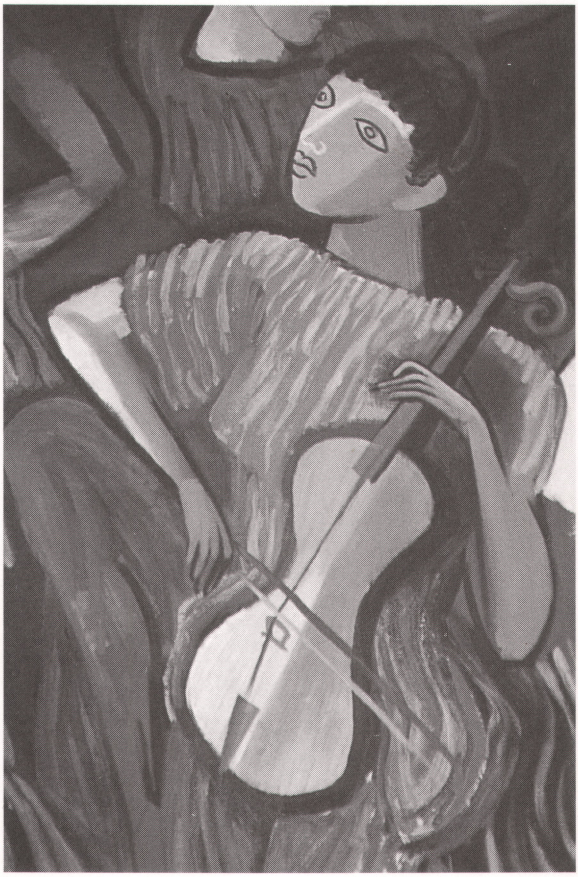
Winter·Spring 2000

REDCEDAR REVIEW



RED CEDAR REVIEW

Winter·Spring 2000
Volume XXXV Issue 2

This book is dedicated to the memory of Jim Cash.

REDCEDAR
REVIEW

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 guidelines 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 6.5 and printed by McNaughton and Gunn, Inc., 960 Woodland Drive, Saline, Michigan. Body text is in Times New Roman 10 point, titles are in Kaufmann 36 point, and authors are in Geometric 8 Point.

Cover art: *Pleiades* (1949) by John DeMartelly; this oil on canvas painting hangs in the lobby of the MSU Union Building. Photo by Heather Moreland.

RED CEDAR REVIEW

Poems

What Slaves

Don't bother to look for anything less simple
Than simple myrtle, suitable to the scene:
The garlanded cupbearer waiting, and garlanded I,
Here in the shade of the arbor, drinking my wine.
Horace, i38

Come into the arbor, the bower,
and we will consider, first with our hands,
the arched backs of leaves,
trace the veins barely raised,
rub between our finger and thumb that skin
until it yields, a little damp, beneath our touch,
filling the dry riverbeds of our prints with green,
creating moist swirls that might stamp our skin.

Bring the wine in its season, watch
its legs climb the wall of the goblet
and linger against the sides, one
breath, one drop, caught tremulous as dandelions
on the curved lip of the glass. How it trembles!
How it waits to be caught and broken
by the same breath, against the same tongue
and the taste, let it be rich and full,
let it last in the dark fold of our mouths
where every taste might be another.

Come garlanded – in what? The sun,
a hot breath around our shoulders, dappled
and erratic through the trees. Come with the garland
of my arms, full-white around your neck,
with the stain of wine against your lips,
and mine, the myrtle blossom beneath us,
pink and white, ground into green, a mosaic
of the moment, a subtle pattern against your back.

Don't bother to look for anything less simple
than the arched backs of leaves and the sweep of my spine.

Guardians

One night he lay cold as a stone slab beside her
as she broke the covers off.
She began to walk towards the door when
her toe nudged what was a pile
of laundry in the daytime, coiled on the floor.
The warning hissed until she crawled back
and curled onto her side.

He holds her like a ball of string that he is slowly unraveling.
When she opened his bedroom door to leave
she found a maze of hallways, dry earth lit by flickering torchlight.
She remembered the last time she had tried to leave—
The corridors seemed to fold on top of each other
and she heard the footsteps behind her again
until his voice came, calling her name
as patiently as a pendulum.
Turning around, she saw she had returned to his door.

She knows that each slice will shorten the arc.
She used to think that pendulums tired
and finally gave up. Now she wonders
if maybe the air
grows nauseous from continuous parting
and finally decides to hold still.
She will wait for shedding skin to blind him,
and keep pulling at both ends of herself
until the wave's curves flatten.

An Angry Young Man

I found a drone struggling
outside the hive like a drunk husband
and dropped him in a paper cup.
The sound of him was the sound
of a retreating motorcycle,
and of the neighbors cursing
down the street.
Strange boy in the gold
and black stripes of an electric guitar,
loud punk, listening to no one.
I drizzled a circle of honey
around his body
in case he had a hunger,
but he didn't eat.
Just sat there bellowing
in the amber light.
All the angry young men
I've ever fallen for,
sitting in miniature
at the center of my palm.

June

I.

We launch our small red canoe
into the tree-green river,
wake to the chi-chi-chi-chi of kingfishers
leaping from branches
to skim low and low and lower
over the length of the loin-rippled water.
All day we're held in the rhythm of paddle,
breath and sweet, sun and shadow,
until a sudden orange flash of oriole,
or better still, the primordial flap
of slate-blue wings as a heron lifts
into the span of trees: down and up,
down and up, until it blurs
and disappears.

II.

Dusk folds over the trees
before you lift the book from my hands,
feather fingers down my thigh,
curl and slide into night-lit waters.
Now we ride the pulse of tides,
a thin layer of air closer than skin touching,
your cheek and my cheek,
close, but not touching,
and then a quickening, a fluttering,
the rising upwards, sweep of wings
and final sounding, moments looking
down, the turn and drifting
past the bend, places we are leaving,
things we'll never leave behind.

The Etymology of Science

Think of the zoologist
who translates yellow umlauts
on the spotted shells of turtles,
who combs the lip of a bayou

mimicking the dialect of geese,
who huddles knee-deep
in the soft mud to see a moccasin
curl like a tilde towards its meal.

Think of the botanist
who presses his ear deep
in the sweaty crotch of a cypress,
who scours its knotted trunk

scraping through the grammar
of earthworm and beetle,
searching for meaning
in its think tangled root.

Think of the medical student
whose red-inked scalpel
slices through the intestine
of a word.

Inventing an End

For Leanne Thibodeaux, whose body was never found.

Maybe he's straddling you in the soft mud,
his eyes the brown shells of beetles,
your voice a yellow-jacket buzzing
in the sweaty throat of his palm.

Maybe the sunlight bleeds onto the ground
as the sharp black wings of crows ripple
in the rusted steel of his switchblade,
or, maybe he has a gun.

The end is always the same: your pale body
spun deep in the muddy mouth of a river
where rusty lures flicker like flashbulbs
and the spotted scales of bass blink

through green lashes of eel grass.
In my mind I see you reaching through a cloud
of cattails, hair tangled with leaves, lips curled
around your final watery word.

Counting Fingers

My old lover, this is your song of sorrow.
It has played itself out and you're gilded
with an antique's lacquer, novel
in your useless oddity. You are an old fashioned
abacus, carefully counting out blue-beaded lovers.

A dynasty of women stretches its lines about you.
Strung together, they are the notes of your tune.
The women spiral down your spine.
They are the spirits that made you
and they have gone and you have no climate.

You live on stories –
their breadth and width and sacrifice.
For each woman purchased, a finger was lost.
After fingers went toes until you were handless,
footless, unable to touch and turn.

So you stay where you are
where thumbs are the first to go.
One held you so tight, bound
up in ropes of her hair, that
she convinced your grip away from you.

Then went the next.
She demanded the forefinger
pointing to other beauties with legs,
long legs and beautiful breasts. She demanded
the pointing stop, and you agreed.

Then went the angry one.
The fuck finger another
said was never enough.
Let me count myself
in each of them.

The ring finger was hardest.
You never wanted a conjugal bed.
Offering it up was the closest you could come.
I have it in my back pocket.
And it still bleeds.

Inscription on Delos

I am glad someone understands these languages.
You had found them old
inarticulate voices heard by the sea

by crevices in rock, concavities in sand.
But this summer you changed, skin a fine clay
fired to cinnamon against the blue.

Closing our eyes during light,
we awaken hours later to read
constellations night swept in circles.

I notice your face is made of lines
that break mid-sentence; living on islands,
must have reminded you

not only how things are defined by contrast,
but also that a measure of the practical
gets you across the rocks

to the low-tide mark, teaches you to forget
everything as you search through dust
and heat, scanning the scarp

for figures in chariot races
even at the height of the sun. So,
having been in the sea (breath spreading

like waves), hair wrinkled with salt,
specks of silica and volcanic ash
decorating the skin's molten surface--

by that time you knew
I was trying to do something
in another language: trying to forge

a primeval knife,
its hilt a mirror
the blade equally dangerous.

Because you understand this,
I am ready to forgive you your old habits
of excavating my skeleton, my intact jewelry,
poring over the small things left in my grave.

Sergei Yesenin
1895 – 1925

to D.G.

This matted and glossy photo of Yesenin
bought at a Leningrad newstand—permanently
tilted on my desk: he doesn't stare at me
he stares at nothing; the difference between
a plane crash and a noose adds up to nothing.
And what can I do with heroes with my brain fixed
on so few of them? Again nothing. Regard his flat
magazine eyes with my half-cocked own, both
of us seeing nothing. In the vodka was nothing
and Isadora was nothing, the pistol waved
in New York was nothing, and that plank bridge
near your village home in Ryazan covered seven feet
of nothing, the clumsy noose that swung the tilted
body was nothing but a noose, a law of gravity
this seeking for the ground, a few feet of nothing
between shoes and the floor a light year away.
So this is a song of Yesenin's noose which came
to nothing, but did a good job as we say back home
where there's nothing but snow. But I stood under
your balcony in St. Petersburg, yes St. Petersburg!
a crazed tourist with so much nothing in my heart
it wanted to implode. And I walked down to the Neva
embankment with a fine sleet falling and there was
finally something, a great river vastly flowing, flat
as your eyes; something to marry to my nothing heart
other than the poems you hurled into nothing those
years before the articulate noose

originally published in Volume VIII, Issue 2 of *Red Cedar Review*
December, 1973

Interview

Interview with Jim Harrison

Interviewed by Carrie Preston and Anthony Michel

"As a child, fresh out of the hospital
with tape covering the left side
of my face, I began to count birds.
At age fifty the sum total is precise
and astonishing, my only secret.
Some men count women or the cars
they've owned, their shirts—
long sleeved and short sleeved—
or shoes, but I have my birds…"

from "Counting Birds" in *The Theory & Practice of Rivers and New Poems*

For a graduate student in American Studies just finishing his thesis and an English senior preparing to enter graduate school, traveling to Jim Harrison's home outside of Traverse City in Northern Michigan, was an unusual opportunity to go to an interesting area to speak with one of the more intriguing personalities in contemporary literature. Preparing to meet the novelist (*Sundog*, *Dalva*), screenwriter (*Legends of the Fall*), and poet (*Outlyer*), we were particularly intrigued by the implication in many articles that there is an ambivalent and, at times, tense relationship between Harrison and academics, journalists, or literary critics.

The day we spent with the Michigan State University graduate and recipient of last year's MSU Distinguished Alumnus Award, was starkly different from what we were led to expect by the increasing body of work devoted to explicating something like a "mythos" surrounding Jim Harrison's work and person. Meeting us at the door with a quip, "this one must be the girl," Harrison exuded a contagious sense of peace with his immediate surroundings. We found ourselves immediately drawn into conversation, and it wasn't until ten minutes after a tour of his home, when we had settled into an old granary, converted into Harrison's writing studio, that we realized the interview had already begun. With the exception of a quick changing of the tape, and an occasional formal question drawn from our seldom-used script, this interview is better characterized as a terribly interesting conversation with a man who speaks openly about writing as both a calling and the most prefer-

photo by Carrie Preston

able of the various types of labor he has done in his life.

The conversation that follows is permeated with a concern, found in Harrison's works, for rituals that mark the passage of time and the significant events in our lives: graduations, deaths, traveling, and returning home. The rituals appear with raw, coarse power in such acclaimed writing as Harrison's poem "Counting Birds," which uses images of nature and an Anasazi legend to represent birds as the messengers between temporal lives and transcendent spiritual existence. Asserting himself as an "outlyer," Harrison prefers the rivers and forests surrounding his secluded home to the more recognized reservoirs of culture including the academy, Hollywood, the East Coast publishing industry, and Paris. His works and life, however, belie a concern for how individuals move between the natural world and various communities. Following the day we spent with Harrison, including a tour of his farm, lunch at a local greasy spoon, and always, intriguing conversation, we understand this interview as less a commentary on Harrison's literary works than as a meditation on how each of us attempts to mediate the tensions between where we have been and where we may go.

Carrie Preston: How do you remember your experiences at Michigan State?

Jim Harrison: I had personality differences with some people. You know how you develop those with teachers (laughs). You simply don't like each other, and the people I didn't like in the English Department didn't like me either. But Herbert Weisinger[1] was in the position to facilitate things. He was the director of comparative literature. I don't even know if they have that anymore. It was very active then, and to me it was more interesting. I like to study world literature and, at the time, I was interested in French and Spanish literature. Weisinger, who died last year, was maybe the largest brain they ever had at MSU. He was at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies for a couple of years and the Warburg Institute in London, and he was one of these great European émigré scholars that didn't even have to read the book. He had a vast, vast library in Okemos you know, and a vast, vast wine collection. He was a different kind of teacher. As the head of the department he got to do whatever he wanted, and he got me the degree so that I could go up to Stony Brook with him. After three years of manual labor in northern Michigan, mixing mud and carrying sod in February, going to New York seemed more and more attractive.

Anthony Michel: So you went to Stony Brook to teach?

JH: Or as his assistant; I taught a course in modern poetics. I only lasted a year and a half. I sacrificed a whole truckload of student papers in a fire. So when they asked where their papers were, I said they're being kept for research. Already I was doomed, I mean, I flunked out of graduate school, and they finally facilitated my degree after I had my first book out with Norton. They never had a student that had a book out so they thought it would be nice.

AM: What would you have done if you didn't become a writer?

JH: I have never thought about it, but I can't come up with anything.

AM: Not teaching?

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[1] Herbert Weisinger was a professor in the Department of English at Michigan State University from 1942 until 1966. In a personal remembrance written after Weisinger's death, Harrison describes the profound impact the teacher had on his life: "Herbert Weisinger was certainly the mentor of my life and for a while very early a stepfather." Harrison describes his forty-two year relationship as seminal in the development of his interest in good wine, Freud and Jung, mythology, iconography, anthropology, nature, and Mexican art.

