"Rubber Walrus Speaks" and other stories

Steven Walsh Christenson

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THE RUBBER WALRUS SPEAKS
AND OTHER STORIES

By
Steven W. Christenson
B.A., University of Montana, 1969

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for the degree of
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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School
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I am Roger Clifton. My wife is Susan. We had arrived home late after a marvelous evening riding the giant slides and eating ice cream cones. We had not been settled in our arm chairs facing each other for ten minutes when the telephone rang. Since Susan was sitting in the chair near the telephone, she answered.

"Hello," she said, at first drily, after which she broke into an excited smile and exclaimed, "Well hi-i-i-i!
"
I had an idea then who was calling. I looked for Susan's eyes to see if I wasn't right. She didn't look at me right away. She laughed and said, "So you got the walrus, eh?"
Then she looked at me and winked. Again she laughed. I figured the caller, who was the dearest friend from my childhood, Elmer Wheeler, was saying to the effect, "Yeah, I got your goddam walrus and you're really freaking my head," and enjoying each passing moment of it. Elmer Wheeler. We had grown up together, went to school together, solved our
adolescent difficulties together. I remember in high school how I used to translate his love poetry into Latin, I thought it so good, and of course he was perfectly flattered. "Did you get the point of it?" Susan asked. It was a small rubber walrus we found in a curio shop which we bought as a present for Elmer. We decided we would use it as a letter. Fake yellow fur on his chest and head, bouncy white tusks, wrinkled brown body, we realised we had to ink our messages on the flat smooth bottom: "Dear Elmer, We like you, Susan and Egor." This walrus was in reply to a nasty letter we had received from Elmer in which he condemned me as "a cynic" and "an egotistical bastard," while announcing his love for my Susan. This nasty letter of Elmer's had itself been in reply to a letter he had received from me in which I thanked him on behalf of Susan and myself for two lucky agates he sent us which he found by the tracks while working for the railroad. He had said then that these agates would bring good luck if one breathed on them three times followed by a polishing. I thanked him, explaining how three onioned breaths and a polishing in the cat's flea powder brought forth a thunder and hail storm, loud party-crazy neighbors, an overdrawn statement from the bank, bickering from Susan, a complaint from our landlord about
our cat who meanwhile had a deranged outburst as she clawed up the curtains in pursuit of a fly. He thought my appreciation of his agates a definite insult to the meaning of friendship, condemned me, declared love for my Susan, begging that she write, begging me not to. Of course, Susan and I are wife and husband and desired, at least idealistically, to embark on joint ventures. So Elmer retrieved the walrus from both of us. "And you didn't find anything else?" Susan laughed into the phone. "Yeah, I figured you wouldn't have the curiosity to wonder if there wasn't more."

"Don't tell him," I whispered over to her. I genuinely hoped he would stare at that walrus, probably sitting on his dresser, and stare at it for months before he discovered the secret of it.

Susan cupped the phone with her hand and went, "Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh" at me.

"Let me talk to him," I said.

"You want to talk to Roger?" she asked. She looked at me, then said, "He says he doesn't want to talk to you."

"Let me talk to him," I insisted, getting up from my seat, going to Susan, and taking the receiver from her hand. She just laughed at me. I didn't know what I would say or even why I wanted to talk to him at all. After all, he's my friend, isn't he? Perhaps I simply didn't want
him talking all that time to Susan without saying something to me. "Wheeler!" I said.

"I don't want to talk to you, man," his voice cracking with static. "I want to talk to your wife." He was laughing, mocking me, I could see the sour grin curling his lips. Wheeler's humor. I knew it, grew up with it, felt accustomed to it, and usually my worst reaction was only boredom at times. I was rarely ever offended by it.

"You didn't like the walrus, eh?"

He laughed again. "I'll get even with you, but look, you're costing me money. I've gone over three minutes already. Now let me talk to your wife." He stressed wife as if the "I" sound in the word entitled him to possession of whoever filled the role.

"She's not my wife," I said returning a laugh for a laugh, trying to trip up his pre-conceptions, whatever they were, feeling insulted that he would refer to her merely and mockingly as my "wife."

"Your wife please," he said and he broke into an hysterical frenzy of laughter which crackled through the phone like flames until I gave up and handed the phone back to Susan.

"Elmer," Susan said, trying to snap him to her attention. I noticed how she was amused and delighted by our brief exchange. I noticed particularly because I was not
myself amused and delighted. I forced a smile for Susan to see. After all, it had to be another of his pranks. Yet I knew I felt strangely fearful, and I didn't know why. After all... my best friend. Susan fell silent for a great while as Elmer apparently was speaking at length about something. He didn't say anything that disturbed her. She smiled, chuckled on occasion, uttered "yeah" a number of times. I wondered what he was saying. Why didn't he want to talk to me? He must have been joking. "I'm not telling you anything about the walrus," Susan finally said. Now he had to be on to the walrus. He knew there had to be more than ink scribbled on the walrus' belly. Susan spoke defensively, "No, Elmer, I was merely saying that I knew you wouldn't be more curious." She laughed. But now Elmer surely would be more curious. Once off the phone, he would take that walrus and pull off its head, which we had discovered to swivel and detach easily, and he would find stuffed within two acorns, a pair of dice loaded to land snake-eyes, a reefer made out of cat-nip, and dozens upon dozens of tiny folded bits of paper which he would pick out at random, unfold, and find typewritten aphorisms or short poems, some intended seriously, others satirically, and others to be absolutely meaningless. A line from Hesse, for example: "What are reason and sobriety without the knowledge of intoxication?"
I knew Elmer worshipped Hesse, especially after his elaborate love affair with Nancy Bush ended disastrously. A short verse by e. e. cummings: "may i feel said he/ (i'll squeal said she/ just once said he)/ it's fun said she" -- intended to turn him on . . . somehow . . . or just to tease. A question from a Psychology Today survey: "How long after you were married did you first engage in extramarital intercourse?" I suppose the joke finally had to be on me, teasing my friend into flirting with my "wife." A quote from a mad philosophy professor: "My life will be remembered as an experiment that didn't work." Graffiti from the women's room in a skid-row tavern: "You don't change dicks during a screw; re-elect Nixon in '72." Even a quote from his latest, greatest, but now lost love, Nancy Bush: "You two are really queer, aren't you?" -- one he would remember as well as I since it was directed to the both of us. And these little folded bits of paper would unfold one after another after another for what I hoped would seem endlessly, defying any kind of pattern, while whatever cumulative sense they might make would depend solely upon the random order in which they were read. Only one slip of folded paper contained any personal message, Susan's along with my own. Our messages were in direct reference to Elmer's previous letter. Susan said, "You need to learn how to laugh more, Elmer," while I said, "What use are
gifts, be they agates or walruses, if we cannot have fun with them?"

