# RED **CEDAR** REVIEW

Winter 2000-01

# Red Cedar Review

Winter 2000-01
Volume XXXVI Issue 1

*This issue is dedicated to the memory of D.M. Rosenberg.*

# Red Cedar Review

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Cover Image: Untitled, *from the series* Scenes Taken in Hemlock, Michigan on October 24, 1999 *by Roger Funk*

"About four years ago, I passed through the village of Hemlock, Michigan on the way to a meeting in Midland. This was the first time that I had seen the village and this aging grain processing facility. It sits in the middle of town and projects a kind of majesty and splendor over the surrounding area while speaking of a departed past. As I drove on, I resolved to return and photograph the building at some point. On October 24, 1999, I revisited Hemlock on a crisp, sunny fall day so typical of Michigan and made a series of images, of which this is one. I was excited by the abstract qualities of the structure, the cast shadows and the strong contrast between the intense sky and the stark whiteness of the corrugated siding."—*Roger Funk*

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# Heads Up, Seven Up
## by Matt Duke

So I met Marvin at this party right before classes started. Mutual friends. I saw him and introduced myself, because I thought, well, you can't just not. I kept wanting to put my hand on his back, his shoulder, his neck. Then at some point I'd had enough to drink that I just found him and chatted him up and then leaned in and whispered, "You're very nice looking." I didn't have the guts to do this in a gay bar, but apparently at a house party full of straight people it wasn't a problem. Or maybe I just knew something.

If my statement surprised him, it didn't register in his face. He just started asking me questions: "Why are you gay, what made you gay, okay then, why do you think you're gay?" Then later, "What kind of guys are you attracted to?" and with each successive question, I knew I maybe could have him.

Around five in the morning we ended up in bed; more accurately, a big old couch upstairs. Someone had passed out on the floor in the room. We dragged him out, shut the door, locked it. Marvin checked the lock twice. He'd been playing it real cool all night, I was making all the moves; everything seemed slow and like I could say the wrong thing at any time and my chance would be over. And then when I'd been about to give up and walk home–I lived close enough–he'd suggested we find somewhere to sleep. Okay, I thought. Okay.

In the predawn summer light, he lay down on that sofa, somebody's parents' sixties relic cast aside after redecorating. I squeezed in next to him and he turned away from me and said, "Unh uh, sleep somewhere else." So I tapped his arm, said "good night, good-bye" and started to really leave and he grabbed the back of my shirt. But this time I kissed him and his hands reached around my back and stayed there. Then he was kissing me back and saying, "No. No, no, no," but I knew. This was it. His heart was growing instead of his stomach, so I didn't stop and kissed him harder. Dark: he was dark, sometimes it was hard to see him, and next to him my skin looked sickly, pallid. He was broad-shouldered and hairy and had a big gap between his two front teeth I explored with my tongue. The thinnest beard and goatee.

Once we started, he didn't want to stop. I said, "Marvin, wait, wait." We were both breathing with heft, economy. Bearded chins together making velcro music. Our kisses were scratchy, sloppy, rough; a woman would slap you for kissing this way I thought. So we messed around 'til I decided there was too much light in the room to feel comfortably naked in

front of him anymore. I couldn't close my eyes, couldn't spare a blink, thinking he'd probably be gone if I did. There was this mosquito buzzing around somewhere in the room. It alighted for a second in my ear, whispered, "susceptibility, vulnerability" then flitted away, dripping blood. It left Marvin alone.

It was two weeks before I even talked to him again. I called him, though; a lot. I didn't want to, he avoided the calls. If he'd had caller ID that probably would've been the end of things. But finally, one day, he answered.

"No one can know," he said. "You can't tell anyone what we did."

I said, "Okay. So when can I see you again?" Because how did I tell him it was already too late for warnings.

We talked easily, conversationally, from the beginning. At first, just about boys. The guys we knew mutually, but mostly celebrities: actors, singers. Sometimes our choices overlapped; we never got tired of talking about Bruce Willis. *I* never got tired of talking about Bruce Willis. Then we started swapping more personal information: family, disappointments, secret desires. He talked about his mother a lot.

"Tell me about your dad," I said once.

"Nah. No." And that was the end of it.

We didn't have dates so much as encounters. He was always reticent about getting together, going out. The problem, he said, was that people, our friends, some of his, knew I was gay. So we sneaked around and it made him edgy. Sometimes I saw those old-fashioned grocery store produce scales in his eyes, weighing risk versus pleasure. I watched for tipping. I was vigilant.

I gave him my dirty magazines. I only had four. He took them all, and my two pornos. It wasn't much of a collection. One night, he called me up late, one or two in the morning, said, "Guess what I'm watching," and started chuckling. I couldn't see his eyes, but that particular night I didn't worry about the grocery scales.

He wouldn't meet my friends. He wouldn't let me take his picture.

"No, I don't look good right now.," he'd say.

"Well, how am I going to remember you when I'm old and gray," I joked once.

"Are you planning on forgetting me?" He kissed me then. "You won't remember me?" Another kiss.

Once, I started to snap a shot, quickly, while he wasn't paying attention. "No!" He held his arm up, palm out, and turned away.

Encounter #6: Marvin's dorm suitemate had gone home, so I spent the

weekend over there. At one point, we had Marvin Gaye's *What's Goin' On* LP playing, trading back massages.

"You know I'm named after him," Marvin said. He was sitting in front of me, my legs around him. I couldn't see his face. "Marvin Gaye."

"No kidding," I said.

"Yeah, my mom was listening to the *Here, My Dear* album when her water broke, so she just thought, why not, right," he said.

'"You know, I always thought he was a lot sexier once he grew that beard," I said. Marvin just shrugged. He liked white guys better. "You know he added that 'e' to his last name," I said. I stopped massaging, cradled my arm around his neck.

"Why?" he asked. He took my arm from around his neck and put it back on his back. "Don't stop," he said.

I got back to work. "Well, kids teasing him I guess. So when he was old enough, he just changed the spelling."

"No kidding." Mimicking me.

"Well, would you want 'Gay' for your last name?" I karate-chopped his back a little in retaliation. He thought I was telling stories.

"No, but I mean, it's not even different really. It's the same name. Don't stop!"

"Sorry," I said. "Listen. I agree with you, but it was different enough to make him feel better about it, I guess."

"I guess."

I rested my face on his bare back, lips to spine. "Marvin, gay," I whispered, mouth muffled. "Gay, Marvin."

"Shut up," he whispered back.

*

After a while, the phrase "I love you" got a green card and set up permanent residence in my mind. I wondered if I'd ever feel secure enough to say it out loud, and then one night in his bed I did. But the worst part was that he said it back and nuzzled me, put my hand on his chest, rubbed it around because he knew I loved the feel of the hair there, and so I felt compelled to say it again. Then this look on his face, like it'd gotten too serious all of a sudden, and he wanted his words back, back, back. A long drive into foul territory. I caught it anyway and treated it like a home run. But it stung my hands a little, a lot.

There was this annual lip-synch contest, *Fake Da Funk*, the black caucuses on campus sponsored. It was pretty legendary among black students. A lot

of people came into Lansing from all over Michigan and even other states. After the contest, there were big parties held all around the campus. I wanted to go. Badly. I maybe romanticized it a little bit; I'd never been.

Marvin talked about it a lot. You saw people you only saw once a year, if that often, or people you hadn't seen in a long time. There was a spirit of camaraderie I couldn't get a handle on. He had networks of friends and relatives and acquaintances he knew by name; literally hundreds of people. I thought about having hundreds of gay friends and relatives and acquaintances and the impossibility of it all. The pathetic attempts at Gay Pride Days and Weeks on campus that brought out homophobic graffiti artists and drunk gay bashers instead of thousands or revelers, dancing, drinking, laughing. Hooking up. I thought of all this and felt the envy of an unwanted party guest, a desperate need to be a part of it.

Marvin thought it was out of the question.

"Because I'm white," I said.

"Okay." Noncommittal. "We could start with that." He made an attempt at laughter. He had white friends. We both knew my color wasn't the real issue. I might be able to butch it up for awhile, but would alcohol eventually give me away? A chance that couldn't be taken.

Sometimes the words "fear" and "queer" got so twisted, tangled up, blurred in my mind that I couldn't tell the difference between the two. Being a fag was bad. Being an obvious one was unforgivable. We both lived by these rules. I just broke them unintentionally.

"I'm not saying you can't go, you just can't go with me." The worst thing he ever said to me.

No. The worst thing he ever said to me was, "I'll call you." Because I believed it for a while. I lived by the phone, turned the ringer up, turned my life off. And when I couldn't stand one more game of solitaire, I'd call him up and get the machine. Or a dismissal: "I have to study. I have to chill. I have to live my life." I couldn't do any of these things anymore.

No one had it easy. I tried to remind myself. Would you rather be so ugly, he'd never have gone to bed with you in the first place? I needed to be happy I'd gotten as much from him as I had. Would you rather be a cripple, a quadriplegic? Some days, it was harder to answer that question, so I gave myself a shunt or a colostomy bag. Was there really such a difference? We were all, all of us, marginalized in some way.

Encounter #17: We had one last weekend, right before he flew home for

Christmas Break. This time, my apartment.

When he took off his shirt, I saw he'd shaved all the hair off his chest. He saw the look on my face and immediately I was sorry I'd given him any kind of reaction.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked.

"Just felt like it I guess."

I ran my hand over the newly smooth skin and felt slightly sick to my stomach.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I like it. Looks good." It seemed like the only safe answer.

I wouldn't drive him home after sex, so we spent an awkward night beside each other on my futon. He hadn't spent the night with me in awhile–he didn't know what to do with his body. In the morning, I saw he'd edged his way to the end of the bed, one leg on the floor. I reached out to touch his eyelashes and he batted my hand away immediately. Already awake, faking sleep. He turned away.

I lay quietly for awhile, mind wandering. "Did you ever play that game, 'Heads Up, Seven Up' in elementary school?" I asked him finally. He was from California, this was the Midwest. They did things differently out there. But he had. He remembered it.

He opened his eyes. "Yeah, the teacher, what, sent seven kids up to the chalkboard, and you, you like, put your head down on your desk so you couldn't see—"

"Well, you weren't 'supposed' to be able to see," I said. I saw myself, then, six or seven, arms around my head to block my peripheral vision, my thumbs erect, hoping. It was a cruel game, I decided, the seven "chosen" wandering the classroom in search of someone worthy of their touch. If your thumb was tapped you were supposed to retract it, keep quiet until your turn to guess who it might've been.

Marvin was sitting up now. "Yeah, you cheated. That was really the only way to win." He walked over to my desk and sat down to demonstrate. "The trick was to slide your face to the edge of your desk until you could see the floor, and then you just watched the shoes. It was so easy to get away it."

I laughed. I'd done it too. But if you did it too often, classmates got suspicious and they wouldn't tap your thumb.

Marvin walked back over to me then, lay down beside me, looked me in the eyes. "What made you think of that game?"

I conducted a one-sided staring contest with him until I blinked first. Then I said, "I don't know."

But this is what I didn't tell him. That being with him brought back

that rush I'd gotten years earlier when someone would tap my thumb during that stupid game, that introductory lesson the politics of popularity. That touch, sometimes so light you weren't sure it had really happened. Then, too, sometimes a mean boy would twist your thumb or pull at it hard. Either way, it was some kind of magical validation.

He called me from California between Christmas and New Year's. He said, "Let's not do this anymore," and hung up. The scales had tipped for good. Later, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and saw that someone had written "CHUMP" on my forehead with one of those black, indelible markers.

I saw him sneaking back to his old life, slipping back into homosexual anonymity. I found myself unloading on him one night in January. I wanted answers. I wanted The Answer. Why don't you like me enough? Marvin just laughed, laughed like he always did whenever talk got too heavy. Then he said, "I'm sorrry," all stretched out and chuckled through. "I know this is not funny to you." He hid behind religion, sometimes society. I understood he thought his life was happy, just fine the way it was. I had no real right to try and change it.

Encounter #23: A Friday night. Lonely. I called him up and he acted so annoyed, bothered—"I've got people over, good-bye"—that here was an opportunity to make trouble. Would I take it? I sat in my car for a full ten minutes, debating, until it got too cold. I started the car to warm myself and then I was driving, parking at the dorm. Shared the elevator with a cute Domino's delivery guy. We got off on the same floor.

I listened outside Marvin's door for sounds. Chatter. Enough people inside to make voices indistinguishable. I knocked, thanking State silently for not putting peepholes on the doors. A twitch went through him when saw it was me. Probably had an inkling what I was up to.

"What?"

"Let me in."

"Uhn uh. Nah."

"Come in!" A girl's voice, inebriated. Laughter.

Marvin stepped aside. His suitemate Kevin and his best friend Chris were lying on their stomachs, a big glass mug in front of them. One of the girls was Chris's girlfriend. I didn't know the other one. They were all playing Quarters, the girls kneeling tiddlywinks-style on the carpet. I knew Chris a little bit. He looked a little surprised to see me. If he'd been sober he would've questioned it. Instead, they all said hello and went back to

their game.

I turned back to Marvin. "Listen, I just came to get my magazines. I want them back. And my videos," I added.

"I don't have them, I threw them out," he said. I wasn't always the best at reading people, but even I knew this was a total lie. Men–gay, straight, closeted–never threw out porn. I walked him toward the bathroom.

"Look, just get them," I whispered. "I'm not going to make a scene."

"Can't you get them some other time?" He was a little drunk himself.

"Look at it this way," I said. "Give me my stuff and you never have to let me in here again."

Marvin looked at the four on the floor. They were ignoring us. "Okay," he said. "But then leave."

"I will, I promise."

He dug into one of his dresser drawers and rummaged around for a minute. Then he pulled them out, handed me the videos, folded the magazines into a cylindrical formation so no one could see the titles, opened the door. He hesitated, and for a second I thought he was going to throw them into the hallway and leave me scrambling. But then he handed them over, slowly. I gripped, he let go, and I threw everything straight at the window at the far end of the room. The videotapes hit the glass but didn't break it, and there was a satisfactory slap when the magazines connected with the window. They scattered and one landed on Chris' girlfriend.

"Marvin's gay!" I must've screamed it, some kind of exorcism. For a second all I felt was adrenaline. I might've said more but the punch to my face came hard and fast, and then Marvin had me down on the ground where they'd been playing Quarters only moments before. The edge of the right side of my head caught the mug and a few quarters spilled out as it tipped in my direction. I felt one, cold on my earlobe. My shirt had slid up a little and I felt the cold a few places on my back: quarters that had missed the mug, I decided.

Marvin was swinging and I wasn't fighting back. The girls were screaming for him to stop. Blood started running out my nose; it felt like chocolate syrup and tasted like something sweeter.

He'd mounted me—a sexual position—dick on dick, and I thought, God, wouldn't it be great if he just started making out with me in front of all his friends. He saw me kind of giggling to myself about something and pounded me good. I blacked out for a second, came to, felt for the mug and clocked him with it, just hard enough to get him off me.

Then there were RA's in the room and I saw Chris and Kevin standing over me. One of the RA's finally helped me off the floor and I saw Marvin, head in his hands, sobbing. Whoever had helped me up asked, "Can you

walk downstairs?" I nodded and sort of hobbled out of the room. There was a crowd of guys in the hallway. A handful of them were gathered around one of my magazines, laughing.

The RA led me down the hall. "No," I heard someone say. "He fucking outed him, man! He outed him! So Marvin fucking beat the shit out of him."

I walked down that hallway, and really, the only thing I was thinking was: I never did get to take his picture.

Encounter #24: Campus Library, a month later. A random sighting. I approached him and he didn't walk away.

"Everything okay?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"Your friends still speaking to you?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. "It was weird for a while, but I have a girlfriend now, so . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Sorry I have a girlfriend?"

I guess I laughed at that. "Yeah."

"Looks like you're healing okay." He smiled for half a second. I didn't respond.

"Well. I gotta go," he said, and stood up to leave. We were face to face for a minute. Not face to face I guess; he was a little taller. I reached for his thumbs, palmed them in my fists. He let me do it.

And then we were joined for a moment, and I wondered why, why did we have mentality inside of us, among us, surrounding us, that this was something that had to be hidden, done in secret, heads down thumbs up. Marvin had selected me because he thought I wasn't looking, and it was safe. But I'd cheated. I'd looked at his shoes. And, more importantly, I'd been caught.

I felt him struggling out of my grip and we parted, his thumbs free from mine. When I was sure he wasn't looking I tucked my own tight into my fists, and started to walk away. I didn't want to be touched, tapped, anything for awhile.

# Triptych
## by Cynthia Atkins

This time the brooding highway signs
are lit by the last love of another town
and the men are leaving like boxcars

one by one, switching tracks, the dubious train
scuttled away like a crab in the sand.
Meanwhile, the women spoon, slump in their chairs

fanning the coat-tails of aftershave in the air.
Tunes on the radio; *Oh my Bonnie lies over*
*the barstool, my Bonnie lies over the floor.*

She slips the envelope from which
the sad note has already been removed,
into the lining of her growing belly:

(before words, before memory, a new life dangles
like a toy shoe on a charmed necklace.)
Twinkle, twinkle little star . . .

He empties his pockets atop the Motel TV,
and does *peluka push-ups* on the floor.
Meanwhile, at home, she stews, airs the pillows.

Outside, the wind sets off a threat and poofs
into a girly-wide skirt. All the same old arguments
tossed to the ceiling like spaghetti.

Implacable moods, dormant moon.
While the men and women sleep inside
their secrets, the world is loosened

like a hem. *He's a boy sailing paper airplanes*
into the hot jaws of a fire. She's the mother
*of invention.* Rumor has it, he's gone off with

a dimestore floozie. She had a knack for leaving her mark
on a room, but loved once too often. He was the bastard
of a bastard, but had initialed cuff-links.

Good Morning, 7 am, they rise like bread, half-toasted.
He yawns into the mirror. She rouges her cheeks.
The ubiquitous boxes of cornflakes begin to roost

on smooth kitchen counters, as the milk-cartons
announce the day's new missing toothless grin.
And the men and women pick-up and start again.

# Measurements
## by Diane Thiel

She enters him moments before he enters her
and she tells him she is doing so.
And in doing so, she is suddenly his,
but even more her own—

wishes like seeds she sprinkled long ago,
then spun them into yards and yards of hair
she dreamt she had cut for a single night
from another woman's head to finish her own,

to wear it down below her waist,
to wrap its darkness around her,
to hang from her window.
She measured her life each night,

just to know the lengths that she would go.

# Water Signs
## by Meg McClure

Two identical markings, symmetrical
just below your ears, along the jawline
coral-colored scars barely visible to the
naked eye, visible only to my fingertips
or the tip of my tongue.

Gill glands removed at birth, you say
you're convinced you're part Mer
intended to live underwater in a
menagerie of mermaids and sea
anemones, misplaced on dry land with
the seasons and unsmiling women.

