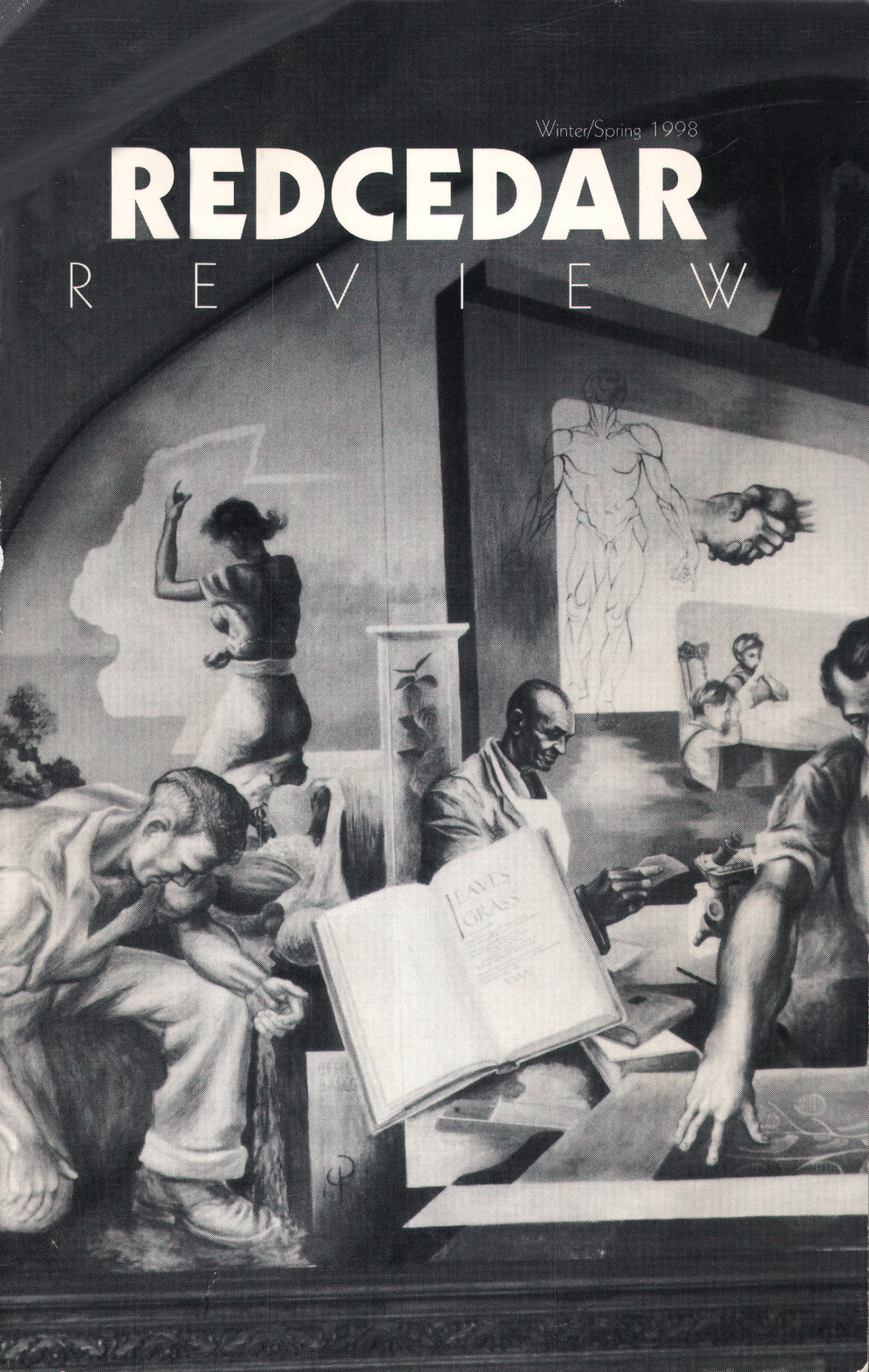
Winter/Spring 1998

REDCEDAR REVIEW



RED CEDAR REVIEW

Winter/Spring 1998
Volume XXXIV Issue 1

RED CEDAR REVIEW

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Red Cedar Review is a biannual literary magazine published on the campus of Michigan State University for thirty-five years. Subscriptions are available for $10 for one year. Sample copies are $3. Correspondence should be sent to *Red Cedar Review*, 17C Morrill Hall, Department of English, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48823 or send e-mail to rcreview@pilot.msu.edu. Manuscripts are read year-round. For submission guidlines send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the above address. Visit our website at http://www.msu.edu/~rcreview

This issue was designed in PageMaker 6.0 and printed by University Printing in East Lansing, MI. Body text is in Times New Roman 10 point, titles are in Kaufmann 36 point, and authors are in Geometric 8 point.

Cover art: *The Modern Man I Sing* (1944) by Charles Pollock; this is a detail of one of three murals by Pollock located in the MSU Auditorium foyer.

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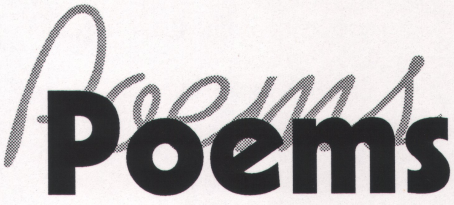
Poems

Jellyfish

Their bodies lay bloated in the sun,
flickering like whole notes on endless bars
of sand. In deep Orphic tones they suck
at the waves as infants pulled
from watery breasts, to sink vulnerable
in the grit of a sweltering other world.

We avoid this path, walk with caution
along the edge of a shore rife
with music: a Capella sea gulls
and the hiss of cymbal waves
that touch, recoil, and shake.
You dodge the broken shells
while I skirt the rocks that spit at us both.

At another time, perhaps as children,
we might have foraged castles
and scattered crabs into them with sticks.
Now, we know too much;
read so far into images that we sink
like the same jellyfish whose bodies
hazard the ground as translucent welts.

A storm builds over the waves
with green-tongued flames
that puncture the sky as we pass.
Like caesuras in the sound,
we turn from one another
as the music imparts a vast, imagined
glance and a myth we've only read.

The Arch

stand on a corner waiting for you.
A child could draw this—
a tree visited by improbable blue
blossoms, a car or two, a mist
blown from the harbor, a man.
From the blotch of red for a shirt
and squiggled lines for arms,
one wouldn't know the blaring alarm
that used to wail and bleat
like set upon sheep is finally gone
from the stick chest. One wouldn't
see that I am talking to my one
most remembered self, the wooden
young man who prayed to be done
with fear every morning, every night,
that I'm saying *We have come*
through my friend (though the grey
smudge on the circle head tells us
time has run far in the long
workings of grace). One can't see you
nor the line that connects the frightened young
man to the stations of our shared lives.
One can see that the man stands there
like the tree in their embodied reach.
You and I know the long dying of fear,
like a coal mine fire that burned for years
hollowing out the hills, has cleared
space for something (a wash of gold and red)
to stir along the dark vein of a spine.
I know it rises towards you, an arch
that spans the roiled ink-spill road.

Waking

From a dream of the faded barn,
the house I grew up in,
the field in back stretching
out toward pond, I find a window
and watch the light change as memory
of the farm builds itself
back: cottonwoods flag sky
above Charlie Lee working on a tractor,
the smell of grease and dust, tall grass
bending, bits of bright metal shining
in the dark lines of Charlie's hand.

Shadows angle forward as if they know
of the spider web hanging
in the corner of the shed
above tractor fenders catching sun.
The dust from a pick-up rolling by
ignites the morning and reminds me
of the darkness in the barn
where I went to be alone,

where the field turned
to a single square of sunlight,
a portion of the world I could handle,
and I believed the day would never end
as it never has, as it never does.

God's Eye

Reds and yellows
streak the cornea
like paint thickening
on the sky. The pupil
is a tumor, benign
and malignant. The iris
turns inside out,
a rainbow tuned
in basic white. Waters
of chaos still cloud
the lens, swirling
against shores. Sparrows
sit in a row
along the optic nerve
as if numbered. The blind
spot is a black
hole, waiting
for the last judgement
when everything
will disappear down its vortex
in a rush.

Painting Auvers

For Vincent & Theo van Gogh,
buried there, side by side.

1. Letter to Theo, May

No sleep but the wind is cool
at dawn, the air tastes of vanilla
bean, all's calm. It's not for us

to question why the sun must pulse
so furiously at noon, the wet
rags we tie around our foreheads
peeling back like onions in a stew.
Perhaps our struggles please Him.
I will paint what He has made.

2. To an Imaginary Patron, June

I know what
you want me to paint.
So I labor each

day at the edge of
the public gardens,
gathering light

along a set-out
street of plane trees
rising precisely
behind the station.
Here's the canvas
you commissioned

and another made
on my own time:
the fractured trunk

of a fallen tree
one off the straight lane,
heaving black dirt,
thick roots stymied,
puzzling sideways
instead of down,

delivering
dark blood to
a broken body.

You needn't pay me.
Keep it. Hang it near
the other some day.

3. Letter to Theo, Early July

For three days straight
I've been working,
knee-deep inside the wheat,

watching light consecrate
each pale green stalk stretching
toward the sun at noon,
each stalk moving through
the fiercest heat becoming
a deeper gold, a fearless

soldier whose fire burns
even when the sky rolls over,
darkens and turns cold.

4. Advice to Theo, July

Imagine Paul Gauguin
and me racing down to
the river, half-crocked from

the night before, to paint
a nauseating dawn.
Or don't think of us at all.

Stay focused on what you can
see, your best recollection
of the finches' wings

opening and closing
like the muscles of your heart:
striped wings, purple and green in

an ordinary sky,
tattooed and wavering
on the river below.

5. The Last Entry in van Gogh's Diary, July 28, 1890

Yet it would make a remarkable scene:
the lull between a gunshot and a winding sheet.
The bandaged artist seeping blood

in a garret where the walls have been hung
floor to ceiling with paintings he'd
never assembled before: mauve-gray thatched roofs

dancing skyward as if they were alive
and a violet sky showering birds
and stars and light back down. Each brushstroke

rises as if it were on fire.
And flowers everywhere: in clumps, in rows
or running riot. Bearded iris

bending like shy geishas away from the sun:
lilies, poppies, roses, waving
the answer to some forgotten question.

Writing Desire

After she left, he remained in motion:
a hanging plant, twisting.
He said the word *desire*.
He tried to write *desire*
on a wall beside a window
with his palm, a kitchen knife, a pillow.

How he'd carved space for her!
As one carves pumpkins for children:
the quick incision, everything jagged, gutting.
Now the shell: candleless.
The open mouth unsmiling,
wrinkling in its after-season.

What he wouldn't give her was loneliness;
his four walls grew to look too much like hands.
Carving words into his wall
he sees what she saw:
the faint outline of cupped palms,
their lifelines curving.

Safe Keeping

Her babies were blue,
born still and cooled
quickly, like lapis lazuli
after the sun goes down.
Always, just before they
were wrapped and boxed,
she saw her steam coming
like breath from the dark
moons of their mouths.
Each time, she opened
her nostrils and took back
all she could, hid them in
her throat where they've stayed
fetal, yet kicking when
she laughs loudly, pressing
hard enough to tear
when the pink baby next door
pries a finger between her lips
just to see.

Divorce, No Children

It was already decided that of the three
hanging lamps I'd get the one
with real stained glass, tan and brown,
that hung in the corner of the living room,
so when only two days later the screws
that held the bracket the lamp hung from
pulled out from the wall, the screws
that had held that bracket and that lamp
for at least five years pulled out as I sat
a mere six feet away not knowing at first
what it was had crashed behind my back, it
seemed a sign of something, not just that I
shouldn't get that lamp, but that anything
anytime could inexplicably fall.

Making Candles By Hand

Patient women knot wicks at their bases
and dip the length in wax,
lift it out by the extra string
hooked up to a stick.
Gravity tapers the top
and thickens the bottom
while hot drops spatter the table,
quickly stiffen to molded buttons.
The women let new layers cool
and harden before each lowering.

It is slow work,
work that occupies the hands
and watches the lit shape
of the window smolder across
the floor. Each candle takes
those same hours to extinguish itself,
move from a high tight flame
to a last glimmer. For now
the candles gather to hang together
on their nails, fat soft carrots,
drumsticks that click in the breeze.

Outside, the day pulls hand over hand
along its rope until the sun
is a low point of fire
slow-burning down grass stalks.
When evening puddles, sparks persist;
stars move so slowly they stand still.

Last Words

The undeniable burnt rim
Around the bloom
Of a shotgun wound, through which
You try to touch
What each day aims toward
Or away from. A hard
Thing: sometimes what it all comes
Down to is the same
Room—that is, not wanting to be in it
With that hat or that
Purse; then the plate breaks, snapdragon
Crushes, its odor
Smelt against a sickness that colors
Skin the color
Of a yellow and green and purple bruise.
A black dog chews
On his own leg—in your dream—as every
Door blows completely
Open, making the whole house part
Of the night, the part
In which a cop car's flashing blue light
Sweeps in right
Through the window while the suspect
Sits, circumspect,
Under the faint glow of his own dome
Light: a home
He likes, for now, in the little play
Playing its way
Out in ever-present tense.
To not write means
The same as *to* write, sometimes. Do
Flowers, flowering, go through

Excruciating amounts of pain to put out
Buds, petals?—the opposite
Of pre-amputees, cut to cut off their
Naked suffering;
Waiting, drugless, they beg for anything
But the next breath in.

Interview

Interview



"Who are you?" he said. "Who in the world are you?"
(from Charles Baxter's "The Disappeared")

Charles Baxter's stories are, among other things, narratives of encounter: urbanites encounter villagers, rich people encounter poor people, citizens of the Old World encounter citizens of the New. In "Cataract," for instance, a rich businessman quits work and drives into the country to paint barns. Before he knows what's happened, he's inside a strange farmhouse trying to understand the lives of its inhabitants. Perfect understanding, of course, is never possible, especially in a story that is about various kinds of blindness. And yet in this and other stories by Baxter, one feels that understanding is sacrificed for something equally precious—a restoration of the essential mysteriousness of human individuals.

Over the past three decades, Charles Baxter has generated a truly stunning body of work, proving himself in a wide variety of genres and modes. He has published two novels and several collections of short stories and poems (see the list of titles that follows the interview); his most recent book, *Burning Down the House*, is a collection of essays. (Though he's not revealing much about the novel on which he is currently at work, *RCR* managed to unearth a few hints—see below.)

On an uncharacteristically sunny December afternoon in Ann Arbor, Baxter spoke with *RCR* about overpowering love, the human body as an epistemological site, and the possibility of an intentionalist universe.

Interview with Charles Baxter

Red Cedar Review: In *Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov discusses "the discovery the self makes of the other." It strikes me that a lot of your stories are about this discovery. Are you conscious of this as a type of narrative?

Charles Baxter: No. Because it's too abstract. In my youth I might have put a story together with that kind of theoretical template at work. But for the kinds of fiction that I write, I can't imagine beginning with anything that theoretical. It's not that I think that can't be read retroactively back into the stories, because I'm sure that it can be. But it wasn't strictly my intention to do that.

RCR: To attack the subject a little bit differently, you've said elsewhere that strangers tend to crop up frequently in your narratives . . .

CB: Yes. That's much more concrete, and to the degree that you can equate strangers with the 'other,' then I'm very happy with the question, because it is something that I do a fair amount, and I think many of the stories arise from that.

RCR: But they're strangers in both senses of that word: people who haven't met and people who are decidedly different from each other. In "The Disappeared," for instance, Anders encounters someone radically different from himself.

CB: The history of fiction, it seems to me, often has to do with the discovery of the other; the stories that people tell often are about exactly that. When you think about what stories do—even a love story is a discovery and an accommodation—an attraction to and accommodation of difference. And stories that are able to capture somebody's imagination have to, I think, at this late date, do something like what "The Disappeared" does, which is to find something—I want to avoid at all costs the word 'exotic' because that word is completely on the taboo end of the register—but something to which you are attracted, something which you find mysterious, and something which has some reward and real danger for you. I think that's often where stories are. It's where mine are.

RCR: I wanted to get to the love story component of this. One interesting thing is that while a lot of fiction—especially popular fiction—stresses the similarity of characters who are in love, in your fiction it's precisely the difference that is stressed.

CB: Yup. I feel as if I'm taking a courageous stand here, in some ways, because the component of narcissism in love stories—in many conventional love stories—is very strong, this sense that, 'I have discovered somebody who's just like me. Isn't that wonderful? Except that he or she's different in this small way, which I can manage.' That's not what I'm interested in. I'm interested in very different types who are almost blindly drawn toward one another, and the consequences of that, which can be life altering.

RCR: Sex and sexuality almost become a flawed epistemological tool. Again, in "The Disappeared," when Anders, the 'morning after,' tries to assert this bond between them, Lauren won't let him have that.

