had almost completely cleared. Herrick back-fired the jeep by switching the ignition off and on, a loud flatulent pop. The bells on Bell Block chimed out "Nearer My God to Thee" as Herrick skidded into the driveway of his house and jerked to a stop. Herrick never thought of his jeep as a mere means of conveyance. To

him it was a highly refined instrument of percussion, a feat of mechanical artistry, and he reveled in the purring, popping, skidding, knocking, chugging symphony of jeep. Morgan always delighted in her rides with him because he was a safe but aggressive driver. Once, to avoid an accident, he deliberately hopped a median, crossed three lanes of on-coming traffic, and stopped neatly on the opposite shoulder of the highway. "Close as a shaved baby's ass." Then he waited for all lanes to clear, hopped back over the median, and headed down the road without saying another word about it. He was, to use one of her mother's Vassar expressions, "Completely unflappable."

Herrick's house was an old nineteenth-century Victorian, half-painted a rich French blue with ox-blood gingerbread and slate gray trim around the windows. Morgan packed her sandals under her chin on top of her sewing and nightgown and walked the railroad ties that lined the access to the front porch.

"Ouch, dammit!" Morgan hopped about on one foot, spilling her things onto the lawn.

"Coal tar creosote. Jeese-o, Morgan, you're supposed to go up to the house like a white man, not a coal train. What do you think the sidewalk's for?"

Morgan tried to rub the tar off on the needles under the spruce tree.

"It'll come off with gasoline. There's some in the shop behind the saw. I'm going to pick up the U-Haul."

Herrick made a quick tour of the house, unlocking all the doors. He emerged on the south side, climbed in the jeep, popped the clutch, and squealed rubber out of the driveway. Morgan watched him until he

turned off Colorado Avenue, and then she gathered up her stray underwear and embroidery threads and hopped on one foot into the shop.

This was it. This is what happened to people. They got sick; they moved; things changed. Herrick used to have a wife; he didn't anymore. His wife used to be thin; now she was probably still fat. They were both collectors, but his wife must have decided one day to keep her possessions right on her where Herrick couldn't mortgage them: she ate and ate. Then one day she left. She had to. She had to run away from her appetite and from Herrick. Even back then, Herrick was a dead man. He was impotent. He had to run his blood through a sieve every couple of days. She took the cats with her.

Morgan found the kerosine behind the table saw. She found an old T-shirt on the fly wheel and used it to rub the liquid into her arch. Little by little, all the cross-hatched lines in her feet re-emerged, till the arch and callouses were shiny white. She kept rubbing anyway, watching her fingers travel over the ball of her foot, letting her gaze fall out of focus and gather her into the blue of Herrick's tidy workroom, into the dance of tiny particles in the sunlight. She shook the shirt and sent them flying. This was it.

At the Estate, one time, she had actually seen where a pack rat lived. Her father had hoisted her high up above his shoulders so she could see into a hole in the lath under the floorboards of the Main House. Inside was the most elaborate assortment of goodies: lint, nutshells, pinecone cores, a rubber soldier, a pencil, a firecracker, a playing card, a marble, bobbie pins. The rat wasn't home at the time, so Morgan unsnapped her favorite pink barette off her braid and put it on what she thought might be the rat's front porch as a surprise.

When her father let her down, though, she regretted her impulsive magnanimity. That night, she put her ear to the linoleum in the kitchen over his nest to see if she could hear if he was glad.

From then on, she always thought of Herrick in terms of that rat. She thought of his locked treasure room by the foyer, full of guns, brass candlesticks, egg coddlers, cloissone boxes Theopholis got in China--almost all of it besides the guns was loot from the Estate. Morgan thought how if people from another century were to open Herrick's treasure room, they would know--just like they knew when they opened the Egyptian tombs--that everything inside the room had special significance. Well, maybe they wouldn't know. After all, they could have just placed Tut in there with some decorative salvage, but they probably didn't. Same with Herrick. Everything he owned meant something to him, and it was hard to covet anything he had, since his attachment to his possessions far exceeded any interest an outsider could muster. Every once in a while, he could be persuaded to sell something, but only for roughly three times its worth.

This was it. Today they were going to load as much of Herrick's workroom as they could into the U-Haul. Herrick agreed--although Morgan was dubious--to transfer into the Denver dialysis ward, and Morgan had promised to help him store his tools at her mother's. She heard the jeep pull in, popping like the fourth of July.

Herrick trudged through the house.

"I'm in here."

He came in through the kitchen and paused in the doorway. "You look like forty miles of bad road--what's got you?"

"I don't know. I'm sad."

"Why should you be sad? I'm the one that's dying."

"Well, I'm still sad."