You knew I was a water sign upon our
first meeting, the emotional baggage of
Cancer lacking the jagged armor of a crab
An orphan in the ocean of the Zodiac

I always wanted to be a mermaid
practiced swimming with my legs
clenched together as if they were
a single slender fin, as if I decorated
the bow of some sea vessel, arms
outstretched, swirls of orange hair
dancing off the surface of the water

Someday we'll gather our desires
and swim away from each other
Surfacing, I'll adapt to the seasons
Returning to the sea only in dreams,
salty air fresh on my homesick tongue

Until that moment finds us, I tread water
beside you, silent, running my thumb
along your dormant gills, pretending not
to feel the rush of the tides, holding my
head above water in a final attempt to
prolong the ill-fated swirls of fire.

# Night Hawks
## by Jane Vincent Taylor

*After Edward Hopper*

No one seems to care about the man in white–
bar keep, glass swabber. He's not the center of anything.
He wasn't born for it. He's just a quick light
on the eye. The guy whistles, calls out. He's got
the curse of happiness. Six years at Phillie's,
he's feathering his nest. While the rest of the
world is brooding like a dark suit or dealing
romance on the side, he takes pride in the symmetry
of pepper and salt. Later, he'll probably fly out
for a date. Cut a rug down at the old Sipango.
Sugar-bowl boy, she calls him. But in
conversation with the customers he knows
how to dip and glide. He tries to be a cog
in the natural balance. It's no easy job
night after night, perched in the yellow
angle of light, keeping his claws clean
of the cash drawer.

# The Charm of Repeating Islands
## by Virgil Suarez

My oldest daughter Alex brings me a map
of the island of Cuba she's found in her book.
I am shaving and in the mirror in front
of me and the mirror behind me, this island

of my childhood repeats itself as many times
as my eyes can look, and I think of the countless
times a man, shaving, looks at a map of his country
multiply in the mirror, his daughter's puzzled

look verging on annoyance. I say, "Look how
it goes, sweetie." She doesn't know what I'm talking
about, this endless repetition of exiles, caught
in the endless act of shaving, wiping the slate

clean, cutting themselves–all this blood shed
in the traveling from one place to another. Sure,
it is a simple act, this act of repetition, but clearly
it shows us the way. There, on this mirror, that

one, the island rises from the depths of ocean,
dresses itself in its most luscious green, it beckons
us to return, the living and the dead, and suddenly
you can image what the Tainos, saw, what Arawaks,

saw, what Siboneys saw, what Columbus himself
must have seen, an island in the distance, its lure,
a trace of green-blue tinge blurring in the horizon,
a father, a daughter, on the verge of getting home.

# Debris
## by Nate Blom

The ice was going out. Day after day, the piles diminished. In the dead of winter, the ice shoves had climbed past twenty feet. Twenty feet of canyons, slopes, and passages mounded against the shore. Ice driven by the expansion of the freezing bay, crushed between the lake and the rocky face of land, and piled into jagged shapes that the wind whistled through in the cold winter nights. It was a landscape well suited to the boy's imagination. In his storybook visions, he had waged covert operations, avoiding the snowmobiles that sped across the ice, and fought post-holocaust wars against the invading hordes from across the bay. But now the ice, grown in the inevitable freeze of winter, was dying under the warmth of new spring air.

"Winnie! Winnie, come here!" the boy shouted as he watched the chocolate Lab disappear around the curve of the small peninsula. "Jeez, Winnie," he finished to himself.

He picked up his walking stick and followed after the dog.

He had fashioned the stick with his pocketknife, while walking the trail from his house to the park. His grandfather had given him the knife for Christmas, and since then, the boy had been whittling incessantly. As he walked, the curving shoreline brought him closer to the open water that nudged the ice's crumbling edge. One more windy day and the remains of the white mountain range would disappear, swept out into the lake by five-foot breakers.

Bald patches of brown earth were already growing in the snowy fields. The boy's own backyard was flooding with runoffs that couldn't drain through the still-frozen layers of ground. Traces of spring could be seen in the park, too. The soft surface of the deer yard had deteriorated into an open plain of mud. The monotony of a long winter of cedar boughs had the deer churning up the ground with their sharp hooves, looking for fresh sprouts and roots. The ponds' frosted shells of ice were cracking and dark spots appeared as the water, seeking escape from its winter prison, seeped to the surface. With spring would come the crowds of nature-seekers on cool afternoon walks, couples enjoying the breezes off the lake, and children feeding the ducks with the stale ends of bread. And then, when summer finally took its brief, muggy, grip on the park, they would give way to the beach-lovers and car stereos. But for now, the peninsula was still locked in ice, the only sound was the waves, and the boy had the park to himself.

The ice bottle-necked between the black waters and the land at the point, forcing him onto the wooded shore. He stooped through the low-hanging cedars crowding the lake at the peninsula's tip, and emerged from the sheltering trees into a late afternoon wind that smelled of newly opened water. Wishing he had worn his heavy jacket, he brought the hood of his windbreaker up. Winnie was digging in the ice. Her muzzle was white with snow and she paused to look at him as he approached. With a small yip, she resumed digging. "Oh, no. Winnie, get away from that." He climbed over a rock and chased towards her. "You come home smellin' like fish and you know what's gonna be waiting for ya? A bath." The dog had a particular talent for finding the perch fishermen sometimes left behind on the ice. She would take the stiff little fish gently in her teeth and, with a flick of her head, toss them into the air in play. When a fish landed, she would roll on it, wiggling back and forth with her feet in the air. This was, perhaps, the greatest experience in the dog's life.

However, it was unusual for her to find a fish this close to shore in the winter. The fishermen always worked farther out. The boy came closer to see the treasure his dog was unearthing. Winnie had something now, something bright and orange. A piece of cloth frozen hard. She jerked her head against the ice-embedded fabric.

Just as the boy neared, the cloth broke loose and a hand, whitish-blue and clenched, sprang free of the ice.

"Fuck," he said. Winnie brought her head up, a small piece of cloth caught on her tooth. The boy dropped his stick and rushed forward, sliding onto his knees. He threw off his cotton gloves and began to dig, the thawing snow sharp against his fingers. Like a desperate still life, the frozen hand clutched at the air. The boy could almost believe the person was still alive, but as his digging exposed the arm, its stiffness betrayed only death. He backed away from the arm and sat, his breath blossomed heavily in the cold air. He waited, hoping for movement, hoping time would break its freeze-frame and slip back into normal speed, the arm would flex and the person would sit up, ice cracking in their hair as they emerged from the snow.

Winnie trotted up and lay down next to him. The boy put his arm around the dog and pulled her close. For a moment, Winnie tolerated the boy's silent embrace while he stared at the projecting arm. Then, her patience exhausted, she squirmed and wiggled until the boy released her. She moved next to the limb and laid down to gnaw at the accumulated ice between the pads of her paws. The penetrating cold prodded the boy into movement. He jammed his gloves back on, and crawled to the arm. Slower now, he brushed the loosened snow from the base of the arm. As he moved

down the arm, a curve of darker fabric sewn to the orange sleeve appeared. A black patch embroidered with silver lettering and the image of a ship. White stitching rolled from the front of the vessel, waves breaking on its prow.

A dead sailor. The boy read the name of the vessel aloud, "The William Connick." What was the man's name? The patch didn't tell. How had he died? Was he washed overboard on a stormy night, or did he get drunk and fall, the way his friend's father had fallen out of the canoe last summer? Was this the only corpse, or were there more? Did the whole ship sink? He was sure he would have heard if a ship had gone down, but still his eye traced the curved line of the bay, searching for others. He imagined an entire cove of undiscovered corpses, the shoreline dotted with different appendages jutting from the snow, like bulrushes in winter, frozen in ice. Or like the alewives in summer, thousands washed dead upon the beach, their bodies forming stinking heaps. But the landscape was empty, the arm was alone. Did anyone else know this man was dead? Was somebody still waiting for him to come home? What did he look like?

With tentative fingers, he wrapped his hands around the arm. The frozen cloth crinkled in his grip. The arm felt hard, like the arm of the statue at the library, like it had never been real flesh. He gave the dead appendage a curious push. It didn't move. Pulling his hand inside his sleeve and holding it shut to keep snow out, he dusted the grave with wide sweeps of his arm. But after removing the fine surface covering, his sweeps slid ineffectively across the packed layer of snow underneath. He walked back to his stick and picked it up.

With hands on either side, he pulled the dead branch against his knee. The stick bowed in the middle and began to splinter. Arching his back and lifting his shoulders, the boy stretched and the walking stick snapped. Dropping one end, he moved back to the body and kneeled beside it. The broken remainder of the walking stick, gripped in both hands, the boy began to chip loose the packed snow that covered the body. When enough snow had been loosed, he scooped the powder from the growing hole with cupped hands. He used the frozen arm to orient his digging, a frozen compass needle pointing along the dead body's alignment.

The boy focused on unearthing the body part by part. Clear the snow from the leg, the hip, now the shoulder. As the afternoon's light faded, the boy saw only his digging, not the emerging man. It wasn't until the body was exposed in its entirety that the boy stepped back. The man had been tall, but now his frame was bent over in an almost fetal curl. He was wearing an orange float-coat, brown woolen pants and heavy boots. The pants and the coat were torn in many places, evidence of abrasion in the

waves after the body had become just another piece of floating debris. The fingers of the man's other hand were splayed at odd angles, broken from smashing on the shore's rocks. Or maybe they had been ripped away from some last object of hope as his ship went down. The man's face was pale and bloated, but not soft like the dead carp that washed up and rotted on the summer shore. The doughy, waterlogged flesh had been frozen hard in the winter. The man had a short trimmed reddish beard and his jaw was shut, his white lips pressed into thin lines. It didn't look like he was sleeping. It was supposed to look like sleep when someone died, but it didn't. The eyes were open and glassy.

Their shine was dull. Any warmth they had ever possessed was gone. Their cold emptiness scared the boy. Where was the warmth? Had it just seeped into the water as the man died, diffused throughout the Great Lakes' thousands of miles? Or was there somewhere it had gone? A tiny corner of the universe, where the man's heat would collect and never dissipate. The boy began to shiver. The wind had changed direction and was coming off shore now. It swept across the body and brought the faintest scent of sweetness. Even frozen, the body gave off the smell of death. The boy got to his feet and backed up. The wind gently brought the smell, trace as it was, into his face. The boy stumbled away, bent double and vomited. His muscles cramped as his stomach wretched itself empty but continued to convulse.

When the fit had passed, the boy stood up. Winnie, now agitated, jumped against him, trying to lick his hands in concern.

Fighting nausea and dizziness, he picked up his impromptu shovel and walked uneasily back to the body and its sick, sweet smell. It was an object of the cold and had no place in the spring air. With the setting sun and the newly thawed trees watching him, he began to pile snow, trying to undo what he had done, trying to return the body to winter. The scent of the body fingered in his memory. Behind him, waves washed against the disintegrating ice, as the lake continued the erosion of winter's debris. He didn't notice as Winnie circled him, jumping and barking, instinctively uneasy.

# My Mother's Sculptures
## by Barbara O'Dair

Series of headless torsos on makeshift pedestals,
shapely women fired red and prematurely aged
centuries by my mother's deft hand,
which knocked their blocks off before soldiers had a chance to.

Bronze male head with mess of molten curls.
Tender toward this hunk of metal,
she named it Teddy, after a
young lover grown up faithless, and gone.

And then, over in the corner on a low bookshelf,
propping up a couple of cracked black bindings,
pre-fetal figure of unadorned clay,
newt-gray, stumpy, expressionless
save a round eye and crude swipe of smile.

Next to this saved child, self-portrait,
the others are stone-cold.

## Hearing the Middlebury Beeman is Dead
by Lyn Lifshin

On a day honey comes in the
mail. *Honey,* what my mother
and one lover called me,
call me in dreams or in
poems still left to write.
For a moment, the bitter
dissolves. The honey is
like stained glass, the
amber panels in the Church
mansion on the Hudson
that must have twisted
upstate New York grey
days brighter but not
bright enough for him to
go on. The honey sticks
color of beads I found in
my mother's drawer,
broken but full of light.
This honey, flavored with
coconuts from deserts
of sage to soothe the news
of death. In Middlebury
close enough to the bee
man to smell clover and
honey some nights in the
wind. Horses and wild
cats, some said a panther.
Jars of spun honey in the
house I'm rarely in now
waiting like a night light,
twisting the light a little
like the clover smell in our
sheets in the dark

# Chick Sexing School or, How Our Dead Grandfather Summoned Us to Japan

## by Kyoko Yoshida

*List, list, O, list!*
*If thou didst ever thy dear father love–*
–Hamlet

It was right after our grandfather died when my brother George suddenly started to resemble him. To be precise, George started to look like the portrait of Grandpa.

I never met my mother's father, Grandpa Taketora, while he was alive. I'd like to pretend, at least, he was in his coffin, pale and all wrinkled up when I finally saw his face in December 1959. 1 could tell you details as if I had been at the wake, like, his gray hair sticking out of his nostrils bothered me; the tails of his eyebrows were almost touching his closed eyelashes. He was so big for a Japanese man of his age that the undertakers had to bend his knees to fit him into an extra-large coffin, et cetera.

But this is not true. I couldn't see his real face, dead or alive. When I met Grandpa at last, he wasn't Matsuda Taketora any more. He had been given a protracted, incomprehensible posthumous Buddhist name. He had been cremated, put into a ceramic urn, and placed in his family grave on a hill, which commands the Omura Bay.

I have never seen Grandpa Taketora's photograph, either. All I have seen is his oil portrait, which still hangs in our living room. He is in his mid-thirties in the portrait. I must admit he is quite handsome. There he stands, flat against the velvety, gloomy background. He is lean and tall, wearing the Japanese Army's uniform, which doesn't exist on the earth any more, thank goodness. Five decorations on his chest dully gleam in ocher. Grandpa Taketora's prominent features are his wise-looking forehead, lean, lofty nose, and the stubborn-looking thick black eyebrows above gold-rimmed round spectacles on his long, clean-shaven face. My mother doesn't look like him at all. She is a round-faced, button-nosed, short-limbed woman. I regret that I didn't benefit from atavism. Though I inherited none of my maternal side's features, I had been his favorite, his first grandchild.

My parents married against Grandpa Taketora's will. Since then, Grandpa Taketora had never sent her a word, even a New Year's card. The official excuse was that he could not admit that Ma had chosen to stay in America and marry Pa, a second-generation Japanese, a degenerated Japa-

nese–Grandpa might say–who dared to volunteer to fight against his own people in the war. This is not true, by the way. Pa fought against the Germans in Europe. I think Grandpa had been simply difficult because his daughter didn't come back to him. He insisted my mother's stay in America with her aunt was temporary, but technically speaking, she wasn't his daughter any more.

Her mother passed away around 1920, leaving her and her three older siblings. Her father, Grandpa Taketora, was in service in Siberia and had no idea when he could come home. The Reds were so stubborn in Siberia. He had to give up his children to his relatives' care. Three relatives in Japan looked after the three older children, and my mother was sent to her aunt Satoko in San Francisco. Auntie Satoko, who had divorced an Irish-American man, adopted Ma right away before the Anti-Japanese Immigration Law passed in 1924. This made it difficult for Ma to go back to Japan. Although Ma admits that she hoped to remain in America for her own interest, it was not only her fault that she did not return.

As California became a difficult place to live for the Japanese, Auntie Satoko moved to Utah with Ma. I know they moved a couple of more times afterwards, but from then up until I was born, their stories suddenly get obscure. I don't want to ask what they don't want to talk about, so they still remain obscure. All I know is that Ma met Pa before he went to Europe, and after he came back, they moved to Tacoma, where we live now.

Grandpa didn't know my brother and I had been born until the war was over. I was two and my brother one when Grandpa learned that Japan lost the war against America, but that he gained two grandchildren in America. That's when he sent his portrait to his daughter in America. My mother remembered the portrait well. It had been hung on his drawing room wall, when she was little, over the leather chair where Grandpa sat and smoked while waiting for his patients. In the spring of 1946, when Ma tore open the brown parcel paper and saw the ocher medals revealed, she realized right away that it was her father's sign that he would permit her marriage, her way of life, and accept the two of us as his grandchildren. She has treasured the portrait since then, and it will be my job to carry along the portrait in the future, because my mother always tells me that my mere existence retrieved our extended family from our little diaspora.

We grew up hearing stories of Grandpa Taketora from Ma and Auntie Satoko. He was six foot four and could lift three hundred pounds. He swam across the Omura Bay when he was twelve. When he was a teenager, he used to dunk himself into the Saigo River at five every morning, snow or rain, dredging the water for sweetwater clams for his family's breakfast. He won a national scholarship to study medicine at the Imperial University of Tokyo.

He knew more than four thousand Chinese characters. He won two medals in the First World War and three in the Siberian Dispatch. But when we asked Ma and Auntie Satoko how he acquired those ocher medals, nobody knew. Ma and Auntie Satoko would assure me, whenever I asked, that Grandpa Taketora was an army surgeon, so he got the medals for saving people's lives, not for killing them. I sort of bought it, but my brother George didn't. He didn't say he didn't believe their stories, but I knew he suspected our Grandpa had killed at least a couple of pre-Nazi Germans and Red partisans in his years of service. Poor Germans and Russians, they had to play the role of expendable extras in our family epic. Grandpa Taketora was a mythic hero. All the more so for his bodily absence and his portrait presence in our house.

After the war was over, Grandpa Taketora wrote to us until he was hospitalized for cancer of the larynx. A few lines were devoted to his life in Omura: not only did he work in his clinic, he was the head of the municipal health center; we heard about vaccinations and nutrition education in his small town. His letters gave me an impression that Japan had a long way to go to improve its public hygiene.

I also learned things like this Japanese superstition: if you get poisoned by fugu, a poisonous blowfish, the Japanese will bury you alive with your head sticking out of the earth like a neglected winter squash. Grandpa had blowfish-poisoned patients a couple of times a year. Usually a stomach pump would save them, but once this poor middle-aged man, who illegally cooked blowfish which he fished himself, came too late to his clinic because he had been left in the dirt for half the day.

Besides his life in Japan, he spent many lines describing what he wanted George and me to become. That was the cream of his letters. He sounded quite authoritative, like any mythic hero. George would be a doctor, naturally, Grandpa Taketora asserted, and he had planned my life according to the years left in his life. In his old-fashioned imagination, he wanted me to do as much as a woman could do–which was not much–while he was still alive. After I finished my compulsory education, I would marry a good Japanese man on my sixteenth birthday–the legal age for a woman to marry in Japan–and bear his great-grandchild in nine months sharp. He would be seventy-eight by then. He would die, he wrote again and again, after he saw his first great-grandchild. He always wrote that he could wait only until I became sixteen.