JH: No, the trouble with teaching, for me as a writer, is that colleges are always in the wrong place. I didn't mind teaching; I mean we're all proselytizers. For instance, I've got a children's book coming out this year called *The Boy Who Ran Through the Woods*. It's one of these recovery children's books that draws on my interest in the natural world as opposed to cities, where colleges are usually located. After I was seven years old when I lost my eye, I was more interested in rivers and forests and so on. While I like to go to Paris and New York occasionally, I can't live in a semi-urban atmosphere. Here we have one hundred and twenty acres, and I will never have to have any close neighbors. I'm claustrophobic, and when I got the MSU Distinguished Alumni Award this spring, I had to stay in a motel over in the southwest corner of the campus. Four times a day this driver would come pick me up to go do something I didn't want to do which was invariably non-smoking (laughs). Anyway, we had to drive right past where I'd lived in married housing, thirty-five years ago. It was enough to puke a maggot. That sense of claustrophobia—I mean there's only one way to drive from married housing to Morrill Hall. After you've done it five hundred times there is an accumulation of emotions you have, which is called torpor or ennui. I have my cabin in the Upper Peninsula, and it's quite remote. And then our casita out on the border in the mountains where we don't have real neighbors for a couple of miles. Somebody said about Picasso once that he carried his environment wherever he went. As a writer, you have to create in your writing, and in where you live, your own sort of soul's habitat or else you can't function. I think the tough part for my writer friends who still teach, and the reason that I think they should get a lot more money than they do, is that they are never done.

AM: Do these friends of yours that are teachers work in universities?

JH: Yeah, but they have to be professors because the odds of making a living as a novelist are a hundred thousand to one, if that. I can't think of a more unpromising profession anyone could enter. That's what I think is sort of sad about all of the MFA programs. It's the same problem as the well-educated students in Africa. This is a bit of a jump, but it works. You have all these very educated Zambians and Nigerians and there's no place in the economy for them. There's no place in the U.S. economy where there's room for so many MFAs. It's what they call a revolution of rising expectations.

CP: Do you think higher education of that kind is worthwhile at all?

JH: No. Not for writing. I think a gorgeous model for universities is Italy in the 14th century where a scholar would take eight students and teach them everything he knew for a year. The contemporary university is a formalization of that process. You had certain teachers that you were sort of spellbound

by. That's what makes it worthwhile.

CP: What do you think about literary theory? Do you think it adds anything of value to English education?

JH: Oh, sure. Oddly enough, I'm relatively intellectual for a novelist. I want to entertain all of the possibilities, and I think that the history of literature is important. I was fascinated by Northrop Frye, and Kenneth Burke, but I bypassed deconstruction because I thought it was an elaborate plot to make the instructors more important than what they were reading (laughs). But those things seem to fade. I mean they have their efflorescence for a while and then they dissipate.

AM: Do people send you their scholarly work?

JH: No, I don't cooperate in any way. But there is this guy, Bob DeMott, who is a big deal Steinbeck scholar and they're more interesting than ten thousand Eliot scholars. The big problem in America is that it is very difficult for critics to take a writer seriously who actually goes outside rather than stays inside. I tease Tom McGuane[2], with whom I still correspond every week or two, that his problem is living in Montana. Larry McMurtry used to wear this wonderful shirt that said "minor regional novelist." It seems that every one that's not in New York City is a "regional novelist."

AM: Do you think that's changing at all?

JH: No, but I don't think it matters. One thing you learn is what to exclude in your life, and for me, a concern with that kind of thing would be something to exclude. Literary criticism is not my business or my calling. My business is to write the novels and the poetry. If you let what they say about you concern you, it could piss you off.

AM: So you exclude a concern over how you are being categorized.

JH: Oh sure. There's this Spanish critic, I forgot where I read this, but he said that I was doomed not to get certain prizes because I made fun of white men all the time (laughs). I don't know if I'm pro-feminist or not but they're on the money. The suits control the world, and in my mind that's comic.

CP: You've introduced feminism, and we found in *New York Times Magazine*

[2] Tom McGuane, a founder of *Red Cedar Review*, is author of several acclaimed books and essays including *The Sporting Club* (1968), *The Bushwacked Piano* (1971), *Nobody's Angel* (1981), *Something to be Desired* (1984), and *Nothing but Blue Skies* (1992).

where you talked about…

JH: Writing as a woman?

CP: Yes, using female narrators.

JH: Writers have always done that, and critics treat it like it's something new. Writers have been doing that for centuries, and Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* is just one example. If I can't write from a woman's perspective, then I'm cutting off half my world. I can't say whether I'm pro-feminist or antifeminist. I let that kind of thing go by too. As with any form of politics, I can't seem to digest it all. I was an old laborite, and as a former member of half a dozen unions, I thought that when the Equal Rights Amendment first started they ought to strike for equal wages for equal work. That's the one that counts. When I went to Stony Brook with Herbert Weisinger, the first thing he did was to pay female assistant professors the same as male assistant professors. Before we got there, the women were about twenty percent lower. Anybody who has an ounce of democratic sentiment knows that's just wrong. If you don't have equal pay for equal work, you're fucked from the beginning.

AM: Did you make any kind of conscious decision to start using women's voices in your writing?

JH: No, I was just tired of what I was doing. I wanted something new. When I wrote *Sundog*, that was an interesting, different kind of man. But—I first said it in *The Paris Review* years ago—I don't want to be limited to the main subject matter of white middle class novelists in America which is "nifty guys at loose ends."

CP: How is your character in *Sundog* different from one of these guys?

JH: Because he's not the usual kind of man. This is a more interesting person than a professor on summer vacation who has an affair with his babysitter. There are all sorts of permutations of that kind of thing.

AM: It seems that in *Sundog*, there is a recovery of the invisible workers.

JH: Oh, yeah. You know, there's a fascinating thing you should read in the new *Harpers* on that. In the front, where they gather work from other places, there is part of an essay by Hayden Carruth, a very good poet, where he identifies the real working class that nobody knows exists. These people don't even own farms, and they don't really have factory jobs. They sort of mill around and do odd jobs. A farmer is a different thing. A farmer is a land-

holder. On the border, and here to a certain extent, if you own some land you're a Mister. Down there, you're El Don. But I like the way Hayden Carruth identifies this whole class of people. I was one of them until I was forty. I could even finish roughing houses or big footings. You do everything just to make a living, in addition to your writing, which doesn't do it.

CP: I think that kind of work is different from what most writers engage in.

JH: Well that's true, but it's very bourgeoisie. I was reading a Dan Wakefield essay where he says that when he was in New York, his parents would visit him on a train. That was totally out of the question for somebody from my background. I moved to New York with twenty dollars, and I don't know if my parents had ever ridden a train. I think my father had been on a train. We didn't quite make middle class, well, I suppose we did when my dad was a county agent.

CP: My dad was a farmer and also a 4-H county agent. I'm curious, because our family backgrounds are somewhat similar, how your background informs your work.

JH: Well, it does because it links you to the natural world and as Naneus said, "We're a heap of all we have met." It's the foundation of how I look at the world; it's the way my brain is programmed. I know the names. Robert Graves advised poets to know the names of things. My dad could drive down the county road and name all of the weeds by the smells, all of the trees, all of the crops, natural watersheds, the way the earth is shaped. That's a different kind of knowledge. I don't mind mentioning the mind doctor I visit in New York at least once a year. He told me once, "Think of what it's like to treat people who never see the sun and the moon and the stars and the earth." You see, there's a whole set of problems there.

AM: I'm really interested in the contrast between the way you describe your orientation to the natural world and the way you describe driving through the campus area in East Lansing. Does that kind of orientation to the natural world seem more consistent with your sense of the way you're marking time?

JH: I'm sure that, just because your parents and grandparents did, you think in terms of specific seasons, and everybody is happy at the solstices and it's actually sort of primitive. It's just the way you look at the world. But even those midway points in Lansing… I remember a bunch of students and graduate students were growing pot in the big swamp behind Spartan Village. They were watching out, but I don't even think at that time, in the late fifties, that it was particularly against the law. It wasn't any good anyway; it was like the

pot people used to get from Indiana where you'd have to smoke a cigar before you would get anything.

CP: This poem called "Counting Birds," that Anthony and I discussed for most of the drive up here, I heard you read it at MSU two years ago and it really stuck with me. You use an Anasazi myth about birds, and it seems that the speaker in the poem is using the birds as a way of marking time in the way that Eliot's Prufrock marks out time with coffee spoons.

JH: Yeah, maybe so. I never thought of that connection, but that's obviously true. The Lakota and the Chippewa, had what they called winter counts. They had a cane and they'd draw little petroglyphs of the events of the winter. It's like time, a time passing, though they tend to be less swallowed by time. In other words, it's not the clock, but it's the event. I've never been good at time at all. For instance, I don't remember my career in terms of the books, but of what dog I owned at that time. That's how my mind works. I was at the Tuscan airport and my watch had stopped. I was getting my boots shined and I asked five different passing Mexicans what time it was. Nobody had a watch and it was marvelous. It was the usual gringo question, and this old man told me, "What time is it? Who the fuck cares!" Sometimes they want to help you: "Uh, it's maybe noon" (laughs). That is a wonderful attitude compared to the way the White Anglo Saxon Protestant thinks about time.

CP: Do you think we have this necessity of marking time or counting time or accounting for your life in terms of something?

JH: Yeah, we all have these ways. The Romans used to mark time by how they were aging: "Oh I have a wrinkle," or something like that. What are the events in your life? How many divorces? We're always keeping track. With so many men, it's how much do I have in my 401K or my IRA. What's my salary now? What is the inflation compared to what it was, because we are always counting.

AM: Do you find yourself feeling a sense of counting time through the events of your publications?

JH: No not any more. I did for a while. Everybody in our culture teaches that if we even blink, we're going to fall behind. People aren't even taking all of their vacation time. Now they're working longer hours because there's always this fear of being outsourced. Even in our highest prosperity, people are more insecure than when they didn't have any money. I have a number of friends who are very wealthy, and they seem to be more like victims than Joe Blow who spends his last five bucks down at the tavern. I was thinking of it in

Biblical terms. When you're reading the Bible, which I did a lot as a young man, so and so rich man had nine cows and three horses and a granary full of wheat. That was a rich man then. Now what is it? I had three land cruisers in a row, because I'm out in the boonies. When I went to get another one, suddenly they're fifty eight thousand dollars. I got in it and I said that the inside of this car looks like Liberace's toilet (laughs). It's no longer a functional vehicle; it's being built now for soccer moms. It's amazing. You can get the one I want, but you can only get it in Africa. They're about thirty grand there and they're functional, but they don't have our emission standards. I looked at a farm, I certainly don't need another farm, but I was looking at a farm and this is what drove me crazy—in the UP there's eighty acres and this house for fifty eight thousand. That's why it squared with me. So you could buy a whole fucking farm for the same price as you can by a car, you know. Why would anyone do that? But that's just an older man reflecting on how things have changed.

CP: This is interesting. In one of the poems I was reading, "Drinking Songs" from *Outlyer*, you wrote, "I want to die in the saddle / an enemy of civilization / while I walk around in the woods and fish and drink." Do you think that the Jim Harrison of today differs from this portrayal?

JH: Not greatly. I did that this summer, although now I've pretty much given up hard liquor in favor of wine. I like really good wine. It's a little expensive compared to just a shot and a beer, but it's basically the same thing. I feel most at home at this one place up in the UP that's fifteen miles from everything. But I also like certain cafes and bistros in Paris very much, and I feel at home there. I feel much more at home in Paris than I do in New York City. I think they're more receptive. You know, my last book got up to number three in France.

CP: Why do you think the French are more receptive?

JH: Just because they're tired of only Parisian literature which is more like New York literature. The French are more fundamentally rural than we are. If they live in any of the big cities, they're always trying to get out. Except the upper class, of course, but they already have an estate.

AM: One of your interviews suggests that the mainstream is shaped by New York, and having grown up in Iowa, I found that everybody's sort of aspiring to that conception of cosmopolitan life.

JH: McGuane and I used to always try to get each other to say things that needed to be said so that we could blame it on the other person. But McGuane

said, "Why don't you say that southern writers have always had their crotchless panties aimed at New York" (laughs). That's a real McGuane witticism. He did an interview once with a gay magazine, and everybody has a lot of friends that are gay. I told him to say that you can't make a philosophical system out of your weenie. So, he said that and he got viciously attacked for years on that comment (laughs). I thought that was funny. But I feel uncomfortable because the University Press of Mississippi, you know Old Miss? They are considering a collection of my interviews next year with DeMott, the Steinbeck scholar, and Patrick Smith as the editors. I'm doing a lot of French interviews too, and I have no monetary interest in this. I'm just wondering what they're going to come up with. The French are odd because there are about eighty newspapers in France that have full time literary critics, and here we only have one in Washington, one in Los Angeles, and some in New York. This old man said to me once, "How much has your poetry been affected by the early poetry of Robinson Jeffers?" I've never been asked that question in America. It is strange how much they have studied American literature.

CP: When I first started talking about wanting to interview you, I was told there was no way possible that I could get you to do an interview. Why did you agree to talk with us?

JH: I don't have any idea (laughs), because I turn most of them down. I think it was an odd image to me that you should publish this. When they started *Red Cedar Review*, with McGuane and Walter Lockwood and those guys, I was an aesthete then. I wouldn't have anything to do with something so tawdry (laughs). I remember going into this office in a corner room of Morrill Hall. I said once, "Where's Tom?" We didn't know each other that well, but we would stop and talk about literature, because we both wanted to be writers. It was either Walter Lockwood or somebody else that said, "He's in the closet with a bottle of whiskey and a secretary from Lansing." I admired Tom because he was so good looking. He was worldly and rather than putting up with coeds, he and a couple of his friends would go down to Lansing to these dances. They were secretaries' dances and they would just clean up. He had all these girls with beehive hairdos driving around with him. Just normal girls, not some difficult, neurotic student, but a living breathing girlfriend from Laingsburgh… Where did you grow up in Iowa, Tony?

AM: Ames.

JH: Oh yeah, that's a fascinating place. I finished a new novella a couple of months ago with an odd title: *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*. It is about a guy, a young man. The narrator's an old creep, but it's about a guy who has a

head injury from running his motorcycle into a beech tree. I got hundreds and hundreds of books on the brain under the hubris that after a couple of months of reading I could understand the human brain. Well, forget it. Anyway, here's one of the great ones, one of the most difficult ones that I've almost made it through. I love this title: *Neural Darwinism*. Wow. Anyway, one of the great brain centers in the world is in Ames, Iowa.

