RED CEDAR REVIEW



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THE RED CEDAR REVIEW

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Winner of the Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize

NOTES I'VE COLLECTED FOR MY DEAD MOTHER

kierstyn g. lamour

My mother wanted children when she was 34 the same year that she was born in Detroit and my grandmother told me she had 41 skirts to wear to school she was never decorated the same twice in one month

So she had these children three two one and they were not so pressed or pleated they grew out of new wrinkles slower than the malignant ones she grew into

And when she turned 52 her children were not older than her wedding ring so she divided her jewelry among them giving them something unreligous arranging her funeral around a church they did not know

And people came to her with baggy faces and moist hairlines wiping and nodding wearing something mournful and someone thought I looked appropriate in my black skirt french braid peering into the coffin to look at the paper bag colored skin in a wig and a fuchsia dress A good job, they told me yes a fine job someone over said

And they saw her ring attached uneasily touching my dried hands telling me they wouldn't burn her jewelry and I haven't worn any since

A FORTIES PHOTOGRAPH

I.e. bryan

Standing against an iron fence somewhere in south Jersey, a couple, colored they were called back then, stare out at the world through young eyes, she, a statuesque, honey-hued Venus in a smart suit, leather purse tucked tightly under one arm, a picture of containment, gloved hands clasped, wearing a cool, enigmatic smile, he, a dark, dapper man in a pork pie hat, sportscoat cut to mid-thigh, baggy pants, dressed for style, stylin' he is, the heel of his shoe hooked on the bottom rail, nonchalant. Both been stompin' at the Savoy Ballroom, or about to be, maybe, doing "The Hucklebuck," jitterbuggin', truckin', cuttin' a rug all night to Jimmy Lunceford's all-Negro band. They stand there, shoulders touching, lightly, newlyweds staring straight into the camera, in a photograph from the early forties, momentary youth captured forever, this picture of man and wife, a portrait of my mother and father still life in black and white.

HAWKS laura albrecht

We sit behind our vague Cold faces, arms crooked On the counter top, fingers Rolling cigarettes up, down. Fluorescent lights line The low paneled ceiling, Bleaching until our faces Blur, take on the round, Dulled reflection of ten Year old dimes heads up. We don't look like much In our dark creased jackets And scuffed up shoes, Mumbling back and forth Into each other's ears, Slouched over steamy cups. The tail end of the night Presses in against The restaurant's pane Glass windows, temperature Falling off a few degrees Anticipating the split White warmth of morning. Between breaths, we hear Neon buzz, frost spread. The few people scattered Close, the jouncing waitress, The unseen cook, none hear The choppy stories we tell Over each other's shoulders. No one notices how Aluminum sometimes flashes Up, tinny and high, In your dark eyes, How ink, between blinks, Occasionally splatters in mine.

THE BAKER'S WIFE

diane wakoski

She is tiny as a butter knife and as if she were some dainty pastry, she often wears lace or hugs silver next to her cheek.

No children, but in the kitchen, a big red and blue Macaw, a living room full of yellow and blue parakeets which she claims all talk to her while she reads poetry and drinks coffee from a doll-sized cup.

If I met her in the library, I'd never think she were married to a dough man. And in fact if I saw her husband on the street, with his torso slim as a French baguette, and his long-fingered hands which don't seem like paddles or even hooks, but more like those of a man on a tropical terrace drinking rum, I wouldn't guess that either of them go fishing in the Rocky Mountains on their vacations, or that they avidly read a Star Trek fanzine.

HOW TO CARVE WILD FOWL

renée sedliar

for KG

It's like leaning on a wooden table indented with trails from coffee spoons, toast knives—proof we were here:

such hearts & tales, incisions delicate as cutting ourselves on paper, comforting as key to palm.

Take care in hand: a bird frozen live to the sidewalk, spill warm water & coax it from the ground

like the imperative molding to perfect replica: diagram the beaks and wings of these stories, how we trust to sculpt them true.

Later we will shrug our days into air mail envelopes, filigreed post cards—a bird cages frantic grillework.

I will lean with your letters, a breakfast to feed anything huddling, flex its wings, let them flutter through long fingers

of fog spilling a road, a commune of travellers in foul weather—our faith in safety that carves the way home.

FOR MY WIFE, SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE SIXTH DAY OF SNOW

todd davis

- I. We have fought, too long together in this house, while out in the cold, in the broad dark of the Sabbath's earliest hours, snow falls for a seventh day, ribbons of white sifting down over earth, quilted layers, three months of snow and no thaw, so my steps, if I were without snowshoes, would sink to midthigh.
- II. White tumbling, no heavier than moonlight, clings to me, to meadow floor, crown of trees, to the backs of deer who in the night have been blanketed under hemlock boughs, and I shoe along the edge of the forest, bringing corn to deer, my anger into the open, where above there is only gossamer, the odd constancy of movement, the dark filled with rags of light, soft, muted, evanescent: falling, falling.
- III. In the house you are already in bed, and what has come between us is now diminished by sleep, by dreams of winter falling into the creek,

only to push from its banks with spring's rich harvest, silt for summer's garden. And I know this season will end, give way to cone flowers and fleabane, yarrow and chicory, whose lace, not unlike the lace that has fallen this night, will cover the spots of the fawn now curled inside this doe who makes her way out from under green boughs, eats this corn at the edge of our meadow, feeds the life that lives between us.

WILD CHERRIES

In the heat of July when I was a boy, I scraped shit from the sweating floors of the kennels (sick dogs' offal always the most pungent), played with boarders whose owners had headed north from Indiana to some harbor town off Lake Michigan, and imagined black cherry orchards just over the Michigan line, heavy-layden, bending beet-red, until my father called me outside to the courtyard where an Irish Setter lay beneath the sun like death's silent stone.

The owners, having asked for an autopsy, waited out front while we cut open the dog's side: an aperture through which we could see all that had perished, listen to the blood sloshing against the walls like some inland sea.

Covered by pale, rubber gloves, my father's hands fished for parasites and defects, the normal abnormalities that wither the flesh, and every so often he would push aside an organ, offer a lesson in anatomy or pathology, then resume his rummaging.

In the end, it was the heart, grown old and pithy like a peach or plum.

But how does one say this?

I don't know what my father said,

never saw their faces when they received the news. Instead, I took the dog, careful not to spill any blood, and buried him in the field out near the railroad tracks where we buried all the pets for owners who had no other way of disposing of their love.

And there, at the corner of the plot, a wild cherry draped itself: its fruit ripe, ready to fall, but always so bitter in my mouth.

THE CELLO MUSIC GHAZAL ethan gilsdorf

From the cello in the center of the chest, up muscles the music of sinews, collar bones and empty vessels where a mother's lungs play catch up.

The sawing motion of the bow opens the wood, the wallpaper fuzzy and obsolete, the thousand oranges repeating their little wedges across the room.

The music undermines even you, Ethan, and despite the pain of abandoning your frail mood, the music soon sinks to your pelvis, and even you are humming.

THE NIGHT ARM ethan gilsdorf

The slammed door, the green vase.

The hammer of thought that talk has lost its way. Lipstick worried to the mirror.

Revealing as a kind of science, emotion pulled back cell after cell, the saying one is forever open and nothing is not known.

The belief that the mouth has saving powers. That deities and demigods swim in the veins.

The idea that pencils aren't needed, that childhood equals dread, and endful ruin is fun.

The assumption of the ordinary, the empty bird cage, the open closet the gaggle of shoes, the whistling kettle caked white by chemistry and time.

The stubbed toe, the ribbon of blood, the sharp and inferior taste of love.

All redeemed by her night arm across my heart.

ANDRA'S HAIR gwendolen gross

When I noticed how long her braids were and brown like birds who don't deserve elaborate names-I knew we were sparrows. We were grackles, shiny but loud with angry yellow eyes like shadeless lamps or pigeons old, and gray but hardly birds; meant instead for scattering with running steps and a hoot. Once I saw her open them, though, at a birthday party at the lake. I watched them glide and spread across the warm lap of the roped-off end for children. We stopped being sparrows. We became sea animals instead, with wild names like anemone, like hydra and urchin. Her hair was longer than her legs or arms or voice, and it reached into our game of Marco Polo and around anklesseagrass. It stretched across our bodies like a giant tropical jellyfish-like silky cloth

it stung us, shaping the small beginnings of breasts, which we denied. Still we shrieked as we bumped into each other—feigning blindness.

Winner of the Jim Cash Poetry Contest

CANVAS

alan k. newton

When I was a child we lived in Mexico. and memory lays a collage: fat, brown boys named Luis. dogs peeing in crinkly fountain shade, hunks of octopi at outdoor markets, my sister's sneakers skipping down Chapultepec. Once we drove in green mountain drizzle, passing an aftermath when Mother whimpered, hovered, covered our eyes with her hands. "It was a donkey," she told us, killed by the headlong vanity of a macho bus driver on a deadly curve. My sister cried, but donkeys dead or live to me were funny.

Last year mother came to visit, saw on my wall Picasso's *Guernica*; strangely, she turned her eyes.

I pointed out the famous bull, its hairpin craning, the equine carnage sprawled across canvas, the forlorn woman hovering over dead children, braying not just for loss but for her frailty as shelter.

After coffee, inexplicably, mother wept.

Today my sister and I talked of Mexico, of her souvenir dolls and my collage, and she betrayed what mother keeps from me still: that the donkey cut in two by a fender, tossed in a cotton field was really a child, loosely shrouded, likely buried and long forgotten.





SUSAN'S WEEK cezarija abartis

SUNDAY

keep a sanitary pad in my purse wherever I go. I can feel the paper wrapper getting tatty and splitting open.

Tomorrow or very soon I will go to Kmart and buy a pregnancy kit, read the instructions, and do the test. I haven't tried it before because I hoped my period would start, because it's embarrassing, because the weather has been muggy, because I've been busy, because I haven't had the time, because I've been afraid.

Even if I do the test and I'm not pregnant, I won't believe it. I won't believe it unless it gives bad news.

I will go up to Wallace as he's reading some anthropology text about the kinship relations of the Trobrianders and say, "Wallace, I'm pregnant." He'll say, "Shit." I'll tell Nora over a bowl of soup and she'll say, in one of her very rational, schoolmarm pronouncements, "Of course the most important thing is to figure out what you want to do and how to control the situation." I'll tell Jeff, and he'll be solicitous and self-sacrificing. I won't tell Mother.

Wallace will say in a generous and matter-of-fact voice, "I'll pay for the abortion." His fine, kind eyes will be focused on the faraway. I wish I could imagine him saying something beautiful and transforming. We cannot make each other fit our separate dreams.

He represents the effortless perfection of America—or what I think that is—smooth skin, straight bones, regular teeth, the heritage of good nutrition and of the affordability of medical miracles. My own mother, the daughter of two Polish engineers, has broad hands and a mole on her forehead. She told me she was relieved that I favored my small-boned American father.

Wallace said once he believed in ecstacy but not happiness. I replied that his arrogant expecations were due to his privileged upbringing, that people who were not children of corporate lawyers did not expect ecstacy. "You misunderstand me," he said, not even raising his voice. "I meant that happiness does not exist except as an occasional spurt of dopamine." I felt sorry for the poor little rich boy then.

Wallace plays tennis well. That's a game which, when I was growing up, was a bus ticket and a transfer away. He wears Ralph

Lauren eyeglasses, not the discount-store contact lenses that Jeff wears. What is most shameful about me is that I like Jeff's adoration. I should just tell him to leave. Nora said, "Your problem, Susan, is you want it both ways—you'll have to let one go." Easy for Nora, who is radical, not divided. Wallace knows that Jeff carries a torch for me, and he feels sorry for Jeff. Sublime lack of jealousy or self-confidence or trust of me or something. Not indifference, I think. Not that.

Yesterday Wallace wore the sky-blue shirt I had given him. He stood against the square of my window, with the light and melting humidity behind him. The July heat had softened the six candles on the sill into arcs that bowed toward him. He gleamed as if he came out of the sun-soaked sea, a halo surrounding him, spangling him with dew drops, pearl drops, tear drops. Oh, Wallace, Wallace, Wallace, I want you to be my knight in shining armor, my lover who cancels Time and Space, my prince of men who promises eternity and delivers, who strides through this world untouched and always excellent, but I don't think it's the you of wry speculation and Armani socks with holes in them, of surprised eyes and sweaty palms on airplane flights I'm attached to, I doubt that I love you, I don't think I love you, I know I don't love you.

You so obviously jump off that pedestal I constructed. Even that is graceful, though.

MONDAY

Jeff was making calf-eyes at me during the Ethics of Newsreporting seminar, and when he saw I noticed him, he quickly put on a neutral face, and that sweetness cut me, his concern for my comfort. I kept running my fingertips over the initials and lopsided hearts incised on the old oak table while Schultzie droned on about participatory journalism. I could not concentrate on the oral reports, but listened to the whine of the lawnmowers outside and, farther off, the sawing down of a diseased elm. Jeff struggled to open a jammed window; the clover smelled dense and green on the stagnant air.

Right after the seminar, Nora and I walked over to the cafeteria. We had salty chicken soup, which I gulped down. She wanted to talk, to tell me she loves the new TV she bought with the money she got for housesitting, to tell me she received the packet of information about the Peace Corps, to tell me her father is okay. I wanted to wail

at her that my problem is much worse and I don't have sympathy to spare.

Nora's father does not have prostate cancer. She was still wound up, happy and intense. "I don't know which is worse, the waiting or the cancer."

Yeah, I said.

Nora chattered away about her housesitting job, that she had to do some final house cleaning before her professor returns from Europe next week. "I'll miss working in the garden," she said. "I never realized how much I'd enjoy planting flowers."

Nora mocks my bourgeois triangle. She has no use for Wallace and no affection for Jeff. I told her I was trying to recruit for her cause. Laughing, she patted my back and said, "Come the revolution, I'll put in a good word for you."

My birthday is next week. I'm worried that my graduate assistantship won't be renewed after this year. I'm embarrassed about having to ask Schultz for an extension to complete my seminar paper. I'm behind on grading the exams for my professor. And I'm deathly afraid I'm pregnant.