Every time I thought of Grandpa's obsession, an imaginary scene came into my mind–he would pass away at the peak of his delight, lying spread-eagled on the runway, upon seeing me descending the steps from the trans-Pacific airplane, landing on his soil with my newborn baby in my

arms. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" My parents, George, and I would run up to him and jolt him, but his contented smile would be peacefully fixed on his long face. We would shoulder him back to the airport terminal, each of us holding a limb, since he was so big. I wouldn't be able to hold my baby in my arms while I'd support Grandpa's limb, so my baby would be laid on its belly on Grandpa's belly. Then I'd suddenly come back to reality, asking myself, where is the baby's father, where is my husband? He should be carrying my baby while I am taking part in the triumphant yet tragic end of our hero. Then I would finally realize how impossible the first premise of the scene was. How could I get married at sixteen? With whom? Frank? Takeshi? Or James? Can I scream?

In his letters, he always counted the years he had to wait. Every letter was a countdown. It sounded as if he couldn't wait for his last day. I have felt sorry for Grandpa because I have known all the time that his dream wouldn't come true. When I was ten, my dream was to become a head keeper of a zoo or an ostrich breeder. Even as a ten-year-old, I was aware that having a baby at the age of sixteen would be a great obstacle to my future career. My parents had their own expectations for me and George, but marrying me off at sixteen was not one of them. But Grandpa's countdown letters kept coming.

The letters were written in Japanese mixed with many knotty Chinese characters I had never seen. Even after Ma read them aloud for us, we needed some words rephrased or interpreted. Sometimes all of us got lost in the labyrinth of his old-fashioned Eastern rhetoric.

And today, I am still sorry and confused because he did wait until I became sixteen. He died a month before my seventeenth birthday. Long enough to have a baby. Was he serious about his plans? If so, what could I have done for him instead of just feeling guilty and telling him nothing?

Looking back on my past, I was always more concerned about my career than romance. I became acquainted with my first uninspiring date when I was fourteen while I acquired my first chickens at the age of ten. Aspiring to be a top ostrich breeder, it was natural that I started with a smaller kind. I bought the chickens from the old Chinese man who used to bring chickens in baskets to our grade school. He was trying to sell chickens to school kids. Kids liked to finger the chickens, but they weren't selling well. Bringing a chicken back home was a different story from buying marbles on our way home from school. There were two baskets of chickens: one for hens and one for roosters. He sold a hen for a quarter and a cock for a nickel. He would appear one or two times a month and squat at the edge of the yard lawn near the school entrance, smoking a long Chinese pipe. His chickens

were busy tweeting and pushing each other. Sometimes they were so loud they sounded like rain falling upon a tin roof. Their feathers were different shades of chicken yellow: some were almost creamy white and some were sunny yellow, and there was every possible shade in between. Before spring break every year, his chickens were dyed pastel with food colors. Orange chickens, pink chickens, blue chickens. Once Easter was over, the chickens would go back to the normal gradations between ivory and yellow.

The first time I touched the chickens, brushing against the flock of them squeezed in the basket, I wish I could tell you, "Electricity thundered from the tips of my finger through my spine and limbs and I felt my hair bristle up; and right away I realized that it was a predestined encounter, me and chickens." But this is not true. My fingers stroking their feathers, I actually chuckled; the surface of the fidgeting bunch of warm down tickled me amusingly. Then the Chinese man grabbed one chicken and held it out to me. I offered my palms side by side. He put the chicken in the narrow ditch between my palms. I curved my palms and shaped two hemispheres to form a round cage for the chicken. The interior of my hand cage felt a scurrying sunny ball of fur, and I was still chuckling, feeling lemon-yellow airy feathers filling me up and warming me up. I put the chicken back into the girl basket and hurried home to persuade Ma and Pa.

This is how I obtained my first three chickens and how I got into the whole business about chickens. Before they were large enough to stay outside, they lived in our room. I kept them in a worn-out corrugated box. I held them in the round cage of my palms, one by one in turn. I could do it all day.

I called my chickens Chicken-one, Chicken-two, and Chicken-three, because as much as the feeling of those little yellow down balls in my hand, I liked the sound of "chicken" in my ears. The two jumpy sounds followed by the comforting grounding of a nasal sound pleased my tongue. *Chicken, Chicken, Chicken.* I kept repeating their names while I played with them. Chicken-one, Chicken-two, Chicken-three. I was very happy. But my mother found a need to intervene between me and my chickens. She didn't find Chicken an aesthetic name for chickens. She thought I was playing the role of an oppressive jailer with my chickens. "Eleanor, don't call your pets by numbers," she said. "They are not prisoners. They are your friends, Eleanor. Give them nice names." I tried, but I had to tell her I couldn't find any more suitable name than Chicken for them. "Okay," Ma said nonchalantly. "Let me name them for you." Then I realized she had been longing for this moment, but it was too late to stop her. She had had their names in her mind already. She named Chicken-one, the white girl chick, Tosca, Chicken-two, the only boy, Tristan, and Chicken-three, the yellowish

girl chick, Isolde. Before I knew it, it became our family rule to name my chickens something like Aida and Ladames, Carmen and Don Jose, Rodolpho and Mimi, and Papageno and Papagena.

My mother always wanted to become an opera singer. That's why she didn't want to go back to Japan even after Grandpa Taketora came back from Siberia. She wanted to go to a music school in San Francisco. But soon it turned too difficult for her to pursuit her dream for various reasons. I think it was a good idea that she gave up the prima donna thing because even if she had made it, what roles could she play as a prima? Not much choice. The frustrated Chinese empress who kills men and the neglected Japanese geisha who kills herself. That sounds like a monotonous prima life.

My love for chickens caused me some hardships, too. I was so much into my three chickens, I couldn't eat any kind of poultry any more. At the dinner table, I would poke the bumpy skin with my fork, thinking of death and my chickens, until tears welled up in my eyes. This habit drove my parents crazy. The fuss snowballed as my thing infected George, who is a bit more sensitive than I. We wept in chorus, poking the plump poultry in pity for the poor birdie together until we were sent to bed in disgrace.

This symptom lasted for three months until I found twin baby owls in the woods in Washington Park. Two fat piles of gray down were cuddling together at the base of an oak tree. They must have fallen from their nest. They were too little to fly. I couldn't keep them as pets. Ambitious as I was, skipping from chickens to raptors was a leap too sudden. I asked Ma for help. She found a veterinarian in Forrest Creek who took care of injured big birds. We brought the baby owls to his clinic, which was full of big falcons, old kites, and grown-up owls, all sick and hurt. They were motionless and sullen in the cages. I smelt their wounds and diseases. I heard the air vibrating with shame, shame for their disgraceful scars.

"Let's see. Hum. The birdies are quite meek!" Dr. Cheyenne peeped into the box of owls we put on the counter. The baby owls were still stuck together like Siamese twins. "How come they are so down?" the doctor cheerfully said, rubbing his hands. "They are not hurt or anything. I wonder if they are hungry. Let's see." He opened the maple wood drawers under the counter in a businesslike manner. Standing behind Dr. Cheyenne, the contents of the drawers jumped into my eyes. The drawer was full of fluffy yellow things. They were freshly dead chickens. There were about thirty of them, cleanly dead, lying in the drawer, riveting my eyes. Seeing my paralyzed face, Ma's eyes reflected great regret. She must have thought, oh no, this is the last blow; Eleanor won't eat chicken for the rest of her life; what should I do with the chicken left in the refrigerator?

The doctor pinched out two chicken corpses, and put them under the

owl's noses. The birds squeezed against each other even tighter. They didn't seem to understand the furry balls were their food. Dr. Cheyenne sniffed at this sight, whipped a knife out of his laboratory coat, and started to dress the tiny chickens. This made me weep. Ma touched my shoulders, but she was also amazed at my stupidity. The chickens didn't bleed. The doctor nimbly peeled the feathers and skin off, and I saw the tiny chicken breast flesh, about the size of my thumb, but otherwise the same fresh, skinned chicken breast I had seen in the market. I don't remember the details which followed that. I don't recall whether the owls ate the meat or not. I was devastated, yet the image of the tiny pink chicken breast led me to come to terms with the relationship between man and chicken. The fragile chicken, cute to look at, nice to play with, good to eat. From that day, I resumed eating poultry. I could chew and swallow chicken again.

Meanwhile, my three chickens, Tosca, Tristan, and Isolde, had passed the cutest phase of their life and became ugly, angry adolescents. Their cream feathers were mixed with yellow down; their little cockscombs didn't match their baby faces. In short, they looked like vertically stretched chickens somebody created by mistake. And poor Isolde, she turned out to be a rooster!

The old Chinese man had told me she was a girl! Of course, I waited for him to reappear in front of the school and complained to him. He promptly apologized for his mistake. To my surprise, he said that this kind of mistake would happen sometimes, and gave me a newborn girl chicken, and a boy chicken in addition. He put a red rubber band around the girl chicken's leg. I timidly asked him if I had to return Isolde to him. He waved his hands and shook his head, repeating, "No. No." So I was very happy, getting two more chickens for free. I named them Romeo and Juliet on my way home. Romeo was a rooster and Juliet was a hen.

Two years passed. Carmen and Don Jose, Aida and Ladames, and Papageno and Papagena joined my flock of chickens. As I learned more about chickens, as chickens became a part of our family life, including the fresh eggs on our breakfast table every morning, my vision of becoming an ostrich breeder started to take a different shape, a more realistic shape. I couldn't say it aloud to anybody else. The more serious your dream becomes, the more fragile it appears. If I'd say it aloud, the spell would be no longer good, and the dream would never come true, I felt.

I frequented the science museum to see the chicken incubators. On weekdays, I would squat in front of them and watch the activities inside for hours without being disturbed. They let me in for free because I sometimes brought in fertilized eggs for the incubators. No matter how many times I

saw the scene at home or at the museum, the spectacle in the incubator overwhelmed me. The newly hatched chickens especially caught my attention. Their down still damp and bloody, exhausted from the tedious labor of coming out into the world, the baby chicks tottered along the glass walls, tweeting weakly. Due to their bloody appearance, they looked as if they were dying, instead of just having been born. And there were about two dozen other bloody chickens, reeling and staggering, or tweeting and pecking or lying and resting. The resting ones actually seemed quite dead. With their little chicken batteries dead, they were flat on the floor, their short legs and little wings sprawled in every way, their tiny tongues sticking out, their eyelids half-closed showing the whites of their eyeballs, with clotted blood all over the body. Gosh, they're dead, I first thought. Almost a quarter of them are dead; I didn't know they had to risk their lives to come out into life.

But I found out, after a while, in five minutes or so, those dead chickens rose up like zombies and started to waddle about to explore their little world as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile, those who had been toddling would pass away in a flash, *boom,* like drunken old hobos falling asleep in the gutters of graveled road.

This repetitive cycle of newborn chicks' life–tweet and toddle, *boom,* drunk dead, up, toddle and tweet–never bored me. These gory creatures were full of life! And they constantly reminded me of my father's father, Grandpa Tomizo, so-called Grandpa Tom, who died during my incubator years, when I was thirteen.

He showed his first sign of a drinking problem after he had moved into a hospital for nephritis complicated by gout, a half year before his death. Grandpa Tom had been drinking since he was twelve, but, mind you, always moderately. He had never caused trouble to others because of his love for liquor. If you could just listen, at his wake, how his friends and relatives praised the way Grandpa Tom used to drink! They would lament his death as they filled each other's glass with Grandpa Tom's favorite English vodka, calling his drinking style noble and humble at the same time. He was always quiet, smiling occasionally, sitting at the comer with his glass of vodka and a piece of fresh chili pepper in his hands. He would nibble the pepper and lick the liquor; lick the vodka and nibble the pepper. Thus he would sit for hours. His relatives talked and laughed in his funeral about the way how Grandpa Tom had been happy as a clam during Prohibition with his handmade little distillery in the basement, making his own liquor from sweet potatoes.

But at the end of his life, Grandpa Tom behaved like a wicked alcoholic

just because he had never lived in a place as dry as the hospital, even during Prohibition. He really didn't know what to do. The nurses treated him like an alcoholic, and this made us really sad. We pleaded with his nurses to let him have a drop of vodka and he would be contented, but they would just nod and smile with their eye saying, "Sure. That's what they always say." So finally one day, Grandpa Tom sneaked out of the hospital and toddled across the eight-lane boulevard on his gouty feet to a liquor shop. He bought a mini-bottle of vodka, and restraining his excitement, he toddled back across the eight lanes to the hospital. He later told Ma it had taken him an hour to cross the street twice. He waddled up the stairs and climbed up on his bed, again, on his seventy-six-year-old gouty feet. Now he put his hand into his bosom and took out his mini-bottle when a nurse came into his room.

When we heard this story from another nurse, we all blushed in shame and exclaimed in protest. "How dare you, tyrants! He's finishing his life! A drop will do him good, no harm!" The nurse gave us a dirty look as if we were grumbling nonsense, so we decided on our way home, the next time we would come visit him, we would bring him vodka in a coffeepot.

Grandpa Tom could not even finish a spoonful of vodka. Three drops were enough for him. He blushed like a bride and said thank you to us. After we talked a little about the weather, school and the nursery, he became drowsy so we left. He died two months after, and we managed to smuggle in the coffeepot every other week in his last months. Every time we walked into the hospital with his coffeepot hidden in the bottom of Ma's tote bag, I glanced back at the street where Grandpa had crossed twice for his vodka, and then I thought of the chickens in the incubators. If Grandpa Taketora is a titanic hero in our family epic, Grandpa Tom is an old friendly fairy in our family fables.

After Grandpa Tom died, I stopped visiting the incubators. I was not only busy with my ever-increasing chickens–now there were a dozen of them–but I had also started going out with this eighth grader, whose name I don't want to mention. Well, I didn't hate him or like him, but I went out with him only because that's what everybody was supposed to do and he wasn't as bad as the rest of the herd. School had turned into a strange place when I became a seventh grader: suddenly, all the girls started to flirt like crazy. They were blinking their eyes harder than ever. I could hear them tweeting *coquet, coquet, coquet.* The boys appeared like half-grown chickens with their tiny cockscombs and their ill-proportioned, stretched bodies in mixed feathers. They were ugly and angry like my half-grown chickens. I wished I'd had a garbage lid at school to protect myself from those half-chicken,

half-rooster boys. That's what I used at home to shield myself from the young roosters.

Ma became frantic when she found out I had a date, not because she thought I shouldn't, but because my brother had none. She insisted that George must be secretly popular at school. I said no. Being such a short, ugly, clumsy, shy thing, how could he interest those half-chicken, half-coquette girls? Then Ma would accuse me of not introducing nice girlfriends of mine to him. "Since you are the big sister, Eleanor," Ma went on, "you have to take care of your little brother for the rest of your life. It's your duty to introduce him to nice girls. They must like him." The idea of taking care of my brother for the rest of my life depressed me.

Ma had her own theory. She insisted that George had no date because of his hearing problem. He had been hit by a Sunday school bus when he was six. I saw him tossed up like a volleyball on the bonnet. After the ambulance had carried him away, the neighbor kids who had been watching the accident from the distance rushed to me, their faces all glowing in excitement.

"Did he die? Did he die?" That's all they wanted to know. No, he didn't. He didn't even break his leg. But the shock to his head caused this hearing problem—he could not catch high-pitched tones very well, especially when the sound came from behind him. So according to Ma, George must be missing the pretty chicks tweeting behind him at school every day; the chicks must be desperately curious about him.

I knew that this was not the case, but I had no good counter-argument, so I just let her believe in her theory. I had no time to check the chicks tweeting behind my brother. I was already busy with my chickens: Romeo wanted to monopolize all the hens, and poor Don Jose was always getting beaten up by Romeo. Carmen would flirt with Romeo openly. I had to put Romeo into a separate cage before jealous Don Jose stabbed Carmen with a dagger or innocent Juliet stabbed herself.

There were more sexual confusions. When I was sixteen, Papageno turned out to be a hen and Papagena a rooster. Again, I thought about complaining to the Chinese man. They were the last chickens I bought from him. I actually went to see him. By then I knew where he lived. In his shack, I saw the same two willow baskets, one for girls and one for boys. Since he couldn't always keep an eye on the chickens, some of them would jump out of the baskets. He grabbed them and put them back, but sometimes he couldn't tell from which basket the chicken had sneaked out. And he had no way to tell whether the chicken was a boy or a girl. Only the chicken farmer could tell. The Chinese man just bought chickens from him.

I returned home without telling him what had happened to Papageno

and Papagena. I couldn't tell whether Papageno was a boy or a girl, either, when (s)he was a baby chick. I had a lot more to learn about the creatures. On my way back, I became more determined about my future plan. Now I felt I was ready to tell my parent what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to college to become a veterinarian. I thought it was a matter of course.

So I told Ma and Pa that I wanted to go to college to become a vet right after I reached home.

"What?" Pa grimaced at my confession and lost his word. Ma interrupted him, "I'm sorry, Eleanor. We don't have money. I'm sorry. We can't even afford to go back to Japan. I mean, for the funeral. Grandpa Taketora died. We've just got a telegram."

It was a remote death. He was my mythic hero, but I didn't know his face, and I hadn't heard his voice. Somebody had died far away on the other side of the Earth. Somebody I knew only in stories and in letters. He had a big wish for me. But the wish was very remote from my real life. Ma was crying. I tried to cry not to be rude to her and dead Grandpa. But tears just didn't come. I had to give up crying. My eyes got tired from too much squinting.

A week later, I had to face a close death. Romeo died, having being bit by a weasel. I found him cold and stiff in the little comer behind Pa's lily greenhouse one morning.

Two weeks later, Tosca died. I suspect the December chill did it. My first chicken. *Chicken-one.* This time I didn't have to try to cry. It was disturbingly easy.

We sort of avoided talking about Grandpa Taketora. I noticed my parents were exchanging letters with Ma's relatives. But it was too sad to think about him and not to be able to go to his funeral, or his burial, or even to see his grave. We all tried to concentrate on our business, chickens and college in my case. Then good news came in. Some girl asked George to go out skating with her. My brother got a date! See, it wasn't because of his ears! We just needed some patience.

Ma was ecstatic. She had known the day would come, but she couldn't believe her eyes. Christmas came and my brother got presents from two girls he didn't even know. He was becoming popular. Now freed from the duty of introducing nice girls to my brother, which I never did actually, I focused on my future. I had to manage to go to college all by myself. I had to put my chickens into one of Pa's chrysanthemum greenhouses so that they wouldn't freeze to death. I had to go out with my date. I had to study,

especially biology.