AM: Did you spend a lot of time driving around the Midwest?

JH: Yeah, because that used to be one of my so-called therapies. The other trouble with teaching is that you don't have freedom just to go. My wife's secretary always could tell when I was getting weird, when I just needed to go on one of my car trips. I remember driving 12,000 miles in a big circle, down into Mexico. I rarely ever drive on freeways. I have a compass in the car and go on the county roads.

AM: So you have a sense of being able to do that at any time?

JH: Yeah, number one it's not expensive compared to anything else.

AM: What about that looming pressure for getting the next book out?

JH: I don't think about it. I might have at one time, but the biggest liberating point was when I quit writing screenplays essentially two and a half years ago. That's why I know a lot about the money trap, which is the big trap.

AM: How would you characterize your relationship with Hollywood now?

JH: I still have some friends out there. It's one of those places where you like one out of a hundred people you meet, which is about the same as academic life. I don't find it morally or ethically any different from book publishing. I don't find Hollywood types any lower on the squeeze box of life than the book publishers. Nine of our biggest publishers are owned by the Germans. Before that it was corporate America blah, blah, blah…

CP: Why did you stop writing screenplays?

JH: Just fatigue. What happened was that ten years ago, I hadn't saved any money and I had to go back to work out there to make some money. Because I'm in a free economy, and I don't work for anybody.

AM: I was really interested in your comments about teaching a while back. Do you think it is possible to teach writing in college or high school class-

rooms?

JH: I don't know, you know, it's an odd thing. There was a teacher at Michigan State who was quite extraordinary—and then he had some problems. But he was a big shot, and after Michigan State, he went to Berkeley as a full professor. He was a brilliant man who taught the only essay writing course I ever had in my life. Every week, our assignment was to imitate a great essay writer, and I just loved doing that. I thought that this was a way you could teach writing. Philip Caputo, who's a novelist friend of mine and wrote *A Rumor of War*, went broke as a novelist and taught up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He was supposed to be teaching a course on the modern novel but ended up teaching six courses of composition. It really pissed him off. I bet they learned something, though, because he's a tyrant.

AM: What do you remember about learning how to write?

JH: Nothing except what I remember from that essay writing class. You can only learn how to write by writing, and I started in high school. You know, writing down thoughts—your pompous thoughts (laughs). And I read a lot because, oddly enough, for an agricultural family we read quite a bit—mostly modern fiction. It was my dad who gave me Sherwood Anderson and Faulkner and things like that.

AM: So, were you pretty clear that you wanted to be a writer from the beginning?

JH: Yeah, and I didn't really know if I needed college. I quit school five or six times to go to New York or San Francisco or Detroit to write, but when that didn't work out, Johnny Wilson who was the head of scholarships would always give me my scholarship back. And then I got married rather early, and the year after I got married, I took eighty-eight credits just to get the degree. I also worked practically full time, so it's no wonder I was a Wombat.

AM: This distinction between academic knowledge and experience reminds me of one of the major threads in *Dalva*. There is an interesting comparison between two conceptions of history embodied by the characters of Michael and Dalva. Michael seems to be unfavorably cast as the Western academic in comparison to Dalva's more nativist, circular, conception of history.

JH: Yeah, although I find academic history very interesting. That's one thing about Michigan State. I never took a course from him, but I knew Russell Nye very well. And you could walk down the hall and ask any question you had in your brain about American history and he'd know about it. Then you could

go down the same hall and ask Weisinger anything you wanted to know about world literature. Both of them would start dictating these monstrous answers, and that's the real value of a university. It can promote a kind of contiguity with people.

In *Dalva*, Michael presents one possible view of history. It reminds me of a new historian—I wish I could remember her name—who was at Harvard. She said that she liked *Dalva*, except for Michael. But you have to have a character like Michael who serves as the clown, just like in Shakespeare. He's the buffoon outside comment. And Michael has a lot of very valid points. But he also represents conceptions of American history that we were taught in school that leave out women, Mexicans, Indians, and immigrants. It's a vision of American history that never existed in the first place.

AM: What is interesting about that is there's a line where Dalva says something about his writing and, I can't remember exactly the line, but his writing is a bit stiff.

JH: Yeah, there's a great saying—he's got the top screwed on too tight. Of course Michael's an obsessive-compulsive manic-depressive, and I often find that these kinds of people are the ones you want to listen to. Because any conception we have of normal is always an extrapolation of someone who's bored with his life.

AM: Do you think that academics do a kind of violence to history?

JH: Well, sometimes they do. But then without them, we don't have anything. For instance, in all of this stuff about the Columbine high school shooting, nobody has mentioned Richard Slotkin's absolutely epochal study, *Regeneration Through Violence*. I was going to write Noah Adams at NPR about it, but I keep forgetting. I mean, you have a lot of dimwitted pundits blaming the television, and no one considering how such events fit into the tradition of America. When I was in high school, if you had a difference you'd walk the distance down to the grain elevator and fistfight. That's how things were done. Even the coach would have us put on sixteen ounce boxing gloves. This sort of thing happens less now. I've been going down to Montana for thirty years and it's interesting that today the cowboys are the dope smokers and they don't fight anymore (laughs). I mean it's really amazing how things, like smoking dope, have made their way down the food chain. So it's interesting that in some places like bars, there isn't as much violence as there used to be.

CP: Do you think that is unfortunate?

JH: No it's a good thing. They banned arm wrestling at Dick's tavern a couple

of years ago, because it was causing fights. One guy would get pissed off after he lost.

So, to answer your question, no I don't think academics necessarily do violence to history. Sometimes they do, but then what kind of history could we have without them? I used to complain about university presses a lot, but in a totally market driven economy, you have to have venues for academics to publish important studies.

AM: A related question: How do you feel about seeing your book, *Legends of the Fall*, go through the process of being mediated through Hollywood which is increasingly being viewed as the source for historical and literary information? That's unsettling for a lot of historians.

JH: Well it should be. It 's just so funny. I mean there are mines of material in anything you read from some of these University Presses. Oklahoma and the University of Nebraska Press are just fabulous in contrast to Hollywood's views of history. Fortunately, the guy who directed *Legends* is a Harvard graduate. We talked on the phone a lot and there was no way he was going to sacrifice important historical information. Unfortunately, that has been done over the years in Hollywood. The Indian nations are represented by Jeff Chandler and that kind of garbage. But, I do think they're trying to be a little more accurate as the years pass.

AM: Were you pleased with the way that film went?

JH: I'm never pleased by anything, because I saw it differently. I think the main thing that went wrong with *Legends*, which wasn't a bad movie, is what Jack Nicholson said about it: It wasn't gritty enough, whereas the book is gritty. The art director got a little out of hand, you know, and everyone looked too pretty. But they essentially told the story. I went to a couple of early versions of the screenplay, but then I gave it up. The guy that did the best work was the screenwriter who also wrote *Lonesome Dove*, Bill Wittliff. *Lonesome Dove* was the best thing on TV that dealt with the Western movie. It was really on the money. But Wittliff was a Texan with a background in that area and *Lonesome Dove* was totally accurate. So anyway, he had done the basic version of *Legends*. It is the only reason it was as acceptable as it was.

CP: What is the fascination for you with the American West?

JH: Oh, I don't even think there is one. I hitchhiked out there a lot when I was young, when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen to look it over. I suppose it is just the natural extension of the American East: Greed goes West. Fucks it up. Hits L.A. Then it filters back across the country drowning every-

thing in its lint. The West is misunderstood. Demographically, the L.A. area has a much higher concentration of readers than the New York area. Isn't that amazing? But if you think of New York, people often mistake Manhattan for New York and that is only a hundred thousand people on the uppity side.

AM: Jim McClintock gave the Russell Nye lecture last year and it was about your writing and the relationship of your writing to Carl Jung and James Hillman.

JH: That Hillman thing was interesting. I don't know how directly apropos it is, but my brother is quite a book collector and, for a brief period, we owned together the collected works of Carl Jung. All twelve volumes. I really liked the pictures, you know, the pictures of a tiger eating the sun and all those primitive images. So, I read a lot of Jung and it seemed like Hillman was his best explicator. And Jungian theory isn't as dreary and sodden as Freudianism.

CP: How have you used Jung and Hillman in your writing?

JH: I've been influenced by some of their ideas, especially in regards to conceptions of masculinity and femininity. I think it was Hillman quoting Jung who asked, "What have we done with our twin sister that the culture has forced us to abandon at birth?" So many Middle Eastern poets and Spanish poets were virtually androgynous in the way that a shaman is androgynous and can move between sexes, at least philosophically. I think poets are mostly shamans without portfolios, and very bad ones at that. Failed shamans. Take Robert Gray's *White Goddess*, about Celtic folklore and the emergence of poets in ancient Ireland. Gray writes that if you wanted to be a poet, you traveled around with a woman who taught you the names of everything. The woman was thought to be more related to the moon, hence more related to poetry.

CP: What kind of spiritual orientation, if any, informs your work?

JH: I don't know if any does. I suppose I am essentially Christian because that is my mythos. I said once in my food column in *Esquire* that I found it was easier to believe in the Resurrection than the Republican Party. For me anyway, it still is. I've studied Zen for twenty-five years but that is more of an additive than an attention to detail. Most of our lives are dissipated on garbage and nonsense, and Zen philosophy keeps you attentive. There is this old Japanese guy who taught that you must concentrate yourself wholly to each day as though a fire were raging in your hair. You know, there is a high level of attention there, which is good for me because I don't have any

discipline. I never did. I'm only writing because that is what my calling is.

AM: Do you have to instill any structure or sense of discipline in your practice?

JH: Not when I'm working on a novel or a novella or poetry. When I wrote screenplays, I had to tell myself, "Go do three pages and then you can go bird hunting or fishing." I had to write by quota every day.

AM: Conversely, do you have to stop yourself?

JH: Yeah, that's my main problem. When I finished *Dalva*, both my eardrums were broken and I didn't even know it. I mean, I had the flu, and it was just insane. The same thing happened when I wrote *Legends*, which I wrote in nine days. I was clearly deranged by the time I got done. It is what Walker Percy calls the *re-entry problem*. That is why writers are generally drinkers. Alcohol is a way to get back to the world from your daily voyage in your fiction. It is an interesting point of view. And some people like to stay in that world all of the time which is problematical. Even though I was gentler with myself on *The Road Home*, it still caused a lot of problems. The back and forth between these parallel universes is hard on yourself physically and mentally.

CP: I read an interesting piece in *Smart Magazine* called "Mid-range Roadkill." You tell the story of how a friend illegally shot a turkey and brought it to you. I'm wondering if cooking is another way…

JH: Oh, I'm sure. See, when I was ruining my brain by going to the bar directly after work roughly twenty years ago, I got more and more interested in cooking as a great way to return to earth. An illegal wild turkey is a great gift. There is nothing that tastes any better than a not totally adult wild turkey. And this guy was real coy because he said, "I hit it with my car," and there was a neat little .22 hole in it. I said, "Do you have a .22 mounted on your bumper?" If you are depressed, gifts like that change the nature of your thinking. Once when I entered in a depression, I went to Costa Rica and I was fine. That was where I met the man who gave me the idea for *Sundog*. This brings up another trap with academic life, at least for me. Just about all of the novels I wrote after *Wolf* depended on me being free and easy in my travels. I don't know if I would have gotten any of those ideas if I had been limited to the classroom. I can't think of any of the novellas that didn't depend on knowledge of the Mexican border, or Canada, or Europe, or parts of the United States. I mean academics can have quite a free schedule, but it is still a schedule.

AM: So, you met this guy in Costa Rica and then some idea started to germinate…

JH: Yeah, it starts to germinate. Sometimes it takes several years. Right now I'm working on a novella, a comic, in the Jacobean style. Not a farce or anything but I'm trying to write something about success and it is called, *I Forgot to go to Spain*. Because that was true in my own life. When I was nineteen I was obsessed with Spain and Spanish poets: Lorca, Neruda, Hernandez. I just had to get to Spain. I never got around to it, and then when I made a lot of dough, I just wanted to go to Michigan's Upper Penninsula and get away from the accoutrements. So, when I was in France in May, I finally thought, "Hah, Why don't I fucking go to Spain?" I was busy in Paris, and I just thought, "Hah, I'll go to Barcelona for the night." It's only a couple of grand, you know. I'll stay in a simple hotel. This guy reserved my room and when I got in this hotel, it was just a bathroom with a balcony. This woman came in and spread a linen cloth by my bed so my feet didn't have to touch the rug. And I thought, "This is the real Spain that I thought about when I was nineteen." That kind of crap. And then it got very hot. It hadn't occurred to me that it would be hot because I like to walk, and I could only walk at night. I stayed two nights. It was sunny and this French vogue magazine gave me some money, in cash, for something I had written for them. I got an air-conditioned Mercedes and a guide who spoke perfect English, an architectural graduate student or something like that. So I went to see a bunch of art work without getting out of the car. You know, it is what happens to successful people—so-called successful people. What happens is that you become utterly removed from any kind of life you value—unless you are very careful.

CP: Do you feel like you have avoided those kinds of problems in your life?

JH: Somewhat, but not totally.

AM: What about the threat of having a mystique built around you—if you lived in New York for example.

JH: I couldn't do it. It is harder for me in public in Paris than it is in New York. A lot of people recognize me in Paris. New York somewhat, but what I do is just avoid everything now. I didn't for a while. You can avoid a lot of problems associated with success with sufficient alertness. Only there are some situations where you are trapped. I did a nineteen-stop book tour last fall, and it took me three months to recover. I got over it by writing last winter. I correspond with Louise Erdrich who is a writer that I greatly value, and she was making the same complaints. She was sitting with a bunch of Bostonian ladies at a book luncheon and she told me that she had this really strong

urge to say, "Wouldn't you old bitches just like to sit down and have a bunch of martinis? Wouldn't that be better?" But she also said, "Just remember back when nobody wanted you to go on a book tour." It's just something that you have to do, that I find really difficult. But, of course, it is even tougher *not* to have a successful book tour. Like when you make a stop and nobody shows up. That's something you have to keep in mind. But, if you have a situation like I did in Mississippi last year, where I signed seven hundred books in four and a half hours, you're not really very happy about it.

AM: Do you feel like you are expected to maintain a specific persona at such events?

JH: Yeah, you do a little reading and then go to dinner. But writers are never famous. I mean someone like Hemmingway was, but writers are usually well enough known to get irritable but never famous. I spend a lot of time around people like Jack Nicholson, Harrison Ford, and Sean Connery and those are really the people who can't go anywhere without people being insane.

CP: Do you ever desire that kind of recognition?