"Yes, Elmer, I understand, you're running out of money," Susan said to a stretch of unendurable silence. "Okay, I'll let you go." And then a moment later, "Goodbye." I decided not to ask her to tell Elmer good-bye for me. I would write him another letter, satirize his loneliness, or send him another walrus. He could deflate me face to face, but I could at least deflate him in a letter. In such a fashion we have continued to ridicule each other and endure being ridiculed and still consider each other the greatest of friends... I think. "Okay, good-bye," Susan repeated. Elmer would ramble on more and more and say good-bye and ramble on before hanging up the phone. "Good-bye, Elmer," Susan said again. This time she hung up the phone. She looked at me with the oddest smile.

"Surprise," she said.

Now that it was over, I didn't care to think of it any longer. "I guess so," I replied. I didn't know what else to say, so I asked, "What all did he say?"

"He said he's in a Hinsdale bar watching all the chicks and writing poetry and that he was lonely and was getting drunk."

I laughed. Hinsdale, Montana. Elmer Wheeler. Working for the railroad to pay off his gambling debts. Living in
a dirty room in the eight unit Prairie Fire Hotel for seventy-five cents a night. Dreaming of chicks. Chicks in Hinsdale? Morbid day-dreaming on how he and Nancy Bush had broken up. Mushy sentimental poetry about his rampaging feelings. Yet, while I accuse him of being too emotional, he accuses me of being too intellectual, and whenever we meet we never see how blinding either extreme can be. "Anything else?" I asked.

"He said he called Nancy and asked for his records back," she said.

Yes, Nancy Bush has his records, all those countless songs which vividly re-awaken his memories of our high school days, his friends, his first shy dates with modest girls, all the nights at his mother's apartment where the gang congregated to talk and listen to the records and to drink beer and to play poker or twenty-one. Elmer considered these records to be the key to these memories which he so ardently cherished. Then, Nancy decided she would keep the records after she kicked Elmer out of the house for being lazy, weak-willed, and sadly lacking ambition, since she figured Elmer owed her seven hundred and fifteen dollars for room and board during the year they had lived together. Elmer wrote poems about how his precious records had been kidnapped for ransom.

"What did she tell him?" I asked.
"Well, he said that she asked him, 'Don't you think you owe me something?' Then he told her, 'No, when people are in love they give to each other, Nancy.' And she said, 'But, Elmer, I need the money.' And he said, 'But I got debts to pay, Nancy.' And she got mad and yelled at him, 'Don't you owe a debt to me?' And he simply said, 'No.' Then she said, 'Then fuck your records,' started crying and hung up on him. Anyway, that's how he told it to me."

I had to laugh. The floating soap opera. "What else did he say?" I asked, more amused now.

"He said he was coming over again next weekend."

"Damn him," I shouted. "But he was just over here two weekends ago. He's poor, in debt, three hundred miles away, and yet he can call us long distance anytime and travel over even when he doesn't have a car. Damn him. I wish he'd leave us alone for just a little while..." I felt like I must have meant it, yet I knew I was being carried away by some obscure tug. Wheeler. Afterall, he's my best friend. Oh yes, over coffee I would agree with him that he's had some tough breaks in his love life. But then after all the damage is done, he wanders pleasantly about like the wayfaring poet telling everyone from close friends to remote acquaintances about his downfall in the greatest dramatic detail, and Nancy Bush invariably comes out waving the wand of woman's villainy, the inevitable
enemy to his chivalric ideals to whom he had been blind. Yet he is lonely and he is my best friend. So I had no objections that he make friends with my wife. Hard up men need women to talk their problems out to, I suppose, but I also realise that this is where all their problems begin. "How's he going to get over here?"

"He said Bessie would bring him over."

"Bessie Jones! No!" I groaned. "She brought him over the last time."

Susan laughed. "I know."

"I don't like Bessie."

"Maybe she likes you."

"Yes, I suspect she does and I also suspect that the only reason why she drives Elmer over here is so she can be with me since she knows the only reason why Elmer wants to come over is to be with you."

"Roger, you're stretching."

"Isn't it true?"

"You're jealous."

"Didn't he keep telling me last time, slobbering and grinning, 'Hey, Regor, I'm falling in love with your wife.' Didn't he?"

"He was just teasing, Roger," Susan said. "After all, he's your friend, and all I want to be is his friend. Really, I don't want anymore." She smiled and it was convincing. I
believed her. Of course, I'm a fool to believe any woman with a convincing smile -- that was Elmer's mistake -- but I believed her. But what was I to believe about my best friend Elmer Wheeler?

"That's just the problem, Susan. He is teasing, and it's all he ever does anymore. Everything he says now is a joke. The problem is that I can't tell if he means anything he says anymore. Everytime he tells me he's in love with you, he laughs me blue."

"Then why did you send him the walrus?"

"Well, you helped."

"But originally it was your idea."

She stopped me speechless. Stinging. I knew I was being absurd, and all I really wanted to do then was laugh at myself, but I needed two steps of distance I just didn't have.

"You're jealous," she said. "That's all."

"That's what Bessie said two weeks ago."

"She's right. You're jealous."

I didn't know how to answer the charges. Why did I send the walrus? Am I jealous? Bessie Jones. Little bitch who brought Elmer over two weeks ago. A surprise visit, arriving just the day after I mailed him the satirical thank-you letter for the agates. Bessie. Short little blonde headed Bessie with the enormous breasts. Yes,
enormous. She had bought me another whiskey sour, standing next to me at the bar, while we were watching Susan and Elmer shoot eight-ball across from us on the dusty pool table beneath the dim lamp orbited by a swarm of flies. He grinned at me when Susan sunk her fourth solid ball in the corner pocket with a tricky behind-the-back shot. "I guess she's winning," he said. He kept missing his shots at the striped balls. Susan downed her fifth solid with an easy straight-in shot. "You know, Roger," Elmer said, "I don't think I believe in marriage anymore." Grinning razor teeth, Susan would smile at me before making her shots, delighted to be beating him. Elmer scratched the cue ball. He might originally have thought so considerately of giving Susan a chance at a fair game, but he certainly didn't calculate that she would beat him with ease. "Isn't Elmer wonderful?" Bessie said nudging my side with her elbow, "I've known him for years and I think he's one of the most wonderful people I've ever met." I've known him all my life, I thought, yet this had been my first meeting with Bessie. Susan pocketed her sixth ball with a simple combination involving one of Elmer's striped balls. "Clifton, I'm definitely becoming infatuated with your wife," Elmer laughed at me. "Why are you so quiet?" Bessie asked. Susan sunk her last solid ball with an easy short angle shot. "I'm falling in love with your wife," Elmer
taunted, grinning yellow teeth with ridiculous bloodshot eyes, even the acne scars on his face seemed to laugh at me. He had four striped balls scattered about the table.