It was one afternoon before Valentine's day when a book parcel arrived at our place. Pa had ordered *the 1959 Directory of Japanese-Americans* from *the Daily Japanese-American Times* in Los Angeles. It was as thick as Pa's hardcover Bible. He paid the publisher to have his nursery's name in bold letters. I had just come home from school and, munching on toast, I watched him thumb through the directory. After checking Suzuki Nursery in bold both in English and Japanese and browsing other names like Auntie Satoko and other Japanese friends, he went back to the greenhouses. I reached for the Persian blue book to see what it was like and got bored right away because there were so many Chinese characters I couldn't read. I discovered there were many Suzukis all over America, even in a city called Boring, Oregon, where only three Japanese families lived.

My eyes stopped at the advertisement section in the middle of the book. They were full of photographs: banks, many Mount Fujis, Tokyo Tower, airlines, rich farms in California, exotic places in Japan, girls in kimonos, etc. There was a full-page photograph of President Eisenhower, too, with the title *Supporter of the World Peace* in Japanese. Then there was this photograph of diligent-looking young Japanese men and women, all dressed in white lab coats, with smiles on their faces. A man in the center was joyfully examining something blurry in his hand under a lamp. He seemed to be examining something very curious. Two women were smiling and watching him courteously on his sides. The caption screamed on the top, *A Secure Future in a High Paying Job! Earn $50 to $150 a Day!* That's a lot of money, I was surprised, but I couldn't tell what sort of job the three people in the photograph were performing. Smaller letters under the caption itemized the job's merits: "Job guaranteed upon graduation. Technicians are urgently needed. Servicing hatcheries in 42 states. Oldest & largest school. Write today for free catalogue." Under the photograph the advertisement read, *American Chick Sexing School, Long Beach, California.*

I studied the black and white photograph closer. It was hard to distinguish against the man's white lab coat, but he was surely holding a chicken upside down, checking the underside of the chicken's tiny wings. I could barely see its pointy beak and dotty eye in the blurred photograph. Under the lamp was a large wooden box divided into partitions, whose insides the photograph didn't show much, but now I could recognize a couple of little fluffy nodules peeking out of the box.

I nervously searched through the book for more chick-sexing schools. There were at least four other schools listed in the directory, including the one in Washington. One of them put a small ad which explained that evaluating a chicken's sex was very critical to determine its market value, but

sexing newborn chickens required a trained, professional eye. Only a certified "chick sexist" could tell hens from roosters from their appearance. This chick sexing technique had been originally developed and systematized in Japan and the trained Japanese's observant eyes and delicate hands were in great need in the chicken farming industry. The certified chick sexists were living proof of how Japanese immigrants could contribute to tomorrow's American society, etc.

My head was throbbing. I regretted that I grew up in a suburban nursery, not on a rural farm where I would have learned all about certified chick sexists. The scattered pieces of my future vision came to fit neatly together in my future perfect life. I could make my living by handling yellow fluffy chickens every day. I would save the money and would go to a veterinary college, or I could even go to college while sexing chickens every day. This was what I wanted in life! To become a vet, sexing chickens. I had to tell my parents. But I had to calm down first. I had to choose the best time and place to propose my wonderful plan. No mistake was allowed. The mission must be accomplished with discretion and precision.

That night, I dreamt myself sexing chickens in a chicken farm in the clouds. It had all the highlights of my life, my life with chickens. In the dream, I could somehow tell chickens' sex by gently holding each chicken in my palm. My palms sensed their sex intuitively through the sensation of the fluff's fidgeting in my hands. I grabbed the chickens one by one, exclaiming *Chicken-one, Chicken-two, Chicken-three,* and I could see at least a thousand chickens lining up to the edge of the cloud patiently waiting to have their sexes determined by me. This mere sight put me into total euphoria. Even the clouds, tinted sunny yellow with patches of creamy ivory, felt furry. I was putting chickens into a pink willow basket or a blue one, exclaiming, "Chicken-one! Girl! Tosca! Chicken-two! Boy! Tristan! Chicken-three! Girl! Isolde! Chicken-four! Boy! Romeo! Chicken-five! Boy again! Papageno!" and so on. The old Chinese man was smiling, squatting and smoking his long pipe by the two baskets. Behind him were ostriches curiously peeping into the baskets with their necks curved, wowing at my dexterity.

When I reached Chicken-ninety, I felt a new, yet familiar kind of sensation in my hands. I couldn't tell its sex. Gradually opening my palms to uncage the chicken, I saw its beady eyes on the yellow ball of down. It had somewhat longish face for a chicken and strands of longer, whiter feathers above its ebony eyes. Our eyes met. "Hello," I said to the chicken, and the chicken replied, "We finally meet." Right then, I opened my eyes.

I walked into the living room in my pajamas, still in dream state. What a

happy dream. I hadn't had such a nice dream for more than a year. My footsteps were light. Maybe today is a good day to bring up my plan to Ma and Pa, I thought. The dream must be a good sign.

Passing through the living room to go to the kitchen for breakfast (and notice, how *kitchen* sounds similar to *chicken!* I said to myself), I glanced at George, saying good morning, which I don't do very often nowadays. He was standing in front of the fireplace, yawning and stretching. He nodded at me and relaxed himself, resting his right hand on his hip and looking outside through the lacy curtain. The pose looked familiar to me. I looked at him carefully again.

*Oh my god,* I said to myself, *Oh my god.* I stood gaping, quivering and trying to scream, but I was choked and all I could do was to let pitiable sirens of strange vowels out of my trembling throat.

George had accidentally posed the same way Grandpa Taketora does in his portrait hung above George's tousled head: the right hand on his hip, his face slightly averted. The two identical figures made me realize that they also had identical faces. Lean noses, thick eyebrows, long faces—if you'd take off Grandpa's glasses, pluck off several sprouts of hair from George's chin, smooth out his dark pimples all over his face and neatly comb his thick black hair, they would look like the same man in the future and the past. Furthermore, I realized that the last chicken, the ninetieth chicken in my dream, had the same face as well in a chicken sort of way. Now I knew why George had suddenly got dates after Grandpa's death. Looking back, I thought George's face had started to change slightly about three months ago–about the time Grandpa had died. Before that, George hadn't looked like Grandpa Taketora at all.

"Oh no," I said to myself, this time aloud, "Oh no. Grandpa's summoning us from the netherland. We are dead!"

"What are you talking about?" George cried.

Our parents came into the living room from the kitchen. "Enough, kids," Pa said. "My Eleanor!" Ma ran up to me. "What's wrong? You're so pale!"

I told them George looked like Grandpa. They looked at the portrait, George, and back at the portrait again. They seemed amazed at this discovery but didn't get what I meant. They took it as something wonderful: George was becoming a mature man. I had to add, still choking, "And I saw Grandpa Taketora in my dream this morning."

They fell silent. "You know what," Ma opened her mouth after a long silence, "It's been ninety days since Grandpa died." This fact chilled me even more, but she was smiling at me, sorrowfully, but smiling. I couldn't

tell them about the details of my chick-sexing dream. How could I? So I suppose they imagined Grandpa Taketora in his shroud, standing on the cloud, beckoning the two of us to heaven.

"He's calling you two," Ma continued. "You've never met Grandpa, and he couldn't see you two, either. He must have longed to see your faces, don't you think?"

Grandpa Taketora always counted the days left before I turned sixteen. Every letter was a countdown. He could wait only until he could see his great-grandchild. But he hadn't met me, either. He had to see me and George first before he saw his hypothetical great-grandchild. We were his first grandchildren.

Pa put his hands on our shoulders and said, "Do you want to visit Japan? Do you want to say hello to your grandfather in Omura?"

So we went to Japan, me and George. My parents could afford tickets only for the two of us. Everything went like a dream. The earth was curved in a smaller scale in Japan. Mountains, rivers, fields, houses–everything was steep and tiny. We were in a miniature country. My mother's cousins and siblings were gentle, but neither of us understood their dialect. We were clumsy, not knowing how to sit on the floor, to take off our shoes, or to use the toilet. Our Japanese was awkward. They watched us behaving like aliens with curious and persistent smiles. Grandpa's house smelt salty and smoky. We saw his leather chair above which his portrait had been hung before it came to our house. We didn't say anything about the portrait. I found many things surprisingly familiar and dear, but also many other things remote. Probably everyone finds any foreign land this way: familiar and odd.

The day we visited Grandpa's grave on the hill which commands Omura Bay, cherry trees were blossoming. Many folds of hills surrounding the bay had started to blush in pale pink. The bay, where Grandpa swam across as a twelve-year-old, formed a circle almost. It was much smaller than the titanic bay I had pictured when I had heard the epic. We heard the engines of fishing boats coming home. I couldn't see the boats because of the diffused reflections on the water. I could only hear the sound.

# To the Stomping Ground
## by Carrie J. Preston

My father led me
to East Pasture,
his weekend daughter
tiptoeing around cow dung
no stains on my white tennis shoes.
A silent procession,
to survey the herd and determine
which were to be bred that evening;
to cleanse me of city and mother.

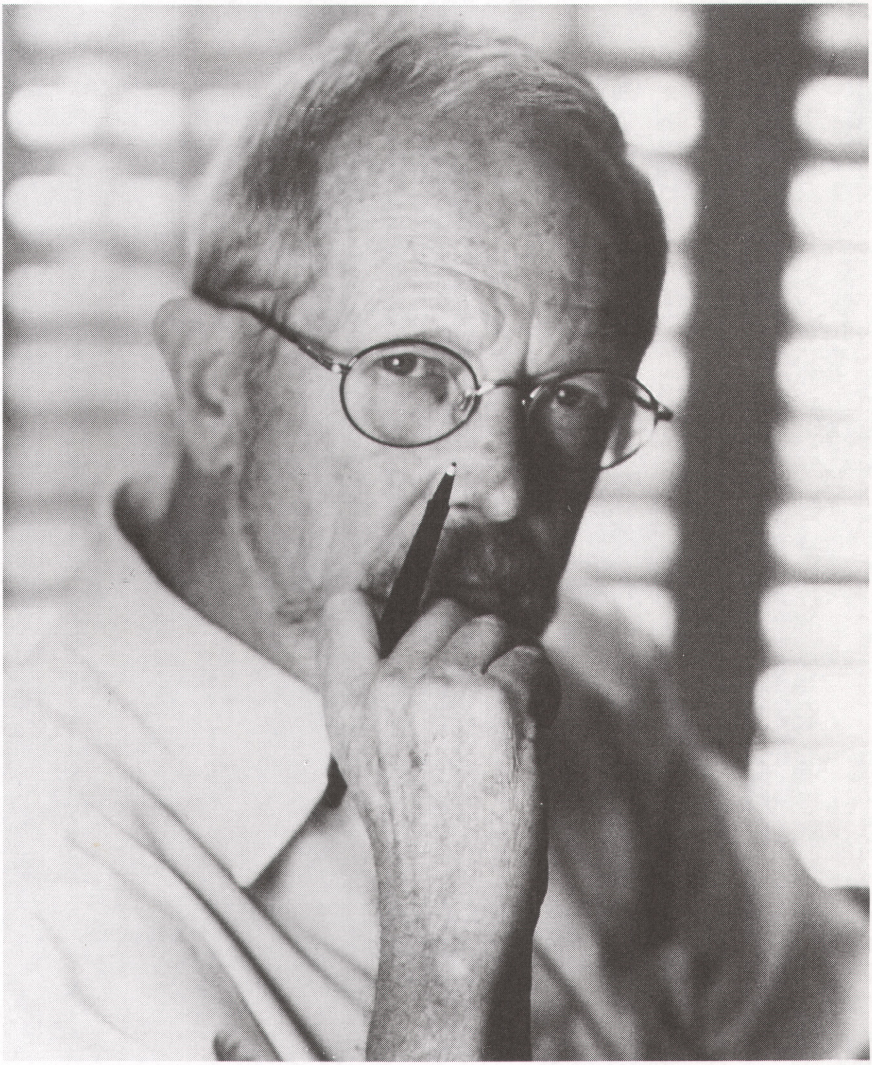
Morning, time of ritual,
the ochre-streaked horizon
still rising from a night union with earth.
The ash smudge of a heron
pressed downward before us,
slowly as a thumb marking temple to cheekbone.
Legs, two sticks of finder, locked behind.
Like the tools my father carried in his back pockets,
handles of pliers or wrenches,
the long tube carrying frozen semen
and the parallel steel applicator.
I knew the geometry of those pockets well,
the curve of chew he denied as a roll of tape,
the jackknife protrusion shaped like a baby's shoe.
Curious adornments that made his Levi's
sag below his narrow hips.

Pausing to watch the heron wade,
I remember my surprise
that the legs, unfolded, were not like tools.
They pressed slowly as the bird walked,
as if through plush, heavy air, or viscous fluid.
Narrow, long, like my father's legs
but so unlike his nervous stomp among people,
boot heels stamping curves, like young breasts, in the soil.
With his cattle, my father walked like the heron,
cautiously, as if moving through honey.

He told me of a heron nesting ground nearby.
We would go that evening, after breeding the cows,
watch the birds return to a ritual dance
on the lips of their nest.

Evening,
as he worked, my father joked
that this was the safest possible sex.
His caution stretched the time
until our visit to the nesting grounds.
Only one heron still returning,
lowered to the ground,
its great wings pulsing drafts
that flattened the meadow grass into shallow bowls.
The other birds,
already dancing in rhythmic stomps.
Girls protesting their bed time.

I've always seen herons as male, alone,
the way I imagine my father.
And I suppose I believed sex would really be
        clean white shoes,
        stomps in honey,
the last great blue heron to return,
legs carried straight
as the tools in a back pocket.



# Interview with Elmore Leonard

The author of over thirty short stories, almost forty novels, and many screenplays (including adaptations of his own work), Elmore Leonard has not only entertained; he remains a moving force in the shaping of American literature and culture. Before Leonard, the good and bad guys of westerns and crime novels were typically made of a simple fabric: always good, or always bad. But in Leonard's stories, the reader (and American culture as a whole) can no longer conceive of criminals as monsters. Instead, the everyday habits and behaviors of both sides entered the milieu of criminality, where bad guys did good things and good guys did bad things, and the seemingly stark division between the two blurred and often conflated into a great adventure.

Elmore Leonard is simultaneously the ultimate postmodernist and the ultimate humanist. With charm and a dash of sneakiness, with the goal of entertaining himself along the way, Leonard consistently and continually writes characters that start off as types but end up as individuals. He plays with the divide between reality and realism by splicing and weaving characters from people, people into characters. Leonard is always preoccupied with his characters, what areas of life they inhabit, their social and individual dialects, and how they interact and perceive each other. He is as interested as most of the canonical writers in elevating the everyday person, criminal or otherwise, into someone capable of adventure–despite the blemishes of living–someone worthy of reading.

Our discussion focused around Leonard's favorite subject: the development and deployment of his characters. The two-hour-long conversation that took place at his Detroit home also meandered into the nature of screenwriting, the role of literature in society, academia, and the writing market. The conversation was entirely informal and a fantastic pleasure.

*—DOUG DOWLAND*

**RCR**: I hear that you write about five pages every day, on a good day. What did you write today?

**EL**: I'm researching right now. I'm going to Flint on Sunday for a Civil War reenactment. It's an encampment reenactment.

**RCR**: What interests you in these reenactment?

**EL**: The characters. At about the time I was finishing *Pagan Babies*, I started thinking of a character, a high diver. A guy who dives from the top of an eighty-foot ladder into eight or nine feet of water, and I thought he would be an interesting character. Last month I went down to Panama City, Florida and met some high divers, watched them erect their ladder and dive and you know, talk to them: "How'd you get into it?" and "Why do you like it?" and so on. And I was right. This could make a good character.

I don't know how I got onto Mississippi as a place I wanted to research and set a book. And perhaps because I wanted to get some white supremacist, racist types in the book too. And then when I began to read about the reenactments, I thought "Well, this is natural, then these guys are going to be a part of reenactments." What the high diver is doing there I don't know yet.

I thought of a character of a black guy from Detroit, kind of a hustler type, who goes down to Mississippi to look into the fact that his father had been lynched there in the sixties. And then I wonder, how would he enter into it? This is where I begin, always, with characters. Not with the plot, because I'm not interested in plot. Plot comes along. This will be my thirty-seventh book, so I know how to plot. But I don't have to until I'm about a hundred pages into the book. Then I have to figure out what it's about.

**RCR**: Why not plot?

**EL**: Because it doesn't interest me. I want the readers to read the book because they're interested in the characters. The characters are involved in one another, and out of that—whatever it is—comes the plot. But I always think of it in three acts. By the end of the first act, everyone—usually everyone—has been introduced, and you know who they are and each one has an attitude. By attitude, I mean a personality, the way they talk. And they have to be able to talk because my purpose always is to move the book through dialogue, as much dialogue as possible. Simply because that's what interests me. When I was reading, that was the books I liked: Steinbeck,

John O'Hara, Hemingway. Hemingway especially when I was learning to write.

**RCR**: Was it the shortness of Hemingway's sentences?

**EL**: I didn't think Hemingway's sentences were particularly short. In *The Sun Also Rises*, they are, they stand out as being short, but I think he was just going through a phase there. Because I spent most of my time reading Hemingway's short stories, or *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. It was in the fifties, when I started to write westerns, that I started closely studying him. I was reading *For Whom The Bell Tolls*—just opening it anywhere—because I felt it was kind of a western: they're out in the mountains of Spain with guns and horses. I was also reading John O'Hara closely because of the way he got people to talk, the sentence structures. But Hemingway made it look easy.

**RCR**: Is there a Hemingway-Elmore Leonard connection?

**EL**: Unlike the traditional way of writing novel, from the point of view of the novelist, the omniscient author who knows everything, including his judgement of what's going on and his description of what these people look like and who they're like. But I'm doing much the same in third person, from *The Big Bounce* on. It's what you see, and what the characters think of one another. Rather than me describing a character, it's how one character sees another. But I don't go into any detail or physical description; I don't think it's necessary. The reader will immediately see the character, and I don't want to screw up the reader's judgement, the reader's take on the character.

**RCR**: Looking at your bookshelf, I see you've read quite a bit of Cormac McCarthy. What other contemporary writers do you read?

**EL**: Russell Banks, Don DeLillo, but I don't read when I'm writing. I like Raymond Carver a lot, and Bobbie Ann Mason. I read a lot more short stories now than novels. I don't read any fiction at all when I'm working. And then I'll start something else before the book I'm going to read, like I've got books stacked up here right now that I want to read, but I don't think I'm going to get through them, cause I'm almost ready to start writing again. Not quite, but I have the urge, and when I have the urge, I should do it.

**RCR**: Do you give yourself time between books to read?

**EL**: I don't give it to myself, it just happens. Because I finished my last book at the end of January and I'll start the next one probably in June, but then I'll be on the road with book tours.

**RCR**: Do you write when you're on the road?

**EL**: No. But I can write anywhere. I wrote screenplays in hotel rooms many, many times. And you're sitting at a desk that's right against the wall, and you're staring at the wall. But I had to write screenplays because it supported the book writing. But I'd prefer to write here at home. My research books are all laid out in front of me.