JH: No, no, Christ no, nobody would in their right mind. Nicholson was a master because he always wore dark glasses. That means no eye contact, so people will feel nervous. Even being blind in one eye, like I am, it's harder for them. I can always get away with it because they don't know if I'm returning their look. So they can't say, "Hi, I'm dirt. Maybe you would like to read the manuscript of my novel."

CP: How do you think you are perceived here in Michigan?

JH: Oh, I've always gotten along OK because I started out here. I did a lot of manual labor, so I feel no resentment. Rich people who move in here don't know that if you aren't nice to the plumber, he doesn't come to your house. If I call the plumber, he's here in five minutes. If they call the plumber, he'll let them wait four or five days–which is appropriate, if you ask me.

AM: Another interesting thread that seems to be coming out of this conversation and also out of a book like *A Good Day to Die* is this notion of the outlaw. In some ways, there is a suggestion that the outlaw, or the people who define themselves as being outside of mainstream society, are the sane ones.

JH: Well, possibly, but this is odd. I remember once when we were broke and it was just before I had gotten successful with *Legends*. They called me from

this university, because even then I had a small cache, three books of poems and a couple of novels out. They had a creative writing program and they offered me seventy-five or eighty thousand dollars—and this was over twenty years ago. I said, "You're kidding, that's a lot." But I said, "No," to the discouragement of my in-laws. "I can't do that," I said. Somebody's got to stay outside. That is what *Outlyer* means. I can't say that they are the sane ones because they are transparently not. But it gives you a way of looking at your own culture if you are on the outside.

AM: What would you say is the state of our culture, U.S. society, now—especially in contrast to when you wrote *A Good Day to Die*.

JH: Sometimes, the places I choose to live in don't give you as good a view of the entire culture as even television does. Living in the U.P. and on the Mexican Border where it is really remote offers a view of a different kind of sub-subculture. For example, I was asking this guy, a sort of hippy, half Mexican, and half gringo, "Why isn't there any crime around here?" And this hippy said, "I don't allow no fucking crime." This is definitely a subculture.

But I've seen over the last thirty years that we are as completely submerged and drowned in outright banality, where greed and apathy are the ultimate virtues as we were in the twenties. It's hard on university people too because they say that they and their families have bypassed that. They are really getting paid miserably compared to what they probably should be, as far as I'm concerned. I noticed that in France, the reason teachers are so respected in each community is because they are usually the highest paid people in the community, outside of the banker and the doctor. And if you don't value your teachers, the culture snubs them. By making fun of the government, Reagan did a great deal of damage to the country because to infer that the populace is collectively more intelligent than the civil service is a big mistake.

There is another myth: these small businessmen feel that if it wasn't for the constraints of government, they would be wildly successful. I ought to ask them about Bill Gates. I mean, give me a break. Obviously, even here in my so-called retirement, I would deeply enjoy a fifty percent drop in the stock market. Anything to slow down this craze.

CP: You mentioned the affect of this craze on professors and their families. Have your decisions made it easier for your family to have a different perspective on work?

JH: My youngest daughter hated college. She's too excessively attractive, which, Carrie, you probably know about. Anyway, she just likes to work in bookstores. But my older daughter graduated from a little podunk high school.

Her counselor, they are usually lamos, told her to try to go to a small college but she went to U of M and graduated Summa Cum Laude. I mean, she was her high school's first National Merit Scholar, and that didn't merit a sentence in the newspaper because they've never had one before. But, I never could understand where she got her study habits. I certainly didn't have them. I started out a term and took perfect notes the first day. The second day it's tits and ass, and the third day I cut class and I'm at Mac's Bar playing pool. I mean it was just hopeless. It was a good thing that I was sort of smart because back then, they let you comp the basics. You could take the test and not take the class.

AM: How was high school?

JH: I was reading James Joyce when I was sixteen. I had a couple of good teachers, one even subscribed to the *Nation* magazine, which caused a little talk because he was a left winger. I had another high school teacher who was a POW from WWII who had been in a German prison. That kind of experience gives you a view of the world. But, I naturally liked to get out of there. I hitchhiked to New York when I was sixteen. I knew that was where I wanted to go. I wanted to be a bohemian instead of hauling corn.

AM: What did you think about the whole Bohemian movement then?

JH: Oh, it just seemed like more freedom. When you're that age, all you want is freedom. I don't even know how young people survive these days because back then we had so much less scrutiny from the world. We were people with our own culture, and now right from the cradle these kids are under such incredible scrutiny from parents, PTA, and everything. They are being told never to talk to a stranger, you know…

After a brief pause, Harrison abruptly signals a shift. "Let's go get some lunch." *The conversation continued, however, at Dick's Bar and Grill over burgers and beer.*

Works By Jim Harrison

Fiction
Wolf
A Good Day to Die
Farmer
Legends of the Fall
Warlock
Sundog
Dalva
The Woman Lit by Fireflies
Julip
The Road Home

Poetry
Plain Song
Locations
Outlyer
Letters to Yesenin
Returning to Earth
Selected & New Poems
The Theory and Practice of Rivers & Other Poems
After Ikkyu & Other Poems

Essays
Just Before Dark

Stories

Queen Esther

Perhaps the most interesting bureau drawer in Ben's mother's room was her unmentionables drawer. Most of the items looked fragile, the same shade of pink, coral and dusty rose, stacked in three rows like silk scarves. Further, once the compartment was drawn open, a sweet aroma wafted out of a calico sachet bag.

Petticoats, half slips, camisoles, panties, and, at the very bottom, the ballast—a chunky girdle festooned with bone stays, wire fasteners and elastic straps with catches that kept her nylon sheers from drooping like loose skin on her legs. "It doesn't belong here," thought Ben. He recalled an aged catfish he'd once pulled out of a pond with wire leaders and hooks decorating its mouth.

Ben had looked forward to this day. She'd promised the two of them were going on a special trip. He sat all dressed on the side of the fully made bed. His father had left early to hurry onto the golf course.

"Where are we going, Ma?"

"To a Queen Esther social."

Queen Esther was the name of her Sunday Bible class. All women, most of whom Ben thought looked like boarded-up Victorian houses. His mother was the youngest and prettiest in the group. He watched her draw cocoa stockings up her legs, careful so as not to cause them to run, then roll their ends in cloth covered rubber bands high on her thighs.

"Are the seams straight, Ben?" she asked. Lifting up the half slip.

"Yes," he said. She never asked his father.

"Ben, go get the clear nail polish."

He watched her dab its applicator brush on the snag that threatened to travel a cloud stream down her leg.

"What's a social, Ma?"

"An occasion when women get together."

"What do they do?"

"Oh, talk. Drink tea, and there will be much to eat." He'd seen the fresh macaroni salad sitting in a container in the refrigerator that morning.

"What will I do?"

It didn't matter, actually. When he was invited by his father to go someplace, it meant sitting on a barstool downing several fountain Coca-Colas while studying reflections of the patrons in the giant bar mirror. It was always dusky in those places, and smelled of Lysol. His father never wanted to leave. But he and his mother took long drives in the country; she'd turn on the car

radio and sing like Jo Stafford. Sometimes she'd drive thirty miles to Warren, Ohio, to visit her aunt. Ben would walk down the street to the crossing and watch the freight trains move through. Alongside the tracks a black man owned a shack roofed with metal Royal Crown Cola signs; he sold bread, milk, candy, and soda chilled in an ice trough. Ben liked to go inside and "fish" for a bottle of lime green soda. The store had a dirt floor. Black children would fish with him in the soda trough, too. They liked purple soda.

"You will do what you've always done, Ben… stick by me."

The social was being held in a rambling Queen Anne Victorian with a grand wrap-around porch in a rural community called Harmony. Several wicker-back rocking chairs with peony cushions lined either side of the oval windowed entrance like Hotel guests taking the morning sun. When the pair climbed the steps to twist the bell, Ben spotted goats in a penned enclosure alongside the driveway.

"See," she said, "I told you there would be something for you to do."

Ben immediately recognized Grace McKibben when the door opened, the president of the Queen Esther class. Except he was used to seeing her dressed in black wool, layers of it—blouse, cardigan sweater, a jacket, and skirt that fell just above a short expanse of her black cotton stockings and string-tied heels. A cameo brooch was the only color in the whole expanse of garments, and it rested tight against her Adam's apple. Mrs. McKibben always wore a pill box hat in church, too, with black netting over her chignon—a dark scrim that she might pull down over her chalky face at a moment's notice, he thought.

But this Saturday morning she met mother and son at the door in a dress patterned with a riot of melon peonies, like those on the porch rockers' cushions, against an ivory background, and matching salmon satin slippers and hose. Stuck in her gray bun was a sprig of baby's breath.

"Welcome to Queen Esther's soirée!" exuded Mrs. McKibben.

"Oh, Grace, you look so beautiful," Ben's mother declared.

"What's a soirée?" he whispered as they were being escorted into the dimly lit vestibule.

"Shhhh," she admonished. "It's a woman's social. Now be on your best behavior."

It was a grand interior. A Matisse odalisque hung in the paneled hallway. Oriental carpets jeweled its dark parquet floors, and like young girls, huge Chinese jardinieres stood sentry at the living room entranceway. Ben could see perhaps a dozen women standing, talking to each other animatedly, all attired in muted spring dresses with white or pastel slippers. When the hostess opened the French doors the fragrance of a sweet perfume momentarily overcame him.

"Katherine Daugherty and her Gainsborough son, Ben!' the hostess

gushed. The women all turned and smiled at the pair, one of them commenting, "Oh, Katherine and Ben, we are so glad you came." Ben watched a fawn-colored Siamese cat with gas-blue eyes brush up against the shiny hose of several of the guests. Cookies and delicate pastries graced glass-topped tables throughout the grand room. At one end in a circular alcove with curved windows sat a home organ. Mrs. McKibben was the organist for the Second United Presbyterian Church.

"It looks like we're all here," the Bible class president declared. "Please sit down, ladies." Eyeing Ben standing at his mother's side—"and gentleman."

The room is as large as our downstairs, thought Ben. Tufted sofas, love seats and overstuffed chairs were backed up against oak wainscoting. Timbers lined the ceiling.

"We have some minor class business to conduct before we begin the SOIRÉE ..." she hesitated, and several women giggled. Ben's mother smiled innocently, not knowing anything more than he did. "But before that, I want to introduce you to my dear friend and companion."

She opened the French doors to the dining room. A diminutive woman entered, perhaps a decade younger than the hostess, with marcelled raven hair, pale skin, and wearing a watery persimmon red lipstick. Mrs. McKibben wore no make-up, except white face powder.

"Lydia Hopkins, ladies." Miss Hopkins curtseyed. The Queen Esther president grasped her hand and directed, "Go bring in the tea, dear."

The woman was as young as his mother and, Ben thought, as attractive, too. "Where's Mr. McKibben, Ma?"

Katherine Daugherty scowled.

"Who takes care of the goats?" he asked.

"Ben!" she hissed.

Miss Hopkins wore a crisp white waitress' apron over a black shirtwaist dress. Its collar, unlike Grace McKibben's, was open and exposed a flushed expanse of flesh. She had a self-effacing manner, and was given to uttering short sentences.

"Oh, you're welcome. I'm sure."

"Yes, isn't it a lovely home? Grace has such exquisite taste."

"Oh, no, I didn't bake these brownies. Grace did. She's a marvelous chef."

"Does she take care of the goats?" Ben asked.

Lydia Hopkins, who stooped over to pour tea in their bone china cups, smiled. Katherine Daugherty grinned sheepishly.

"Oh, why are you so nosey?" She glanced up at Lydia, appealing for her understanding.

"Yes, I tend to the goats, Ben. I'll take you out to meet them later this morning."

He liked her right off. As the Queen Esther women palavered about the upcoming business of the Bible class, she'd periodically glance over at him

and wink.

Soon the noise in the large room subsided. The hostess had excused herself minutes earlier, and her guests were all comfortably ensconced, waiting for the next turn of events. Ben fidgeted like it was getting stuffy.

There were occasional puddles of hushed conversation, but most of the women sat decorously mum, a few studying the sunlight filtering through the stained glass window over the double keyboard organ. When, stunningly, Grace McKibben swaned through the dining room doorway bedecked in a bottle-green velvet chapeau festooned with plastic cherries, one banana, and an orange. Throwing her arms wide, she kicked off her salmon slippers and cried:

"Welcome to Queen Esther's Soireé!"

The ladies burst into laughter that sounded more like delighted squeals.

President McKibben sat down at the organ, and broke into a rousing chorus of "Mississippi Mud."

As she furiously pedaled, and pushed and pulled at the concert stops—the living room literally swelling with brass instrumentation—an undernourished Aunt Jemima shimmied into the gathering wearing a red bandana—just like on the box of pancakes Ben loved so. Lydia Hopkins' milky white face, now marred with burnt cork, and in her hands—bones.

At the nodding of Mrs. McKibben, Lydia obliged her accompanist with a stiff one minute jig and rib-clapper percussion.

The women were in titters.

Lydia curtseyed once again. When the ringmaster held her hands high in the air, requesting silence, Ben wondered if they'd visit the goats with Lydia wearing blackface.

"Ladies," Mrs. McKibben barked, "Now for the surprise. Queen Esther's Morality Play! But you must all take part." Conspiratorially, she swept her chignon about and glared at each woman assembled. "But never breathe a word of this to any of our congregation. We've survived for thirteen years through ecclesiastical famine and scarce liturgical fortune. But the God of Mercy loves each and every one of us. Pray and be merciful, He admonishes. *And, above all, HAVE INNOCENT FUN!*"

The ladies applauded, even Ben's mother. The cat jumped up between the pair and rolled its back into his side. Ben thought the shade in the room had become rosier. As if the sky outside had begun to bleed salmon. The floral upholstered furniture… all of it gave off a pale carnation glow just as did the soft-hued women's dresses. The tinted flesh of the photographs hanging on the wall. The painting over the fireplace—a pink calliope unicorn. The coral bordered carpet in the grand living room with a mimosa center. Peach roses now began opening in their crystal vases, releasing their perfume. Ben, wishing he were outside with the goats, and slowly succumbing to the

chamber's rising temperature.

Lydia Hopkins opened the double glass doors to the hallway, and switched on the tear-drop chandelier, illuminating a wide staircase with fanciful mahogany balusters. It was as if the women were sitting below a proscenium arch.

The audience was aroused by the sound of bells Ben had heard on horses pulling wagons for hay rides. Leather belts festooned with silver balls inside which rolled steel bearings. The straps shook several times, to announce an appearance. All eyes were fixed on the upper level of the staircase illuminated by a stained glass window.

Lydia Hopkins cried out: "QUEEN ESTHER!"