I'm not superstitious, but I thought to myself, I'll wear my expensive white linen shorts, that will make my period happen.

What would I offer to reverse this? Money? An earlobe? A finger? A memory of Wallace? Eventually I'll have to give a clot. I'm stingy. Even now I'm unwilling to give very much. I want to extricate myself lightly, glide through this easily.

The news was on the radio in the lobby as Nora and I left the student center. Locally, Melissa Hanson reported that there was a trend toward threes in window signs—earrings! earrings! earrings! hats! hats!

"Stupid! Stupid! Nora said, as she stopped to light a cigarette in front of the No Smoking sign. Then she shook her head. "Nothing about community involvement and social issues. I'm disgusted. I'd even rather listen to soft rock." After a singing commercial for home insurance, the news came on with the reminder of the national debt, the conflict in Bosnia, a story about the pollution of a river in New York State.

In a world of torture, death, betrayal, where people disguise their faces, where the valve in my father's heart was defective, and my cousin was born with an unconnected nervous system, I hope and imagine to get off scot-free.

Why do I imagine I'm special, that I'll escape?

TUESDAY

Wallace prepared Eggs Benedict for breakfast. Neither of us had another bite after I told him I might be pregnant. As I tipped my cup, the coffee grounds slid into the shape of a uterus. With the slightest swirl it disappeared.

Now when we run into each other in the graduate office or the Snack Shop or the library, I can see the intensity on Wallace's face as if there were stones beneath his stretched skin. I want to calm him in my most maternal fashion, to lie to him, to tell him I'm not pregnant.

I told Wallace I just needed to put clean sheets on the bed for my period to start. He made a stiff smile. We saw each other a hundred times after classes and he tried not to ask, I could tell.

I feel anxious and edgy. I am a timid person. I worry if there's somebody behind the telephone pole or in the alley when I walk home from the library. I'm afraid of breast cancer—one in nine odds. I worry about shelling in Bosnia, child abuse in California, flooding in Iowa. But I don't do anything about any of it. And most of all I'm worried I'm pregnant. And then I don't worry about anything.

The Operation Rescue organization will be picketing clinics in Cleveland next week and here after that. I don't even hate them, but I'm afraid of a scene. Nora despises them, calls them Nazis. I just don't want to be embarrassed.

WEDNESDAY

I should call my mother because I haven't called her in two weeks, but I cannot bear to hear her loving, tyrannical voice asking me what I want for my birthday. She will be falsely jolly. She will insist that I'm not eating enough, will interrogate and praise me for my few good grades, ask about the Incompletes on my transcript, hector me about deadlines, will not say how much she still misses Dad.

When I was alone in the Office Trailer, Jeff sidled in clutching a bouquet of daisies wrapped in a cone of newspaper limp from the humidity. "An early birthday present," he said. The air conditioner burbled noisily and I was feeling sorry for myself, listlessly leafing through the papers and exams on my desk. It had been exactly a year since we met in Griffin's seminar on Mass Media and Social Institutions and Jeff transferred into the class late. He extended the bouquet toward me. "I'm not asking you for a date," he said. "I'm happy to see you, that's all."

I had tears in my eyes, and he started singing in his thin tenor, "Oh, Susannah, now don't you cry for me . . . The sun so hot I froze to death, the weather it was fine." I laughed and said that was wrong, he'd gotten it wrong.

His devotion makes it worse. He's not even asking me out anymore. He stares at me and smiles. Last month he said he wouldn't ask me to marry him if I would just let him be around me. We can't control our desires. If I could, I would love Jeff for his sappy admiration.

Outside the trailer the train roared by and rattled the tin roof. We didn't have anything to talk about, so we talked about the three kittens in his garage. One is a white male and deaf. What a bad mother she was to abandon them, I joke lamely. Jeff doesn't know what to do because the landlady does not allow pets. He's handfeeding them and sitting perfectly still on the cement floor as they come to sniff him. They romp around him, chasing leaves, pouncing on his toes, mewing at him in their treble tones, demanding and dispensing affection.

THURSDAY

Do I expect to get pregnant again? Why did I do that? It's called First Response ("Easy," "1-step," "three minutes"), as if it were baby's first words, or a missile launch. There were five or six different kinds at Walgreen's, in monochrome narrow boxes with serious words on them and no pictures of fluffy-haired happy blondes.

The checkout clerk, a lady with bifocals, was arthritically putting into a white plastic bag the candy bars, balloons, card, and birthday candles of the grandmother in front of me.

"I can take care of someone here," the high-school kid said behind me from the counter where you leave off film to be developed. I'm thinking if I should pretend I haven't heard. I could see out of the corner of my eye that he'd leaned forward. He'd say it again, I knew, only louder.

I turned away from the grandmother and her shopping cart full of presents for children.

His skinny neck and short hair and big ears made him look even younger. As soon as I handed him the package, he hurriedly dropped it into a bag and didn't meet my eyes. I felt sorry for embarrassing him. At home I read the instructions a hundred times. The detector was a rectangular plastic rod the thickness of a few popsicle sticks, with a pair of windows smaller than fingernails cut into it. I was supposed to pee on this, hold it in the urine stream five seconds, hold it vertically and not splash on the windows. My heart hammered as I tried to manage all this.

I blinked and two lines appeared in the windows. It wasn't even the stipulated three minutes.

Shit. I was pregnant.

FRIDAY

I told Wallace about the test. He took a breath. His eyes scooted away. And finally he asked what did I want to do. (I know what I want, but not what to do. I want time to run backwards, that's what I want. I want the sun to stand still, the wind to be soft, people to be kind, me to be kind.)

I will call my doctor, make an appointment. I'm glad it's the weekend and I don't have to do anything. I'm heavy, lethargic, as if I were deeply pregnant. It's my mind playing tricks. I feel nauseated, hot, woozy. A sharp, cutting pain in my stomach rises and arcs acutely; my stomach is having sympathy pains with my uterus. What a good buddy. The Tummy, your friend. Back at Saint Casimir's Grade School everything from collarbone down was Your Tummy. I have learned better since.

And of course I endlessly analyze the future: I could get married; I could have the baby; I could give it up for adoption; I could <u>not</u> have the baby; I could drop out of school; I could marry Wallace; I could marry Jeff. . . That's as far as my imagination stretches. No—be imaginative. I could go to the moon; I could buy leopard-print tights and become a rock star. I have an infinite world of choices. I could kill myself.

Not funny, Susan.

This is not the year to become a mother.

I'm a modern woman. I don't have a pinpoint of guilt about it. What is this malaise? That I am making a decision for forever? That I will never have a son or daughter? That this decision will be like every other: little by little, forever. But it's not true. I can always have a baby later.

Wallace and I have talked about marriage obliquely, but we don't really love each other. We are both clear on this, which is miraculous:

1) that we should be certain (when we're uncertain about advisors, about dissertations and prelims, about where to live and so many other things) and 2) that we should both agree.

FRIDAY EVENING

As I was getting ready for bed, I had a cramp that seemed to start in the root of my scalp and shoot out of me to the walls of the room.

The spasm passed, I put on my nightgown, I finished getting ready for bed. There was a warm, stringy blood clot, for a moment in the shape of a thorn in the toilet. I knew what it was. My womb expelled the zygote. This wretched tissue, my exhausting, humiliating interior self has finally been extruded and expelled. But I don't feel celebratory.

I'm very tired.

SATURDAY

Nora is sleeping in my bedroom, and I'm sleeping on the couch. While she was staying at her advisor's house, on the night before he came home from Switzerland, a burglar broke into Nora's empty apartment and took her Sears TV, her CD player, even her cheap Japanese guitar. When I drove over to pick her up, her skin felt clammy and she looked flat, the way a frightened animal will collapse, hoping the predator will have mercy this time. She's afraid to go back to her apartment. "Just superstition," she said. "And normal terror."

SUNDAY

In the middle of the night, I woke up with the heavy thought on my tongue—I will die in twenty years. I don't believe it, of course, but I'm drawn to analyze it. My subconscious is perhaps guilty about the spontaneous abortion because I wished it; or my life feels chaotic and I'm depressed; or I'm ill and tomorrow is my birthday and I don't want to telephone my mother or wait for her call. The rational part of me is not superstitious and does not believe in this message from the dark, the knotted sleepy self. This is not guilt, just normal terror.

LIGHT OF HIS LIFE

karl harshbarger

"Harry!"

His wife's voice caught Harry Pickering even before he reached the sidewalk.

"Harry, stop!"

So, it was over. Probably she'd known for several days now. Or the phone had just rung. An anonymous caller. His marriage in ruins.

So keep walking, keep on going, never stop again.

"Yes," he said.

He even turned to face her. Claire stood leaning against the railing of the porch holding a list in one hand, part of her hair falling down over her forehead, not a bad looking woman in her housecoat, quite attractive, as a matter of fact.

"Harry, you won't forget to pick up the wine? White wine. Remember, a good lable. Really good. We can't afford to disappoint the president."

"I've got it all right here in my head," said Harry, and he found himself throwing her kisses, pumping his handout towards her.

"Harry," she said, now smiling.

"I'll be home by five," he said, swinging his arm around.

"Four-thirty would be better", she said. "I'll need help."

"Right," he said, "four-thirty."

So, she still didn't know. Of course, she didn't know. How could she? Nobody knew.

Because look at it this way. The absolutely beautiful day, green grass, leafy trees, balmy air, the birds singing, all that, everything conspiring for him, not against him.

So down Elm Street and Oak Street and waiting at Highway 6 for several trucks before he could cross, and then up on the sidewalk cutting through the maple trees of the campus. A glance at his watch. Too early. Five minutes too early. He had been too eager.

Probably the best thing to do was set his briefcase down on the sidewalk, kneel down over it and pretend to look for something inside, maybe something he'd forgotten at home, all the time imagining eight-fifty sharp, it hadn't failed yet, her bouncing down the steps of the women's dorm, books at her side, the flounce of her hair, the light of his.

"Morning, Harry."

Todd Towsan from Mathematics came up from behind Harry on the sidewalk.

"Morning, Todd," said Harry, kneeling over his brief case.

Towsan stopped right beside Harry.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, incredible," said Harry, making a show of lifting the top flap of his briefcase and looking down inside.

Towsan started to pull out that pipe of his.

"You know," Towsan said, now knocking the mouth of the pipe against his hand, "people back East wouldn't believe weather like this. They just wouldn't."

"No, probably not," said Harry.

"Although I'm certainly not playing down the scenery in New, England."

"Oh, no, not at all," said Harry.

"Still, don't tell me an Iowa spring isn't first-rate."

Harry couldn't keep kneeling forever. Towsan was clearly intent on talking while he lit up his pipe.

But what did Harry see as he stood up? A white police car, one of those big Ford sedans with blue and red light turrets, bristling with radio antennas, turning off Highway 6, slowly passing Harry and Towsan along Oak Street and stopping in front of Old Main.

"Well, well," said Towsan, who now had his tobacco pouch out,

"will you look at that."

The door of the Police car opened and a policeman, overweight, dark-blue uniform, gun, handcuffs, mace, nightstick, all that hanging from his wide leather belt, emerged into view, dug his thumbs into his belt and swung his gaze the College buildings.

If Harry hadn't been standing right there next to Towsan now, sucking flame into his pipe, he might have run. Really bolted. The parents, outraged, demanded action. Calls to the dean of students, the president, members of the board, anyone. The parents came last night, dragged her home, back to Chicago—Evanston really—ordered her not to leave the house, use the phone, and if you ever so much as talk to that monster again. . . . And now this policeman slowly hitched up his belt, stepped onto the curb and crossed the grass towards the steps of Old Main.

"Maybe he wants to take a book out of the library," said Towsan

smiling at this little joke as he puffed on his pipe.

"Oh, sure," said Harry.

"Harry, see you," said Towsan, "Tonight at your place? At seven?"

"Right," said Harry.

"And the president and his wife are really coming?"

"That's what Claire tells me."

"Big time, Harry, big time."

Towsan started on down the sidewalk, trails of smoke coming from around head.

Harry looked at his watch, saw that it was still two minutes before eight-fifty, breathed in the balmy air, the birds singing, the leafy campus—recently violated by a policeman, true, overweight with an absurd arsenal of weapons hanging off his waist-but at least that puff of insanity about running away had passed. Perhaps someone had refused to pay a parking ticket. And now two more incredible minutes until she came down the steps of the women's dorm, books at her side, the turn of her head.

But just as Harry reached down to pick up his briefcase he saw students, lots of them, backing out of the entrance of Old Main. In the middle of all those students the policeman. And what was this? Wasn't that the new faculty member in religion or philosophy, Rodney Carter, next to the policeman? And what did that mean that Rodney Carter was under arrest? But that was impossible. Here at this leafy place.

The students around the policeman saw Harry, ran towards him, got him by the arms and propelled him forward toward the policeman. Suddenly it was the sixties, jeering crowds, lines of cops, bull horns, himself right in there, desperate meetings, student committees, four o'clock in the morning, proclamations, madness.

"Excuse me, I'm Dr. Harry Pickering and I think I have the right to know what's going on here."

The overweight policeman reached for the back door of the police car and opened it for Rodney Carter. On each side the crowd of students grew.

"You work here?" said the policeman to Harry.

"I'm a professor here," said Harry. "And my name is Dr. Harry Pickering."

"It's all right, everybody," said Rodney Carter in that nice way of his. In his jeans and cotton shirt he hardly looked older than the students. "This gentlemen," he indicated the policeman, "is only doing his duty, just what he's told."

"That's bullshit!" called out one of the students.

"Now, now," said Rodney Carter. "When one takes a meaningful position against the government's nuclear policies and refuses to pay taxes, one must expect certain consequences."

"But on campus?" called out another student.

"Yes," Harry found himself saying, "why on our campus?"

"Now, now, everybody," said Rodney Carter. "You can't expect the government to act rationally."

Peggy had poked her head into his office at nine-fifty three, right after his first class, rather loudly said, "Good morning, Dr. Pickering," handed him a small note folded over many times and ducked back out of the door.