**RCR**: To quote you quoting Raymond Chandler, are you through "wearing your second-best suit"? Are you through writing screenplays?

**EL**: I think so. I don't look forward to writing a screenplay. I said in '93, "this is the last one I'm going to write."

**RCR**: You just had a short story "With or Without A Prayer" published in *The New York Times* this month. What led to your writing of it?

**EL**: They told me of this survey about people and prayer, and they said when they got the results of the survey, that they wanted to ask screenwriters, novelists, and poets for their take on it, rather than people in that area—psychologists or sociologists—and they said, "This is one that you might want to write on." And I thought of the "Hail Mary" pass situation that's the core of the story, but I said, "I'm going to have to dramatize it; this is the way I write. Their sound I want, not mine." *Forbes* asked me to do one on "truth." What is "truth"? And I said that if I were to write an essay about truth, I'd fall right on my face.

**RCR**: Why?

**EL**: Well first of all, I'm not an essayist. I said, "You'd have to ask one of my characters to write it."

**RCR**: But your characters aren't the most truthful types.

**EL**: Yes. You see, what my characters rely on are gray areas where they can rationalize truth within a situation. I like to hear characters explain themselves.

**RCR:** Is *Forbes* or the *Times* asking you to write these stories a pretty recent thing?

**EL:** Nobody knew me until fifteen years ago or so.

**RCR:** Before then, there were westerns and mysteries?

**EL:** When I started writing, I had a commercial bent that I wanted to make money doing this. I didn't simply want to be recognized as a good writer; I wanted both to happen. So I'm going to learn to write by writing within a genre, and it turned out to be westerns, because I liked western movies.

**RCR:** Were you trying to replicate the Hollywood western in your books?

**EL:** No. The real west, and that's why I researched Arizona in the 1880s, the Apache and the Calvary. I subscribed the *Arizona Highways* primarily for descriptions, but it was valuable for the captions too. The captions would tell you what's growing up the wall of the canyon, what kind of tree is over there, which being out there you wouldn't know unless you were with someone. And there were all sorts of articles in *Arizona Highways* about cowboys and what they ate and what they wore. So I wanted to be and tried to be as authentic as I could. One time though, when I was out in the Santa Catalina Mountains, they looked different than when I described them. So I went back home and I rewrote it.

Throughout the fifties, just westerns. First sale was in '51, and then from then on, a couple of movie sales. The last one I wrote in the fifties I finished in '59 was *Hombre* and it didn't sell until '61, and I only got $1,250 for it where I was getting $4,000 advance for a twenty-five cent paperback. One time I got $2,000, and they probably only printed 2,000 in hardcovers and it sold for $4.95. After the fifties, I wrote another three more westerns, and that was it. Well, I consider *Cuba Libre* a western.

**RCR:** You consider yourself a "realist" author?

**EL:** Oh yeah. Naturalistic. What I think is funny is that the critics will say "This is the way convicts talk." How do they know this is the way convicts talk? But I hear from convicts, you know, and convicts say, "How do you know what's in our heads? How do you know what we know?" And have I done time? No.

**RCR:** Were there any big changes in your style from writing westerns to writing crime and mystery novels?

**EL:** Yeah. Well, from the beginning I knew I wanted to write in scenes and use as much dialogue as possible. But I think it takes about ten years to develop your style, the most natural way you can write. So even through the westerns and even into *The Big Bounce. The Big Bounce* was rejected 84 times. Most rejections from the publishers were based on the fact that they didn't like the characters. They said, "There's no one to sympathize with. There's no hero. It's a downer." But I liked them all. I didn't think they'd be unsympathetic. I wanted to be realistic. But it did need a plot, so I added a little bit of plot. And then we sold it as a movie, and sold it as a paperback for sixty cents.

**RCR:** What brought you to these characters?

**EL:** When I moved from westerns, I still felt that I needed to write within a genre. And crime, not mysteries. Mysteries have never interested me. Because it seems to me that the interesting parts of the mystery are off stage. And you don't often get to know the perpetrator—he's discovered at the very end—and then the detective goes through this long description of how he figured out that how this guy did it, you know. Well, that's telling, and I've always been very strong about showing. In scenes, so when I sit down to write, I want to know what the purpose of this scene is and from whose point of view it can be most effectively written.

**RCR:** To use Jack Ryan from *The Big Bounce* as an example, your characters aren't heroic. He's both good and bad, but at the end of the book, both he and Nancy are waiting for the police to arrive, and you don't know what's going to happen to them. And it seems like your books end right where I would expect the action to continue.

**EL:** Well, there are so many ways to end it. And nothing to me in life ends that simply, clearly. I think my favorite ending is *Get Shorty*, and Chili Palmer is writing the script, and he's in the car, and he's thinking about how to end it, and he thinks "fuckin' endings are harder than they look." But they're not.

I'm not following a certain pattern, but when I get to about page 300 in the manuscript, I start thinking about the ending. And I don't think about it until I get close to it 'cause I know there are any number of ways to end a book. And there are any number of ways to open a book. So I don't worry about that.

**RCR**: In setting it up that way, establishing the character in the first hundred pages, and not worrying about the end, that it gives you a lot of room to play and provide those unexpected twists that you're so known for.

**EL**: Yeah, and it allows for the unexpected character to come along, who's there, but I didn't plan that this character would be important. Suddenly, the character—and he may not even have a name—but suddenly he says something that I like, and I think: "I could use this guy." And it's always as though he's saying it on his own, you know? And then I give him a name and then he's in another scene, and pretty soon he's turning the plot.

**RCR**: Your character's names are very important to you. How do you develop the names of your characters? Where do they come from?

**EL**: I don't know. I had a guy, Frank Matisse, in *Bandits*. He was a hotel burglar, had come out of Angola, to go to work for his brother-in-law at a mortuary in New Orleans. And he didn't act right, he seemed too old for the character. And I don't know why. It's just that Frank Matisse was an older guy but for some reason to me indicated an older guy. But I thought it was a good New Orleans name, but he wouldn't talk, so I changed his name to Jack Matisse, and he opened up a little bit, and then Jack Delaney, and I had the guy.

**RCR**: How does this relate to your interest in what you call the "sound" of a character?

**EL**: The overall sound, I think of the style of the writer. Style is sound. But then each character has his own sound that I hope you can tell the difference from. Characters talk, and I don't use "he said she said." Because for most parts, the "he said" is used primarily for a beat, a pause rather than identification, and sometimes I'll even put it—which I learned from Raymond Carver—even putting "he said" a couple of times in the same paragraph.

*Be Cool* is what I do. It's so obviously aimed for the movies. Here's a book that's intended to be a movie, but it hasn't been bought yet, 'cause MGM doesn't want to give Travolta twenty million dollars. And in *Be Cool*, he meets characters in the music business, and wonders if he can use that character in the story that he's trying to come up with. Chili Palmer's done two, he did "Get Leo," and then "Get Lost." "Get Lost" was a flop, 'cause it was a sequel. The sequel has to be better than the original—I'm giving myself that . . .

**RCR**: Pressure?

**EL**: Yeah. And so he'll meet somebody. And any information that's needed for the book that I didn't want to write the scene for, he tells to Elaine Levin, who's the studio executive. And then Elaine says, "Well, do you think that's a scene in the movie?" And he says "I dunno, we'll leave it up to the screenwriter."

**RCR**: Why don't you want the reader to know that you're "back there"? Why do you let your characters do the talking?

**EL**: Because, in the extreme, if I were the omniscient author using my words, I don't have the language. I can't write the way Martin Amis writes. I have to use a dictionary when I'm reading Martin Amis. Simple words. I mean, simple use of a word. I asked him, I said: "Do you use a dictionary at all?" And he said: "Sure, once and a while, yeah." I could never understand why he likes my work so much, and he says, "Your work has perfect pitch. There's never anything that sticks out. There's never any sound that jars or isn't in rhythm with the whole thing." And the rhythm is extremely important.

**RCR**: How do you feel when an actor's face is put on one of your characters in a movie?

**EL**: The publishers of my books have lately been going in for photographs on the covers, which I think is ridiculous. You can't use a photograph of a person on a fiction book. Is that the person? But in a movie, that's the way it happens. When I was writing *Be Cool*, I wondered "Could I picture John Travolta?" And I was happy to find out that I could. And he did it on the screen, and I thought he did it perfectly well. However, if I were to bring *Stick* back, I would have a lot of trouble; I wouldn't be able to picture Burt Reynolds, you see.

**RCR**: Are your characters funny?

**EL**: They don't know they're funny, you know. And that's when Barry Sonnefield was directing *Get Shorty* he told them, "First of all, you've got to stick to the script, you can't ad lib, because there's a certain rhythm that runs through the exchanges, not just what you're saying." It's all straight-faced.

**RCR**: Have you been accused of stereotyping?

**EL:** Well, all my characters are a type when I start them. Always. And then as I get to know them, they become human, they become individuals to me.

**RCR:** You mentioned that in the television production of *Glitz*, that they had turned the bad guys into "simple bad guys." What makes your characters not-so-simple?

**EL:** Well the bad guy isn't a bad guy twenty-four hours a day. He's a bad guy when he commits a crime. Otherwise, he may be your next-door neighbor, or someone you're talking to in a bar. There's no indication there that he commits crimes, you know? I picture my bad guys sneezing. I don't know if they ever sneeze in my books, but you see in that moment he is vulnerable. In *Freaky Deaky*—which might be my favorite book—it's Mother's Day, and he wonders if he should call his mother. He's a bad guy. He's not that bad, but he's bad enough. I mean, he blew up things when he was a hippie. Now he's doing it for profit.

And they have to entertain me. That's the whole purpose of my writing. I'm the only one I have to entertain, the only one I have to please, and if I'm entertained, that's it. 'Cause I know my editor will like it, and I assume there are several hundred thousand readers out there who share my idea of what's funny.

But I don't sell more than 125,000 hardcover. Grisham, whose first printing is 2,800,000 hardcover. Now that's even big for paperback. But Mary Higgins Clark and Patricia Cornwell, their first printings are 800,000, and of course Clancy, Stephen King. New York Times asked me to review a Clancy book one time, and I said: "How many pages is it?" And they said, "It's only 540 pages." And I said, "I don't read books that have any more than 300 pages in it." But I can't read Clancy. His characters aren't that interesting to me, the characters aren't human beings, they're what they are, they're just that type. "This is a general," and he talks like a general.

You know, it's interesting that I thought I always wanted to be a writer, yet I wasn't writing, aside from what you had to write in school. But I was studying writing and deciding what kind of writing I wanted to do. Studying "Book of the Month" novels in the early forties in high school and deciding that there were way too many words in almost every book I read.

**RCR:** You learned from emulating Steinbeck and Hemingway and O'Hara, and then you went out and did it on your own. I bring this up because our last interviewee, Jim Harrison, was very opposed to teaching creative writing in a college setting, a very low opinion of degrees in creative writing. Do you think that writing is something that can be taught?

**EL**: Why go through all that? Look at all the stuff that's been written. I mean, there's so much that has been written you can find something. Pick up a book you like and you find an author that you like whose attitude you share and then you study very closely how he does it. Outline his book, outline his book. Put on your typewriter a few lines, a paragraph of his story. Then continue. See if you can write the next paragraph as an exercise.

**RCR**: You probably have people coming to you all the time—this is the one question I would never ask—"What is the secret of your writing?" And my guess is that you feel that it's an uncomfortable question to ask.

**EL**: Well, it's not an easy one to answer. How do I start? You just start, and then something comes out of it. When I go to a writers' conference, and I'm telling people what I do, they all got their pads out and they're all writing, making notes as fast as they can, and I'm thinking, "What are they going to do with that? Do they really understand what I'm saying?" And I don't think most of them do.

**RCR**: Why not?

**EL**: I don't think they're into writing enough to know that what I say. I write from a point of view, always a point of view, and that the sound, that character will seep into the narrative, so that if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go, if it's going to hamper or distort the look, the description of a character. He can't be that grammatical. Not even in the narrative, but he's seeing it, kind of thinking it.

**RCR**: Are the people you see attending writers' conferences are too busy trying to be "writers"?

**EL**: Definitely. I say if it sounds like writing, I rewrite it. I don't want to write the way we were taught to write, with that dependent clause first. It's a moral sin to use an adverb with the word "said." 'Cause if you don't know how the person is saying it, you've done something wrong.

**RCR**: In some colleges, your books are being used in English classes that focus around themes of popular culture. What do you think of that?

**EL**: I think it's funny. I don't consider myself a subject for such a thing. I like my work a lot. I can pick up one of my old books—I've never picked one up and started from the beginning and read right through—but in the morning I'll pick up one of my books before I start to write and just open it

anywhere, just to get the rhythm of it. This is the way I want it to sound, you know, and I'll start reading a scene, and sometimes I'll laugh out loud, and I wrote it, and I've forgotten about that scene. And it's usually something really dumb. But it brings the characters to life.

**RCR**: The critics say, and I agree, that you're an awfully nice guy. How does a nice guy like you write such seedy characters?

**EL**: Well, I can become them. I can get in their heads. I must, right? My friends in grade school were all from working-class families, you know, uneducated. In the forties, I used to go to "black-only" bars a lot, and I'd hear the people talking. When I want to do a black guy, I can hear him. And not in things like "motherfucker," or "you know what I'm sayin?" But it's in the sentence construction more than anything else, words that are left out, or the tense. And I do the same thing with Hispanics, and it's more of a tense than anything else, using present tense for what they want to say.

I listen to people very closely. And I see so much absurdity in everyday life.

I watched the pretrial exams at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice in Detroit, which were really little trials. The judge decides whether a crime has been committed, and should it be tried. I was watching for situations and character, and I've used some of them.

In '82, I sent Greg Sutter, my assistant to Atlantic City, and he came back with all kinds of photographs and he'd talked to blackjack dealers, and he also had the 1980 New Jersey Crime Commission Report, and there was information about the Mafia link to Atlantic City, and tape recordings of meetings at Mafia hangouts. So you hear them talking, and it's not something you can use because it doesn't make a lot of sense. I mean, this guy's talking, and he may say something, but you've got to change it, redo it, and make it sound right. You have do it as the imitation of them, and that's what it really amounts to, is the imitation of these people talking.

**RCR**: There's a pretty elaborate process that you do in order to get these characters?

**EL**: Yeah. I say to Greg, "Find me a bail bondsman." And he has to talk to several before he finds one who understands what he's talking about and is willing to cooperate. And then, he'll ask the guy and record what he does all day, and the guy tells him, "This is what my job entails." Then Greg transcribes that, and I get a stack of papers, and then I read it and I learn a little bit about it. Then I go down and talk to the guy, to see where he

works, what it looks like, and so on. But I'm not going to use the guy, but I'm going to drop my character in where he's sitting. But I'm going to use the shotgun he's got under his desk, and I'm going to use all the forms that he uses. So then when I get into the book and I have a specific question, he can answer it.

**RCR**: You've lived in Detroit all of your life. What do you think is the best thing about Detroit?

**EL**: Well, it's a working man's town. It's a tough town. But I think it's full of individuals. There's a lot of music here too, an awful amount of music. I think it's a vigorous, vibrant town.

I was asked to write an introduction to a book about Detroit once, and it took me three weeks to write two thousand words because I didn't know what I thought about Detroit. So how do I describe Detroit? I quote from my characters. See, 'cause there I can bring it to life. That's why I like dialogue so much; it's living. It's not just words, it's somebody's talking, it's somebody who's alive, talking about it.

The only time, usually, I find myself at a standstill when I'm writing a book is when I get to the point where I have to get into someone's back story, and I have to decide how to do it. Because I don't want to do it. I can do it, maybe, with the sound of that character, or the character imagining telling someone else about their past, or two other characters describing this person and his back story.

Writing gives me pleasure, it's the most satisfying thing I can think about doing. When I finish a scene, or when I'm into the scene, and it's working, I'm having fun. It's hard, but it's an awful amount of fun.

**RCR**: Is literature just fun for you, then? Is that all?

**EL**: Well that's all my literature is. It's entertainment. It's my purpose in writing, to entertain.

**RCR**: I bring this up because there was some dissent over me interviewing you, because several members of our editorial staff argued that you're not a serious writer. How do you feel about being labeled a "pulp" novelist?

**EL**: That's all right, that's an opinion. I don't have to make that judgement. I write what pleases me to write. Then, it's up to the scholars to decide what it is. *The Paris Review* had a similar problem with me recently, and they had that same argument. "Well, what kind of a writer is he? He's a commercial

writer. He doesn't write literature." So I said, "What's literature? When do you decide what's literature? Maybe after he's dead?" But I think my stuff will last a lot longer than most of writing that's out there.

**RCR**: Why?

**EL**: Because it's different. Because it's different, and because it does entertain, and people like it. I mean, I see references to people who read me who I'm amazed that they do, but there are more of them: Martin Amis, Saul Bellow—Bellow has my books on his shelf, and Martin Amis and Saul Bellow talk about my writing. Why?

## WESTERNS AND PERIOD NOVELS

*The Bounty Hunters* (1953)
*The Law at Randado* (1954)
*Escape from Five Shadows* (1956)
*Last Stand at Saber River* (1959)
*Hombre* (1961)
*The Moonshine War* (1969)
*Valdez is Coming* (1970)
*Forty Lashes Less One* (1972)
*Gunsights* (1979)
*Cuba Libre* (1998)
*The Tonto Woman and Other Western Stories* (1998)

## CONTEMPORARY CRIME AND SUSPENSE

*The Big Bounce* (1969)
*Fifty-Two Pick-Up* (1974)
*Mr. Majestyk* (1974)
*Swag* (1976)
*The Hunted* (1977)
*Unknown Man No. 89* (1977)
*The Switch* (1978)
*City Primeval* (1980)
*Gold Coast* (1980)
*Split Images* (1981)
*Cat Chaser* (1982)
*LaBrava* (1983)
*Stick* (1983)
*Glitz* (1985)
*Bandits* (1987)
*Touch* (1987)
*Freaky Deaky* (1988)
*Killshot* (1989)
*Get Shorty* (1990)
*Maximum Bob* (1991)
*Rum Punch* (1992)
*Pronto* (1993)
*Riding the Rap* (1995)
*Out of Sight* (1996)
*Be Cool* (1998)
*Pagan Babies* (2000)

## Self-Talk
### by Mary Crow

The world is so small, a green apple
turning brown, I keep telling myself
Yes, that's me, crazier every day.
Luckily I ignore some moods, go off
to my chores, carrying a pack of faults
on my back, and chestnuts, resolutions, oranges.

If I've become wiser, I've hardly noticed;
day after day I pledge to change completely:
lose a pound a week, give up a sin a day.
The present is a purse stuffed with too many things.

Even when I close my eyes,
I hear the rush of the world's breath
beneath my window,
sough of traffic, distant voices saying:
revise your dreams: you are where you go.

