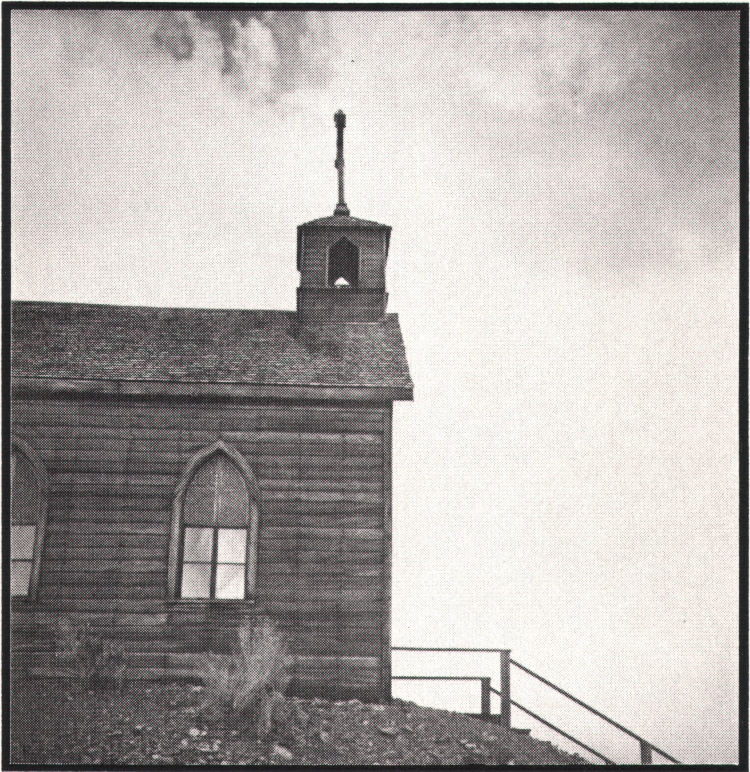


THE
RED



Cedar Review

VOLUME 32, NUMBER 1

THE
RED
Cedar
ReView

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This Issue is
DEDICATED

to the men who started
The Red Cedar Review

jim CASH
walt LOCKWOOD
thomas M c G U A N E



The
r e d
Cedar Review
volume 32 #1

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POETRY EDITOR

Laura Klynstra

CONSULTING EDITORS

Heather Abner

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Diane Wakoski

PHOTOGRAPHY

Robert Turney

BOOK DESIGN

Laura Klynstra

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Turkey Sandwiches

rob KEAST

— for Frank O'Hara

Here our eyes have
 Mouths
 Letting us take in
 Sandstone cliff walls/that rise 70 feet
 Straight up from the water; we sit
 At sandstone shelves—above
 The lake, flat like enormous oak
 Banquet tables.
 Here our eyes have
 Teeth
 We chew the mash of rocks
 The chunky, rust-orange carrots and
 The white potato stones.

Our eyes have throats
 We swallow the waves of bubbling soup
 And, past the spread of beach, we munch
 On stretched pines as though they are
 Stalks of celery.

All of this passes through our mouths,
 Through our teeth, our throats.
 The walls of our stomachs
 Are expanded,
 Pushed outward by the stones
 We are first-time hikers of Lake Superior.
 It is this eating
 That has made us so hungry.

Neighborhood

travis PINTER

We used to watch the black lab
streak through our yards,
dipping in and out of ditches—
like a brush—
at the edges of our road.
Cutting back and forth,
tongue swinging to the four-beat steps,
the creature swept across every blade
of grass, shading yards
dark in the dusk, spreading its ebony fur
until it clung like paint to the foliage.

It slept on our doorsteps
and each of us, in turn, cradled it,
put out blankets, biscuits,
stroked the marvelous fur
until slumber covered us,
running wet up our arms and necks,
filling our ears with silence,
pouring down from our foreheads,
over our faces,
thick enough to close our eyelids
when it met them.

Every morning it was gone,
leaving us dry, alone,
stumbling from our houses,
meeting one another with sidelong glances.
We entered our separate vehicles,
pulled out of our driveways in every
different direction,
stretching the land between us,
straining the hub
with our distance.

A Testarosa with foreign plates
blasted through one night before sunset,
turned the lab into cold fur on hot asphalt

never slowing down. We rushed to the dog,
spread like spokes around it—
the ribs sunken instead of
rising, four legs quiet and
without purpose. Something immeasurable
had been lost in translation
from breathing to dying,
replacing the wet animal eyes
with a dry, white stare.

We struggled for it,
wedged our hands beneath it,
lifted it off the road to find it weightless,
rising from us, spreading and
thinning in the breeze until
the breeze took it completely,
leaving us nothing but each other, converging,
hands and fingers intertwining,
the wheel collapsing to its center.

Late-Night Groceries / Let's Call This The Scarf

matthew THORBURN

—for H.K.

You buy your soda one bottle at a time
so that each night the pretty girl
behind the counter, short-haired and bored

and tonight reading *People*
magazine, will be the last person
you see before you go to bed.

•

Tells you she's from Italy.
When she asks where you're from you stretch
out your hand to make a map of Michigan,
point to the center of your palm. *Here.*

She slips off her sandal,
puts her foot up on the counter.
I'm from here, pointing
to the slow curve of her arch.

Says her name's Maria Isabella,
after the false saint in her grandmother's village
whose stigmata turned out to be papercuts.

Then she puts her shoe back on. What else
is there to say? She smiles. saying nothing,

saying something.

•

Turns out she has a boyfriend.
Wouldn't you know it? They walk
down the sidewalk arm in arm,

though when she sees you and stops
to talk she lets go of his arm, does not introduce
him or speak to him. He stands quietly,
looking up and looking down
and examining the laces of his shoes.

You look at her, at him, back at her,
but no introductions are forthcoming.

Poor boy, he doesn't even have a name.

•

What do you remember most?
How about her scarf,
pink and gauzy, wound once around her neck
and trailing down over her shoulder.

She wore it with a black dress,
seamless it seemed and without sleeves,
her thick-soled shoes putting her an inch
or two taller than you.

And there you are—smile now,
she's watching—in your jeans and t-shirt,
driving a car with a piece of plywood
for a front grill, hoping it doesn't overheat.

Something You Won't Want To Hear

matthew THORBURN

The figurines on the bathroom shelf
skip a step closer to the edge
each time the front door slams.
Sooner or later they're going
to take the big jump.

Like a married couple I knew.
One day the husband comes home,
says, "You're not going to like what I've got to tell you."
Next day he's gone with half the furniture
to a new apartment and a new woman
with four previous marriages
that hang around her neck
like a constellation of cubic zirconium.

Her husband's no longer her husband.
She doesn't know where to go, so she stays.
No proud way for her to leave this house.
It's best just to stumble, trip, do whatever
has to be done to get out. Slam the door.
Let the figurines fall where they may.

Lake Rituals

olivia v. A M B R O G I O

The autumn people are dancing on the lake
their sharp feet cut waves
and burn blue shadows
on the restless water.

Refuge

anita SKEEN

—for Marcia Aldrich

From the bookstore
where tonight women's voices
read their lives into poems

between New Releases and Cookbooks,
we walk in the January night,
to the parking lot,

snow flickering about our faces,
flurries chaotic, lost
from their blizzard, frantic for

the pack. Cars zip by
like assassins from Star Wars
and in each deadly beam white crystals

ricochet jubilant and sharp.
We drive on the main street, then turn
up yours, Orchard, where winter freezes

the trees into icy lattice,
limbs lit from within, a tinkle
like expensive glass in the still

night. In the front yard of one house
bizarre snow sculptures
stagger toward the street

and we back up the truck for a better look.
They glow separate and cold.
Five blocks later we pull into your driveway,

your house dark and your family asleep,
snow still churning in my headlight beams.
I turn off the lights and we sit

in the warm womb of the cab
talking like it is not dark, like I am not
on my way home, like there is time

to say it all, words loose like confetti
in a Christmas paperweight, stories
drifting against both doors.

Walking the Boundaries

anita SKEEN

Here, by the discarded tarp,
the tire snared in thorns,
the carcass of a wringer washer,
I start. I go north. It is hot,
it is quiet, though I know the trees
hum with things I don't hear,
hope not to startle. I tug
a bleached limb from the brush, snap it
for a staff as I enter the woods.
In the weeds, movement, and
a black hose, rubbery and wriggling,
disappears beneath twigs. I keep
walking, duck in among the alder
and cedar where shade
soaks me like a wet cloth.
Now the trickle of the creek,
the nostril tickle of damp moss,
the slippery stones. A lattice
of broken branches makes a trap
of the stream. Even in the driest July
in ten years, a still pool,
clear water. I dip in my hands,
bring them up to my face,
drip from the creek bed
into the ferns, their fronds
gushing a stiff fountain.
On up the hill, the surveyor's
stake, pink and orange ribbon
startling as flame,
another fire, then another,
past the spiney holly,
unaware it's out of season,
down to the rotting cedar stump,
pungent and primordial.
I stop, turn toward the south:
the lake crashes in through the gap
between trees, blue splashes
my eyes. My hands float
to the air like wings.

The Treeless Pears

steve LAPINSKY

The young girl at the marketplace,
on the sly, stuffs a couple of
unripe pears underneath her shirt
and makes off with them.

She is trying to be like her
sister, who stands talking to a
boy across the street,
who is also young, but whose
breath seems to turn his hormones
into a vortex,

a funnel cloud that touches down
and razes the area
of her supple frame.

But this young girl only sees
this boy, who is an odd entity
to her like a freak of nature
like the tasty pears.

She wants to sample the jaundiced
meat of his face, and feel
the velour coat of his cheek,
like the skins of the fruit
against her chest,
but the boy hands her sister
his sweater, they round the
corner and enter a thicket
on the edge of town,
the young girl watching
with her treeless pears.

Collusion

joanne H A Y H U R S T

This tale begins with scratching on the ceiling.
We listen from our bed with open eyes
and hear the digging grind of the intruder.
At nesting time red squirrels have been known
to rip apart pink insulation, wires,
whatever they can pull from padded bones
of human homes.

Your bare back's warm and damp;
I nestle into you. A jagged scrape
goes deep, startles us upright. The rodent's
tearing down the house. So now, it's war.

Outside the bedroom window late that day,
I spot the squirrel stationed on the oak.
She's staring at a small hole in the siding,
the front door to her home above my head.
She's out. She's left her young behind. I call;
you run for boards and nails while I reach toward
the rot through which she dug her hole. She screams
a squirrel's bark alarm, leaps, flies at me
arms stretched out like Jesus Christ, drops,
crushes spring leaves of wisteria.

stone-still, listen to the woods for some direction. We can't see. What's clear is that we're here with hammer, nails and bad intentions. I think about her nest and try to find a way to rescue babies, dismiss it as a waste of time for there's no room in war for sentiment.

Wait. I hear a scrape
on bark. She's heading up. Oh, can't you see?

We strike: I hand you nails. You hammer shut the tomb. The squirrel's bark's percussive; she flicks her tail but changes nothing.

Then we're gone.

She tears the board with claws and teeth until
they're dull. She rests, then tries again, again.
She keeps this up for three whole days then stops.

Beneath our pink Ralph Lauren sheets, your back
is damp and fits my belly well, but when
we touch, eyes still closed, the palest stink
of rotting flesh drifts down from the ceiling.

The Blue Shield

tim LANE

The blue light of the television is as hostile
to me
as the relentless assault of heat and noise in the shop
is to him—
or the cold steel and frozen pipes
at winter's construction site—
but if he has his way I will never know
the drone of the line and the clash of machinery
in the factory—
(a seething hive)—
or the wind's cat-o-nine-tails
in a trench with busted pipe and ice
beneath the skeleton of a high-rise
which creaks beneath
an exhausted sky. I remember tapping crumpled flannel
on a meaty shoulder as a small child while he dozed through
the evening news—
as persistent as a press
or a drill.

First his arms and legs relax,
and then the eyes retreat, with their dim anticipation
of dinner, while murder and unemployment rates soar, and
guerrillas from
Nicaragua plan to immigrate to Flint
to work for GM, and the Colonel discloses
his original recipe of eleven herbs
and spices.

This,
he claims,
is an acquired skill that no apprentice could ever learn—
the ability to outdistance the needling pain of exhaustion,
to let the day's weight drain through the body
like a sieve—

(the evening news like an absurd lullaby
bathing him in the blueness of snow).

This is one speciality—
the ability to withdraw
into his favorite chair and surround himself

with the blue glare
of the TV—
the blue halo of exhaustion that a young child struggles
to penetrate,
like a weary courier traveling miles through storm
to announce left-overs
for dinner—
 (while the world burns out like a welder's torch
with an empty tank).
This is a gift—
his exhaustion ensuring
that I will never be
as tired—
this blue shield
that a teenager bludgeons
with a hammer
at the end of each day
with unreasonable
demands.

Driving Bullock Home From Work

john DAVIS

In my Dodge Dart, Bullock kicks off his purple
spray-painted boots, keeps his lower lip
plugged with chew, uses *Killer*
and *Dude* in most sentences, pulls a Band-Aid
tin from his coat, wants me to smoke
ragweed, his greasy, home grown ragweed—
smells like clams, wouldn't keep a striped eel
stoned three minutes.

He rolls up his window, rolls a joint and smokes,
his thin arms rowing imaginary oars, rowing,
bracing his feet on the dashboard, rowing,
says it keeps him stoned, his cheeks
glowing like rose dianthus.

I shift up the expressway, Bullock yelling
Stroke, Dude, Stroke—a sculler rowing out stiffness
from lifting three ton's weight of garage doors,
his brown hair bouncing off his nose.

Where are the perfect circles
a sculler's oars leave on water?

I want to see Bullock's perfect circles on expressway
asphalt between trucks and BMWs.

Sea Level

gerry L a F E M I N A

Because the body is mostly water we suffer gravity:
a pregnant woman's ankles swell
when standing long; the wounded man in the alley bleeds;
we experience tides as if the moon
dictated more than the sea's
insatiable taste for sand.

And use my knuckles as an abacus to count
my visits to the ocean—
I blame myself not Freddy Clark in his dad's four door Chrysler
driving some girl to a state park

after closing

Friday nights.

Saturday's stories:

All the same.

He's still telling them,

and I'm still listening, the words remaining long in the hollow shells of mornings
after I cursed him—

seeing a woman I wrote poems for
in his back seat.

That night I climbed the ladder of a lifeguard chair and chose
the maudlin canvas the constellations painted on the waves.
Two hours later I was naked and treading water,
wading...

How common.

More often I rise above sea level,
shedding myself of the undertow. At five,
I raced my building's elevator to the eighth floor,
up one more team of stairs to the roof. Hide-and-seek
among its congregation of aerial antennae,
behind the ventilation shafts. We played everyday;

From that height, I could watch the street:
stickball, mail deliveries, Loretta
walking the block to join me for a game of super hero-
and-the-saved. Our curiosity a kind of desire.

•

In school I'd sneak to the roof,
and study trigonometry in the sine curve pattern

a Super Ball thrown to the street would make:

bouncing skyward, a bright rubber sphere, the way the sun caught it
with a glove of brilliance... I'd lose it
high above Eighteenth Street on clear days

tobacco smoke rallying its upward spiral:
a spirit like the ghosts of word problems
erased from the board: *If sea level increases*
one foot per day...

•

Because the body is mostly water a man falling fourteen stories
strikes the sidewalk like a wet sponge, bouncing once,
twice on the concrete.

That's me gawking from the street. Seventeen.
I hadn't heard a thing but had to explain
to the police why my head was down
while I walked,

Why I wasn't in school.

One cop laughed,

All you kids,

depressed and tough.

Stupid.

I bet you wish you were that stiff.

Shit, he was twice your age.

You kids: all dopes.

Shaking the Coke can in his hand,
he scanned my answers one last time
before telling me to beat it. He must be a detective by now
or retired.

Or dead—
some stray bullet while enjoying the ripe gallery of family life
with a day off at Rockaway Beach
when three guys got into a fight over a woman or a remark.
Which one had the gun...

•

On yesterday's news flood victims rowed boats
along Oak Street, Stuart Avenue. Volunteers
with sand bags by the river bank.

A morning later: silence

followed by the shine of a sump pump running, the *slosh* of boots

and damp jeans through ankle-deep living rooms, the occasional expletive
while the river sleeps with the unease of a newborn.

•

Somewhere someone is drowning
and someone else is breaking surface. It's coming up for air

I remember. Three, maybe four,
I'd been jumped from behind
by the tide;

I would have given a pocketful of sand dollars,
my imagined pirate's gold,
to stand with the breakers bowing at my ankles:
Toddler Neptune.

Instead, I crawled the linoleum of broken shells
coughing salt water; crawled past a construction crew of brothers
excavating tunnels for their cars,
young hands steering them through sandy highways; crawled

The brunette girl who could have been Loretta,
her ponytail damp, stringy, and barnacled to her back.
She stared and hugged her Barbie close.

•

Even these are acts of love:

I wanted to dive into the bay after a woman said *no*.
I was tying my wrists together when I was discovered
on the docks by Battery Park;

I once climbed seven stories
by fire escape onto the roof of a walk-up because of *yes*.

By then I knew the difference
between love and desire,
knew the two met somewhere:
a hormonal horizon that I can't see even with hindsight.

•

When the water bursts, it's time.

And to water we'll return

go under and feel the pressure in our lungs,
almost libidinal. Listen to the sea:

I want. I want. I want

In bathrooms all over the country salt water
gossip echoes in conch shells; even far from the coast
they know the stories: the dead lovers forever dancing on the ballroom
of the Titanic. She wears a gown of sea weed,

and his eyes glow

phosphorous as innuendo,

and intentions.

The sun fires just beyond the horizon. First light
far to the East because the earth is mostly water.
High tide and low tide exchange shifts;

already old men with metal detectors clutter the shore
seeking some pirate treasure that's slipped through the pockets of the sea,
a declasped bracelet or an excommunicated earring, but they're lucky
if they find dimes from the years of their birth. Look,
one of them is now on his knees. I can't see
what he lifts to this infantile sunlight
before surrendering it, indifferent.

Only memories.

Those bottle cap and quarter beeps.

Peregrination

gwendolen G R O S S

The mountains are abrupt,
perfunctory, they jut up from
island like elbows and are
as casually awkward—
bruising the tropical sky.

On the foothills, with creases
between the toes, granite
crumbles inward, with
shards of lime trees
and landmass, grunting.

From the ferry she can pass
her wing of hand over the
whole landscape—roll
over it like ink, sink into
the deepest places. She
sticks her fingers in the open
windows of crooked white
houses, squashes apartment
buildings that stand too
stiffly, asks them to bow
to the broad grin of the
Pacific. Then
she paints the sky.

Brushstrokes, fingers
dipped in egg
tempera for Vs, for
curves, for resting places
for the long traveled and
hungry seabirds.

County Fair

david MARTIN

—for my mother

She smoked cigarettes as long
and thin as her fingers that year,
talked crazy about getting a job
or driving to North Carolina.
Long afternoons we scratched
the railroad tracks for bottles
to buy Salems and cokes. She
drove the big Buick to lakes
and parked under a choke cherry
to watch the heat jangle.
Shut up, she said, "we may be
leaving," by which she meant our
father. The August wind burned our
lungs and butch heads to sleep.

That was the year we went to the fair.
We started at the livestock pavilion,
stepped high over clumps of straw, the stew
of shit and urine, to watch sheep rumps
and pigs swollen with heat.
We paraded past angry sleepy-eyed
animals, paid a quarter each to see
the world's largest steer
with the map of Michigan on its hip
and a purple tumor that looked like Christ.
I was alone, walking the dust
and rutted road, looking for the
Buick, my head choked with
noise: the metal grinding whirl-a-gig,
house of mirrors and its crazy laughter,
my head distorted on chrome bumpers
shaped like sharp tits.
I reached the highway and river trash,
walked sobbing on the gravel shoulder
where a man shouted in a high-pitched Tennessee
whine. The gravel roared and mother yelled
to get in the goddamned car. She

yanked me across her lap and we spun off, dizzy.
I watched her thin arm bring the
cigarette to her lips, her eyes slash
the mirror, and felt as if I somehow
loved her.