Sweet one, the note read when he had unfolded it about eight times and eased out the creases with his hand, where were you this morning? I looked everywhere for you. Now I am sitting on this bench in front of Smith Hall writing this note and know I will see you in your office between 9:50 and 10:00. Today I have physics at 11:00 and history at 12:00. Ugh!!! When do I see you again??? I am always, always yours. XXX

That was when the students knocked, and as they came in, taking all the available chairs and even sitting on the floor, Harry stuffed the note as deeply as he could into the pocket of his pants.

"Professor Pickering, we represent the Ad Hoc Student Action Committee." That was the gangly, tall boy, Bob Novotney. So he had emerged as their leader. "If you don't mind, we'd like to speak to you."

Harry saw at once that they had reached the next stage, the more organized stage. Of course, none of them had been to their nine o'clocks and none of them were likely to go to any classes today, or even for the next week. They would now try and organize the whole campus.

"We appreciated your taking a stand this morning," Bob Novotney was saying.

"Not too many professors would do that," said a girl he had never seen before wearing granny glasses.

"It's good to know you care," said Bob Novotney.

"Well," said Harry, "I thought it was the least I could do."

"We really appreciate it," said the girl in granny glasses.

"Sir, we were just wondering," said Bob Novotney, and then the rest of it. Would he serve as the committee's faculty representative? Surely the faculty wanted to be involved, show support. No one could stand idly by while the United States Government, through the military and large corporations, oppressed third-world countries. The faculty and the students must stand in solidarity behind those who were willing to put themselves in the front lines, like Mr. Carter.

"Oppresses third-world countries?" asked Harry.

"Through large corporations," said Bob Novotney.

"I thought Rodney Carter was an anti-nuclear activist."

"Well, yes, that, of course, too."

"You should try and keep that sort of thing straight," said Harry.

"We respect Mr. Carter's position," said the girl in granny glasses.
"But," said Bob Novotney to Harry, "can we count on you?"

"Of course we can count on him," said the girl in granny glasses.

"Can we?" asked Bob Novotney.

"Well," said Harry, "I certainly want to keep abreast, help if I can."

"Solidarity," said the girl in granny glasses.

"Faculty and students together," said Bob Novotney.

After the students left, Bob Novotney giving him a thumbs-up sign at the door, Harry looked around his office. Somehow his glance caught the photograph of his smiling wife which sat at the far edge of his desk. The photograph had been taken around five years ago. He and Claire had gone downtown to a regular studio to have it done, and later they'd taken the proofs home and he'd selected the one of her he wanted for his desk and she'd selected one of him for the bedroom.

Harry moved across his office to his other desk where he was supposed to do his writing and research and looked down at the arrangement of notes all laid out by color code for his long proposed book on Moby Dick. Over the winter the arrangement of those colors had made sense, but as he stared at them now he wasn't quite so sure about the reds and the greens and the blues.

Instead of sitting down he went over to his office window and looked out at the trees and the grass of the campus. Because the thing was, what he couldn't quite figure out: Had he agreed to help the students in their campus-wide protest or hadn't he? He supposed he had. On the other hand, he hadn't quite said so. Although on the other hand, he hadn't really said, no, either. Well. Maybe the whole thing would blow over. And besides which, when you thought

about it, he didn't even know this Rodney Carter. He was new this year, wasn't he? Or was it last year? Even that wasn't clear. It could have been last year. He used to keep all that straight. Who came when. Janus and Brenten and Sullivan and Michaud and he had all come in together. And Towsan and McCormick had come the following year. But what about Anderson and Gorman? And after that, all the people who had come and lots who had gone, too. What about them? Probably his forgetting had to do with his easing into it. And now this Rodney Carter, a nice young man by all accounts, either in religion or philosophy, taking a stand against the nuclear threat to civilization, refusing to pay his taxes. Quite unusual, of course, in this day and age. Rather surprising. This was the nineties. The sixties had been different. Then it had been all right. Somehow it had made sense to be together at the barricades, solidarity, lots of talk of sacrificing themselves to restore justice in the world. That's what they had promised each other then.

Harry backed away from the window, passed by the reds and greens and blues of the color codes for his notes on his proposed book on *Moby Dick*, sat down at his regular desk and pulled Peggy's note from deep out of his pocket. *Sweet one* the note began in that orderly and neatly curved handwriting of hers! *where were you this morning?*

Well, thought Harry, after school today, before four-thirty for sure, he had to go downtown and pick up white wine, ten bottles, a good lable, because his wife had organized a little dinner party. Quite a little coup, that, getting the president and his wife to come over.

The phone rang. Harry reached over and picked it up. It was

Mrs. Smith, the president's elderly secretary.

"Dr. Pickering, can you hold for just a second? The president wants to speak with you."

Again, run, keep going, never come back. His career in ruins.

"Harry!" The sharp, snappy voice of the president.

"Hello," said Harry.

"Harry, I've got an office full of students here protesting something or other regarding Rodney Carter. You know anything about this?"

"A little," said Harry.

"There's a fellow named Novotney here who says you're the faculty representative for this protest. You're giving them your support. That true, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, "that's not entirely true."

"Well Harry, are you the faculty representative or not?"

"Of course, not," said Harry. "I never agreed to anything like that."

"Just wondering, Harry, just wondering. See you tonight? About seven? Your place? Maybe a bit later?"

"Right," said Harry.

"Nice talking to you, Harry."

And the phone went dead.

Harry kept sitting at his desk until his gaze happened on the picture of his smiling wife again. Then he felt Peggy's note deep in his pocket and pulled it out.

PROGRESS

steve almond

I am, as a Texan, deeply affected by traffic. When bumpers snake for miles across innocent asphalt and the horns of a thousand cars erupt, I draw into a state of limbic paralysis. Tongs pinch and pull at my temples. Knives flicker at the weakest parts of my anatomy. Drowning seems a real possibility. It is at this juncture — and, I should emphasize, this juncture only — that I am wont to recall my ex-wife, Arlene, and the words spoken before she disappeared, at last, from my rearview mirror.

"Robert Ray," she said, enunciating. "To hell if you aren't a traffic jam yourself."

Those who knew us as a dashing young partnership, the crown couple of new El Paso, still ask me why I let her go. I cannot say exactly. I can only explain the experiences around which our disappointments circled, the gnashing of gears, the false starts and yellow lights, the gradual loss of that weightless force which signals the passing of one thing into another.

I am not claiming I was easy, that she didn't have the right to complain. I had my foibles, as any man. I would not, for instance, permit her to drive. Not during daylight hours, at least. My reasoning was plain: there were decisions to be made, and these she did not make well. She struggled with complex scenarios. How one must exit before the busiest of interchanges, onto frontage roads that circumvent these dangerous funnels. How a sudden, but well-reasoned, transgression of the law — a foray onto soft shoulder, say, with hazards on — can preserve precious minutes. The subtleties that must be mastered, if traffic is to be avoided.

Arlene, I will say, was not without her own peculiar potential. She proved capable, during the early years, of executing gas station cut-throughs and emergency U-turns with stirring efficiency. Her observations of lane protocol, delivered in a sultry growl over candlelit dinners, moved in me the deep lust for a willing apprentice. But as she faded, our conversations followed suit:

"Adding a lane on old 52."

"Sale at Byron's."

"Rerouting onto Trowbridge, if you can believe that."

"Thirty percent off the new spring line."

Together we surrendered to the lie of compromise, as couples

mostly do, and coasted until our unraveling. Soon there were frequent spats. Over the fact that I refused to leave the house during rush hour. That I pumped the clutch in my sleep. That I refused to take part in funeral or wedding processions, for fear that such behavior would lead me, inevitably, into traffic.

Arlene began blaming my "phobia" on work. It was a simple diagnosis, a shortcut through my circuitry. "Bobby Ray's an engineah for the Department of Transpo'tation," she explained to strangers, in merciless Houstonian. "He's a little funny about traffic."

She had it all backwards, of course — the notion that my joining the department led me to this dark concern. I do not drool over the charts and scale models, like some of my colleagues. I derive no glee from folding demographics into the combine of modern transportation. I do not gloat. I know we are talking about people.

Sometimes, on trips across town, I will pull off the road to watch. I enjoy noting the decisions drivers make, and the decisions made beneath these decisions. Pedestrian overpasses, I have found, allow for a view of facial contours, without the undue distraction of tending to your own vehicle. Here, the tension of a three-lane swoop can be read in a bitten lower lip, the commendable fury directed at left-lane crawlers evoked in a snarling squint. At times I have waited a full hour, and risked scoldings from my boss, to catch the historic pleadings of a woman trapped, left blinker on, in the midst of an intersection.

Professors at Oxford have studied all this, the behavior of automobile drivers. They have concluded, not wrongly in my opinion, that people become feline in cars. They mark territory, hiss and puff their tails, paw at lane dividers. They emulate low-key predators, stalking voices on the radio. (I myself have no radio in my car. I find the jingles demeaning.)

Occasionally I will be at a party where some fellow — usually dressed in fashionable clothes, invariably from one of the coasts — begins blathering the merits of public transportation. I tend to think favorably on such proposals, because they foretell an alleviation of traffic. Often, though, these gentlemen go too far. One entertained a small circle of admirers by announcing, with implied disapproval, that if aliens landed on earth they would probably mistake cars for an alternate civilization, an observation greeted with titters of recognition. I believe he was right to assume this. But I have thought this out from the aliens' perspective. The aliens would not be wrong. The aliens would be dead-on.

As to my work, I do not deny that I have, on occasion, used department statistics to my own purposes. That access to upcoming projects, certain repair schedules, allows me to map superior contingent routes. Who among us wouldn't take advantage of such privileged data? We all want the same thing, after all: to get ahead with the least delay. This is what separates us from the apes, what keeps us from just escaping into the rest stops, with their plastic comforts. We are trying to make progress. At least, I am.

But how do you explain all this to your wife, to your marriage counselor?

The insomnia was a problem. Yes, that too. But then, I did not fault Arlene her unwillingness to cook, her faithful plundering of our credit rating. I forgave her failed liposuction. She should have realized the night sweats were not my choice. Besides, I felt my solution was feasible.

Ladies, I ask you, if your husband rose haggard from a sleepless bed and asked you, softly, to drive him to Las Cruces and back — no more than an hour round-trip — would you scoff?

No, I believe you would do it, and willingly.

"This is craziness," is what Arlene would mutter, slamming the car door on her bathrobe. These excursions (which her lawyer defined as "abuse" during divorce proceedings) remain among my fondest memories. The amniotic sway of the vehicle, the smell of creosote through the vents. Maybe you had to grow up in East Texas to understand the meaning of empty road at night. The gradations of light that fool the eye into seeing only darkness. Had she chosen, Arlene might have looked upon my request as a profound expression of trust. I had, after all, turned the wheel over to her, and slept like a child, soft and soundless.

I will concede that there were perversions at the end, surely, activities that sparked the guardrails of normalcy. But again, these were not purposeless actions. Arlene had refused to lull my bouts of insomnia. I had taken to driving alone at night.

I never planned to survey the accidents. Their tug simply became urgent. I would stop, at first indiscriminately, to see if everyone was all right and so forth. But slowly, deceptively, I became more selective. I grew tired of cracked tail lights and dimpled rear panels, the bickering that envelopes such scenes like radiator steam. I gravitated to those areas where the serious business of blunt trauma transpires.

It's funny how people behave at such events. Everyone walks with purpose. There is a heightened sense of awareness, a prickling

of the skin. Nobody questions your presence if you walk with purpose. I barely had to present ID.

How many of you, I wonder, have ever looked at the expression of a human killed in an auto collision? The offended mouth, robbed of its last shriek. The woozy eyes, lids dragged down by forward thrust. The face of progress gored. I was hypnotized to my core.

This was hard to explain to people after my arrest. My interview at the police station shed little light on these truths. The officers demanded only pedestrian facts. Yes, I had purchased a short-wave radio. No, I was not a member of the Dixon County Coroner's office. Yes, I knew it was illegal to gaze at the unauthorized dead. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. Yes.

The news items hurt Arlene. Of course they did. She was a former cheerleader, for God's sake. And so I apologized, tried to explain. I lied, if poorly, to spare her. Still, I never anticipated such heartfelt retribution; such precise cruelty.

It was, in some respects, my fault. It was foolish to allow her to drive at such an early hour. But we had talked for hours. Hashed out our limitations. The time had come for a gesture of fidelity.

"Bobby Ray, why don'tcha let me drive," she purred. "That old boat of yours makes me nervous."

"Oh, what the hav?" said I.

Her parents' ranch was just past Marathon, a straight shot down I-10. The news forecast little congestion, owing to rain. I was genuinely touched at her restraint in not making reference to the suspended license.

And so I strapped myself into the passenger seat, calmly, sleepily, Insomnia had returned of late, and without my soothing predawn excursions, I had little defense against slumber. The last sound I heard, as we pushed forward onto the freeway, was Arlene humming "Truckin" — the theme song of our long ago courtship.

Will anyone understand the emotions that took hold when I awoke to what she had done? That my wife had guided us onto Route 128 just in time to ensnare me in a miles-long procession. That she had shrewdly gauged the simultaneous eastward migration of fans fixing to attend a country music festival, and a college football contest, then coldly factored in three miles of construction. That she had divined — from studying my own charts! — how the three-lane expressway would bottleneck to one, broiled to bitter licorice under an adamant Texas sun.

Can you fathom the very real sense of death that gripped my

body during those three hours? The fear that punched at my heart, and constricted any sense of a future? I had spent a reasonable portion of my life engaged in the making of deft adjustments designed to assure me a clear path to my destiny. The duty of all sane men in a time of progress.

And now it had all been reduced to this: absolute zero on Route, 128. Not a wheel in motion. Through the windows of other vehicles I saw a thousand offended mouths, still as corpses. Then horns landed like artillery. Strangers glared at one another through bug-smeared windshields. Fathers smashed at their children, while mothers rummaged pointlessly for snacks.

When it was over, when the road had unclotted sufficiently to permit escape, Arlene looked at me, almost sheepishly, and pulled into a drive thru outside Ellis. She spoke of tough love, of trials by fire, and personal demons. As my body slowly uncurled from itself, she asked forgiveness.

I remained quiet long enough to convince her I had not yet made up my mind. "Robert Ray," she said. "To hell if you aren't a traffic jam yourself." She paused, hoping to appear contrite, then walked inside to buy a chicken sandwich.