I felt Bessie's breasts rubbing into my shoulder blade, back and forth, rhythmically, when she said, "Don't be jealous, I understand." I mumbled, "I'm not exactly jealous." Susan bounced the eight-ball off the cushion into the side pocket to end the game. "Did you teach your wife how to play pool?" Elmer laughed. "Really, Clifton, you should know better than to entrust women with such dangerous secrets." When I failed to respond, he clutched his belly with his limber arms as he laughed himself into an endless, helpless hysteria.

"After all, the walrus was a big joke on him," Susan said to my hesitancy.

"I think I sent the walrus because there are certain feelings I don't want to take too seriously," I said. "Like jealousy. Jealousy is just another game, and often it's very dangerous. At least walruses don't bite."

"But aren't you playing the game?"

"Surely."

"Do you wish that Elmer and I be friends?"

"Of course," I said. "Just as you and I have had to be friends in order to live together. I would hope my friends could be your friends."
Oddly, she laughed quietly at me. "You're being idealistic again."

"I guess so."

"What if he were really to fall in love with me . . . and, say, pursue me?"

Why did she ask that? It sounded too serious to take without wiggling my nose at her and snickering, "I'd probably kill him."

"That just might be what I'd expect."

"I don't know." I felt odd listening to her talk like that. It was very attractive, whether what we were discussing meant anything or not. I noticed that the nipples of her breasts were beginning to pierce into her sweatshirt as she sat by the telephone with her legs tucked under her thighs. She motioned softly with her fore-finger to sit beside her. Her eyes suddenly became wild with a dilated intentionality dissolving the wife in her despite our years together. Elmer could have the wife in her if that was what he wanted. He could steal it away from under my watchful eyes. It was silly anyway. He could no more steal her away from me than I could steal her away from herself.

Then, just as I approached her, the telephone rang again. "Christ!" I exclaimed. The clock showed that it had been but a half hour since the phone last rang.

"Do you want to answer it?" Susan asked.
"Not really," I said.
"Then we won't answer it."

I squeezed in beside Susan in the chair. Tight fitting. I rested my hand on her thigh, my fingers creeping like spider legs. **Ring ring.**

"Persistent son of a bitch, isn't he?" **Ring ring.**
"You thinking like I'm thinking?" she said. **Ring ring.**

"Go ahead and answer it."

She picked up the receiver and uttered "Hello," and began to laugh lightly. I wasn't surprised. I could tell that Elmer was in one of those moods.

"So you discovered the secret, eh?" she said. Then she handed me the phone. "He wants to talk to you this time."

I took the phone and spoke into the laughing static, "Yeah, Wheeler?"

"This walrus, friend, is really freaky," he said, laughing, verging towards another hysterical outburst. "He's alive."

"Of course. Afterall, the cat yanked him out of the river and brought him home and tried to bury him in her litter box. We figured you could use a pet."

"But this walrus talks," he laughed, "and he's telling me a lot of really insane things. Like vote for Nixon."
"Maybe the mailman was rabid," I said sinking more into Elmer's contagious hysteria.

"Or your cat. Or your wife."

"Or maybe you bit him."

"Hell, he bit me when I tried to twist his head off, Regor, and he talks, and he's walking all over the top of my dresser trying to find a way down."

"You're drunk," I laughed.

"You're damn right I'm drunk and this walrus is talking madness to me."

"Only the mad can comprehend the mad. Rabies is contagious, you know."

Elmer's laughing voice broke the static like a firebomb. "He's telling me I should laugh more," his laughter cried.

"Laughter is another form of suicide," I laughed while being pulled by the force of his dis-integrating voice into the maelstrom of exploding telephone wires. "You must really hate yourself."

"Don't laugh," he laughed. "I'm serious."

I laughed harder, losing control.

"He says, 'You two are queer, aren't you?'"

"You want to talk to my wife?"

"Damn you, Clifton. He just bit my finger again."

Words creeping madly out of hysteria.
"Maybe Susan would like to talk to the walrus."

"Hey walrus, talk to Susan," and I heard his receiver drop while Elmer moaned in hysterical pain over his finger. The phone fell out of my laughing hands and a bewildered Susan caught it as I fell rolling into the floor with my eyes flooded by an ocean of rabid walruses. Another form of suicide. I could only hear Susan's wild shrieking as I began to wonder whatever in the world was so funny, only it was too late.
THE RABBIT DISCOVERS STOLEN PISTACHIOS

One

... since the commotion in the living room brought me from the kitchen where I was feeding the father rabbit I found this large rainbow glowing rabbit sniffing at the screen door as I fell on all fours to shove open the door and sniff at the rabbit and hum pleasantly and paw at the flashy face when she shed her fur and Marilyn rolled over naked and playfully I fell over her and ... and the shaking floor dissolved the rainbow into melting arms ... opening into caverns darting with black meteors screaming screaming screaming ...

"Why don't you wake up?" Janet cried into my fluttering eyes. "Why do you just lie there as if I and the rest of the world didn't exist?"
Dear Phil and Janet,

I've been doing quite a bit of wandering in the realm of the psychic since I got back. Betwixt Hawaii and some research I've been doing, the spirit world is becoming much more clear. Somehow I think you two have something to do with it, even though I was in Hawaii and you two were on your honeymoon in California.