"Well, cheer up. We've got to dismantle this shop by sundown. Get off your duff and help me load this stuff into the boxes in the hall closet. I'll give the orders. You do the work." Herrick grinned.

They spent the whole afternoon in the workroom. Herrick, exhausted from the drive down, sat in an overstuffed chair, smoking and instructing Morgan as to how to pack his tools. Boxes of hardware, porcelain plumbing fixtures---even the antique marble sink Morgan had given him as a wedding present that he had never installed. Every possible size socket wrench, a full wall of pigeon holes, each with its special contents. Herrick was meticulous. Morgan had to pack, seal, and label everything.

"You sure you want to take all this stuff back to Denver? You sure you're not going to change your mind?"

"Yep."

But Morgan knew he would change his mind, and he would keep changing it until one day, from under his mahogany bed, a tree would grow up entrunking him and she would be turned into the sparrow Isis, dipping and singing in circles around him.

The last thing Morgan could squeeze into the U-Haul was a treadle whetstone Herrick had pilfered from the Estate after their mother had sold it. It looked like a spinning wheel, but the pedal turned a stone about two inches thick and three feet in diameter. Morgan heaved it into the U-Haul and locked the door for the night.

In the kitchen, Morgan found Herrick heating soup and a casserole their mother had fixed for them to take with them. Morgan looked at

him, whittled down to nothing by his illness. "You never told me what happened."

"What?"

"At the Estate."

"What, when?"

"After you went in with your loaded gun to the Main House."

"Oh, well, I just had a little chat with Theopholis. That's all."

"What do you mean, 'a chat?' What happened?"

"Well, I was in the living room by the round table. I don't know what it was that drew me to the table. I guess the fact that I knew he had presided there, that was where he sat and looked each of the members of his family in the eye. I guess I figured I'd find him there."

"It was the biggest table I've ever seen. Do you remember how we used to slide the salt across it?"

"Yep. So I started to walk around the table. I stopped once to light a candle on the sideboard, and then I just walked and walked. I must have circled that table twenty times."

"Well?"

Herrick heaved a big spoonful of casserole onto Morgan's plate and slid it down the counter to her. "Well, he finally just walked in."

"From where?"

"From the master bedroom."

"What did he do? Did he say anything?"

"Well, at first he seemed kind of distracted, like he was looking for something. He patted all the pockets of his trousers and vest, and then he looked at me and started to walk towards me."

"Jesus, Herrick, weren't you scared?"

"Yep. But then he stopped. We just stared at each other, he looking at me and me looking at him."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not exactly, but somehow, I knew what he was saying."

"Well?"

"Well, I knew he was looking for his watch, and I knew that the reason he was looking for it was because he wanted to give it to me. Then, without really saying it, he told me that he had bought the watch in Salt Lake, from a little watch maker named Weybrecht."

"Weybrecht! Jesus, Herrick, isn't that the name of your real parents? Remember that time you told me you sneaked into Mom's files?"

"Yep."

"What did you say?"

"I thanked him for giving me the watch. I told him that the watch was safe in Mom's jewelry box and that I would get it from her and keep it forever. I told him that I was grateful for the sign from my real parents, since I knew I would be sick someday, and would need to have a reserve."

"A reserve?"

"Someday, I told him, I would send it back to them as a sign."

"But how could you? You could never find them."

"I have ways."

Morgan gulped the last of her casserole and went to the stove to serve herself more. "A reserve?"

"Jeese-o, Morgan, you ate that like there was a band of armed Mexicans on the veranda."

"A sign? A sign of what?"

Herrick wouldn't answer. Talking to Herrick was like going on a timed ride. When the ride was up, that was it. Herrick unscrewed the bullet and tapped some saccharin into a cup of instant tea. To save the bother of getting a spoon, he opened his Swiss Army Knife, stirred, wiped the blade on his flannel shirt, and re-deposited it in his pocket.

"I'll do the dishes."

Morgan collected the plates and put them into the sink, and Herrick went in to watch the news on the TV. When she finished, she took coffee to the table and listened to the muffled sounds of the news, watching the tired light fade on the oak tabletop. Like all the other rooms in his house, Herrick's kitchen was pervaded with an air of stark readiness. An old butcher block dominated the center of the floor, and an antique stove that Herrick had re-nickeled warmed the house in winter. Herrick had restored the walls with new wainscoting and his wife had papered above the wainscot and decorated the windows with ruffled yellow chintz. As in many other houses of the era, Herrick's kitchen had more doors than any other room in the house. The dining room, study, bathroom, workroom, and back porch all radiated from the kitchen like streets from a glorietta. From the back door, left open since early afternoon, the smell of grass and day lilies blew in and circled the vacant chairs.