As I mentioned, people still ask why I left her. And though I don't expect them to understand, sometimes I tell them about that open stretch of road outside Ellis, how Arlene's words, her very being, dopplered to a thankful silence as she disappeared from the rearview mirror. And how, for the first time in a very long while, I felt the wind-swept onset of progress.

THE JUNGLE george kuttner

In a letter forwarded to me on my last full day in the hospital, Tommy's kid sister, Mary, wrote that Tommy had been listed as Missing In Action. They'd received word in a special-delivery letter from the Department of the Navy. There were no real details, just that his squad had been in the field, had been ambushed, had not returned and could not be found. "Jackie," she'd written, finally, "please try and find out what happened to Tommy. We're so far away and they won't tell us anything. They're so far away, too, the people we write to and talk to on the phone, I don't think they know anything, either. I know you have rules and maybe can't go around away from your company, but Jackie, can you find out anything? Please try."

She wrote, "I feel like I'm waiting all the time for you to come home."

I was recovering from the effects of "concussion trauma combined with severe battery, without penetration, of the upper right arm by explosive debris of a blunt, heavy sort;" I'd been blown up-by a rocket that exploded outside the wide open warehouse doors I'd been standing just inside of. Something struck me on the arm, a stone or shell fragment, that didn't break the bone but did turn my arm from shoulder to elbow into a blackened, swollen mass of pain—which I wouldn't feel until much later; the huge electric blast rolled on for what seemed like hours, unraveling me at the edges, tearing me loose from my body, so that somehow the light seemed held to the dark only by strands of stretchy stringy glue that sang like too-tight guitar strings wound higher and higher. For days after I came to in the sudden silence of the hospital I moved and walked through the halls and grounds with slow, deliberate motions, trying to hold myself tightly together and allow the glue that I knew held me to the earth to re-adhere.

When they let me out of the hospital, with my arm supported in a cloth sling, I decided I wouldn't be missed for a few more days and went South and West instead of back North to my own unit. It wasn't hard to get around, I was always able to get a ride. I rode in jeeps and trucks—mostly trucks, and even slept in the back of a parked truck one night—through dusty villages as full of dogs and chickens as people, where if we'd stop crowds of skinny children

would surround us with bottles of Pepsi and Tiger Piss beer and chunks of sugarcane to sell or trade. But the drivers would rarely stop, and the people in the villages knew better than to get in front of us as we passed. We rode through open flat country shining with young rice rising from sunny water—water I knew stank like a mile of shit if we were to stop and get near it.

Gradually the country began to rise into hills thick with trees, the hazy mountains came closer, until, almost suddenly, we were driving through forest, and the roads grew rough and often unpaved. When I was close to my destination—at least the right part of the country-I got directions and was able to hop a flight to an inland helicopter staging area that serviced Tommy's unit in the bush. There I had a few drinks with a sergeant who agreed to take me along on the next scheduled supply run, two days later. Meanwhile, he showed me to an empty rack in his hootch, which was in a compound set off a ways from the busy landing pads and the small strip for light aircraft, but from which I could hear the engine-whine and the loud tookatooka-tooka of the choppers coming and going all night.

Sergeant Crowley drank like a movie cowboy, constantly, like liquor was water. He kept me half in the bag, if not completely drunk, the whole two days, and then, after what he called an eye-openerhalf a coffee cup of bourbon at seven a.m.—he led me out to his chopper and over the noise of the engine introduced me to the warrant officer who'd be our pilot. Gunner Gridley looked like he might have been flying choppers since they'd been invented, and that morning he looked at least as bleary-eyed as me. His purplish-brown sagging face was set off by a small, perfectly trimmed gray moustache. The chopper itself, a small cargo carrier, inspired no confidence; battered and beaten looking, it rattled like a bag of bolts beneath its coughing prop. You could have played connect-the-dots with the bullet holes on the fuselage. When the chopper was loaded, Gunner showed me exactly where he wanted me to sit among the crates and bags, and we lifted off.

After more than an hour of flying away from the morning sun we landed at a big camp made up almost entirely of huge corrugated tin-roofed warehouses. Some items were off-loaded and others were put on board. Before we took off again, Crowley and Gunner Gridley and I sat inside a little air conditioned wood-frame office built onto the outside of a hangar that housed a few spotter planes and ate lunch—sandwiches that had been packed for us back at the chopper base. The sun was getting high and the day outside was quickly growing very hot.

Gunner Gridley said, "You're lookin' for a friend of yours, is that right?"

Crowley said. "A guy who's missing."

"Missing," said Gridley. "You mean like, missing in action?"

"Yeah." I said. "That's what I heard."

"Why?" asked Gridley. "I mean, this is a war. What else are you gonna find out?" He looked at me like he thought I should know better. I didn't understand his attitude and I didn't know what to say.

I shrugged my shoulders, and said, "I want to find out what

happened to him."

"What happened to him is he's missing." The gunner spoke to me now like a man who felt the need of patience. "I mean, you seen what we been flying over—it's not like he went to the corner to buy a pack of cigarettes and never came back. That would be a mystery. But this—" he spread his arms as if he was showing me the world from his cockpit, instead of the paneled walls of the little office— "this here is Vietnam, son,"

"We grew up together." I said, "I promised his sister."

"Oh," said Gunner Gridley. Just, "Oh," but the way he said it, his tone, seemed all at once to say that he understood how a woman might want answers from a war, and how a boy like me could be made to ask for them.

"I know that camp," he said. "Crowley and me been in there a hundred times. The Crow used to go in there in gunships, didn't va?" The old man smiled fondly at his partner, then said to me with something like compassion, "If your friend is one of those boys awhile back went missing from there, there's nothing to know about it. He's gone, son, and that's all."

"It's a bad place," Crowley agreed.

"You tell that sister something pretty," Gunner said. "Tell her he died for his country. Tell it to yourself, too, and then leave it be, son. That's the kind of scab you can pick at and pick at for a long time."

"Well," I said, "I guess I've come this far."

We took off and flew Southwest, Crowley pointing at the instruments every now and then and leaning over to say something into Gridley's ear; I never saw either of them look at a map, though for most of the trip we traveled over canopy so thick that I only saw through it for the time we followed a green vein of river. After an hour or so, we set down in the center of a small base camp in a clearing surrounded by heavily jungled mountains. It had seemed so pleasantly breezy, almost cool, in the air, but on the ground the heat was unbelievable. It was like a sauna inside an oven. Your body baked, basted by your soul while it sweat right out of you. You got used to it, I suppose; I saw men walking around, though not many—some even briskly. I felt the urge to lay down—some instinct about heat rising—and crawl until I found water, or air conditioning. Crowley motioned to me to head for a long low shed about forty yards away. There we walked up to a man wearing a camouflage cap and cut-off utility trousers and pink flip-flops that had a blue plastic daisy attached over each toe thong. The man said, "Yo, Crow," and held out a clipboard. Crowley signed something without looking at it, and said, "This here's Jack Terry. He's asking after a friend of his."

"Who's that?" the man asked.

I said, "Thomas Tuohy?"

"He's dead."

Crowley said, "Jack, I'll see you tomorrow. Eleven AM," and walked back to his chopper.

"Okay. Thanks." I looked back at the man. I couldn't think for a moment. I said, "I know that. I came to find out what I could about that." I reminded myself, Tommy's not dead, he's missing.

The man said, "Dead is dead."

"Did you know him?"

"Sure. But not real well."

"Who did know him real well?"

"Over there," he said, waving at a row of hootches with a narrow boardwalk stretched in front of them.

I looked back at him. "Over there where?"

"Someone over there can help you," he said, waving at the row of hootches again. "Nice talkin' to ya."

I left the shade of the shed and walked through sunlight that dropped down around me like molten lead. I crossed to the hootches and walked up and down the boardwalk. None of the buildings had signs on them, but all of them but one were only partly enclosed, having instead walls that halfway up were just wire screening—the kind of hootches that normally housed troops. I went inside the one building that had two dripping air conditioners stuck into windows. A man sat at a desk with his feet up on an open file drawer. Between his toes sprouted the same blue daisies as the guy in the shed, only his flop-flops were green.

"Hey, dude," he said. "You come in on the chopper? Got your

orders?" He held out a hand.

"No, I'm not... I came to ask about a friend."

"Someone with us? What's his name?"

"Tuohy," I said, "Thomas Tuohy."

"Oh. He's dead."

"Is that sure? I thought he was MIA?"

"No. He's dead, all right." After a pause he said, "I'm sorry about that."

An officer walked up from behind a partition. He wore no insignia of rank but I could tell he was an officer, almost certainly a lieutenant. He was obviously someone with authority, and he wore it like a lieutenant—he was too young and too bright-looking for a staff NCO. He was like my own Lieutenant Silver, bushy-tailed—but with a difference. It was something I'd noticed in the clerk, too, and in the guy in the shed. Something hard to pin down—a kind of wildness, or potential for wildness. It was in their nervous eyes, and in their voices a little. I just got the feeling talking to them, and just looking at them, that they, this lieutenant especially, could be dangerous men. The lieutenant also wore flip-flops with plastic daisies.

The clerk said, "This guy's here about Tuohy."

"Tuohy?-"

"I know, he's dead." I felt strange saying that. It felt unreal somehow, impossible. In the pause then, with the clerk and the lieutenant in front of me, looking at me, I had the strong feeling that I could turn around and Tommy'd be there, he'd have that tight grin on his skinny face, like this was all the stupidest kind of mistake. I thought that if I walked out of the hootch door, I'd find myself on the stoop of our building back in the Bronx.

"Come with me," the lieutenant said, and grabbed a widebrimmed floppy hat from a hook by the door and led me outside. We walked through that mean sunlight. He said, "Tuohy was a pretty good man. A hard motherfucker." He stopped suddenly and turned to face me. "He was a friend of yours?"

"We grew up together."

He nodded at me and started walking again. "He was a good man. A mean motherfucker."

If I was meant to, I felt no pride at hearing these things, took no comfort. "It's for sure he's dead? You got his body?"

"No, no body. He's dead, though. Whole fuckin' squad's dead." He stopped again, looked at me. "I didn't like losing a whole squad. I didn't like it at all." He looked hard into my eyes in that way that forces you to look right back, so you'll know that what's being said needs to be understood. "Losing them. I did not like that. They walked out, right there," he pointed off toward the perimeter, but neither of us looked away from the other, "and they didn't walk back." He pointed again, hard, as if they'd done this to him personally, as if they'd used death as a means of desertion.

We walked to a hootch on the far side of the camp. We went inside and the lieutenant stopped at a rack on which a long-boned, very skinny kid was asleep. He said, "Cleary, wake up. Here's a friend of Tuohy's."

Cleary's eyes snapped open and he caught his breath like a man waking suddenly out of a nightmare. "Tuohy?" he said, jerking his head between our two faces, as if he expected Tommy to be with us.

"A friend of Tuohy's is here," the lieutenant repeated. "Cleary here was in Tuohy's squad."

I looked from one to the other.

"I didn't go out that day," Cleary explained. "I had the perimeter duty." He looked at the lieutenant, then at me. "We keep people back from every squad," he said. "As reinforcement for the perimeter security." Looking at me, I saw Cleary had that same vague wildness about him. "We always do that," he said. He stood up. "It was my fucking turn."

I didn't know what I was there for anymore. I felt helpless. It was like they kept telling me, Tommy was dead. But was he? The lieutenant said he'd walked away and not walked back. He was as much lost as dead; Missing in Action: the words sounded like a kind of hope. "Maybe they were captured," I said. I could hear the appeal in my voice, and standing with these men it sounded like weakness.

"Out there?" said Cleary. "Out there you don't get captured. You get gone. It's just sometimes there's something left over to doggy bag for home, and sometimes there aint."

This was, I figured, turning into the kind of routine these guys must pull on their FNGs. Not that I doubted the jungle that enclosed us like a solid maze, or that other unsympathetic wilderness I sensed inside these men. But I had to know what made them so sure—I mean, this was there AO, they understood it, but still, I had to understand for myself—and for Mary—why it was that when Tommy hadn't walked back out of the jungle he, and his whole squad, were so certainly dead.

"Take him out," said the lieutenant,

"For real?" Cleary turned to me. "You up for it?" He pointed at the sling on my arm.

I pulled my arm gently from the sling. It was tender and sore, but it felt good to straighten it and to flex it slowly. "Yeah," I said, "I'm okay."

"Tell the Gargoyle I okayed it," the lieutenant said, then to me, "You be careful. You do what these guys tell you—"

"I will, sir," I said.

He stared at me for about five beats, "-because if you get dusted, my friend, you are somebody else's thin air forever. I aint doing the paperwork it would take to explain you." He walked out of the hootch.

"Rest awhile," Cleary said, and pointed at the rack next to his.

"We get ready to go out in an hour."

In that heat I could think of nothing else I wanted to do, so I stretched out and held my sore arm across my chest. Out of its sling, the arm throbbed something awful, and the pain there seemed to trigger the headache I'd been able to forget about on the chopper. I fished the big bottle of Darvon they'd given me at the hospital out of my pocket and swallowed a couple, knowing they wouldn't make the pain go away, but could only push it back a little. I thought it would be all right. I'd gotten accustomed to the pain and had learned to comfort myself imagining a time when it would be gone. Now, though, in this extraordinary heat—even just lying here I could feel my sweat drenching the naked mattress beneath me-I found it impossible to project my mind ahead to a time when the pain in my head and arm would be gone, impossible to imagine a time, or even the possibility of a time of no pain. Boozing with Crowley had helped make me numb to the pain, turned it for a while into an uncomfortable nuisance, like an irritating companion constantly clinging to my arm, but now I regretted the excess of the past two days—I felt weak and dull and feverish, and had the kind of gassy nausea that was like a mouse had got down into my belly and died. But I'd be all right once I got up and started moving, once I had things to do.

I must have slept. Cleary was shaking my boot. I sat up on the edge of the rack and felt a shiver of actual coolness as the hot drenching sweat on my back adjusted to the air temperature. He'd found me some gear: A helmet and flak jacket—that smelled of God knew how many men before me—a haversack, into which he'd packed crats and extra socks, and a cartridge belt with first-aid pouch and sheathed K-bar hanging from it, and three canteens, which he'd filled.