Is everything alright with either or both of you? I'm very worried, and this will need some explanation. Two nights before I left the islands I had the definite feeling that something was happening in the spirit world that was calling me to listen. You know how a dog will "sense" something in the air and prowl around in a restless state until things crystalize. Well, I was that way -- couldn't read, couldn't watch T.V., couldn't do anything, so I finally gave up and isolated myself upstairs. I went into a trance which lasted to about three hours so that I might receive whatever it was in the air. Once I had fallen fully into trance and had removed all thought from the screen of my mind, I was overwhelmed by the peace that always accompanies such a state. Several minds wandered by between the intervals of blank-imaged calm. Then I felt the two of you as one. The brush of your minds on mine.
generates a very unique sensation. Individually you two have so very distinctive a touch, yet together you produce an aura as distinctive but far different from that of you individually. After this sensation of the two of you, I received a puzzling image of your van. The van was traveling through a brilliant yellow desert with tall golden rocks along one side of the road, and it was floating towards a curtain of the same yellowish glow hanging between two of the rocks. The van itself was a luminous turquoise burning in my mind-eye. Anyhow -- and this is the part that frightens me -- the van tipped, ran for a while on its side, and stopped, remaining suspended in the air parallel to the road. When the van tipped the dominant emotive force changed abruptly from calm to great anticipation with an undercurrent of question and fear. Then, as all mind images do, the colors became clearer and left rapidly -- the mind-eye is always moving.

Shortly afterwards I woke from the trance. Since then I have had no contacts with either of you. I feel very uneasy. This is why I ask -- is anything wrong? I am very disturbed by this contact, and yet, the more I walk the spirit world the more my waking moments make sense. Let me know what you think of all this. Perhaps it's all a mistake. Peace.

Much Love,
Marilyn
Dear Marilyn,

Once upon a time, I was in the desert alone. I was watching the sun set blood red behind a far away silhouetted mountain. All was quiet. No wind. No crickets. Just when I felt that I was living in a fairy tale, a white rabbit hopped before me. He appeared startled for a moment upon seeing me. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "You know Marilyn?"

"Yes, I know Marilyn."

"She says she is frightened."

"I know."

"And she says she is lonely, becoming wrapped up in herself because she has failed in love. She dreams of those who have succeeded where she has failed."

"Who says I have succeeded in love?"

"She believes."

"Only in the love of others."

"You sent her a message the other night, and her loneliness took it as a distress signal."

"Perhaps it was a distress signal."

"She will make a victim of you. She will drive you away from all you know and love."

"No, Marilyn is not cruel like that." The white
rabbit winked his pink eye at me, laughed, and hopped into the dripping sunset.

Love,
Phil

Four

"The Rabbit Is Born"
A mini-story by Marilyn

"Let's move along the beach so we can be by ourselves."
"Does it disturb you that the others are kissing one another?"
"I want to walk."
The Rabbit skipped along the moonlit beach disturbed by the violent tide. Beyond the beach was a cemetery laid in black grass. The Rabbit scampered around the tombstones until he found an open grave before a stone labeled DAYLIGHT.
"Go on and pour more sand through my hair."
"Doesn't it bother you?"
"I have come for the sand. In it I taste the salt of time."
The Rabbit paused before the tombstone and marvelled.
Tick-tick -- I'm late, I'm late for a most important date. He peeked into the open grave but found only darkness. Curious, he jumped in, and the Rabbit fell and fell.

"We are total strangers, and yet it is like we have known each other before. I think we have always known each other though this is our first meeting."

"I think I feel that way, but how is it?"

"Our knowing comes with listening to the voice of the sea."

Suddenly the Rabbit felt himself hovering as if caught by a pocket of air and he settled calmly to the bottom of the deep hole. Tick-tick -- I'm late, I'm late for a most important date -- the watch around his wrist flickering its radium dial in the silence of the grave. The radium dial dimly revealed the outline of a tunnel leading farther into the darkness. The Rabbit was frightened, but there was nowhere else to go.

"Why did you come to Hawaii?"

"The Navy brought me."

"But why really?"

"To find who I am. To become a man."

The Rabbit turned a corner of the tunnel and found a fire. It was warm and light and he thought at last he had found the elusive whateveritis he had been searching for since he could no longer hear his watch ticking. He
was so happy for the light and warmth that he wanted to take the flames in his arms and never let it go.

"And why did you come to these islands? To find a man? They all do, you know."

"No, not this time. It's bigger this time. Usually I look, if only from habit, but not here."

When the Rabbit embraced the fire, he found himself in an agony deeper than any he had ever known before. The fire would not stay within the confines of his arms but it wanted to consume and hold him as much as the Rabbit desired it. He lept away into the darkness. Because he had seen light and felt its warmth, the tunnel was even darker and colder than before.

"Bigger?"

"I began here. Somewhere between the volcanoes and the sea I began. But even before my parents came to these islands I began here. I have always wanted to return to see what it was like. But when I first stepped into the sea and felt its life against the lava rock that cut my feet, I knew it was not want to but had to come."

"?" -- "?"

Very weary and confused, the Rabbit lay upon the hard cold rock of the tunnel and fell into a deep sleep in which he discovered the daylight where he was swarmed joyously by a throng of curious little rabbits inspecting the
burns over his body.

"In the beginning there was the sea. Then chaos, then a cooling that spurned order with its own breed of chaos. The sea watched. The sea was cool and warm and warm and cool again, and in the sea grew life. And life spread to the land and was trapped and weathered by its days. But there are no days in the sea."

"Did you come for the sea?"

"No."

And all the little rabbits gathered the Rabbit into their arms and carried him to the sea where they washed his wounds in the salt breakers before floating him far from the land.

"No, I came from a time without direction for a time that is a gift from the sea."

"?? -- "?"

And when the land could no longer be seen, each joyous little rabbit kissed the Rabbit who opened a peaceful maelstrom into which they all journeyed to the beginnings where there are no days.

"And what did you find in that gift of time?"

"That time lives as the waves lap the future over the sands of the shifting past."

"?? -- "??"

"Shema Ysroel."
These are hard times for someone like me, and powers which were expected of me fifty years ago are today considered fascist. So I have had to become clever and sneak up on people in the least suspecting disguises if I, as in the old days, wanted to learn everything about people I felt needed to be understood by others when the time comes to write it down. This has changed my role from former days when I was a grand invisible over-seer to what I am today -- a sneaky visible spy. But my new role does work. I have grown long ugly ears that droop on top, and since people can see ears they naturally conclude those ears can't hear. It was when I was invisible that they grew to fear me, largely because being invisible they feared they had invented me and that having invented me they feared that I strung them up like marionettes. I understand these people today -- give them a sense of your presence and they'll leave you alone as if you were never around. But jump in a hat and pull a disappearing act -- watch out.

And so when I popped from my hat into that living-room at the beginning of what would quickly become a heated argument, neither Phil nor Janet paid me any attention since my ears were too big to hear anything. Janet was chuckling as she read from a manuscript handwritten
on yellow notebook paper smelling awful from perfume.