"Well," said Herrick, "my lust for life seems to be on the wane." She heard cane creak on the wicker settee and then she heard him punch off the TV. "I feel like I got chewed twice, digested twice, and shit out of a Charolais. I'm going to bed, but you can stay up and howl if you like. Your bed's in the first guest room. It's still not wired.

I think it has sheets, unless they were hers." Herrick walked painfully through the kitchen to get his cigarettes, and then she heard him fumbling with the padlock in the foyer on the treasure room door.

"What are you doing?"

"Arming myself."

"What for?"

"I always do."

He pulled the string, locked the door, and as he ascended the staircase, each step an effort, Morgan could hear him screwing his silencer into the .44 magnum revolver for the night. "Goodnight," she called, and then she called out the family cautionary adage, "Watch out for the wheelbarrow."

"You too. Goodnight."

Morgan made one last swathe with the sponge and then switched off the kitchen lights. In the study she propped some pillows on the couch and pulled the end table up close. She ran her fingers across the titles of Herrick's art books, finally stopping at a collection of the paintings of Andrew Wyeth. She pulled it down and turned to her favorite painting, "Ground Hog Day 1957." Of all the paintings in the book, it was the most evocative of Herrick. It was a painting of a corner of a kitchen, and out of the mutin sash window there were two logs, one bitten by axe strokes and one sawed. Inside on a bare table was a plate, a coffee cup, a saucer, and a knife. They were white. The table looked as though it had been set for sunlight itself. A long even shadow slashed the wood and the wallpaper. The picture looked the perfect formula for peace, for the solitude that foreshadows some personal revelation. Painted white as prayer, the wood work, the cup,

and the empty plate bespoke a hunger so old the smell of food and drink had gone from it. There was no smell in the picture. No smell of coffee, of warmed linoleum, of damp cuttingboard. It reminded Morgan of Herrick's supplies in the jeep—enough to keep alive in the wilderness for a week.

Suddenly Morgan felt forlorn and afraid. She closed the big book and pulled the light strings and crossed the floorboards to secure the lock and retrieve her pannier from the darkness of the stairwell. She took the stairs two at a time to the guest room. She tried the wall switch but no light came and then she remembered about the wiring and found the candle and the matches on the nightstand, little paper fingers dipped in sulphur, and she struck one and the light bloomed on the ceiling and on Herrick's wife's sock-monkey doll still propped on the pillow. The light flickered on Morgan's nakedness and on the pool of clothes at her ankles, and then steadied when she was safe in her flannel nightgown, the colored embroidery threads strewn over the quilt and the monkey hugged close. She threaded the needle with sea green and the light settled shyly around her wooden hoop and she began stitching an eye where only blank muslin had been before. Slowly, over the blind membrane, she built an iris, pouring her wakefulness into it stitch after stitch. Then she threaded her needle with black for the pupils and heard Herrick coughing in his bedroom and wondered how the gun was pointed. She found gold for the arched brows and heard his muffled footsteps and the sound of retching and moaning and the toilet flushing from the bathroom. Then red thread and silence, and Morgan patiently stitched a smile into the muslin, thinking how she would thread the candle wick next and sew light into the face until the wick

was gone. Then she would gather up the melted wax while it was still warm, molding it to her own face, giving away the last of her features while the light sputtered and died. Little crewel-work flowers and a valentine on the cheek, and she plaited the long blonde yarn of her hair while the Santa Fe Train howled through the town northbound to Denver. By 4:00 a.m. she was wearing the caul of the dream, and light as a sparrow she stepped off the dirt road that led to the Main House of her mother's grandfather's Estate. She walked through the yarrow and wet sage past the old pump to the hitching post, recognizing it as the same post she had tried to tightrope as a little girl. She turned and faced the old barn, locked and string-latched, a suffusion of bluish-gray light on the shingles, green shadow smeared on the hinges and crowded into the slits in the double doors. It was the old barn. There was no mistaking it, for it was here that her mother--or at least the disembodied presence of her mother--said, "I'm not sure, thinking back, that it was my anxiety, not having enough for your brother Herrick to eat, that kept me from the world."

Morgan was fumbling through the keys, the paper labels having gotten all tangled up with the metal. She stopped, for without even going into the barn she had the presentiment that the hay shutes had been blocked, and that there was no unplugging them, no sliding down them as they had done when they were children. Of course she wasn't sure what had blocked them, perhaps lint that the mice had brought in, odd castaway objects mingled with dirt and hay, the hand-me-downs of the pack rats. Nevertheless, she was certain that it was at that moment, for the first time, that she was made aware of the enormous difficulties her mother must have faced in order that her older brother

might have enough to eat. She turned to her mother—or the presence of her mother—and expressed her amazement and concern.