Walter, Oh Walter

kenneth P O B O

In Oxford
centuries of civilization
cram gargoyle mouths.
Dons dash as history
goes gouty. Go to see

gardens to ask ivy
what it thinks of gray
rain. And to visit
Walter Pater's grave.
Nothing special—just
another name

on a GRE exam. Walter
and I have a good chat.
He says be more gemlike,

more like angles of sun
on stone. Some say
Walter made a mess
of things, made life
seem too beautiful. What
do they make of moonlight
on an iris? How
do they critique that?

Do they not see beauty
as a fire calling
a single hand
to pass through it?

Rosebud

brett HURSEY

Hardly a night passes
that her restlessness fails
to rouse me—

the barely audible sound of bone
rasping close to bone
as she rearranges her aching
joints beneath the sheets and blankets.

Even sleep has become wearisome—
stiffness seeping into her ankles
and knees until she wakes
to the aftertaste of aspirin
and a pain so palpable

it clammers up the curvature
of her spine, or hangs on her skirts
during our daily walks
to the post office.

Sometimes I lie awake listening
for the future—
rattling and squeaking its wheelchair

inevitably closer until the sound scrapes
the remaining scraps
of cartilage from my subconscious—

the way I dream of her weeping
over swollen, ruddy roses
sprouting from her wrists—
fingers hopelessly twisted and bent
into withered, frost-bitten buds.

Food Rut

p.v. L e F O R G E

Suddenly I'm alone in the kitchen again
with tomatoes, French beans, and pasta
as light and fine as sunbeams.
Here are condiments and knives and lots of pots
and it's here that I boil and bubble
away my evenings.

While others join fitness centers
until their bodies attain the color
and texture of shaved tennis balls,
I puff around my kitchen like a tuba
snapping beans into green mosaics
and grating cheese into mist.
I spread the angel hair around my plate
in soft billows; in the center I place
a tomato sculpted into the shape of an open rose.

Oh, my beloved capellini!
My faithful nightly visitor,
I need no other. Into my soul
I commend your spirit.
I am a shark in a crowded ocean,
a long-tongued wolf on a sheep farm,
the only guest at the birthday party,

And when I hear myself moaning with excess joy,
when my plate is as shiny as a full moon
and the earth has become a speck
on which I teeter like an egg,
I know that I've done it all wrong.

What I really want is a smoother face,
season tickets to see the Magic,
a two-car garage, new sheets. I want to be
a figure on a wedding cake.
And I want to be hungry again.

Syrup Rum

j. rodney K A R R

With his stick whip, Witch
lashes sugar maples hung
with buckets. He dips
his fingertip inside a tap
then licks. The trees leak
their sap. The bubbling vat
goes on and on. It is all
too slow, so he punishes
the trees to let them know
it is he who drives the spikes
in November and gathers wood
for the continuous fire. It is he
who loves them, if they bleed.

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An Interview With Elinor Lipman



Elinor Lipman has been described as having “the sensibility of a Jane Austen married to the antennae of Woody Allen,” and as “one of the writers who can pierce the heart as well as the funny bone” (*New York Daily News*). If it sometimes seems perilous reading an author heralded as “funny,” it is because “funny” is a label that begs to be defied by each reader’s idiosyncrasies, for each reader’s expectations to fall short. “I heard this was *funny!*” we say, and throw the book across the room.

So perhaps the most surprising thing about Elinor Lipman’s novels and stories is that they *are* funny: laugh-out-loud funny, wry funny, sad funny. Of course, only a grim-faced bore would tell you that being funny as well as a serious writer is incompatible, and, anyway, to label Elinor Lipman as a “funny writer” is rather like saying Ghenghis Khan was cranky. It would in fact be difficult to find another contemporary author who looks at modern life—such as America’s recent saturation by talk shows, half-wit celebrity authors, and the trials of small town, mainstreet businesses—with such a sharp and keen and ultimately forgiving eye.

RCR fiction editor Tom Bissell sat down with Ms. Lipman to talk about MFAs, the dark abyss, the ten million of us who need *The Bridges of Madison County*, and the importance of being nice.

RCR: To start with the most basic question: Why do you write?

EL: I write because I like doing it. I like assigning my thoughts and observations to characters, I like inventing lives, and I love having books in print, but I continue writing because people want to publish my work and read it. There's nothing I'd rather do, workwise, than write novels, but if I hadn't been validated somewhere along the way, or had no hope of being published, I'd have stopped.

RCR: You've been visiting faculty to various writing seminars, such as the Bennington Writers' Workshop. To what extent do you feel you can "teach" an aspiring writer? In the end, how valuable are gatherings like MFA programs and workshops?

EL: I think because it's a craft and not a science, you can point out mistakes the new writer is making and teach them some tricks. (For example, point-of-view switches—easily avoided once the writer is attuned to such non-fatal mistakes.) I think the best workshops act as kindly editors who want you to develop as a writer and are willing to put in the time. Beginning writers need feedback, need an editor's eye, need encouragement, need tips and shortcuts, and sometimes just the deadline of a weekly meeting. I was almost literally taught to write in a workshop. I'd been writing non-fiction, mostly in PR jobs, and needed to be told simple things like, "It's nice to break up the dialogue with a gesture or some physical act." I remember my teacher, Arthur Edelstein at Brandeis adult education, writing at the top of the page, "How about 'She took a bite from the radish,' or some such." I think there are things to learn, support to be had, constructive criticism and praise to be dispensed. But then there is a time when you have to go back to your room and be your own writing group. I've seen workshop regulars who don't want to judge their work at all, even to the point where they quote their writing group's prescription, and don't give themselves a vote. I say, "I liked the other version better. Why did you change it?" and they say, "My writing group made me." I always encourage beginners to join workshops, and eventually tell them to be their own counsel. I can't speak for MFA programs, because I don't have an MFA . . . and I don't think I

need one.

RCR: A recent review called John Updike's novel *Brazil* "a happy book about miscegenation." I was struck by how apt a description that would be for the interracial romance in your novel *The Way Men Act*. Is such topic matter best handled in this manner?

EL: I don't think in terms of "miscegenation" because I don't like the prefix—bad, wrong—applied to two people who want a life together. It feels like a racist label. I don't see the interracial romance as something that needs to be handled, and of course I think all topics are grist for comedy or at least for irreverence.

RCR: John Gardner once said that "good" artists create a "vision of life worth pursuing," whereas "bad" artists "are whining or moaning or staring, because it's fashionable, into the dark abyss." Do you feel this is an accurate comment on the state of contemporary literature?

EL: I love this quote; in fact I'm going to memorize it, although his "good" and "bad" strike me as high-handed. I might edit it to say that some of us create a "vision of life worth pursuing" because that's what we want to read, whereas some of us, thinking it achieves instant depth, "whine or moan or stare, because it's fashionable, into the dark abyss."

RCR: This is a three-tiered question: What writer most influenced you? Who, today, is your "favorite" writer? Are there any writers who continue to astound you?

EL: The writers who most influenced me were writers of funny stories: Ring Lardner, Max Schulman, Dorothy Parker, Woody Allen. A writing teacher steered me toward Fay Weldon and Grace Paley, saying, "They're funny, but they do so much more." My father adored Ring Lardner, and throughout my childhood he raved about "Alibi Ike" and the rest of the stories in *Round Up*. He used to laugh out loud when he read, take off his glasses and wipe his eyes. I think I came away with the idea that good writing means writing that is a joy to read.

I don't have one single favorite writer today, but many favorite books, among them: *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* by Fay Weldon, *Waking the Dead* by Scott Spencer, *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner, *A Summons to Memphis* by Peter

Taylor, *The Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies, *The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham, *The Floating Opera* by John Barth, *That Night* by Alice McDermott, *First Light* by Charles Baxter, *The Man Who Owned Vermont* by Bret Lott, *Happy All the Time* by Laurie Colwin; *Anna Karenina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Room with a View*. All of those astound me. I consider each new book by Carol Shields, Stephen McCauley, and Joanna Trollope a cause for celebration.

RCR: You've said that "meta-fiction"—or the kind of self-conscious exploration of fictional form—doesn't really interest you. Why not?

EL: I did? I don't think the term "meta-fiction" has ever crossed my lips, but I'll be a good sport and answer it anyway.

RCR: Thank you. I should say that I'm using "meta-fiction" on my own volition here, but I remember you saying somewhere that you were irked by fiction that's about fiction more than anything else. A writer like Kathy Acker, say, or some of William Gass's novels.

EL: I subscribe to John Gardner's assertion that "a writer's first duty is to storytelling." I don't want to see the writer's feet showing; I don't want to notice his or her tricks. When I read I want to believe in every word of the voice and story. I want to believe, to paraphrase Somerset Maugham, that it is a life I am living, not a book I am reading. Another Gardner rule I follow: The author's job is to create a "vivid and continuous dream" in the mind of the reader. Anything authorial, I feel, interrupts the "vivid and continuous dream."

RCR: How many novels had you written, or tried to write, before you published *Then She Found Me*?

EL: None.

RCR: Really? That's interesting, in that you hear so much about writers—I'm thinking in particular of Robert Olen Butler—who are said to have written five or six novels before finally selling one.

Well, I guess that sort of leads me to my next question: What younger writers do you admire and expect great things from?

EL: Younger or older is irrelevant. Authors I'd like to see second books and more from are Wally Lamb, Christopher Tilghman, Suzanne Strempek Shea, Joan Wickersham, Karl Ackerman, P.

Carey Reid.

RCR: Bernard Malamud once said, "The human race needs the novel. Those who say the novel is dead can't write them." Do you agree?

EL: Can't write them or would rather read *Entertainment Weekly*. I absolutely agree that the human race needs the novel; I only worry that ten million of that race need *The Bridges of Madison County*.

RCR: Your fiction is often described as "quirky," or as being "comedy." Does this bother you? To put it another way: Do you feel that such labels ultimately take away from the seriousness of your work?

EL: Why would the label "comedy" bother me? You wouldn't be one of those people staring into the dark abyss, would you?

RCR: No, no. I'm a whole-hearted avoider of the abyss.

EL: There will always be people who mistrust humor, who feel in a very literal, antonym-ish kind of way that "funny" and "serious" are opposites. They think that writing about loneliness or love, for example, is serious and "big" enough as long as sadness and loss prevail. Inject a little hope or happiness or resolution into the character's life—and you're writing a comedy of manners. I say, to hell with them.

RCR: Do the politics of the literary world ever bother you?

EL: I would be an ingrate and a schmuck to complain about the publishing world. I have always been treated fairly, even fondly, especially at Pocket Books, where the whole process has been very warm and personable. I think, if I may preach a bit here, that you get what you give; that I am reasonable and appreciative, and that is reciprocated. On the other hand, the politics of the book reviewing world can get me going. Sometimes you feel that behind every review is a disturbing story of who assigned it, to whom, and why. When I review, I consider the author's feelings and emphasize the positive. It's not exactly politics, but the process of promotion and criticism results in some terrific authors remaining unknown, their books sinking like stones, while others, no better and probably worse, are anointed. I think it helps writers to remember that the anointing counts in the very small province of publishing, and

doesn't carry over to readers.

RCR: True or false: If a writer is talented and works hard, he or she will "make it."

EL: True.

RCR: On that note, what advice do you have for aspiring writers?

EL: Don't be sentimental about your work, by which I mean be flexible about editorial suggestions, but don't change things slavishly just because your friend the slightly more experienced writer tells you to or because a rejection letter invents a criticism to justify the editor's decision. (I once received two rejection letters in the same day for the same story. One editor had said, "Sorry, but the ending doesn't work," and the other said, ". . . with *exactly* the right ending.")

Revise, but you don't spend your life beating the same dead horse. Sometimes the best form of revision is to start something new.

Always have the next envelope addressed so you'll be ready when your S.A.S.E. comes back. Turn it around immediately from a rejection to a submission.

If you join a workshop, join with a teacher, not just a peer group, because without a good teacher you'll go home with the words of the loudest, most opinionated, but not necessarily best critic ringing in your ears. A group needs a leader to put the criticism in perspective and have the last word; to say, "I disagree with all of you and here's why."

Write every day (within reason; it's not such sacred work that you can't take days off). Think of writing a novel as getting from one scene to the next, rather than as a 300-page project. I aim for two pages a day, and it adds up.

And this: I once called my agent's office and said to the temp, "Hi, this is Elinor Lipman calling for Lizzie." Later my agent was asked, "Who *was* that? She was the nicest person I talked to all day." It made me wonder what kind of arrogance and rudeness is out there in Authorland that would make a temp think my one declarative sentence was award-winning behavior.

So, be nice.

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Don't You

andrew ALEXANDER

On Thursdays, Arthur and I would leave school early and I'd take him downtown on the new Marta train to his speech therapist. He was my responsibility then and, although I complained about it and taunted him by calling it "peach pearapy," I loved to take him. I liked the way his brow would wrinkle when we stepped off the street and down into the new station, fluorescent-white, tiled, startling as a swimming pool. Even when he was mad at me, he would need to stick close by in the crowd, clutching to the back of my bookbag when we threaded our way off the platform and into the train cars with their smell of upholstery and hair oil. My little brother would sit next to me, and I would unfold the subway map and hold it away from him so he couldn't see; I pretended that it was absolutely necessary that I knew where we were at all times, as if our route were as intricate and perilous as the ancient Silk Road.

His speech therapist had an office in one of the new buildings downtown. When Arthur was inside with her, I would sit in the waiting room and read *Ranger Rick* magazines. Once, when it was getting late and I went back to check on him, I found the two of them, my brother and his doctor, playing checkers. When she saw me, the doctor picked up the board, dumped all the checkers into a shoebox, and told Arthur it was time to go.

One afternoon—I had been taking Arthur downtown for a year—we arrived at the office and found the waiting room dark and empty except for a lone receptionist typing behind the glass panels. "Oh, yeah," Arthur said. "I was supposed to tell Mom. Dr. Morano went to a conference in Washington."

I threw down my bookbag. "Well, that's jutht terrific, retard," I said. "Mom's not picking us up till five."

Arthur shrugged. "That's all right. We'll take a walk around." "A walk?" I said.

"We're all the way down here," he said. "Let's just walk around." He walked out of the waiting room. I followed.

Outside on the sidewalk he walked a few paces in front of me, but checked every now and then to make sure I was still behind him. He stopped in a drugstore and bought a big piece of bubblegum in the shape of a record, which—I was surprised—he split with me. There on the downtown street, two paces behind

him, chewing my half, it suddenly hit me how much he had changed in the last year. He stopped at a sandwich shop and bought a Coke, leaned his back against a wall like a ten-year-old James Dean to drink it, and belched when he was finished. He stopped and talked to a man selling tie-dyed T-shirts from a cardboard box: I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the man spoke and then Arthur spoke and then they both laughed.

In the car on the way home I told my mother everything that had happened, and Arthur and I were both grounded. The next week, on our way downtown, Arthur told me that he thought the subway in Atlanta was so simple an ape could use it; one line goes north-south, he said, and the other east-west. When Arthur was in sixth grade, he was old enough to go on his own to speech therapy, and by seventh grade he didn't need to go at all. They must have been doing something more than checkers; his speech impediment was gone.

By the time I finished college, I was nothing to him. Right after graduation, I went to a friend's beach house with seven others to celebrate. It rained the whole time, so we sat inside, watching MTV, eating fried vegetables, and drinking cheap Margarita mix. One night, through some combination of boredom and drunken desperation, I tried to bite the head off a Hummel figurine. Our hostess cried and said that it was a figurine of great personal and sentimental value. Everyone, even the people who laughed when I did it, took her side, and nobody cared that I chipped my tooth. I refused to apologize, resolving never to speak to any of them again once I got back home. I changed my flight and left two days early; I took a cab to the airport one morning before anyone had gotten up.

"I'm home for good," I said to my mother when she picked me up at the airport.

"You'll find a job," she said. "You'll find something." She hadn't turned my room into a study or a lounge or a tasteful guest room. She'd kept it as it was before I had left: the posters of Pink Floyd; the stolen road signs; the beer can collection; the fish-empty, algae-smirched aquarium. It was just like being back in high school except I had no classes, no homework, no friends, and nothing to look forward to. I thought I would see a lot more of my brother Arthur, but I didn't. He had skipped his last year of high school and had just finished his freshman year of college. Although he lived and went to school right in town, I hardly ever saw him. He had a summer job, a girlfriend.

I bathed a lot and checked the mail. I played our old Atari.

During the day I would lower the blinds and turn the AC in my room up so high that I could lie under a blanket and still feel a chill. I had arrived home at the end of May, and before I knew it, it was June, then July.

I might have continued that way, undisturbed until death, except for one afternoon when my mother was at work, the phone rang. I never answered the phone because it was never for me, so that afternoon, as usual, I just listened and waited for the answering machine to pick up.

The tape started rolling, and then an unfamiliar voice spoke my name. The way she said it, foreign, almost incorrect, made me want to hear her say it again. "Hamilton, answer," she said. "You are there, I know. Pick up the phone. Pick up."

I quit my game of Defender and picked up the phone. "Who is this?" I asked.

"This is Arthur's friend. Helene," she said. It was my brother's girlfriend, French no less; I had never spoken with her before. "You are Hamilton, the brother of Arthur," she said. It wasn't really a question, but I answered, "Yes." I was vaguely aware that Arthur had told me that they had been fighting lately. "Can you drive me to Conyers?" she said.

"Why can't Arthur take you?" I said. There was a long silence. I wrapped a finger in the frayed belt loop of my bathrobe.

"I'm meeting him there," she said. She explained that some friends of theirs were having a cookout—a "cooking out" as she called it—at a farm in the country.

"Can we be back by seven?" I said.

"No," she said. "You know you're not busy. Come pick me up."

Half an hour later when I came to get her, she was standing outside her apartment building waiting. She wore a pair of dark sunglasses and a shirt with big wizard sleeves that flapped and flared as she stalked towards the car. She was compact and pretty, with a walk like a pair of scissors, full of energy and purpose. She said nothing to me as she got in.

"Nice day for a picnic," I said once we were on the road. It was hot and muggy, and the sky was gray, tornado-brown at one corner. All the windows were down because my Le Car had no air-conditioning.

"Nice car," she said, pointing to the candy wrappers and sticky cola-grit on the floor of the passenger side. I sat up taller, kept both hands on the wheel for a moment, then, casually, let one arm hang out the window.

Half an hour later we were lost. I pulled over onto the shoulder of the road, and Helene unfolded the highway map and spread it out in front of her with much elaborate rustling.

"Why couldn't Arthur take you to this cookout?" I said. She didn't say anything, but traced the highways on the map with her finger. I tried to imagine what they had been fighting about. "You know," I said, "I don't think Arthur would go to this party with another girl. Is that what you think?"

"Stay quiet," she whispered to the map. Bent over it she was squat and lovely, thrillingly French and mean in my front seat.

By the time we got to the party, it was almost over. The farm looked conquered: a barbecue grill near the farmhouse gave off thick and brutish smoke, a few people lay stretched out on blankets in a pasture littered with soda cans and paper plates. There was the sound of feedback from speakers and a microphone not yet dismantled. A few beers floated in a washtub of melting ice. Helene and I each took one.

"Where's Arthur?" Helene asked a girl sitting in a lawn-chair.

"Arthur," the girl said. Then, "Has anyone seen Arthur?"

The boy next to her shrugged. "I don't think he ever showed up," he said.

The heat splotted my eyes and slicked my armpits. "I'm going inside," I said to Helene. "Come get me when the party's over."

In the dark and empty farmhouse living room, I found no television, no magazines of interest, but from the bookshelf I pulled down an old paperback copy of *The Scarlet Letter*. Sitting next to a taxidermied black bear, I perused the notes and sketches some dazed high-schooler had made in the margins: drawings of death's heads, angels with guitars, contorted cats, scribbled notes like "Hester = eerie" and "Roses = mankind" and, most enigmatically, in a tiny, unassuming script at the top of page 124, the exuberant declaration, "everybody wants me."

When I looked up again, Helene was standing there in the room, slightly drunk, not looking at me but wiggling the teeth in the bear's mouth with her fingers. She still wore her sunglasses although the room was so dark. "I'm a very stupid girl," she said. "Were you the one who drove here with the stupid girl?"