CB: Yes. She says that what's brought them together is a force that's much more unknowable than he thinks it is, and that they're not dealing at all at the level of friendship and niceties; that she's radioactive; he's drawn toward that; if he's going to be ruined by it, that's his problem. And there are these scenes in which he tries to make little commentaries about the artwork around the apartment, and he tries to make a kind of vaudeville small-talk with her mother, and it won't work. He's in a different world altogether, where those kinds of things don't apply. And as far as the 'flawed epistemology of sex' is concerned, he thinks he knows what sex is—just a fairly straight forward physiological event. And what he gets thrown into is something like the mind world of Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry, where you find your soul rising out of your body, so that it's more like—in contemporary terms—a drug trip.

RCR: In "The Disappeared," the reader has a kind of dual awareness. On the one hand, we're looking at the world through Anders' eyes and can identify with the limitations he suffers from. On the other hand, any reader who knows Detroit will be aware of some of the mistakes Anders' makes. Were you consciously positioning your reader in this way?

CB: Very consciously. More so in that story than in many of the others I've done. The story has a very deliberate form of defamiliarization in it. By having a foreigner come to Detroit, I manage a perspective on the material which an American wouldn't have. And I thought, If I put the narrative behind this Swede, who doesn't know very much about Detroit, but does know a lot about cars, I can turn him into a kind of Candide. I can also give him a quest which many people reading the story will be mildly interested in. The guy wants to get laid. It's not much more complicated than that. He's in a foreign country. He's a single man. He's heard about American women. He

wants to get laid. Simple: a simple story. On the other side of the picture is Detroit, a city which I felt had not been dealt with satisfactorily in fiction, at least in short stories, for I think a number of years, partly because it is now always equated with crime, which is a sort of white, and—I won't say racist way of seeing it—but it's more complicated than that. I think of it as an interesting, layered, very complicated city with some fairly dark stuff going on underneath that most people don't see, can't see, and don't understand. And I wanted to get those two things, one very simple (Anders) and something relatively complex (Detroit) colliding with each other, and he's the one who takes the fall.

RCR: Is Lauren an embodiment of the city?

CB: It's not an allegory. I gave her features of people I've known. I wasn't out to create a symbol; I didn't want to make her a type. I wanted to give her a real physical presence—a real character, the sense of a person who is living in a city that feels as if it doesn't have a future. (It may have a bit more of a future now than it did when I wrote the story.) But I thought, what is it like to live in a place like this, to be young and to be living in the mid to late 80s, in a place like Detroit. I'd be lying to you, though, if I didn't say that there were some features of the city itself that I wanted to implant in her, and I did. You mentioned unknowability: she's a kind of compendium of unknowability: She's racially unknowable. Her plans are unknowable. Her intentions are unknowable. The source of her power is unknowable. If you ask her a direct question, she'll deflect it.

RCR: That gets us back to what I wanted to follow this up with. "Kiss Away" in some ways—and I want to state this carefully—in some ways it's the opposite situation: in "The Disappeared," the reader knows more than Anders, but in "Kiss Away," the reader is subject to the exact same limitations as Jodie. Both Jodie and the reader are desperately trying to figure out what's going on with this guy, who he is, is he dangerous. It's another 'discovery of the other.'

CB: I didn't want, for example, people thinking that with "The Disappeared" I was making some sort of statement about gender politics: "Oh, he thinks that women are unknowable." And so on. Because I think that the whole situation can be transposed, that men under some circumstances—certain of which are duplicated in that story—become as unknowable as Lauren is in "The Disappeared." I don't actually think that in "The Disappeared" the reader knows that much more than Anders does, and you certainly can't find out anything more about Glaze in "Kiss Away" than the protagonist knows. I was very careful not to give the reader any information—there is no break in the point of view. You cannot get outside of her way of seeing things to find out whether he's a dangerous guy or not. You have to take it on faith, which is all that she can do.

RCR: This isn't a fair question, but why did you end it there? You switch to the future-looking tense, and you essentially leave the mystery unsolved.

CB: I felt that in the last five to ten years, we have become conscious as a culture of abusive relationships. Women in particular are conscious of the brutalization of other women by violent guys. I also felt that if you're a woman and you make a commitment in a relationship, you don't necessarily know all there is to know about the past of the guy that you're attaching yourself to. You make certain educated guesses based on the behavior that he's shown. But you can't know for sure—until you're well into the relationship, often so far into it that you can't get out of it—whether he's going to do you harm or not. I didn't think that it was in the interest of the story or of the reader to reveal whether Glaze was as bad as Gleinya said he was; I felt that the reader had to make some decisions on his or her own that were analogous to what my protagonist had to make. Jodie doesn't have the answer and—I know this is the imitative fallacy, but I wanted to put it into the story anyway—I felt for my own part as I was writing it that I knew what the answer was: I felt that the guy was not going to hit her, and I put the dog in the story to underscore that. But I wasn't going to reveal it in any sort of straight-forward way, because I didn't think that she would be able to know. Epistomologically, she's going to be in the dark for a long time.

RCR: What are some of your goals when you're trying to establish the physical presence of a character in a story.

CB: Well, you know, actors talk about signature actions, small gestures that give you a feeling for the whole character. I try to give that. Even before I give the whole sense of what the body looks like. But I'm very conscious of whether the body in space is visible, and if it is, what particular features of it, what close up details are going to be relayed or shifted in the reader's direction. It makes a difference, also, if the story is one in which the physical reality of the character has some bearing on the story; i.e., is this a love story in which the physical body is going to make an impression on another character. If it isn't, if you have two characters who are doing business but are not at all interested in one another's bodies, couldn't care less about them, then I'm not going to waste a lot of time detailing those features. I'll write the scene and get it over with, without getting the corporeal details on the page.

RCR: Often in your stories, it seems to me, the whole mind/body dualism seems to get chucked aside, that the body functions as an extension of the soul. You see it that way?

CB: I think so, but it's very hard to talk about.

RCR: What makes it hard to talk about?

CB: We don't have a language for the soul anymore that's shared in the culture. If you start talking in that way, you just don't have the discourse that makes sense to many people. That's the problem. Kirkegaard talks a lot about what it is to have feelings that are knowable; of course in his world both love and God are experiences that everybody has but which nobody knows how to talk about. Something like that is at work in what you've just asked. I use the terms that everybody can use. I have certain private references which sometimes glimmer out, but I'm not going to make my more eccentric notions the cornerstones of my stories.

RCR: I'm thinking of lines in the early chapters of *Shadow Play* regarding the gymnast who feels like she has a line running through her body to the center of the earth. Whereas Wyatt has a lot of "waste motion" as he runs. And it just seems to me that there's something truly spiritual about their bodily presence in that work.

CB: Sure, well I think that a lot of people who fall in love—who fall in love rapidly—often feel that way. They are subject, both of them—Wyatt in particular—to a kind of soul sickness that takes over him as the novel goes on. But when they first meet, one of the experiences—one of the primary experiences that he has is that of his...personality, let's say, his inner life, meshing with hers, and it feels like a spiritual experience. Feels religious. Maybe because it's the largest thing that's ever happened to him, and to her too.

RCR: I think some day someone will write a dissertation on the way the body functions in your narratives, because I think it operates in a number of important ways...

CB: That's entirely what I'm writing about in my new novel.

RCR: Oh yeah? You want to talk about that?

CB: No. [laughs]

RCR: One thing I've noticed—I don't know the word for them—but I've been referring to them as "found texts" or "alternate discourses"—which tend to pop up in your narratives. I'm thinking of the matchbook cover and Scrabble board in "Saul and Patsy Are Pregnant," the sign that's missing letters in "The Disappeared." I could name other examples. Are you attracted to these for some reason?

CB: Oh, I love them. I love them. I like the sense that we're all—that life is a kind of detective novel and you're looking for clues to a badly defined mystery. Turns out that the mystery is your life, and wherever you look you get these intimations of meaning. You don't know how they got there or who put them there, but it feels as if they're intended for you to see. And in those stories, it's as if Saul—Saul is very much like this, it always feels to him like

he's picking up clues from somewhere, that have been put in his path. He's the sort of character who is quite acutely conscious of that sort of thing. But I like it too, I like the discovery of the 'found documents,' or...call them 'false documents,' call them documents that just show up. American life is full of these things.

RCR: False?

CB: False documents, documents that...matchbooks, pamphlets, newspapers, National Enquirers. Everywhere you go there's sense that somebody is trying to tell you something. Most of it is just junk and we spend most of our lives filtering it out. But every so often you get the weird feeling that somebody wanted me to read this thing. And it's that moment that I'm trying to get at in these stories. Somebody wanted me to look at this.

RCR: It reminds me of Gerard Manley Hopkins statement that "all things are charged with the grandeur of God."

CB: But Hopkins also talked about "widowed images." Hopkins had an idea that an image that stuck in your head often was there because the meaning that was attached to it had gotten lost, and he felt that these widowed images were often the ones that were the most powerfully obsessive. And I think that these documents are maybe full of the grandeur of God, but they're also things for which the meanings have been lost, or which seem unattached, which is why they seem to float free of everything. That's true of a story like "The Next Building I Plan to Bomb," which is full of free-floating documents. It's an intentionalist universe, but you can't see whose intention is operating.

RCR: It *is* an intentionalist universe, it's not random? It's not Saul's desperation trying to project meaning into everything?

CB: It's an intentionalist universe.

RCR: I was going to ask if the Scrabble game in "Saul and Patsy Are Pregnant" is an instance when postmodernist values are creeping into your stories, the signifier detached from the signified...But after your answer that seems like a cheap question.

CB: It's because I know as a writer that every reader is going to look at that Scrabble board. It's not an ordinary Scrabble board. It's a Scrabble board that appears in a short story that appears in a book and because of that.... You know, I can be sly. I can make the board look as if it has what Pynchon calls "an intention of meaning," and I can make the reader feel a little bit like Saul. The real granddaddy of this kind of maneuver is Nabokov in a story like "Signs and Symbols," and what's good for the master is good for the man. I'm just doing what Nabokov does in my small way. Because I know that you're going to look at the Scrabble board, and it's going to look as if it wants to mean

something. I knew that I was engaged in a kind of game—it *was* a kind of game, but a game that had a very serious kind of intention.

RCR: I think your stories walk that razor's edge of tone, that line between being sentimental on the one side and heavy handed on the other. And I think humor plays a big part in that.

CB: It's a great anti-toxin. You can get very close to sentimentality, which is to say you can get very close to passion, and you can get very close to heavy-handedness, which is to say clear intentionality, if you use wit, if you use humor, because it's an anti-toxin to both of them.

RCR: But are you aware that it's a tight-rope walk.

CB: Oh, you're aware of all these things when you revise. I think you try not to be aware of them when you're making your way through the first draft. If anything, you're trying to forget what it is that you do. Because if you're really self-conscious of it, you'll be paralyzed. Just like a self-conscious speaker in front of an audience. It's a form of paralysis.

RCR: I was reading through a primer on narratology recently, and it just occurred to me that what narratology does is take the discourse of creative writing workshops and systematize and codify it. Do you think that a formalized study of narrative like narratology can be helpful to a writer?

CB: A little bit. Probably not much. But I don't think it does any harm. I think it doesn't do any harm to have a sense that stories are different from the modes in which they appear. That there may be such categories as narratable—as opposed to non-narratable—sequences, or rather sequences which are not stories until you change the context for them. I think it's so theoretical, though, that it's more useful in retrospect than it is in the moment that you are trying to create a story. You can use whatever rules of thumb you've learned, but they have to be internalized by that time. The way a surgeon has internalized what he knows about the body.

RCR: When you say "retrospect," do you mean in a postmortem like we're doing now, or in the revision process?

CB: Maybe in the revision process. Suppose—I'll just be very specific. Suppose you see that you've written a story about a couple who have separated and the guy has said that he's leaving his wife because he needs space and she is holding him back. And she's angered because he's using these TV clichés on him. And you got that as a rough draft of a story. And you look it over. And you've just taken a narratology class. Your narratology class is not going to help you very much in revising that scene. It will not give you specific strategies to use. At the same time, you might realize, cognitively, that if you're going to have a guy leaving his partner, you probably would be better off if you

gave him some good, interesting reasons for doing so, that it is aesthetically not a good idea to blame it on TV because what it does essentially is to flatten the story. Maybe narratology could give you some help on that. And maybe it couldn't. I honestly don't know.

RCR: You mention theorists frequently. Do you read people like Barthes and Todorov and Genette? Do you read stuff like that?

CB: I used to. I used to read a lot of it. I used to be pretty serious about theory. There was a time I was associate editor of the journal *Criticism* at Wayne State—the book review editor—so I read a fair amount of theory. But as my writing—my fiction—became a bigger part of my life, the theory part of my life diminished somewhat. Also, it's just harder to keep up now, because so much criticism now is theory that it's really a full-time occupation. There are not very many fiction writers in this country who are absolutely adept at theory now.

RCR: You mention elsewhere that you tend to start with characters. And yet a sense of place is so important in your fiction. Do your characters come to you already living somewhere?

CB: Yes. I think they do. I can't remember, although I know it's happened, but I can't remember a particular instance in which I had a character who didn't live any place special. I think in my early stories, the ones in *Harmony of the World*, I would think up a character and put him or her more or less into a generic setting, which nearly always looked like the Midwest. But I didn't think in those days of this character in that place, which is what I do now. It's just to get them so that there's some—I'm rubbing my hands together as if I'm trying to generate a spark.

RCR: Frequently a character's strangeness seems to be inscribed on his or her body. In "Xavier Speaking," for instance, he's got the scars.

CB: He's got the scars and the tattoos.

RCR: Exactly.

CB: It effectively puts me in the rearguard of storytelling. And I'll tell you why. Vivian Gornick has a new book out called *The End of the Novel of Love*. And her argument in it is that for serious people, the novel of love is dead. It's dead because people don't take such things seriously anymore. They are entertainments or they are relaxations. But it's not as if your life's meaning is going to be found in who or what you happen to love. In the same way, we are so far from Puritanism in one sense that no one's body is a mystery, and it cannot be made exotic, unless you're brought up in such a way that bodies are still objects of terror and wonder to you. Then....then you're my perfect reader, actually. But there's this whole business in postmodernism that has in some

sense gone past the body into computers, into information, into cognitive psychology, and into systems theory. Mystery has moved out of the body and into systems theory. That's fine for the people who do it. David Foster Wallace, and a lot of the big guys—and they're mostly guys—DeLillo, Wallace, and Pynchon, and all the systems novelists, are doing that sort of thing. I still think that the body is the primary epistemological site. And I think certain books in which computers become surrogates for human beings are preposterous because I just don't believe that a cognitive operation can proceed without bodily experience to provide the source of the information. I think that's where the information starts.

RCR: You mentioned Detroit. Plan to set any more stories in Detroit?

CB: No.

RCR: Don't plan to, or plan not to?

CB: I plan not to.

RCR: Really?

CB: Yeah. I don't live there. I was always something of a tourist, even when I was working there. And it's for others to write about that city. I don't want to be a neo-colonial writer, treating Detroit as if it were some kind of exotic grab bag that I can use for my purposes. I don't want to be the baggage handler of Detroit bric-a-brac. I'm not going to do it. It's like Gershwin writing about Porgy and Bess. People who don't live in Detroit and write about it—unless they really know what's going on in that city—are doing something which I think is marginally...I want to say immoral. Considering the suffering of that place.

RCR: It strikes me that "Xavier Speaking" and "Kiss Away" are quite similar in a number of ways. Do you associate those stories in your mind?

CB: Never. Haven't done it until this very moment. The difference is that "Xavier Speaking" is triangulated by a guy named Arthur who watches his wife, Carrie, being drawn away by this creature from the underworld, who is—you can read the story that Xavier is some kind of externalization of whatever Arthur has pushed out of his life: Xavier shows up in the dark, he's almost always on the other side of a door. Whatever Arthur is, is the daylight, and Xavier, whatever he is, is another thing. But there is only one Glaze in "Kiss Away." He's both the light and the dark together. He hasn't been divided into dualisms between which Jodie has to decide. She gets the whole package and she has to make her decision. In "Xavier Speaking," Carrie goes off with Xavier because—well, because why? I guess because he's more physical, he's more sexual, he's more violent, he's more of a man. *She* thinks. I mean, I never use terms like that: "More of a man." But that's a way in which

a lot of people think. She knows perfectly well that it's self-destructive on her part, but she's drawn toward him and she can't stop it.

RCR: That's a reoccurring theme in your stories: this truly overpowering romantic or sexual attraction that renders the other 'victim' of it almost helpless.

CB: Well, that's not a new idea, David. I didn't invent that. Romantic attraction has been sanitized by television, and it's been turned into this Hallmark card lunacy. Anybody who's thought about these matters at all, going back through medieval romances and ballad traditions and the narrative poems of Romanticism, up to and including such things as Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, I mean the whole idea of love in the Western world, it's full of destructiveness and division and terror. That's what it's all about. And to give it its due, to give it its weight, is to say, when you embark on these relationships, if you really give yourself over to it, you're going into the deep end. Some people swim and some don't.