# Indian Pond
## by Gary Erwin

She smelled of paper and dust. Maybe a hint of oil paint, too. An oily film was smudged across the upper right corner of the cover and made the white letters and numbers of June 1969, look faded. Adam rubbed his chin and squinted through the tent blackness, past the featureless faces of his friends, trying to calculate his age when this issue came out: six, maybe seven—a good five years before his mother got sick the first time.

He bent his head to the magazine and took another whiff. He liked to smell the girl on the cover, to touch her with his cheek, his eyelids and his nose, to press his lips to the dusty pages until it felt as if he were going to sneeze. He didn't want to stop sniffing.

He settled the magazine into his lap. His flashlight, dangling loosely in his fingertips, moved when he breathed and made white swirls of light squiggle across the page like fluorescent snakes that crawled around her cascading red mane. With his pinky he traced her figure and wondered what it would be like to have her naked body sprawled on the tent floor in front of them at this very minute, what he would do if he had the chance to kiss and probe the secret crevices of her body that the photograph didn't reveal. She wouldn't smell like paint or dust in real life. Apples or oranges maybe, but not paint, not that odor that stung his eyes whenever he glided down the basement stairs in his house to see what painting his mother was working on. He couldn't imagine the girl's soft breasts or the smooth ticklish spot around her belly button smelling like that, or her hair and fingers giving off any bad odor. Those parts smelled natural; those parts reminded him of wildflowers—the ones that shot up through the brown stalks of field grass in the spring and swayed back and forth along the shore of Indian Pond . . .

He bent his head to the page and breathed heavily until blood rushed to his temples and made his face hot. "She's the one," he said and smoothed the crinkled page with his palms, then raised the magazine to show his two friends as the flashlight beam swam across her figure.

He looked back down at her, then closed his eyes and envisioned every detail of her face and every contour of her smooth body. She was one of his favorites, pulled from the dislocated mounds of Sports Illustrateds and National Geographics in the basement one blistering morning after his father left early for the doctor's office. Now that his mother was in the hospital again, Adam kept a magazine wedged between his Monopoly and Life games in his bedroom closet, and one rolled up inside his GI Joe

Command Center, places he wouldn't normally hide them if she was around. The other magazines he'd stashed in different parts of the house: a willowy brunette pinched between the wall and couch in the basement, a small black mole hovering just above the left corner of her gaping round mouth; a blonde stuffed under the mattress of his bed, her red fingernails barely touching her lower lip as she lolled on the sandy shore of an island choked with palm trees. Sometimes he imagined them standing above him as he lay in the tall orchard grass watching the billows of clouds lumber by and feeling himself growing hard, the soft hairs on their arms and finely molded faces beading with a dewy perspiration he wanted to taste on his lips like maple syrup.

He traced the girl's face and neck in the magazine with his finger, then squirmed a few seconds, trying to fit his shorts around his erection without having to touch it in front of his friends. "What I'd do if she were here right now," Adam whispered, looking up at Johnny and Ed, the magazine propped up in front of him and the flashlight beam focused more steadily on her body so they could see what girl he was talking about.

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On Saturdays, he fished with his father. It was a distraction they tailored around his mother's stays at the hospital as the days crept deeper into the hot summer and made big drops of sweat fall from their brows. They caught fish—some of notable size—but at these they only smiled and marveled at without speaking, raising them towards the sun to study their working gills, then tossing them back into the dark water and watching them swim past clouds of lake weeds and disappear.

They spent most of their time beneath the hazy layers of humidity that clung to trees and floated above the pond, listening to the swells of water that lapped against the aluminum sides of the boat. Eventually, maybe near sundown, raccoons wandered down to the mossy edge and skimmed the water with their paws, hunting for the young fish that drifted lazily like shadows among the fallen tree trunks and dead stumps that sat half submerged in the shallows. Sometimes the coons caught fish. When they did, their chattering voices carried across the water to the boat where Adam and his father sat, searching for fish feeding on the water bugs that skated back and forth across the glassy surface. They stared for hours in silence at the raccoons on the shore, until the 9 PM freight train clattered around the valley ledge, its big white letters "SOO LINE" fogged with rust as it thundered past.

"Well, I guess that means it's about time," his father would finally murmur.

Something heavy settled in Adam's chest when his father turned away and watched the train claw its way towards the orange ball of setting sun—a dampness that clung to his lungs and encumbered him with a drowsiness that made his eyes sag and his veins feel as if they'd been filled with sap instead of blood. He never wanted to leave. Months ago, when his mother got sick that first time, he sat on the front porch all day long with his face in his hands, searching the small dark cracks in the cement for something that would make him cry. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't coax the tears to come—not even when he thought of all those clear tubes plugged into her arms and chest, or imagined her sitting by the window after visiting hours were over with no one to talk to except her dim reflection in the glass. Maybe, when she sat alone gazing at the yellow lights in downtown Ann Arbor, and along the sun-baked hills near the highway that lit up when cars roared west over the river overpass, she searched her past for the debris of family illness that no one had ever talked about, trying to piece together the reason for her condition, as if it lay somewhere between the light and the dark outside her window.

"I think Uncle Morris had it in '54," she whispered to Adam and his father one Sunday when they came for a visit. "The same kind of angina. But he was older. I'm still fairly young, so that's in my favor. It just takes a little time."

"What's it feel like, Mom?" Adam had asked.

She turned and touched his knee as he sat on the bed beside her. "Do you really want to know, honey?" she asked, smoothing her hand over his leg and looking into his eyes. "It's hard to describe, but I'll try if you really want to know."

"Maybe you should rest," his father cut in, standing up from the chair at the foot of her bed. He came forward and leaned on the end railing, then beamed down at her, the fine lines around his eyes growing more pronounced when he smiled. "Might not be such a good idea to tell him right now. All that technical mumbo-jumbo is pretty confusing."

"It's okay," she said and nodded. "He's old enough to get the picture. He should learn what's going on."

"Lyn, he's just a boy. You don't really expect him to understand. Even I had a hard time trying to get what the doctor was saying."

"He should know. Besides, being 'just a boy' doesn't mean he can't know something about his health history," she said, her soft voice growing breathless. She took some deep breaths and closed her eyes. "I suspect that if

I knew before this happened, it may not have happened at all. He should know what to look out for, that's all," she whispered.

"Really, now, I don't think it's . . . appropriate."

His mother raised her hand to him. "It isn't a question of what is and isn't appropriate. It's about being well and not feeling sick." She opened her eyes, put her head back against her pillow and looked wearily at Adam's father. "I think he should know. It's about us—him, me you—the family. We should make him understand."

"How? I mean—what's he gonna know?" his father asked. He took a few steps away from the bed and raised his hands, as if weighing the question in his meaty palms. "All I'm saying is that it might not be such a good idea trying to explain it right now. Maybe later, when you're home, but not now. He'll get confused."

"I can help him understand," she said flatly. "In fact, this hospital room is probably the best place for him to learn."

Adam looked at his mother's band resting on his knee. It was small in comparison to his leg, just a bony thing with pale skin and small blue veins stretched tightly over the knuckles and long fingers. Small chips of brown and red oil paint flecked the oval portions of her nails, and the thin, smooth ridges of bone on the back of her palm rose and fell when she moved her fingers over his knee cap.

"That's okay," he said, enjoying the feel of her hand moving back and forth over his knee, watching the different colors of old paint on her nails blend into one hue. "Maybe you better sleep."

His father stood up and leaned over her once again. "Rest," he whispered. He patted her hand, then bent down and softly kissed it.

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The afternoon following that visit, Adam sat on the porch and tried to summon the tears, but nothing worked. He squeezed his lids with his fingers, slapped the side of his face a dozen or so times until he could feel the heat radiating from his red flesh, but all he felt was an intense, burning sensation inside his stomach and on his cheek. After a while his father walked up behind him, his feet making slow measured steps on the creaking wood floor, then stopped.

"Your Mom's a strong woman. She'll be all right," he said from behind the screen door, trying to affect in his voice a note of optimism. "I know I've said it at least a dozen times, but I feel it to be true. She'll get better and be home before you know it."

"I know," Adam mumbled, rubbing his dry sockets with his fists, then looking up at the field across the street. Young shoots of green corn had

begun to stubble the brown earth. The first time she got sick and went into the hospital, the corn in that field was tall and ready to be harvested. When he was ten or eleven, she used to sit with him on the porch after dinner showing him how to sketch the tall green rows in her pad using a dark-leaded pencil. He would lean in close to her and allow her paint-speckled fingers to guide his hand over the page, until an exact likeness of the field emerged on the paper.

He looked down at his hand now, then moved it across his lap, trying to recall the drawing movements she'd taught him. It had been a long time since he felt the dryness of her hand on his. He wondered what it would be like not to feel that again, or to have her around for any length of time, what he would do if he had the house to himself every afternoon the rest of his life. Growing up, he liked watching her glide silently from room to room, her robe stained with the same colors of paint that dotted her fingernails—red, blue, green, brown and some other shades he didn't know the names of. When she waltzed into the kitchen to fix his lunch, the scent of oil paint always followed in her wake. No matter how vigorously she scrubbed her hands, his ham and cheese sandwiches always tasted like paint after he took his first bite. But after so many years, those sandwiches never really tasted right if he couldn't detect the slightest hint of oil paint in them.

"She'll be okay. Right?" Adam asked, turning around to look at his father.

"Of course," his father said, his lean body shadowed by the screen door. "I suspect sooner than we think. She's a quick healer."

Adam nodded, then looked back out over the field across the street. He wasn't sure that what his father had said was the truth, but that was all right. Maybe he could wait for some kind of strength to unfurl or suddenly dawn on him one day as he sat on the banks of Indian Pond when he was feeling alone, peering at his muddled reflection on the water.

*

He loved his father. He loved that part of him that fished for comfort in the murky water of Indian Pond as he gazed over the edge of the boat and stared at the reflection of his face. When they fished together they sometimes talked about the prospects of the Lions, whispering about Barry Sims' breakaway speed as their boat drifted silently past the moss-covered trunks that littered the shore, and finally stopping in the green muck at the north end of the pond where frogs could be heard clucking below the shafts of pussy willows.

They talked to forget his mother's illness, trying to bury it beneath the

sound of their voices echoing against the trees in some corners of the pond, or disappearing over the water without ever reaching the opposite shore. After a few hours in the boat their talk thinned into complaints about the steamy weather and the things that needed repair on the house, like the aluminum shutters dented from a recent hail storm, and the small doors to the storage cabinets in the garage that cracked when his mother backed the station wagon into them once after a trip to the grocery store. But in the quiet moments Adam felt the weight of his father's unspoken worries in the air above them like the threat of rain as they rowed quickly toward shore just before sundown.

A warm, sweet pain blossomed in his groin the summer that he turned twelve—a spot of discomfort that flowed through his inner thighs and ebbed on days he and his father fished. He remembered his mother and tried not to think about the girls in his magazines. Instead, he imagined the bloated green bullfrogs he and his friends shot with a BB gun on the shore of Indian Pond, their green bodies heaped at the edge of the water, the sunlight glinting off their moist backs. But even these thoughts failed him. Eventually he found himself in the basement surrounded by all her paintings, feeling the pages of a magazine crinkle and rip just below his face as his body rocked back and forth.

After a month or two the feeling subsided. It came mostly in the afternoon—sharp, distinct, its range confined to his inner thighs and lower stomach as the wetness flowed into his shorts and glued the waist band of his Fruit-Of-The Looms to his skin. It smelled like bleach. No matter how hard he tried not to inhale that smell, he still caught traces of it on his clothing or in his hands when he went outside to play baseball with his friends. After a month he told himself that he wouldn't do it anymore, that it wasn't right, but this didn't work: each day he still found himself downstairs stretched out on the couch with his head pressed firmly to the coarse fabric below his face, his eyes fixed on the specks of dust that floated in the beams of sunlight that hovered a few inches in front of his mother's painting cove.

Adam clung to his side of the tent and stared at his friends giggling into their magazines, their heads cocked down, flashlights shifting from page to page. He moved to his right, poked his head out the doorway and looked up at the sky speckled with thousands of stars.

He wondered if anyone could see him. Maybe, from a grassy hilltop above his town or staring out the window of a slow moving jet, someone could see his gaze glued to the starry sky above him, and the ribbons of his neck muscles as he thought about all those afternoons in the basement. He considered this a moment, thinking that he'd left pieces of evidence of what

he'd done: the corner of his pillow jutting out from under the couch; a page, accidentally ripped from his magazine, crumpled on the last step of the staircase; the tag from his undershorts resting on the floor in a pool of warm sunlight. Perhaps, before that bad bout had gripped his mother a month ago and left her struggling for breath on the lawn out back, she'd found his pillow while arranging the dozens of half-finished paintings and unused canvasses that lay against the walls and rested in piles near the couch. Or his father, hunting around the basement for a tackle box or old pole, had nudged the couch aside with his knee and discovered the pillow himself.

Adam shook his head, trying to rid himself of these images. If caught, he could never look into his parents' faces without feeling dirty, as if a clean part of his innocence unleashed itself, spilled out through a seam in his body, and left him half the boy they once thought he was. Sometimes at night, when he finished saying his prayers and gazed through the dark at his window, watching the moonlight spill across the glass, he imagined his mother's smile fade after discovering his magazines. Or else he saw her trembling, paint-smeared fingers carefully pinching a worn end of his pillow and raising it towards the stairway light for inspection some late afternoon he sat along the banks of Indian Pond, looking through a magazine.

He couldn't really picture his father's reaction; with his mother in the hospital, he'd become distant and remote, as if her illness lay heavy on his mind every second he watched a Tiger game in the den, or sat hunched over the kitchen table in the late afternoon, squinting impatiently at the three-day-old newspaper spread in front of him. Adam shook his head, then looked up at the sky, at the soft white rings that encompassed the moon, and wondered what he would say if they both caught him lying on the basement couch in the middle of a hot afternoon.

He brought his head back into the tent and looked over at his friend Ed, sitting Indian-style across from him. Ed laid his magazine down and listened to the crickets in the grass just outside the tent door. He was short, with fine straight hair the color of field grass and puffy eyelids that drooped over his pupils.

Behind Ed, smothering a cigarette against the sole of his tennis shoe, loomed Johnny Hazleton, a new boy who'd moved with his mother to Northville from South Chicago earlier in the year. He was two years older than Ed and Adam; this fact fascinated Ed beyond reason, as if Johnny had garnished some worldly experience Ed wasn't privy to. To Adam, it seemed that the world in which Johnny had once lived found him and his mother unsuitable for its taste and coughed them out into Michigan.

"Look at this one," Johnny muttered, his voice gravelly from cigarettes. He dropped his magazine in the middle of the three of them as they sat inside the tent, then waved the flashlight across the page. A dark-skinned man with thick knots of black hair plastered all over his back appeared, stretched out on a carpet of white sand. A blond woman had her head hunkered down into his crotch.

"Is she doing what I think she's doing?" Ed asked, leaning forward to get a better view.

"Blow job," Johnny murmured. "You guys know what that is?"

Adam nodded. Ed sat back.

Johnny shifted his head back and forth mechanically. "Kind of neat, the way it feels," he murmured, looking down at his magazine.

"You ever have it done?" Adam asked.

"Sure. Back in Chicago, an old girlfriend used to do it all the time whenever I needed it. Really feels good."

"What's it feel like?" Ed asked.

Johnny leaned back. "Well," he began, his tiny eyes darting across the tent floor. "It's like a vacuum, except that it feels soft and doesn't hurt at all. My girlfriend was really good at it."

He peered through the darkness of the tent at Ed and then at Adam. "She told me I was big," he announced.

"Big," Adam repeated, a little annoyed at the encroaching story.

Johnny put his magazine down and looked across the tent at Adam and Ed.

"You wanna see it?" Johnny whispered. He looked over at Ed, then back to Adam again. He slid his body to the tent center and ran his tongue over his lips. Saliva made them sparkle in the moonlight that shone through the door flap. "I kinda had the feeling you both did. Just ask me and I'll show ya."

"Right," Adam muttered, looking back down at his magazine, feeling uneasy at the proximity of Johnny's body.

"Just admit it and I'll be happy to show you."

"Take it easy, Johnny," Ed said.

Johnny pressed his fists to the ground, levitated himself forward a few more inches towards Adam, and then stood up.

"Keep your pants on, Johnny," Ed said. "No one cares."

"You'll get your chance, Sanders," Johnny whispered, tracing his belt with a finger. "Just be patient."

"Pigboy, stop. No one wants to see it," Ed chuckled. "Maybe your mom makes you keep it at home when you go out. Maybe your dad can take it off, like a car tire."

Ed and Adam looked at each other, then exploded with laughter. They rocked back and forth a few seconds, clutching their sides. As Johnny knelt between them, Adam recalled rumors about his father leaving them before they moved to Northville, but nothing he could substantiate. Johnny kneeled before them, his mouth formed into a small pout, his gaze shifting nervously between Adam and Ed.

"I know one thing," Johnny roared above the laughter, his lower lip quivering. "Rickson here does want to see it."

Adam and Ed continued laughing.

"Funny, huh," Johnny yelled. "Tell ya what, Rickson. To make you happy, I will show it to you." He stood again and began fumbling with his pants button.

Ed put his magazine down. "Jeez, Johnny, we were just kidding. Enough already," he said, but Johnny kept going, until the white of his undershorts was visible against his pale skin.

Johnny clutched a wad of underwear and jeans. He moved forward until he was within an arm's length of Adam. "Okay, you ready," Johnny said. "Here we go. On three. One. Two. Three!"

Adam slid back and looked away. A few seconds passed. Finally Ed said, "Adam, he's not doing it."

"What a wuss," Johnny cried. "God, Rickson, I was just kidding. Wasn't gonna make you jealous by showing it off. I swear, you can be such a wuss."

Adam looked up. "Your dad teach you that one?" he asked, shaking his head.

He glanced at Ed sitting quietly across the tent, then at Johnny, who turned away in his embarrassment and began fumbling blindly for his pants buckle. Adam wondered what he would have done if Johnny had actually exposed himself—what he would have said or how he would have felt. Giving Johnny a straight right to the jaw seemed the appropriate thing to do, but the results could be hazardous, given Johnny's age and size difference. A feeling of uncertainty made Adam's head feel heavy, and the space inside the tent began to grow fuzzy and undefined. He gazed at Johnny standing awkwardly in front of him, chuckling. Then Adam rolled his magazine up with his sleeping bag and stood up.

"Adam, come on, don't leave," Ed pleaded. "He didn't mean it, right Johnny?"

Adam brushed past Johnny. "Of course not," he whispered close to Adam's ear.