"Yes," continued her mother, "if it were not for the tremendous responsibility of having to feed Herrick, I am sure none of this would have happened."

"But, Mother, it was thirst."

Standing thus by the barn, Morgan suddenly had the transcendent sensation of being the bluish-gray light, tingling in the sage, winding through the stalls where the ghosts of horses stamped, flicking away flies, waiting, which is what horses do more than anything, for the dank grain, the salty halters. For it was with the fluidity of light that in her mind she went up the road to the Main House, slid through the shutters into the living room where the furniture had been piled and covered with old sheets. And it was with the softness of light that her fingers grazed the keys of the player piano, the G where the ivory had chipped, soaking the dust up from her fingers into the mote that was herself, for she was a mere shaft, dusty with memories when the sun fell on her from somewhere, a black funnel indistinct from ordinary darkness when it did not.

Of course, this statement of her mother's was quite a surprise. That so much could be reduced in her mother's mind to the difficulty of feeding Herrick, well, it was a bewildering thesis, and Morgan could not but think it another glaring example of her mother's feeble powers of analysis to attribute to the appetite of her adopted older brother the collapse of an estate within her own soul, and of course all the other things—closed shutters, shrouded furniture, stalls emptied of horses—that were attendant on the collapse. But then, she reasoned,

her mother often said things that were so preposterous that they couldn't be salvaged by reason or feeling: statements that bloomed unexpectedly, like Fireweed.

There she was, picking through the keys, turning over the faded labels, "Maid's Cabin," "Coal House," "Barn"--Ah! the barn, but it was the old skeleton key, and she wanted the padlock key. When she found it, among the keys that had lost their labels, and sprang the lock, she became excited and afraid, for the years that had separated the opening of the barn door seemed more ominous to her than had the distance, when she was a child tightrope walker, between the hitching post and the ground.

The door opened with a sharp cry, and three moths tumbled into flight, and she entered. When her eyes had adjusted to the darkness and her nose to the salt-leather and ammonia smells, she was relieved to find everything as it had been, the buckets hanging from their hooks, the pack saddles wrapped in gunny sacks, the bailing wire wadded up under the grain bins. For an instant she thought the horses might be out to pasture, or that she might turn again and see her brother running down the road, his legs churning like beater-blades; that they might have planned a ride to Captain's Rock of Gem Lake. She gave the low horse whistle her mother had taught her. The sound startled her.

The three notes of the whistle made her mistrust the fact that she was alone, and knowing, as she did, that in all dreams there are unseen listeners; and trespassing, as she was, with stolen keys, she felt more urgently the need to sweep the corners for their eyes and signal threads. She mounted the stairs gingerly, and the gooseflesh was all

over her, and she thought of her mother's grandfather's hired hand, who slept in the garage and pushed the pedal of the whetstone all day like a spinner, sharpening the axes and shovels.

She gained the top of the stairs and threw open the hay window. She knew she had come for some treasure, something to keep, to remember; a symbol, perhaps, of Herrick's thirst. The gray light flooded the loft. There was nothing blocking the hay shutes--she had grown up, could not slide down them, that was all. She rummaged through the harness, found a broken singletree, an old horse collar turned porcelain with dust. Where had they put it?

She found it behind an enormous heap of rusted box springs in the corner. It was an old harp with a woman's head carved on the front. The gold leaf was cracked, milky with dust, and the spiders, as though to repair it, had spun their traps in the strings. The face was stony, slightly mad, an innocent turned wood for gazing on the forbidden.

Morgan dragged the old harp out of the tangle of springs, old bailing wire of the hired man's bed. Stirring a cloud of groggy moths, she lugged it to the open hay window, fastened it with harness reins, and lowered it down.

The moths followed, like angels at a resurrection.

Tangled with the threads on the bed were harlequin patches of red, yellow, blue and green from the stained glass in the south window. Morgan thrust her wrists into them and they were hot. She found the monkey by her pillow and used its red sock-toe mouth to soak up her sobs. Fragments of her dream, red, yellow, blue and green, winked at her through the semi-darkness of her tears. The monkey smelled of time, like the quilts at the Main House when they were first taken from the

closets in early summer. Maybe the monkey smell had fomented the dream imagery of grief and loss. Morgan knew that dreams are never generous, that darkness was what Herrick strained his blood against. The quilts were hot; she threw them off and made for the bathroom. She knew Herrick was up since there was an empty insulin bottle on the vanity, so she dowsed her face quickly in the sink and put on her same old dirty jeans and red shirt. She couldn't find her shoes, so she went downstairs barefoot.

Herrick was coming in through the front door.

"Where have you been?"