Interviewed by David Sheridan

POETRY
Chameleon (1970)
Imaginary Paintings and Other Poems (1990)

STORIES
Harmony of the World (1984)
Through the Safety Net (1985)
A Relative Stranger (1990)
Believers (1997)

NOVELS
First Light (1987)
Shadow Play (1993)

NONFICTION
Burning Down the House (1997)

Infinities
Richard Kostelanetz
(Design by M. Zuray)


Stories

Edith Drogan's Uncle is Dead

The day after Reuben lost his job at the garage, his mother called and asked him to come over and put up some wallpaper. In the two weeks since he moved back to town, he had not visited home once, and each time his mother questioned him, he told her it was because he needed time to get settled in the room he had taken at a nearby boarding house. The truth was, Reuben thought he would be more comfortable on the ledge of a building than in the house where he grew up. This time though, she didn't leave him any room to refuse. She had found something under the old wallpaper when she was taking it down, a message written on the wall. It was weird, she said, and now she wanted it out of her sight.

Reuben didn't have a car and outside, rain was barreling through the gutters, turning the patch of yard the boarding house claimed as a lawn to mud. The only one in the house who did have a car was a man named Loames who stayed in a room down the hall. Reuben hadn't met him yet but had heard that he was known to keep to himself and never to flush the toilet. At that point, Reuben didn't care about either thing. So he went to Loames' room.

He knocked, then a voice inside said, "Enter." When Reuben opened the door, Loames was sitting on the edge of his tightly made bed. He had bad skin and his dark coarse hair was packed down with water. Loames looked straight at Reuben. He seemed happy to see him.

"So listen," Reuben said. "I need to get to my mother's house, but I don't have a car. I can't pay you for the ride, but I bet I could get you some coffee, maybe something to eat, for driving me."

"You going there for dinner?" Loames asked. His hands were folded on his lap. "It's a little early for dinner."

"No. I have to put up some wallpaper."

"Sounds like a two-man job."

Reuben considered this. He could use the help, but Loames had a look on his face that he couldn't read. In the time that he had been at the boarding house, he'd never seen anyone talk to Loames and, even though it wasn't the sort of place where people came to buddy-up, Reuben thought there had to be a reason why everyone stayed away from him. The house, a converted Baptist church, had a painting of a rainbow and a black Jesus on the living room wall,

and Reuben had often seen Loames sitting in there alone, reading magazines by the light that was positioned in the ceiling to illuminate Jesus' head.

"Sure," Reuben said finally. "I guess I could use a hand."

"Good. You and me, we'll get it done right."

"You know I can't give you any money?"

"I know," Loames said. "When are we leaving?"

Reuben waited on the porch until Loames pulled up in an old Buick. When he got in, Loames pushed the gas before he had a chance to close the door. The windshield was foggy, almost opaque, and Reuben asked him, "Can you see?"

"Certainly," he said. "But even if I couldn't, it wouldn't matter. I've been here so long that I could drive any road blind."

"But you don't know where I live."

"Yeah, but I bet I could find it."

Reuben directed Loames to his house, then they rode in silence. When they parked, Loames hit the curb.

"Is your mother going to mind about me coming along?" he asked.

"No. She's out playing bingo at the rectory anyway. The tenant she's got is probably here though. He stays upstairs."

"If she's got a room, why don't you live there?"

Explaining to Loames why he had avoided his own house for the past eleven years was the last thing Reuben wanted to do. He had moved back because he felt sure he could get a job there, either on the city docks or at a one of the service stations. His girlfriend had left him and taken almost everything they owned, including their van. Then he found out that his landlord was raising the rent. After all that had happened, the coastal town where Reuben grew up began to take on a misty, postcard-like quality in his mind — the sun on the water, the seagulls on the telephone poles, the sand in the street along the sidewalks. What Reuben had not anticipated was how quickly those images would fade and what they would be replaced by. The tourist season was over. Stores were boarded up and all of the summer people were gone, so the place started closing in on itself. The quiet, deserted beaches depressed him. Day after day, he did everything he could to keep from coming close to his house. At times, it was almost interesting trying to stay off certain streets, but it was as though he was waiting for something. Nights, he lay in a house full of sleeping people listening to the boards contract in the growing cold. Just being in town was unnerving him.

Reuben decided to lie to Loames about his mother. "She needed the money."

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The house was dark, but a radio could be heard playing upstairs. Reuben stepped inside and switched on a lamp. Walking into the living room was like walking onto an empty stage, a combination of fear and tension and release. He was finally there.

All of the furniture was the same, only it had been pushed into the center of the room. Some ragged strips of the old wallpaper were lying on the floor and the rest were stuffed into a garbage bag. On the far end of the longest wall, the words, "Edith Drogan's uncle is dead" were scrawled in a wide and listing hand, like that of a drunk or a child. Because it was squeezed near the corner, the message looked oddly small and misplaced. The words seemed to hover over the plaster.

"You do that?" Loames asked. He was wandering around the room, checking it out.

"No. I grew up here and we never changed the wallpaper that the last family left. I didn't even know that was there."

"Well, someone wanted everybody to know that this guy was dead."

"I guess so."

Reuben's mother told him that she hadn't noticed the writing when she was peeling off the paper. But turning around and seeing it, she said, was like turning around and finding a stranger in the room. She practically begged him to put up the new wallpaper, explaining how she couldn't even stand to be in the house, let alone the living room, knowing what was there. That was why she had to leave. "I feel like I've been missing something for all these years," she said. "Other people have lived here and they were the kind of people that wrote crazy things on the walls. I don't want to think that those type of people have lived in my house."

She spoke quickly, but her voice was weak. She didn't sound the way Reuben remembered. But even then on the telephone, he sensed the same strange unwillingness that had convinced him so many years earlier that he should never tell her anything that she would not want to hear. At the moment when his life had unhinged itself from what he knew it to be, it was her voice which proved to him that, whatever was wrong, she did not want to know. Unlike his mother, seeing the words on the wall didn't shock Reuben. It only reminded him of everything he had tried to cover over by moving away, of the part of himself that he had tried to forget.

Loames tapped Reuben on the shoulder with a roll of wallpaper then pointed to a tub of paste. "Are we rolling this out on the floor or what?"

"There's got to be a table we could use out in the car port," Reuben said.

Upstairs, something dropped and they heard the tenant swear then pick up whatever it was that fell.

"Okay, then. It's your house," Loames said, gesturing towards the door. "Lead the way."

Rain battered the green corrugated fiberglass roof of the car port and streamed in through the gaps between it and the walls. The smell of oil and wet boxes had not been drawn out by the wind. Reuben found a door behind a pile of lawn furniture and ruined tires and noticed two saw horses hanging off of the cross beam. Eight years before his father's death, Reuben had almost killed him there in the car port while trying to get something out of the rafters and as he looked up at them, at the sheer height, Reuben could not imagine how his father had survived.

It happened when Reuben was seventeen. His father had been lying beneath the car on a dolly replacing tie rods and singing to himself when Reuben came out to get a can of spray paint down from where he'd stored it. It had been months since his father had gone deaf in his left ear and the right one was already following fast, but his father still sang to himself. Only now he sang softly, a tone Reuben didn't think him capable of, as if there were some possibility of him overhearing himself.

At the time, Reuben wished he could have blamed his father's screaming fits on his deafness, but the man had been ranting like that long before he lost his hearing. It was always surprising to see him, as thin as he was, turn and reel like a whipcord and throw a chair to the floor. He was short-tempered but never physical with Reuben or his mother, and his fits were mostly theatrical, something to focus the attention. The outbursts were so stunning and so common though, that Reuben had to wonder if it wasn't the intensity of his father's own voice which had made him go deaf.

When Reuben went into the car port that day, he knew his father didn't know he was there. He stood on a stepladder and reached for the spray paint, steadying himself by holding one of the cross beams. A few gallon-sized cans of paint and a coil of rope were balanced across it. With his touch, the beam shook, and one can of paint rattled near the edge, enough for Reuben to see that it wasn't stable.

Reuben grabbed the cross beam just to watch the can shiver. Seeing it tremble over his father's head made his lungs feel full, so he felt himself breathing. All summer he had been hiding, moving from one room to the next right before his father came in. It seemed like every time he saw him there would be a fight. Reuben might get cuffed in the back of the head for not locking the front door or for leaving the television on, then his father would hold Reuben's face with one hand, studying him, ready to read his lips for any curse or back-talk. When he let go, he would say, "My roof. My rules." Then he would point at himself and the ceiling, as if Reuben was the one who couldn't hear.

Even after he found the spray paint, Reuben gave the beam another squeeze. His father slid out from under the car to reach for a bushing, but knocked it further away. He was still singing, only more slowly as he held out his arm. A renegade emotion began to spread through Reuben's body. Nothing

about his father seemed real or mattered. Reuben looked at his face as it rested on the cement floor and jabbed the cross beam.

He could never recall exactly what happened in that instant. He remembered thinking that, after the paint can fell, whatever it was that had been coursing through him had dissolved. In that moment, Reuben thought he heard the earth scream from under the cement. He thought he could see tears rising in his ducts and spilling over his lids from the inside out. He had looked down and his father was still grasping for the bushing. His outstretched arm quivered.

Reuben was back in the house before he perceived the size of what he had done. The paint can hit his father in the head, knocking him unconscious, and Reuben had just left him there. Inside, his mother was sitting at the kitchen table buttering a piece of toast, the knife rasping over the hard bread. It was then that Reuben's body registered what had happened. The floor kept rearing up beneath his feet. He had to hold onto the counter to keep himself from shaking. Then his mother spoke to him.

"Was the paper out there?" she asked. Reuben stared at her. She must have thought he had gone out for it then come back in through the side door. "If it wasn't, I wouldn't be surprised. Somebody's been stealing it," she said. "I think it's that man across the street. But don't tell your father or he'll wring his neck. Poor man has to steal other people's papers. It's a shame, really."

She spoke so seriously that Reuben had to remind himself that she was talking about someone she was barely acquainted with. She was embarrassed to know what she did, as though the neighbor's small problem was too much for her to bear. Anything he could imagine saying then would have been unbelievable to her, completely beyond what she could accept. After those words, Reuben realized that he could not tell her.

His mother set the knife down and said, "I've been trying not to think about it."

Loames found some paint brushes and a bucket under a work bench and held them up for Reuben to see. "Can we use these?"

"We can use anything."

Reuben watched as Loames took up the saw horses, one on each shoulder, and the bucket full of the brushes. The light coming through the fiberglass looked so thick on Loames' pale shirt and skin that Reuben wondered if he could feel it. Reuben rubbed his own arms and touched his throat. Loames made it up the step into the house carrying everything, then a leg on one of the saw horses got caught on the door frame.

Loames called to him, "Can you give me a hand?"

As he spoke, time seemed to slow drastically, just as it had when his father reached for the bushing. Both of his parents would later call what happened in the car port an accident. That was all they believed it could have

been, and Reuben would never say otherwise. Loames shifted and the leg slipped free. "Never mind," he said and went inside.

The paint can had broken Reuben's father's jaw and because he had to have it wired shut, he was unable to speak for a while. In the weeks that followed, Reuben tried not to act guilty and pretended not to enjoy the solid silence that filled the house. His mother tended to his father, keeping him in bed most of the time, and Reuben thought she was probably just as grateful for the reprieve as he was. He and his mother had never been close, not even in the way a mother and son should have been, and when they spoke, it was only what needed to be said. Like any reflex, their conversations lacked much thought. Yet during those weeks, Reuben became aware of how similarly they moved in the then quiet house, how they both sat there soaking up the stillness, and how neither of them would mention the fact that Reuben's father would soon be well enough to talk. They were not alike, he had thought, but they were far from different. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be.

When Reuben went inside, the living room felt damp. The stains on the walls from the old wallpaper glue looked like watermarks. It seemed like the room had been flooded at one time and the message was floating just above the water line. Reuben unrolled a section of wallpaper and laid it across the makeshift table. The ends curled up, revealing a chalky blue background patterned with feathers and leaves. To him, the wallpaper was like the surface of a lake in a dream.

Measuring out the sheets and gluing them was easy enough, and he and Loames could do it quickly, but getting the paper on the wall properly took concentration. Reuben found a stepladder and held the tops of the sheets while Loames lined up the bottoms, then both of them worked to lay on the paper without any wrinkles. The sound of Loames' steady breathing relaxed Reuben, so much so that when the shriek of bursting glass came from upstairs, he almost fell off the ladder. Heavy footsteps and shouting followed. Furniture was being dragged across the floor.

"This a friend of your mother's?" Loames asked, tracing the sound of the steps across the ceiling with his eyes.

"No. She didn't know him. I've never met him either."

Reuben wondered if his mother would have done anything if she had been there. She had lived with his father's wild temper for all of those years and hardly ever responded to him. She would sit down on a chair or on the couch — Reuben had even seen her sit on the floor once — and look up at his father's red face while he yelled, her own face a blank mask. At those times, Reuben noticed something in her eyes, a kind of dullness and distance. She seemed not to hear what was being said and, in that way, could listen for as long as it took. His father's ability to make the dishes in the cabinets shake when he slammed a door or to freeze Reuben with a stare gave him a power that neither Reuben or his mother ever tried or questioned.

From the living room, he and Loames could hear water running in the upstairs bathroom. Loames put his arms up, as though trying to touch the ceiling, and said, "I guess your mother really needed the money."

The afternoon was darkening and the rain had become light, but constant. More than half of the room was covered in wallpaper. Scraps sat in mounds on the floor. The glue was running low, but Loames said he thought they'd have enough to finish.

"I've done whole rooms with less than this," he said.

It was clear that Loames wanted him to respond, but Reuben wasn't sure how.

"I've wallpapered a bunch of rooms," Loames told him, rolling out a thin layer of glue on the paper and glancing up at him.

"Oh yeah. Where?"

"I used to own a little motel up on the highway. It was a sweet deal when I bought it. Thought I could make a good business of it during the summers."

Loames gazed at the wall. His face seemed to be resisting whatever expression he truly wanted to make. Reuben kept working, pretending to ignore him, then the sudden sound of a radio blaring came from upstairs and Loames' face broke. He shouted at the ceiling, "Be quiet, damn it. Just shut up."

Reuben laid down his roller. He felt the air get thick the way it did when a thunderstorm was coming in off the bay, the same way it would feel when his father would enter a room. Loames shook his head.

"Anyway," he said naturally, as if he hadn't heard himself, "it had a pool and underwater lights. The lights didn't work, but I planned on fixing them. And there were shag carpets in every room and mini-fridges. Pretty nice for a little cinder block building. Had a few old ladies who kept the volume up on their televisions and some illegals left over from working the summer rush. They were all good people though. Paid their bills on time."

Another sheet of wallpaper was ready to go and Loames picked it up, so Reuben got on the stepladder and they arranged it while Loames talked.

"But there was this other guy. The housekeeper told me his sheets and towels were always black and full of holes. When she went in to vacuum his room, there were scorch marks on the rug. One of the illegals told me he'd seen the guy spray hair-spray on his jeans and light them with a match. He said the guy liked to watch himself burn. When I saw him, the guy's clothes were singed and falling apart."

Reuben didn't know where the story was going, but Loames wasn't giving him the chance to interrupt or change the subject. Finishing the room as quickly as possible was all he could hope to do.

The top end of the wallpaper was set up and they were smoothing the rest of the piece down the wall. They'd been working around the room,

unconsciously leaving the message for last, but one of the next two sheets would cover it. Reuben held the paper between his fingers, testing its thickness, as though it might not be capable of covering the writing. He imagined that it would still be visible to him through the paper, the long scrawl rising between the feathers and vines. Whatever the words really meant was lost on him. He could easily guess — somebody was dead — but that was so simple it seemed wrong. There was a story behind them, only it was as unfamiliar as the handwriting. Even so, the message felt important, like it needed to be on the wall.

His mother was right to feel as though she'd been missing something, he thought, though it had nothing to do with what was written in her living room. After so many years, hidden but always there, the message spoke to Reuben and to his mother. It did what he never could.

Loames ran his hands over the wallpaper slowly, almost tenderly. His face was close to the wall. So when the door slammed upstairs, he nearly smashed his nose. Reuben's muscles went stiff and he waited. A second later, Loames was screaming. He grabbed the stepladder from Reuben and got under a ceiling vent. Putting his lips to the slats, he shouted, "I can hear you. I told you to shut up, but I can still hear you."

He was saying the same thing over and over. His hands were braced against the ceiling, but it looked like he was trying to dig his fingers into the plaster. After a minute, Loames came down the ladder and moved it back into position to finish the section. He wiped his hands through his hair and over his pitted face. Sighing, he took up his story right where he had left off.

"Soon other people's clothes were being stolen off their lines. So, at that point, I said to myself, 'Self, it's time to step in.' The guy's agreeable about the whole thing when I talk to him, says it won't happen again. But that night he pours a can of oil into the pool and lights it. When I go to his room, all of his stuff's gone. That fire burned for hours and I just had to wait until it died out."

Reuben stopped working and backed away from Loames, as though the man was a nervous and wild animal. Just standing next to him felt like a risk. Loames was doing all of the work himself, lining up the edges and forcing out air pockets. With his eyes fixed on the wallpaper, Reuben thought he looked the same way people did when they stared down at water, trying to see past the light on the surface.