About her neck a black strap of Christmas bells, and scantily attired in a champagne brassiere, one of those catfish-hooked girdles with catches to which her black mercerized hose were fastened, and no shoes—her pasty flesh, mounds of it, harnessed by the unmentionables, brocaded and laced but still looking very much like saddles or straps—Grace McKibben held aloft two tambourines like the tablets of Moses. Each step she descended, the harness bells jangled, accompanied by a furtive glances she, Queen Esther, shot to her admiring, but noticeably embarrassed, dark-faced Lydia.

The Bible class, at first stunned, gradually effected a smattering of nervous laughter. When Grace reached the last step, they were applauding. Ben heard the goats bleating in the dooryard. Without any prodding, the auburn-haired women sitting alongside Katherine Daugherty darted into the dining room towards the back stairway. Momentarily, she, too, appeared on the upper landing, slapping her hand against a pressure cooker she'd lifted on her way though the kitchen. She wore no shoes or stockings, a purple petticoat, and had a carrot stuck in her hair.

The guests egged her on as she flounced down the steps. Soon the women were waiting in line to be the next on the illuminated stairway. The hilarity was building.

Grace McKibben and Lydia sat on carpeted Kurdistan cushions in the vestibule, clapping robustly for each grand entrance.

Another member of the Bible class (Ben recognized her as the Union Trust bank teller's wife, Sylvia Lowell) poised on the landing behind an ironing board, her dancing partner. Out and in she moved it in clipped tango fashion, to the snapping of fingers in the audience. You couldn't see her entire body until she began to do a liquid turn as she and the dancing board "male" descended the oaken stairway as partners. She wore Titian-shaded panties, and for Ben's sake, one presumed, spools of thread cellophane-taped to her nipples.

Ben had forgotten the goats. He couldn't even hear them. *Would his mother dare do it?* The women all around her were plotting, getting ready. Finally, one of the last, Katherine Daugherty rose. Ben stood up, too.

"I want to do it," he begged. She shook her head and sat him back down. The women snickered. Soon she, too, appeared at the top of the stairs in a red and white gingham tablecloth.

"*Ohhhh,*" her classmates teased, as if they were men. Katherine Daugherty held up her hand to silence the impatient, and with cunning deliberativeness, pealed the tablecloth off her body. Instead of panties, she wore a flour sack dishtowel diaper and copper wire pot scrubbers she'd strung over her breasts with kitchen twine. From behind her back she proffered an iron, and at each stair pantomimed steaming the creases out of her thighs and derriere.

The assembled stood and huzzahed. Ben heard the goats bleating. *What if Mr. McKibben comes home?* he worried.

The last member of the Queen Esther class to descend the stairs was Pastor Rose's wife, Blanche, who'd tied a length of clothesline about her upper torso and another about her waistline. To cover her bodice she'd attached labels from canned goods to the rope by clothespins. Over one breast was a Del Monte Corn label, the other—Campbell's Pork and Beans. Two clothespins held the crushed tomato labels over her pelvis, front and rear.

The congregation had finally spent itself.

Gathered closer together—huddling actually—in the center of the capacious living room, they sat with their legs folded beneath them, some on pillows, still wearing their improvised costumes, or wrapped in bed sheets that Lydia had supplied. The detritus of domesticity—sundry pans, scrubbers, iron, ironing board, clothesline, clothespins, ersatz fruit—and even silk panties, girdle and one camisole—lay in a heap over by the organ.

They ate coleslaw, macaroni salad, potato salad, and baked beans on paper plates served by Miss Hopkins, who by now had cold cream buttering her face. Coffee was perking in the huge metal church urn in the kitchen. Katherine Daugherty made a plate of food for her son, who sat off with the cat, wondering if Mr. McKibben might take him out to tend the goats. It felt like it was getting that time of day. The dusty rose atmosphere in the room had begun to give away to a chromatic blue, and the strong fragrance of lavender sachet had evaporated, perhaps much earlier when Ben was watching the stairway show. Shadows had converged on the room. Several of the assembled looked pale under their sheets; others shivered in their unmentionables.

Katherine Daugherty finally stood, and gathered her clothes. The rest of the Queen Esther Bible Class did likewise.

"Oh, Ben, we didn't even get to feed the goats, did we," Lydia said. "You come again. We'll do it first thing."

Mrs. McKibben hovered behind her. "Did you enjoy Queen Esther's soirée, son?"

"I did," he said.

"Now you won't breathe a word of it. Promise?"

He nodded.

"Scout's honor?"

Ben extended his index and middle finger.

"You're still a little man. That's why your mother let you attend. We don't permit grown men in Queen Esther's Bible class."

He could understand why.

The Refugee

I've given up sleep now like everyone else, traded blankets for books and pillows for papers—flow charts and flash cards, diagrams and drawings. Through my window the moon is setting; it's past two in the morning but still I'm cramming, trying to memorize the Kreb's Cycle now, the biochemistry of human energy. That sounds interesting, even metaphysical, but actually it isn't. It's just phosphates. ADP. ATP. An hour ago it was clotting factors, and an hour from now it will be something else, if I can stay awake—bacteriology perhaps, or maybe some pharmacology. But it's not just tomorrow's comps.

I can't stand my dreams anymore. Too many times Daniel has come back, the boy I knew like a brother, the man I didn't know at all. The dreams have no boundaries. Sometimes I glimpse the person he will never become now, and sometimes I dream of Daniel as he was long before I ever knew him. I see him at five or six, sneaking into his father's bedroom. I watch him open a bureau drawer, take out a belt, run the dark leather through his hands. He looks puzzled, as if he were trying to understand. The belt is as wide as his fingers and supple as a snake, although the brass buckle is already pitted with greenish corrosion. He raises the leather to his nose and inhales deeply. His eyes are closed and his forehead is as wrinkled as an old man's.

I'm tired of this. Exhausted really, bone weary, thoroughly sick of everything—anatomy and histology and microbiology, the life cycles of pathogens and the natural history of disease. Outside my window I can smell the late spring, the cool moonlit night. A gentle wind rustles perfectly formed pale green leaves against the screen. I push my papers aside and I can't get Daniel out of my head and as usual everything else feels pointless. Stupid.

What I'll never understand is why he needed to kill himself. Came back to Connecticut on the cusp of salvation only to follow his father's path, to hang himself in his childhood bedroom. The room we shared in high school, still full of the shelves we built, bricks and boards collected from the dump at Brooksvale Park, stocked with books and bones and the music we listened to. A place of ideas and sharing, Richard and Daniel, one mind touching another. Emerson and Thoreau. *Self Reliance. Walden Pond.* Where once I thought we could create our own selves. *Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.*

His sister found him. Spinning at the end of whatever it was—a rope, a wire, his father's belt. I don't know. There are some questions I can never ask. In my dreams I've seen his toes trying to reach the chair just kicked away,

his fingers trying to get under the thing at his neck, that dark line twisting into his flesh, cutting off his air. Black tongue swollen and distended. Pants full of urine and feces and semen. I don't need to ever dream the details again. In most of my dreams Daniel uses his father's belt.

His father committed suicide when Daniel and Sarah were still in grammar school. Hung himself also, showing his son the way. I will make the focus of my graduation thesis depression and despair. Alcoholism. Suicide. There is a responsibility to the people we haven't become yet.

In the daytime, hustling through the clinics, there is no time to think. There's too much to do and you're always on the defensive, open to challenges from anyone, everyone—fifth and sixth year students and the residents and staff physicians and attendings. They think it's their job; they consider it teaching. There's too much to remember. All the different signs and symptoms, the tests and normal values, the drugs and the glittering machines. And although it's true that a lot of this stuff works, unfortunately it depends on what you're starting with.

It was so raw in Pensacola, detox units primitive everywhere, physical and pharmacological restraints and the beds filled with people screaming at horrors only they could see. We call them delirium tremens but actually the hallucinations are their own history; the snakes and rats they can't throw off are bits of their own past sucking at them like leeches. Memory crawling under closed doors, desire slithering out of every closet and bureau, the patients sweating behind their rope nets. It might have been Victorian London, the hospital at Bedlam. It made me want to give up drinking myself.

Still, Daniel came through all that. And when he returned last winter I was full of hope—I thought he was saved. I thought I had saved him.

Winter is over now and Daniel is gone. Although everything else just continues as usual, as if nothing of consequence ever happened. Daniel has journeyed from life to death and I'm still sitting in the same chair I was in when he telephoned me last January. Three in the morning the night before our mid–year exams, Daniel calling to report he was about to commit suicide. The first time he'd called in years. He talked about childhood and he talked about his father—fishing with him on a river somewhere, the dark green canoe and the bright shiny lures. How once when he was five or six and terrified after watching a horror movie his father came up to tuck him into bed and brought him a stuffed animal even though he was too old for stuffed animals. But he also talked about all the dinners his father missed, and the fighting that woke him at night. The birthdays and vacations that never happened. He talked in a rush and he made no sense and when he hung up I tried to call back but he didn't answer. So I called the Pensacola police and they gave me a hotline number for their local crisis group and the dispatcher there said she'd send someone out. Then I called his family in Connecticut, but I couldn't

wake anyone at Sarah's house, even though I let the telephone ring and ring—Sarah and her mother were always luxurious sleepers, jealous and guarded.

I packed a bag and called the airlines and wrote a note to the dean explaining why I was going to miss my mid–years, our most important exams except for the two–year comps, and then I was driving south through the winter night to Logan International, still two hours away. It snowed lightly the whole way down, and the roads were greasy and slow.

Over the last few years Daniel and I had grown as distant as people can get, and it wasn't simply geography, the thousand miles of American east coast. It wasn't the bootcamp mentality of medical school either, the way every minute of my life was spoken for, planned out, co–opted by someone else. No. It was more like Daniel was evaporating somehow, slowly disappearing, like he was burrowing deeper and deeper into a place where you couldn't really follow him. I think he was fundamentally embarrassed, that his failures had raised a wall between us. And I think he was scared; I think now he must have been aware every minute of the legacy from his father.

Daniel never finished his first year of college. He stopped going to classes and he didn't show up for any of his finals—in fact he was still holed up in his dorm room after the semester closed and everyone else left for the summer. He'd spent that whole year drinking, doing drugs, building these elegant bookcases. I'd seen some early ones. They were beautiful things, tall and graceful, all bird's eye maple with mahogany accents. I wonder where they are now. I was a senior in high school then, and we spent that whole visit staying drunk, even though drinking was already starting to frighten me, the way you woke up sick the next morning and despite all the nausea and your brain split open, still, all you could think about was the next drink. Daniel taught me about the hair of the dog. But later it seemed he'd just wanted a drinking buddy, any old drinking buddy, good buddy. That he'd forgotten me as a friend. And he never came north again, except that last time. Maybe he realized returning would close the circle too tightly. Year passed into year.

Now I think Daniel was trying to achieve perfect drunkenness, and I guess you could say he made that his life's work. I think he wanted to be drunk forever, permanently stopped at that moment on the curve when everything seemed ideal, that space between the nagging worry of alcoholism and absolute dumb narcosis.

I called his place again when I landed in Pensacola, but there still wasn't any answer, and it occurred to me the number I had might be out of date, that the address could be wrong as well and I considered calling Sarah then but it seemed better to have some answers first so I called information instead, confirmed the number and address, then I got a cab and drove out to his place.

His door was locked and I knocked loudly and for a long time but there was no response except from a neighbor. I went around the unit looking in the windows until I saw Daniel lying on the floor in the corner of the living

room, curled up on the rug like a dog before a fireplace. But this was Florida, there was no fireplace, just air conditioning and wall–to–wall carpeting and in Daniel's case wall–to–wall vomit and empty whiskey bottles and white plastic pill bottles and ashtrays spilling cigarette butts. I banged on the window but there wasn't any response so I cut the screen with my jackknife and forced the window up and I climbed into his house and went over to him.

The vomit was a good sign. Daniel was still breathing and his pulse was steady although not very strong. I tried to shake him into consciousness, calling his name, but I couldn't rouse him. I made the neighbor call an ambulance, and I washed Daniel's face with cold water, then I collected the pill bottles and sat down next to him to wait for the EMTs. I thought about calling Sarah and her mother but I decided to wait until I knew something.

I spent the rest of that morning waiting on the wrong side of doors in the Pensacola Hospital, first outside the ER as they pumped Daniel's stomach and gave him narcotic antagonists, then at the nurse's station in the ICU while they put in IVs and hooked him up to different monitors. I spent a lot of time filling out forms and signing papers, making financial arrangements, offering myself as a guarantor. I gave Daniel's history to several doctors. Finally they sent me home, suggesting I not return until tomorrow.

I fell asleep in the cab on the way back, and when I got to Daniel's condominium complex, I was disoriented and I couldn't remember his number. The driver must have thought I was some nodding junkie, because I couldn't find Daniel's unit, but the places were all identical, white concrete slabs set down on artificial grass like giant mausoleums. I wondered how he ever found his way home when he was drunk. Finally I identified his place as the one with the cut screen.

I called Sarah, a number I knew by heart, and this time she answered immediately and when I told her everything that had happened she insisted on coming straight down. I said she didn't have to, I told her, "There's nothing you can do here. He's in the ICU now. Nobody can see him. They kicked me out an hour ago."

"It doesn't matter."

"Why don't you come down after he's released—that's when he'll really need you. He's okay right now." I thought for a moment. "But I don't know how long they're going to take care of him. You should be here for him when he gets out."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Doesn't what?"

"What if he doesn't make it?"

"He'll make it. He's stable now." Which wasn't really true; that's why they put him in the ICU.

"I'll meet you this afternoon," she said, then she hung up.

Next I called the dean at UNEMC, but I could only leave a message

with his secretary. Then I cleaned up Daniel's apartment before Sarah could see it. I kept looking for some evidence of our past, some link back to the people we once were together, even the smallest thing—a book, some music, a picture. But Daniel's apartment could have been anyone's—there was nothing of Daniel in it at all, no sign of the person he used to be, no sign of the person he was now. It was hard to believe he'd lived there for years. His home was like a hotel room, but without the cleaning staff. What I still don't understand is why Daniel would settle down into that isolation, that place with no one so far from home. The refugee. Washed up like debris in a strange sterile land.

I spent the rest of the afternoon waiting for Sarah. And as the day dragged on it occurred to me that's all I'd ever done, I'd waited far too long where Sarah was concerned, I'd waited until it was too late. For years I'd thought of her as a sister, and once she seemed like my lover. But then she announced she would marry, and I suddenly felt a future I'd never considered before forever closed to me. And with that closure came a comprehension I didn't want, and a longing that would grow all through the winter and the spring. An emptiness would form that would somehow be connected to the loss of Daniel, but would include and then become the loss of Sarah herself.