"Where have I been? I've been up for hours. I roused myself at zero dark-thirty, went to Shop-go for my morning cake doughnut, took a drive around the courthouse and went to the parts store when it opened for an air filter for the jeep. When did you get off the rack?"

"Just now. I had a bad dream."

"Well, did you snap your underwear?"

"Snap my underwear? Jesus, Herrick, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, in my opinion, a man can always tell what kind of day he's going to have by how hard he snaps his underwear elastic in the morning. A real healthy vigorous snap on both sides so it stings will guarantee him a good day; a feeble weak snap on one side and the whole damn day will be mediocre."

"If I tried to snap my underwear, it would either disintegrate or fall down. But you must have snapped the hell out of your underwear. What's the plan?" Morgan wandered into the kitchen.

"I thought we'd go to Raton."

"Raton? What for?"

"Oh, there's a little antique store I'd like to check into."

"What about packing?"

"Forget packing."

"Forget packing? But Herrick, don't you want to move that stuff up to Denver? Don't you want to go up and live with Mom someday so you don't have to drive 100 miles to Pueblo to get dialyzed?"

"Nope. I don't."

"Jesus, Herrick, what are we going to do today, unpack?"

"No. We can take all that workroom stuff up to store in the carriage house behind Dad's old shop. I've already unpacked what I'll really need to tinker around here now and then."

"But what about Mom? How's she going to feel about you living down here with nobody to look after you?"

"I've got all the neighbors. You've met Margaret, lives across the street with her Scottie dog?"

"The old lady with the Wedgewood collection? Herrick, she's older than Prospect Mountain. How's she going to keep the walk shoveled, feed the fire, or jump start your jeep for the drive to Pueblo in the winter? She has trouble putting in her false teeth, never mind storm windows."

"I'm not helpless, you know. It's summer. By Christmas I'll have the house sold. Besides, I don't think I could stand living with Mom and her constant ragging. Storm windows, ha! Mom wouldn't buy me any last winter; I practically froze my can."

"Well, Herrick, she supports you completely as it is. She's got rocks but she's no Stonehenge. She's no Easter Island."

"Well, she may not be Easter Island, but she sure has the money to go flying down there to look around."

"Well, why shouldn't she travel? It's her money, not ours."

"It just makes me so damn mad." Herrick kicked the footstool, stomped over to the stove, and slammed the copper teakettle so hard on the burner that it sang without being hot. "All I have to do is think about it and my blood boils hotter than a popcorn fart."

Morgan remembered waiting in the car in the freezing snow by the Passenger Pick-up at the Denver Airport. It was always a thrill to see her mother's tall aristocratic figure, a healthy tan showing above her tweed coat. On the way home, her mother told her all about the statues at Easter Island, and the best thing about them to Morgan was the fact that they faced inland--not out to sea. No man is an island, she thought, but if he tries to be one anyway, he better build his gods so they face they enemy.

"But Herrick--"

"Oh, for crying in a bucket, Morgan, leave me alone." Herrick reached for the bottles on the kitchen table.

"What are those pills?"

"Well, the white ones make me pee, the tan ones make me shit, and the yellow ones are to keep my heart from stopping. They bind the potassium."

Morgan watched Herrick limp over to the sink and swig the water for his pills straight from the faucet.

"Do your legs hurt?"

"Oh, a little. By the time I get off the machine, my body is so cramped it's practically fossilized. Sometimes my hands cramp up too,

Jeese-o, like those dinosaurs in the Museum of Natural History." Herrick made his fingers into a shape like a small garden rake. "Holy Monument, it hurts. The machine drains all the sodium out of the muscle tissue. Afterwards, you feel like a sucked scorpion."

Morgan was still thinking about the tall elegiac statues of Easter Island, carved of volcanic tufa, each leveling its monolithic scrutiny on the windswept grasslands. On the backs of those that had fallen face down towards the inland there was not a trace or wrinkle of lost dignity. They had simply transferred their gazes earthwards. Looking at Herrick, she realized that it was not always the sea that swells and diminishes the shoreline. Herrick was tethered to a tide all his own. His Easters came three times a week now, the tides pulled out of his body as though through the eyes of some strange pillared being. Dialysis really was a kind of redemption, and Herrick was born to be redeemed, first by her parents, then by insulin, and now by the machine.

Morgan knew that her mother would be dismayed by Herrick's capricious change of plans, but that finally she would be unable to stop Herrick from doing whatever he wanted. Her mother had always been wealthy, and had always nurtured in her children that peculiar dependency for which wealth was the only cure. In her, there was a fragile balance between an essential generosity and an inbred inability to abandon that generosity to the gratitude of her children. What seemed to be a lack of trust on her mother's part was really just a fear of loneliness, the loneliness of corner cupboards full of expensive china and monogramed silver, the loneliness she must have felt as an only child hunting Indian Paintbrush at the Estate, dream-

ing, perhaps, of the romantic playmate she would finally marry.