"The next day, after the fire burned out, I went to buy tile to re-do the lobby. I found some with mermaids on them and fish spouting water. The tiles were good-looking, pretty, you know," Loames said, then he paused. "When I came back the fire trucks were already leaving. The place looked like a photo negative. The cinder block was all black from the smoke, and the doors and the roof were white because you could see the cloudy sky through them."

Reuben watched as tears made their way down Loames' scarred cheeks.

He felt at a loss. Even though Loames made him uncomfortable, at that moment, Reuben would have told him whatever he wanted to hear. But he couldn't imagine what that could be.

"I had that tile for years," Loames said. "I couldn't sell it. The distributor wouldn't even buy it back. I guess I'm the only one who ever wanted tiles with mermaids on them."

The last section of paper was ready to go up, but Loames' arms were hanging at his side like he'd lost feeling in them, so Reuben raised the piece himself. The previous one only covered a few letters of the message. This one would cover the rest.

Before Reuben got both of the corners tacked down, there was a crash upstairs. He felt a shudder in the wall and the paper fell. Reuben thought the tenant had thrown his television on the floor.

Loames didn't move for a few seconds, but when he did it was with surprising speed. The door to the hall closet flew open, then Loames was hidden behind it. When he reappeared, he had Reuben's old wooden tennis racket in hand. The bracket was still on the head, but most of the strings were missing.

Loames faced Reuben then took off up the stairs.

Reuben's eyes were open, but he felt like he couldn't see because he was listening so hard. It had gone silent upstairs. He sat on the low seat of the stepladder. It was too tight, but he was so close to the floor that it would have been more trouble to get up than to stay down there.

He put his hands on his knees and stared at the spot where Loames had stood. He heard sounds above his head, but the noise was more muffled than before. His skin was throbbing. Reuben wondered if his mother had known this dizzy shivering feeling. He tried to imagine how things had been when she was alone with his father. From time to time, he had seen her with her hand over her mouth because she had been blushing or laughing too hard. Once, he watched them through a window as they worked in the garden together, his father removing his work gloves, shaking them clean, then giving them to his mother to wear.

That was what he thought of as he sat there waiting for Loames in the living room he hadn't been inside of in eleven years. Then he thought of his empty room at the boarding house and he was struck by how much he had lost.

There were no other cars on the road as Loames drove them back. The street lights had come on, but only every other one worked. Loames was holding the steering wheel lightly, taking the turns slowly and wide. After a while he said, "I didn't do anything to that guy, your mother's tenant. Just so you know. But I'm pretty sure nothing like what happened today is going to happen again."

Reuben felt like he was sitting in the front seat of a cab with the driver.

He could tell that Loames didn't want to be with him, at least not any more.

"Maybe you should tell your mother to find somebody else to rent to. It's not good to have people like that in your house. You never know with them."

"I'll tell her that," Reuben said.

Loames stopped in front of the driveway and left the car running. Reuben hesitated, then said, "Well, thanks for the help." He opened the car door carefully, got out, and leaned in again. The rain blew against his back and spattered the car seat. After a moment, Loames said, "That seat's getting wet."

"Oh," Reuben said. "Sorry."

Loames let his foot off the brake and the car moved. Reuben had no choice but to shut the door. He watched Loames make a U-turn, trying to see his face through the foggy windows. He thought he understood what it felt like to stare down the past and only see a single moment, but Loames had proven to him how far a person could go. It seemed to Reuben as though he was glimpsing a vision of his life years in the future, one of a number of possibilities. When the rain forced him inside, he went and sat on the rusted glider in the screened-in porch. The porch smelled like an old rowboat, rotten and water-logged, and the screens were warped. Because of them, everything outside appeared to be vibrating.

Right after Reuben sat down, a tall solemn black man stepped onto the porch holding a mug of coffee. He stood by the door. "That Loames' car?" he asked.

Reuben nodded and rocked the glider.

"What'd he help you do?"

He turned to the man, who was rubbing one side of the mug to warm his hand.

"I had a pair of pants. They were too long," the man said. "Loames offered to fix them for me. He came to my room and hemmed them. Did a real smart job. Then he told me about his burnt-down motel. Another guy warned me about Loames, but I wanted the pants fixed so I didn't care. Somebody else got him to repair a typewriter for them."

Reuben squeezed the faded cushion beneath him until his fingers lost the sensation of the fabric.

"But don't worry, it's like a one time deal with Loames. He won't bug you again. He won't even talk to you now that he's told you."

It was cold out on the porch so Reuben could see the man's breath even after he spoke. The light was going and the gray air off the bay was drifting in through the screens. The rain was turning to sleet. Reuben remembered thinking that he was looking forward to the first snow fall at home, to seeing the snow on the beach. That might have been the one thing he wanted to come back for. It amazed him to watch the tiny particles of snow piling up over the grains of sand and to see the shape of the dunes rising beneath the cover of the

drifts. The past was like that, he thought, one thing overlapping another with the bottom layer always pressing itself through. He realized that Loames did not want to help him. He only needed someone to listen, whatever it took.

Reuben concentrated on the motion of the glider, letting his head sway as it moved. He knew his mother would call him as soon as she got back from the church. He told himself that he should go inside and wait. It would be better to stay near the phone, to be right there, close by.



Infinities
Richard Kostelanetz
(Design by M. Zuray)

The Expatriate

December 19.

Dear Drew,

I heard about what happened, what you tried to do. Gretta told me. Do you even remember her? She is one of the few who knows of some connection between us, which is to say, she knows I want to hear news. Even those few people really don't know, though. Or if they know, they don't know they know. Or, if they know they know, they have been decent enough not to put it all over the province. Gretta said you couldn't have been serious or you would have put the gun in your mouth. But I remember everything you told me, including where you said you would go to do it, which is just where she said you did go, and about not wanting the person who found you to come onto something grisly. I loved you for that, I wonder if you know. I loved you because you were crazy enough to kill yourself and considerate enough not to want to ruin anyone's day in the process. You don't meet a man like that every day.

News travels fast. You were still doing your time in the hospital when I heard. I should have come to see you, like I should have come to Audrey's funeral. I guess I'm writing this to say I would have if I could. I guess if I could I wouldn't need to write this.

Steven has me seeing a good psychologist now. Did I tell you that, last time I wrote? Because it was his suggestion, I feel a little more comfortable with the whole deal. He makes it sound like a reasonable thing to do. He says I'm in remarkable mental health all things considered. He has that nice calm, reasonable way. He can make a thing like that sound good. Positive somehow. Maybe you would prefer I talked less about Steven. But then I guess since you won't be reading this it doesn't matter. Bobbi says that when I write these letters I should say what I want to say, not

what I think you want to hear. Which I can do, knowing I will never send them. Bobbi is my new psychologist, in case I forgot to mention that. I never talk to Steven about you. He doesn't even know there is such a thing as you. Oh, I guess he's heard of you, like most people around here have, but not in connection with me.

Bobbi says it's okay to feel the way I still do about you, that I need to vent that rather than stifle it. As long as I don't follow through, whatever I feel is okay. A huge relief, because stifling it never worked at all. I think all these years I was mostly waiting for someone to give me permission to stop.

Because of what didn't happen between us, not because of what did, that's why I can't let go, I think. Because we never took that final step. It's such a big piece of unfinished business. We brushed so close so many times it was like years of foreplay. Well, not even <u>like</u> it. It was. Sometimes I think, just one time, just so I can say we finally did after all these years. But Bobbi is pretty sure it wouldn't stop there. I'm lying, actually, when I make up reasons why I can't let go. I don't know why. I might just be wired that way. Maybe even Bobbi can't change that. Maybe Steven can write checks to her until I die and she still won't have changed that. I tell him the sessions are going really well.

She says it's even okay to have those weak moments when I realize that you never meant me any harm. But then she adds that I have to accept that you will do harm just the same. When I'm feeling weak I need to call her or see her and be told that again. I don't forget, exactly. I just forget why it seemed so true.

Steven makes me happy. I think I say that too much. I have to tell you though, since you will never read this, that when it comes to sex, it only works when I think about you. Bobbi says what I have with Steven is real love which is a lot harder to feel. She says I've been desensitized and I need more drama. Like when your taste buds are weak you need hot spicy food. I figure by now an atomic device would have to explode underneath me to get me to feel. Which is pretty much what you were. In my life anyway. There, I wrote all that down and you know what? I don't feel better. I've been doing this for nine days and I don't feel different. She says keep doing it though, even so. Keep writing letters, keep burning them. These things take time. I'll always love you Drew. You know that. Maybe if you didn't know, then it would be safe to see you. But you do.

Love,
Jane

She folds the letter carefully into thirds, leaving a half-inch paper border at the top, to grasp it by as it comes out of the envelope. Even though she knows it never will. Because this is common courtesy, and because Bobbi has told her never to act as if she will not mail the letters. Then she remembers mentioning in the letter that she would not mail it, which might negate the whole purpose. She struggles with this, but decides not to rewrite it. It took a lot out of her the first time.

In a careful hand she writes Drew's full name on the envelope, and his address, which she knows by heart. Then her own return address in the corner.

Why do I put it in an envelope and address it? she asked Bobbi at first. Because when we decide not to send a letter, we crumple it up and throw it in the fireplace. This is more like really sending it. Symbolically. You get it all ready like you'll really send it, but you use the fireplace for a mailbox. It's all very symbolic.

Jane follows Bobbi's directions carefully, even though she does not wholeheartedly believe what Bobbi says. She has made an on-faith decision to follow directions. For Steven. She reminds herself that she does not wholeheartedly believe in anything, except those things she shouldn't, like Drew.

She licks the edge of the envelope flap and seals it shut.

The phone rings. It is one of Steven's credit card companies. Well, equally theirs, she supposes, although Steven opened the account. The woman wants her to purchase protection against disability or involuntary unemployment. Jane listens to a speech about the plan, which will make payments for them in such an emergency, because the woman went to the trouble to memorize it. When it's Jane's turn to talk, she's not sure how people with credit cards think, what choices they make. She never used to use them, and they haven't been married long. She suggests the woman call back later, when Steven is home.

A split second after she hangs up the phone, he comes through the door.

She fixes dinner, they eat, and she asks about his day. He is an engineer. He works in an office until a bridge support weakens or a sewer line ruptures. Then he stands out In The Field, as he calls it, in a parka with the hood up, warming his hands on a coffee cup and talking to men standing beside heavy equipment, which idles loudly as they talk. If she asks, he will tell her all about his day. She always asks.

Jane has read books and seen movies containing men who hold jobs as engineers. They bring home good paychecks with health benefits and retirement plans, and they do this for decades and don't mind. Until Steven she had never really known one up close, so had always suspected they were a kind of archetypal legend, like the happy family. Every time she asks, she expects him to say he minds now and can't do it anymore. He never does.

After dinner they do the dishes together, and Steven sits down to pay the

monthly bills. Jane watches and asks herself if she is happy. Because she knows she should be at a moment like this, which compels her to test the response. When she is at a picnic or a softball game with Steven's family, she asks herself if she is having fun. She knows *they* are, and also that when people have fun they probably don't ask.

He puts on his hooded parka and drives to the Post Office with the bill payments. He likes the sense of completion.

She tucks into bed with a book.

When he comes back, he strips and climbs in with her. The skin on his face is cold and stubbly with five o'clock shadow and he seems to want to make love. While they are making love, she remembers that she forgot to tell him about the call from the credit card lady. It doesn't seem worth interrupting him now. Then she remembers the promise she made to herself. Not to think about Drew this time. Just as she breaks it.

Half an hour after he drops off to sleep, which she knows by his breathing, she sits up, remembering. She turns on the light.

"What?" he says, which he always says when wakened.

"I left a letter on the table. I forgot. I'll go get it."

"Oh, that," he says, still very sleepy. "I mailed that."

"You did? It didn't have a stamp."

"I put a stamp on it and mailed it. Didn't you want me to? It was on the table."

"No, that's fine. Just so I know. Where it went."

She turns off the light and Steven goes back to sleep.

Steven is gone to work by six-thirty a.m. Jane dresses warmly and goes out back to tend the horses.

Ephraim comes to the fence to greet her, his hooves clumping on the frozen ground, puffing great clouds of warm steam from his nostrils. She scratches his upper lip, the way he likes. He is an enormous chestnut, a Dutch Warmblood, huge muscular legs with prominent veins like a human bodybuilder, and a Roman nose. He wears a warm blanket. He is hers. He always has been.

The boarder horse, a bay Arab mare half Ephraim's size, stays behind in the three-sided shelter, front legs splayed, indulging her neuroses by rocking her long neck back and forth. Jane is considering asking the boarders to take the Arab elsewhere, because they don't take care of her.

She uses a hay hook to break up and drag away the crust of ice on the watering trough, so they can drink. The water seems murky with algae again. Steven, who knows nothing about horses, doesn't think it's a problem; the man who delivers the hay, who knows quite a lot, agrees. Drew knows everything about horses. If he were here, he'd tell her to clean it. "When you love a horse you take care of him." So today she will bail out the freezing trough, scrub it clean and allow it to fill again, frostbitten fingers or no.

Ephraim leans into the fence, pressing his massive forehead against her, and she wraps her arms around his head, enjoying his warmth. Ephraim knows Drew well, is the only living soul in her life who does, so she discusses Drew often.

"It's not even seven a.m.," she says. "So it's still sitting there in the mailbox. It won't even go out until twelve-thirty. But it's gone, anyway, Ephraim. Once it's in that box, it belongs to the Postal Service. There's no way to get it back that I know of. Maybe it doesn't matter now. Watch for Drew, anyway. He'll be coming right down that driveway I think. Maybe he'll get it tomorrow. I wonder how long it'll take him to come. You do think he'll come, don't you?"

The Arab wanders up, tentatively, and Jane realizes they want to eat. She separates off two big flakes of alfalfa hay and tips them over the fence into their feeders. Ephraim gently pulls the corners off his. The Arab grabs the flake by the top, lifts it out of the feeder and shakes it, raising a flurry of alfalfa particles. She drops the hay on the frozen ground and eyes it sideways, as if it frightens her by being there.

Jane turns her back on the horses and looks to the driveway, imagining the crunch of gravel, thinking how that same driveway will look when it is no longer empty.

Two days later, while she is trying hard not to think like a waiting person, she hears Ephraim whinny his excited greeting. Her heart pounds, and it makes her dizzy, wondering if Drew will be there when she opens the back door.

He is faced away from her, scratching Ephraim's upper lip. A new silver Cadillac idles in the driveway, sending steam clouds of exhaust into the gray afternoon. He's wearing a plaid shirt, no coat, and his hair is longer. It hangs straight over the back of his collar. She steps out and he turns around. He still wears black sunglasses, even in winter.

She walks to him. He puts on that twisted little smile, probably not on purpose. She knows that if she could see his eyes they would be soft. She knows they can be strong and frightening and cold, but she won't see that come out today. She knows where to go and where not to go, to not see that come out.

She touches the sleeve of his shirt. "You'll freeze."

"You know I wouldn't have come by. You know that, right? If you hadn't written."

"Why didn't you wear a jacket, silly?"

He touches the sleeve of her sweater, as if to remind her that she is similarly underdressed. The pair of simple touches conveys an almost unbearable heaviness.

She tries to swallow. "You didn't come by before you did it. I couldn't imagine you wouldn't come say goodbye first." She wants him to say it was

for her sake.

"I did come by, three times. I just didn't come in. I promised you, after you got married."

She wishes he hadn't mentioned promises.

"You must be doing great," she says, pointing with her chin to the idling Cadillac.

Money was never Drew's strong suit. Maybe Audrey left him money. Life insurance, maybe. They walk to the car together, get in and slam the doors. The heater is running full blast.

"I've had it for two months. I didn't put anything down. First month was payment-free. Don't ask me how I rate all that credit. I haven't figured it out myself." He tilts his head and his dark hair parts, falls over the corner of his sunglasses, and shields half his face. He seems puzzled and curious.

"How much are the payments?"

"Nine hundred a month."

"How can you make that?"

"I can't." They listen to the heater blow for a few protracted moments. Through the snowy windshield Ephraim runs the fence, whinnying for Drew. "I didn't figure I'd be around."

She nods, remembering. She reaches out and taps his knee lightly. "Are you glad now that you didn't die?"

"No." It takes a long time to say, as if it had a lot of syllables. "I'm already planning my next one." He looks up at her and smiles, like it hurts him in a wonderful way to see her. "I wouldn't have come except..."

She nods. She knows. "I hope you don't really do it. But you have to come say goodbye if you do."

"You won't try to talk me out of it?"

"Of course I will. If I can."

"That's the problem with talking to somebody beforehand."

"Doesn't have to be beforehand."

"Well, I can't very well do it after." He laughs at his own joke, maybe thinking she will laugh too.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. You hear about things like that. I had a friend once who said she was lying in bed one night, and she felt like somebody was in the room. It didn't feel scary, though. And then later she found out this guy she used to date had just died."

She watches his reaction. He shrugs, then nods.

"Well, then we'd know," she says, "if you can do that or not." She wants to be the person who'd still matter enough, even after he died, to warrant a stop. "This car is incredible."