"What are you laughing at?" Phil asked her.

"This is funny," Janet replied.

"I didn't think so."

"Sure it is. The idea of a rabbit jumping into a grave where daylight is buried. It sounds so juvenile. What's she trying to prove?"

"It's symbolic, Janet. It reaches deeply into something very real and vitally important."

"Really?" she pondered. "Reaching deeply into something real, eh? What about the bitch who doesn't want to kiss yet she wants that sailor to pour sand through her hair. It's absurd. This inter-psychic bullshit is just fantasizing and game-playing and escaping from reality."

"Reality is always hidden. We don't escape from reality so much as it escapes from us. Through its symbolism, Marilyn's little story is trying to reach the inaccessible. Think, for Christ's sake! What does it all mean?"

"The only reality I care about is how to find some affection in you. Can't we understand enough about each other when we are in each other's arms? You give Marilyn so much attention, but I'll bet you aren't any warmer to her than you are to me. You let that stupid rabbit be your go between. It protects you so you don't have to
express your feelings to her."

"Janet, quit being stupid. You just want to see it your own stupid, selfish way."

"Selfish! I'll bet that rabbit is laughing at you every time you open your mouth."

"If the rabbit exists."

"Oh, the rabbit exists alright," Janet said very cynically. "When you're sitting in your chair brooding, you're probably talking to that rabbit. It's really funny. You look so unhappy when you're brooding, and I'm so helpless. Go ahead, have your rabbit if you think it makes your life more significant. You sure do look the worse for it sometimes."

"I don't need a psychoanalysis, and besides, you're missing the whole point. Don't blame me because you don't understand the rabbit," Phil's voice strained with anger.

"You're trying to make me feel inferior again," she said shyly. "Whenever I resist your ideas, you try to make me feel dumb."

"Jesus!" he exclaimed. "It's just that you never try to get your head into anything."

"There's nothing to get it into," she screamed. "You and Marilyn are just psyching yourselves up into believing all there is to living are spirits wandering around looking like rabbits swimming in the oceans. And you call that
important. I call it stupid."

"The impulse behind it is sacred."

"Then it's doubly stupid. And I'll doubly laugh at it. Ha ha. Ha ha."

"Fuck you."

"Well, if I'm so dumb, then go fuck someone with some brains. Like Marilyn."

"Come on. Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

"I can't help it living with someone with a fat cock sticking out of his head."

"God," Phil whispered.

"Come on, come on, that should mean something important, shouldn't it? Ha ha. Ha ha."

"Shut up, bitch."

Oh oh. Janet gets ready to throw that smelly yellow manuscript at Phil, but then, I think she sees me because she begins to stomp in my direction. I do think it's time to jump back in my hat. Besides, the fleas have been getting through to my ears.

Six

Maybe things are getting out of hand. I realise, Rabbit, that you're nothing more than a figment of my
imagination, and of course Marilyn's imagination, but here I am talking to you. But who else can I talk to? Janet doesn't take me seriously anymore, and then you know more about Marilyn than she would be willing to tell me. So I talk to you. I like the way you wiggle your ears to show me how willing you are to listen. Not even Marilyn is that willing. Sometimes she talks too much, other times not enough, and either way she's more interested in what she's saying than in what others are saying. Like today she really flipped out. She called me on the phone and frantically begged me to come over to her apartment because, she said, she had some very important things to tell me. She sounded like she had been crying, so I figured not to waste any time getting over there. When I arrived, she had me sit down on the floor while she prepared tea. Her apartment smelled like it was sprayed with perfume, but I knew it was merely dabbed behind her ears. Janet never used perfume herself and ever since I began living with her I've found it more difficult to grow accustomed to Marilyn's unusual scent. I also noticed that Marilyn was getting fat again. She must be sucking on those tubes of cake frosting again, just like she was before she went on her last diet. Odd to think of it, but Janet is very slender. When Marilyn sat down on the floor after setting the tea tray to the side of us on
the rug, I noticed how she wore three rings on her left hand and two on her right. Janet never wears rings, not even a wedding band. And I knew Marilyn was wearing her wig, something which Janet always found abhorrent. Marilyn blamed this on laziness.

"How goes your world?" she asked. No longer did she seem so desperate as she did on the phone.

"I don't know," I said, feeling safe with her. "A little lonely."

"You and Janet having troubles?"

"Not really. I'm just coming to realise after living with her for two years that as I get to know her better she becomes more and more a stranger."

Marilyn nodded her head sympathetically. "I know, Phil," she said and motioned for me to move a bit closer to her. As I complied, she took my hand. Her hand felt warm and moist as if it was saturated with hand cream. But her hand felt good and it seemed wrong to resist her.

She pressed my hand. "I'm pregnant," she said.

"I never knew you had a lover," I said.

She started laughing in a quietly ambiguous way as if the soft heavings of her breasts would bring tears to her eyes at any second. "You knew," she said.

"No, I didn't know," I responded with a laugh.

"Sure you did," she nodded.
"No," I insisted in good humor. "Who is he?"

"Someone you know very well."

"Who?"

"You."

I laughed without knowing why. "What do you mean me? I've never touched you." I withdrew my hand from hers quickly. "That's the closest we've ever come to making love and you know it."

She shook her head slowly with a calm confidence. Suddenly I felt very strange and oddly suspicious as if I was being tricked. She continued her quietly deliberate laughter and raised her two hands into the air, bending her fingers, then making as if she was clawing the air.

"Meow," she said.

"Meow bullshit," I said. "What are you talking about?"

"You know," she said confidently.

"No, I do not know."

"Meow."

I suspected that now, after all the years of our friendship, she was convincing herself that I wasn't psychic after all. I suspect she was convincing herself correctly. "I'm lost," I said.

"The Rabbit," she said.

"What?"

"You're the father of the Rabbit. I'm the mother."
"H-m-m-m."

"The Rabbit is really alive, Phil. Don't you get the funny sensation that he's writing our story?"

"No, not at all."