Perhaps it was in the first shadow of disillusionment with that elated loneliness and romance that her mother had decided to adopt Herrick. She had no doubt assumed that he would feel as she did, that when he grew up he would take things like brass candle snuffers and egg coddlers for granted; that he wouldn't pack and unpack for impending journeys, or have on hand enough guns and supplies to fight a small foreign war. Morgan knew that her mother would keep on paying for Herrick, always accompanying her checks with the gentle criticism and suggestions that boiled his blood to a steam toxic enough to warrant dialysis in its own right.

Morgan poured herself some coffee and traipsed around the house looking for her shoes. She found them in the shop, parked neatly beside the boxes Herrick had removed from the U-Haul.

"What are we going to do about the rented truck?"

"Oh, I'll take this load up to Denver to store in Mom's carriage house and explain my change of plans."

"I suppose this means you will stay in Pueblo's dialysis ward?" Morgan trailed her shoes into the kitchen by their strings and plopped them down by the kitchen table.

"Yep."

"Do you think they might have any doll shoes at the antique store?"

"Stella's got everything. I'm sure she'll have shoes. Is that what that bag of cotton in the back of the jeep is for?"

"I'm making another doll. So far, all I've bot is the head and body. I've got tubes for the legs but they're not stuffed yet. I'll

show you." Morgan took the stairs to the bedroom and swept the doll parts off the quilt into her pannier.

"What should I call her when she's finished?" She brought in a torso and head, its embroidered face frozen in a cheerful smile.

"Jeese-o, I don't know."

"Just making her hair the other day took two skeins of yellow yarn. But her eyes are green, the color of lichen."

"Name her Lichen, then."

"Lichen? But that's a mold that grows on the rocks. Her eyes are the color of verdigris, you know, brass rust."

"Name her Verdigris, then."

"Verdigris? I never thought of naming her Verdigris. Do you think it's a name that will scare children?"

"Why would it?"

"O.K. Her name's Verdigris. Let's go."

Morgan grabbed her doll legs to stuff during the drive to Raton. She laced her sandals and scrounged for the scissors and thread in the bottom of her pannier.

Outside the sun cast a chalky light on the spruce tree. Morgan remembered to avoid stepping on the railroad ties, which were sticky as birdlime with hot tar. In the glove box of the jeep she found a pair of expensive army sunglasses that Herrick reserved for guests and when she put them on the lawn and house leaped away from her, tinged with olive. Herrick waited, listening to the staccato idle of the jeep before he burned rubber out of the drive. He made a U-Turn around the median and as he headed down the hill Morgan caught a last glimpse of the house, framed by the canvas, the U-Haul propped on its

hitch in the drive and the spruce turned verdigris through her glasses and the scratched plastic of the window; verdigris, the green mold of nostalgia on treasured metals.

At the corner of Colorado and Commercial Street the house slid out of view and they headed down I-25, the old Santa Fe Trail, towards Papa Wooton's Toll Road, already bloodied with the red dirt of Raton Pass.

"What are we going to get at the antique store?"

"Oh, some things."

"What?"

"I don't know, but I do know that whatever it is, it's there and I'll get it."

"I had a dream last night."

"Of what?"

"Of the barn, and the Main House at the Estate."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I found a harp. It was the spring because the yarrow was out."

"A harp? What deep psychological significance could you possibly ascribe to a damned harp. Did it have tits or something?"

"Tits?" They laughed. "Well, almost, but that's your dream. No, it was Dad's harp, the one in the poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. He used to recite it to us. He recited it to me the night he died, in that dying voice he had that sounded like he was under water. You remember.

> There sat my mother
> With the harp against her shoulder
> Looking nineteen

And not a day older,

A smile about her lips
And a light about her head
And her hands in the harp strings
Frozen dead.

You do remember it, don't you? The harp had a woman's head, and the mother's little boy was starving, and they burned the chair, and she wove clothes for a king's son for him all night Christmas Eve?"

"Yep. I remember."

"I've always wondered why he liked it. I asked him once, and he said it was because of the rhythms, as though a shutter were loose, flapping in the wind. He recited 'The Listener' too, and 'The Forty Singing Seamen' by Alfred Noyes, but he ran out of wind when he got to 'Casey at the Bat' and he fell asleep."

"Weird." Herrick struck the flint of his silver lighter and brought the flame to his mouth. Clouds of smoke billowed into the windshield from his cigarette. A sign said, "Welcome to the Land of Enchantment."