I drank a third of one canteen off and refilled it from a water can be pointed out by the door of the hootch. Cleary was already in his gear and I put mine on now. He had to help me get my sore arm through the pack strap.

"You sure you can do this?" he asked. He was looking at my

face. "It's a serious hump."

"Yes," I said, and forced a grin. "Absolutely." I felt butterflies in my stomach, flitting over the nausea. I reminded myself that we were going where Tommy had gone and not come back.

We stepped out of the hootch. There was a small patch of shade in front this time of the afternoon, which gave a respite from the sun but not much from the heat. The squad was gathered there, smoking and checking their gear. Cleary took me over to a big, oily man, uglier than any man I'd ever seen—he looked like Quasimoto in the old movie, only without the hunch, and with less fat and a lot more muscle than Charles Laughton. Cleary said, "This is Sergeant Gar."

"I'm lack Terry."

Gar said, "Yes, you were a friend of Tuohy's. I was a friend of Tuohy's. A crazy little fucker, but a good man." He had a voice that matched his bulk, booming, and yet with a mincing quality to it, as if he felt the effort of making each word intelligible. "I hear we're going to show you the big bad woods." He looked over my gear. "Well, let's get you a rifle."

"He's got a bad arm," Cleary said. "We should give him a

sidearm."

Gar asked, "Wound?"

"Concussion," I said. "I'm just sore."

"I've got a weapon for you," Gar said, and went into the hootch. He came back out with a forty-five in a scuffed and battered brown holster, and three full clips. "Check it," he said, and handed me the gun. I drew the forty-five, ejected the clip and pulled back the slide to check the breach, put the hammer home and reinserted a full clip. I attached the holster to my cartridge belt. "Okay," Gar said, loudly, "let's go." To me he said, "You follow Cleary."

Each man knew his place and one by one they joined the column led by Sergeant Gar. We walked into and out of the shade in front of the hootches tucked alongside one edge of the perimeter, and filed past a heavily sandbagged, steel-doored magazine, outside of which a man in only skivvy drawers, dogtags, and aviator sunglasses—and daisy flip-flops-stood beside an open crate of fragmentation grenades. The men knelt as they passed and took out at least two grenades. Most hooked them to the straps of their packs or to their belts. I took two and stuck them into the big side pockets of my fatigues. We paused at a break in the concertina wire surrounding the base. Gar said, "Roach. Go on." A husky man came forward, spoke with Gar for a moment, and moved out on point. We walked into the woods, and as we climbed a little rise maybe thirty yards out, I caught a backward glimpse of a steel water tower and a stretch of the perimeter fence, and then it was as if a heavy green curtain had come down between us and the base.

At first we walked on a narrow path bordered by thick bushes and locked tangles of leaf and palm-up ahead I heard someone using a machete to cut back the re-growth from the path. After a while we left the path and began to climb, and shortly after that the ground growth thinned a little under a shadowy, tiered canopy—enough so that I always had Cleary in sight, and usually saw beyond him to the man with the heavy radio on his back, whip antenna extended, who walked behind Gar. Most of the time the grade was no more than about fifteen degrees, and my legs got used to the climb pretty quickly. Where the daylight had been blinding in camp, now it was as dark as dusk, though if anything, the heat was worse. If it had been like standing too near a fire in the sun, in the jungle it was like being locked too long in a sauna. Everything dripped, and seemed coated with a sheen of oil, the way we coated our weapons against rust. I quickly felt the oiliness on my own skin. After almost an hour, Gar called the first break. I collapsed against the bole of a tree, and Cleary went to his knees beside me. We shook out of our packs and half out of our flak jackets and felt that momentary touch of coolness on our soaked backs.

"How far we going?" I asked when I got my breath. I hadn't realized how short of breath I was until I stopped walking.

"A couple hours or more. Gar said maybe three hours out. But he's always an optimistic son of a bitch." Cleary lay down using his pack as a pillow and lit a smoke. "Shit, I hate this part. You holding up?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm good." But I wasn't so sure. The weary routine of walking had deadened the pain in my arm, but I felt light-headed—the headache now a fragile thing held carefully at bay by not allowing my head to move too suddenly or letting my eyes look at anything other than head-on. I was feeling distant, somehow—distant and muffled and achy in the joints. It occurred to me that, if I'd let myself, I could easily fall deeply asleep right there on the jungle

floor.

Gar got us going again. My legs and back had stiffened up during the break, but soon I was moving along surprisingly easily— I began to feel in a strange way disconnected from my body. Tired and pained in my mind, it was with surprise that I observed my legs stepping strongly along the jungle floor. We walked for forty-five minutes before Gar called another full break. Up ahead, I saw him and the point man and another man crouched over a map and compass. I lay panting, leaning against my pack. I drank deep from my canteen, and no water had ever tasted as necessary, or as good-I could feel it seep sweetly into every parched cell. A corpsman came up the line and handed Cleary and me two salt tablets each, which I swallowed, drinking some more water.

"Take what you need, but don't go too hard on the water," Cleary said. "It's gotta last."

We moved out, and it was harder this time to get back into the rhythm of walking up the soft black jungle floor. I thought for a moment I might not be able to keep up, but then, again I found the pace, and followed after Cleary, suddenly surprised that I was there, allowing myself to plod blindly through that dark jungle with men I didn't know. I didn't even know where we were going-hell, I didn't know where the place was we'd started from. Sometimes we'd stop at a signal passed down the line from the point, and we'd crouch facing out to the side, each man turning the opposite way from the man ahead, while the point man and first fire team checked out the ground in front of us. Cleary and the man behind me held their rifles at loose port arms, to be ready, and I'd draw Gar's forty-five and hold it between my thighs, muzzle toward the ground. Like the others, I watched the thick woods, I listened—but what was I looking for? What was I waiting to recognize? Was I supposed to understand something about Tommy by sweating through the miserable wet air of that hard place? Then the word would pass down for us to move on.

During those stops, watching the deep still gloom of the woods, I began to see they were not so still, really. Birds swept between trees, in fact, I noticed how just below the canopy bright birds crisscrossed the shadowy air constantly. They'd disappear sometimes up into the deep green ceiling, and I thought how they must have access to the sky above. I began to feel a touch claustrophobic, though my memory of the furnace outside the woods was still vivid enough to keep me from feeling too uncomfortably closed in. The

jungle wasn't as quiet, either, as I had at first seemed to think. I heard the cries of animals, birds, I suppose, sounding sometimes like the sound track of a Tarzan picture, though once in a while some creature would call out so strangely—half human and echoing eerily—that it made me shiver. The sounds, the animal cries that had that human quality, were, if you thought of them as coming from animals, free-sounding, almost happy; but if you thought of the sounds as human, they suddenly seemed filled with pain—long drawn-out pain cried out to us sadly, but without the least tone of hope. I remembered hearing there were tigers as big as bears in these jungles, and vipers with poison so potent, it was said, that if bitten, you might just have time to light a last cigarette. Then I smelled again what my nose had gotten used to: the dank, lush woods held, tucked into the rich mixed scents of vegetation, the permanent under-odor of death and decay.

After a stop that left us waiting a good fifteen minutes, everyone watching the woods, panting to catch the breath that we only seemed to miss when we stopped walking, we moved forward again and behind Cleary I walked into an enormous glade where the squad was loosely gathering together, dropping their packs and cartridge belts, stretching and sitting down tiredly on the soft black ground. As we came in, Sergeant Gar sent men out into the jungle ahead and to either side to keep watch. The rest dug into their packs for c-rats, or lit cigarettes, the smoke forming blue clouds that hung in the air above their heads. The high canopy over the glade let in sunlight here and there in hard bright slanting spikes driven without diffusion straight down into the ground. Where it burned through the narrow sun-spikes, the clear gloom of air suddenly seemed filled with dusty debris. Birds flashed in and out of the sun with wings like burning paper. I dropped my pack and flak jacket, my helmet and cartridge belt, and feeling light and even a little cool I sat on the ground and hugged a rock the size and color of a watermelon. The lightness of my body, now that I was sitting still and unencumbered, only seemed to exaggerate the throbbing in my arm and, now again, in my head but it was less of a hurting, somehow, as if the pain existed separately from, or was too great to be experienced by my suddenly weightless body. I still had that distant, feverish sense, but where before I'd felt sunk down into myself, now I seemed to wear myself like a shell, my body too light and airy to contain me. Still, I popped two more Darvon, just to be safe.

Cleary sat beside me, nudged my knee and said, "You should eat." I lay there trying to assess myself, not sure I could eat. The

sounds of men talking and fussing with cans and mess gear sounded far away. Even Cleary, right beside me, seemed to be talking from a distance. I thought about Tommy, lost somehow in all of thismissing or dead in this place where no one seemed to see the difference.

Cleary pulled a c-rats box out of my pack, opened a can of peaches and handed it to me. I asked him how he'd known they were my favorite—they weren't in every box of c-rats, and he'd packed them for me. He said, "Peaches are everyone's favorite." I sat up against the rock and sucked down sliced peaches, and once I started I couldn't stop and finished them all, and opened a canned pound cake, dropped it in a canteen cup and poured the rest of the syrup over it, and ate that.

Big Sergeant Gar came and squatted on his heels beside us. The ugly man's oily skin was shining, and his large, crooked white teeth showed when he smiled. "Are we having fun?" he asked. And then, "How about these woods, boy? Are they hell on earth, or are they not?"

"What happened to Tuohy?" I asked. "Were they on a patrol like this when you lost them?"

"I didn't lose them." Gar raised his bony eyebrows looking at Cleary. "Did you lose them, Cleary?" Then to me he said, "No. This is a stroll in the park. They got caught in something. We got that much on the radio. Then nothing."

"You didn't know where to look for them?"

"Yes, more or less, we did. But we never found them, not a sign. They were a good squad, too, which is why they were out there—some said they were our best squad, but we can see now that wasn't so. Hell, we even had gunships on station, and your friend and the rest of them still managed to disappear."

Another man had come up behind Gar, handed him a canteen cup of steaming coffee and stood listening. He said, "It was gook voodoo, man. They just disappeared them, man, turned them into zombies and shit."

Gar stood up, and asked me, "How's your arm? You're all right?" "Yeah," I said, "I'm fine."

"Good. Relax. We'll stay here for a bit, then the long way home," he said, looking at me hard, then smiling that big white smile. Gar walked off, and the other man followed, walking backwards, saying, "Zombies in the jungle. Or maybe zombies in Hanoi unloading Soviet tankers and shit. You ever think of that,

Cleary?"

When they were gone, I asked Cleary, "He said they were 'out there'—out where?"

Cleary sat up cross-legged and lit another cigarette. "They were sent out on an op—all of us were, the Gargoyle's squad, too. Except me." He looked down, then up, and blew a stream of blue smoke straight up into the dead air. I thought I knew what Cleary was feeling, but I was surprised when he said it: "I don't want to be dead, but I can't stop wanting to have gone out that day. I should have been with the squad."

Suddenly angry, Cleary said, "Some fucking recon listening post out in the middle of fucking nowhere heard something moving on some fucking trail on a mountain. The whole company went out to intersect branches of the trail down here, by chopper for a ways, then they humped for a day and a half." He looked straight at my eyes and his voice took on the tone of someone needing to convince you they've been competent, as if what happened to Tommy could have been his fault. "They set up a series of mostly squad size ambushes. They were all linked by radio and they had gunships in the air, hanging off a ways but ready to come in shooting. Tuohy's squad—my squad—was furthest out, anchoring the line on the far end. They hadn't even got in position yet, nobody really knew where they were when they radioed they'd made contact. Then nothing else. We never found them, and we searched for days, and choppers searched every day for weeks, but they were just gone."

Bitterly, he said, "Like the asshole says, gook voodoo disappeared them."

I saw that Cleary was as uncomfortable about saying that last as I was hearing it. "It can happen," he said. "look around you—and I been up where they were, and it's even worse."

"They were captured," I said.

"I told you, man, out here you don't get captured."

"Yeah. You said it!" I still clung to the notion that Tommy was missing, but I'd begun to understand the faith these men had that remaining in this jungle, walking in and not walking out, was equivalent to death.

"Okay," Cleary said. "For instance." He paused to look over at Gar where he sat grinning, talking with three others. "I'm in the Gargoyle's squad now, and we were out a while back, after the thing with Tuohy—after Tuohy and the others died. We were in jungle like this, only up higher, gook country, and we took fire and returned

it. The fight didn't last long—we had the fire power and we responded fast. I gotta give the Gargoyle credit—he knows his shit, and he keeps his people ready. We dislodged the gooks quickly and chased them a ways, not far-it's their jungle up there more than ours."

Cleary paused and looked around. "See that guy?" he said. "Reading?" I saw a man leaning against his pack where a spike of sunlight fell through the ceiling and splashed onto the pages of his open book. "We call him Professor, and you believe the dude humps books in his pack? The Gargoyle always checks him to make sure he's carrying maximum ammo. Which is unnecessary—Professor's no slacker.

"When the shooting's over Professor steps out of the trees and says, 'I got prisoners.' Like he's a goddamn cop. I got fucking prisoners." Cleary shook his head, smiling. "Professor's pointing his rifle into the trees, and he motions for these two slopes to come out. One of them's got his arms out at his sides, and his eyes are popping like he's scared shitless. The other one's shot in the foot and he tries to hop out on the one foot and he falls down howling, holding his bloody stump of a foot in two hands. Professor picks him up by the arm and half carries him in and drops him by his partner."

Cleary paused to light a cigarette, leaned in toward me and went on, his words coming out now in an eager rush. "The one's howling and the other's laughing and jabbering something in gook over and over, and the Gargoyle, ugly motherfucker that he is he's even uglier when he's mad-gets all red, you know?-he steps up close to Professor," Cleary shifted around and brought his face in close to mine, "and says right in his face, 'Fuck you, book reader, and fuck your prisoners.' Then he calls one of his boys over-the one scratching his feet there—and tells him to take the jabbering gook back into the woods, and Gar grabs the guy with the shot foot by the collar and drags him out, too, and he kills them. Two short bursts. I think it was the Gargovle did them both himself."