He brags about the horsepower, which seems odd. He didn't used to care about things like that. She remembers a man at a horse show bragging that his car had 180 horsepower. Drew was riding by on Candle, and he said that

sounded like 179 horses more than necessary, to this man he'd never seen.

He shows her all the power features, such as the seat which automatically adjusts to three pre-set positions. He points out the c.d. player, but says he has no c.d.s and asks if she does. She says she and Steven still use cassettes. The inside of the car goes cavernous and quiet at the mention of his name.

After a while he says, "We should go for a drive sometime. Soon. Before they come take this back."

Bobbi is in her head, feeding her lines. Say, It's all in the past, Drew. I'm happily married now. Say, I know what a drive actually means, in our shared language. Say, I'm not as good at self-destructive behavior as I used to be. But if she had wanted Bobbi's advice, she would have called Bobbi when the letter was accidentally mailed. Bobbi probably would have said, There are no accidents.

"Let's do it now," she says. Before I change my mind.

He asks her if she wants to get anything out of the house, like a coat, or leave a note or anything. She says no.

Drew's farm is more than sixty miles south, off Highway 2, almost halfway to Toronto. An icy wind off the lake blows snow sideways across the road, which hasn't been plowed. But the Cadillac has an advanced traction control system, he says, and good snow tires. He says he needs to stop home to feed the dogs.

As they pull onto his property she sees changes. Sad changes. Audrey's little plane is sitting out in a pasture, half-covered by a drift of snow. Not the one she crashed. The one she was building in the back of the barn. Jane heard it was ninety percent finished when she died. The house looks old and tired, like no one loves it anymore. Drew parks by the barn.

"Wouldn't it be better for that inside?" she says.

"Better for what?"

"The plane."

"Oh, that. I guess." He seems distracted, as though he has to go far away to consider it. "A guy came by to look at it. He didn't buy it. I never hauled it back in."

They step out into the freezing air, and he pulls the barn door open, shaking his hand briskly after touching the metal handle. Three dogs come to greet him, old Mister the hound, who she knows, but who is now unbelievably, painfully old, then two skinny black and white Border Collies, big pups, strangers. Drew closes the barn door behind them, turns on fluorescent overhead lights. He takes down a twenty-five pound bag of dry dog food, tears it open and sets it on its side, spilling kibble into the barn aisle. He refills a horse-size watering bucket from the hose tap. The dogs ignore the food and wag around his legs. She looks at the mountain of kibble and doesn't ask how long he thinks they'll be gone.

Wandering up the barn aisle, she is a student again, a teenager, because

she always was, here. She feels short and unattractive and insubstantial. She hurries past the stairs leading up to the loft, her old home.

Every stall is empty, bedded in clean straw and shavings, canvas web doors clipped across the open entryways, as if each stall expects a horse again soon. At the end of the barn aisle stands his shelf of trophies. His ribbons are mounted on the wall, including his Olympic Silver, and a photo of him accepting it with the other two members of the Canadian team. She received the same photo in the mail when she wrote him a fan letter at the age of fourteen. And the photo of him taking Candle over a seven foot one jump, the horse seeming to drop straight down, back legs kicked out and up to keep from knocking the rail. She'd been sitting in the stands that day, at the International Horse Show in Buffalo. She has not since seen or even heard of a horse and rider going higher than seven one. Only Drew on Candle had a clean final round.

She turns to see that he's done, and watching her patiently.

"Nothing you haven't seen."

"Where are all your horses?"

"Sold them or gave them away."

"Candle?" You sold Candle?

He shakes his head, and she knows. "He was old. His arthritis was so bad, I couldn't ask him to do another winter, it would have been selfish. You know how athletes are. Our bodies fall apart on us. The school horses I gave away, mostly to the students. I kept wondering why nobody figured out what I was going to do. Or maybe they did, but they didn't care."

He slides the barn door open and motions her through. She asks about the plan for the dogs, and he says his neighbor promised to take care of them if anything ever happened to him. He opens the car door for her and asks if she wants him to go into the house and get her a coat. She says no, it's warm in the car, which is where they'll be. She wants to leave. The barn makes her feel young and Audrey's plane seems to be staring at her. The gravel driveway crunches as they pull away.

He asks where she'd like to go. She suggests they cross the border. She hasn't been to The States in years.

They stop at the Falls on the Canadian side, at her request. It's a mistake, she realizes almost immediately, because it's a longish tramp from the parking lot to any good viewing sight, and they're not dressed for the cold. It's that early winter dusk, and when they reach a railing, it's too fogged in to see the Falls. She hears them, though, and feels the cold mist of them, and Drew puts an arm around her shoulder to keep her warm.

She can tell that his pain is setting in again. His medication must be wearing off. She's watched this for years, though she realizes he also has a gunshot wound now. She doesn't know where, or how much it hurts him, only that he miraculously missed almost everything important.

When they get back to the car he starts the engine and runs the heater. She asks. It still hurts, he says. But it's nothing compared to his back, after all these years.

Then he tells her something she didn't know about the self- inflicted gunshot. The round was supposed to explode on impact. As he explains, he takes his pill bottle out of the glove box and shakes three into his hand.

"So, what happened? It was just a dud?"

"I guess. You know I'm only good for twenty minutes of driving now." He swallows the pills without water.

"Go around," she says, and takes over the wheel.

It's not twenty minutes to The Peace Bridge, but he's already nodding, his lids heavy. The way she knows him best. The car feels huge and smooth, but strange, like driving a whole house. But also secure somehow. More familiar than it should.

As they drive through customs, she tells the border guard they are both Canadian citizens, which is only half true. She jabs Drew in the ribs because the guard has to hear it from him. He waves them through.

Darkness falls. She heads for Buffalo, for lack of another plan. She stops at a service station and calls Steven.

"Where are you?" he says.

"Niagara Falls."

"Your truck is here."

"I'm with a friend."

"When will you be home?"

"I'm not exactly sure." She marvels at her own lack of preparation for this inevitable exchange.

"Should I be worried about this?"

"I don't think so. It's just an old friend, whose head is in a bad place. I know, the blind leading the blind, right?"

"Stop it, Jane. I'm a little worried."

"Well, that's appropriate," she says. "But I really think it's going to be okay. If I'm not home tonight I'll probably be there when you get home from work tomorrow. Love you. Bye."

She hangs up quickly.

As she pulls into Buffalo, she feels disturbingly without destination. She wonders how long he'll sleep. She drives through downtown, just to see if it's changed. It has. She passes an open record store, pats her jeans pocket to see if she has money. She does, but doesn't think it's much, and wonders if Drew has money, and if she should save hers for food and gas.

She wanted to buy a c.d., the one she has at home on cassette, with that song that reminds her of her time with Drew. "Tell Me Why", it's called. She wanted him to hear the way the word "why" spins out into eleven syllables, the last one strangely long and modulated, like Drew saying no. Maybe he'd

answer the question.

She gets off the expressway at Delaware Avenue and drives to the Buffalo Equestrian Club, because she's tired and sleepy and wants to stop. She pulls into the familiar rutted driveway, and parks by the office.

She watches him sleep until it seems scary to be where she can. Then she slips into the big back seat, and tries to get a night's sleep. And wants to be home. Every time the cold wakes her, she climbs into the front seat to run the heater.

She wakes up with Drew on top of her.

"Wake up," he says, "before you freeze."

But she doesn't feel cold, just his hands under her sweater, running up her rib cage, and his lips on her neck. She tries to draw a breath but it decides to be a gasp. He releases that sound into her ear, that she hasn't heard for years, and hasn't forgotten, and pushes against her.

They hear a car pull in and park beside them. They keep down until the footsteps disappear, then hear another car. They sit up. She feels half relieved for the interruption, because things just happen, with him, to a point, unless concrete circumstances prevent it.

She sits, adjusting her breathing, calming her heart rate by will. The building looms like a warehouse, like it always has, a mammoth arena hooded with windows in small, square panes, except now almost every one is broken.

She looks at the car parked beside them and says, "Henry."

"Who?"

"Old Henry. The stable man."

"What about him?"

"He's still here. He's still driving the same car. I don't believe it."

They run shivering inside. Henry is turning on lights in the office, and the Tack and Gift Shoppe. He's grown shorter, and more stooped. He still carries himself with the subservience of a white plantation slave. He blinks at them.

"Morning."

"You don't remember me, Henry."

He moves close for a good look.

"Jane? Miss Jane? You sure did grow up!"

"I can't believe you're still here, Henry."

"Oh, I know a good thing when I see one."

She tries to imagine his cold, tedious job in that light. She starts to introduce Drew, but he waves that off.

"No introduction necessary. Pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Duncan. You two are gonna freeze. Where your coats? Hold on."

When he shuffles away, Drew says, "Did I meet him before?"

She points to the photo on the wall. The same one that hangs in his

barn. Andrew Duncan on Candle Power clearing seven one. In this arena. Drew has come through this club on pro show circuits, maybe half a dozen times, unlike Jane, who grew up here, who learned to ride here. But as the most notable rider to come through, he is the most easily remembered.

Henry comes back with two clean, heavy horse blankets, and they wrap up. Henry starts a pot of coffee, and Jane has to tell him what she's been doing for the last dozen years. Which she hates, because she figures she hasn't done much. Never made it to the Olympics. Never went pro. But then, she doesn't even have to ask what's new with him.

"Canada?" he says. "Why there? No offense, Mr. Duncan."

"None taken," he says, clearly fixated on the coffee drip.

"Needed the change of scene," she says, which sounds weak.

She never told Drew she followed him there, dropped everything when she read that after the accident he'd retired, and settled down to teach. Gave up her country of birth, and, well, really nothing else. She had nothing else worth keeping at the time. She told Drew only that she'd run away from home, another truth, one truth out of two. She doesn't want to tell Henry either one.

Holding styrofoam cups of strong black coffee, one hand peeking out under the huge padded flannel blankets, they step out into the boxes and sit, and watch a solitary young woman work her horse in the arena. Drew leans back and puts his feet up on the rail. He puts his black sunglasses on. His eyes are inordinately sensitive to light.

"Why are we here again?" he says quietly.

"I don't know. Where should we be?"

"I don't know." He sips coffee. "Alone somewhere?"

The woman reins her horse to a dirt-throwing stop right in front of them. She pats her horse's neck, above where the snug double reins have worked up a lather. "You look like Andrew Duncan," she says. She's irritatingly young.

"I am."

"Wow. I used to be a big fan of yours."

Drew shows no expression. Jane winces inwardly. It's almost as bad as the comment she initially feared. Didn't you used to be...? Then she says one more sentence, just as bad.

"I grew up watching you ride."

Drew gives her a nod and an imitation smile, and she squeezes the horse's sides and canters off. They watch her in silence as she shows off with dressage work. She is properly attired in jodhpurs and English boots and black hard hat, modified only by a down jacket. The horse is a leggy black, Morgan maybe, with his winter coat partially buzzed away. He looks freshly groomed, wearing leg tape and matching bell boots. And according to the clock in the arena, it's barely seven a.m. Which can only mean one thing. This girl is going to the Olympics. And Jane is not.

On each trip by she smiles at Drew. On one, she calls out, "I'm nervous now." She could do that and not be flirting, but she is flirting. Women do, with Drew. Sometimes they can't help it and sometimes they don't even know it, but they always do.

Jane looks up to the shattered windows. So much decay.

"Let's go," she whispers.

"Where?"

"Somewhere we can be alone."

He raises his eyebrows and follows her out. They leave the blankets. Henry is not inside, so they don't say goodbye.

As Drew backs the Cadillac out of its parking space, she remembers what called her back to this place. Other than the fact that she grew up here, because her house was no place for such an activity.

"This is where we met, Drew. You probably don't remember."

"I thought we met in my barn."

"No, this was two years before that. Right by that stable entrance. You'd come down for the International. I followed you around all weekend. Everywhere but the men's room. I even followed you when you hot-walked Candle. I was fourteen. I thought you didn't even know I was there. Then all of a sudden you turned and spoke to me. Nearly stopped my heart."

"What did I say? Something witty and brilliant, I hope."

"You said, 'Want something to do, kid? Want to hot-walk my horse?'"

He smiles, hidden behind his dark glasses, the way she's used to seeing him. He doesn't remember. She knew he wouldn't.

She remembers that her hands shook when she took the reins from him, and that every three steps or so she reached a hand back to touch Candle, as if to verify his existence. She remembers the way his neck muscles felt, coiled under foamy sweat and thick, smooth-coated skin. She remembers Candle best from that first meeting. He was like Drew, big, powerful, a little scary.

"I was a little bit scared of you," she says out of nowhere.

He reaches his hand out and places it on her thigh. "You didn't know me." He turns his hand palm up, and she runs her fingers along it. It feels cool and padded and soft.

She knows that could not have been why, because she's come to know him well over the years and she's a lot scared of him now.

Drew has money. Well, he has credit cards. She almost asks how he'll ever pay the bills, but she knows. Audrey kept them in good shape, now she's gone, they're out of control, and Drew doesn't expect to be around long enough to worry.

He stops at a discount drug store and she waits in the warm car while he buys toothbrushes and hairbrushes and toothpaste. Buy winter coats, she almost tells him. If she had one, she'd step out of the car now and find her own way

home.

They sit in the car for a moment outside the hotel. Drew opens the drug store bag rather gingerly.

"Look," he says. "I'm no good at this. But I just thought. I don't know." He sets a box of condoms on the seat. "I thought you might want me to use these. Or I might want me to. I don't know."

She feels a tightness in her chest. "I didn't know..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, what? You didn't know what?"

"That we were going for broke this time."

"Isn't that what you want? You said in the letter that's what you want."

"I also said it wouldn't stop there. That letter was never supposed to get to you. It got mailed by accident."

"There are no accidents," he says.

She thinks of the day he broke his back in a jumping competition, ending his career, and wonders if he believed that at the time. Or if he really believes it now. Or if he would if it didn't happen to serve him.

They take showers, Jane first, and she lies in bed naked and waits for him, which is nothing so unusual, because they've seen each other naked before. If Bobbi were here Jane would say, I know this looks like a step back, but I remember the bad times now, which I'm always saying I can't. And you're always saying I have to. When he steps out of the bathroom she sees the toll a few years has taken, and the bullet wound. It's near the center of his chest. He sees her looking.

"I was aiming for my heart," he says. "But I missed."

"You always used to say you had no heart."

"Then maybe I'm not as bad a shot as I thought."

He eases himself under the covers. They lie quietly for a few uncomfortable minutes.

"What's wrong?" he says.

She sighs, overwhelmed by the vastness of the answer.

"Do you remember when I left your place, and I got a job in that racing stable?" Left *him*, she means, but this sounds better. "They had all these studs there. One of them, they never actually let him breed. They used him like a tester, to see if the mare was in heat. If she was they hauled him off and brought out one of the better stallions."

Maybe it's a mistake to talk about racing stables. Maybe it only reminds him of the three and a half years he spent in prison for beating a horse trainer to death, after the trainer "froze" the injured leg on a racehorse so many times that the bone snapped coming down the stretch. That was years before she met

him, but she always saw it as a subject to avoid. One of many.

"Anyway, one day they decided to let him breed. The guys figured they'd give him a break. So he got up on this mare. And then he got down again." And she'd felt a tragic bond with the poor confused animal. She waits for some reaction.

"I take it there's a message here."

"Well, just that he got so used to thinking of sex as something that got interrupted."

"Who does the stud represent, you or me?"

"Never mind," she says. "Sorry I brought it up."

He picks up the box of condoms and throws it across the room, hard, and it bounces off the opposite wall. She knows he's angry. She knew he would be. She decides not to be scared this time, but it's a hard habit to break.

"You were the one who wanted it," he says.

"I wanted to marry you. I wanted you to love me. I didn't want you to sneak up to the loft and paw me and rub against me and disappear again."

"You never argued about it."

"No, I didn't. But I was aiming for your heart, you know?"

He lets out a snorting laugh. "I have no heart," he says.

"Then maybe I'm not as bad a shot as I thought."

He sighs and swallows three pills from the bedside table.

She says, "I never understood what kept stopping you. And whatever it was, where did it go?"

He never answers.

"Tell me why," she says when she knows he's asleep.

She watches him and thinks about Audrey, crashing her Cessna into a stand of trees, practicing "touch and goes", a simple exercise to renew her pilot's license which she should have been able to perform in her sleep. No mechanical problems turned up with the plane. Just one of those things that happen. Not everything has a hidden meaning.

Drew always said it wasn't really a marriage, but Jane used to question that, to herself of course. If he was Mr. Duncan and she was Mrs. Duncan, what else does it take? She knows they slept a long way apart, but she also knows suddenly that Audrey was the barrier, the thing that always stopped him, because she is the only thing that has now been removed. And because he'd been talking about shooting himself for years, but didn't until she was gone. She watches him sleep and wonders which is worse. If Drew has no heart, or if he gave it to someone else.

She rolls against him and puts her head on his shoulder, jarring him half awake.

He says, "You used to say I was the only man you ever loved." Then he fades out again.

She did used to say that. Because at the time it was true. She rises and

dresses, slips down to the lobby, and calls Steven at work. She says she loves him, and can't wait to get home. She doesn't tell him that he is the Audrey-sized barrier that stopped the momentum this time, even though it's true, and seems like wondrous news.