From the top of the pass, Raton looked no more than a cross-hatched reddish grid in the valley. New Mexico was enchanting, vales of mesquite and pinon; forest-green florettes in a reddish-brown tapestry. But when they turned down lower, the whole vista was spoiled by the gigantic letters on the hillside west of town.

"Why do they label the town like that? Are they trying to make it look like a tombstone?"

"No. It's just the only thing the goddamn Mexicans know how to spell: the name of their hometown. At night it's a lighthouse for truckers."

Herrick pulled into Stella's, cut the ignition, and waited for the

last sputtering peroration of jeep before he grabbed his cigarettes and swung himself out. They tinkled through the glass door, rigged with chandelier prisms knotted on lace.

"Hello? Stella?"

"Oh, Herrick, it's you." The voice came from behind an antique tailor's dummy that was decked out for a wedding and covered with harness.

"Stella, I came for that ivory-handled pistol. I brought my little sister Morgan."

Stella stuck her head out and nodded. Morgan nodded too. People always stared at her a little longer when Herrick introduced her as his little sister. She was almost a foot taller. She walked cautiously around a table piled with blue china to see what Stella was doing.

"Do you think you might have any doll shoes?"

Stella was sorting a box of large metal records from a music box. She indicated a chest of drawers with her chin. "Doll stuff is in there. A rich Texan rummaged through it yesterday, but I don't think she got the shoes."

Morgan went to the chest and lost herself sifting through the little ironed piles of lace collars, monogramed hankeys and christening hats. Crocheted antimacassars pressed flast as Columbine, old rolls of hand-made lace; she even found a small disembodied arm with a pop-bead socket. In the third drawer was the perfect shoe, a ballerina's slipper, but there was only one. She took it to her panniard and tried it on the foot of her doll. The stuffing bulged prettily. She would change the doll's name to La Cenisa. One shoe was enough. She found dddd Herrick at the register, squinting into his tiny pistol and spinning

the chamber like a kaleidoscope.

"How are you going to pay for it?"

"Oh, I have ways."

"What's it for?"

"I've always wanted it."

"Is it real ivory? How can you tell?"

"The grain. Besides, I know when it was made."

Stella pushed her way through the dutch door to the counter. "Did you bring the watch? Let's see."

Herrick unhooked the gold clasp on his vest and pulled out their great-grandfather's watch. The elaborate incised initials seemed to bite into the light.

Stella looked down her nose through her half glasses, and her pince-nez chain glittered and swayed over the register. "It's a fair trade, certainly." She looked up. "Want a receipt?"

"No. But Morgan found a shoe. How much?"

"Never mind the shoe. It's on the house."

"Gee, thanks."

They walked back into the sunlight. The door made a little shattering sound and clicked shut. Herrick stabbed the key into the ignition and pumped viciously. Morgan heard the ruthless firing-squad sound; a soul rising up in the engine.

"What's the matter?"

"Give me a break, Morgan."

Morgan reached for the solace of the doll's leg in her panniard. She fingered the red stitching on the tiny leather sole and watched the sunlight travel across the facets of the rhinestone ankle button.

When the jeep hit the dirt road she looked inquiringly at Herrick but his face was set.

"I've got to shoot off some steam."

"Where?"

"One of Daddy Wooton's little gullies. The old Toll Road."

"Herrick, you didn't have to trade the watch."

"God damn her. Do you think I can live on the measly two bits she sends trickling down here when the mood strikes her?"

"You mean Mom? Did you have to get that ivory pistol?"

"You think I would have traded that watch for the hell of it? I've been planning this for a long time. Herrick McLeod might be content to let his life tick quietly away hooked to a goddamn fob in a blood shop, but not James Andrew Weybrecht. Weybrecht's got plans for that little pistol."

Herrick jammed the gear shift into second; the red dust bloomed around them.

"Shit."

Herrick veered off the dirt road and yanked the keys out of the ignition. "You ever shot off a Thompson sub-machine gun?"

The red dust clotted and sank.

"Jesus, Herrick."

Herrick heaved a violin case out from under the seat and slammed the jeep door so hard behind him that Morgan winced, forgetting it was w ww canvas. Without looking back, he trudged painfully out of sight into the green of pinon and sage. The door yawned on its hinges.

Morgan felt dumb and small. How could she have thought that one shoe was enough? It wasn't. She sat waiting for the deafening explo-

sions, wishing that Herrick would come back so that they could go to Stella's and comb the chest for the other shoe. How could one shoe be enough? Herrick had parked the jeep crooked and it irked her to see the door hanging open like the tongue of a suppliant. It upset her sense of symmetry. Stella hadn't even told them for sure that there wasn't another shoe. Then the sounds came, yesterday's first raindrops on the windshield, the faint stutter of bullets filtered through the silencer.