I smiled nervously and closed the book, keeping my place by folding a page. "Yes," I said. "That was me."

She scratched the bear's tongue, then patted its head. "This thing is repulsive." She walked over and flung herself down on the couch next to me. I heard beer slosh inside her. "Arthur never

came," she said.

"I know," I said. "I could've told you that before we left."

"Can we go?" she said. She seemed embarrassed, so I didn't say anything more, just led her out to the car. On the drive home, she made a catalogue of all my brother's transgressions: a parcel of lies, I thought, made lovely by her accent, the halting way she handled English—it made her sound sad, nostalgic, broken. From time to time she looked at me for my approval, agreement, even asking me if I had noticed any such selfishness in my brother when we were growing up. I said nothing. I nodded.

The next day, I lay in bed trying to read the old copy of *The Scarlet Letter* I had lifted from the farmhouse, but it was no good. I could smell detergent and sweat in the sheets. I tried calling Arthur, but there was no answer. I bathed again, prepared to go out.

I went to Helene's apartment, but she wasn't in. I waited for her in my car as I had no other place to go. I kept my mind off the heat by trying to imagine where Arthur would park when he visited, which path he would take from his car to her apartment door.

After a while Helene pulled up on her bicycle without noticing me. She leapt off before it had completely stopped and landed it in the bike rack. As she was locking it up, I honked my horn. "Hey. Hey!" I said.

She rolled her eyes. "What are you doing?" she said when she got to the car.

"Do you want to go for another ride?" I said.

"No," she said. She looked at her watch, then weighed the offer in her mind. "Can you take me for groceries?" she said. I nodded, leaned over and opened the passenger door for her.

At the store she didn't say much, but tossed items into her cart angrily. She compared the things with stuff in France: olives, sardines, artichokes, strawberries, everything was better in France. In the toothpaste aisle she demanded that I explain the difference between mint, peppermint, and spearmint gel, but I couldn't. She opened a tube of toothpaste, sniffed it, and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Too sweet," she said and held it up for me to smell. "America."

I didn't say anything in the store, but on the way back, when she was searching through the static on my car radio for a station, I said, "It's just not as good as the Le Cars they have in France." She didn't laugh, but turned off the radio with an angry flick of her wrist. "You're right," she said. When I dropped her off she

didn't say a word, just grabbed her groceries and walked away.

That afternoon back at home, I picked up a *Beginning French* text book from my mother's bookshelf. It was a big clunky thing from the fifties, bright and simple, but the acid in the paper had turned the pages a stiff and moldy brown. The people in the dialogues were forever asking directions, buying loaves of bread, touring the countryside, throwing parties; if only in the book, everything did seem better in France.

The next day I waited in my car again outside of Helene's apartment. "*La chambre est-elle grande?*" I yelled out the window when she pulled up on her bike.

She smiled and walked over to the car. "*Oui, elle est grande,*" she said.

"Would you care," I said, "to do something?"

"Do you pay?" she said.

"I'll pay," I said.

She scratched her wrist and sighed, "All right," she said. "Let's go."

"Pardon?"

"It's already a late hour," she said. It was five. "Let's just go now." She and I drove to the Landmark Diner. My French was exhausted in a few minutes so there wasn't much for us to say. She ordered the stuffed grape leaves, although I tried to explain that you weren't supposed to actually order the grape leaves at American diners. As we ate, she told me that she had decided that she was no longer seeing Arthur, and that they hadn't spoken in days. "He hasn't called me either," I said. "He never calls, and he never comes home. The jerk." She didn't say anything.

"*Il parle très bien, n'est-ce pas?*" I asked her on the drive home.

"*Non, il ne parle pas bien,*" she said. It was just simple French, I knew, but somehow I felt as though I were learning her own secret language, and soon, I would be fluent.

When I got home that evening, my mother told me that Arthur had called. "Where did you say I was?" I said.

"I said I didn't know," said my mother. "I said you were out."

"Well, stay out of my business," I said. "Both of you."

The next night before going over to Helene's I stopped at the drugstore. She had complained that the pollution in America was making her joints ache, so I thought I might make her a gift of some American aspirin. Near the checkout lane was a bin full of the odd flotsam and jetsam of a discount drugstore: single flip-flops, cans of off-brand hairspray, sun-faded Garfield stationery,

lidless tins of shoe-polish, and—though it was months from Valentine's Day—an army of those holiday hair-trolls with haunting, prenatal smiles. I picked up one that held a plastic heart inscribed with the words "HotStuff" and bought it along with the aspirin.

When Helene answered the door to her apartment she was in her bathrobe. It made her look tired and exasperated, lovely. "Please go away now," she said.

"Why? Is Arthur here?" I asked. I brushed past her into the apartment. I looked in her bedroom, her kitchen, bathroom: all empty. She sat down on her couch as if bored. Since she wasn't speaking to me, I started to examine the things she had on her shelves and walls. "I used to have that poster," I said, pointing to one of Sting. I commented on the things on her bookshelves, "Nice little pig. Good nail clippers. Macramé, I see," and then I stopped.

"What is that?" I said. On her bookshelf, next to a stereo speaker, was a little pink-haired troll. I picked it up. It was just like the one I'd bought, only in its arms it held a plastic heart with the words "I wuv you" written in crisp bold letters.

"Arthur gave it to me," she said. She picked up the remote control, aimed it at the TV, but then put it down again.

"When?" I said. I fingered the plastic bag in my pocket.

"A long time ago," she said.

I picked up Arthur's troll and twisted its head, trying to tear it off. "He probably got it on sale at Big B," I said. Actually, I thought, he probably paid full price. She aimed the remote at the TV again, and this time turned it on.

The phone rang and without looking at me Helene answered, waving her hand to keep me quiet. I reached into my pocket to give her the troll I had brought her, but before I could do it, she spoke.

Her features were relaxed in a way I had never seen them before, even her eyes smiled. She turned off the TV. I wandered into her kitchen then back into her living room then back into the kitchen, listening; whispered apologies, short, relieved laughter.

"Oh, your brother is here," she said. Then, "I don't know. I think he's trying to learn French or something. He brought me to that party the other day. Yes, I went. I thought you would be there." I could hear the kitchen clock ticking; I took a drink from her faucet as if it were a water fountain. "Hamilton," Helene called to me. "Your brother says thank you for taking me to that party."

"Tell him I said you're welcome a whole goddamned lot," I said.

She relayed the message, then said, "He wants to know what

you're doing here."

I walked into the living room. "Tell him I said I'm trying to steal his girlfriend."

She didn't need to repeat the message. I could hear Arthur laughing on the other end of the line. Then he said something that I couldn't hear, and Helene began laughing, too. Without a word I left.

In my car, I swallowed three of Helene's aspirin and let them sit, dry and gaggy, at the back of my throat. I took the troll out of his bag, and I wedged him up between the windshield and the dashboard.

I didn't go home right away but drove further into the city. The streets were bare and clean and ugly. The troll stood smiling, looking out at the empty road, his expression changing, lightening and darkening with a rhythm like laughter every time we drove under a street light. I half-hoped to see Arthur on the sidewalk, in every doorway, on every crosswalk, nine years old again and needing me to take him home; he would come running to the car, worried and waving, crying, and I would gun the engine and run him down. Although the evening was cool, a greasy, fuggy sweat was making my hands slick on the steering wheel. I wanted to have something more to do, someone else to see since I was out of the house, this far downtown. It seemed unfair, but of course there was nothing more, nobody else, so after a while I just had to stop, turn the car around and go home.

Lubrication

elizabeth SMITH-MEYER

She had been thinking of new and varied ways, ever since her last doctor appointment, and now she tells him, assures him, rather proud of herself, that she knows what they can do.

He tries to ready himself for her, lying on the bed, wearing only his underwear. His arm is thrown over his eyes and his lips are slightly parted. He breathes through his mouth.

She hikes up her maternity dress, kneels on the bed beside him, and slides the underwear down his legs. He shivers. Her hands press his legs apart as she situates her pregnant body awkwardly between his knees. She opens a tube of lubricant and squeezes a thick puddle of clear gel into her hand.

"It's cold," she tells him, smiling faintly.

He's been complaining of the flu and he snuffles but doesn't speak. The air whistles between his teeth.

"Wait a minute," she says. She blows on the clear gel, trying to warm it, and it squirms under her breath. "This should be better. I'll try it now."

She rubs her hands together and then smears him with lubricant. He flinches as she touches him.

"Is it still too cold?" she asks.

His head moves side to side.

"Am I being too rough?"

"If you're going to do it," he finally says, his voice pinched under his arm, rather hoarse from the flu, "then just do it. Don't ask me so many questions."

Her swollen fingers stiffen, and she pauses to straighten them before taking hold of him again. "I just want to make sure I'm doing it all right," she says.

"You don't have to do it at all."

"Yes, I do. You're a man. You have to have some kind of release."

He waits a moment and then answers in a tone that is not familiar to her. "It just doesn't feel comfortable."

"But this way is better for the baby," she says quietly. She tries to see his face, looking for some assurance, but he keeps it hidden. She says, "Give me some time to get used to this. Then it'll be better."

There is no response, and she begins to stroke him. He lies,

without feeling, beneath her. She strokes harder.

"Is this all right now? Does it feel better?" she asks, slightly breathless. Into the eighth month now the baby presses high under her ribs, making it difficult for her to breath.

"Just finish," he says.

She strokes faster, hoping to find a rhythm that will satisfy him, but her hand feels clumsy, ill-conditioned for this angle, this movement, and he doesn't get hard. There is a refusal about the situation that begins to anger her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, releasing him. "Aren't I doing it right?" Her hand hangs in midair, glistening with lubricant, slick and wet and tired. He doesn't answer, and in a lowered voice she says, "I'm only doing this for you."

"Then stop," he finally says. "If we can't do it the normal way, I don't want to do it at all."

"But how else are you going to get it?"

"I just won't. We'll wait until after the baby comes."

"No, no," she says, shaking her head. "That'll add another eight weeks. You can't wait that long."

There is another pause before he responds, "You just worry about having the baby."

She clicks her tongue against the back of her teeth. "Why are you being like this? Why don't you want me to help you?"

He removes his arm and stares at her. "Just lying here, waiting for you to make me come, is not the way I want it. This wasn't my idea."

She takes hold of him and tries to smile, but her face, although rounded by pregnancy, is strained, deepened by worry lines around her eyes and mouth. She says softly, "But it's the only way I feel safe doing it right now."

He stares at her, then closes his eyes and puts his arm back over his face.

She continues to stroke him until her hand feels dry. He is semi-hard—still not hard enough—dry and red. He doesn't say anything, doesn't look at her, as she stops, resettles her body, and puts more lubrication on her hand.

Fool's Progress

mark J A C O B S

In the summer of 1969 I graduated from high school and became a fool. Only a fool would throw away a full-ride college scholarship, fill a duffel bag with clothes, then drive a wounded Triumph Spitfire non-stop from Albany to Miami. In Georgia, the steering wheel broke in half, so I held onto the half that stayed on the column and coasted over the Florida state line. Only a fool would walk away from the Triumph when it wouldn't go into first gear at a stoplight in Miami. I did remember to take the duffel bag. But only a fool would show up asking for a job from a local hotel proprietor in Miami Beach on the same day that proprietor was indicted by a grand jury on racketeering charges.

I got the job, which was parking cars at the Lady Luck Hotel.

My first night in town, my new employer took me to dinner with some friends. Albert was about forty-five, maybe, with thick hairy wrists and a belly shaped like a Butterball turkey. A kind of collective doom damped our dinner spirits at Mary's Traditional Pasta House that night. Just about everyone associated with the Lady Luck had been indicted by the same jury, guests included. I was too young, at that time, to know what the word *ethnic* meant. Albert explained patiently why we had to eat our pasta *al dente*, and what the cock on the bottle of chianti stood for. I drank enough to get a headache but kept my mouth shut, my first intelligent move since walking away from an Ivy League college scholarship for the intelligent indigent.

So I learned the car-parking business, which is about as complicated as it sounds. On Albert's recommendation I split the rent on a crummy apartment down the road in Hollywood with the Lady Luck's chief bellhop, Bert, who was too dumb to be indicted for anything except a slow-moving traffic violation. From the start I hated Bert, mostly because of his fruit and vegetable lists. But I was honest enough to admit he was right about one thing, and that thing had something to do with my being a fool.

"What you need, Spud," he explained to me one afternoon in October when business was slow for both of us, "is you need to get laid."

Outside there was real weather—heat and humidity and a sun that scalded—but inside the hotel the cooled air was as antiseptic as a space ship. We were killing time at Bert's bellhop desk. He

had already gone through his first list of the evening.

Before migrating south Bert had worked in a cold storage warehouse, and he derived a profound satisfaction from writing down in lists all the fruits and vegetables he had hefted in his warehouse career. "We had rutabagas," he would sigh, reaching for his pencil. You get the idea. I have never seen an adult so entirely absorbed by so little. The worst part for me was, every time he came back to his remembrance of fruits past he assumed it was all new and gripping knowledge for me. He assumed, for instance, that I would love watching him painfully print out a subcategory of the various lettuces he had carted around. No one before or since has ever called me Spud, by the way. Bert never called me anything else.

I gathered that the main reason Bert stayed at the cold storage plant for as long as he did was because of the day-shift foreman's wife. Bert worked afternoons. I couldn't turn him off the subject; every three or four days he got misty-eyed, sinking into X-rated detail. Unfortunately, it seemed, his future in fruit and vegetable management was squashed when the day-shift foreman came home unexpectedly one morning with a hernia complaint.

Not that things were going poorly for Bert in Miami Beach. It was easy to share the apartment with him. He was never there. I resented his dumb luck. I resented even more the patronizing, good-natured way he set about trying to help me.

"I'm dead serious, Spud," he warned me. "You can't jack off in isolation forever. You know what they used to say about going blind?"

"What about it?" I was hoping hard that a guest would show up and give one of us something to do.

"What you don't know is there's a scientific basis to that old wives' tale. I read a study on the plane coming down."

I tried to think how I might jockey the conversation back to varieties of apples.

"It turns out there's a limited number of brain cells inside your sperm. Don't ask me how that works, I'm not a surgeon. Anyway, the fact is the more you pound the pepperoni the more likely you are to have problem children. They might come out blind, let's say, or idiots, or axe murderers. You name it. It's a question of odds, Spud. You want a family someday?"

Maybe it was chance that Jupiter blew by at that moment, but I'll die believing it was fate. Jupiter was a long-term guest, a friend of Albert's from Rockaway. Twenty-five or thereabouts, pneumatic in an earthy, semi-slatternly way, she had captivated my hyperactive

imagination the first time I saw her browning body at the pool. Mesmerized, I watched for fifteen minutes as she worked suntan oil into those healthy pores. Her brown hair, long and free falling, shone in the Florida sun. Her white bikini was understated overkill. With Jupiter around, no other woman south of the Mason-Dixon line had the slightest chance with my single-minded imagination. Passing Bert's desk, she breathed out something that might have been "How's tricks, boys?" in an offhand way that was as provocative, for me, as fine quality erotic literature, and disappeared into the Topless Bandit Lounge, which was almost empty at that early hour. Frustrated, I wished that Albert had given me a job tending bar.

Even a slug like Bert could see my infatuation. He shook his head reprovingly. The overgrown brush of a mustache on his Alfred Hitchcock-style face made him look like a constipated walrus. Hard to figure his success with women.

"Forget that one, Spud," he advised me. I hate it when a person wags his finger in my face. "That one's got ambitions. She figures she's an actress, maybe, or an artist, something glamorous. She's looking for a sugar daddy, not a horny teenager. Listen, you look around, make your choice, and I'll work it for you. On the house. You don't want blind axe murderers for kids, do you?"

I didn't. But nor did I want anybody but Jupiter. Call it a fool's fixation. Call it love. Though I had a comfortable way to go before catching up to Bert, I was growing stupider by the day.

I suffered through October, the first two weeks of November. A steady rain of tourists began to fall on Miami Beach. Albert and his co-workers celebrated the success of a legal maneuver that forestalled their grand jury appearance with an *al dente* dinner at Mary's. I couldn't go; I had to work. But Albert himself brought me a pasta doggy bag, and I felt abjectly grateful for his thoughtfulness. I was beginning to feel at home in the Lady Luck. Plus Bert hadn't spent a night at the apartment in three weeks. He performed his bellboy functions in a fog, exhausted by love. So I had the apartment to myself. All I needed was Jupiter to fill it up.

I know it was no coincidence that Jupiter found her sugar daddy at about the same time she began to show a little interest in me. Marvin was from New Jersey, he was powerful in many senses of the word, he wore a gold pinky ring. Everybody at the Lady Luck, including Albert, spoke his name with reverence. "America hasn't seen a legal mind like that since Daniel Webster," Bert informed me one evening when we had worked through the fruits and as far as summer squash in vegetables.

I was jealous as only a fool could be of Marvin's instant success.

I couldn't turn around at the hotel without seeing him and Jupiter cooing and billing in their transplanted New Jersey way. Poolside, they applied unguents and oils to each other's bronzing bodies. They brought each other cooling drinks. They made their own little self-referential world. It was about bodies. Mine was lonesome, and I never had enough time off from work to get much of a tan.

"Money talks, Spud," Bert teased me, enjoying my suffering in his dull way. What he didn't know was that Jupiter had called me to her room one afternoon the week before. Her TV set was on the fritz, she said; would I look at it? It took me no time at all to plug it in, and there she was radiant in a terrycloth wrap-up. She offered me a Coke, we sat on her bed, we said some stupid things. I liked the way the flesh of her legs spread and fattened when she put her knees together. I liked her perfume-less smell. I could scarcely tolerate the electric tickle on my arm some stray tendrils of her long hair made.

We kissed, and I was ready to make unending love. But Jupiter had second thoughts; she pushed me away.

"You're a punk," she said. "I don't need a punk. I need . . . I need something else. Sorry, Silver Boy. You keep shining on. You'll get what you need, some day."

It was all I could do not to slur out a wise-ass comment about what Marvin needed, and how he got it. But I managed to keep my mouth shut, and I managed also to embrace that twenty-five-year-old pneumatic body for a second before I slunk out into the hard-eyed sun.

Given Marvin's stature at the Lady Luck, it would have been suicidal for me to brag. I kept my counsel. When Albert mentioned that the lawyer was thinking about spending the winter with us, though, I worried big time. If Marvin stayed, I could never compete with his money. But if he went, he might take Jupiter with him. That possibility drove me wild, which made me take some foolhardy risks to get close to her.

Well it worked. One day Albert fired up his Lincoln and drove Marvin to the West Coast on business, and quicker than you could say wish fulfillment I was in the sack with Jupiter and nobody the wiser. The experience, if that's what you call it, was good beyond good, it was transport to the stars, it was bodily edification and nourishment and definition. It was fool's love. Without it I would have died. I fell asleep on Jupiter's breasts listening to the rhythmic beating of her cheating heart.

What happened afterward only seems outlandish in retrospect. At the time it all seemed as right and reasonable as secular

humanism. Through December and into January Jupiter spent her public time with Marvin and her private time—not that there was much of that—with me. Making love with her was like sucking honey through a straw. Once in a while she showed up at my apartment in Hollywood. It was high tourist season so Bert was otherwise occupied. While she was there, we filled up the shabby emptiness of the place with love.

Fool that I was, I came close to derailing the train of perfection we were riding every time jealousy overwhelmed me, which was pretty much every day. But Jupiter convinced me that Marvin was chronically exhausted and close to impotent, that he only wanted to wear her like a diamond ring. I had to believe her. What could I give her except myself? Marvin let her shine.

By the end of January the grand jury indictment had ended in ignominious failure for the local prosecutors. We had dinner and unlimited chianti at Mary's, where Marvin made a gassy speech of self-congratulation that drove me up the brocaded wall. Jupiter sat next to him like a bored housewife. We both knew better than to look at each other, but I almost cried out in pain when Marvin announced that he and Jupiter were going to hop on a sailboat and cruise the Caribbean for an indefinite period of time. He needed a break, he explained to us, and everybody at the table muttered an encouraging Yeah! Everybody liked Marvin. Jupiter's face colored like a blushing bride's, and the Lucky Lady crowd clapped like cheerleaders.