It was late in the evening when the cab brought Sarah to Daniel's condominium. We went out for dinner but neither of us really ate anything. That night Sarah slept in Daniel's bed. I slept on the couch in the living room, and I had bad dreams there. Daniel's dreams, dreams of the refugee. A tunnel without lights. Black loneliness and despair.

Early the next morning we went to see Daniel, and learned he'd been moved out of the ICU. We went up to the detox unit, and they let us onto that ward almost without caring. When the ambulance brought him in yesterday, nothing I could say could get me past the front desk—not that I was Daniel's friend, or that I rode in with him, or was his brother (which was almost true). When I told a nurse I was a medical student at UNEMC, she laughed.

We walked down a broad hallway separating private rooms. The place was overrun with staff, the orderlies and nurses and aides almost all men. The patients were mostly men too, various ages; they all looked old. I glimpsed one man in heavy restraint sobbing before his door was closed from within. There was one woman I heard screaming through a closed door, just inarticulate terror. People in mauve and teal went in and out of her room but they couldn't make her stop. In Daniel's room a heavy screen covered a narrow window that looked down several stories onto a parking lot and a golf course beyond. There was a television and some magazines, two copies of impressionist paintings, and a rope net surrounding the bed, thick nylon strung between sturdy tracks bolted to the ceiling and the bedframe. Daniel's skin was

wet and pasty. He groaned and turned away.

"Jesus," I said. I looked at Sarah. Her eyes were wet but her mouth was grim. I got an orderly to unlock the net and slide it back against the wall. "Daniel," I said. I touched his shoulder. "It's me, Richard. And Sarah."

Daniel blinked his eyes. His face looked swollen and thick and I wished Sarah hadn't come. She sat on the edge of the bed and took Daniel's hand in hers. I couldn't think of anything to say.

Daniel coughed and motioned for water and I got him some. "Thanks," he said finally. His voice was wooden.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Do you remember yesterday?"

But Daniel didn't answer. We sat in silence for a long time. Eventually a nurse came in and told us we should go and let Daniel get some rest. She gave him some pills and said we had about five more minutes. Daniel looked ashen against the white bedclothes. His breathing was gentle and regular. He didn't stir when Sarah let go of his hand. She rose from the bed and went to the bathroom to wash her face. I was about to leave myself when Daniel slowly opened his eyes, focused on me with an effort and said, "Do you remember the first time?" He looked like he was going to cry. "You took care of me." I squeezed his hand. "It was like magic," he said. "Then it was gone." He closed his eyes again. "Magic," he murmured. Then he was asleep.

I'm not sure what they gave him but for the first time Daniel looked peaceful, and I was thankful for that, whatever the pharmacology was. In his sleep he was smiling now, and I wished him a long rest, untroubled by dreams. Who needs dreams anyway? Daniel had his memories. Let him write his own history, create his own past. We all make up the truths we need to survive.

"Magic," the nurse sniffed behind me. I swung around scowling but she just stared right back, that purulent look I'd been noticing recently, disdain for doctors seeping out everywhere. She was right though, and she knew it; finally I was the one who had to look away. It wasn't magic Daniel remembered—it was just shape-shifting, transient as smoke, not real at all. I turned back to the bed.

This was real. This gray boy—man on the white sheets, the twilight half-life that brought him here. *You took care of me Richard.* But I couldn't remember that. In my whole life I don't think I ever took care of Daniel—it was always the other way around. His was the older brother's role.

In high school they called him Prince Daniel, after the time a girl stumbled out of the main entrance and fell down the front stairs. She was high as a kite and she bounced on her ass all the way to the sidewalk, scattering her books and papers behind her and jamming her skirt way up past her hips. Then she just sat there next to the buses, dazed and confused, stoned out of her mind, her legs spread wide and anyone could see she wore no underwear. Every-

body stood around laughing and staring. Except for Daniel. He ran over to help her, shaming the others to silence; he covered the girl with his jacket and made me gather up her things. She was shaking hard as he helped her to her feet, and he had to support her by the waist as he walked her past the others to his car. Prince Daniel. But they never forgot the way he made them feel, and the name was always tinged with contempt.

Do you remember the first time? I remembered the bulletproof feeling clearly enough, and the way time started sliding around. Being late for school and leading Daniel up those same granite steps on a leash. How quiet it was inside at first, everyone already in class, the empty hallways stretching away on either side like dim and dusty tunnels. The school felt old to me as it never had before, ancient, almost archeological, and I wanted to linger there and understand that, but Mr. Pfnausch came roiling out of his office then and he changed everything. Then we were running and some others started running and by the time we ducked into the empty auditorium five grown men were chasing us. Daniel opened an emergency door and we ran across the parking lot and the football field; we ran all the way up the hill on the other side before we stopped to look back. The alarms going off and Daniel still on his leash.

I remembered how inviting my school looked from that perspective, the broad expanse of sunny brick long and low and warm, and how small Mr. Pfnausch seemed in the doorway. If only he'd been calmer. His distant shouts, the tiny figures at his side. They could have been us.

It was like magic. A perfect morning and a perfect escape, right out of the books. The sun–drenched hilltop in the clear spring light. Daniel pulled off his collar, saying, "Thanks. I won't need this anymore." I stood next to him with my arm around his shoulders. The day was just beginning, and life seemed limitless.

Of course there was a following day, the appointment in Mr. Pfnausch's office. There would always be following days. Mornings after. One tomorrow after another stacking up beyond belief, beyond endurance. I touched Daniel's shoulder under the crisp white sheet but it felt bony and cold.

You spent your whole life looking for magic, going back over and over, trying to find that place again, that hilltop in the sun, that moment before tomorrows when everything seemed perfect. And all the time your life kept moving forward, while you kept going back, until what you finally found was just yourself for a moment, lying at a crossroads, true and gray against bleached hospital sheets. Daniel.

Drinking was the great expansion, where all the rules were suspended and nothing could ever go wrong. I came to believe it was like sex, always there just under the surface, silently organizing everything and everybody. The want that could not be satisfied, the voice that would not be stilled—

whispering to you endlessly with its promise and its power. Promising everything, conscious and unconscious desire, waiting for you forever. But the promise was always the greatest part, and always disappointing in the end. No one could keep promises like that.

But more than broken promises, I think the tomorrows finally overwhelmed Daniel. The immensity of them stretching away. When I picture him now I see him exhausted, I see him scared. Scared for a long time, a lifetime. I don't think he was ever able to face his fears. Except maybe at the end—and maybe that's what killed him. Perhaps he always knew it would—perhaps he spent a lifetime sobering up to terror. Self–loathing and defeat and the knowledge of his father's death. The knowledge that this thing was his inheritance, his birthright, greater than he was and maybe from the start he knew he was doomed. Maybe from the very beginning he could see all the way to the end, the dangling belt.

Here, we learn the most basic things—electron orbitals, positive and negative valences, the way atoms combine to form simple molecules. We proceed step by step biochemically—through sugars and fats to proteins and nucleic acids. Then microscopically, histologically, anatomically—cells to tissues to organs to organ systems. Finally we consider the human organism. It's very thorough.

But no one ever asks why. No one even remembers.

Here, we understand nothing. Not even simple physics, the second law of thermodynamics. We forget that chaos is the natural order of things. That ultimately everything comes apart. Life is futile beyond words, a puny holding action against the inexorable scraping of the universe.

We're nothing but a collection of molecules, spinning through the void—atoms linked for a moment by shared electrons, seeking balance and stability. Driven by positive and negative forces, trying to equalize opposite charges, always looking for the perfect match. Is that the same as loneliness?

I think of Sarah a lot. I was the one who gave her away when she married last week. She asked me to walk up the aisle with her and I couldn't refuse—I took her father's place, her brother's place. But across this long spring I've come to realize that I wanted to take the *groom's* place, I wanted to be the one to walk *down* the aisle with her. I wanted to *start* a life with Sarah, not mark the end of one. There are too many endings here.

Once Daniel was like a brother, showing me the way. But I'm not sure I want to continue anymore. Four more years here and residencies after that and anything that matters just sort of tacked on later as an afterthought. Love and marriage. Or not marriage. Eventual children. A friend's suicide. What's the point of going forward? I want to go back, start over, find the wrong turns and make the right ones.

My first mentor, Skip, tried to teach me to get used to the idea of dying, death. But personally I don't think you can ever do that. Sometimes I think

hope is all we have, and the loss of that is unbearable. But hope is just ignorance; knowledge reveals that.

I wish for a return to simplicity. A hilltop in the sun. I'm sick of thinking. Remembering and dreaming. I want to find those memory links and break all the connections, clog the receptor sites, flood the synaptic spaces with some kind of useless analog. I want to forget.

I am so weary. ADP, ATP—there is no energy left. Tomorrow at eight we start our two–year comps, the exams they use to determine who gets to continue. Right now, all I want to do is get drunk. It's a desperate feeling. Scary. Where a phosphate ion ought to be binding with adenosine diphosphate, I just see ethyl alcohol. A much simpler molecule.

Grandmother's Footsteps

I was twelve the summer Grin's boots finally fit me. For years, I had been going to the cupboard under the stairs with its dirty black and white floor and feet-worn smell of very old gumboots, and pressing my own feet down onto the imprint of hers. Not gumboots, these, but brown leather ankle-boots with sturdy, flat heels, round toecaps, and a big metal zip right up the front. Winter boots with sheepskin inside, only the sheepskin was worn to lumps around the shape of her feet at the bottom, and fluctuated in thin yellow curls around the ankles. I think I had memories of her gardening in them, but I'm not sure if I really saw her wear them, or if I just knew that she had, once. Not like her faded black coolie hat with the pointed crown and long raffia plaits that hung down on either side of your face like real hair. I had short hair that never seemed to want to grow much, and I loved wearing that hat, and tossing the plaits with a rustle over my shoulder just as if I had long hair myself.

Grin let me borrow the hat if I was careful with it, but she wore it quite often herself in the summer when she went into the walled garden to weed or prune or deadhead. She looked like a little Chinese doll from a distance, specially when Johnno was with her, panting up and down somewhere close to her, or sitting on a nearby bench as if he were on a mantlepiece. He was a Pekinese with a silky coat of wheat and a snarffly nose, and ever since he was a puppy Grin kept all the hair she brushed out of him to have woven into knitting wool some day. After he died two years ago, she burnt it, though, and I was secretly rather relieved. I had a feeling it was me she was thinking of making something for, and I don't think I could have worn Johnno's fur, however nicely she knitted it.

She was a wonderful gardener, who could coax any plant up from the heavy black soil as if it was springing through the most airy of peats. Her snowdrops hung heavier heads than any in the surrounding woods, lavender grew for her into great silvery cloudpuffs, and fuchsia tangled into the jasmine and honeysuckle climbing the wall behind it. Irises and columbines, lily-of-the-valley, musk roses and forget-me-nots, marigolds, mallows, mimosa and pinks—the walled garden where I spent so much of my time rioted with her green power. You should have seen it.

She wore plastic sandals now, with ankle socks, because she said they were soft and really quite cheap, so that she could buy several pairs at a time and store them in the larder, in a dark corner beneath the great slate shelf. She told me that sun was bad for them. The plastic was transparent, and I thought

it was odd to see my grandmother's socked feet through them, smoothly shaped like hot-dog buns, but I never thought much about it. I didn't question my grandparents like I did my parents.

I went to stay with Grin and Granpa every summer while my parents went abroad to France to eat. Sometimes I stayed with them at Easter, too, and once I had been there for Christmas with my parents, but I knew that had been a long time ago. Then, if I stood tall, I could just rest my chin on the dining-room table. I liked the cool, waxy way it stuck to my skin as I dipped my head first to one side and then the other. But I was the only child there, and I had to be very quiet. My mother made much of scooping me up and kissing me when it was time to take me upstairs to bed, but she never stayed and read to me, and Uncle James and Aunt Lara kept asking me questions that they didn't wait long enough for me to answer. I felt myself physically shrinking in size like Alice, and imagined myself walking easily up and down the stairs of the doll's house in the nursery, and climbing into the fourposter bed beside the little Victorian lady with red circles painted on her cheeks. Only Grin and Johnno treated me normally, but Grin was distracted with so many people there, and seemed to spend all her time counting to make sure she had enough things to go round. Eight, nine, ten potatoes left; a dozen eggs ought just to do breakfast if there are still seven sausages; six napkins means one is missing; are there enough soup spoons if both Thompsons stay for dinner? One pot of raspberry, four of rhubarb, only Lara won't eat that, two peach, one marmalade, it's not enough. She still counted, but now she did it on little pieces of paper. It took me ages to work out what they were when I first found them lying around the house.

The walled garden was no place to wander in the cold, January rain, even if I had been allowed out alone. Grin came with me one morning when I had been hanging around her skirts to show me the black and cabbage-grey dyingness of it, and after that I hid myself in the nursery with Johnno. I played with the old toys that my father and Uncle James had played with, and Grin and her sister before that, and I inhaled the cedar-damp smell of the deep cupboards in there, and wished that me and Grin were the only people in the world. I much preferred coming here in the summer.

Sitting in my shorts on the muddy black and white floor, I zipped and unzipped the boots several times, a most satisfying sound and a most satisfying tingle up the middle of each foot as I did so. I pushed away my abandoned Reeboks, and stood up into the heavy hanging macintoshes and tweed jackets, clumping the boots solidly up and down for a moment. A perfect fit. I could remember the disappointment when, so many times before, my feet had slid right out of the boots even when they were zipped up, and I had been able to move the boots only by dragging their heels along the floor. I pushed my way out of the cupboard, and walked slowly down the long wooden floor of the passage to the kitchen, listening with a hugging delight to each step's

hard clop, and feeling the alien weight at the end of my legs like extra years.

Grin was making pastry. There seemed to be yards and yards of it spread like a blanket over the old kitchen table.

"Pies for an army, Grin?" I asked.

"What army?" she said, and broke off her smooth motions with the rolling pin. "What army are you talking about, Child?" I had always thought her eyes were the blue of bright sky, but they looked dull this morning, and wisps of white hair were sticking like feathers through the net that was supposed to keep her tidy.

"You're making lots of pastry, Grin. I just wondered." For a moment I really did wonder. "I mean, a lot."

She looked at it. "I added some more flour, and then I think I needed more margerine. And more flour. And water. I had to get the balance right. Did I remember salt, now?"

"It looks good," I said, hoping she might offer me a little raw handful of it.

"You can never have too much," she said. "You never know when you're going to need it. Quite suddenly." She looked down at her blanket with a certain air of puzzlement.

"Grin," I said. "Would you mind awfully if I wore your boots?"

"Boots?" she said vaguely.

I stuck a foot out. "These boots. I fit into them. They're really nice."