Cleary looked surprised he'd come to the end of his story, looked like he wanted to say more, but there was no more. I said, "Did you tell anyone? I mean, not you, but do you report that kind of thing? You can't, can you?" Hearing myself, I stopped and said, "Hell, I do mean you. Didn't you tell anyone? Didn't the Professor?"

Cleary looked at me the way his lieutenant had looked at me back at the camp, like here was a thing he had to see I understood, and he said, "Listen, my friend, and hear me straight. I don't like the Gargoyle much, but I don't think the Gargoyle's wrong. And neither did your buddy Tuohy. Me," he nodded back at where the Professor lay reading, "and Professor now, and all of us," Cleary spread his arms, "when we fight we fight to kill what's in front of us while it's still in front of us. We erase our enemies, we want it known out here not to fuck with us in our part of the jungle, to leave us alone because we are badder than the bad guys, the baddest shit out here, bad, bad news. Because that's our best bet—we stay tight and we stay mean, and we get home."

Something screamed from the woods, something that sounded close and, to my ears, terrified—some strange beast seeking its mate, maybe, or challenging a rival; or maybe it was screaming at us, we made it nervous, it wanted us gone from so close to its home. For a moment we sat looking in the direction of the scream, then Cleary stuck a cigarette in his mouth, said, "I gotta pee," and walked to the

edge of the glade.

I lay against my rock and felt relaxed in the sense that I felt overwhelmed, as if I were floating down inside my once again weighty, muffled self. I had begun to shiver occasionally, short fits of jittery shivers that set my teeth chattering and made my skin tighten suddenly. Then the shivering would stop and instantly I became drenched again with sweat. But I was down, down inside, away from all that. My rock felt as comfortable as a pillow, and my eyes wanted to shut against the dull ache in my head but I made them watch the woods, and I thought about Tommy, out there somewhere, certainly dead. I thought about Tommy, how when we'd been kids we used to swim in the Harlem River from off the blocky stone base of a huge old, unused bridge built for carriage and foot traffic, spanning the Bronx and Manhattan. Our part of the Bronx had been named after the bridge: Highbridge. But we always called the beautiful, decaying old structure just "the footbridge." We'd swim sometimes for hours on hot days, jumping or diving from the base of the bridge or from the rusty steel girders arching above. We assigned reputations for daring to one another according to how far out over the river the girder was from which we would jump, and Tommy was a fifth-girder man, jumping from almost as far out as the Circle Lines cruise boats would pass, giving the passengers a thrill. First girder was my limit, and I'd jump from there only rarely— I'd mostly stick to cannon balls from the base. Tommy was always braver than me or almost anyone we knew-once he actually swam all the way across to Manhattan. Most of us wouldn't venture beyond the shit-line, a kind of natural, narrow off-shore stream of garbage that floated on the current—scum dotted with turds, wrappers, cans, cigar butts and condoms. But we watched Tommy swim beyond that—slipping underwater to pass beneath the shit-line—and decide to keep going. I don't think anything up to then had ever worried me so much as watching Tommy slowly go away and away, losing him finally in the bright sunlight on the water and being frantic until I watched his skinny body crawl out onto the rocks and wave to me from far, far over on the other side.

I came back from remembering to a fit of shivering, I watched how the jungle surrounded me, covered me, and I began again to sweat. I thought about Tommy alive-almost dreaming of him, remembering with the displacing, near-tactile force of hallucination: how sometimes we'd swim at night, a transistor radio spinning music out over the black water, the only light from a streetlamp back across the railroad tracks that ran along the river. How one summer we'd hung a long rope from the girders and would leap out over the water and try to catch the rope from the air, or with a stick pull the rope in to the base and, with a running start along the edge swing out in a long arc through space, letting go and flying down into the sundanced water. How some days the tidal current would be running strong, and we'd leap off one end of the base and be carried back by the current to the rope hanging just above the surface, and grab the rope as the water pulled us past and, holding it, kick toward the rocks near the shore. How one hot night the river current was strong when Tommy and I went down to the footbridge, and let little Mary who shouldn't have been out so late so far from our street-tag along with us, and she sat on the bridge base in charge of the transistor radio, singing along with the music, sitting barefoot and her thin legs bare beneath her shorts and stretched out on the stone so we'd step over them in our running starts off the end of the base. I ran and stepped off flying into dark air and knew as I struck the water that I'd jumped out too far, then stayed under too long, and when I popped up I saw the rope and struggled in the current to pass close enough to grab it. As the water dragged me by I stopped stroking to stretch out my arm and fingers and still stretching them beyond the moment I should have felt the rope I saw as in a vision what would happen to me, how I'd be drawn along in the current, pulled out to sea where I'd drown in the dark. It was as if it had happened already, I began, even in the moment, to believe in the vision, I felt almost calm—and then I felt Tommy's fingers with my own, locked onto them, our curled fingers hooked together, Tommy hanging onto the rope and hanging onto me, and he held on and I held on until he could draw me toward him and I could grab his wrist with my other hand and with our four legs we could kick together toward frightened Mary standing above the rocks at the river-edge.

The spikes of sunlight flashing down through the canopy had shifted in their angles of slant, were shifting as I watched, and beginning to spread, diffuse, even as they slowly disappeared. I was listening to Cleary's voice, but not making out the words. I came back from a half-dreaming state to the sounds from the jungle, and to a slight, relieving coolness of the air as evening came on. Cleary said, "We're gonna saddle up in a few minutes, start back." "Okay," I said, nodding firmly, trying to show I was alert, I was with the program. I saw the Gargoyle standing—in his chiseled ugliness like something from the jungle—back a ways behind Cleary, watching me. Cleary asked if I was all right, would I make it all right—as if there was a choice. But I was fine, and I'd be better once we started walking. Still, I didn't flinch when Cleary poured, gently and a little at a time, cool water onto my head from his canteen cup.

Getting to my feet I stood for a moment gathering myself, then walked to the edge of the woods and peed. Buttoned up, I stood watching the green gloom of the woods. The jungle was a living thing—looking, listening carefully into it I saw and heard a concert of movement and sound, and recognized, finally, what I'd been sensing all day: how carefully the jungle watched and listened to me, to all of us. Feeling myself watched, I couldn't help thinking, wanting, some part of the watching to be Tommy, as if his consciousness had become part of the consciousness of the woods staring back at me. For one stunning moment I felt certain I could reach in behind the leaves and bushes and trees and find Tommy's hand and hold on, not letting go, not for anything, and draw Tommy out and take him home. Then the moment passed, and it was like I'd had my chance, and failed.

I got into my gear and fell into line behind Cleary as we left the glade. Walking out was easier than walking in had been—the ground sloped downward a few degrees, the air was cooler, though after a few minutes we were sweating as much as ever and the coolness was only noticeable on the breaks. There were fewer breaks than on the walk in, and we stopped less often to listen or to check out the woods ahead, but I grew stronger as I walked and my arm felt pretty good,

though I'd taken to cradling the sore right arm with my good left forearm. The long dusk seemed nearly complete and darkness about to fall on us when we stepped out into a cleared field within sight of the camp, and I was startled by the brightness left in the day outside the woods. Sergeant Gar put out yellow smoke as a signal and we walked across the field and into the camp.

Later in the hootch, showered and wearing skivvies Cleary had loaned me while my own rinsed-out clothes hung out to dry, Cleary showed me photographs of himself with people from his dead squad. In two of the pictures a too-thin, tired-looking Tommy was grinning at the camera. One of those pictures is of Tommy and Cleary and another man in a place that could be the glade we'd walked to earlier, sitting around a sterno fire waiting for coffee to boil, and Tommy, in the middle, is making devil horns, or peace signs, behind the heads of the others. Even in the photo, faded now and looking almost antique, the presence of the jungle was, is, at least to me, a palpable thing.

Sergeant Gar came and knelt beside us by Cleary's rack, handed us canteen cups, and poured us out a few ounces each of Black Label from a bottle he drank from directly. Gar looked at Cleary's pictures.

He said, "What did you think of my woods, Jack?"

I told him I'd never seen anything like them, and wouldn't mind if I never did again. I wasn't sure that was true, though. Bad as the jungle was, it was also oddly compelling. By the time I'd come out of its woods that evening I'd gotten something of it inside me, some part of it that had to do with the quality of its light, or with an echo of its hidden beasts that screamed so nervously.

"Are you convinced Mr. Tuohy is dead?" Gar had a way of turning on the smile in his ugly face that made you want to shudder with distrust. "You know he is, don't you. Deader than shit."

"Listen—" I started, but he cut me off with his deep voice and its precise manner, saying, without the smile, "Your Thomas Tuohy was a good man." He held up Tommy's picture so that I was looking at it, and said, "I'd have had the man in my squad anytime." He kept watching me and holding the picture up for me to see. My head had begun to throb again with pain that seemed connected to my blood-pulse. Gar said, "I think I'd have you, too, Jack. I'm not sure, but I do think I would." If I'd have spoken, I didn't know if I'd have said Fuck you or Thank you to the Gargoyle. He put the picture down on the rack and stood up. "Instead, I got Mr. Cleary here. That makes me lucky, I suppose. A real survivor, Cleary is."

Smiling down at Cleary, then winking at me, Gar turned and walked away.

I looked at Cleary, trying to read his face. He said, "Fuck him, Jack. When he does that I wish the asshole good health. The worst thing that can happen to him is he'll live to get home and be the ugliest civilian in America." We sipped Gar's whiskey in a silent toast. Cleary leaned over and reached between his legs to pull a footlocker out from under his rack. He opened it, and I saw that half of the top tray was filled with worn and dirty flip-flops with blue daisies, like the ones Cleary had on, and even Gar had been wearing. He plucked out a pair held together with a rubber band, and said, "These were Tuohy's, if you want them." I took them—orange flipflops with blue daisies—I held them, and it didn't seem at all strange to me, then, that they were what there was of Tommy that I could carry away with me.

The next day started off viciously hot, too hot to eat, too hot to move or do anything but lay still and wait for my ride. When I'd get back to Danang I'd find in a letter from Mary that Tommy's official status had been upped to Missing, Presumed Dead. I decided to take Gunner Gridley's advice and tell Mary that Tommy was certainly dead—I'd write that he had died for his country. Late in the morning Crowley and Gridley swooped down to pick up outgoing mail sacks, and lifted me away from the camp, up into the clean cool moving air above the jungle that spread out on all sides like a sea. In the letter I'd write to Mary I'd say that I, too, felt like I was waiting all the time to come home.

Winner of the Jim Cash Fiction Contest

ED IS ON NO SIDE

eric gregg

When he first came to Kesey Home for the Elderly, I was just starting a new puzzle. It was a 2000 piecer with a tomato-red bridge, a snow-white windmill, and pretty trees Mom would have loved. I was facing the door, but it wasn't so that I could watch people walk in. It was so I wouldn't have to look at all the old folks behind me watching Oprah. Not only may that be the most Godawfullest show ever created, but they talk to the set as if they was little kids watching Sesame Street.

I didn't even look up when he walked in. Heck, you seen one old person with his face falling off, you've seen 'em all. As he was walking by, I could see that he was wearing white Converse tennis shoes, a little muddy from the dirt I spread on the icy walkway that morning. After he walked by, the sneakers stopped squeaking, which meant he was standing right behind me.

If you ever spent any time at an old folks home, you'd know that it smells just like a nursery. Everybody smells like lotion, baby powder, and sometimes you get a whiff of someone's dirty diapers. But the man standing behind me smelled like coffee and cigarette smoke, like my father had. In fact, when I looked up, I was expecting to see my dad for the first time since my parents got divorced thirty years before. What I saw was Edde Fry.

His face was starting to slide, but I wouldn't say it was quite falling yet. His cheekbones were still high and hard and his lips were smooth and more pink than purple and I would swore he had all his teeth. His eyes were shaded under his hat brim, but I could tell they were big. Not sunken in or bugged out, but just big, like when a man first sees his newborn child.

He put a hand on my shoulder and I could feel his bony fingers dig in to my flesh; he must've found the miracle cure for arthritis. He smiled down at me and says, "You could save a whole hell of a lot of money if you bought the picture."

"But that would take all the fun out of it, wouldn't it sir," I says to him and returned his smile.

"Fun. Shit, puzzles are for little snot-nosed brats learning shapes. For a young buck like you, they can't be anything more than a bore or an insult, am I right?"

Well, I guess he had a point. It wasn't the most exciting thing in

the world to do. But I knew one thing, it sure beat watching Oprah. "It does at that, my friend. The name's Edde Fry. That's E-D-D-E."

I told him my name was Ed and that it was nice to meet him. Then he gave me a handshake so strong I wondered again how a man that was at least thirty-five years older than me could have missed getting arthritis.

I wasn't very far into my puzzle yet (I only had the three easy pieces done: MILT connected to TON BRAD connected to LEY), so when Edde walked on over to the TV room, I swiveled my chair around so as I could see what the old folks was going to say.

He introduced himself the same way, except after he was done spelling his name, he says, "Never odd or even." Everyone but Katie looked at Edde like he was from Mars. Katie said, "Isn't that nice," but that's all she ever said. It probably would have done her some good to watch Grover and Big Bird teaching new words.

Billy looked up at Edde and says, "Never odd or even? What in tarnation is that supposed to mean?"

Edde says, "It's a Palindrome. The same thing spelled forward and backward, like 'party trap.' Or maybe 'yawn a more Roman way.'" He said this last one like he was some big-time actor, his head raised up and a hand in the air with his fingers spread apart.

All the old folks looked up at the ceiling, to where Edde was looking. They were trying as hard as they could to make the letters appear there so as they could read 'em backwards. Some of them was even pointing their fingers at where each letter would be and then pointing them the other way. I tried the same, but it was no use. My letters kept getting mixed up and I can't spell very good anyways. I just took Edde's word for it that they was palydomes.

After they all got done pointing their fingers and squinting their eyes and looking at Edde as if he still hadn't left Mars, Billy asked Edde to get out of Oprah's way and they all went back to talking to her as if nothing happened. They didn't seem to care that a new guy moved in at all, let alone what a palydome was.