Lucky for me that Marvin had no idea how to make a sailboat go. I didn't either, but Jupiter convinced him to take me on as a one-man crew. It was a measure of our success in hiding our affair that no shadow of suspicion flitted across the flat expanse of Marvin's mind. I was around, I was available, I was affable. I would work cheap. I was a fool. So he picked out a pretty little fiberglass boat he christened the *Bayonne Baby*, and Jupiter spent two weeks teaching us the basics of sailing on the safe edge of the Atlantic. She was a good sailor and a good teacher. Don't ask me how she learned to sail in New Jersey; Jupiter was a woman of hidden depths and I only plumbed some of them. Anyway both Marvin and I learned to sail in a hurry. Me, I was entranced. The movements, the calculations required, the instincts involved all became synonymous in my mind with freedom. Screw the Ivy League.

Funny, it didn't seem unreasonable to think about the three of us cruising the Caribbean aboard a boat for months on end. I thought: We'll make stops on colorful islands. Marvin will disappear to make business phone calls and drink expensive pastel drinks in

tall glasses with paper umbrellas. He'll take up snorkeling. Sometimes Jupiter will stay behind on the boat with me.

The day we decided we were seaworthy Albert and the idle half of the Lucky Lady crowd came down to the dock to see us off with champagne and salami sandwiches. Bert was there, too. His uncanny sexual antenna must have given him a sense that something was up between Jupiter and me. He pulled me aside on the dock while Albert was saying his official farewell, stared me in the face searchingly with that walrus-look I hated, and told me, "Don't do anything stupid, Spud."

"What do you mean, Bert?"

"You know what I mean. Don't let the wrong head do your thinkin for you is what I mean."

Too late for that. The wonderful thing was it did work for a while. We were all northerners. The Caribbean was as exotic as it looked on postcards, and we fell willingly under its wind-driven spell. With Jupiter's even-handed nurturing both Marvin and I developed into creditable sailors, and the *Bayonne Baby* moved across the glassy surface of the sea like a dancer in a dream. We became explorers. We found islands with white virgin beaches, a billion coconuts, palm trees that rustled suggestively, hermit crabs, self-absorbed herds of sea birds, driftwood shaped like the carcasses of extinct animals. We trolled for our supper, cooked fish whose names we didn't know or care to know. We drifted, listened to shortwave broadcasts and talked politics like civilized refugees, and I realized for the first time just how conservative many marginally law-abiding elements in our society can be. In Marvin's opinion anybody who resisted the draft and going to Vietnam should have been shot in a public place for desertion. The Vietnam War was tearing apart the nation, but we sailed in a cocoon of peace and plenty that went with us wherever the *Bayonne Baby* moved.

Every couple of weeks or so Marvin had us park the boat at a populated island. He went ashore and made phone calls. But apart from keeping up that minimum link with the world that owned him he gave himself over to the trip. He developed an extraordinary, child-like enthusiasm for snorkeling. He spent hours at it when we dropped anchor in what seemed like an infinite number of isolated blue bays. With the diligence of a novice he catalogued the flora and fauna he found under water. He began to grow gills, and there was a certain waterlogged look to him even on the boat. Of course he was disappointed that Jupiter did not share his enthusiasm. She was afraid of being cut on the reefs, so she often stayed on the boat while he explored his new world. Me

too. I was sucking honey through a straw.

Looking back, I think it was the liberating sense of wonder that Marvin experienced on our voyage that doomed us. It wasn't just the snorkeling. It was the entire adventure we were living, the escape into discovery of a wild world of beauty and mystery a million miles away from New Jersey and business. The upshot was his sex drive came back to life.

Clean living had expunged a few pounds from his substantial body, which was turning a rich olive color as though slowly baking to perfection. Jupiter began to have a harried, bitter look that I knew too well how to interpret. She refused to talk about what was happening, but it was plain to me that I had a rival. A rival with a boat, a bank account, a legal reputation to equal Daniel Webster's, and a revived sexuality that was more threatening than all the rest put together. Our cramped quarters on the boat didn't help much. I was more jealous than I had ever been on land. I was a green sponge; squeeze me and I dripped bile. I was primed to make a stupid mistake.

"What goes on with Marvin—and it isn't much, let me tell you—pays our rent," Jupiter told me. We were sitting on the edge on the boat watching Marvin frolic over the reefs off the shore of an uninhabited jewel of an island called Vixen Cay. I was irritated because she was filing and polishing her nails, a homely task she took on, I was sure, only because Marvin had asked her not to let herself go. "What you and I have is different," she insisted. "It's love. You give me pleasure."

"I can't stand the thought of him touching you, Jupiter."

"It will pass. This is a phase Marvin is going through. Trust me." She crooned and clucked in my direction, but I would not be soothed. We both knew she was lying. Whatever was happening with Marvin had the stink of permanence. I was not the least surprised when we hauled him back on board that he told us he was thinking of early retirement.

"This trip has been like a religious experience for me," he confessed to us, blinking in the blinding mid-morning light. Unconsciously he flexed his biceps. He didn't look too bad for a middle-aged city boy. "It's scary as shit, people, but it's exciting. It's like I'm making my life go backwards. I'm getting younger instead of older, and this time around I'm enjoying it."

It was true. I hated him. I hated anyone who called the two individuals he spent twenty four hours a day with "people." He babbled on about the trip, his new life, the soul-less vanity of preoccupation with worldly frills and prime real estate and lawyer's

briefs. He had enough money put aside to get out of that world and stay in this one, in which Nature had begun talking back to him, whispering some of her secrets into his unplugged ear like a prodigal lover come home. Remember this was 1969, the summer of Woodstock, when Joni Mitchell dreamed she saw government planes riding shotgun in the sky turn into butterflies. Anything was possible.

He and Jupiter took a vote. I was a non-voting member of the crew, so I didn't have any say in the decision they made to stay on Vixen Cay for an unspecified while. The place was a sunny little paradise, no doubt about it. Shaped like a half-moon, a beach of white sand that ran the length of one side of the island, and on the other side you stepped off into world-class reefs and underwater delights. But staying meant Marvin would not be disappearing to make phone calls, which cut into my precarious sex life with Jupiter.

We lasted for a week like that, living half on the boat, half on Vixen Cay, where we made enormous bonfires at night and Marvin told gripping stories about his now-discarded shabby life of crime and money. I became introverted and sullen, but Marvin was so engrossed in the drama of his own rebirth that he scarcely noticed my funk. Jupiter shuttled back and forth trying to do some justice to both of us, but I wasn't having any of that. I bided my time waiting for the chance to make a big mistake.

It came one crystalline morning after breakfast when Marvin left us on the sandy side of the island to snorkel off the other shore. He had a new project. He was going to learn to sketch, and then to draw the wildlife he had been observing underwater. He had already started keeping a journal, and he thought he might want to publish the journal with his own fishy illustrations in the form of a book. We kicked around tentative names for the book, which sounded to me kind of like a Damon Runyan version of *Steppenwolf*, but Marvin finally settled on *Bayonne on Blue*, which I had to admit was catchy. Anyway he took his snorkeling gear and a sketch pad and pencils and disappeared leeward. Vixen Cay was just wide enough across that he was lost from view, screened by the wind-bent palms that populated the island.

It didn't take me long to coax Jupiter onto the *Bayonne Baby*. No doubt my boyish pride in my own power of persuasion contributed to our mutual recklessness. The next thing we knew we were down in the cabin in Marvin's bed wrapped together and frantic, a moving feast of limbs and appendages and seeping fluids. The second thing we knew was here came Marvin down into his violated room.

In one instant he was transmogrified from the sensitive author of *Bayonne on Blue* to the street-smart lawyer who knew more about racketeering than J. Edgar Hoover. He roared and dove at me. I escaped only by the aid of one of those adrenaline bursts that sometimes save soldiers in combat. Jupiter, as you might expect, screamed. On the periphery of my terrified consciousness I was aware of how vulnerable and sexy she looked, naked and scared, her pinkish nipples pointing at me, erect and accusing.

It was pretty clear that Marvin wanted to kill me. In the confining smallness of the cabin he came at me again and again, and each time I escaped dramatically. My penis wagged as I jumped and ran, like a semi-tumescent Exhibit A before the jury. I had youth and speed and terror on my side, but Marvin had strength and anger and righteousness on his. For a while we stayed even. Marvin knocked me around, and my mouth bled, but a couple of times, dancing away, I got in a token wimpish jab, which only made his anger still more righteous.

I don't know how it would have ended if Jupiter had not suddenly let loose a fierce scream that made us both aware that she had Marvin's pistol in her trembling hands. Seeing it, he stopped slugging and smiled.

"Good girl, Jupiter," he praised her. "Hand it over now. I'll take care of this from here on out. You're a good girl."

"Don't!" I squeaked. "He'll kill me."

"He's right about that," Marvin said. "And there ain't a judge in the friggin Carib that'd send me up for it. Justifiable homicide is what they call it. Come on, hand it over." He was breathing hard; there was a hoarse whistle in his voice as he panted.

Perhaps it was the way, both high-handed and disparaging, in which Marvin assumed she would obey that led Jupiter not to. Shaking her beautiful head slowly she retreated backwards up the ladder onto the deck, the pistol held steadily enough now to give the lawyer pause. One conservative step at a time he went up after her. I took a second to pull on my swimming trunks, which made me feel a whole lot better, then went up after both of them.

Jupiter was standing straight-shouldered, almost majestic, on the bow. Her armed nudity disturbed both of us; it sent a message neither of us could quite interpret.

"Toss me my cover up," she told me. I tossed. Marvin stood watching, trying to come to terms with the possibility that the woman to whom he had given so much would consider shooting him.

"Jupiter," he growled. His voice box emitted a noise like agitated gravel.

"Shut up!" she barked sharply. With her robe on she was easier to contemplate. "I have to think."

"Come on, baby. Leave the thinkin to the experts. All you gotta do is hand me over the pistol and this nasty little misunderstanding is over."

"He'll blow my brains out," I warned her. "Let me have the gun, Jupiter. I promise you I won't shoot Marvin. All I care about is him not shooting me."

"Don't forget who's been buttering your bread, sugar," Marvin said. "Stick with Limp Richard here and you got nothin, absolutely nothin. Stick with me and I'll show you how forgiving I can be."

Maybe every person born is allotted one such moment on the planet, in which she or he must choose between two starkly different lives, two futures, two possibilities. I could see that struggle to decide crease Jupiter's face. The options and their ramifications were obvious to all three of us. I thought Marvin might try to rush her, figuring she would not have the nerve actually to put a hole in him, but he must have seen the passion—and I'm not talking about sexual passion—illuminating her. He was smart not to take the chance.

"Jupiter," I said after a decent interval, during which a big fish leaped like a showoff and a swarm of gulls sent their dark shadows fluttering across the deck of the *Bayonne Baby*. Paradise lost, I thought. I will not forget the Caribbean blue of the bay.

"It's not over for you, punk," Marvin said in an undertone; the conviction with which he spoke convinced me, anyhow, that he knew what he was talking about.

But Jupiter had made up her mind. "Promise me you won't kill him," she said.

"I already promised," I told her.

Seeing his odds dwindle, Marvin made his move. He dove prow-ward toward Jupiter to get the gun, which had assumed the status of a totem for him; without it he could not imagine living. For a moment he forgot about me. As he lunged I went up behind him, hit him low, and drove him over the edge into the water he had come to love. Glowing with the intensity of having worked her way to the right choice, Jupiter surrendered the gun to me. "Promise," she said, and I promised again.

The safest thing was not to let Marvin on board, which she did not. While he treaded water and cursed I aimed the pistol in his direction. How could he be expected to know that I had no nerve to shoot? I was lucky. Jupiter tossed him a little rubber dinghy, into which he crawled only because he was too tired to stay afloat

on his own power. Then she considerably passed down food, water, all kinds of supplies, even a deck of cards, taking care not to let herself get close enough for him to grab her arm.

"You leave me out here, it's murder," Marvin blustered. "It could be weeks before a boat comes by. What am I supposed to do until then?"

"Write your book," I thought but didn't say to him.

Jupiter thought for a minute, gave herself up to her better impulses, for which weakness I admired her tremendously. She went below and came back with the ship's radio, lowered it carefully with a gaffe to Marvin, who was surprised at her magnanimity. Not me. Jupiter had grit, she had character. What she didn't have, at the moment, was a regular income.

With the radio Marvin knew he was saved, which brought back some of the anger I didn't blame him for having. While we hauled up the anchor and got ready to leave Vixen Cay in a hurry he sat in the rubber dinghy cursing both of us and making threats he had the power to carry out. He fondled the radio in his lap.

"Enjoy what you got," he warned us, "cuz it ain't gonna last long. Every law-abiding boat in the Caribbean is going to be after your tail. There's nowhere you can hide. Go ahead and screw each other's eyeballs out for the next day or two. That's all you got left. When I get a hold of you I'm gonna make it hurt. Real bad, real slow"

In self-defense we tuned him out and tended to the business of getting under sail.

"I'm scared," Jupiter told me, taking the cover off the mainsail. I could think of no consoling or manly thing to say that would have the slightest convincing ring to it, so I concentrated on my chores.

It wasn't until we were away from the island, out of earshot of Marvin's threats and vituperations, that we found our voices. There was only one way to go: run for Key West, ditch the *Bayonne Baby* and walk away. On the strength of Marvin's credit card and a few hundred dollars in cash he left us we could rent a car and disappear into America. The prospect didn't seem too bad.

"I'm glad it happened, sweet one," Jupiter told me. She burned my lips with an undivided kiss, and we clenched. "I couldn't go on the way we were going. Something had to give, didn't it?"

It had. The wind was freshening. We were moving. It felt like freedom, though I knew we both felt a sadness we would hide at having to leave behind the world of the Caribbean. Jupiter took up the position in the bow from which she had made her moral

choice, selecting youth, penury and possibility over age, a magic wallet, and *Bayonne on Blue*. That was her power spot. No wonder she stood radiant in it. The sun, lowering down the afternoon, made a halo around her bikini'd body. I knew I was a lucky man.

"I made the right decision," she called to me as from a moral summit I myself could not hope to scale.

"You made the right decision," I agreed.

"And I'm going to stay with you forever," she promised. "We're in this forever, aren't we."

"Nope," I was surprised to hear myself correct her. It was the first step into knowing that I had made since becoming a fool, and I didn't even know I was making it. "About a year is my guess."

"What do you mean?" she asked me, but she knew I was talking truth.

"I mean we're going to have one hell of a year. We're going to see the world, and make love every day."

"Twice a day!"

"Don't make promises you can't keep. I mean what if we have a hangover or something?"

"Twice a day," she insisted.

"But there's going to come a day when it's over. The main thing," I said, and I was inventing here a little, "the main thing is to do everything we do so that there's no regrets when it's over. You follow me, Jupiter?"

She followed. All the way to Key West, where we ditched the boat as planned and rented a fire-engine-red Mustang convertible courtesy of Marvin. We drove north and then went into the tumult and color and beauty of America in 1970. One place to which we did not drive was Miami Beach and the Lady Luck. Thinking about the reception our perfidy would entitle us to with Albert and the gang spooked me. The thing to do was not think about Marvin, and we didn't, much. We became our own adventure. And I was right. In about a year it was over.

Nothing is the way it used to be, of course. For now, I'm living under an assumed identity in a place with no return address. Even my body is not my own. At night I walk the streets of our city and listen to the life that streams there. It is abundant, it wants to overwhelm. My life is as dense and prickly-textured, as fraught with complexity and enigma, as that of any middle-class adult American. I wouldn't trade it for the world. Nevertheless.

For a long time, the longest time, maybe forever, I'm slipping into a dream behind the wheel of a sleek blue Spitfire. My code name is Spud, but the only one in the world who knows that is the

pneumatic woman next to me in her leather bucket seat. We synchronize our watches. The little car leaps to life and we race. We slice the wind. Her hair is blowing free, she looks over at me and smirks.

We race. We're off on a top-down adventure across the highways of America. Jupiter plays with the buttons on the radio, tuning through static until finally the music of the spheres comes in clearly. I could listen to that music forever. I have visions of fields full of flowers, mountains full of bears, dirty streets full of lovers and spies, mothers and muggers. And us. "You're a fool," Jupiter tells me. She laughs. "I know that," I admit to her, and she laughs again. Then Oh! do we drive.

The Last White Woman On Warsaw Street

pamela MONTGOMERY

Mary Johnston's mother managed to sit in bed and bellow out eight last words before she flopped back onto her pillow and died: "Don't let the niggers take over the neighborhood." That was thirty years ago, and Mary was holding fast, the last white woman on Warsaw Street.

Standing outside the screen door of her little shotgun house on a gloomy Saturday, Mary surveyed the neighborhood through squinting eyes. The breeze ruffled her dress and tickled the long hairs on her legs. The 9:15's shrill whistle blasts were doubled by the standing rainwater that spread across the train yard next to Mary's house, engulfing the hatchmarks of the tracks. The reflected din drowned the squeals of the neighborhood children as they swarmed the street and the neighbor's porches like an invading army of giant black ants. Even Darnell Freeman's boom box, perched on his broad bare shoulder, disappeared under the weight of the whistle and the immense iron grumblings that cracked the street and made the fragile old houses shiver and groan their foundations.

As regular as clock cuckoos, the neighborhood women came out onto their porches, not to wave their husbands off to work as the Polish neighbors used to do when Mary was a child—not one husband remained on Warsaw Street—but to receive their mail into their creased hands.

The mail carrier was a blue man in shorts at the top of the street, tipping his safari hat at each face on every porch. The caboose rumbled past, leaving the water to lap and slurp the tracks in the train's wake. Mary could hear the mailman saying, "Morning, Miss Brown . . . Miss Jackson . . . Miss Freeman . . . Miss Johnson," at last reaching Mary's house at the bottom of the street: "Morning, Miss Johnston."

Mary squinted at him as he opened her gate and strode briskly to her porch, his knobby knees flexing just below the hem of his official postal shorts. "Morning, Miss Johnston. Just three today. Nothing from your broker. Holiday's got things messed up a bit."

Mary snatched the mail from him. "No check?"

"No, ma'am. Probably come Monday."

"But they got *their* checks," she said. "I saw." She squinted up at him through her bushy black eyebrows.

"Well, now, those checks are different. Those are Social Security and Family Service checks, now aren't they. Remember? Don't worry. IBM won't forget you; they're more reliable than the government, if I do say so myself."

"I know that." Mary flipped rapidly through the three envelopes while the mailman waited in the cloudy heat. "Here," she said, "you've given me Mrs. Johnson's food stamps. My name has a *T* in it. Remember?" She shot him a glare and told him, "My mama once said that little *T* is what separates our family from the niggers."

The mailman smiled with half his mouth and said, "Sorry, Miss Johns-ton," and tipped his hat.

He was through the gate before Mary could look at her mail again; he doubled back to the Johnson's house next door. She watched as he tipped his hat to the screen door. A long-fingered black hand emerged to take the envelope, then disappeared back inside. He tipped his hat again and was gone across the street, headed up the other side, his voice fading as Mary watched him approach Lake Avenue. The screen doors banged one after the other as the women retreated inside with their mail.

"Mornin, Mary." The voice, deep, rich, and leisurely, came from the porch next door. Mary squinted through the dark humid air that pressed down on the neighborhood like a low black ceiling. She jerked her head eastward, toward the voice. She knew it was Vincent, Mrs. Johnson's middle-aged son come home to roost, as his mother called it.

Stretching explosively on the porch, Vincent flexed his muscles, popping them all over. With a lazily cocked hand, he scratched his belly through his undershirt and yawned loud, with gusto. When he finished the ritual, he rolled his eyes in her direction. "Was that you I heard screaming last night?" he said.

Mary bristled. "No, that wasn't me. Possum got in. Hit him in the head with my Bible."

"Oh," said Vincent, lolling his eyes around the street. "So you killed him then." He smiled all over his face; the gold in his mouth caught the reflection off the rainwater standing in the street.

"No. He run off."

"Oh," said Vincent, scratching his chest. "So that was the *possum* I heard screamin'."