"Stand next to me," she said, "Shoulder to shoulder." I shuffled alongside her, till my shoulder touched hers and we could just squint round at each other. She smelt a bit like the cupboard under the stairs, and was just as familiar and dear to me. "You're as tall as I am," she said. "Look how you've grown. Another year and you'll have grown past me."

I'd always liked the fact that she wasn't so very much taller than I was, didn't tower and lean like so many grown-ups. But I hated the fact that she might soon be smaller than me. "We're equals, Grin. We're twins. Peas in a pod."

"Sisters," she said unexpectedly. "Ellie and Ursula."

My Great Aunt Ursula had died in a hotel fire in Marrakesh twenty years before I had been born. I used to have nightmares about it, and wake sweating and suffocating into my pillow with the smell of smoke tangibly in my room.

"Little Ursula," said Grin, and she swung round and looked at me with her eyes full of tears. I felt myself blushing. I couldn't help it. "Of course you may wear my boots," she said fiercely, and her feathers of hair shook for a moment. "Of course. Now go and leave me in peace. I should never have made so much if you hadn't distracted me."

The morning seemed suddenly light and long. I clopped back down the wooden passage again, past the dining-room that was completely shut-up now,

and ran across the wide hallway covered in prickly brown matting that muffled my boots. I walked through the open front door onto the stone slabs outside, and into the lovely, green-scented air. My footsteps on the slabs sounded like my father's when he was dressed for the office: firm, authoritative, click, click, click on the hard pavement, in a hurry, earning money, going to meetings, man to man. I strode round the small stone square, wondering, as I had most of my life, what it would be like to be a boy. Then I thought of what it would be like to have a sister, but without the sense of loss I used to feel. I was glad to be here, alive this morning and on my own.

I decided to walk down the long driveway, whose hardened gravelly-with-bald-bits surface made a lovely scrunching, scraping sort of sound, like chewing on dry cornflakes. I still felt unlike myself, or rather like myself extended into someone else, someone in charge, a soldier or a nurse or a John Buchan hero. You know, Richard Hannay with a spare shirt and a toothbrush and a book in his pocket, and *nothing else* for a ten-day hike among the hills.

Half way down the drive, I turned off into the best of the rhododendron caves that flanked it. Grin had first showed me this one when I was quite small, and told me that it should be mine for as long as I needed it. She gave me the oval wooden base from a box of dates, on which I painted "Misselthwaite Manor" before being allowed to nail it to one of the rhododendron trunks. And trunks they had, these huge gnarled rhododendrons. Planted by my great-great-great grandfather, they were bent over one another now, intertwined, fallen in to form earthy, fragrant caves big enough to stand up in, with branches that made seats to sit in or swings to swing in, or rigging to play Pirates in—round and round the cave without your feet touching the ground. Misselthwaite was my house, my sanctuary, my theatre, and the scrubby little rhododendron bush at school could sometimes make me cry with its pale travesty of a scent that would make me homesick all my life.

I sat on my favourite branch, and spread my boots out before me so that I could admire them. I stretched out first one leg and then the other to see how they looked. The surface of the leather was crisscrossed all over with tiny lines, rather like those on Grin's face, especially after she had taken her afternoon nap, only Grin's face was soft and warm, and the boots were hard and sassy. There were deeper scratches here and there, and almost no proper brown left on the toecaps, which were a kind of wounded yellow colour. I leant forward and stroked them gently. "I'll get you some polish tonight, I promise," I said. As I looked down at them, I felt a protective, lurching-in-the-stomach kind of love for them. I drew my feet up, and clutched my arms right round the soles, feeling the thick worn leather of them and the little nails and the square ridge of the heels, hugging them as if, painfully, I was about to lose them.

I thought about Grin and her pastry, and the pairs of plastic sandals in the larder, and the scraps of paper covered in sums, and the box of used elec-

tric light bulbs in the big kitchen cupboard, and the notes that she left everywhere to herself. I mean, everyone writes notes to themselves every now and then. I do. Grin's had begun to make me feel unhappy, though. I had found one yesterday in the bathroom that said "Remember to look at note on left of sideboard in kitchen." I wondered if Granpa knew she was worried. I knew, but it wasn't the sort of thing that she and I talked about usually. With Grin I could talk about birds and books and flowers and about how I was doing in school and things, but it would never have occurred to me to talk about her. It wouldn't have seemed right. I don't think until then that I'd realised that the years I longed for to make me grow tall and free from childhood would make Grin old. Not old like she'd always been, but really old. I didn't think about her dying because that seemed like at the wrong end of a telescope, but I thought of her here alone with Granpa after I'd gone home, and it made me want to cry. I hugged my boots tighter, and took a big long breath of rhododendron air. I wondered when she had bought the boots, and what they looked like new in the shop, and where the shop was, and what Grin was wearing that day, and why she had decided on that particular pair, and whether she could ever have imagined that one day I would be big enough to wear them too. And I felt a bit better, though when fear pushes inside you, it's as hard to ignore as pain. I got up out of the silence, and pushed my way out through the Misselthwaite leaves. As I walked on down the drive, I listened only to the hard responsible sound of the boots tramping until I had reached the wide and rather dirty white gate that led out into the lane.

I stood on the bottom rung of the gate and leaned my arms over the top, and the thickness of the boots under my feet was comforting. I could hear, somewhere far off down the lane, the familiar grumble of Granpa's car, so I waited to open the gate for him and maybe to catch a ride up the drive with him if he was in a good mood. Granpa was one of my favourite people, but from a distance usually. I don't mean I was afraid of him or anything, just that while I admired him a lot, I couldn't share important things with him like I could with Grin. Like I might with a friend. Talking to him was sometimes difficult, as if we didn't quite use words the same way, or as if we had only just met for the first time and weren't sure how to get acquainted. He was writing a book about local history, which he had been writing ever since I could remember, and he spent much of every day sitting at the huge desk in his study surrounded by books and papers and maps. I loved his study. It had books from floor to ceiling, and a particular leathery church smell to it, and lots of little tables all over the place that had wonderful things on them. A zebra-skin drum, for instance. An old tin monkey whose legs went up if you pulled his tail. A fly whisk made from the tail of one of Granpa's favourite horses when it died. A stuffed barn owl with scary wings outstretched. A real pelican's egg. I liked it when Granpa sat back in his chair and lit his pipe, and let me move around the tables touching his treasures. But I didn't really like it when

Grin asked me to go up and tell him lunch was ready because I never knew if he wanted to be interrupted or not, and sometimes he didn't, and either growled about damnfool women and their everlasting meals, or ignored me altogether, coming downstairs ten minutes later to complain about cold food.

I liked it best when I could watch him from a distance, and then I knew why I loved him so much. He could play the piano fast enough to make your skin go funny. He could do tricks with a yoyo that left me green with envy but that he said were impossible to teach anyone else, and he was the best fisherman for miles around. It was a special treat to follow him down to the river, and watch him thigh-deep in the pushing water, whirling the line above his head and sending it sissing into the deep shadows. He rarely came home without a fish, and would present his catch with a ceremonial bow to Grin, who would invariably sigh and say to him, "Oh, Arthur, all those scales," but then serve it up just the way he liked it with melted butter and parsley from the garden and one slice of lemon. I liked watching Granpa shaking out his big Sunday paper, or stuffing his pipe with tobacco. I liked watching him striding across a field with his tall, blackthorn thumb-stick, or laughing with his head thrown back at something one of the neighbours had stopped to tell him. When I watched Granpa, I was always proud of him.

I swung the gate back, and he stuck his head out of the car window. "Want a ride?" he asked. I moved the two Tesco's bags full of groceries to the back seat, got in beside him, and shut the car door carefully. It was a rather old Toyota. We sat there for a minute in silence, and then he said, "Playing Grandmother's Footsteps, I see."

It was so often like that. I didn't have a clue what to say.

"If the boot fits, wear it, eh?"

"Oh, boots," I said finally. "Yes, I'm wearing Grin's boots. She said I may. And yes, they do fit. My feet have grown."

Granpa said in a grave voice, "Showed him his room where he must lodge that night. Pulled off his boots, and took away the light." He put the car into first gear, and as its tires began to roll, they sounded as if they were popping the little pieces of gravel beneath them. "Milton," he said.

I kept quiet as we drove slowly up the drive until he said unexpectedly, "Bought those boots for her myself. Might almost be yesterday. Good lord."

"*You* did, Granpa?" I couldn't help it. I was astonished.

"Marshall and Snelgrove, 1948. January sales. Icy weather. Lot of damnfool women and Ellie's feet were cold. She liked the zips."

"So do I, Granpa," I said. "I really like the zips."

"Good lord," he said again. "1948." He parked the car under the corrugated-iron roof of the lean-to that sagged out from the end of the walled garden, and we sat there in silence for a moment, staring out at the shadowy wall in front of us. I waited for him to tell me more about the boots, but he just sighed. "Anno domini," he said finally, and got out of the car. I didn't ask him

what it meant. I sat and watched him in the mirror as, without another look at me, he began walking off slowly towards the house, a plastic Tesco's bag hanging heavily at the end of each arm. He looked very small.

I glanced down at my boots as I opened the car door. In 1948, my father hadn't even been born yet. I went into the walled garden, and began to walk up and down its paths, testing the boots first on a cobbled path, then on a cinder one, then on the concrete one by the little shed. My feet were getting a bit hot, but the satisfying authority with which my heels met the ground was giving me back my still center that fear and Granpa had unsteadied. I could feel the hollow inside me begin to close its edges together.

A long time ago, the garden had been laid out in three parallel segments: a vegetable garden at one end, a flower garden at the other, and a narrow lawn set between two yew hedges in the middle. The vegetable garden still had a few vegetables in it and a strawberry bed in one corner, but most of it was just weedy earth now. The yew hedges needed cutting, and the lawn was more like rough grass, though Granpa did occasionally come out and rather crossly push a mower through it. In the flower section, you could no longer tell it had ever been a rectangle, or see it had ever had a pattern to it. It was a wonderful jungle of lush bushes, pergolas draped with trailing roses, little winding paths, benches almost too overgrown to sit on, and everywhere unexpected bright spaces glowing with brilliant clusters of flowers. There was a pond and a sundial and a herb corner and a stone summerhouse that I think must have had an open space in front of it once and a view of the little pond, but had green leaf-blinds pulled down around it now. Don't think this had all happened by accident, though. This was the careful work of Grin, who spent long hours there, planting and dividing, grafting and feeding, labelling and watering and planning. I knew because I had spent so much time there in the past working with her, one or other of us always wearing the coolie's hat with the long plaits, me asking question after question, and her always trying to answer everything properly. Do you know how rare that is?

I was on a gravel path now that ran round the pond and then led to the one bench I knew was still useable because it was on a little bit of paving in front of the fig tree. Grin used to sit there when her legs started aching. I sat and breathed in the heady scents of roses and nicotiana and somewhere, faintly, rosemary. I wondered how many of the flowers I could still name, and whether Grin had added any new ones this year. I wondered if she was going to come out this afternoon, and whether she'd mind if I wore her boots and her hat. I wanted to toss those plaits over my shoulder just like I had for so many summers, and I wanted Grin to be talking to me about which plants lived happiest together, and about the science of pruning an Albertine, about balancing soil acidity, and how bees found their way back to the hive. This summer, I was beginning to see, she was always writing lists or notes, or she was taking a nap, or she was waiting for something, or she was just too busy, and

then I was afraid that it was me, and I was making all this extra work, so I didn't ask her any more. But I thought perhaps in this blue and fragrant sunshine that this afternoon she might be persuadeable, especially if I had something to show her.

Ground elder is also known as goutweed, which always used to make Grin and me laugh, as we couldn't quite imagine some old curmudgeon with a bandaged foot yanking up difficult handfuls of the stuff and then boiling it or crushing the root or whatever you'd do with it. "It probably gave him the gout in the first place," she'd say, puffing as she pulled and dug with her trowel and tugged at the noxious weed. She would talk to it in quite a cross voice. "Come *on*, you stupid thing. No, you may *not* go running under the jasmine. You really have no business in my garden at all. You are *not welcome*, do you understand?"

It's no good just pulling up ground elder, breaking off the bits you can see. You have to dig down, gently if it's close to a precious plant, and trace the tough white roots, and get every last one of them out if you're really going to do the job properly. Of course, you never entirely get rid of it, but me and Grin were pretty good at keeping it under control. I went to the little shed, and found a trowel and a small fork and the wheelbarrow with the dippy wheel, and I got to work. Almost every bed in the flower garden seemed to have ground elder creeping across it, as well as other easier weeds like groundsel, and it was quite hard to know where to start, so I just went back to the bench by the fig tree and began there, working my way backwards from the wall, and concentrating on a small bit of earth at a time, so that I wouldn't get discouraged. Sometimes I had to stand up and dig. Sometimes I had to kneel down and scoop with the trowel, then I had to half get up again and pull. It was hard work

Hard work brings its own reward. Granny always told me that, though I often wondered how she knew, as she never seemed to me to do any real work at all. Granny was my mother's mother, and she lived in a tall London house in a square that had a communal railed garden in the middle that was hard to get to because of all the traffic that constantly streamed round and round the square. It looked nice from my high bedroom window, though, when I could look down through its tall trees to its green grass and its formal rose beds, and lots of scarlet and yellow tulips in the spring. Granny was eight years younger than Grin, and they had been great friends a long time ago when Granny was nineteen and about to marry Grandfather. She lived alone in the tall house now, except for the Jephsons, who looked after her, and Freddie, who was a rather beautiful corgi with a head like a regal fox and legs like a clockwork mouse. I liked Freddie. I wasn't allowed to take him for walks on my own when I stayed there because of the traffic, but I used to take him out into Granny's long, narrow garden behind the house, and play with him there. He'd hurl his roly body recklessly after a ball for hours, and as long as

we didn't stray off the lawn onto a flower-bed, we were left alone. Mr. Jephson did the garden, and he kept it very tidy indeed. Nothing rioted in Mr. Jephson's garden. Everything grew symmetrically and neatly, with no weeds and no intertwining, but a lot of pink and lilac and white and green, and a miniature croquet set pressed into the lawn if it was warm enough. I thought it was a lovely garden to grow in a town. It was still and clean in an otherwise noisy and dirty place that I wasn't sure I liked, and I enjoyed its crisp, delicate lines just as I enjoyed Granny herself.

I had stayed with her this past Easter, just for the long weekend, while my parents went to stay with my godmother, who lived on her own and didn't like children. My mother didn't exactly say that. What she said to me was, "Cecy will want to talk and talk about her new book, darling. You'll find it all a terrible bore. Wouldn't you be much happier having a cosy weekend with Granny?" Cosy was a funny word to choose, but I didn't at all mind swapping my godmother Cecy's expectation that children should be present but silent for Granny's more relaxed assumption that I would keep out of the way until she had time to give me her full attention. I liked visiting Granny. She had lovely fingernails and ankles, and was always immaculately turned out. So I went to the tall house, and played with Freddie, and went with Mrs. Jephson to Marks and Sparks to buy hot-cross buns, and watched TV in my bedroom in the day time (not allowed at home).