She smiled as if convinced that she had trapped me in an irony which I sensed only as a vacuum. For the first time in the years I have known her, I suspected being in the presence of a mad woman. Yet it was a madness I suddenly found mysteriously attractive. We sat there for the greatest while in silence. I listened to her breathing keep rhythm to the squirming of the electric clock in the kitchen and the creaks in the frame behind the walls. She had closed her eyes and was sitting motionless as if she was going into trance. Maybe Janet is right, Rabbit. Maybe all this is silly and juvenile. Whatever, I caught myself chuckling in a subdued voice. Marilyn took no note of it. I thought she was only pretending to go into a trance because I felt as if she was trying to make herself attractive to me. I caught myself taking long and thorough looks over her body, and I knew I desired her, that I wanted to throw all this Rabbit business aside and touch her. After-all, I figured, hadn't she asked for this? Hadn't we both secretly desired each other for years but held back instead? I took her hand, squeezed it, and began to bend towards her. I kissed her softly on the lips and she opened her eyes and
she smiled. But it was when I motioned for us to lie on
the floor together that her eyes turned to fire and she
broke into violent sobs, "No, no, no! I can't, I can't,
I can't!" And with her cries, Rabbit, you became more
alive than ever. I feel horror when I hear your breath­
ing in the dark, but just now I have no one else I can
talk to.

Seven

Phil,

I don't understand what has happened. The Rabbit has
died. I am sure of this. I am going away to find a job. I
may never see you again. It is meant this way. Janet is
good for you. Do not foresake her.

Marilyn

Eight

"Wow, you want me to steal you a package of pistachio
nuts!" I exclaimed, pulling on my whiskers.

"Yes, they taste better stolen," she said while push­
some long strands of hair from her eye,
"And popcorn!"

"And a park bench," she laughed easily.

"I do have, I say, I do have a bottle of stolen burgundy in my fur coat," I told her. "You should have seen that old lady in the liquor store when I shoved that bottle of burgundy up my sleeve. She couldn't believe her eyes."

"It's because you're so ugly," she smiled pulling at my whiskers.

"It must have been my ears that got her," I said.

She laughed and called me "Silly" and hugged me and pulled me back under the sheets and started running her hand over my chest and clamping her legs around my thighs. "Hey, Jan, we just made love."

"But you're so neat and furry," she said. Then she kissed me. She really wanted to kiss and to taste my mouth and feel my tongue lapping around her teeth. "Hey, you're swallowing me," she said.

"Why not?" I said. I lay back propping my head against the pillow and she cuddled up close resting her head on my shoulder. Her breasts and belly were sopping in sweat but it felt really good. Far out chick. I started thinking as she relaxed about her telling me things about her old man Phil trying to hang her up on shit like rabbits. She was sitting on this bar stool when I came in and I took the only
vacant one loft which was next to her. She wasn't depressed or anything, but she wanted to talk, and especially to me because, she said, I was a funny looking stranger and a nice one at that. She didn't believe me when I told her that I've known her from before, but I didn't press that seeing no need to argue over mistaken identity. She told me how her old man was sort of an intellectual who liked to bullshit ideas all night and that he was getting bored with her because she was dull and just wanted to go out and have fun. She said her old man had this friend named Marilyn who thought she was psychic, you know, talking to spirits and ghosts, and that Phil would talk to her for hours about all kinds of shit that Janet said she couldn't understand very well and that Phil would just call her dumb and lazy and empty-headed. She said he wasn't so bad after they first got together because all she ever used to do was sit all night and watch T.V. and couldn't snap out of the habit til one day when Phil met her smoking cigarettes in a Catholic church and fell in love with her. She said she found his ideas exciting then and even though she wasn't so thoughtful or philosophical she found him definitely inspiring and gave her some hope of breaking out of what she called her television reality. So she married him. Strange chick. Anyway, she told me how he would sit on the livingroom rug and cross his legs and go into trances and
he would tell her later how he was communicating with this Marilyn bitch who sent him mind-pictures of rabbits and other animals and of deep, dark, stormy oceans with underground zoos and shit. Jesus. No wonder the chick's really freaked out. She said she could never quite understand Marilyn, that in her opinion Marilyn was not even a woman because she and Phil would bullshit their ideas to each other all the time like they were old men over a cup of coffee, and Phil had told her how he and Marilyn had been rapping it off with each other like this for years, and all that time, I guess, they never fucked or nothing, they just worshipped each other's minds, and that's pretty heavy shit, if you ask me, and I told Jan that. Anyway, she said how Marilyn suddenly up and left a few months ago and that Phil never heard from her and he kept going into trances in which he couldn't find her anywhere and that he would just sit immobile for hours and brood and brood and brood and never say anything and just be depressed. It was too much, she said, and one day last week she got spitting mad and told him he might find Marilyn down in hell or somewhere thereabouts and kicked him out of the house. I guess she can be a mean chick, so I'll watch out, but anyhow, that's how I got here this time, because her old man's been gone all this time and I just hope he don't come back now, but she told me not to
worry about that because even if he did come in he'd probably just sit in that chair and brood and act all defeated and be depressed. I hope so, but I'm not so sure, because I suspect he might try to kill me once he sees me trying to hide behind my ears or something like that. Anyway, she wanted to fuck, she said she really needed it, and wow, she can really do it. Jesus, I just can't understand why her old man let's himself get all hung-up on all that heavy shit like he does. But then, if he didn't, I wouldn't be here right now, and actually I rather like being here. Maybe tomorrow I'll go out and steal her some pistachio nuts, and then if he comes back and finds all those red shells in the bed, he might finally figure it out once and for all and let it be.
HOW CHE GUEVARA LOST THE REVOLUTION
IN THE HILLS OF MONTANA

They named me Rolando and gave me a marcher's mock carbine in a white stock which Theodore Fredenberg, Phd. in Philosophy, had stolen from his wife's trunk of childhood memoirs saved from the day when she belonged to an American Legion drum and bugle corps. "Here, Coco," he said handing Don a similar carbine also from the trunk. "Very good, Che," Don said, "for you have learned well the wisdom of Mao who said, 'All reactionaries are paper tigers.'" Che gulped from a gallon bottle of cheap red wine and passed it to me. Then Che's long white beard seemed to spark electrical flashes as he handed his son's sling-shot to Dianne, Don's woman. "Remember the wisdom of Mao," Coco said, "'The richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people.'" And Che added, "Yes, and remember Lao Tzu who said, 'As soon as you fashion a thought, laugh at it.'" Rosita cursed propaganda.
and took the red wine from me and declared that Uncle Ho, Che's labrador who was sniffing at my blue jeans, would find the way. Che picked up two more half gallon bottles of wine and motioned to the forest which we could see through the screen of the back door. "The jungle!" I said. "We must embark on our campaign of guerrilla war against the paper tigers," Coco exclaimed raising his rifle high over his head.