*

He draped his sleeping bag over his shoulder and walked home, past the yellow shreds of daisies that littered the spaces between houses, their crowns chopped off by lawn mowers and scattered over yards like confetti from a parade. He lumbered through a thick haze that hovered above the water in the Gliders' front ditch, then cut across a back yard studded with small dirt pyramids made by moles. Finally he reached his house, crept to the side door and slowly opened it. He slipped into the laundry room and glided past a yellow basket overflowing with sheets, dish towels, his father's tee shirts, and Adam's cutoff shorts. Another basket, filled with the same sort of laundry, stood on top of the dryer propped against the wall.

He wandered through the front hallway, past his parents' room where his father breathed heavily in his sleep, then to the basement door. He opened it, reached above his head, pulled the fish string that clicked on the bulb, and followed the tunnel of yellow light downstairs to his mother's painting cove. When he got to the bottom, he put his hands forward, felt for the stool, and sat down.

He turned and gazed up at the window behind him. A splotch of mold grew on the glass above her canvasses and mingled with the cottony threads of spider webs woven into elaborate patterns among the rafters. He turned back around and peered into the areas of the basement where everything from his family's past hid in the dark beneath dusty blankets or packed into cardboard boxes. The only time he came downstairs was to be alone with his magazines, and even those moments were brief and sweaty interludes during the day; he was always in a hurry, working feverishly so as not to get caught. Still, his father, at least from what Adam knew, hadn't been in the basement for months.

He peered at the area where the couch sat and walked towards it. Once there, he stretched out on his stomach and thought about Johnny. He thought about Ed and how Johnny got him to do anything he wanted. His only best friend had been sucked in by the countless Johnny-stories that had to be untrue. Adam took a deep breath. Thinking of Johnny made him sweat—it beaded along the small of his back and slid down into his shorts. He decided he was going to get back at Johnny. No real pain—no blows to his head, stomach or chest. Images would be enough.

He closed his eyes and imagined Johnny's mother as a young woman strewn on the couch beneath his body, her skin as white as porcelain. Her breasts, tummy, even the patch of brown hair on her crotch were like fertile islands that gave expression to her face, one that replaced the leathery-looking woman he saw slouched in a lawn chair on the back porch of Johnny's house that first day he and Ed had met her. She slugged whiskey from a Flintstones cartoon glass all day long and basted herself in suntan oil

until her skin, dented and bunched together in fleshy deposits around her thighs and upper arms, looked as soft and brown as peanut butter.

Adam imagined her lips fluttering as he drew closer to her and felt her hot breath curling around his nose and mouth. He could taste the saltiness of her skin on her neck, behind her ears and on her cheeks. He stuck his fingers between the wall and couch and extracted one of his magazines. He spread it out in front of him, but because of the dark, he had to angle it towards a patch of light thrown from the bulb at the top of the stairs. The somber, curtained eyes of a long brunette lying on a cot came into focus. Posters of red Mustangs and black El Caminoes covered the wall behind her.

"Well, hello," he whispered, his fingers moving deeper into the space between the couch and wall, searching for his pillow. He closed his eyes and thought of Johnny's mother, but as his fingers probed the area between him and the wall, he felt the coarse texture of a canvas just below the spot where he usually kept his pillow. He squeezed his arm further down to gain a better grip on it, then pulled upwards and freed the painting from it's resting spot.

In the dark, with specks of stairway light barely freckling this side of the basement where other unfinished canvasses lay scattered around the couch and her painting cove, this painting looked like a patch of several colors mixed together—orange, powder blue, green, brown, red. Weeping Willows huddled around the glassy water and beyond them stood oak trees with crowns lit with autumn colors. Beneath one of the willows sat a crude-looking figure with its hands coupled in its lap. He or she, Adam couldn't tell which, wore a red-and-white striped shirt and black pants. But there wasn't any expression on the face—no eyes, mouth or nose, just a smear of creamy paint framed by a sprinkle of dark hair. Adam couldn't understand it. His mother had never before mentioned seeing Indian Pond or ever walking out to the orchard to look at it; yet here it was, locked onto the canvas by her imagination, the art of her brush strokes unblemished by the absence of this person's face.

"How?" he grunted. He stared up at the wood beams.

When did she go there? Why? He closed his eyes. Is this me? he wondered, looking again at the unfinished figure in the painting and smoothing a finger over it. Inside he felt an anger grow, a tight squeezing of muscle in his chest that constricted his breath. She should have said that she'd been there, he thought to himself. He threw the magazine towards the stairway where it landed in a wedge of light at the foot of the stairs. He made a fist. He held it above him so long that the blood drained from his fingers and made his hand tingle. Finally he brought it down hard against his chest once, then twice until the air squeezed out of him and he fell forward onto

the floor on top of some canvasses. The frames at the end of the couch smacked the ground; the painting slipped from his lap and settled beside him. He pushed a hand out and touched it. Within seconds he heard the creak of his father's bare footsteps near his bedroom, then at the basement entrance. The door opened.

"Adam?" his father called. Adam watched the beam from his father's flashlight jitter in circles on the floor, then move backwards until it enveloped the magazine resting in a heap at the foot of the stairs. The light remained fixed on the brunette's naked body as his father descended the stairway.

"Adam." The brass screws that secured the wood railing moaned as his father leaned his weight onto it. "Come here, boy."

Adam peered at the crumbs of paper, wood, and minute drops of oil paint that lay on the floor before him like fragments of an imaginary world that had somehow teetered off its axis and fallen aimlessly into the dark basement where it shattered into millions of pieces. He raised himself up, looked into the area of the basement where the furnace sat, at his mother's painting cove, then dropped his head to the cool floor.

"Come on, boy. Time for bed," his father cooed. He moved forward a few feet, then stopped. He cleared his throat, and in a small, feeble voice he said, "We'll go fishing in the morning if you want. Should be good day for it—weatherman says it's gonna rain."

Adam swallowed and licked his lips. After a few seconds his father walked over and knelt down beside him, then laid a palm softly on his back and rubbed.

"Come on, son, it's getting late."

But Adam didn't move. He simply stayed on the ground for what seemed to him a long time, moving a finger back and forth across the rough texture of that faceless figure resting against a tree in his mother's rendition of Indian pond.

# Phalaenopsis[1]
## by Josefina Diaz

The air swelled light
and water, like my mother's greenhouse.
An orchid
breathed, I strained
Her petals poured out
like milk in the morning,
the heart and juice of a young coconut.
They stretched and curled
on sepals, drooping,

curved lips red.
Red as the sash of the Spaniard
who ravished
my great-grandmother, the wound pulsing
from her bolo knife, the mud
on his grave.
Red as the bayonet
of the soldier from Japan, the one
that pierced my aunt's baby girl; red
as her own
hands and blade. Red as the mat
where an American smothered
the cries of my cousin, seized her. Red
as the sun pooling
in Manila Bay.

She's a product
of the tropics, the gardener offered. Exotic.
Snagged her
at a cheap price, he boasted.
She's easy, doesn't need much
water. This hybrid's been perfected
through generations of breeding.

The gardener's hands were chapped
and scarred. Black soil
lodged in every crease.

I know, I answered.
My mother grows them at home.

[1] *Phalaenopsis* is a genus of orchid that is native to the Philippines.

## March 26, Frost's Birthday
### by Lyn Lifshin

I think of him huddled
in olive green work pants
in my grandfather's store
exchanging a look of
shared glumness with my
father who would stitch
and hem what didn't fit,
the one place he could.
They didn't need to say
much, my father, head down
with a needle as if he could
sew up the holes in our
family. Each knew about
what nothing could fill. My
father, with his notebooks,
scribbling stock market
reports, what his burden of
a family spent for a meal
as if it was a poem the poet
knew, could read in his
eyes, could feel was as
icy as a year in a house
with a woman on the other
side of the wall he never
talked to

# En la clase de español: significación y los verbos

## by Judith Arcana

*En la clase de español,* it's different. I own my life
in years: *tengo cincuenta y cinco años*; I have fifty five
years. This ownership goes beyond English; *en inglés*
*(simplemente),* I am fifty-five, I am those years, those years
are me, my life. And this is fine, *esta bien,* however simple
the talking. But in translation, moving from one to the other
not all the movement is simple. In both Americas, *los dos*
daily life contains the sublime; and Spanish names it.

When I pull on two shirts, a hat and a jacket that's
because *hace frío.* A nameless power is pulling air
across the sky in waves, turning green leaves brown,
paralyzing water, making cold, making cold happen.
If I were to say all that in my own words, just as in court
where that's what they want I'd have to swear I couldn't.
*Porque en español, hace frío:* it makes cold. But if you're
talking English, it's cold, it's just cold; nothing happens.

As it happens, *hay mas*; there's more to consider. Like when
for example, *tengo miedo,* I have fear. I am not then simply
afraid, as I might be in words I was born to, no no
*en la clase de español, I* have fear; I own it, fear is my own.
And *en clase también,* also in Spanish class, *tengo hambre*
I have hunger. So I own the hunger inside of me, *sí,*
I hold it inside like the fear, *hambre como miedo.* Then
*tengo los dos: el hambre y el miedo.* Both belong to me.

## Proposition and Question
### by James Cervantes

If you shrink the universe to fifteen floors,
with each floor containing fifty rooms,
and make the present the sole realm
of their occupants, what are the chances
that they will encounter their past? Given:
that they will observe their own schedules
and not communicate about routes, such as one
going down for breakfast, and another
sinking to the basement for a swim.
Or that one might have to cross a common room
which another will occupy some time before
and neither alerts the other to this possibility.
Allow even for the fact that one might
have alerted the other to a general location
but was vague about time, such as
"I might go for a swim." and "I'll probably
go get breakfast." What clocks operate
that bring them to the same elevator
within seconds, her braided hair
like strands of time brought together
while the whole building collapses
into one floor where, lifting his coffee
he watches her dive into the pool?

# Man and Woman, Reclining
## by Orman Day

The snoring sounded like a bombing raid over Iraq. I leaned forward and squinted my myopic eyes at the video screen to see what kind of a man would make such a sound. I expected a retiree, breathing heavily through a veined nose, every exhalation disheveling his wispy white hair.

And then I saw beneath the veil of tubes and wires . . . A sleeping damsel . . . Yellow hair, flowing to the waist . . . Beatific smile framed in round, red cheeks . . . A pillow dappled with pastel unicorns. I gasped, reminded of the Picasso painting, *The Dream,* with its bounteous woman, thick armed, eyebrows plucked thin, red-lipped, head atilt, the same yellow hair, bare-shouldered, a breast half exposed, dozing in a red easy chair. My mouth was dry because I was still winded from the climb up two flights of stairs, but I finally mustered the moisture to read the embroidered name off the technologist's white coat, "David . . . It is David, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is that a woman?" I scratched my goatee. "In the other room?"

"It sure is." He was reaching into my XXL T-shirt to shave the area next to my left shoulder. "Now, sit back. You've got an awfully hairy chest and we wouldn't want the razor to slip."

"A woman . . ."

"Anyone can have a sleep disorder," he said.

I could imagine snores emanating from Rodin's *The Thinker,* but not from Leonardo's Mona Lisa or Picasso's *The Dream.* And there could be no such sounds from Picot's *Amour and Psyche,* she slumbering and he . . . Cupid . . . lost in infatuation. The mind makes wondrous, loopy connections. I—who had matched so many lonely men and women at my very own Garrett's Coffee Cart—realized that I was Cupid, wounded by my own arrow. Smitten by the Dreamer's image, I transformed her snores into a cluster of Bartok's bassoons.

"From your questionnaire," said David, "it appears that you might have sleep apnea. You gasp, you say?"

"My mother says."

"You're tired during the day?"

"I go out to my van to nap whenever I can. But I have trouble trusting my cashbox to my assistant. He's a parolee." I sighed. "I've been losing weight."

"That should help," said David.

"I hit forty a couple years ago and I quit burning calories. My weight went up and up."

"Fat happens." Though it hadn't happened to David, a triathlete type whose body looked like it had been carved out of Carrara marble by Michelangelo himself

"It's been tough cutting out sweets," I said, "but Dr. Madrid told me I better if I want to keep out of Heart-Attack City. I haven't eaten a crumb of biscotti or blueberry muffin in two weeks. That's not easy when you're surrounded by the stuff all day. And homemade macadamia nut cookies . . ." I shook my head. "My body's gone into shock from sugar withdrawal."

"If it's warranted by our findings, I'll be waking you in the middle of the night to test the effectiveness of a CPAP on you. Continuous Positive Airway Pressure. I'll put a mask over your nose and air will be pumped steadily into your nose and throat. But I'll only if it's indicated by our measurements."

"People live like that?" I asked. "Wearing a muzzle all night? What do their wives and girlfriends think? That they're sleeping with Hannibal Lecter or the goalie for the Mighty Ducks?"

"People get used to it," said David. "Now, Garrett, you'll have to take off your glasses."

I put them in my plastic grocery bag and closed my eyes slightly, so that the sleep lab and its machines and monitors blurred into a grand canvas that Monet or Pissarro or Cézanne could have painted in Argenteuil or Aix or Pontoise. Water lilies. Parasols. Blossoms and drooping branches and the riffled, shimmery surface of the Seine . . . A field of splashed color surrounding the recumbent figure of my Dreamer. I wanted to dull the cold mechanics of the room by seeing it through the eyes of Degas, Manet, or Sisley.

David disrupted my reverie with words like "blood oxygen levels" and "rapid eye movements . . . REM sleep" and "the thermistor under your nose will be measuring the airflow through your mouth and nose."

"These electrodes on your chest will connect you to the EKG monitor . . . electrocardiogram . . . to record your cardiac activity," he said.

I didn't want to know any of this, I'm needle phobic. When Dr. Madrid sent me for tests of my cholesterol and liver levels, I told the phlebotomist to hide the needle from my view and describe her vacation in Cabo San Lucas. It's not the pain, it's the idea, and I have come close to fainting several times after flu shots and blood draws. Even walking down a hospital hallway turns me green and weak-kneed. And now David was sickening me with his talk of the elastic belts he had wrapped around chest and abdomen to measure contraction and expansion, and the oximeter and its ethereal red light which crowned my index finger "to keep track of your pulse and blood pressure oxygen saturation." Just as I was about to ask David if he had

smelling salts . . . I concentrated on the Dreamer's soft image and her snores replied with a reassuring resonance.

Trussed, tethered, my scalp dripping wires, I padded behind David the short distance to one of the two laboratory bedrooms. I was already dressed for bed: beige sweat socks, loose-fitting grey cotton shorts stretching to my knees and a souvenir gift from one of the Coffee Cart's steady customers, a T-shirt permanently stained with "100% pure Hawaiian red dirt."

I should have brought my own pillows, I realized that right away, once I was lying between the sheets. I'm not used to crispness of any sort: sheets, pillowcases, shirts. At the Cart, I'm known for a rumpled, unbarbered look. My pillows at home, in my studio apartment above my parents' garage, are thin enough to twist, and my sheets are age-frayed and wrinkled because I wrap them around my legs when I sleep. This room did not make me feel at home. How could it, with its flower-patterned bedspread, framed prints in ornate frames, soft carpet? All color-coordinated.

"You're wearing a microphone," said David, "so we can communicate both ways. And that little infrared light ahead of you is the video camera. If you need to use the restroom, just speak and I'll help you get up. Any questions?"

I was anxious to fall asleep so the monitoring could begin. I had brought a paperback, a tedious management tome, but the lamps were out of reach, so I decided to see if I could fall asleep right away and put the electrodes, EKG, EEG, and oximeter to work. David left me in what would have been total darkness except for the lights at the camera's eye and on the tip of my index finger.

I couldn't sleep.

After a while, I tried to put myself in a meditative state by descending a spiral staircase and picturing falling raindrops, but I couldn't quiet the monkey chatter in my head. I felt too tired to sleep. Per the printed instructions mailed with the questionnaire, I had not napped all day and drank only enough caffeine to keep from having a headache. I deserved to be asleep. I willed it. My body ached for it. I prayed to Hypnos to touch my forehead with his magic wand and fan me to sleep with his wings. I asked his son, Morpheus, to bless me with beautiful dreams. But I kept thinking of another god . . . Eros . . . and the slumbering goddess down the hallway.

By her face I knew the Dreamer bore the plumpness I desire in a woman. I trace my predilection to the family's collection of slipcased books from the Time-Life Library of Art. I was imprinted by their slick pages, just as my classmates were imprinted by the visages spread across Playboy and National Geographic. And now I'm an idiot savant who can't remember my

social security number, but who can recall every brush- and chisel-stroke of masterpieces as defined by *Time* and *Life.*

At the onset of adolescence, when boys form lifelong fixations and fantasies, I would occasionally stay home feigning an upset stomach, so I could spin Pachelbel and Vivaldi atop the stereo and dance shirtless amid the multitudinous art books, propped open to their naked treasures. Rembrandt's *Danae.* Barry's *Jupiter and Juno on Mount Ida.* And from Rubens, who etched the feminine ideal into my brain cells: *The Toilet of Venus* and *Marie Arrives at Marseilles.* I found myself lingering over the rounded flesh of Giorgione's *Fete Champetre* and refusing to revisit the lean nymphets of Cranach's *Judgment of Paris.* Thus was an obsession formed.

Reminded of these grand pieces of art, I couldn't sleep. Perhaps, I thought, I should have spent an afternoon half-hour squandering some of my chi . . . my life force . . . by sequestering myself with the pages of a magazine indelicately titled *Big Butt.* I prefer that the magazine have glossy pages with air-brushed, art-directed images and a different name, perhaps—if alliteration must replace alliteration—*Bounteous Bottom.* But it is what is and, unlike the Time-Life books, is easily hidden within the crevices of my roll-top desk, away from my mother's inquisitive dust rag.

But my chi was far from spent and in fact, seemed to be boiling as one sleepless hour melted into the next. Although I'm sure David would have forbidden it, I wished I had brought along my Itty-Bitty reading light. Three pages with my tome, learning how the savvy boss can motivate the unmotivated, and my eyeballs would be darting back and forth beneath my closed lids, monitored by the EOG . . . the electrooculogram.

Alas . . . no light. I called out, "David!" and although I had no idea where my microphone was situated on my body, he heard my words and replied through the intercom from what I assumed was his office, "Yes, Garrett."

"I can't sleep."

"Maybe you're trying too hard."

"I feel like I'm messing up the tests," I said. My attention was diverted by my glowing fingertip, which I waved in figure eights until I realized David could see me on his monitor. "What time is it?"

"Midnight."

I sighed deeply.

"Sometimes people just have trouble sleeping in this environment. Take your mind off the machines. Picture yourself in your bedroom."

"I can't sleep in my own bedroom either."

David didn't respond.

"Okay," I said, "I'll try again."

"If you need to use the bathroom, let me know."

"Thanks, David."