When they cross the border she lies again, and says she is a Canadian citizen. But it feels true, because Canada is her home now. She no longer remembers why she wanted to cross back into The States.

They stop for gas on the QEW outside Niagara Falls. They buy packaged sandwiches and sodas and put it all on his credit card.

Just as they get back to the car, he grabs her, and leans her up against the passenger door in an extended bear hug. The car is cold against her back. The air is cold around them. Over his shoulder, she sees a blow-up Santa Claus on the roof of the pump island, tied down with guy wires. She watches it sway in the frigid wind, listens to the thup-thup of it, rocking over the scene. She wonders how many days it is until Christmas, if there's still time to buy something really nice for Steven.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he says. "Can you accept that?"

She nods, knowing he can feel it against his shoulder. Tears start, which he might feel in time. She's cold, and wants to get into the car and go home. "Don't forget your promise."

"What promise?"

"To come say goodbye." He never promised, she knows that, but she wants him to now. "If it's possible to do it."

"Will if I can."

"Promise?"

"Yes. Promise." It always takes a few tries to pin him. "I love you," he says.

She pushes him away and gets in. He comes around to the driver's side and starts the engine.

"What, Jane? What did I say wrong?"

"Remember when you threw that boarder out for not taking care of his horse? I said, 'He loves that horse.' You said, 'Bullshit. When you love a horse, you take care of him.'"

He nods, and turns on the wipers against a fresh fall of snow. "Horses are easier," he says.

Less than a month later, Drew proves that he actually does have a heart. Because the round explodes, as it is designed to, and shatters it.

She hears this four days after the fact. The funeral is over, so Jane need not agonize over whether to go. It's a great relief. The whole thing, not just the issue of the funeral. Now she knows it's really over. She decides not to say that to anyone. It would sound cold, and she doesn't mean it to.

Then she changes her mind, calls an emergency session with Bobbi, and tells her just that. Bobbi says it's a human thing to feel, and she should forgive herself for it whenever possible.

After the session she drives by Drew's farm, and opens the barn door to see if dogs wag around her legs. When they don't, she drives on to his neighbor, whose name she does not remember. She knocks on his door, and he answers, but the dogs are not wagging around as she expects.

"I wondered if Drew's dogs were okay."

"I took them to the pound," he says. "The pups'll get homes. Last stop for the old dog, as it should be."

"Okay, thanks."

She drives twenty-five miles to the pound.

Mister, she is told, was humanely put down, almost as he came through the door. The Border Collies are available for adoption. She writes a check and loads them into the back of her truck.

She bathes them both before nightfall and lets them sleep in the bedroom, curled together with their chins on each other's backs. She half expects Steven to object, but he doesn't mention it. She lies in bed and listens to the comfortable sound of their breathing.

She realizes that Drew did not come to say goodbye.

She could say it only proves that isn't possible, and so delude herself, but chooses not to. She could be a step more honest and say that seeing Audrey, or even Candle, was a higher priority. But she chooses to be even more honest than that. She admits to herself that Drew never kept his promises worth a damn anyway.

In the morning she'll admit that to Bobbi. Bobbi will probably say, Okay. Now we might actually be getting somewhere.

Moss

Carter sat this morning like he'd sat every morning the past month, slumped against the decrepit steel lawnchair, its back fanned out like a seashell bleached dead by the May sun. He pulled a bottle of Johnson's Baby Oil from the bib pocket of his iron-stiff Roebuck overalls and slathered it over his face. The clear oil drew old Ra, whose right eye sliced through the South Carolina haze. As the oil seeped into the sunburnt cracks of his skin, he felt his self-cure working. He liked the warmth that reminded him of his days on the tennis courts, a time that now belonged to someone else's skin.

He hadn't played tennis, hadn't moved much period this past month, ever since a pack of failures overtook him. Out of all them, his mysterious skin cancer horrified him most. It swelled, like ocean waves before they become waves. But he could whip the cancer—by baking himself in the sun. He knew his self-curative contravened both popular belief and standard medical practice, but this past month, he'd had enough of his dad and friends, of counselors and doctors. Wanting to reach back to some kind of happy, he sifted his recent accomplishments through his brain: tennis champion, college graduation with honors, a few sparkling girlfriends. But the cancer rolled over these things.

Like many of the interminably disabled and depressed of Cass, South Carolina, he was planted in the front yard near the road. In his case, he was close to the drain ditch along Rural Route 7. Around Cass, families saddled with sons or daughters or grandparents whom they called "simples" had a time-tested, cheap, and easy treatment. Sit them outside, give them a flyswatter and fluids, and let them wave at cars all day.

But he didn't look simple or ugly in any obvious way, unlike Herbert Swaim who lived two miles down 7. Some creator—old Ra?—had lashed Swaim with two congenital defects: a baby's mind and a huge, rotund face: he'd been lawn-sitting for two decades. No, Carter was just over six feet, trim with tennis thighs like dogwood trunks, and a good chin. Not great-looking, but far from ugly, he'd been told by the sparkling girlfriends. Until now.

On either side of his dad's house, the road ran as straight and black as the edge of a shark's tooth. A car came out of the loblollies: a white Chrysler Lebaron with no hubcaps and fenders caked with orange clay. Ameliann Pressler drove the same make of car, but an intact and polished version. Ameliann, a

lay counselor for the Baptist Church of Cass, was due in a few minutes for what she called an "emergency help session" before Sunday School. Earlier, over the phone, she had started counseling him: "You fit right into my special area of concern—pyschospiritual delusion." An evangelical Christian with a license to counsel, he thought, a true double-whammy. He felt like he was talking to a summer hurricane that swallowed his words while screaming its own. He agreed to see her because his dad had asked her to help him, and his dad didn't ask him for much.

For the last month, his face had erupted in a yellow fire of cancer. The new, cancerous skin clambered over his old and sat there like the crepe-paper flesh of a Peruvian shrunken head. And he knew that such conditions would lead to a rare form of scabbing, in which his entire face would become a huge wound. A few old friends from the high school tennis team, tanned and slim and not yellow, had stopped by: No, they couldn't see any difference in his face. He looked ready for the courts.

He remembered all of them the same way, shuffling off, talking quietly to themselves as they got into their cars. He never had repeat visitors.

This morning he'd taken another step in his self-cure. He conferred a title upon himself: the Grand Scorekeeper of the Ugly. A scorecard explained almost every failure. He'd graduated from Princeton but had no job after looking all senior year; had slunk home to Cass, the town he'd swore he'd forever escape; had turned 22, scared to be the same age as his mother when she died driving late at night, nearly home. Scoring ugliness soothed him. Another way to fight the cancer—to record all the permutations of the ugly. You find it in the unlikeliest of places, he thought, but mostly in yourself.

None of the other cures had worked: Seeing Dr. Jacobs, the only dermatologist in Cass, then, at Jacobs' recommendation, submitting himself to a weekend's worth of tests at the Atlanta Center for Oncology Research. All prognoses were negative.

He reached down under the seashell chair for the thermos of lemonade his dad had given him and dumped all the lemonade out on the spring grass. Pulling the amber bottle of homemade scuppernong wine from the long pants pocket of his overalls, he carefully poured last summer's vintage into the thermos cup. A crude kind of decanting, but necessary, because the sediment in the wine hung in suspension like bits of seaweed. He drank it fast, poured another.

Spanish moss hanging from the dogwood limbs turned in the breeze like long, silent propellers. Five summers ago, his dad had brought several bushels of the stringy parasite home from Folly Beach. Grabbing handfuls of the gray-green stuff, his dad threw it up into every dogwood in the front yard, clump by clump. Give the stuff five more years, and it'll win out, wash over the green dogwood leaves with gray, then kill the trees—not by strangulation like a vine, but by blocking out their sun.

He heard another car, one with a loud muffler. The early sun squatted

above the loblolly pines, only half an eye. Only by squinting could he make out the car in its crawl toward him. A crummy black Olds with a gray front fender and a chrome grill with a boxer's grin. The wheels spat out loose gravel from the macadam. Something black, and a black shinier than the car, hung out of the passengers' side window. As the car got close, a man swung a black plastic garbage bag like a lasso. Just before it passed, the man threw the bag at him, then yelled over the shot engine:

"Hey fucker-drooling-fuckedup-retard-fool!"

The Grand Scorekeeper of the Ugly couldn't let that pass.

"Hey putzim—and all your ersatz, meshuggeneh, cowboy ways!" he said, mixing the little Yiddish he knew from his Princeton friends with what he imagined was New York syntax.

As the bag sailed near him, he covered his head. It split open, and out bounced shards of hamburgers, a couple of half-full Cokes, a dirty plastic diaper, and some small furry thing. One bouncing chicken wing grazed his left boot. The Cokes in the fresh grass looked like coagulated blood.

With his newfound powers surging behind his eyes, the Grand Scorekeeper of the Ugly stared at the offering. That was it—blood—the secret conduit that transported his ugliness. The cancer lapped in his bloodstream. His face was falling in on itself.

He reached for the Waterman fountain pen in the bib pocket of his overalls. Under them he wore a beige shirt, plus brown workboots with tan soles. He who was used to the establishment panoply of khakis and overbig oxford-cloth shirts at Princeton—had robed himself in the unlikeliest and possibly the ugliest outfit he could find. He carefully unscrewed the cap on the pen, and from a pants pocket, pulled out a stack of index cards. The Grand Scorekeeper of the Ugly scribbled his first internal memo:

29

May 1997
Assortment of domestic waste, hurled from a passing car, including a dead animal. Won't pick any of it up—will leave as a kind of a tableau vivant *of the ugly. Two dudes in beater insulted the Grand Scorekeeper. Felt every syllable in my cancerous skin. Cancer lending me a new vision. Like what I see.*

He flipped the card over.

What I see: Like bas-reliefs on a Mayan cornice, their skulls protrude; lines cracking along their foreheads. Their eyes look squinty as a hog's, their noses have round swells like cheap mylar balloons, and their lips pursed like they'd never cuss again. How would they fare as human sacrifices?

The small furry thing was an orange tabby kitten with yellow eyes open to the sun. Whatever had killed it didn't involve external bleeding. The male kitten's fur felt stiff and cold as ceramic. Carter's legs felt wobbly as a jellyfish washed on shore, only to be poked for fun by kids with driftwood sticks.

He heard the long-off whine of wheels on the hot road, and soon Ameliann Pressler's white Lebaron turned quietly into his dad's gravel driveway, its spoked wheels glittering in the sun. Ameliann got out. She was in her thirties with a thinnish face on the top of her chintz dress with a jewel neckline. Running down the yellow field of the dress were cascades of pink and blue peonies.

But as for looks, he didn't trust himself to gauge her according to the world's measure. Ameliann had been some beauty queen back in high school. She was still lithe and petite, with blondish hair and blue eyes. But to The Grand Scorekeeper she was repellent: A slight kink made her nose look so mountainous that the rest of her face became a valley sloping away from it, and her thinness seemed skeletal.

"Carter, I haven't seen you in so long. We down at Third Baptist miss you."

"I've been tied up."

"I see. Well, you certainly look tan. And fit." She reached a hand inside her neckline to adjust her bra strap. He stood up to offer her his seashell chair. She pulled her hand out of her dress and laid it on the cool steel armrest. Her fingers curved like the bow in the steel. But they were no longer the hands of a beauty queen, he noticed. She'd been a sun-worshipper herself for too long not to have some wrinkles bleeding across her hands and fingers.

"No thanks. I'm running behind—got to get to church. Look, I'll call you after dinner—set up an emergency help session. Here—" She went through her cordovan satchel. "I mentioned the retreat before on the phone. Many of my young, single clients swear to me it's helped them more than any individualized sessions."

He held the pink tract, complete with computer graphics: *Baptist Singles' Retreat '97—A Summer of Fun, Fellowship, and Feeling Great!* Pivoting like she learned years ago at the Cass School of Charm and Beauty, she turned to go.

"Carter—why is the yard covered with trash? I can't see you or your father allowing this."

"Some folks drove by and threw their trash at me. Refuse for the refuse."

"The things lost souls do these days. Merciful God—is that an animal?" She walked over to the dead tabby.

"They threw it out, with their lunch."

"It's morbid." Ameliann pointed at the kitten with the toe of her ivory pump, "Why don't you bury it?"

A small, cold ocean whorled around his heart. She drove off with a beauty queen wave. Carter left the trash. But softly, with his boot, he nudged

the kitten into the bag.

From the garage, he picked up a pivot shovel. To the vineyard where he walked under the scuppernong vines that curled around a skeleton of two-by-fours. He remembered how last year's scuppernongs developed greenrot: they doubled in size, ruining their must. They burst open on the vine, dripping to the ground. His fine hands brushed the small grapes like sparrows flying through on their way to a richer meal. Behind the scuppernongs, he came to an old strawberry field his dad hadn't used in years. The field leveled out for a good two acres until it hit a line of loblollies, a stretch of land as flat as his dad's white coffeetable Bible.

Pulling the bag behind him, he, the funeral cortege, crossed the field and went into the loblolly forest. The kitten in the bag kept knocking against his calf. When he looked down, his face was reflected in the shiny black crinkles. What he saw was ugly. Some god, goddess, or hermaphrodite deity had pumiced his face into a landscape. Creases and hills of sand where his nose jutted, mouth and eyes recessed, forehead slunk back into the ball of his skull. Before his black plastic vision faded, he wrote it down on an index card:

> *I believe I've seen ugly that morphs all the way back to the source, the Ur-ugly. I'm fascinated—I'm in love with seeing my skull imprinted on the black bag, like an x-ray that only I, not some doctor or Christian counselor, am privy to.*

Clearing some pine straw, he dug into the sandy ground, that vestigial blanket of the ancient Atlantic coastline, now 100 miles inland. Well-drilling companies and kids from Cass carving their way through to China still found seashells. After about a foot, he hit orange clay and stopped. He gingerly shook the kitten out of the bag. It landed on its back. In the cat's eyes he saw that it'd had a tough, unforgiving life. He thought he could see all the ugliness of one life. No prayer escaped him.

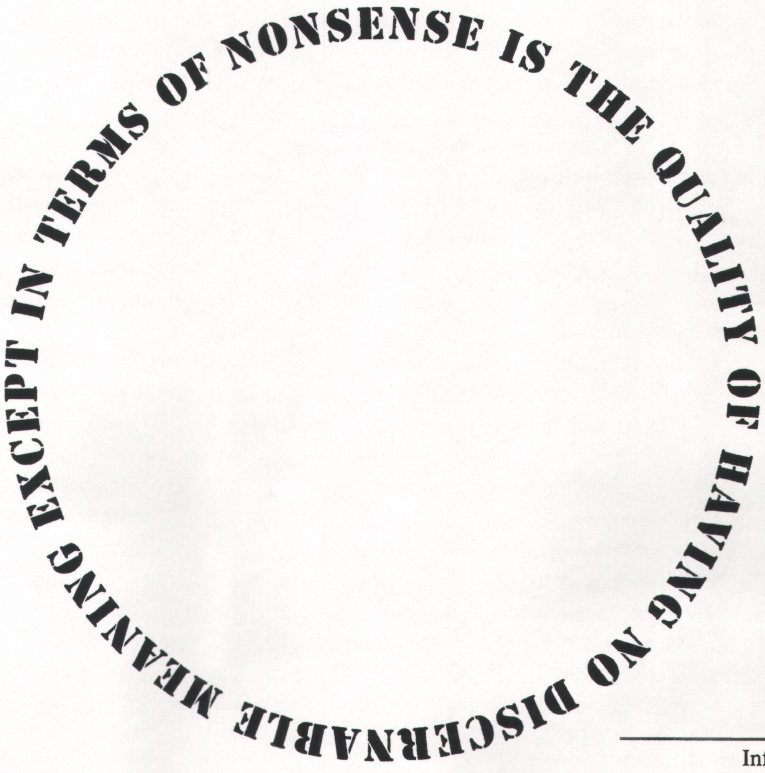
His imagination got caught in overdrive. Not the overdrive that blurred the roadside of Route 7, but the kind that let him see every blade of crabgrass and each granule of sand on the shoulder and even each grain of melted sand in the tossed beer bottles.

He believed he'd be so thoroughly wiped out by cancer that no one would remember him. Emaciated, he'd just tire himself right off the earth. After his death, they'd make up stories about him. He'd seen their talk circumnavigate Cass: it sailed across living room suites, echoed in church vestibules and shot over telephone lines, and cut through the steam from the coffee at the local McDonald's. Usually a week or two after somebody's funeral, the stories would start, and the dead adulterer would morph into the wonderful family man, and the faithful one would be known as the molester. What would they say about him? That he was one of the most industrious young men in Cass; he who

probably couldn't hang onto a job if he were duct-taped to it; he who had worlds of natural talent just wasted away from pride; he who had rested and yard-sat, like the old folks down at the Cass Village of Retirement and Rest; and he who'd never known his sainted mother.