Mary spun around and went inside. She closed both her doors, even though it was already 98 degrees on the suction cup

thermometer on the living room window. She wiped the sweat from her upper lip. Thank God her house had no windows on the east side; no telling what Vincent might occupy himself with at night, when she watched her big-screen cable TV in the dark in her sweaty underwear.

The neighborhood wasn't safe anymore. Half the time she was afraid to go to the grocery store—all those niggers swarming the place like water bugs, always on the fourth of the month, the day after welfare checks. Not this month, though—Fourth of July was yesterday, no mail, no checks. Today, they'd all be there, talking their weird tongue, calling each other *honey*, and *sister*, and *girlfriend*. It made her cringe to shop alongside them, but she was out of anything that looked like supper—she would have to go to the store today.

She unlocked the pantry door, took out her big purse, and slung it over her elbow. She carried the purse around with her as she readied the house for her departure. First, she jerked up hard on the back door to get the stubborn lock to jibe. Then she went around the rooms closing and locking all the windows. The little shotgun house would be an oven when she returned, but it was best to be safe in this neighborhood.

Satisfied, she strode to the front door just as the 9:30 was thundering past, sloshing muddy water right up to Mary's side yard. The front door locked easily; every time she twisted the key and felt the brass bolt slide home, she felt mad enough to spit: Vincent had fixed it for her on the sly, and she knew he was waiting for her to thank him.

"Lock still works good, huh, Mary," came the deep voice from the porch next door.

Mary jumped slightly, but covered up by plastering her damp graying hair back to her skull. "It's all right," she answered. She kept her eyes trained on the swayed wooden steps as she hurried to the gate. She wished she didn't have to pass the Johnson house.

As she walked up Warsaw Street, Vincent sprang off his porch and fell in beside her. She walked faster, and so did he. He had no trouble keeping up, and didn't even breathe hard when Mary began to puff and sweat.

"Here, now, Mary, let me carry that heavy bag." He reached for her purse.

"You keep your greasy hands off my purse!" she screamed. She tried to walk faster but she couldn't get enough air to fill her lungs.

"Oh, now, Mary, we been neighbors a while. You know I don't

mean no harm. That satchel's heavy, now. What you got in there, anyways? You carryin around all that stock broker money?"

"None of your business, mister."

"I seen your checks, you know. Mailman's always screwin up our mail. I seen your checks. What do you do with all that money? All them zeroes, man oh man!"

"You got no call to open my mail."

"Didn't mean to, now, Mary. I thought it was Mama's. Come on now, you know how I feel about you. Why, if we was to get married, our mail could get *all* mixed up, and all you'd ever have to do would be take that little old *T* out your name."

Mary swung on Vincent and caught him upside the head with her purse. For a minute, he was thrown off balance, but he recovered by the time Mary's swing came full circle. His pearl and gold teeth flashed in a bright smile.

"Why, ain't you the spunky one!"

"You get away from me, nigger!"

Vincent let Mary put a few paces between them before he took up behind her. She heard him chuckling back there, saying, "Just fine back here, now, just fine."

Mary had reached the old church at Lake Avenue. The traffic was heavy and she looked around for someplace to rest her eyes as Vincent sidled up beside her. The church would do, the pink stucco Baptist church where she had been baptized Polish Catholic forty-five years ago, right there in the imported tile baptismal font of the stage. The Baptists used the font for flowers now and dunked their people in a stock tank under the stage. The tall black minister was unlocking the front door; soon the *hallelujahs* would float down the street to disturb her Saturday peace, doubled and redoubled by all that standing water in the train yard, until it ended up sounding like a tabernacle choir under a dome. She could only hope for heavy train traffic.

Vincent's voice rang out from her elbow. "Morning, Reverend Tremont! Choir in good voice today?"

"Let's hope so, Vincent. Special services tomorrow, you know. Dr. King's speech on video, freedom for the people."

"Hallelujah," said Vincent.

The minister stepped inside and closed the carved oak doors behind him.

Mary looked hard at Vincent. "You're no Christian," she said. "You're Baptist."

He smiled and chuckled. "You ain't no Christian neither."

Mary felt the blood rise to her face. "Am so."

"Ain't neither. You hit that poor little possum with a Bible. That ain't Christian." He smiled all the way to his pink gums.

Like a taut string snapping, something in Mary gave way. Maybe it was Vincent's persistence. Or maybe it was his closeness, and the cheery gold teeth that flashed on a gloomy day. Or maybe it was the rich coffee eyes that pinned her to the pavement. It was when she caught the sight of her wavering reflection in his eyeball that her spine snapped to and she made a grab for her dignity. "Least I wouldn't *eat* a possum," she said.

Finally there was a hole in the traffic and Mary darted across the hot asphalt to the Sack 'N Save, her run-over rubber thongs flipping and flopping behind her. Vincent was right on her heels. She flung open the door and stepped inside the cool store.

"You got shoppin money, Mary? I know your check didn't come."

Mary didn't answer. She yanked the last shopping cart out of the corral and started toward the meat case. The cart's wire body was sprung sideways. Its rear left wheel rode completely off the floor, spinning like a tossed coin, and one front wheel was permanently locked. The other two squealed.

Something bumped Mary's arm and the cart jerked free of her hands. Vincent stood staring at her, smiling, his fingers curled hard around the sticky cart handle. From deep in his chest he said, "I'll push the cart." He started shoving it down the first aisle. "Man oh man! Like pushin a dead pig through a slaughterhouse. Why ain't they got better carts?"

"They got better," said Mary. "The niggers got here first. They're taking over the Sack 'N Save, them and their food stamps and welfare checks."

Vincent leaned close into her neck and said, "Boogita boogita," and laughed out loud.

As they made their way through the store, Vincent excusing them around browsing neighbors, Mary didn't speak a word; she just threw items into the bottom of the cart. Vincent quietly put his in the baby seat. Soon, Mary got used to having him push the cart and was glad she didn't have to shove the stubborn thing down the aisles, but every once in a while, she grunted or snorted and shot him a look, just to keep up appearances for the neighbors, who were casting sidelong glances.

"One thing, Mary, these here wheels is a natural brake, what with these floors all slanty the way they is."

She was reading a pickle label when he said it. It made her think of the day that she was reading a label and her cart had

wandered off on the sloping old concrete floors. First she thought, "A nigger stole my cart." But then she saw the cart at the other end of the aisle, unmanned, nosing into the Lucky Charms. She had laughed to herself, and now she smiled, until she remembered who she was with and she put her hand over her mouth.

"What's funny?" said Vincent.

"Nothin's funny." She wasn't about to get into any real conversation with him.

"Somethin's funny. What is it?"

"Nothin's funny! Are you done shopping?"

"Mama wants some Lucky Charms."

The laugh was in her belly, making her sick. She had to let it go.

"What's funny?" Vincent said, already laughing.

"Once I thought a nigger stole my cart, but it went off on its own." She laughed so hard she had to lean on the front end of the cart.

Vincent never stopped smiling. "You got a strong laugh for a honky bitch."

Mary straightened up suddenly and leveled her stare at him. "Don't you ever call me that again."

Softly, he said, "Why, Mary, I didn't mean nothin by it," and smiled.

She looked at him long and hard. She suddenly wanted all her groceries out of the cart, but there were too many. "We're finished," she said, and wrenched the cart handle out of Vincent's hands. She wrestled the cart toward the check-out.

Mary's groceries came to \$59.62. When she saw the numbers glowing green on the register, she felt her stomach sink. What had she been thinking as she tossed item after item into the cart? Furiously, she fished in her big purse for loose money, but ever cautious of robbery, she carried very little cash—she found a five-dollar bill folded into a tiny square and tucked for safety under the ripped lining.

"Mary, you out of cash? Here now, miss," Vincent said to the cashier. "You put all of this together. This order goes all together. This is all food stamps." The checker started ringing in Vincent's purchase on top of Mary's.

Mary spun around and charged out the door just as a clap of thunder split the sky. Thank God there was a lull in the traffic. She plunged across the street and headed down Warsaw as the warm rain pelted her. The church choir had started up, all black *hallelujas* and *praise-the-Lords* and *Jesus-save-mes*. She put her hands

over her ears and tried to recall the tender *Ave Marias* that once floated through the imported pews and washed over her. She was walking so fast in the increasing rain, it was hard for her wet toes to keep a grip on her thongs. When she reached the Johnson house, Mrs. Johnson was standing out on the sidewalk under a red umbrella looking up the street at her. She stepped aside for Mary, smiling.

"My Vincent Christopher with you?" she said.

"No!"

"Oh, never mind. Here he comes now." She called and waved up the street, where Vincent was a dark head bobbing above three big grocery sacks bundled in his powerful arms.

Mary was having trouble getting her key into the lock. Sweat and rainwater ran into her eyes and clouded her vision.

"Trouble with that old lock again, Mary?" Mrs. Johnson said. She sauntered to Mary's gate and rested her free hand on top of it. That's as far as she had ever gone, and that's as far as she would ever go. "I'll send my Vincent over to fix it again. He sure is handy to have around." She sniffed the wet air. "Rain again. Wettest summer I recall. That river coming in the train yard, and I got bugs and mice trying to get in, get out of the way of the water. You got 'em? Next thing you know, snakes." She shivered and chuckled.

Mary got the key in the lock just as Vincent stepped up beside his mother. "Open the gate, Mama, I got Mary's groceries."

Mrs. Johnson looked from her son to Mary, Mary to her son, then gently eased the creaking gate in. She watched big-eyed as Vincent took the three porch steps in one long stride and stuck his foot in Mary's door just as she was slamming it shut.

"Damn, woman! Let me in here with your groceries!" He shoved hard on the door.

"Sweet Jesus," said Mrs. Johnson. Under the red umbrella, she began easing backward toward her house muttering and shaking her head.

Inside Mary's house, Vincent closed the front door with his foot. It slammed so hard the glass rattled in all the windows of the house. Mary had taken a stand in the arched doorway that led from the living room to the bedroom, her legs spread in a defiant stance, arms stretched from doorjamb to doorjamb. Her thin summer dress was glued to her body by the rainwater, a puddle forming beneath her. It was hailing now, hammering the windows and battering the roof, and Mary had to shout over the din: "Keep out of here!"

"I mean to bring your groceries to the kitchen," said Vincent. He wasn't smiling; his big jaw was thrust out and his eyes were slightly crossed. The rain droplets on his taunt arms sparkled.

"Them groceries ain't mine."

"Is."

"Ain't."

"I'm coming through." Two steps carried him across the tiny living room. He turned his shoulder to Mary and nudged it insistently into her chest, carefully positioning it over her heart. She resisted. He pushed harder on her breastbone. She lost her wet grip on the left doorjamb and had to resort to grabbing his slippery bicep. The first feel of him shocked her. His black skin was soft like suede, and hot, thinly layered over muscles that moved and rippled under her hand. She squeezed his arm as hard as she could, but even her big hand would not go around it. She could feel the veins pumping under his skin.

His nostrils flared as he snorted with the effort of pushing her into the bedroom that stood between them and the kitchen. Sweat droplets and raindrops were launched on his breath across to Mary's face; they trickled down her forehead and cheek to her chin. She braced herself on the bare wood floor, but her feet were sliding out of her thongs. Sweat ran down her legs.

She wedged a hand between the limp sacks of groceries to push on Vincent's chest. The smell of meat-blood and ripe bananas rose out of the wet paper sacks. Mary and Vincent grunted and strained against each other, nose to nose, eye to eye, chin to chin. Mary lost her grip on one thong and the splintered floor chewed her bare foot. She pressed against his chest. His wet T-shirt clung to him. She could feel his heart beating fast under her palm as she pushed hard against it. His breath puffed on her sweaty face.

The center grocery sack fell to the floor between them and Mary shoved her other hand into Vincent's hard belly. He pushed with his hips against her hand, straining forward with his flexing buttocks. Mary was losing ground. Her other thong popped off and she dug her curled toes into the wood floor, feeling for a warped floorboard to cling to. But then, her right hand slipped on the wet shirt and slid like an oiled fish past his belt, running up hard against his sharp hipbone.

Vincent dropped both sacks of groceries. A pickle jar exploded, filling the room with the smell of dill. Their scuffling feet mashed bananas and sausages into the wood floor.

And then, Mary just caught the mischievous flash of Vincent's smile as he abruptly stopped resisting, causing the force of her

thrust to drive her straight up against him, chest to chest, belly to belly. Black arms then wrapped her up and her pale bare feet came up off the floor.

"Mary," he whispered into her ear.

All night long, the rain and the hail drummed on the house. When Mary opened her eyes that bright Sunday morning, her cheek was resting on a wad of cockleburs brought in by the possum the night before. She didn't move. At first she thought the possum was in bed with her again, stroking her shoulder with his leathery palm.

New sounds flooded her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears against them but they forced their way in: soft breathing beside her, her heart, his heart, water lapping, dripping, a sudden splash.

Her eyes sprang open. The first thing she saw was a new pattern on the ceiling. Across the familiar cracks and stains and hanging chunks of ceiling paper danced glittering reflections, flashing lights, sparkling patterns of motion. She turned her head toward the kitchen door. A big silver fish jumped halfway up the pink wall, then splashed down on its side into the water.

Mary sat up in bed and looked around. Her thongs floated like gondolas toward the kitchen door. A wooden end table drifted silently in from the living room. Muddy water lapped at the low windowsill and eddied in and out the open window.

A black shape moved silently out from under her bed and through the water, twitching fleshy whiskers and twisting its big body as it made its way across the room, approaching the floating thongs. Suddenly the water churned and a thong disappeared; a moment later it bobbed to the top again.

"Sweet Jesus. What—?" Vincent sat up in the bed. "Why, Mary, the river's got out. We's flooded." A big catfish twisted its black body through the door to the kitchen. "Why, he know right where to go, don't he? Fish fry tonight." His laugh filled the little room and echoed off the surface of the muddy river water.

Mary swung her feet over the side of the bed, clutching the flowered sheet around her. The cold dark water came almost to her knees; the brown silt at the bottom felt silky, soothing as balm on her splintered soles. A turtle floated in over the windowsill and eyed them before pushing off toward the living room. She stood up in the water, the sheet spreading around her knees, and turned to face Vincent.

"My mama died in this bed," she said. She looked down at

him. "My mama died in this bed."

Gently touching her hand, he smiled and drew her down to his side. She sat with her back to him. At the kitchen door the catfish captured her thong.

Watching Albania

terry POW

I received my first glimpse of Eugene Spizatti as the ancient Morris Minor crept around the side of the mountain high above his villa. At least I assumed that the distant figure with a shock of bone-white hair was Spizatti. He was standing on a terrace and appeared to be looking out to sea. We were still too far away to be sure. The car had stopped at the top of a hairpin descent—the steepest yet—while Mrs. Spizatti thrashed wildly with the gear stick, trying to wrench it into first.

“Christ,” she said. “Christ, *Christ!*” It sounded like an invocation, but the gods were not so easily propitiated. The gear refused to budge. We remained poised at the top of the hill, a little island of profanity and grinding metal in the tranquil afternoon sunlight. I turned my attention to the distant white stone building. The villa was perched on the edge of a sheer granite cliff like the bleached nest of some mythical bird. Below, the sea stretched smoothly toward the faint outline of a landmass to the east. Through the haze, I could just make out a swelling of bare, dun-colored mountains. When I turned again toward the Villa Lupus, the lone figure had disappeared.

I was thinking how splendidly isolated was the Spizattis’ villa—it was impossible to speculate by what number of twists and turns the road would eventually deliver us there—when the Morris Manor lurched forward and we began our descent. Mrs. Spizatti had been silent during the long drive from the airport. My attempts to chat had been met with grunts and shrugs, so I’d closed my eyes and dozed. Now, when the road would seem to demand her complete attention, Mrs. Spizatti launched into a frenzied verbal attack on recent visitors to Villa Lupus.

“Piranhas!” she exclaimed, turning on me a pair of large, intense eyes and waving a finger under my nose. “They try to strip his flesh from his bones. Piranhas!”

“But surely, having materials of such literary interest will inevitably—”

“Bastards! Thieving bastards, the lot of them!”

Seeing her now, it was difficult to imagine that this jerkily animated figure, shabbily dressed, had once been one of Europe’s most promising young poets. Adele Serrano, as she was then known, had blossomed into fame with a little collection of poems

entitled *Petals*. She'd already been living with Paul Valéry for more than a year. He'd discovered her waiting tables in the Café de la Paix in the Latin Quarter. On the back of his bill she had written a five-line poem. Something about the direct, unforced sentiment of the lines intrigued him. He returned the following night, and the next, and the next six nights after that. Each time he came away with a new poem. Without telling Adele, he had them published at his own expense. He presented the book to her late one evening, when the café was almost empty, and they were sharing a bottle of armagnac and chatting about this and that. That was the moment Valéry realized how much he had fallen in love with this slight young woman with the pale complexion and large, dark eyes. In the next three years she turned out three more volumes of poetry, each more praised than the last. The critics were in love with her too. No poet had revealed the sensuous contours of the female heart with such touching simplicity. Then Eugene Spizatti had arrived on the scene.

Although faded now—a dusty scandal concealed in the back issues of the European gossip columns—it had been part of the folklore of the late 1920s literary scene. Spizatti the Svengali. Spizatti the genius. Spizatti the corrupter of youth and promise. Looking at the photos taken at the time, there was an undeniably diabolical cast to the face: something cunning, wolfish. When he met Adele he was still caught up with the Dadaists, reciting his poems in the cafés of Montmartre, naked with a dead cat draped around his neck. He was arrested several times, but the outrage he provoked was tempered by an irresistible charm he could manifest when needed. Judges invariably let him off with a wink and a mild warning. Valéry had no notion this *outré* character would, in the instant of a chance meeting, appropriate totally Adele's affections. But it happened just like that. She left him with barely a word exchanged and set up with Spizatti. Valéry was crushed; Adele and he never spoke again. Soon after, Spizatti's last great scandal—involving allegations of sexual misconduct with the twelve-year-old daughter of a government minister—drew Adele away with him in its wake. They fled the country, first to Turkey, then Afghanistan, and on to Algiers, before settling at the remote north-eastern corner of the island of Corfu.

The "great scandal." How difficult it was to picture this "Mrs. Spizatti"—now lapsed into a sullen silence as the car wound through a narrow, twisting driveway leading to the villa—as an international fugitive. Neither of the Spizattis spoke in public again. The zeal of the French authorities gradually waned after a series of unsuccessful

extradition attempts. The evidence was thin and after a few years their heart was no longer in the chase. For more than fifty years the couple lived incommunicado in the Villa Lupus, holding court with a few expatriate friends from the Paris days. Even these contacts dropped off in time. So far as I'd been able to find out, the Spizattis now lived alone apart from an elderly Greek housekeeper.

What disrupted the slow, apparently contented drift into oblivion was a rumor that had seeped into the publishing worlds of Paris, London and New York a year ago. The rumor claimed that Spizatti had certain letters and manuscripts from the Twenties that he was prepared to sell. Interest in Spizatti's own idiosyncratic productions had long since dwindled to the level of curiosities, and would hardly have drawn agents from any of the major publishing houses. No, it was further whispered that the Spizatti trove included letters and other memorabilia from writers and artists of the period whose reputations, unlike Spizatti's, had grown and ripened in the intervening years. The *piece de resistance* was an entire section from *Ulysses* which Joyce had suppressed from the final manuscript. The missing section was said to shift the work in a new direction. Of course, this had seemed too good to be true. Publishers are a strange cocktail of the skeptical and the romantic, and none of the major houses was quite prepared to throw its hat into the ring until the rumors gained volume and a certain credibility from the independent testimony of a Turkish literary agent. He claimed to have seen the typewritten section and to have authenticated Joyce's correcting style and even his handwriting in the margins. For a moment, sober heads appeared ready to overlook the notorious fact that Teluk Begim, the agent in question, had the professional ethics of a Colombian drug baron. But almost immediately, Begim closed the door he'd cracked open. He tried to slip away with the Joyce manuscript stuffed down his pants. This clumsy ploy sent Spizatti scurrying back into his shell. Other free-lance agents, who felt inclined to give Begim's authentication of the manuscript the benefit of the doubt, were coldly rebuffed when they turned up at Villa Lupus.