Edde stepped out of the circle, took a cigarette from behind his ear and lit it with a wooden match he pulled out of his pocket. Before he got more than three puffs, Mrs. Swender came running as if he just committed a capital crime. And let me tell you, she scared the living crap out of him. She grabbed him by the elbow and he jumped a good three feet, bumping into Billy and dropping his cigarette right into the poor guys' lap.

Billy leaped out of his seat and started screaming like a little kid having a temper-tantrum. Edde gave him a queer look, picked up his cigarette, which had found it's way to Billy's chair, and says to Mrs. Swender, "What the hell are you doing?"

Mrs. Swender explained to him that all smoking has to be done outside and the butts put into a coffee can. Edde laughed, took a drag off his cigarette and walked out the same door he walked in.

I swiveled my chair back around toward the door to see if he was just obeying rules or if he was going to leave and never come back. He turned the corner towards the parking lot as I heard Mrs. Swender telling Billy that everything was going to be okay.

He walked back in about five minutes later and this time I looked up. He sat across from me and started fumbling with the puzzle pieces, separating the only three I had put together. He says to me, "You know what, Ed? We're not like them. We don't fart dust and we don't need to soak our teeth in prune juice."

I looked behind me and would swore I saw a big puff of dust come out of Katie's rear end. I looked back at Edde and I says, "Edde, you got to be just as old as the rest of them."

"It's true Ed, I am an old man. But I'm still too young to be here.

Too young feeling, that is."

"Why are you here then?"

He started looking down at the puzzle pieces again. I felt bad for prying, but I just couldn't understand why he would insist that he didn't belong at Kesey. I mean, he was there. He walked out to smoke his cigarette, but he came right back in.

He looks up at me and says, "I'm too old to work. You see, most of the people over there were sent here by their ungrateful kids. I never had any kids to be ungrateful and use their money to send their old man off to bingo heaven. I have enough saved up to last me a while, but I plan on kicking around for a lot longer than that. In here, my money can last." He paused for a few seconds and then added, "So why are you here? You're definitely not old enough to make it a necessity."

"I guess I'm sorta like a groundskeeper. I plow the driveway and spread dirt on the walkway in the winter and I tend the garden in the spring."

"C'mon, a young guy like you can find a more exciting job than taking care of a retirement home. Shit, having to hang around all the old folks should be enough to make you want to run out that door right now."

I had never thought of leaving Kesey before. It was more than just a retirement home, it was my home. I got along with the old folks and they treated me like I was one of them. And I had things to do there. Besides my everyday chores, when someone needed something done, they came to me. And when I was sick or hurt or just plain down in the dumps, Mrs. Swender took care of me. She was good that way.

I had only had one other home in my entire life, at Baker Street with my mom. And that had been pretty much the same situation. Minus the old folks.

Of course, I couldn't tell him all that. I just says, "This is my home."

He laughed hard for a long time, until he started coughing up whatever it is that smokers cough up when they laugh too hard. He says, "When was the last time you looked at that sign? It says 'Kesey Home for the Elderly.' It's a home all right, but not for you."

I couldn't tell for sure whether he had misunderstood my meaning or if he was purposely making fun of me, but I didn't know what to say about it either way. The only thing I could think to say at all was, "Tell me how you think up one of them palydomes."

"What? Oh, you mean a palindrome. I can try, but I've never taught anyone before."

"Well, how do you do it?"

"First I write down a simple word," he says to me and then brings out a pencil that had been hidden in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, where the match had been. "Lets start with 'wall." Then Edde grabbed the puzzle box and started writing on it like he was helping me with my homework or something.

He made "wall" into "wallaw" and then put the pencil in his mouth like I've seen actors put knives in their mouths in movies. Then he started tapping the eraser with his thumb like he was speaking in Morse code. I was happy to see him having troubles, 'cause I didn't even know what the heck he was doing. But then he took the pencil out of his mouth and says, "It doesn't have to be a sentence that you would ever say. You see, if you put 'K' in there, we got 'walk law."

He wrote this down on the puzzle box and then turned it toward me so as I could read it. I thought it was the neatest thing since Mrs. Swender taught me how to play 'cat's cradle' with yarn. I looked up at him and asked him if he could do another one for me. He says, "Ed, if you want to learn, you'll have to start doing them yourself. I'll

tell you what. Tell me when you get your first one and then I'll teach you how to make the bigger ones. It shouldn't take you more than a couple of days before you start coming up with shorties like 'Sue us.'"

It ended up taking me a week and a half and a pad of paper. It wasn't very good, but I ran into Edde's room as soon as I got it. I ran in and I says, "Go Dog!"

He looked at me like I's from Mars, but then I guess he figured out what I was talking about 'cause he says to me, "Great Ed. You're getting the hang of it. Go dog! That's right, 'go dog' and 'stack cats."

After having spent over a week thinking about them, I was actually able to see the letters in my head and then read 'em backwards. 'Stack cats' was a good one and I gave him a big smile and he says, "Go dog, stack cats, but 'step on no pets."

I wasn't sure if that one was a palindrome or not, but I laughed so hard my stomach hurt like when my old gym coach used to make me run The Mile.

"You ever play cards?" he asked me as I was getting myself under control.

"My dad used to tell me he was going to teach me how to play poker soon as I got old enough. I guess ten isn't old enough because that's when he left and I still don't know how to play. And Mrs. Swender once tried to teach me a game called 'auction pee-knuckle,' but I never caught on. I've really never been any good at that kind of thing."

"I'll make you a deal. If you can come up with another palindrome by ten o'clock tonight, I'll teach you how to play rummy, a good game for two people. And I'll try to think of a new one too."

"Edde, you know ten o'clock is lights out."

"We'll be quiet and if it makes you feel better, I'll shove a towel under the door to stop my smoke and any light from sneaking out."

"What if Mrs. Swender catches us anyway?"

"What, is she your mama?"

"Just about."

"Well, she's not and we're not her little kids. We can stay up as late as we want."

"But what if I can't think of one?"

"I'll teach you anyway, but you still have to try."

It took me over a week for 'go dog,' and now he wanted me to get one in a day. Can you imagine that? Since Edde said I could come anyway, I stopped trying after a couple of hours. But when I

was done taking my shower and I was cleaning my ears, I got one.

When I got to his room, he looked like he was fixin' to play without me. He had the cards all dealt out and a bottle of Jack Daniel's on the table between him and the ghost player.

I sat down across from him and he held his hands out, palms up, to ask me if I got one. "I got one," I says. "Spit Q-tips."

"Very good. Rise to vote, sir."

I stood up. I didn't know what the heck he wanted me to vote on and I never did vote before. I just figured he was taking some kind of survey of the home or something, but I was excited anyhow. Edde laughed so hard I thought he was going to stop breathing.

"No. 'Rise to vote, sir.' It's a palindrome."

I sat down and stared at the bottle of Jack Daniel's and prayed that he wouldn't make fun of me. I didn't mind the laughing, but I didn't want him to call me no names. I think I would have left and never talked to him again. He didn't. He grabbed two Dixie cups that he must've stole from the bathroom and put one in front of each of us. He took two ice cubes from his bedpan, which he was using as an ice bucket, and dropped one in each cup, telling me not to worry, he hadn't used the bedpan. Then he filled each cup full of whisky.

"Ed, I'm sorry I laughed. I'll make you a deal. From now on, when either of us think of a new palindrome, we'll wink at the other one when we say it. That way we'll never have to worry about confusing each other. How's that sound?"

I thought that sounded just great. I could see us talking to each other all day, winking. We could say things like "That's a nice car" and "I like pistachio ice cream" and no one in the whole building would know what we were talking about. Neither of those are palindromes, of course, but you can see what I'm saying.

It took me a week to get good enough at rummy to be a challenge to Edde. Then we started playing every day. I'd come in from plowing the drive and walk over to the TV circle and there Edde'd be, outside the circle like a buck-toothed kid in first grade. You know the kind, the kid that was always picked last for dodgeball. Or even worse, a trade would be made for you and a girl for a different buck-toothed kid who just happened to be a little better than you.

Edde never seemed to mind being excluded. He'd just say, "Ready for rummy?" and I'd tell him okay and we'd play. By the time night came, we were always rummied out, so Edde started to teach me other games. He taught me blackjack, auction pee-knuckle, and he even taught me poker, though he said it wasn't no fun with only two people and nothing but pennies.

Mrs. Swender seemed to exclude Edde even more than the old folks did. Well, I guess she ignored him more than she excluded him. But either way, I thought it was pretty funny. Edde'd put a cigarette in his mouth and ask her for a light and she wouldn't even look up at him. When he actually lit it himself, she'd look up, but it was only to shake her head and point toward the door. I'd always laugh and follow him out so as we could practice our palindromes.

When spring came, we had so many we really could walk around the place winking all day. I just loved saying things like "pots nonstop," and then Edde'd say, "we panic in a pew," and I'd say, "desserts, I stressed," and he'd say, "pull up, Bob, pull up," and sometimes Katie would say, "Isn't that nice," and all three of us would laugh.

I think it was about that time, when I started to plant the marigolds, that I noticed Mrs. Swender starting to ignore me too. I think she thought me and Edde were in cahoots together or something. But it wasn't like that at all. I'll admit I thought it was funny to watch them fighting, but I thought she thought it was funny too. I never knew that there was any real problems between them. I wanted Edde and Mrs. Swender to get along. I really did. But I guess some people just aren't meant to live together.

That's why I knew what was coming when Edde asked me to sit on the couch one night instead of pouring drinks into Dixie cups and telling me to shove the towel under the door. I've never seen anyone faint or fall over when they hear bad news, but that never stops the news-teller from asking you to sit on a couch. It was like a place of doom. It was my grandma's death and my parents divorce and I knew that very soon it would be Edde leaving Kesey.

"When are you leaving, Edde?" I ask him after I sat down.

"As soon as I sign these papers," he tells me and holds them up. I knew that they must have said something like "LETTER OF DEPARTURE" or some other mumbo-jumbo, but to me, they said "DIVORCE PAPERS."

He put his pencil in his mouth and started giving me Morse code. He waited about the same time as my dad had before actually signing. Only a minute or so. But if you were to ask me what were the two most important minutes of my life, I would have to say that they were both spent on couches, one at my first home, one at my second. He took the pencil out of his mouth, signed the papers, and said, "Ed, I don't have a car. How would you like to go with me? We

can throw our stuff in the back of your truck and leave the plow attachment here if they want."

Almost everything was right. Edde was there. The papers were there. The couch of doom was there and I was there on it. But Mrs. Swender wasn't there like Mom had been. I guess it was because she really wasn't my mom. But I couldn't stop from making the connection, not even then. Everything else was just too perfect.

It's like being on a train. When you're with your parents, you can have one at each side, telling you which window to look out of. But my mom could only tell me what was outside hers. And Mrs. Swender was looking out that same one. Now I had a chance to take the train the other way and have Edde tell me what's on his side.

I watered the rose bushes one last time and I left the plow attachment there for whoever was going to take my place. Mrs. Swender wasn't mad, not like I thought she'd be. I think she understood why I had to leave with Edde. She helped me pack and even gave me and Edde some sandwiches for the trip.

All the old folks told me how sad it was that I was leaving, except for Katie, who told me how nice it was. I was sad too, and I think Edde could see that. When we walked out, he looked down at the walkway and says, "Don't worry, Ed. They'll find someone else to (wink) dump mud here so that the old folks won't fall."

Edde always knew how to show me the funny side of things and he knew that palindromes always made me laugh. I looked up at him and says, "Yep, and I bet they'll find someone to tend the garden and dig their hands down into (wink) *worm row*."

Despite my laughing, I was worried about where we were going. All our stuff was packed and we had already left the home. We were almost to the truck and I didn't even know where we were driving to.

"Where are we going, Edde?"

"Tulsa."

"Why Tulsa?"

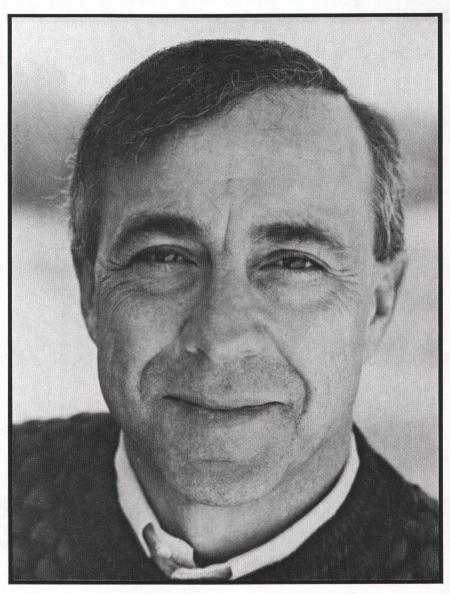
"Because, a slut nixes sex in Tulsa." I didn't even have to look at his face to laugh at that. Some palindromes were just too obvious to need winking.

I got in the truck, started it up, and then realized I still didn't know where in the heck we were going. I looked over at him and I says, "Are we really going to Tulsa, Edde?"

I was hoping that he didn't think it was just another obvious one, but he didn't even blink when he looked back at me and says, "No, son."







AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP CAPUTO interviewed by phil dekane

Dhilip Caputo is one of America's most prominent writers. His memoir, A Rumor of War, remains a standard text on the Vietnam War, and his novels (Horn of Africa, Delcorso's Gallery, Indian Country, and Equation for Evil) have solidified his reputation as an important and perceptive commentator on what can happen when human beings struggle, as Caputo puts it, "to navigate through ethical wastelands stripped bare of landmarks that guide human actions." Caputo was born in Illinois, served in Vietnam in the Marine Corps, and for several years worked as a journalist, most notably for the Chicago Tribune, where as part of an investigative team he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Today he contributes journalism to Esquire, among other magazines. His other book, a memoir of his days as a foreign correspondent, is Means of Escape, and May of 1997 will see publication of his new book, Exiles (Knopf), a collection of novellas.

Red Cedar Review: To start out with the most basic question, why do you write? What drives you?

Philip Caputo: I don't know what drives me to write, only that I am driven. It's probably not a good idea for a writer to try to uncover his motives. Naming the angels and demons that drives him to write risks destroying them. I don't think that the practice of literature is a career, much less a job; it's a vocation, in the old sense of the term; that is, a calling. (Obviously, I'm speaking of literature as art, not the literary crack cocaine that fills the best-seller lists).