In the afternoons at the Estate, she and Herrick would cuddle together on the wicker porch swing like fattened emperors, sharing grapes from lunch, watching the jagged lightening rip through the curtains of rain like pinking shears, randomly sacrificing here or there one of a repeating pattern of pines. They counted the seconds before the thunder, trying to read the sky as though it were the score of some terrible music.

At night, the coyotes would circle her bedroom keening orison. It was the sound that made her vulnerable, the plangent wailing breaking on the old quilts and soaking her fear. In the morning, the orphan bleating of the goat would blend with a trace odor of camphor and she would wake to the staccato pealing of flattened bells, a screen door slamming somewhere in the Main House.

Morgan could not move. This was it. Her fear had curled around her and turned gelatinous. Her forehead had stuck to her knees with sweat; her arms had fused with her shins; and her feet, stuck up on the dash, had become an amalgam of bone and the metal of the hand grip. She stared into the red of her shirt as into the walls of a womb, and her blinking became systolic, a spasmodic fluttering of wings still wet

in a chrysalis. She listened to the bullets, trying to make out their rhythm, sometimes a little scattering of sixteenth notes, sometimes an even slapping. She wanted to run into the fire like a child into a turning jumprope:

One for the money
Two for the nurse
Three for the lady
With the alligator purse

One for the money
Two for the show
Three to get ready
And four to...

Nothing. She pulled her forehead off her knees like an old band-aid. After a silence of sage, Herrick limped towards her. He threw the briefcase onto the hood of the jeep and the sound echoed through the metal like a recess bell. He took the gun apart and methodically put the pencil pieces inside. "Click," "Click," and then he heaved it towards the back seat and followed it in on the momentum. Herrick had always known how to make noises in his throat like a jeep, and Morgan wondered if he made them now, the jeep turning gracefully as though guided by giant fingers down the red road to the highway.

At the top of the pass, Herrick pulled over and stopped. "You drive. I have a goddamned headache." He lugged himself toward her, forcing her out the canvas and around to his side.

Morgan sewed the road shut behind her. Past Herrick's profile, defeated by pain and exhaustion, the mesquite was faded green calico, a fabric turned inside out and blurred by the heat. She wanted him home before the rain, home, helping him down out of the jeep, home, over the tar-baked pilings, up the wooden stairs with their half-disintegrated carpet.

"Let me take off your shoes."

Herrick was flopped over on the bed, all the stuffing slapped flat in him or sunk to his feet. When she pulled the laces, they popped open like the seams of dried pods, swollen with edema.

"What time is your dialysis tomorrow?"

"Noon. Pueblo."

"Do they know you're coming?"

"Yes. I called."

"Pills?"

"Nope."

"I'll wake you at dinner." Morgan turned again at the door. "Do you think you'll ever be Herrick again, or just James Andrew Weybrecht from now on?"

"Leave me alone, Morgan, I'm beat."

Morgan went downstairs and dialed the phone in the sun room.

"Stella?"

"No, Stella's gone for the day."

"Oh."

"Message?"

"No thanks. Later."

She found some meat in the freezer and set it out on the cutting-board to thaw, and then she headed out the back door up Simpson's Rest. It was a steep climb. The sky was black but there would be no healing rain, and she wanted to put the town below her while Herrick slept, watch the clouds brood and scatter before the dusk.

The rock itself was an old Indian ambush, carved up with hearts and initials, and Simpson was laid out beside it under a concrete slab

with a bronze marker.

Morgan sat on him. Scattered in the valley below her were the baled houses of Trinidad. Morgan wondered that it was a town at all. The rains were scant rations, hoarded by the yucca for their pink blossoms in spring. She could see the church, the museum, the courthouse, and a sprinkling of colored roofs. One day a great tongue of water would come again, swamping the town, carving new mesas, lapping up the foothills and sloshing against the Sangre de Cristos. Then he would say, "The days of biscuits and hard tack are over," and they would laugh, the house bobbing and creaking and the light bulb swinging in circles from its cord over the kitchen table. And then they would hold up glasses full of yellow wine to toast their opulence, armed and alive, with enough supplies to last out the flood.

But until then, Herrick's secret pile of sweepings would lie ignored under the threadbare carpet of the town. She would have to keep searching for the parts to him, holding out now and then a bottlecap of rubber soldier. Until then, there was her mother to think of, and getting the watch from Stella's. Tomorrow, his wrist threaded in the red strings of the dialysis machine, he would dry out again like the prairie after an afternoon rain, and when he swore from the cramps, she would lay his legs out and press them against the sheets, pressing his blood back in because she knew that for now he would keep better that way and because that was the nature of redemption.