So matters remained for several months. Then another whisper emerged from this little corner of Corfu. This one was carried—by an agent deemed trustworthy this time—to the chairman of our own publishing house. A man of grace and old-world charm, he had spent his youth in the Paris of the late 1920s. While there, he'd helped Spizatti out of a small financial fix. Apparently, this slight gesture had been remembered now that the Spizattis were

again financially embarrassed. Spizatti's health was said to be failing and the word was he would be ready to part with the papers for a reasonable price. Of course, there was no guarantee Spizatti had what he claimed. But now it seemed worth the gamble. Within two days I was on a flight to Corfu with a banker's draft containing an enticing number of zeroes after the dollar sign. Given Spizatti's well-documented unpredictability, I'd been instructed to proceed cautiously, to let Spizatti raise the issue of the documents and his notion of a price.

At close hand, Villa Lupus was something of a letdown. My first impression, stepping out of the car, was one of sorry dilapidation. Paint had long since peeled from the door and window frames. Grass grew in wiry clumps up to the house. Four or five moss-covered roof tiles leaned against the side of the building.

Mrs. Spizatti led the way to the front door. It was not locked, but swung open with a gothic creak onto a twilit interior. It smelled musty, but at least it was cooler inside.

"You can wait here. I'll have Helena bring in your bags." Mrs. Spizatti looked at me searchingly with her large crepuscular eyes then shuffled off through another door. I was in a small antechamber. No carpets or wall drapings relieved the almost monastic starkness. Through the soft leather soles of my shoes I could feel the coolness of the dark floor tiles. In a corner, near a narrow window that looked out upon a triangle of herbage that may once have been a garden, stood a small table and a low chair. Since no one was apparently going to rush me into the formalities of a greeting, I sat down in the chair and almost immediately felt sleepy.

I must have dozed off, for when I opened my eyes after what seemed like only seconds, my heart jumped at the sight of Eugene Spizatti bending over me. He was tall, though somewhat stooped, and so thin his corduroy pants and old white tee-shirt hung from his body in folds. The whole energy of the body seemed to have retreated into the large head and mane of matted white hair. His facial features were disproportionately small, except for his eyes. They were closely set, but like those of his wife they seemed to bulge from some inner pressure. He said nothing.

In my confusion, I stood up and held out my hand. He took it without enthusiasm. His hand felt cold and enervated.

"I'm so grateful for your allowing me to visit you—"

He cut me off with a shrug. "Do what you must. It's really no concern to me. What can I say?"

The voice sounded dry. And yet I sensed, and I can in no way

explain why, a discrepancy between his words and intent. This was the first almost imperceptible clue that Eugene Spizatti found me, for his own imponderable reasons, somehow "interesting."

The housekeeper entered with my bags. Spizatti muttered something to her in Greek. She grunted, turned and indicated with a jerk of her small, round head that I should follow her. As soon as I reached the room assigned to me and the housekeeper had left, I stretched out on the narrow bed and fell into a deep sleep.

A beam of sunlight from the small, high window woke me. I checked my watch: 6:30. I noticed a tray on a table beside my bed. It contained a basket of bread and covered containers of cheese and large, black olives. There was also a carafe of resinous white wine. Someone, probably the housekeeper, had brought me supper the previous evening. I broke off a corner of bread and nibbled it. How long had I slept? Fourteen hours? I could now hear voices outside the window. I was apparently on the second floor because the small opening allowed me only a glimpse of porcelain sky. I could make out Helena's voice, and that of a male also speaking Greek. It didn't sound like Spizatti; this voice was younger and laughing. Another servant perhaps? I could also hear dishes being placed: breakfast was being arranged. Anxious to get my business underway, I washed and dressed and somehow found my way down to a small terrace where the Spizattis were already at breakfast.

Mrs. Spizatti looked up, fixed me with a glance as if she'd forgotten who I was, then nodded and returned to the book she had open at the table. Her husband stared straight ahead. He held a mug of coffee in his right hand. With his left hand he held in place a light woolen blanket he had draped around his shoulders. Though the sun was making encouraging progress in the sky, it was still quite early and an intermittent breeze carried the remains of the previous night's chill. The silence should have been awkward yet somehow wasn't. We simply sat. A moment later, Helena appeared and set before me a bowl of dried fruits, some bread and a steaming mug of strong black coffee. As I sipped the coffee, I realized where we were in relation to the rest of the villa. This was the terrace on which I had spotted Spizatti yesterday, when we were still high on the mountain road. He had been standing by the railing, looking across the narrow finger of sea that separated the island from the distant landmass. No haze obscured the mountains now. The crystalline morning air brought them into sharp focus. They still seemed desolate and blunted, yet I now could make out a telecommunication structure on the top of one

summit, and a track or road that wound its way down and disappeared into a canyon.

"Albania."

Spizatti's voice startled me and I spilled hot coffee on my hand.

"I tried to swim across once. Got halfway when a current caught me. I would have drowned if a fishing boat from the island hadn't picked me up."

"Bloody fool," muttered Mrs. Spizatti.

Spizatti turned toward his wife. I believe he smiled, though it was difficult to be sure. The thin lips twitched at the edges, and the great white head nodded slowly and slightly.

"Why swim to Albania?" I asked.

Mrs. Spizatti snorted and threw a piece of bread toward a squat gray bird that had been watching the table from the edge of the terrace. A yellow beak jabbed, impaled the bread, and bore it away toward a clump of tall grass. Spizatti looked sharply at me and chuckled, a rasp from somewhere deep inside this throat.

"In my younger days I might have said I was inspired to do it. I was inspired quite a lot back then." He turned toward his wife. "I should say, we were inspired, wouldn't you, Adele?"

"Fuck you," responded Mrs. Spizatti absently. She was fumbling in a small, tattered handbag. She pulled out an empty cigarette packet and tossed it on the table. She delved deeper and surfaced with a single battered cigarette. Her husband pulled a lighter from his pocket, leaned over and lit the cigarette for her. She nodded coldly, and leaned back in a cloud of blue smoke.

"I thought it coincidence," Spizatti continued, "when we ended up here. After all, we'd been in so many strange places before this. With the authorities hot on our tail, as they say in the detective stories. But as the years settled into one another, I realized more and more that coincidence was just another form of certainty." He pointed toward the country across the strait. "Godforsaken looking place, isn't it?"

"Somewhat barren, yes."

Spizatti began to laugh. "I've been staring at that 'barren' country every day for the past twenty years! It has become my muse! I read secrets there that would freeze your blood!"

Suddenly he stood up. "If you decide to take a walk, beware the donkey. A vicious beast." Without another word, Spizatti shuffled back into the house.

I sat there for a full minute in silence with Mrs. Spizatti, who finally said: "Of course, he's totally mad."

I took the walk and I did see the donkey. It was chewing on a white brassiere that had apparently slipped off a railing above. Mrs. Spizatti (I could only assume the item to be hers) had probably laid it out to dry in the sun. The track brought me near to the animal. It was tethered by a long rope to an olive tree. The donkey regarded me with a large vacant eye and, perhaps to mark its territory, farted as I moved past. Minutes later, when it was already out of sight, I heard a desperate he-hawing. I wondered if the poor beast was choking on the bra strap, but by now the track had descended twenty feet at least, and I didn't have the energy or inclination to return to check. Anyway, if the animal was capable of making that kind of racket it was unlikely to be in any immediate danger.

Mrs. Spizatti had informed me, grudgingly and vaguely, that this trail would eventually bring me to a small cove with a pebble beach where I could swim. What she had neglected to mention was that the last twenty feet involved an almost vertical descent down the cliff face. Iron spikes had been hammered into the rock to provide foot- and hand-holds. I sat on the small ledge and studied them. The prospect was not enticing, but at the same time I was hot and sticky. The thought of a swim was tempting. I took firm hold of the first spike, within easy reach at the edge, and eased my body over the side. For a moment I panicked when my feet couldn't find the next spike. After that, an absurd feeling of bravado took over as I lowered myself, hand over hand. When my right foot finally touched the bottom, I felt I had traversed some rite of passage into a new dimension of manhood. I shook my head and chuckled.

The sea, silky and almost motionless in the noontime heat, lay less than twenty feet away. A profound hush pervaded the cove. It seemed as if I'd stepped into a photograph: nothing stirred. I felt suddenly alone. The feeling passed as abruptly as it came. I slipped out of my clothes and stepped into the water.

At supper that evening, I was surprised to see I was not the only guest. Also seated at the table was a young man, I should say in his late twenties. He was dressed in a priest's surplice, but he wore it with a kind of gaiety as if it were a costume. Two empty bottles of Retsina stood on the table. It looked like the three of them had been drinking for some time. Mrs. Spizatti leaned back in her chair, eyes closed and legs splayed almost indecently. Her husband stood up when I stepped onto the terrace.

"Ah, our fearless publishing minion! Allow me to introduce you to our good friend, Father Gricki—soother of souls, friend of the damned!"

Spizatti slumped back into his chair to study the effect of his introduction.

The priest looked up and smiled. It was a handsome face; I could imagine the young women of his parish incurring penances just for the sake of being near him. He seemed at once out of place and in a curious way at home at Villa Lupus. Spizatti interrupted my thoughts.

"You went swimming?"

"Yes."

"Naked? Skinny dipping, as you Americans so quaintly call it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, did you get an erection?"

A loud croak came from Mrs. Spizatti. She slumped forward, slapped the table with her hand and went into a coughing fit as if she were about to deposit her lungs on her plate. Her other hand flailed around beside her chair. The priest got up, moved to her side, found her handbag and pulled out her cigarettes. He opened the packet, lit a cigarette and passed it to her. She took it eagerly and in a brief interval between wrenching coughs, shoved it into her mouth and drew deeply. The effect was immediate and calming. She opened her eyes, looked at her husband, then sideways at me. As if on cue, Spizatti continued.

"I'm 72, but when I come out of the water I'm ready to fuck."

"My dear," croaked Mrs. Spizatti, "you're always ready to fuck. You'd fuck the donkey if you could get it to stand still long enough."

Later, after the Spizattis had both retired for the evening, I found Father Gricki standing on the spot where I'd seen Spizatti on the afternoon of my arrival. He was staring across the strait at the Albanian coastline, now burnished by the last flare of sunset. He acknowledged my approach with a slight inclination of his head.

"Do they usually go to bed this early?" I asked.

Father Gricki smiled. "Oh, she'll sleep through till morning. The Retsina will see to that."

"And Spizatti?"

The priest turned to me. The smile was gone, and in its place an expression of sudden intensity. "He never sleeps."

This cut short further conversation, and for several minutes we stood in awkward silence staring across at the distant coastline, now almost completely swallowed by a profound blackness. I sensed

Father Gricki relax beside me.

"Have you spoken with him yet about the manuscripts?"

I was a little surprised that the priest was aware of my mission, but then again I had no idea of the degree of intimacy he shared with the Spizattis. My information, back in New York, was that they lived reclusively.

"I thought I'd see the lay of the land first. This is not your average couple."

Father Gricki chuckled. "Interesting word." Sensing my perplexity, the priest went on: "Average. From the Italian, *avaria*. Means 'damaged good'—a maritime term, I believe."

"I'm impressed."

Father Gricki shrugged. "I studied comparative languages. It has turned me into a bit of a bore."

Again we lapsed into silence. A breeze began to pick up off the water; it felt pleasantly cool on my face. There was a kind of magic to this spot, and I began to understand why Spizatti might want to spend so much time here, watching Albania. Father Gricki turned to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Do not take too long assessing the lay of the land, my friend."

"You think I should be more direct with him?"

The priest shrugged. "There's an influence at work here that may not be altogether healthy."

The words were delivered with such deadpan seriousness that I was almost taken in. Father Gricki was watching me closely. He seemed disappointed when I burst out laughing.

"Father Gricki, I'm here to coax some old manuscripts from a man who is clearly batty. His wife, too, come to that. I'm far too prosaic to be susceptible to 'influences.'"

The priest smiled broadly. "Ah, the wonderful American skepticism." He looked at his watch. "It's late, and I must depart early tomorrow. I will leave you to the evening's charms."

He shook my hand and began walking back to the villa. No lights shone from any of the windows, and the black-robed priest had already disappeared into the gloom when he called back: "Was it true?"

"Was what true?"

"About the erection?"

I can't be sure what awoke me. I'd been having a complicated dream about Spizatti and the donkey. The donkey had some proofs spread out between its hooves and was correcting them with a large, thick pencil. Then Spizatti was somehow there. He began arguing

with the donkey about a change the beast had made to the manuscript. Spizatti wanted the donkey to reinstate a word. In the dream I knew what the word was and Spizatti's point made sense to me though I didn't agree with it; I sided with the donkey. Spizatti rounded on both of us. He screamed, his eyes sintered, and a thick viscous fluid began to spill from his mouth. I wanted to run, but the donkey stood firm. Its pencil grew, larger and larger. I heard a voice—Father Gricki's. That's what awoke me, I remember now. I was scuttling naked across a bare, rocky landscape like a demented baboon. No houses. No people. Only cindered grayness. My feet bled and I felt a terrible pain in my groin, as if something had been cauterized there, but I could not bear to look. Then I saw them. Three figures: the Spizattis and the priest, standing at the cliff edge looking seaward, toward me. Father Gricki raised his hand and opened his mouth. Something silvery and liquid emerged, pulsed in the air for a moment, and moved slowly across the water toward me. Then I heard Father Gricki's mocking words: "Was it true?"

Opening my eyes, my first feeling was that I'd soiled the sheets like a thirteen-year-old, and how was I going to explain the mess to the Spizattis' housekeeper. I hadn't fortunately, yet I did feel terribly hot. I glanced at my watch: 3 a.m. Moonlight filled the room from the small, high window. I needed to get some air, and slipped on my bathrobe and padded barefoot down the stairs and out onto the terrace. The pre-dawn breeze felt good.

At first they seemed like a single dark shadow bunched at the end of the terrace. As my eyes adjusted, I made out Spizatti's mane of white hair. To his left, the stunted outline of Mrs. Spizatti, and on the other side the tall, cowed figure of the priest. They faced away from me, motionless, toward Albania.

One-Card Crazy Eights

valerie BROCK

You don't play One-Card Crazy Eights so much as you decide to live in that world for a while, by those rules, by that commitment. It's a stupid card game. As if regular Crazy Eights isn't tedious enough, One-Card is harder to win, or even to conclude. Like the ordinary version, the object is to get rid of your cards. One-Card adds rules—like you have to say “one-card” when you're down to your last one. If you forget, you pick up the pile.

I spent long afternoons playing it the summer I was nine. My best friend and I would lay on the floor of her older sister's bedroom, listening to 45s, dipping all-day Charms Pops in ice water and laughing ourselves sick.

We played with two decks, personalized rules, and cat-like attentiveness. The reward for catching a minor infraction was seeing your opponent's pile increase. The games were interminable. By dinner time, our hands were cramped from holding cards, our elbows were raw from propping ourselves on the floor, and we were giddy and headachy from giggling.

There were no clear victories. Winning was almost accidental, and always seemed to occur just as we were called to dinner, or when we had decided to go to the pool. We would emerge from the room in a daze, with images of playing cards congealing and curdling behind our eyes for hours afterward.

Because of my mother, we rarely played at my house. Her sodden, cheerful omnipresence made my friends uneasy. Now I know that she was drinking too much, but then she just seemed goofy, different from other mothers. She didn't like games, and always pushed us to play with dolls as she had at our age. I wasn't interested. I loved games, and as I got older I played them compulsively. Word puzzles in the newspaper, trivia games on the radio, even the science questions on the backs of cereal boxes. Getting them right made me feel in control.

Card games were fads for us. We'd play one game until we were sick of it, then move on to the next. One-Card Crazy Eights only lasted one summer, then gave way to the more challenging King's Corners. After a brief, dull interlude of making gum wrapper chains, we moved on to Gin Rummy and stuck with it for years.

Although I never expected to play One-Card Crazy Eights again, I didn't forget how to play it. Those long afternoons

embedded the game in my mind, buried beneath Top 40 song lyrics and jump-rope rhymes. Fifteen years later, I was able to recite the rules as if I had a lollipop in my mouth and "American Pie" on the record player.

One-Card Crazy Eights is a game for children, but last winter in the Denver airport I explained the rules to an adult. Kevin could loosely be described as my boyfriend. He and I had started seeing each other a few weeks before he moved to Los Angeles. His job brought him to Chicago once a month or more, and he usually managed to spend the weekend. I had visited him in California twice, once on a business trip, and once for the hell of it. We'd been living like that for two years when Kevin suggested the ski vacation.

It was a big step. We were used to our habits, our guidelines. Kevin always stayed with me when he was in Chicago, but I didn't give him a key to my apartment. He usually initiated telephone calls. We never asked about other people, but I suspected Kevin had a local girlfriend.

On my second trip to Los Angeles, I had looked in Kevin's refrigerator for a beer and was surprised to see two cans of Diet Coke sitting on the top shelf, united by sagging plastic rings. Kevin hated Diet Coke; he said it tasted the way tar smelled. I held the cans up, saying, "Have you developed a taste for tar?"

"Oh, I . . . My friends drink it, it's left over from a party, I didn't buy it."

He didn't look me in the eye when he answered, and I knew he was lying. I set the cans back on the shelf and said, "Jesus, it's not like it's illegal."

Later that day, Kevin threw the cans in the trash and we pretended I never saw them. His deception relieved me, allowed me to feel much less guilty about the man I occasionally slept with in Chicago. After that incident, Kevin and I developed something more than an unspoken agreement. Neither of us wanted to lie, so we never mentioned love, our relationship, or the future.

The ski trip unnerved me because I sensed that Kevin was finally going to cross the line. Something was building in him. He complained about the Chicago weather more often, especially in comparison to Los Angeles. He asked me about my career plans. He pointed out cute children. I couldn't tell if he was rationalizing a potential break-up or deciding if he should ask me to move to Los Angeles.

I liked the way things were. A boyfriend when I wanted one, being alone when I didn't. If I was sitting home feeling sorry for

myself on a weekend, I could argue that I had a boyfriend, and if I slept around, well, technically it was okay, because Kevin and I had never agreed that we wouldn't. People assume that a long-distance relationship is difficult, but for me it was easy.

The vacation put me and Kevin on neutral ground, in between Los Angeles and Chicago. It was the perfect place to make a change, either advance or retreat. If Kevin was assessing our long-term compatibility, I wanted him to decide favorably. I figured I'd rather be in the position of turning Kevin down than having him dump me.

Consequently, I was on my best behavior all week. Cheerful, but not too cheerful in the morning; enthusiastic, but not too enthusiastic on the ski slopes. I took fast showers, even when my muscles were sore from skiing. I was ready to go in the mornings before Kevin was, and at night I cooked dinner. I gave Kevin back rubs which he did not reciprocate. By the end of the week, even I wanted to live with me.

Kevin seemed perpetually on the verge of saying something. He'd start, "Audrey, I've been thinking . . ." and I would somehow cut him off. I deflected any sentences he began in that thoughtful tone of voice. Once I even had to drop my mitten off the chairlift to keep him from leading me into a conversation I didn't think I wanted to have. At last he began to stop himself, exasperated and I thought I was home free.

Because he wanted to talk during the vacation, I thought he was probably going to suggest I move to Los Angeles. I knew Kevin. If he wanted to break up with me, he'd wait until the end of the vacation to say so. Why spoil our fun? I was pleased that I passed the test, but I wanted him to ask me over the phone so he couldn't see my face. Also, it would give me more time to think.

On the drive from the ski area to the airport it started snowing. Of course, I had volunteered to drive. The rental car skidded a little, enough that I skipped my third beer. We were drinking the last six-pack of our vacation because neither of us wanted to carry it home and it was a waste to leave it in the condo.

"Hey, Kevin," I said. "Do you think this snow is going to delay our flights?"

He turned to look behind him. "Nah. Stapleton is set up for this stuff." A moment later he added, "Too bad it didn't come earlier in the week."

I agreed. "Fresh powder."

Inside the Denver city limits I started watching for planes. I didn't see a single one take off or land. "This doesn't look good."