I pictured the Dreamer's image on the monitor and shook my head. How could I be so entranced by a woman whose face was screened by tubes and wires? Am I so lonely that I compare myself to Cupid, piercing himself at the sight of a nose, an open mouth, closed eyes and a hank of yellow hair? Am I so desperate? Yes! How long has it been since I've lain with a woman? It's been five years since I sneaked into my apartment . . . lest Mom know . . . my last girlfriend, a pious mailroom clerk, whose lightness reminded me of the Three Graces in Botticelli's *Primavera.* I pulled the bed out of my couch and stripped myself naked—revealing myself as Goya's *The Colossus.* Besieged by remorse for an act we had yet to initiate, she crossed her arms across her bare breasts and wept. I crumpled, stricken anew by the compassion I had felt for the rape victims depicted in the Time-Life Library of Art: del Pollauiulo's *Deianira* and Poussin's *Sabine Women.*

Not since that afternoon with the mailroom clerk . . . and that was forty-five pounds and a thousand mini-muffins ago . . . had I stood naked before a woman. No, that wasn't true. The last time was two weeks ago at my long overdue physical examination. My mother made the appointment with the medical group without asking my permission, and my primary care physician turned out to be Dr. Delores Madrid, a native of Honduras.

This was a memory, I knew, that I could not repress, a memory unconducive to sleep, but I relived it nonetheless: the calling of my name by nurse Carol as I sat in the waiting room reading a year-old Money magazine; nurse Carol's grunt of disapproval as she readjusted the scale from 200 to 250 to 265, my caustic comment to nurse Carol about her insensitivity, nurse Carol's smirk as she left me in the examination room with a petite-sized hospital gown; Dr. Madrid's introduction of herself and my flinching at the Dadaism of Schwitters' *The Lunatic-Doctor*; the physician's scrutiny of my non-private parts while I envisioned myself as the corpse in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*; the slackening of my jaw when Dr. Madrid told me that she was going to fetch nurse Carol to witness the final portion of the examination (so there could be no question of inappropriate behavior; five sobering minutes during which I compared my body unfavorably to that of Titian's *Adonis*; my realization that I'd come to look like one of the gluttons in Rubens's *Fall of the Damned*; the return of the doctor with nurse Carol, who was barely suppressing a grin, and my over-identification with the subject of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*; nurse Carol pretending to shuffle papers while Dr. Madrid lifted my gown and began to fumble beneath my belly, bringing to mind van Leyden's *The*

*Milkmaid*; Dr. Madrid's request to cough and cough and cough again and my recollection of Wagguno's still life, *Fruit and Goldfinch*; nurse Carol furtively eyeballing the produce cowering in my hairy basket and my remembrance of Leonardo's *Lady with an Erminel*; Dr. Madrid's request to turn around and bend over with my elbows on the examination table, the sense that four eyes, not two, were scrutinizing my ursine backside while I recalled Rubens' *The Presentation of the Portrait*; the gloved finger sliding into my sanctum sanctorum and my recollection of Winslow Homer's *Bayonet Charge*; Dr. Madrid's telling me I could stand up now and me awakening from my dissociative trance by remembering Fiorentino's *The Descent from the Cross*; Dr. Madrid excusing nurse Carol, whose face mirrored the triumphant expression of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*; my mind reconstructing Giacometti's bronze sculpture, *Woman With Her Throat Cut*; Dr. Madrid excusing herself temporarily so I could have privacy to put on my street clothes; my envy of Dürer's *Adam and Eve* for their fig leaves; Dr. Madrid handing me a list of foods to avoid (which read like the Coffee Cart menu) and informing me that she'd authorized an overnight stay at the sleep disorders center.

My remembrance of Delacroix's *Hesiod and The Muse*, of the sleeping poet visited by heaven-sent inspiration.

"David," I called out.

"Yes, Garrett." From the intercom somewhere out there in the darkness of my room.

"Has anyone ever gone the entire night without sleeping?"

"No. It'll catch up with you sooner or later. It always does."

"Should I do a visualization?" I asked. "Like there's a river called Peace and Quiet and I'm floating down it on an air mattress, getting sleepier and sleepier, rocked in its wavelets."

"Whatever works."

I was struck by a thought: I was having trouble sleeping because this bedroom was too peaceful and quiet. I needed the reassuring murmur of a radio or television or—and I often nap on my parents' sofa—the grunts and purrs of my mother's housekeeping appliances or the snap of her solitaire cards. "Thanks, David. I'll try to hypnotize myself."

"I'll see you in the morning."

I closed my eyes and tried to think of a painting that would be calming. I rejected one ill-suited choice after another . . . Rembrandt's *The Blinding of Samson* and Gros's *Napoleon Visiting the Pest-House at Jaffa* . . . until I alit upon Gainsborough and his pastorals: *Mountain Landscape with Peasants Crossing Bridge*, *The Wood Gatherers*, and, alas, *Haymaker and the Sleeping Girl*, she with her basket of mushrooms and soft, pale neck inviting a kiss. I

mustn't dwell on sleeping women, so I filled my mind with *The Boy in the Cart,* which reminded me of Garrett's Coffee Cart, parked outdoors in a promenade blessed with sunshine, sea breezes and street musicians: Vermeer's *Lady with a Lute,* the bustled songstress from Seurat's *A Café Concert* and the angel playing the violin for the road-weary Holy Family in Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight to Egypt.*

I was back among the Cart's spigots and knobs and Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder.* Befogged by milk steam, surrounded by Picabla's *Machine Turns Fast,* I took orders for café au laits and mini-muffins. Customers were lined up, but my assistant had taken yet another an unauthorized break. At the counter stood Whistler's mother, demanding her Sumatra black and unsweetened, and leaving nothing in the tip jar.

Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider* stopped for café mocha and a handful of chocolate truffles on his way to fight the infidel Turks. I gave a complimentary pot of chamomile tea and a cranberry bagel to Picasso's *The Absinthe Drinker* and she sat at one of my tables, transformed into Maes's *An Old Woman Saying Grace.* I heard beans grinding and water percolating through Kona beans and found myself an inmate in Goya's *The Madhouse.*

I wanted to know if it was seven AM yet, so David could open my cell. I couldn't find a clock, only the limp timepieces of Dali's *The Persistence of Memory.* A person was shouting for the non-dairy creamer. I was out of it and Equal too and wooden stirring sticks. The voice was getting shriller and I confronted Munch's *The Cry.* I snorted loudly in surprise, waking myself, and called out, "David?"

"Congratulations, Garrett," he said. "We've recorded some activity. REM sleep all the way. Actually I think you've slept more than you think."

"I feel like it totaled ten minutes."

"Nope. Much more than that. Now that the pressure's off, why not see if you can't drift back to sleep."

I pondered the difference between the thought and the dream fragment and then I felt the flush of humiliation at baring my elephantine backside to Dr. Madrid and nurse Carol and then I was shoveling mud as a creaking treadmill drained water from a pit in Peale's *Exhuming the Mastodon.* My leg jerked as I tried to free it from the excavation site.

Later, and I'm not sure how much time had passed, I was awakened by sounds coming through the wall at my head. I felt like my frontal lobe was being waxed and buffed. "David?"

"He's gone to quiet the cleaning people . . ." A woman's voice. "The janitors shouldn't be on this floor yet."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Your angel. I watch over you."

I smiled at the light of the camera.

"Are you my sleeping giant?" she asked. "Will you slay my dragons?"

"Are you my sleeping beauty? Do you await my kiss?"

"Shhh." Her voice lowered to a whisper, "David nears. I return to my castle tower. Embrace your dreams."

The noises ceased beyond the wall. I wondered if the woman's voice was dreamed or not because—as my mother will attest—I often answer aloud to words spoken to me only in my mind. The question went unanswered. I dreamt of the moat and the castle and the tower and a rope of yellow hair, but I was diverted to a side room where I was drawn toward a woman's bare breasts and saw that they belonged to Delacroix's *Medea* and it dawned on me that she was poised to avenge Jason's desertion by slaying their children. My legs churned as I tried to flee, panting with fear . . . gasping so loudly that I awoke.

I wondered how a mother could kill her children and then I considered the kind of punishment—corporal, capital or pecuniary—that Medea would mete out to my assistant for his dereliction of duty at the Coffee Cart. And then I was asleep again. And then I was awake again. I called out to David and he said through the speaker that he would come for me as soon as he was done disconnecting the other patient. While I waited, I envisioned the shuttered store of Hopper's *Seven AM, 1948*. After a few minutes, I could hear the Dreamer taking a shower: Degas' sculpture, *Woman Washing Her Left Leg*. Then quiet: his painting, *After the Bath*.

My door opened and I was flooded with the light of revelation from Michelangelo's *Conversion of St. Paul*. Exhausted, I padded behind David to the monitoring room and sat down heavily in a chair and was slowly freed of electrodes and the like.

"Any problems?" I asked.

David was unwrapping the oximeter from my fingertip. "The somnologist will evaluate the tests, the videotape, go over your questionnaire, then make recommendations to your primary care physician. You'll need to make an appointment with Dr. Madrid."

"Off the record."

"It looks like you've got mild sleep apnea and RLS."

"RLS?"

"Restless leg syndrome. You jerked your legs a couple of times."

I winced at that diagnosis and decided not to tell him about trying to run away from Medea and yanking my shoes out of the mud at the excavation site. "What now? Do I need to go under the laser?"

"Change your diet," said David, scraping at my scalp where electrodes had sat. "Walk a few miles a day. Join a gym. Sometimes the apnea problem

can be solved through proper sleep positioning. Sew some tennis balls into the back of your shirt and they'll keep you from sleeping on your side. Better for the airflow. Look, I can't get off all this electrode paste. Want a shower when the other patient comes out?"

"I'll wait till I get home and take a bath." I haven't liked showers since junior high. Jocks like David snapping towels at me and ridiculing my gut.

"Suit yourself."

The Dreamer came out of the bathroom, shaking her yellow hair, cradling two pillows below her small breasts, dangling a canvas tote bag from her left hand. Confident posture. Strong shoulders. Blue eyes, like Psyche.

"All set?" said David.

"I think so," she said.

"Excuse me, Garrett." David turned to her. "A little paperwork and you'll be on your way.

They both stood facing a table, so that their backs were to me. She was wearing a pink shift that clung to the firm mounds of her broad undimpled hindquarters, ever so slightly backlit so that—even without my glasses—I could make out the cleft. I gasped audibly at the beauty of it all.

When they both turned around at the noise, I smiled and said, "Must've had an apnea."

They returned to their paperwork and then she was gone and David had disentangled me and I had finished with my own papers. In my plastic shopping bag, inside one of my shoes, I discovered a note. A woman's handwriting, by the undulation of its letters and the lightness of its touch. Surreptitiously I read: "Are you the dreamer or the dreamed? Are you ready to wake a sleeping beauty and find out?"

She was waiting for me downstairs, in front of the medical office building. Her red convertible was parked at the curb and she motioned toward it. My mother and father were staffing the Cart for the day, so I climbed inside Stubb's *Phaeton with Cream Ponies and Stable-lad.*

"You should know that I'm one of those women who runs personal ads," she said, paying less-than-safe attention to the road. "I describe myself as a big, brassy woman who knows what she wants. When I watched you sleep, I knew I was going to drive you to the beach."

"You watched me?" I asked.

"I visited the bathroom. Then David went to talk to the janitors' service about the noise they were making, so I stood in front of your monitor . . . Mesmerized, I might say. You reminded me of the Minotaur."

"The Minotaur?"

"From Greek mythology. The head of a bull and the body of man.

You've got the shaggy head of hair and the goatee and—if I might be so bold—you seem to have heaps of gorgeous hair spilling out of your T-shirt and down your legs. I like a hairy chest, just like my father's. Men's taste in body shape is determined by their mother's shape. Ask a woman if she likes a hairy chest or not . . . It depends on her father."

"Do you know Picasso?" I asked.

"I saw his exhibit in LA two weeks ago with my ex-boyfriend. That's why the Minotaur came to mind. Picasso's sketches. The Minotaur and the sleeping girl."

"The Minotaur rapes virgins," I said. "He went blind."

"You may look like the Minotaur, but I think you have the soul of the Altar Boy." She was driving us down the Costa Mesa Freeway toward Balboa Peninsula. "There's something else that attracted me to you."

"What?"

"You smell like vanilla coffee beans," she said.

"I do?"

"I adore that smell . . . and you have it." I sniffed my forearm. "I guess you want to know how my boyfriend became an ex," she said.

"You don't have to explain."

"There can be no secrets in a sleep center," she said. "I snore and nothing seems to stop it. Not those nasal strips. Not tennis balls sewn into the back of my pajama top. Nothing. I guess the next step is losing weight . . . Snipping my bowel off at the pass or wiring my jaw shut. But I'm a woman with big appetites. Men and chocolate mint ice cream." She laughed, shaking her damp yellow hair and lifting her fair bosom, and I recalled Sloan's *Sunday, Girls Drying Their Hair.*

"Your boyfriend broke up with you because you snore?" I asked.

"Do you know George Bernard Shaw?"

"The Irish writer? *Pygmalion. Man and Superman.*"

"A woman once wrote him, 'Laugh and the world laughs with you, snore and you sleep alone.' Burt loved me and I loved him. He liked to swim in my fat. There's even a name for what he was. An FA, a Fat Admirer. But he was a Vietnam vet . . . Humping through the boonies, that's what he called it. The slightest sound, like a twig snapping, would jolt him into full battle alert. We'd make glorious love and then—learning from other times, other lovers—I always found an excuse for him to leave or for me to leave before we fell asleep. One night I had to put Plan B into effect. He was too drunk to drive home and dozed off on my bed. I turned my air purifier from 'Quiet' to 'High Clean' and put on a custom-made cassette tape: kodo drums from Japan, pan pipes from the Andes, Mickey Hart's 'Planet Drum' . . . Stuff I figured might keep him lulled to sleep and still mask my snoring.

Put the player on continuous loop, so it'd go all night. An hour later, he shook me and complained that my snoring sounded like rounds of incoming. I couldn't keep myself awake. In the morning . . . a note on my nightstand. My bedroom's nothing but a slumber room."

"A slumber room? Isn't that where you view the corpse?"

"I'm surprised Burt didn't plop coins on my eyes and drape me with a sheet."

Her vulnerability reminded me of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*: sitting beside two fully clothed men . . . a naked woman staring at the viewer.

"And you?" she said.

"My dating life?" I thought of Reinhardt's *Black Painting.*

"From that tone, I'd guess you're destitute of love. Your sleep disorder?"

"Mild apnea . . . that means you gasp and snort . . ."

"Sounds a Minotaur would make."

". . . And if David is to be trusted, Restless Leg Syndrome."

"I wouldn't trust him," she said, "would you?"

"He's all protein drink and anabolic steroid. I know the perfect woman for him. Nurse Carol. They could explore each other with calipers. Ferret out pockets of body fat."

We moved down the road with a swiftness that made me imagine that we were being borne by the chariot of Rubens's *The Apotheosis of Hercules.*

"Could you accept a woman who snores?" she asked.

"Burt's pain would be my pleasure. I'd welcome your snoring."

"No?"

"Test me."

The Dreamer unrolled a blanket on the damp palm-rimmed grass up from the sand near Balboa Pier and the ocean. We each took one of her pillows and curled into each other. I didn't have my frayed sheet so I clung to a corner of her shift. As tired as I was, I couldn't sleep until she began to snore. Twice, I gasped awake and then was serenaded back to sleep. Only when she quit snoring did I open my eyes and lift my arms into the salt-scented wind.

A seagull culled through the grass for stray crusts and I whispered to her, "Joan Miro's *The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers.*"

She scraped the electrode paste from my scalp and scattered the flakes into the wind. "What does that mean? The beautiful bird?"

"It's a painting," I said. "I'm drunk on exhaustion. That's why I may not make sense, but I need to tell you about the last twelve hours. It'd sound weird to most people, but I trust you because you love Picasso." I took a

deep breath and steeled myself with the image of Gericault's horse-spurring *Officer of the Imperial Guard.* "When I was just starting puberty, I got addicted to the Time-Life Library of Art. *The World of Copley, The World of Watteau,* all of them."

"I know those books," she said.

"I got carried away, starting at those pictures for hours on end. I used the text to write term papers and book reports: English history through the eyes of Gainsborough, the geography of the Netherlands as expressed through its painters, the biological source of Van Gogh's work. And I developed crushes: Delacroix's *Mademoiselle Rose* one week, Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* the next. My high school counselor suggested I go into art, but I'm blue-green colorblind and I never could draw a barn in perspective. One more thing you should know, I fell hopelessly in love with one of the paintings. For months, before my mother put it back into its slipcase, I propped open the *World of Picasso* to *The Dream.* Every morning I offered it some sort of sweet . . . a muffin, truffle, shortbread, a macadamia cookie. In the evening, I considered it blessed and ate it with reverence. But after high school, I walked away from those books, got a degree in business, started reading management books. Began to worship other things, most of them unhealthy. And then last night . . . I was deluged with memories. I think it all has to do with Goya's engraving, *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters.* Under the picture, Goya wrote a caption, 'Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders.'"

We were both quiet for a moment until I said, "I'm too tired to conceal my emotions." I sighed. "Now I think *The Dream . . .*"

". . . Has come true." She smiled, rose and brushed grass clippings out her hair. "Let's go pick the lock on a lifeguard tower." She held out her hand to me.

"Then what?"

"You pretend every single hair on your body is a bristle," she said. "You pretend that my flesh is a canvas stretched tight."

I was Giotto's *The Raising of Lazarus.* "And then?"

"You'll be a brush in Rubens's hand."

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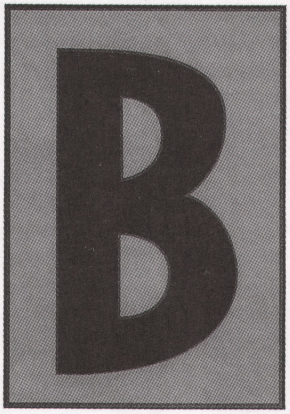

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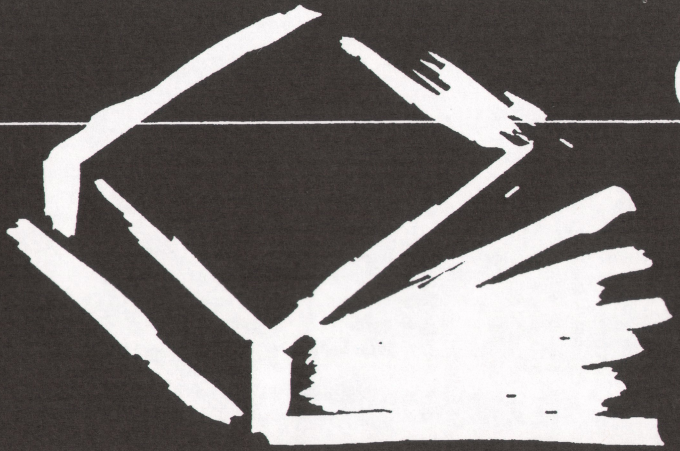

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