Che led the march over the little log bridge spanning the trickling creek which separated the back yard from the forested hillside thick with underbrush. We climbed a narrow muddy path into the growth picking at the huckleberry bushes along the way. Uncle Ho followed and barked whenever we stopped. The tall pine trees engulfing us shaded out the early evening sun. The neighbor's donkey hee-hawed in the distance echoing off the canyon walls. The mosquitos clustered around us like vultures, ripping into our skins, becoming tangled in our beards. I used my rifle as a walking stick to keep from stumbling over tree roots which tore into our path. Far in the distance, beyond the chirping of the birds, we could hear children screaming at each other and little caps banging off like firecrackers.

"Didn't Mao say something about preparedness?" I asked.

"Mao said, 'We should rid our ranks of all impotent thinking: all views that over-estimate the strength of the
enemy and under-estimate the strength of the people are wrong.'"

"Si si, Coco," I replied swatting three mosquitos off the back of my hand.

"And Lao Tzu who said, 'A leader is best when people barely know that he exists.'" Che chanted into the breeze, sipping off the wine.

"The mosquitos are winning the revolution," I said.

"Find us the way, Uncle Ho, find us the way," Rosita, marching just ahead of me, said. So attractive this Rosita. Uncle Ho leaped into the thickest clumps of underbrush off the trail. Che gave warning that we were entering enemy territory, that there was a rusty barbed wire fence just ahead. I ripped my pants crossing over that fence and cursed. We found ourselves in a small opening where dry grass held the soil firm, and we walked easily along side the fence and back into more woods and through a thicket.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Bolivia," Che answered.

"Where?" I asked again.

"Into the heart of the Andes mountains where we will join forces with the just cause of the peasant people," Coco said.

"Bolivia, eh?" I repeated.

"Bolivia," Che said, adding, "The absurdity of it all."
Bang bang I heard through the distance. Children were screaming, "You're dead, you're dead." The donkey hee-hawed. A motorcycle was roaring up the canyon road below us. Uncle Ho barked invisibly from somewhere in the thicket.

"Hey, wait for us," Rosita cried. I followed Rosita through the thick brush. Hiking now along more level and firmer ground, Che and Coco had wandered quite a distance ahead of us. "Bolivia is near," we heard Che shout, but we could no longer see him through the trees. "Come on, come on, for Che is drinking all the wine," Coco shouted to us, also invisible. I wouldn't mind becoming lost in the woods with a revolutionary's mistress, I figured. She was wearing dirty pink slacks which shined in the shaded darkness of the woods. "Just follow the fence," Coco shouted. How did we ever manage to fall behind them, I wondered. Rosita tripped and fell in the bushes. "Shit!" she screamed. "Rosita!" Coco shouted joyously. "There's a hole in the ground here," Rosita said. "A booby trap no doubt," I said. "Just follow the fence," the invisible Coco repeated. I looked around and saw only the trees and the brush and Rosita peering at me with dark eyes. "What fence?" I shouted. "Oh no, we're lost," Rosita said. Bang bang, echoing beyond the trees. "Scramble your minds, the people's army is lost in the woods," Che sang. "Here, Uncle Ho, help, Uncle Ho,"

"Still have your sling shot?" I asked her.

She laughed. "Yep, right here in my back pocket," she answered patting her hip with her hand.

"We might need that. We might be attacked any minute."

"I know."

"And my rifle's full of mud."

The brush crackled beside us and Uncle Ho ran up to us from nowhere. **Bark bark**. We would have gladly followed that dog except that he kept running around in circles. We marched on without direction.

"Where are you guys anyway?" Rosita shouted out.

"Over here," Coco said sounding farther away than before.

"Fine help you are," Rosita said. We could hear Che and Coco laughing. We marched farther along and finally the trees began to thin out and we could make out sunshine glowing on a field not far ahead. When we came out of the woods we found ourselves at the upper edge of the hill. Below us to our left and ahead of us were several
houses and mobile homes. To our right the hill sloped gently down a grassy field where just a hundred yards away sat Che and Coco by the barbed wire fence drinking the wine. Uncle Ho was leaping through the air all around us.

"There you are," Coco said.

Che was guzzling the wine. Rosita and I walked down to join them and catch up on all the wine we had been missing. Farther below us, to our right, we could see the winding canyon road which led down to the large valley where the city was. We could not see the city, but the air above it was smoky red as the sun lowered near the horizon. A logging city. Smog and smelly. Behind us were the trees, so we could not see the house from where we departed. I set my rifle down in the grass and sat down and asked for the wine.

"Scramble your mind!" Che said.

"Remember the revolution," Coco said.

"Oh yes, the revolution. Scramble your minds!"

Rosita sat down beside me and I gave her the wine after taking a good swallow. Coco was standing now, bearded, holding his rifle, dressed in a surplus pair of army fatigues. Rosita passed him the wine and Che opened the other bottle. Bang bang and children screaming. Cars passing by below. One blue with red cherries on top. Timber
Creek County, Montana, Sheriff. A pair of motorcycles. So distant. An airplane puttering overhead.

"Yes, yes, the revolution, eh?" Che said. "Yes, See all those houses below. Landowners. See that trailer down there. An insurance man lives there, and every evening around five o'clock he comes home after a hard day racing around town trying to sell policies, and he runs in to his wife of three months and pulls shut the shades and turns off the lights and fifteen minutes later the lights go back on again and the curtains are opened and he's back in the car racing again for town to sell a few more policies before bed time." Che was kneeling and gesturing with his arms. "Yes, the revolution, you say?"

"Chairman Mao is a wise man," Coco said.

"The absurdity of it all," Che shouted, jumping up, performing a somersault, rolling into clumps of grass.

"The cosmos is absurd!"

"Silly man," Rosita said.

"It is twelve hours to Santiago," Coco said calmly.

"Right, right, we're in Bolivia, aren't we?" Che panted.

"In the Andes."

"Fine, let's go to Santiago for more wine," I said.

"That's La Paz down there. It is twelve hours to Santiago. On foot."
“Let’s go to La Paz,” Che said.

“It’s six hours to Buenos Aires,” Coco said.