Kevin answered, "Mellow out. This airport's like O'Hare. They never close it unless there's a blizzard or something. Can I have the last beer?" Without waiting for my answer, perhaps seeing that I hadn't reached for my third beer even though I'd finished the second one fifteen minutes earlier, he pulled the last bottle from behind my seat and opened it.

While we waited for the rental car shuttle bus I heard a man say, "It's supposed to go all night." The woman he was with answered, "I'm so glad you got a hotel room." I looked at Kevin apprehensively and he patted my leg. He was acting calmer than he felt, I could tell. His face was flushed from more than beer and sun. I didn't even want to think about how I looked. My nose was peeling and seven days of mild hangovers had given me dark circles under my eyes. The tan helped, but probably not enough. My skin tone was a major flaw in my presentation of the perfect woman.

The list of flight departures was a mess. None of the flights even had estimated times. They just said, DELAYED, DELAYED, DELAYED. We went ahead and checked in, mainly to get rid of the skis. If flights had been leaving, my plane to Chicago was scheduled to take off an hour before Kevin's flight to Los Angeles. We decided to go to my gate.

After finding seats that were comparatively isolated in the crowded terminal, Kevin said, "Look, Audrey, you stay with our stuff. I'm going to see what's going on. I'll find a TV or something." I nodded, not caring. The past week was the longest time we ever spent together and I wanted to be alone for a while. The strain of performing was beginning to wear on me; I felt like being privately surly.

I looked at my watch. It was 5:15; 6:15 in Chicago. My flight should have been airborne by now. The prospect of further delays suggested a headache. I pulled a bottle of aspirin out of my purse even though I was losing faith in the curative power of the drug. I put two pills in my mouth, feeling them slide past the beer memory at the back of my throat. My mother had once told me that aspirin heightened the effects of alcohol.

She had a lot of strange ideas about drinking. Most of them were expressed in rhymes that she learned in college. I often wondered about her sorority. They taught her, "Wine then beer, you're in the clear," but also, "Beer then wine, you'll be fine." I had proved both of these wrong several times, but my mother believed them.

She lived a dreamy life, teetering on the edge of the world. She was so proud of me. Proud that I graduated from college, had

a job, and, she was certain, a glamorous life in Chicago. It was funny. We talked at least twice a week, and I told her almost everything, yet her perception of my life was completely at odds with reality.

She envied my control. "Who ever would have thought that I'd have such a take-charge daughter? You must get that from your father, the way you just know what you want and go get it!"

My mother always drank while she talked on the phone. I heard the ice cubes tumble against each other in the glass, and traced the thickening of her voice. Asking her about her drinking made her angry, then sad, so I learned not to do it.

She liked it when I talked about men. I had elevated my casual sex partner into an actual relationship for her benefit, but I hadn't told her about Kevin. Either I wasn't ready for Kevin to become a conversation topic, or I didn't want her to think she had raised a slut. Maybe both. I told her I was going skiing with girlfriends for the week.

Sometimes after talking to my mother, I thought I should cut back on my drinking, just to see how much I missed it. But not this week. It would have been too hard to explain to Kevin why I wasn't drinking. After three days, the old "high altitude, dehydration" excuse wouldn't have worked. Besides, I wanted to drink on this trip. It made Kevin and I get along better and I thought it kept us from talking about what we were doing.

Kevin walked toward me carrying two large cups of beer. "Looks like we're in for the long haul. There's a blizzard moving up from Pueblo, and we won't get out tonight. The hotels are full."

I hated him for ever suggesting the ski trip, but lapsed back into the ideal traveling companion. "Well, we might as well relax," I said. "Can I have a beer?"

He looked down, as if startled to find the cups in his hands, and said, "Here, this one's for you. Lukewarm Coors Light, your favorite."

I grimaced, almost believing him. "You didn't really get me that, did you?"

Kevin answered, "Just kidding. Get a grip. It's Heineken." He handed me the cup, then sat down and put his feet on my carry-on bag.

I picked up my book, but couldn't seem to keep my mind on it. It was almost black outside. Sporadic bursts of snow and ice flung themselves against the window. Unless I deliberately refocused my eyes, I could see only the reflection of the inside of the terminal,

me and Kevin. He just sipped his beer, watching people walk by. He muttered, "This really sucks."

I closed my book, feeling responsible for Kevin's petulance and obliged to entertain him. "Do you want to play cards or something?" To my surprise, he agreed. I went to the closest gift shop and bought two packs of cards, one with dogs on the back, and one with hamsters. Kevin moved our bags together and used my book as a flat surface for us to play on. I asked, "What do you want to play?"

"I don't care, something that takes a while."

I was already starting to feel a little loose from the beer. I didn't think I was up for the intellectual rigor of Gin Rummy and I didn't have the energy for Spit. We needed a long, lethargic card game. I looked at Kevin. "Ever played One-Card Crazy Eights?"

Kevin shrugged. "Teach me."

I explained the rules and told him that I'd be lenient in the beginning. "Do you know how to play regular Crazy Eights?"

Kevin shook his head. "I've played it but I don't remember how."

"Each player gets eight cards. You try to discard them by matching the card on the discard pile, either the number or the suit. If you can't match, you have to draw cards until you can. If you have an eight, you can change the suit, and you can play them anytime. One-Card adds variations. Twos play double, fours quadruple, jacks and kings together, say 'one-card' before you're out, or you pick up the deck."

Kevin listened half-heartedly. He said, "So you just remember all these rules and try to get rid of your cards first?"

I said, "Yes, but also watch me to make sure I don't mess up. The combinations get tricky."

Once we started playing, Kevin concentrated. Outside, the snow blew harder, sending swirls of white against the window. Fewer people walked by, and throughout the gate area little nests of travelers began to form. All flights were canceled so the airport emptied of everyone except the stranded.

I noticed that Kevin and I had been given a wide berth. Families seemed to avoid us. Kevin thought that maybe our beers made us look like a bad influence. Using our boot bags and ski jackets, we established a camp encompassing a row of chairs, part of the ticket booth, and a section of windows. Twice I saw people start to invade our territory, then reconsider. Kevin and I looked at each other, raised our eyebrows, and shook our heads. Kevin said, "If someone asks, I'll move our stuff. Otherwise . . ."

Without thinking, I answered, "As long as they don't have children. They'll be up all night." Luckily, Kevin didn't seem to notice my anti-family remark. He just stretched, looked around, and returned his attention to his cards.

During the first hour of the game, I almost won twice. Both times I was forced to draw new cards. Kevin left to get us beers and, on returning, announced, "Bar stays open until midnight. We're not supposed to drink out here, so be discreet." I laughed. Under the circumstances it was hard to imagine airport police caring about where we drank.

Kevin picked up his hand and looked at me suspiciously. "There are more cards here now than there were before."

I tried to look innocent. "Are you saying I'm cheating?"

Kevin eyed me and said, "Let's just say my hamsters seem to have reproduced."

I denied it, but, a little later, when I got up to go to the bathroom, I took my cards with me.

After two hours, Kevin wanted to quit. I said, "Great, do you concede?"

He looked at me for a moment, then said, "When you put it that way, no. Let's keep playing." He then spent the better part of an hour on the verge of victory. Finally, after I bought more beers, he forgot to say "one-card" and had to pick up the deck.

We gradually slid from the chairs to the floor. By 11:00, I was lying on my back, holding the cards up in front of my face. I built a little pyramid out of the empty beer cups, making a triangular backwash spot on the gray carpet. Kevin told me I was making a mess, so I stacked the cups together, right side up. Kevin pointedly shifted his body away from the damp spot. He was starting to get a glazed, desperate look in his eyes. Usually I liked that look, but that night it gave me a sense of foreboding. Anything could happen.

We were playing cards very slowly. I coaxed, "Come on, Kevin, give up. You'll never win, and once you lose you can go to sleep." He stopped answering me. He just played, methodically.

At 11:30 we made a final beer run. We each bought two beers, brought them back, and set them next to the window. Then, carrying our cards, we returned to the bar and drank whiskey shots until just before closing. I had decided that as long as my cards were protected, anyone who wanted to could steal my carry-on bag and my ski boots.

My head was buzzing, and the few lights still on seemed very bright. I wanted Kevin to lose so I could pass out. I mentally amended my mother's rhyme from "Drink too much whiskey, you'll be frisky," to "Drink beer and whiskey, you'll be drunk." Back in

my prone position on the floor, I began droning again, "Kevin lose, Kevin give up."

He said, "You first. Give up. We've been playing for six hours." We were the only people in the vicinity who weren't trying to sleep. Crabby flight attendants had passed out thin blankets and pillows hours ago. I had a blanket on top of me even though I was sweaty.

Kevin held up his cards and said, "Look, our hands are about even. Let's mutually concede."

I shook my head. "No, one of us has to decide to end it." I couldn't just let it go. We'd been struggling against each other for so long that to simply stop would have seemed hollow. All that wasted time.

Kevin said, "I'm going to let you win so we can quit."

"You can't, you can't influence the cards. Anyway, if you want to quit you can concede."

Kevin said, "I'm just so tired. We've been playing this fucking game for way too long, and there's no way to end it."

"Well, my friend and I used to change the rules to make the game end. Like the first one to laugh loses, or if you forget to say 'one-card,' instead of picking up the deck, you automatically lose." I was really drunk. I went on, "You can raise the stakes. It's like you do lots of things for a while in this game, then the rules change, and you can't adapt, and you lose."

Kevin's eyes rested on my face. "You mean it, don't you? I've never seen you like this. Okay, forget to say 'one-card,' you lose, it's over."

We played in silence after that. I propped myself up occasionally to drink my beers. Setting them next to the window had kept them cold. The storm pounded against the terminal. From time to time, I'd glance up at Kevin and he was always looking right back at me.

Finally, we both were down to less than five cards. When I had two and Kevin had three, I began murmuring "one-card, one-card" like a mantra. Kevin remained silent. I couldn't play in suit and had to pick a card up. Kevin played, then I played. As he laid his second to last card on the discard pile, I raised my voice, reminding him to say, "one-card." Kevin ignored me. He set his last card, a four of clubs, down with a snap. He could have won, but he just wanted it to end. He was out.

I set my last card, the ten of clubs, on top of his. We looked at each other for a long moment, then Kevin slowly stood up. I gathered the cards and shoved them into the boxes, dogs and hamsters commingling. Then I drained my last beer and stacked the cup with the others on the chair above my head. Kevin leaned

with his forehead pressed against the window, watching the snow.

I closed my eyes and felt the terminal start to move. There was nothing to do about bed spins if you were already on the floor. I couldn't remember any helpful rhymes for this situation. Behind my eyelids, hamsters faced off against dogs, charging, then exploding in a minefield of hearts and spades. I fell asleep.

The next morning I woke to Kevin standing over me, prodding my hip with his foot. "Check it out," he said. I rolled over and saw that the blizzard had ended. Snowplows were out on the tarmac, pushing huge drifts to the sides of the runway. "Six feet," Kevin said.

I sat up. Around us, families were gathering luggage, blearily trudging small children to the bathrooms. Kevin said, "You're on Flight 816, right?" He looked at his watch. "You've got about hour and a half."

I asked, "What about you?"

"A little after that."

I held out my hand and he pulled me to my feet. My head seemed to remain on the floor. Kevin laughed at me. "I'm going for orange juice. Want some?" I nodded and sat heavily in a chair.

While he was gone, I took three aspirin, wishing I'd had the foresight to take them the night before. The dry pills stuck in my throat, and I gagged. A tremendous effort and fear of my head exploding kept me from vomiting. When Kevin returned, I took weak sips of the liquid. Somewhat incoherently, I asked, "Is my flight still at this gate?"

Kevin laughed again. "You're still drunk. Yeah, it is. I'm going to head on over to mine now."

He slugged back the juice, looking remarkably healthy and cheerful for someone who had spent the night on the floor of an airport. I stood up painfully, setting my juice next to my empty beer cups from the night before. "Well, I guess this is it," I said. Kevin looked at me speculatively. I asked, "Any plans to be in Chicago soon?"

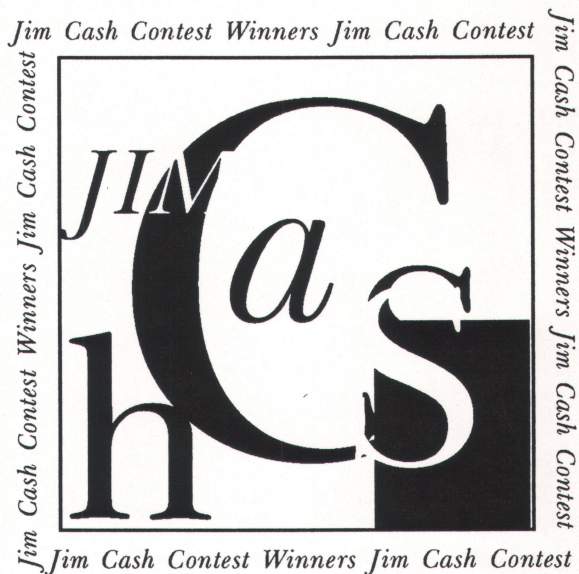
He shook his head. "No, maybe in St. Louis for a while. The Chicago project is over."

I said, "Well, I guess I'll see you."

"Definitely, I'll give you a call." He gestured to the floor. "Don't forget the cards."

I followed his hand and saw the dogs and hamsters squished in one box, loose in the other. "No, I won't."

Kevin kissed me, then he picked up his bags and disappeared down the terminal.



FIRST PLACE WINNER IN THE JIM CASH POETRY CONTEST

selected by Kimberly Blaeser

The Beekeeper's Daughter

heather A B N E R

I have always wanted
to come out from my father's hives
like a cactus bristling with needles,
glazed with bees.
Their bodies thick
and dripping from my ears,
 my throat,
 my wrists.
The comb opaque as pearls in my hands.

And today
I came home with a fine pot of honey,
wide as a sunflower,
with the comb floating murky inside.
Each cell concealed.
Dark tongues of honey
frosted over with wax,
like confectioners' sugar.

All afternoon I sat with it
cracked open on the table.
The fear still sharp in my body.
I stared in it,
as I used to stare into the tops
of the open hives
trying
to get over my terror of them.

I have been thinking of nothing
but bees

all day long.
The hives, tall,
white as wedding cakes
in the grass.
The insects gold banded
and constantly humming.
The sound of them,
slow
like a rolling boil.
Each belly heavy,
vibrating with work
and the love of honey.
Windows of honey
shaded in wax.
So edible.
Yes.
I know
that the only way
to conquer a fear
is to eat it.

FIRST PLACE WINNER IN THE JIM CASH FICTION CONTEST

selected by Kimberly Blaeser

Finding Home

heather elizabeth C H R I S T I A N

There were rumors of cannibalism in Denver. Trees resembled hands of drowning men reaching up for the last time. Gila monsters had been seen migrating north. None of the signs were good. Two terrible events had broken free, the third was waiting its turn.

No one was quite sure what had happened. No one was prepared. The most reliable information was that while moving some nuclear weapons to a safer storage sight, something backfired, misfired, fired. Suddenly, everything became a quiet twilight.

Frank and Hestia had been walking for a couple of days, following I-25 south from Castle Rock, looking for a place that wasn't hit as hard, and they had heard rumors that there was a Red Cross shelter set up in Taos. Frank took charge of the expedition using the excuse that an older brother should always take care of his baby sister. Besides, he reasoned, he was an Eagle Scout; he knew how to survive in the woods using only a compass and an army knife. Hestia shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes. She didn't care who led, but she did say under her breath that a person didn't need to be a boy scout to follow a four-lane highway. What she did like was being alone with Frank. With just the two of them, he didn't seem as nervous. When he was with other people, he always seemed to be looking over his shoulder for that someone who would stab him in the back, or shoot him in the heart. Maybe now that it was just the two of them, she thought, there was the hope that he would relax.

Hestia and Frank found the little pre-fab ranch house just south of Pueblo. Hestia knocked on the screen door. No one answered. Windchimes made out of soup cans clinked softly on the porch, as

if they were afraid to wake the dead. Hestia dug in her pocket and offered small bits of oreos to the plaster coyotes and concrete deer in the front yard, asking for their protection against the evil spirits.

They went in, and while Frank secured the house, Hestia made small talk with the family of skeletons sitting in front of the TV. "We really appreciate you having us here on such short notice. Don't worry about us. We can sleep on the floor."

"Like hell I will!" Frank yelled, walking in from the garage. "I am not about to give up a bed so you can play house with a bunch of bones. Shove them in the closet so I don't have to look at them!"

Hestia leaned over the largest skeleton's teeth. "He says they'll be happy in the master bedroom, and we can take the children's room." She looked at the family and then at Frank. "Don't they look so happy sitting together?"

"They have no lips," Frank said. "They have no choice but to smile. Come on, help me find some food."

They walked through the small hall connecting the living room to the kitchen and dining-room. Gray light filtered through a collection of stain-glass butterflies suction-cupped to the kitchen window, turning the kitchen into a dusty kaleidoscope. The table was set. A loaf of Wonder Bread lay next to a jug of grape juice. The fried chicken waited patiently in its tub.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Hestia sighed. "They were planning on us coming after all. Could we stay here? There's a ton of food in the cupboards, and enough 7-Up to last us until forever. We don't need to go to Taos."

Frank looked at her and shook his head. "You know we have to go to Taos, but we can stay here tonight. It won't put us that far behind schedule."

Hestia looked at him and sighed. She knew that once he started talking about keeping schedules, he wouldn't listen to her. She quietly opened cans of pork and beans and Bartlett pears. Frank opened a can of 7-Up and scrubbed his hands and arms until they glowed pink. Refusing to eat with silverware that might contain germs, he ate with his fingers. Hestia picked at her plate with a knife and a salad fork. Her steady cough added a counter-rhythm to Frank's smacking lips. "Do you think the family minds not eating with us?" she asked.

"Jesus, Hess. They're dead."

"You never know. Let's eat dessert with them in the living room. It could be like a slumber party. I bet they're just dying for some good gossip." Frank rolled his eyes. Hestia laughed which triggered a fit. She fell off her chair and rocked back and forth in a ball, unable to stop coughing. Frank watched, frozen in his chair.

After dinner, Hestia and Frank went to the children's bedroom looking for board games. Dinosaur wallpaper peeked out from under rock posters. "Let's play Life!" Hestia said. "I'll be a doctor with three boys. I'll name them Lazarus, Elijah, and Chad."

"Hestia, you can't choose what you want to be. You have to spin."

"Who's going to make me," Hestia challenged, "the Life police?"

"Why are you going to play if you're going to do everything before we start?"

"I just want to get the details out of the way so I can enjoy the game."

"That's all the game is, is details."

Hestia paused. "Do my eyes glow?"

"No."

"I hoped that they would. Then they could mutate into lasers and I could do cool stuff like pop popcorn with my eyes."

"You are completely whacked." Frank spun and won \$5000.

Hestia looked at the Life board. She picked up her pink car and began gnawing the heads off her children. "Frank, can I ask you a question?"

"No."

"Did you ever kill anyone?"

"You have someone in mind?"

Hestia's foot began shaking. She kicked her lips and whispered, "Dad."

Frank looked her straight in the eyes, "Would you be happy if I had?"

"Probably."

"Then, sure, I killed him." Frank was tired of playing Hestia's games. He loved her, and could go along with her when it came to feeding plastic lawn ornaments, but he wondered whether this was going a little too far. Yet, he wanted more than anything to see her happy. Besides, if he could keep her happy, it would be easier to convince her to keep to their schedule, and not get sidetracked playing with dead people.

Hestia moved closer to him. Frank tickled her back. He watched the fine dust escape from her blouse and sail around the room catching the fading light from the window. He decided to play. He whispered, "I shot him."

Hestia moved away. "No, you captured and tortured him, remember? It was the night Mom went to the hospital for cracked ribs. Remember? When I was in the kitchen making strawberry Kool-Aid, you snuck in and grabbed the bastard while he was taking a pee, and dragged him down to the basement."

"Yeah—that's right."

Hestia moved closer, she rubbed his shoulders. "Tell me how you tortured him."

Frank almost smiled. "I tied him up and gagged him. Then I plugged in the iron, and set it to cotton. For every time he hurt you, I burned him. Then I took a razor and sliced him up for every time he touched you."

Hestia brushed her lips against his ear and whispered, "Then did you stab the fucker?"