He patted the sand down on the grave with the back of his shovel. Amazingly tired, he lay down on a stretch of loblolly straw and closed his eyes. Ra's red self shone through the blood vessels of his eyelids. He saw how his cancer made his skin roil, and how it might roil for a long time before it went. Everybody else—all the storytellers, the doctors, Ameliann, and his dad, thought, well, that his skin was a tidal pool isolated from the Atlantic by a spit of sand. They considered the pool as placid, stone-colored and stone-still. But he saw another pool, with ripples made by a baby eel that had washed in, the tiny waves brushing the sandy edges of the pool. His skin shook in relief, like the tide lulling him to a peaceful sleep.

He stood up, threw the shovel across his shoulder, and started back to the house.



Infinities
Richard Kostelanetz
(Design by M. Zuray)

Crescent Heart

Waiting silently in the bus station a few minutes before midnight, Carolyn and Art Bradley wondered how in the world they had gotten themselves into this baby business. Neither of them wanted to voice an opinion, neither wanted to lose the courage they had so carefully nurtured together, but privately each speculated: Carolyn had answered the advertisement, made the first call; but Art kept talking about how empty their house seemed. Yet even to themselves the answer was obvious: they wanted a baby, and they were willing to do whatever was necessary to get one, including meeting a complete stranger at a midnight bus station and housing her for three months. In fact, the Bradleys had paid an exceptional amount of money to the Lullaby Adoption Agency for just such an opportunity, and they were in way too deep, psychologically as well as financially, to back out now.

At least the bus appeared to be on schedule. Midnight was not the time to wait for a bus, or to arrive in one, for that matter. But the message Carolyn had received earlier that afternoon, sufficiently cryptic to start the secretaries talking in her office, was clear on the time of arrival: "K. Miller on Greyhound from Dayton at 12:12 A.M.." A few days earlier they had been notified that their pending obligation was being called in – a sort of last minute check by Lullaby to be sure the couple wasn't reneging – but real information, other than a first initial and a last name, had been purposely withheld. Confidentiality was a large part of any adoption program, yet somehow they had expected a little more than a name and bus route. After all, this was not the mother of *their* future baby; they were simply obliged to house another woman giving up her baby – a "birthmother" in adoption jargon – for the final three months of her pregnancy.

"Many of our girls want to relocate those last few months," the Lullaby spokesman had told them. "Some are trying to hide their pregnancies, some are forced out of their houses, all are under great stress. You are providing a service to these girls, a service we require, and in so doing you should remember our golden rule: treat your birthmother the way you hope a couple will treat your future child's birthmother."

I wonder how this K. Miller will think she's been treated when the bus pulls up to this place, Carolyn thought, glancing at two drunks fighting over a

paper bag and staring down a young hoodlum who had just inquired for the third time if he could hail her a cab. Probably like she's been conned by the Lullaby Adoption Agency. Maybe they all had. After all, the Bradleys had passed up offers from four or five very fast lawyers for the stolid reputability of an established operation like Lullaby, and now here they were waiting for an unknown pregnant girl in a foul-smelling Greyhound terminal after midnight.

"We're all going to come out of this feeling rotten," she said out loud, as if Art had been listening to her thoughts.

"Let's not be too pessimistic," he said. That was Art, not too pessimistic. Of the two, he was the more likely to play the hand he was dealt, without complaint. After five years of trying, infertility tests, counseling, tossing about possible names in case they ever got lucky, still it had surprised him when Carolyn had suggested adoption.

"I don't think you're going to find too many optimists at this hour," Carolyn said, waving her hand in a semi-circle across the station.

"Maybe a few cock-eyed ones," Art laughed, but to no avail.

"Besides," Carolyn continued, "how can Lullaby expect any birthmother to adjust under these circumstances?"

They continued on in this way a few minutes more, and soon a teenage girl was standing in front of them. Beside her was a beat-up leather suitcase that seemed to have come out of an old Truman Capote story, covered with travel stickers of locations she could not possibly have had time or money to visit. But soon she dispelled whatever air of worldliness the suitcase lent to her.

"Are you the Bradleys? This place is like cool," she said, as wide-eyed as a kid in her first video arcade. "And huge."

"You should see the train station," Art said.

• • • • •

"I'm sorry about that *K* business," the girl was saying as Art threw her bag in the trunk of their car. "Lullaby insists on initials; by the time they're done you think what you're doing is either top secret or filthy. Anyway, my name's Kayley."

"Forget about Mr.and Mrs. Bradley also. I'm Carolyn, this is Art. Kayley...Kayley..."

"Don't bother," the girl said, "it doesn't grow on you. Believe me, I've tried. Apparently I was supposed to be named for some actress, Hayley Mills. Hayley Miller, right? So of course the birth certificate comes back wrong, and my parents decide they like it the way it is. It always made sense to me that I'd be named for an actress nobody ever heard of."

"I heard of her," Carolyn said.

"You're the only one," Kayley muttered. Recounting the story seemed to

have altered her mood.

"Well, it's certainly unusual," Art said. "It's nice to have an unusual name, once you get older."

"I guess I've got a couple of years to go. Not that you're old, Art."

Carolyn snorted. "Not old, ancient."

"Remember the application, dear," said Art. "We're supposed to be a loving couple."

"Kayley, forget you heard that," Carolyn said, finally turning toward her guest after a few seconds had passed without a response. The girl was asleep in the back seat. They drove as quietly as the traffic would allow through the streets of center city, and gently nudged her awake only after the engine had been turned off and the suitcase removed from the trunk. The phone was ringing as they entered their house, and Carolyn ran ahead to get it.

"They hung up," she said when Kayley and Art reached the kitchen. "Welcome to the big city. I guess you don't have to deal with too many phony phone calls in Dayton, huh?"

"Shoot," Kayley said. "That's about all there is to do in Dayton."

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Later that night, Carolyn told her husband that Kayley "had gone down easy," a phrase she used to laugh at her sister for using: did she go down, did you put her down, is she down? Don't parents say put to bed or put to sleep anymore?

No, her sister had said. One sounds like punishment, the other euthanasia. The child is either up or down.

"Do you suppose that means I view Kayley as our daughter," Carolyn whispered.

"You would never name our daughter *Kayley*," Art said from the hollow of his own sleep.

"A name, a name for our daughter," Carolyn continued, and then dreamed about calling her little girl by the name that she had selected, not any name in particular but the name *she had chosen*, while her husband snored lightly at her side.

Kayley was up before either of them the next morning. The adoptive couple, as they had come to refer to themselves, found her sitting in the kitchen waiting for water to boil.

"You have a beautiful house," she gushed, nodding, it appeared, in the direction of the garbage disposal, as if any house with indoor plumbing might qualify. Who knew what she was used to in Dayton? Carolyn, unsure of the sincerity of the compliment, went to the cupboard for coffee.

"You don't have to have instant. We have a coffee maker we can dust off for you. Is decaf all right?"

"I'll stick with instant if you don't mind," Kayley said. "I need a jump start in the morning." She formed her right hand into a syringe and pretended to inject something into her left arm. "Caffeine fiend, don't you know?"

Carolyn caught herself before lecturing on the problematic relationship of caffeine and pregnancy, and instead mentioned, almost too quietly to hear, that you could barely tell the decaf without looking at the label. But Lullaby had warned about the great stress their birthmothers were under, advising their hosts to let minor transgressions pass without comment, which was fine except that someone was going to have to raise a caffeine-thin or alcohol-shaking or drug-addicted baby and it sure as hell wasn't going to be the Lullaby Adoption Agency.

"The key word is *minor*," Art had said in their only real discussion about the policy. "No one is saying we have to overlook crack vials in the bathroom."

"No, just beer bottles in the trash."

"Maybe this is a bridge we should cross when we come to it," Art said, holding them together, modulating, playing the proverbial one game at a time. And it turned out he was right.

Morning was the only time Kayley needed a jump start; she was able to pass the rest of her day in the less than innervating state of decaffeination. In fact she survived Carolyn's scrutiny as well as Carolyn herself would have, perhaps eating a few more chocolates than the doctor might recommend but otherwise behaving like the ideal expectant mother, exercising and sleeping and avoiding even the small glass of wine that Art offered at dinners. There was a glow about her, how much Carolyn hated that word but there it was, the glow of healthy pregnancy and even more, of looking forward to motherhood. As if she were going to keep her child, Carolyn thought. And if she did, there was nothing anybody could do about it. How unfair! Somewhere a couple waited for a baby, sacrificed for it, *invested* in it, for god's sake, and a little girl from a little town could just change her mind at the last minute and take their baby away. Carolyn didn't clutter her mind with semantic, and ultimately pointless, debate about whose baby it was to keep or give up – a knowing and voluntary decision had been made, and no one had put a gun to anyone's head. If the Rubicon had ever been crossed, it was by the woman who decided to give up her baby. These were the thoughts running through Carolyn's head when she went to answer the phone during Kayley's seventh breakfast in their house. Again there was no one at the other end – they had been suffering a rash of such calls lately – and Carolyn took the opportunity to curse the dead receiver like a schoolgirl showing off for the shop boys. Just as she was hanging up, though, the phone came to life.

"I want to talk to Kayley," the voice said.

• • • • •

Carolyn covered the speaking end with her hand, and whispered loudly for Kayley to come in from the living room. "Have you given our number to anyone?"

"No," Kayley murmered, instinctively reaching for the phone that she now understood was for her.

"No one is supposed to know you're here," Carolyn said, a bit louder now but with her hand still covering the receiver. Then, as if what she'd said had been only advisory in nature, she turned over the phone to her boarder.

"Hello," Kayley said. "Who is this?" She waited ten seconds, and when no one answered she hung up. "Shoot," she said. Carolyn watched her walk slowly back to the living room, and followed her when it became apparent she wasn't going to discuss what had just happened. Kayley, deep into the newspaper, did not look up as the older woman entered. The two of them sat in silence at opposite ends of the sofa for five minutes, Carolyn practically staring at her guest in amazement, and then the phone rang again. She held herself down for the first ring and the interminable pause that followed, but Kayley didn't move a muscle; finally Carolyn grudgingly went back into the kitchen.

"Who is this," she said. Curious, angry.

"Arthur," the voice replied. "Arthur Bradley. Your husband."

"I thought it was someone else," Carolyn exhaled, feeling the tension leave the pit of her stomach and work its way to the surface, dissipating finally like perspiration through her skin.

"Milkman or postman?"

"We get milk at the AM-PM, and our postman is a woman," she said, feeling immediately at ease, spreading out on the sofa, her feet almost touching Kayley; by the end of the conversation, she had pushed the earlier call back to a more tranquil place in her mind. Her view toward Kayley had broadened and softened as well, and she decided that an explanation, if there was one, might reveal itself more honestly without cross-examination. She watched the young girl aimlessly turn the pages of the newspaper, seemingly absorbed in the print itself rather than the words. After a few minutes she put the paper down.

"I guess you're wondering about that call."

"Well, I did think it was a bit odd," Carolyn admitted.

"This whole situation is a bit odd," Kayley said, smoothing the newspaper over her stomach. "I mean, it wouldn't really be normal if everything went normally, would it?" She bent the last few words, turning the sentence from a question into a plea, a plea that Carolyn understood was for forgiveness. And yet, even in the expansive mood she was now in, there was something that hadn't broken down yet between them, something that prevented her from making it easy on this pregnant girl who had perched so precariously on their lives.

"We've led pretty normal lives up till now," Carolyn said.

"I guess I should apologize for messing things up," Kayley said, her

voice quavering in such a way as to make it likely she would soon begin to cry.

• • • • •

The first sixteen and a half years of Kayley Miller's life had passed without real moment in Council Bluffs, Evansville, and finally Dayton, where her father quit sales and opened a diner not far from the interstate. It was there that she'd met Leslie Moore, a slicked back short-order cook who shared with her the common thread of being named for a forgotten actor. This was not very much on which to base a relationship, and in fact no relationship ever developed, but for a two week period of sexual frenzy that started when Kayley got drunk the afternoon school let out. Indian summer had come before she even realized she was pregnant, and a long minute passed after that before it dawned on her that Leslie was the father. She had been ducking his phone calls since the middle of July, and certainly this latest development did not change her mind. There was a certain ambivalence in her feelings about the pregnancy, but time after time her thoughts came back to this: I don't want Leslie's child. She had written PRO and CON on a divided sheet of paper, listing the usual concerns and emotions that a sixteen year old might be expected to have, but always the father's name, in capital letters under the CON column, weighed in heaviest.

The problem was, who wanted this child? She had waited too long for an abortion, and her parents had not caught their collective breath since she'd told them her predicament. They were too staggered to give any real advice, too aghast to think of the next step when they could not accept the last. Instead Kayley sought guidance from the huge billboard two exits down from the diner on the interstate:

Lullaby Adoption Agency
Can Help
Confidential
624-5353

Incredible that she had never read the sign before, or at least never focused on it, yet there it was bigger than life and telling her what to do. No one would know.

But word gets out. Always, always, in a small town like Dayton or a big one word gets out. Kayley's aunt mentions it to her best friend, Kayley misses some school and then some more, she starts to show, wears baggy clothes, word gets out. But not to Leslie, at least not directly. No one thinks to tell him, he's not the sort to have friends or discuss his affairs; but soon it's all over the diner, and even Leslie can add one plus one and come up with late June.

Now everything made sense: Kayley could ignore him till the weather turned and it didn't matter, the magic had been there and was still there, alive and growing and now part of her as it had always been part of him.

He started calling more often, leaving long, convoluted messages that

Kayley's mother wrote down word for word and then threw out without showing to her daughter. "Meet me down the old tar road near the river, you know where," he dictated to Mrs. Miller a few weeks before Kayley left town, "and underline 'you know where'."

"Maybe you should tell me where, just in case she doesn't know," Mrs. Miller said. She imagined driving over there with a shotgun and blowing his brains out.

"Oh, she knows," Leslie said. There wasn't a trace of impropriety in his voice, in fact there was nothing but vacant worship, and what was the point of even shooting the damned fool? Each time he called, it was with the absolute conviction that Kayley would love him again. When her father fired him from the diner he seemed unfazed.

"I know this is about your daughter," he said after Ernest, Kayley's father, threw a stained white apron in his face and told him to get the hell out of his restaurant. "It's not necessary that you accept what happened, I should have come to you like a man in the first place instead of slipping around and losing respect for the both of us. But it *is* necessary that you accept what's going to happen, because I think it's real important to have a happy home, and a child's got to see his grandparents."

"Les, I know you've heard by now that Kayley is not going to keep the baby," Ernest said. He was feeling a certain sympathy for this boy – his chest stuck out, his hair greased back with what he would have sworn smelled like Brylcream – but he couldn't bring himself to say "*your* baby."

"I think you need to get past this, maybe you can even come back here to work in a few months after you get your head back on straight."

"She's going to keep it," Leslie said, wrapping the apron around his fist and then banging it against his thigh.

"Leslie, I should tell you that I've spoken to Kayley at length about this," he lied. He was surprised at the tone he was now taking with this young employee, a short-order man he had fired only seconds before after two years of sweating hard work in the kitchen. But there was something lost about him; for a passing moment Ernest was actually sorry things hadn't worked out for them.

He went on. "She's informed me, in no uncertain terms, that a relationship between the two of you is impossible. Impossible," he repeated, because he wanted the word to hang there, alone, and portend the future for this boy who apparently could not envision one without his daughter.

"I don't doubt your word, Mr. Miller, and I know you're her father. But you don't know her like I do. You *can't* know her like I do." From anyone else, Ernest thought, this would be sexual innuendo; from Leslie, it was no more, or less, than the embodying delusion of true love.

"Well, I'm sure we'll be seeing you again, and you'll be back to work here sooner than you think," Ernest said. He grabbed Leslie by the shoulders,

pulled him an inch or two closer, and spoke conspiratorially: "Let her go, son, and let yourself go. You won't do anybody any good by holding on to nothing. If you do, you'll come away with less than you started with." Then, still holding on, Ernest shook him slightly and pushed him toward the door. "You go now."

Leslie did not resist. At the threshold, though, he turned back to see his former boss. "I'm glad we were able to have this little talk and clear the air," he said, and tossed his apron, all knotted up, behind the counter. It was only then that Ernest understood the extent of the future problems his daughter would have with this young man.

That evening Kayley thought she saw Leslie hiding behind a broken down pick-up in the field across the road from their house. It was that dusky lightless hour after the sun had dropped, and shadows defined the field and everything on it, including the blurred movements Kayley saw when she opened the basement door to put out the trash. Someone was out there – she was certain it wasn't an animal by the awkward ducking down of the silhouette she saw – and the only person she could think that had any business on that burned out acre was Leslie Moore spying on her. At the time, the significance of this conclusion escaped her.

"Whoever's out there," she said, trying not to embarrass him, "you should go on your way. There's nothing for you here."

Backing away across the field, low to the ground and hiding behind the abandoned truck as long as possible, the shadowy figure fled into a dark orange horizon that seconds later became black. Watching him run away, arms unbent and tight to his sides like a penguin, she started laughing uncontrollably; soon she was dabbing tears from her eyes, and only seconds after that she was crying. Maybe this was one of those mood swings the school counselor had told her about. Just stop it, she said to herself, and like that she stopped crying.