RCR: Many aspiring writers today pursue MFAs or attend various workshops in order to "learn" to write. I know that you gained your experience through journalism. How do you think this route differs from the "academic" route?

PC: Journalism, especially newspaper or wire-service journalism, is a very good way for the aspiring novelist or short-story writer to learn his or her craft—provided he or she doesn't stay in it too long. It teaches brevity, clarity, and accuracy in the use of language, and it certainly teaches you about life. Its downside is that it requires you to tell rather than show stories, and with its emphasis on immediacy, it attenuates your memory. That's why no would-be fiction writer should stay in it for longer than, say, three to five years. I was a newspaperman for ten years, and my fiction sometimes suffers because of it—often I find myself imparting information rather than letting

a story unfold or allowing a character to reveal himself or herself. That said, I would still urge a young man or woman to spend sometime in a city room rather than four years in an MFA program. MFA programs—and I think there now are hundreds across the country—are not incubators for latent literary talent but artificial biospheres wherein tenure, retirement plans, and health plans insulate novelists, poets, and proliferation of these programs hasn't been good for American writing. A lot of it is workshop, union-made stuff, full of too-cute-by-half po-mo novels written by author-teachers, not to be read by the public but to be studied by other graduate students and professors.

RCR: In the end, do you think anyone can really be "taught" how to write? What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

PC: When I was researching my third novel, Indian Country, I met an old Ojibwa who made birchbark canoes. When I asked him how he learned his trade, he told me that he'd watched his father build canoes and then started building them himself. There's a lesson here for the young fiction writer. Writing can only be learned by observation and experience. So my advice to the aspiring writer is to read all the good literature he or she can and to write, write, write.

RCR: It can be said that your novels are often about very troubled characters struggling in an amoral universe. Horn of Africa is the epitome of this. Do you think your work is not as popular as it could be because of your refusal to allow your reader to look at the world through rose-colored glasses?

PC: Well, Horn of Africa wasn't as unpopular as you might think. It sold 40,000 copies in hard cover, 200,000 in paperback, and is still in print. No, I'm not a kind of optometrist, offering rose-colored glasses to the reader; neither do I delight in rubbing the reader's face in the dirt. In that novel, I simply tried to be true to my vision of the contemporary world as amoral, or, at best, as morally ambiguous. This popularity business can be tricky. The serious writer shouldn't whore after commercial success, but the writer also has to be careful of being deliberately difficult, obscure, inaccessible, or harsh in an effort to avoid popularity, which many consider as the prima facie evidence of second-ratism.

RCR: What was it about your experience in Vietnam that led you to write about it in *A Rumor of War*?

PC: I'm not sure what compelled me to write A Rumor of War; all I recall is an obsession to write it. I started it when I was only twentyfive and didn't finish till I was thirty-four. I guess what drove me was my discovery, through my own actions, that even good men can do evil things in places or circumstances where the ethical guardrails have been torn down. At one point, I and four other marines were charged with murder, for killing two suspected Viet Cong who turned out not to be the enemy. As the saying went in those days, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The charges against us were eventually dropped. We were legally innocent of homicide, but I felt morally culpable; moreover, I was shocked that I did not feel guilty about shedding innocent blood for days afterward. I even laughed when the soldiers brought one of the dead men in, with the side of his head blown out by rifle bullets. Perhaps there was nothing new in that, nothing peculiar to Vietnam about such incidents or cruelty. The great World War One poet, Wilfred Owen, once wrote: Merry it was to laugh there / Where death becomes absurd and life absurder./ For power was on us as we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder." But there are certain similarities between Vietnam and World War One: the latter shattered the certitudes of Victorian Europe; the former shattered the certitudes of 1950s America, the America I grew up in. I sensed that Vietnam-a most morally ambiguous enterprise—was a metaphor for our times.

RCR: Do you feel that, in some way, you are still writing about that experience in novels like *Horn of Africa* or *Equation for Evil*?

PC: Yes, Horn of Africa is set in Ethiopia during the Cold War, Equation for Evil in 1990s California, but Vietnam is the moral and psychological landscape. Some of the fictional characters (Charlie Gage of Horn; Gabriel Chin and Lee Heartwood in Equation), like the real-life me in A Rumor of War, are struggling to navigate through ethical wastelands stripped bare of landmarks that guide human actions. Other characters, e.g. Jeremy Nordstrand, Mace Weathers, aren't interested in navigating, but find themselves quite at home in the wilderness indeed find there the license to do whatever their demons prompt them to. They prefer to be lost.

RCR: With the United States still practicing a sort of "big brother" foreign policy, what do you believe we've really learned from our experience in Vietnam?

PC: I think our government and military did learn lessons from Vietnam—lessons about the limits of power, about the need to gain the consent of the Congress and the people before committing military forces to a conflict. History seems to have assigned us the role of global cop, and I hope we act it out wisely. Playing peace-keeper in Bosnia or Haiti is fine, up to a point, and we do need to keep Hussein in check, since no one else seems able or willing to do it. The danger, of course, is getting involved in one of these post Cold War ethnic conflicts, with roots that go back centuries. Our leaders should remember something Wellington said: "Great nations should not fight small wars."

RCR: To paraphrase an English professor of mine, Bill Vincent, our society has "digged" violence like no other since the Romans. If they held gladiator matches at Spartan Stadium, the first weekend everyone would be shocked, but the second weekend they'd be lining up to get in, screaming for blood once inside. When it gets down to it, do people like violence?

PC: I agree with Professor Vincent. In the electronic, information age, cable TV is the circus maximus. I am appalled that gladiatorial contests like "ultimate fighting" have gained a kind of acceptance among the viewing public and that networks like Fox show people burning to death or getting shot in real-life disasters and crimes. I guess our people do like violence, so long as it doesn't affect them and is presented as entertainment. Livy tells us that Rome was born in violence (just as America was), and that much of its early history was violent (as our was); but the Romans' penchant for bloodshed was checked by the Roman virtue of piety during the days of the Republic. As Rome grew into a decadent empire, its citizens indulged themselves in the vicarious violence of the circus—and became numbed to it. Our capacity for outrage has also been numbed. We now accept as more or less normal horrors that would have brought howls of indignation when I was young. The nihilism of A Clockwork Orange has become a reality. Art imitates life imitates are. Shakur raps about gangstas killing people, and Shakur is killed by a gangsta's bullet, and the record company's execs make millions. What swill.

It's things like that that make me, a lifelong liberal Democrat, want to sign up with Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition.

RCR: Some critics say that in Equation for Evil, your attempt to explain evil through various psychological or neurobiological theories fall short. Is it your goal in that novel, or in any other for that matter, to explain evil?

PC: My goal in Equation for Evil was not to explain evil. The point of Lee Heartwood's monologue to Mace, in which he expresses various theories about why Mace did what he did, was that evil cannon be explained by psychology or neuro-biology. There is no "equation" for evil. Evil is a mystery beyond the ken of science. In my fiction, I try to tell stories about people and themes that concern me, and to avoid making points. But if I have a point is that the darkness in the human heart will prevail when we lose the light of grace. We no longer see ourselves as moral beings, responsible for our actions; we seem to have forgotten that we, and our fellow men and women are children of God.

RCR: In your memoir, Means of Escape, you mourn the coming of the Global Village because it would mean "the end of all variety in the world." However, do you believe that it is this very variety that promotes conflict?

PC: Conflict is promoted by the two emotions that drive the stockmarket—greed and fear. The world is a "global village" only superficially. The terrorist who wears Nikes and Chicago Bulls Tshirts while he plants a bomb in an airliner has the soul of a naked, ravening savage. Who knows, homogonousness may breed more hatred than diversity. In the Balkans, people who had been neighbors for decades butchered each other with glee.

RCR: Which writers have most influenced you?

PC: Conrad, Melville, Hemingway.

RCR: Which writers writing today most impress you?

PC: I enjoy reading the Latin Americans—Marquez, Llosa, Fuentes, etc. I thought Lloa's The War at the End of the Worlds was one of the

grandest novels written in this century. Would that some of we Norteamericanos write such a book. Among "older" U.S. writers, I like Bellow, Styron and Updike most. Among my contemporaries I'm fondest of Raymond Carver, Don DeLillo, Louise Erdrich, Jim Harrison, Cormac McCarthy, Thomas McGuane, Larry McMurtry (thought Lonesome Dove was a great epic, an American Icelandic saga), Tim O'Brien, and Thomas Sanchez. I'm not as current as I'd like to be on upcoming writers in their 20s and 30s—I simply don't have the time to read everything I should.

RCR: I understand you recently changed publishers. Do the politics of the literary world bother you?

PC: No. What bothers me about the modern literary world is the dearth of editors who actually edit, who help a writer shape and polish a manuscript into a finished work. Most editors today, taking their cue from the visual and electronic arts, are "acquisition" people; i.e. they sign up a writer and that's the last the writer will see of him or her until it's time for the promotion tour. Some editors today don't even read their authors' work—they just send it off for a cursory copy-editing, slap it between covers, and ship it out to the chains those consumer-society emporiums that sell books like toothpaste or detergent. The days of a Maxwell Perkins working page by page with a Scott Fitzgerald or a Thomas Wolfe are as dead and gone as quill pens and parchment paper.

RCR: Lastly, what's next for you? Do you have any novels in the works?

PC: I've recently finished a collection of novellas, Exiles, which Knopf will publish next Spring. I'm now working on a couple of novels about the relationship between an AmerAsian young man (the illegitimate son of a former CIA agent) and his biological father's big, dysfunctional New England family. As for going places, I would like to see Africa—the Serengetti, Tanzania, or Botswana.

Thanks for giving me a chance to babble.





BIOGRAPHIES

Cezarija Abartis teaches Freshman Composition, Creative Writing, and Shakespeare in the English Department of St. Cloud State University. She has published fiction in *Twilight Zone Magazine*, *Manoa*, and *Whetstone*. "Susan's Week" is one story in a collection she is working on, tentatively titled *Nice Girls and Other Stories*.

Steven Almond is Fiction Editor of the *Greensboro Review*. His work has appeared most recently in *Rio Grande Review*, *The Lyricist*, and *The Georgia Review*.

Poet and writer, L.E. Bryan, a New Jersey native, currently resides in Bellingham, Washington. His work has appeared in *The Crisis, New Mexico Humanities Review, Hayden's Ferry Review*, and others. He has received awards from the Seattle Arts Commission and the Vogelstein Foundation and PEN/American Center, in New York for poetry and stories exploring both the African American experience and the universal, human condition. He is now working on a novel and a new collection of poems.

Todd Davis is assistant professor of English at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. His poems have appeared or will appear in Yankee, Image, Aethlon, The Wolf Head Quarterly, The Journal of Kentucky Studies, Blueline, and other small literary reviews.

Ethan Gilsdorf was awarded the Esmé Bradberry Contemporary Poets Prize and was an Academy of American Poets Prize finalist. His poems have been selected by The Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry, and will be forthcoming in Outsiders, an anthology to be published by Milkweed Editions. His poems have appeared in Yankee, Pivot, CutBank, Permafrost, Poets On:, Green Mountains Review, Poetry Motel, Pacific Review, New York Quarterly, Descant, The Quarterly, Southern Poetry Review, and Exquisite Corpse. His essays and reviews have been published in Poets & Writers, American Bookseller, The Baton Rouge Advocate, and Beijing's China Film Weekly. Gilsdorf received an MFA from Louisiana State University, where he was poetry editor of the Pushcart Prize-winning New Delta Review. He now directs public relations for Marlboro College in Vermont.

Eric Gregg is a student at Michigan State University and the winner of the Jim Cash Fiction Contest.

Gwendolen Gross worked as an editor for six years in California before returning east to pursue an MFA. She taught at San Diego's Writing Center and was selected to participate in the inagural program of the PEN West Mentorship Project. Ms. Gross's poems have recently been published in magazines including Southern Humanities Review, Amelia, Santa Barbra Review, and The Madison Review. She has an essay forthcoming in Hemisphere Magazine. She lives in New York with her husband and dog.

Karl Harshbarger lives and writes in Germany. His fiction has appeared in *Yellow Silk* and *Oasis*. One of his stories was nominated for the 1995 Pushcart Prize.

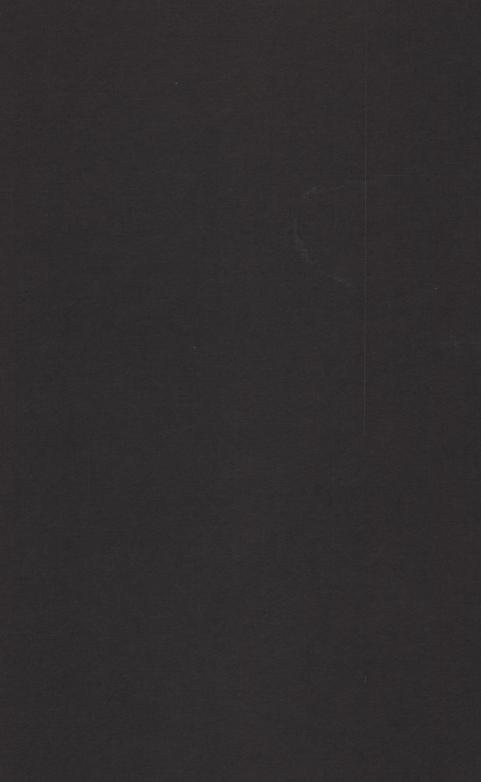
George Kuttner is a graduate of Western Michigan University's writers program and is a proud new father. His stories have appeared in the Alaska Quarterly Review and the Pre-Press anthology.

Kierstyn Lamour received her BA in English this spring from Michigan State University. She was this year's winner of the Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize.

Alan Newton is a student at Michigan State University and the winner of the Jim Cash Poetry Contest.

Renée Sedliar recieved her MFA in creative writing from The University of Michigan. She currently works for Harper Collins of San Francisco.

Diane Wakoski is Writer-in-Residence at Michigan State University. A new collection of her poems will appear this fall titled *The Argonaut Rose* from Black Sparrow Press.





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