Frank closed his eyes and pressed his ear against Hestia's lips. "I got the longest, dullest knife in the kitchen. I poked his eyes out and shoved them down his throat. Then I stabbed him in the gut, invited you downstairs, and we watched him die."

"Oh Frank, I love you!"

The moon rose and woke Hestia. She untangled herself from Frank and walked into the kitchen. The moonlight shone through her almost transparent body. Bringing a small TV tray into the living room, Hess opened five cans of 7-Up and poured them into wine glasses. She sat on the couch in the middle of the family. "I thought that we could sit up and talk for a while. We won't stay up long, I promise. I just wanted to ask you to take care of Frank when I left. I'm hoping he'll just leave me here with you and stick to his schedule. But lately, he's been acting real strange. Like the way a dog acts right before he's taken to the vet. He knows something's up, even though everyone's trying to act normal. I know that if he sticks to his schedule, he can make it to Taos. Then the Red Cross will take care of him. Frank seems to be all strong, but when he was younger he used to be real scared of our father. In fact, I was always the one who had to defend us against him."

The family stared straight ahead and smiled. They sat perfectly still, completely attentive and seemed as if they were going to offer her some tea.

"I remember one time when we were younger," Hestia continued, "Frank was about fifteen, and I must have been eleven. We were hiding out in the barn taking a nap because our father wouldn't let us sleep past five in the morning. Frank was asleep near the door, figuring he could hear my father coming and he could quick grab a rake and look like he was working. I, on the other hand, was asleep in the loft, hoping that if Dad did come in I could just hide until he left. Anyway, my father goes in the barn looking for a tool and he finds Frank dead asleep. Frank always

was a sound sleeper. So my father takes two drops of hot coffee from his thermos and pours them down Frank's ear. Well, that woke Frank up right quick. Then my father starts beating on him, slamming Frank's head into the barn posts and dragging him around the barn screaming, 'You might as well be in your grave if all you're going to do is sleep!' All that screaming woke me up, and when I saw what was going on, I quick went and got a rifle. I pointed it right at my father's back and yelled as loud as I could, 'You let Frank go or I'll shoot!' I was so scared that I couldn't keep the rifle steady, but I tried to look as mean as I could.

"You know what my father did? He just laughed. Just stood up and started laughing at me because I was a scrawny girl trying to keep a big rifle lifted. I hate being laughed at worse than anything, so I shot him. It sent me flat on my back. But I got that bastard in the foot. Boy, was Mom surprised to see all of us at the hospital again. Strangest thing, though, when he got back he didn't wail on me—he got his rifle and handed me a brand-new junior rifle and said, 'If you're going to shoot, you might as well know how.' We had a great time, shooting cans and eating chocolate bars. He never hit us after that, but we all knew that he could shoot better than us." Hestia looked at the family. They were all grinning. They liked the story, they seemed to want to hear more. She said, "Now snakes is a different matter. Frank could kill a rattler by stabbing it in the heart. With animals he's absolutely terrific. He was always rescuing some wounded critter from the highway. It got to be quite a menagerie in our barn." Hestia put a pillow on the biggest lap, and curled up underneath the bones. The family created a blanket for her tired body. Hestia coughed. Blood splattered against a small bony hand. "Sorry about that. If I cover my mouth nowadays I feel like I'm suffocating." She yawned and ran her fingers across her scalp and shook a handful of hair from her head onto the floor. It reminded her of aspen leaves in October. "You know, it's kind of funny, but I don't think I'm afraid to die. Oh sure, I'm going to miss Frank, but he'll be okay. He always knows the right thing to do." She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and sank deeper into the couch. "I'm so tired of all this walking." Hestia closed her eyes. "I bet you're wondering why we didn't take cars. At first, we took his Blazer, but when that ran out of gas, we walked." Her speech slowed, and her breathing became deeper. "I wanted to just borrow cars that came our way, but Frank insisted they had too many germs, that it would kill us to ride in the cars with all that sickness just waiting to eat our bodies." She slowly feel asleep, completely relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Frank woke. He smiled and rolled over. Perhaps it would be all right, he thought. The Red Cross would be in Taos for a while. They didn't need to leave right away. They could stay here for a few days. See if they could make it, then if they couldn't they could always go to Taos. There was plenty of food and 7-Up, and Hess was right, he didn't need a schedule anymore. No one would care if he slept in. There was no one left to care. He would work during the day, maybe fix up the house and try to start a garden; when he came back in the evening, Hess could feed him supper and they could play games. He could teach her how to play chess. It would be heaven. He lay there and thought about how they could maybe find some seeds and plant a garden. Everything was going to be fine. He ran out of the room to find Hestia and tell her that he had decided they could stay here.

At first he didn't see her in the living room. Then he could make her out in the faint light, her body underneath the skeletons. He hadn't realized how skinny she had become. Her skin drooped off her bones, and her hair was almost completely gone. Her ran over to her. "Hess, get up. We're leaving now."

Hestia's eyes flickered open. "What?"

"I said get up!" Frank swept the skeletons off the couch. He shook Hestia until her eyes were bright. "We have to get to Taos. If we leave now, we could probably make it before dinner."

Hestia lay back down. "Frank, that's stupid!" She took a deep breath and reached out for his hand. "I'm going to stay right here."

Frank jerked away. "Get your coat on. We're leaving now."

Hestia coughed. Her body shook. "Frank, I can't go anywhere."

Frank shook his head. "You're just being lazy. Come on, we're going to get behind schedule."

"Frank, listen to me." Hestia gasped. "I'm sick. I'm going to die soon. It's okay, though. Leave me here. I'll be all right. I like it here. I'm with friends."

Frank walked into the hall looking for her coat. He shouted, "You're coming and that's final."

"You can't make me go." Her body had given up shaking, and now it lay completely still except for the shallow movement of her chest.

"Like hell I can't." He scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of feathers.

Hestia couldn't fight him. When she began coughing again, Frank adjusted her so that he held her like an infant, but his grip didn't loosen. Hestia collapsed into his arms. She listened to the

determined pulse of Frank's heart and feet, smelling the dirt clinging to his sweaty chest.

Frank carried her past the garage, and rocked her in his arms down the gravel driveway out into the night. He sang to her the songs he knew from the jukebox and the radio and church. She lay very still in his arms. Then he sang the songs from when they were kids. He thought that if he could keep on singing, Hestia would give up and start singing with him, and if she did that she would want to tap her feet. Then she would be happy, and then he could get her to walk with him, and as soon as they got to Taos, they could fix her up in no time. They would give her a vitamin shot, and all her hair would grow back. When he had run out of songs, he didn't give up. He began to tell her stories. "Remember that one time, I think it was just after Mom and Dad died, I got so mad at you that I took off into the woods and didn't come back for a while?" Hestia seemed to be sleeping, but he kept talking. She would always try to tell a story better than him. This would wake her up. "Well, I never told you what happened. I needed time away from everything. To sort things out. To figure out a plan. Well, I guess I was paying more attention to fixing a plan than I was to the path. I have never gotten to completely lost, and I was still lost when it was getting dark, but it didn't matter. I had my knife and compass. I could survive anything. It got cold real quick. I couldn't find anything to eat, so I lit a fire and watched the sparks fly up—burnt a few pine cones. I couldn't hear anything, which was really strange. Usually you hear some crickets or something. It was kind of lonely. On into the night I hear this rustling sound. I turned around, and here was this mangy dog. I whistled for it, and it came right up to me. It acted real friendly. It went away and about twenty minutes later it comes back with this dead rabbit. Well, that rabbit was looking mighty good at the time, even if it did look a little diseased. He set the rabbit next to the fire. I assumed that he was trying to please me, but when I went to pick up the rabbit the dog attacked me. It got a hold of my arm, and was tearing it to shreds. I finally pried its mouth off my arm, and jammed my fist down its throat. It made these disgusting gurgling gasping sounds, and it foamed at the mouth. But they thing wouldn't die, so I kicked its chest until it went completely limp. So there I was. A boy, his dead dog and a diseased rabbit, all around a fire. Somehow, I knew a round of 'Kumbiyah' and s'mores wouldn't make me feel better. I was starving and completely alone. I decided what I had to do." Frank's eyes became glassy. "I burned the rabbit, ate the dog and found my way back home to you."

Frank looked down at Hestia. Her body was completely limp, and her eyes stared straight up at him. Frank took a deep breath and wiped the spit from the corner of her mouth. He refused to cry. He turned around and walked back to the house. The coyotes in the yard seemed to have lifted their heads just to howl for Hestia's death. The bowed heads of the deer quietly mirrored Frank's heart, and the windchimes were still for the first time in days.

Frank gently placed Hestia on the bed in the children's bedroom, and rearranged the skeletons to form a congregation. He knew that she would want them there. And somehow he felt better knowing that he wasn't there alone, that they were there supporting him, encouraging him. He carefully stripped off her clothes and bathed her body in 7-Up. He wiped away all the dust from her callused feet. He massaged the liquid into her dry, cracked legs. 7-Up bubbled as it ran down her stomach and breasts. Frank tenderly rinsed out her eyes and mouth. Her slicked back her hair, so when he was finished Hestia resembled a saint in a Sunday-school picture he had once seen.

Frank stood there looking at Hestia's body. He wanted to be like her, completely clean. Without any scars or dirt. She had found what he was looking for, a quiet place to rest, a place to call home. The skeletons' heads fell forward, then off the body and rolled to Frank's feet. They stared straight up at him, calling him, telling him that he too could be like Hestia, like them. He could be purified.

Frank stripped himself and bathed in front of Hestia and the family. He took a knife from the kitchen and carved his name in Hestia's chest. Then he carved her name in a beautiful script next to his heart. Hestia's eyes seemed to approve of this gesture and Frank was happy. He lay on her, mixing their blood, smearing it together so that it became impossible to tell where hers stopped and his began. Her blood would enter into his body and she would be with him forever, running through his heart every few minutes.

Frank rolled off Hestia and lay beside her, holding her tight. He lay there quietly at first. Then he began shaking with anger and he rocked her back and forth, unable to stop the tears from leaking out of his eyes. The rocking chair shook loose all that had been trapped inside him. The tears washed away all the hatred he had stored for so many years, the hatred his father had taught so well. The hate had taught him how to survive, how to manipulate the world so that anything was possible, anything but that which hate couldn't control: love. He had spent all his life without letting Hestia know that he loved her because that would mean that he

had to show her a part of himself that he couldn't control, and control was what he needed. Control not to show love, control not to kill his father. He cried not only for Hestia's death, but for his own. He cried and rocked and shook until his body was exhausted. He fell asleep on Hestia, completely free, but completely alone.

When he woke, the moon was rising. Frank kissed Hestia once, then went out into the garage where he had seen a canister of gasoline. He poured a trail from Hestia, over the family, throughout the house. The trail of gasoline led out of the house down the porch stairs to the plaster coyotes. Frank flicked a match, and waited for the flame to appear.

The moon presided over the pyre. The fire started slowly at first, unsure of itself. Small flames reached the roof, not sure of what to do next. The moon waited and watched the flames grow and reach toward her. Struggling, small red fingers arched and shot up. With each lick, the moon grew bigger, brighter. Bright blue and white tongues tickled the center of the stars, and stroked her soft round edges. The fire grew, and eventually swallowed the moon, leaving nothing in the sky but flames.

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B *i* **g** *s* **r** *a* **H** *p*

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BIOGRAPHIES

Andrew Alexander lives in Mississippi. He is a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Mississippi. This is his first publication.

Olivia V. Ambrogio is the editor of *Freezer Burn* magazine. She is a sophomore at Grosse Pointe South High School in Michigan. She has recently been published in *Imprints*, South's literary magazine.

Valerie Brock lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. In June, 1996, she will receive her Master's Degree in Creative Writing. She has recently completed her first novel.

Heather Elizabeth Christian is in Michigan State University's creative writing MA program.

John Davis lives on an island in Puget Sound, Washington. His work has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cream City Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Sycamore Review*.

Gwendolen Gross is an editor and writer who has had poems accepted by several literary magazines, including *Southern Humanities Review* and *Poetry Motel*. She teaches occasional writing classes and workshops at a local writing center. She lives in Southern California with her husband and an exuberant chocolate labrador.

Joanne Hayhurst lives in the Berkshire Hills of northwestern Connecticut. She has been writing poetry for two years under the guidance of her teacher, poet Honor Moore. Her work has been published in *Berkshire Review*, *Blueline*, and *New Stone Circle*.

Brett Hursey is currently working on a PhD in creative writing at Oklahoma State University. His work has won an Academy of American Poets Prize as well as national AWP Journal Awards in 1993, '94, and '95. His work has recently appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *Boston Literary Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, and *Mississippi Valley Review*.

Mark Jacobs is currently Counselor for Public Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Asunción, with experience as a foreign service officer in Ankara, Izmir, and Turkey. He served in the Peace Corps in rural

Paraguay and speaks fluent Turkish and Spanish. His fiction has appeared in *The Nebraska Review*, *The North Dakota Quarterly*, *Buffalo Spree Magazine*, *The New Delta Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, among others. His book of short stories, *A Cast of Spaniards* (Talisman House), appeared in 1994.

J. Rodney Karr is in the M.F.A. program at the University of Arkansas and has recently had poems published in *The Iowa Review*.

Rob Keast graduated from Michigan State University last August with a degree in Journalism.

Gerry LaFemina has published two collections of poems, *23 Below* and *The City of Jazz and Punk*. He has published poems, essays, translations, and fiction in literary magazines all over and is currently overworked in Northern Michigan.

Tim Lane is a creative writing student at Michigan State University. A native of Flint, he now resides in Lansing.

Steve Lapinsky a native of Michigan, was born in Grosse Pointe and raised in New Baltimore. He is presently living in Lansing, finishing a degree at Michigan State University.

P.V. LeForge was born in Detroit but has spent most of his life in Florida. After a fairly typical middle-class upbringing, he attended college, sold tires, racked steel, jobbed records and tapes, edited educational materials, and played semipro baseball. His first book, *The Principle of Interchange*, was published in 1990. This was followed two years later by his book of poetry, *The Secret Life of Moles*. He currently owns and operates a bookstore in Tallahassee and plays league tennis at the 4.5 level. A novel and a second book of poems are in the works.

Elinor Lipman is the author of a collection of short stories, *Into Love and Out Again* (Washington Square Press), the novels *Then She Found Me*, *The Way Men Act* (both from Washington Square Press), and most recently *Isabel's Bed* (Pocket). A two-time recipient of distinguished story citations in *Best American Short Stories*, Ms. Lipman lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with her husband and son.

David Martin's poems and stories have appeared in a variety of

literary magazines, including *The Seattle Review* and *The Wisconsin Review*. He teaches writing at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

Pamela Montgomery holds a B.A. in English from Missouri Western State College and an M.A. from Northwest Missouri State University. For four years she published the literary magazine *Lost Creek Letters*. She currently works as a Kansas Gender Equity Facilitator. This is her first published story.

Travis Pinter recently received his Master's degree in creative writing from Michigan State University and is currently living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His poem "Neighborhood" won second place in this year's Jim Cash poetry contest.

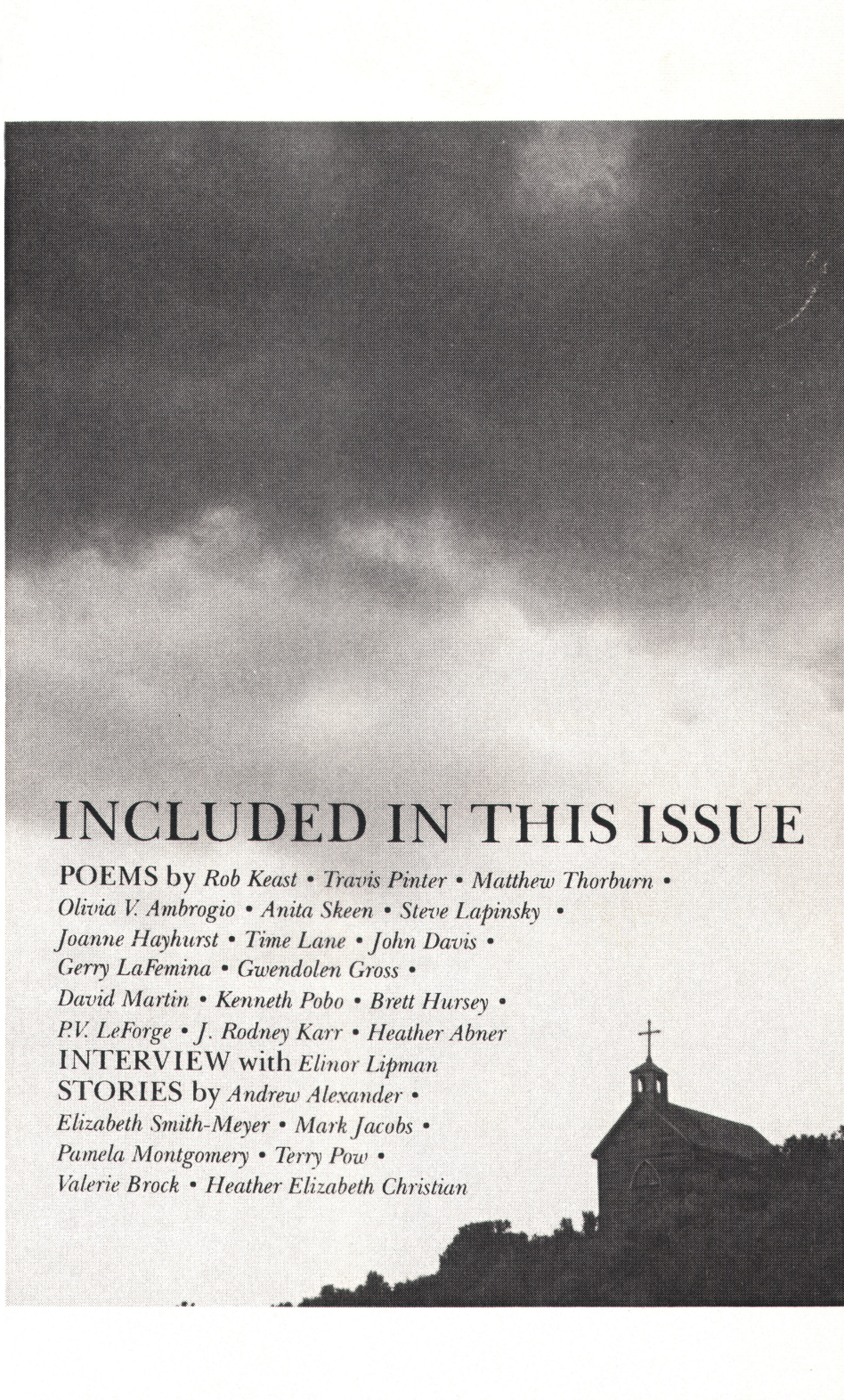
Kenneth Pobo's work has appeared in *Hawaii Review*, *Modern Words*, *Colorado Review*, *Nimrod*, *Confrontation*, *American Writing*, *Weber Studies*, and *Indiana Review*. He teaches English at Widener University. Osric Press published his chapbook, *Ravens and Bad Bananas*, in 1995. He collects records by Tommy James, Jack Blanchard & Misty Morgan, and The Choir.

Terry Pow worked as a reporter, feature writer and editor with regional and national newspapers in England before moving to the United States with his family in 1983. He now works as an editor with a Michigan corporation. He is studying part-time at Michigan State University for a B.A. in English.

Anita Skeen is a professor of poetry at Michigan State University. She is currently teaching Irish literature in Dublin.

Elizabeth Smith-Meyer teaches writing and literature at the Indiana Institute of Technology in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "Lubrication" is the first short story published from a new collection of fiction and essays entitled *Lactation*.

Matthew Thorburn attends the University of Michigan, where he has served as an International Poetry Guild mentor and twice been recognized with an Avery and Jule Hopwood Award, most recently for a collection of poems, *I Wanted to Go to Church, But the Poem Took Me to the Dog Races*. He has poems forthcoming in *Modern Haiku* and *Third Wave* and an essay on the poetry of Marilyn Hacker in *SPSM&H*.



INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

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Joanne Hayhurst • Time Lane • John Davis •

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