Granny was busy, as she always was, rushing out to visit people or talking on the phone or writing letters in the little green room she called her haven, into which I had never seen anyone go but her and Mrs. Jephson. But on Saturday morning, she took me with her to the Brompton Road to help her choose a pair of evening shoes. At least, that's what she said. I certainly wouldn't have chosen the green suede pair with silver leaves on them that she did. I'm not sure I could have walked in them. But then she said she was feeling generous, and she bought me a pair of high-top Reeboks just like that. Black, too, which I knew my mother would disapprove of. See why I like staying with her?

Granny is fun. She thinks my parents are too serious about things, and she laughs when I tell her what we get up to at school, and best of all, when she's in the mood, she tells me lots about her own life, and about her friends and things, which even my parents never do. And without being asked, she'll often talk about her younger days, and show me improbable-looking photographs of herself with long dark hair and bare legs, or of my mother and her two sisters, all smaller and skinnier than I am. It gives me the real crawlies sometimes, thinking that one day I might look like they do now.

She showed me photographs later that Saturday, after I'd exhausted Freddie in the garden and nearly gone to sleep on my bed in front of an old TV film called *Easter Parade*. We had tea together in the sitting-room, and when we'd finished she got out her wedding album, which I'd never seen

before. I must have seen most of her other albums, but never that one, though I'd looked many times at the big photo in the silver frame that was always on the piano. Her and Grandfather kissing each other, her veil almost obscuring his face, though you can see how young and thin he looked. I remember him as being almost totally bald, with a huge belly that caved you right in when you had to kiss him, and odd, sweet breath. He had died when I was seven, though, and I couldn't remember him very clearly. I had once overheard my father telling someone on the phone that his death was a blessing in disguise, but I'm still not sure if it was a blessing because his heart was so bad, or because Granny didn't like him very much. I watched her place the album on the small table in front of her, and I stopped poking down the back of my new shoes at the blisters there, and moved up beside her on the sofa as she slowly turned the pages. After she'd dropped me home earlier, she'd gone out to get her hair done, and I could smell the hairspray as I bent down to look at the photographs.

"What a day," she said.

"Was it very exciting?" I asked her, looking at her five little bridesmaids with some envy. I had never been a bridesmaid.

"My parents made sure it should seem the most wonderful day of my life," she said, and I wasn't certain exactly what she meant.

"They made it magic for you?" I prompted her.

"They made sure," she said, "that it happened, and that every moment of it should appear part of the fairy tale."

"You looked lovely," I said. It was true. She looked just like a princess in a fairy tale should look, and so totally unlike the stiff-haired Granny I was sitting next to that it was hard to connect the two people, though of course I wouldn't have said so.

"There was still rationing then," she said. "Goodness knows what my mother had to do to get the material for that dress. It was very uncomfortable," she added, tracing the dress's outline on the open page with one finger, "but it rustled beautifully. I can still hear the rustle." She gazed for a moment more, then sighed and turned over the page to a group of guests standing on the church porch. All the women wore fur coats. I was rather shocked.

"I would much rather have had a summer wedding," she said. "It was so cold that day. Sunny, but cold. Icy weather."

"Look," I said, pointing, "There's Grin. Doesn't she look young? And elegant. I've never seen her look like that." Standing at the end of the second row, there she was, small and straight, with a little fur hat to match her coat and lipstick on her smiling mouth.

"Oh, Ellie," Granny said. "Impossible Ellie. How angry I was with her that day."

"With Grin?" I said. "Why?"

Granny paused for a moment, looking at the photograph, and then turned

her head away from me. She moved her hands absently across the open book, so that I couldn't see the photos anymore. She didn't answer for a while. Eventually she said, "Well, it doesn't matter now." She cleared her throat. "She was the only person there who didn't tell me how lucky I was. She said to me after the service, 'it's going to be hard work, I'm afraid, but you're strong. You can do it. Good luck, my dear.' And she kissed me, with that assinine husband of hers just smiling beside her. I was so angry with her. We were never such friends again after that, though I think we were both glad when our children married each other." She turned and gave me her pleased-I-was-here smile, but I could see she wasn't really looking at me.

"Hard work being married?" I asked, not until much later connecting the assinine husband with Granpa.

She shut the album with a hollow thud, and pushed herself up from the sofa. "I don't know why I started looking at all this stuff," she said. "So maudlin. Let's play a quick game of Scrabble together, my darling, and then I shall have to run. My dear friend will be picking me up at seven o'clock, and I must have a bath."

Hard work brings its own reward. As I dug and pulled, I thought about how often she had said that to me over the years, and it occurred to me for the first time that she didn't just mean working hard at school or a job or at playing the piano, even though she would say it when I told her I hated practising. I straightened up. I had nearly a whole wheelbarrow full of ground elder, and I surveyed the clean, dark earth of my labours with some pride. The clumps of flowers and the bushes that I'd cleared around already seemed to be expanding into their new spaces. I don't think I'd ever worked for so long in the garden by myself, and I made a vow that if Grin were still busy and tired, I would go on coming out until the whole garden was free from weeds. I wanted to show her, I think, that I was no longer the little girl with all the questions, but someone who could be a help to her so she wouldn't have to worry so much. And of course at the same time I also wanted to be the little girl again, with Grin beside me telling me what to do and answering all my puzzles, and that made me want to cry again, so I concentrated my whole self on the sound of my boots clomping onto the cobbled path at the bottom of the garden, growing harder-edged as they shed the earth that was stuck to them, the little nails clicking and sliding on the stones.

I pushed the wheelbarrow along to the weed-heap at the corner of the vegetable garden, and into my mind came what Granpa had said about playing Grandmother's Footsteps. Such a silly game, but it always made your heart beat incredibly fast, specially if you were the one in front being pursued by everybody else, the one in charge who could freeze them all by turning round, yet the most scared in a way because there were so many of them creeping up behind you, just dying to catch you and touch you so that you lost. Like walking through a field of bullocks. You can hear their legs swishing in the

grass behind you and their long breathy sighs in your ears, but you have no idea if they're about to get dangerous, and butt and jostle past you. It's really quite frightening. Was he just being clever because I was wearing her boots, or did he mean something else? You never knew with Granpa. She and I were the same height, and of course I knew that I hadn't stopped growing yet, and so in that way I was catching her up and would even overtake her, but wouldn't she always be in front? Grandparent, parent, child was how it went, I knew, yet at this moment I had the feeling of being right next to her, as close as I imagined sisters to be, and I felt almost suffocatingly protective.

There seemed to be an awful lot of weeds, and I had to tidy the pile with the fork before it would make a proper mound. My fingernails were packed with earth and my hands ached with all the pulling. So did my back and legs, and I thought with real longing of the bench under the fig tree, but I wanted to go and find Grin and to tell her what I'd been doing, and if possible to get her out here to show her all my hard work. Thin high clouds had begun to film the sky, and the garden had a still, end-of-morning feel to it all of a sudden. As I washed my hands the best I could in the little pond, I felt lonely and lucky at the same time. It was an odd feeling.

When I got back to the front door, I scraped as much dirt off as I could on the scraper, then I sat down on the stone slabs and unzipped the boots. My socks were quite hot. I carried the boots across the prickly brown matting that dug into my feet, and reluctantly went into the cupboard under the stairs. It was really hard to put them down on the muddy black and white floor and to put my boring soft Reeboks back on, but I left them carefully side by side and directly under the black coolie hat, one of whose plaits, I could see, needed sewing up again at the bottom. I vowed I would come back and do it later when I returned to polish the boots. As I walked down the passage to the kitchen, I felt as if my feet didn't quite belong to me, while my legs seemed heavy and unresponsive, like when you've just jumped off a trampoline, you know?

Grin was standing at the sideboard beside a row of pies, some round, some oval, some square, one looking suspiciously as if it had been baked in Johnno's old enamel dog dish. One or two were a little burnt, and there seemed to be a lot of different smells coming from them, but overriding these was a warm, rich pastry smell that hung comfortingly over everything, and with a rush brought back so many summer mornings like this one.

"Grin," I said. "Guess what I've been doing?"

Grin didn't react to me, and I realised she was counting. "Six, seven, eight," she murmured, and stood still for a moment before turning round, her face flushed and slightly bewildered and her hair-feathers more ruffled than ever. "Oh good, you're here," she said. "One of these is for lunch, but how can I possibly tell which one? So stupid. I should have put pastry leaves on top, or L for lunch or something, but I didn't, and now I'm going to have to

cut them all open to find the right one. What a nuisance this all is." She turned back to the pies, but made no move to carry out her plan. "Why am I so stupid?" I heard her mutter, though I don't think she meant me to hear.

"Grin," I said. "I've got an idea. What did you put in the pie for lunch?"

"Put in?" she asked vaguely, still looking at the anonymous row before her.

"Yes, in the pie," I said. "The lunch pie. What was it?"

She turned back to me. "Some had apple and raisins, and some had stewing steak," she said. "And kidney, though the price is fast becoming quite outrageous. And one had bacon from last night with some potato added. And I think there was another."

"Was the bacon and potato one for lunch?" I suggested.

"Your grandfather likes bacon and potato pie," she said. "But I can't find it. This food is all such a nuisance, you can't imagine, Child."

I went over to Grin and I kissed her. I think I surprised both of us. Then I bent over the pies, and it really wasn't difficult to pick out the bacon and potato one. Some of it had come out from under one side of the crust and you could smell it. "This is it, Grin," I said. "Shall I put it on the table for you?" I wiped the table, which was still a little floury, unearthed a mat, then I carried the pie over and set it down. I laid the table, and Grin watched me, wiping her hands on her apron as if it had been a towel.

"I put the rest of the pastry in the fridge," she said. "I didn't want to waste it, but there was so much of it. I have no idea where it all came from."

"I do love you," I said.

"I can't think why," she said quite sharply. "Now, let's bring your grandfather down here and get it over with. I'm much too busy to be wasting time standing around like this. Go on, Child. Go upstairs and tell him lunch is ready."

But I didn't. I went to the bottom of the stairs and yelled that lunch was ready, and I didn't wait for his reply.

"He'll come when he's ready," I said to Grin, and I sat down at the table.

She looked at me, and her blue eyes were very bright. "Poor Ursula," she said. "Such a nuisance for you." I blushed. I wanted to tell her I didn't mind doing it for her; it was not knowing what he might say that I didn't like. "He always went his own way," she said. "Always did exactly as he pleased. But he never amazed me as he amazed other people. Poor Arthur." She placidly began to cut open the pie, and was spooning a third portion out when Granpa came into the room and sat down in his chair-with-arms at the head of the table, and shook out his napkin as he always did, with the same force he used when sneezing.

"Pie, Arthur," she said, passing him his plate. "And do try not to make so much noise, if that's possible." She quite often said the same thing to him.

Granpa sighed. "Little, shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and

troublesome *insects* of the hour," he said, but he was looking at me from under his bushy brows, and I wondered if I was in trouble.

"Edmund Burke," said Grin. "Such a loquacious man."

"What's this?" asked Granpa, forking a piece of pie into his mouth. "Slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails?"

Neither Grin nor I answered him, though for once I could have. But his voice was cheerful and in a funny way gentle, and besides, the pie was quite good and I was hungry.

"Cat got your tongue?" he said, and this time he was looking at Grin. She went on cutting up the tiny portion of pie she'd cut for herself, and eating bird-mouthfuls without raising her eyes from her plate. "Stepped out of her shoes, then, have you?" he asked after several moments of silence, and I guessed he must be talking to me.

"I've taken off the boots, yes," I replied. "I put them back in the cupboard."

"Like those boots, do you?" he asked, but he was still looking at Grin.

"I cleaned a patch of the flower garden this morning," I said, and now I wasn't sure who I was talking to. "I pulled up a whole wheelbarrow-full of ground elder, but there's an awful lot more to go."

"I must go back there sometime," Grin said, half to herself, I thought. "But there's always so much to do."

"Have you forgotten those boots, Ellie?" Granpa said. "Young Ursula reminded me of them this morning. Bitterly cold, do you remember? And some damnfool wedding—whose was it now?"

Grin chewed on her last mouthful of pie without answering, but I was sure she knew whose wedding he was talking about just as well as I did.

"Your grandmother's, that's it," said Granpa, smacking his napkin against the edge of the table with a whipping sound. "Your *other* grandmother's, that is. And what a funny little thing she was, wasn't she, Ellie?"

"Funny?" said Grin, sounding as if she was thinking of something else.

"You know what I mean, Ell. Always up in a snit about something or other. Always Miss Perfect. Felt sorry for that poor bugger she married even as she swept up the aisle towards him."

"Sorry for him?" Grin said, dabbing her finger onto her plate to collect the pastry crumbs there, and eating them very slowly.

"Goddammit, Ellie, stop repeating what I say." Granpa frowned at her, but his voice sounded more coaxing than angry. Grin just went on eating her crumbs, and finally he sighed. He looked at me, then he chuckled and looked hopefully over at her again. "Remember how livid she was with you that day? Remember that, Ellie? Lord, she was ratty. Don't think she ever got over it, did she?"

"Got over what, Granpa?" I asked after a pause, though I could hear Granny's voice in my head more clearly than I think I had at Easter.

"It was those boots, wasn't it, Ell?" Grandpa said, and he gave a short laugh that almost sounded like Ha! "It was those boots. There you were in sable and zip-up boots. Zip-up boots." He wiped his eyes. "She must have thought you were deliberately insulting her and that family of hers, all in their little crocodile flim-flams, just because your feet were cold and there happened to be a sale. I don't know what you said to her after the service, but I remember her ice-queen look alright. Almost made me laugh. Lord, lord, and all for zip-up boots."

Granpa was still chuckling to himself as he began scooping up the remains of his pie. I looked over at Grin, and suddenly she looked up at me, and her eyes were a bright blue, twinkling at me just as I remembered, yet drawing me closer to her than I had ever come in my life. I began to smile back, but even as I did so, it was as if a haze quietly appeared and filtered out the bright sky, and then she wasn't looking at me any more.

Granpa put down his knife and fork noisily, and wiped his mouth several times with his napkin, but even when he took a loud drink of water and then banged the glass down again on the table, she said nothing to him. When I turned round after carrying the dirty plates over to the sink, I saw that she had gone back to the remaining pies on the sideboard, and was writing a note on an old envelope she had pulled from her apron pocket.

Contributors

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