Leslie began appearing more often. He got on a bus she was on and stayed near the driver for two stops, finally exiting without looking back in her direction. He watched a quarter of a high school basketball game from the gym door, but never went into the stands where she was sitting. All the while, though, phone messages continued to come to Kayley's mother, along with a letter that made it past her to Kayley. In block print with a dull-tipped felt pen, he wrote: IN LATE JUNE THE MOON WAS QUARTERED. DO YOU REMEMBER? WE LOOKED UP FROM THE WET GRASS IN THE EARLY MORNING AND YOU SAID THAT SOMETIMES YOU FELT LIKE HANGING YOUR HEART ON THE CRESCENT. YOU SHOULD NOT DO THIS.

LESLIE MOORE

Kayley yipped with delight at the formal ending of the letter, but she was not moved by the rest of it. Tearing a page from a Snoopy message pad stuck to the wall under the kitchen phone, she wrote, "Our time was a mistake," and stuffed it into the envelope with his last paycheck. That night someone smashed

eggs in their driveway and left a heart-shaped box of salt water taffy on the doorstep. The next day Kayley decided to take Lullaby up on their offer to place her for the final months of her pregnancy. She didn't have any idea what else to do.

Two days later she was on her way to Philadelphia and the Bradley family. Lullaby had provided a cab to the station, where a ticket was waiting for her, but it was not until she was actually climbing the stairs of the bus that she understood how little she controlled her own destiny. Maybe she needed to get away, but she certainly didn't need to go to a strange town to have a baby she wasn't even keeping. And more even than a new town or a new family, her whole life seemed to be falling away from her. For just a second walking up the steps she felt that she could still grab it back, that her life was just at the tips of her fingers and if she could just reach an inch further she could pull it back to where it had been only a day before. Then she took another step and knew that everything was lost.

But with the loss of control came a feeling of power, and more, of danger, of being outside the society. At the threshold she stopped and peered down the aisle: the other travelers were already seated, whispering to neighbors, holding tickets in outstretched hands, going somewhere. For some reason this revulsed her; she was convinced that everyone was playing the role of satisfied customer to fool her. When the bus driver helped her to a seat and heaved her suitcase up to the luggage rack, joking for the fiftieth time that night about the bricks his passengers always carried, Kayley stared at him and said that the bricks were cocaine, not asphalt, and that the weight he was complaining of was from automatic weapons. He waited in the aisle for a laugh, but she sat down and told him to drive as fast as he could. Standing there, not knowing what to do, he watched her pull a paperback from her purse and start reading.

"We'll just see about this," he said finally, pulling the suitcase down and searching it. When he was satisfied that there was no contraband, he pushed the clothes back into the case and told her she could get it back up there herself, gesturing with his head to the rack above him. Kayley glanced at the men seated around her, and when each averted his eyes, she removed her clothes from the suitcase and piled them up neatly on the seat next to her; then she put the empty valise above her. She felt capable of anything.

Through Columbus, Wheeling, Somerset. Through Breezewood, Town Of Motels. Kayley loved that one, a town of motels in the middle of nowhere. She waited for something to happen, she was sure something was going to happen. But the trip itself proved uneventful, and as they passed the King of Prussia mall – at one time the largest mall in the world, the driver intoned – she repacked her bag, fixed her makeup in the dark, clicked her compact shut, and the bus was in the terminal.

She spotted the Bradleys; she slept; and when she woke up, in a new bed, the edge was gone, the potential for danger faded away in the gloom of

early morning. That muddy period when you open your eyes in a strange room, unsure where you are, passed quickly and calmly. She had gone to Philadelphia, she had decided to give up her baby. And she had put Leslie Moore behind her.

• • • • •

Carolyn waited. She had a house to show at eleven, but it was in the neighborhood, and she could hear from the television in the kitchen that *Today* was still on. There was time. Kayley, feeling watched, stood up and pulled at her belly, as if she had just eaten a big meal. Finally she whispered that she knew who had made the call.

"Excuse me?" Don't let her off the hook, Carolyn thought. Not yet.

"I know who was on the phone," Kayley said, louder than necessary. The volume helped to steady her voice.

Carolyn only nodded, afraid to talk or even make a sound for fear of disrupting the explanation.

"His name is Moore," Kayley continued, "and he's the father of my baby."

"How would he know you were here, how would he know the number to call?" Carolyn said, more frantically than she might have wanted.

"I don't know, I just don't know. He wasn't on the bus, I checked. I even looked in both bathrooms."

"You checked? Why in the world would you have to check?"

Kayley told her about Dayton, and why it seemed like a good idea for her to leave. She told Carolyn everything, and Carolyn, who might have expected such a story that first night in the bus terminal, stared spellbound as her house guest detailed the bizarre messages and letters that led to her departure, ending the tale with an elaborate description of the salt water taffy left on her porch.

"But how could he know you're here? Isn't the whole procedure confidential?"

"I don't know," Kayley admitted, the weight of her problems just now becoming clear to her. "They don't tell anybody, they say, and I know I didn't tell anybody except my parents." Carolyn looked up, but Kayley barely acknowledged her. "They would *never* tell him. No, I think it's more likely that he robbed the Lullaby Agency and looked at my file." For a second her eyes grew distant as she considered the real possibility of such a crime.

"And that's not the worst of it. Leslie drives a light blue Dart, there's only about fourteen of them still on the road, he always used to say 'Let's go darting around town,' like that was some hilarious joke or something. Anyway, I thought I saw the car rounding the corner when I went out to get the paper this morning."

Now it was Carolyn's turn to stand. She arched her back, as if *she* were carrying extra weight around the middle, and went to the living room window. Kayley thought she might be looking for a light blue Dart, but then she heard

Carolyn's voice, directed not at her but the window.

"I need to talk to Arthur," she said.

• • • • •

Later that day, while Kayley was off shopping for maternity clothes, Leslie called for her. Carolyn, back from showing a magnificent house to a couple who could never afford it, almost hung up without saying a word. Instead she said, "Stop calling, you little punk, or I'll have you arrested. Why don't you just leave town without trouble and go back to Dayton?" But his response, hollow, oblivious, almost automated, made her smile at the old West approach she had taken toward resolving the problem.

"Could you ask her to meet me at the Art Museum? There's a Hopper exhibit on the second floor. Thank you." Then a click: no time, just meet me.

When Carolyn looked down, she was shocked to realize that she had copied the message word for word, and considered for a moment saving it to show to law enforcement officials. But just like that, she crumpled the paper and threw it out. She never mentioned it to Kayley.

• • • • •

"So what did you end up doing?" Art asked. Kayley was asleep in the room next door, and they were whispering. Carolyn had tried to reach him all day – it turned out he had been called to court unexpectedly, the last place anyone would look for a real estate lawyer – and felt the frustration of someone who gets a busy signal for two hours. She had been nagging him to get a beeper for a year now, but he'd said he didn't want to be lumped in with doctors and coke dealers. And to make matters worse, he had come home late tonight after a business dinner with a developer, having drunk just enough to shorten his attention span.

"Do? We didn't *do* anything. What did you expect us to do?"

"I suppose you might have considered calling the police and telling them that you saw a strange man around the house," Art said, softly enough to remove any contention from his voice.

"Doing what," Carolyn said, still whispering, but without the effort of her husband. "Driving a Dart around the neighborhood? It's not a crime to do that."

"Maybe it should be," Art said, but there was no use trying to bring humor into this. They agreed that they couldn't make a decision without Kayley, who had gone to her bedroom at nine-thirty as a precaution against having to repeat her story to Art, or so it seemed to Carolyn. They could hear her airy girlish snore through the door.

"Well, we have to do *something*," Carolyn said.

"I think we'll have to talk to Kayley tomorrow about how to handle this guy, or how she wants to handle him, I should say." Art rolled over on his side and kissed his wife on the cheek: goodnight. The two vodkas at dinner had kicked in; and after all, nothing could really be accomplished until the morning. By the time Carolyn asked him when he would like the alarm clock set for, he was already asleep.

But by morning it was too late. The three of them woke at the same time before the alarm went off, as if they had been shaken by an intruder who disappeared as their eyes focused on the day, and together they convened at the kitchen table. There they found letters scrawled across the living room window in shaving cream: SEE ME KALEY

"Oh, my god," Kayley said. "He can't even spell my name."

"I guess he didn't look at your file as closely as we thought," Carolyn said. There was joy in a deep recess of her voice; she was happy this had happened in front of her husband. For weeks they had laughingly called each other birthgrandparents, but now he was involved, stumbling unshaved and uncombed on the scene of the crime. Now Leslie Moore was his problem, too.

"I need to see about this," Art said, pulling a pair of pants on top of his pajamas, slipping into some loafers and out the door before Carolyn could tell him how ridiculous he looked. She followed him outside a few minutes later, wiped off the shaving cream with a hose, then, chilled, stood hugging herself in the living room while she waited for Art to return. Kayley came up behind her and started to rub her arms.

"I'm so sorry," Kayley said. She appeared to be choking back a hiccup, and Carolyn's heart suddenly went out to her. And to herself. For the first time, amazingly enough, the older woman understood her own desire to have a child – the pain of shrugging off years of childlessness with a "we're just not in that much of a rush," the constant monitoring of monthly cycles and monthly hopes, the anxiety of that dwindling hourglass of fertility – as a roseate collage of little diapers and one-piece pajamas. She had the passing sense of standing in an open field.

"It's not your fault," Carolyn said, reaching her arms behind her to hold Kayley. Which was when Art walked in, shook himself, and stared at the two women who were in a virtual embrace in front of him. He kicked off his loafers and sat down on the sofa.

"The boy's down at the corner," he said. "Just standing there, eating a doughnut, kicking his feet into the cement. He's as harmless as a five-year-old, and as emotionally well-developed, I would think," Art said, forgetting that Kayley had been with this boy, had made love to him, was carrying his child. "He wants to talk, he wants to hear what everyone has been telling him from the horse's mouth, it seems he's never actually spoken to Kayley about this. I think he's entitled to that."

"I'll go see him," Carolyn said, matter of factly, as if she had not heard a

word.

"I told him Kayley would come out to talk, that she would explain her own feelings and her decision based on those feelings."

"Don't be such a lawyer, Arthur. What are you, some kind of father's rights activist? I'm not letting her go out there to talk to a guy who makes spooky phone calls, smashes eggs, trespasses, smears shaving cream on our house, and leaves a goddamn box of salt water taffy as his calling card. What could you be thinking about?"

"I'm just saying she should talk to him," Art said, in the same reasonable tone he had never varied from in their twelve years of marriage. The same inanely reasonable tone, it now struck Carolyn.

"First let's give him a meat cleaver in case he wants to act out again," Carolyn said, reaching behind her for the younger girl, expecting support. But during the argument Kayley had slipped out of her grasp, and now she was in front of them fully dressed.

"I won't be long," she said confidently, pulling an Ohio University sweatshirt over her head. "Everything will be fine." Then she was out the door. Art gently held Carolyn by the elbows until he was certain she wasn't going to follow – more a symbolic than a genuine restraint – then let her pull herself free. She went right to the window, but Kayley was already out of sight. "Everything will be fine," she said. It had been a very warm autumn, rainy and humid like a late spring, and leaves were just now beginning to fall from the trees, swirling in little pools of wind and floating back among the branches. The leaves are the color of pink grapefruit, Carolyn thought; I should think more often about the color of leaves.

After a time she said, "Kayley...Kayley," rolling it around in her mouth as if to reevaluate her opinion of the name. She stayed in front of the window a while longer, but slowly, like a bottle in the ocean, drifted back to the center of the living room, where Art was standing. His arms extended, he received her tenderly, knowing somehow that she now carried a message he had been waiting a long time to hear. A message of finite possibilities and fathomable hopes. Of fulfillment.

Contributors

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Carol Guess teaches creative writing at Nebraska Wesleyan University and received a MFA in poetry from Indian University in 1994. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines, and her first novel, *Seeing Dell*, was published in 1996. A second novel, *Switch*, is forthcoming, and her short fiction will soon appear in *Love Shook My Heart: New Lesbian Love Stories*.

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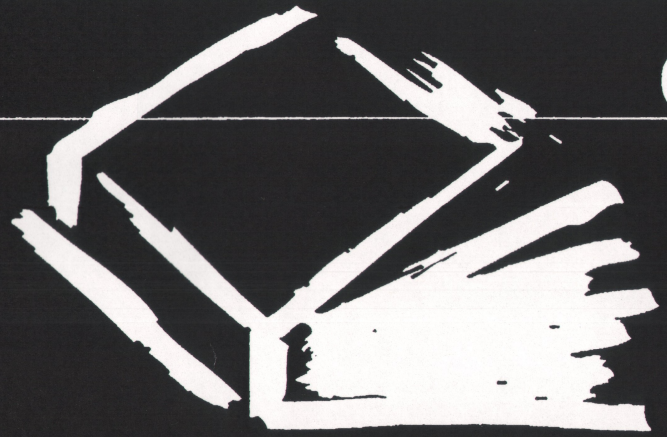
Susan Wallack's poetry has appeared in *Calyx* and *Mississippi Valley Review* and is forthcoming in *Three-penny Review*. "Painting Auvers" was a finalist for the Salt Hill Poetry Prize.



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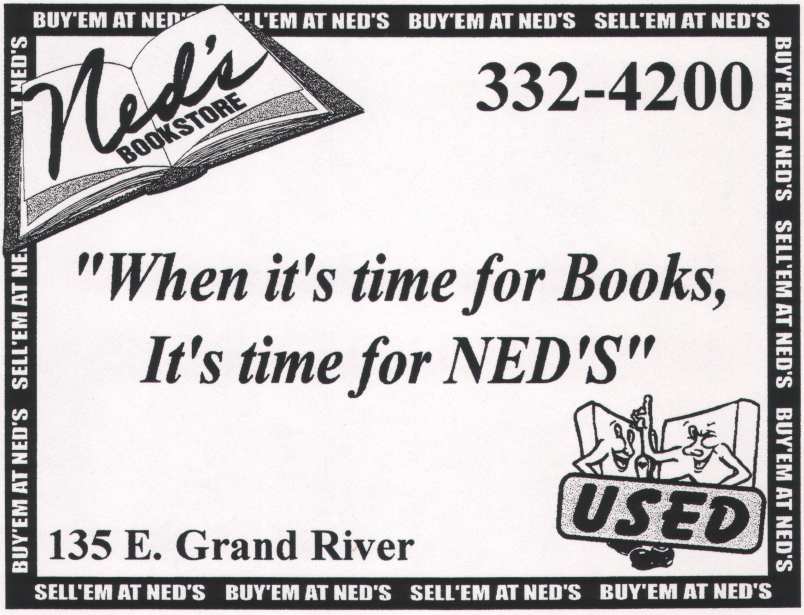
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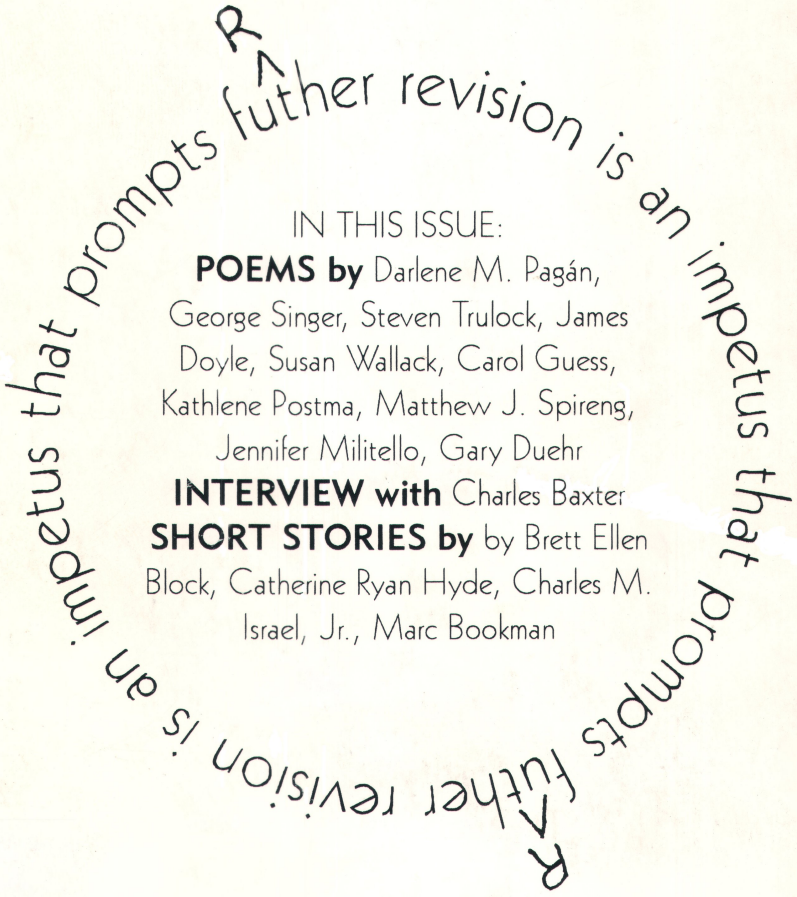
Revision is an impetus that prompts further revision is an impetus that prompts further revision is an impetus that prompts further