I was glad I didn’t know my geography. I scratched my beard where trapped mosquitos were tickling my face trying to escape, and I remembered I was in the company of more than make-believe revolutionaries. La Paz down below. La Paz, Montana, alias U. S. A., People’s Republic of Bolivia. Or something. Sounded okay. Beats Timber Creek County. I kept looking at Rosita. In another world I knew Dianne and kept to myself since Don was my friend. But Coco stood over us like a determined revolutionary general. I wondered if he didn’t look just like that moments before the tear gas cannister exploded at his feet during that demonstration in San Francisco he talks of so often. Rosita lay looking alone during the entertainment. I remembered how dark her eyes were in the woods. I might have fallen over her into the boobytrap. Bang bang and children screaming.

Che. Doctor Theodore Fredenberg’s wife had packed up the children’s bags and headed to Vermont because of continued threats and harassments by the town’s people concerning Fredenberg’s outspoken political views on the local campus. Fredenberg laughed it off. The hours alone for wild parties afterall. A time to announce the winner of the BULLSHIT RHETORIC AWARD to some obscure political philosopher. Not a German. I wanted to touch Rosita. Suddenly, I remembered,
or thought I remembered that distant day several years ago when I first became very disoriented, when rotten eggs tumbled by the hundreds into that peace march, thrown by whom our leaders claimed were football players and frat rats and ROTC cadets, but I was never sure, remembering only the panic cries, "Mortar attack, mortar attack, mortar attack." Another era. Che did another somersault and screamed, "I say let's scramble our minds."

A pine cone landed in the middle of our camp. Then another pine cone hit Rosita on the head. Then another. Then a loud squeaky voice, "Charge!" and bang bang the cap guns popped off and the little army of children started running towards us from the trees, shooting their guns, hiding low in the grass.

"The enemy!" Che bellowed.

"The U. S. imperialists," Coco laughed, lying low, aiming his rifle at them and shouting, "Bang bang bang," since we didn't have any caps to heighten the sense of reality. Likewise I rolled onto my belly and aimed my rifle at one of the children, a boy wearing a cavalry hat and waving an American flag with a circle of stars encircling an anchor. "Bang bang," I shouted.

"Surrender!" the boy said. "We have you surrounded."

"Never," Coco responded. "For Chairman Mao has said, 'A force which is inferior but prepared can often defeat a
superior force by surprise attack."

"Whose side you on?" I asked


"You brought the wine, remember?" Rosita said.

"I didn't even bring a rubber jackknife. I'll be court-martialed. Executed. Lost to the revolution." Che doing somersaults. Children giggling from their hiding places. Che rolling over and over in the dirt. Panting. Twisting his head. Sparks shooting from his white beard. "The absurdity of military justice!" Uprooting the grass. "Scramble your mind!"

Bang bang. "You're dead. You're dead," the boy shouted, one wearing a torn cowboy hat and a red kerchief around his neck.

"Who's dead?" Che asked.

"You're dead," the boy said.

"Me?" so innocently Che asked.

"You."

And Che plops to the ground with a groan. "Oh, I'm dead, I'm dead, and I didn't even get a chance to be executed. Oh-h-h-h."

"Bang bang," I said.

"Bang bang," Coco said.

Bang bang. Another pine cone fell in our midst.
"What are these pine cones anyway?" Rosita asked.
Another member of the children's army answered, this one a small girl. "They're hand grenades and you're all dead."

"Oh-h-h-h-h-h-h-h," and Coco expired.
Che started to stand on his head, yogic style.
"We surrender, we surrender," I shouted.
"You can't," the girl said. "You're all dead."
"Hey, you're dead, you."
"Oh-h-h-h-h-h-h-h," I exclaimed and fell over.
"Victory for the cavalry," the boy waving the flag said. Che was still standing on his head, but he was obviously dead since he didn't move. I could hear the little feet of the children's army approach.
"Is they injuns?" the little cowboy said.
"Yeah, they're injuns," the cavalry man said.
"They ain't injuns," the girl said. "Injuns don't have beards. Boys are dumb."
"They're robbers, I'll betcha," the cowboy said.
"Hey, what are you anyway?" the cavalry man said.
"We're dead, remember," Coco said.
"How're we going to know who we killed then?"
"Maybe Uncle Ho there will tell you," I said.
"They're robbers," the cowboy said. "Betcha there's an award on their heads. Betcha."

"Hey, are you robbers?" the cavalry man said.

"We're dead," Coco said.

I figured this was rather mad, being dead and liking it too. After all, being dead, I thought of Julie who got bombarded by three rotten eggs during that mortar attack several years ago, and she screamed and I patted her head. I wondered what Rosita was thinking now since she was dead. I wasn't so sure Che's or Coco's underworld would be so interesting. The children were walking around the corpses lying about the hill and tried to push Che over since he was still standing on his head. "We won," the girl said. "Hey, think we should sip some of this here wine," the cavalry man said. Later, several years before, when I was wiping Julie's forehead with a wash cloth, she told me how she was convinced that the mortar attack was an historically significant event. Perhaps, though unlikely, possibly psychoanalytically significant for some, so I told her. She screamed apathetic bastard at me and kicked me out of her bed. She threw her shoes at me when I blamed her for destroying my faith in the political system. That was many years before. "Hey, this is good wine," the cavalry man said.

"Maybe we shouldn't," the girl said.
"Ah-h-h, why not?" the cavalry man said.

"Hey you, can we have some wine?" the cowboy said.

"We're dead, remember," Coco said.

Then, in the distance, a woman's strong voice echoed off the canyon walls for Michael and Cindy to come home since it was getting dark. Everybody was shouting. The cavalry man shouted back, "Okay, we're coming!" The "-ing" echoed back like a bell ringing. They all began grumbling to themselves because all the fun was just starting. The little girl said, "Well, I guess you don't have to be dead anymore."

And we all started moving limbs. Che let his legs down from the air and sat down. "We're alive," he said.

"But we won," the cavalry man said.

"I guess so," Che said. "I guess we know who's got the superior force, eh Coco?"

"So, Che," Coco said. "But remember the wise words of Mao: 'Even if we achieve gigantic successes in our work, there is no reason whatsoever to feel conceited and arrogant.'"

The little girl snickered, "What did he say?"

"We better go," the cowboy said.

"Good battle," the cavalry man said. "Too bad you lost."

And we all said good-bye to each other and they ran off down the hill towards the houses below. It was becoming dark. The sun had already set behind the edge of the canyon shad-
ing the entire hillside. The evening star was glittering in the deep blue sky over the hill rising behind the houses where the children ran off to. We drank more wine until the sun was down and celebrated the defeat of Che Guevara's revolution in the hills of Montana.

"I say, now that we have been re-incarnated as grasshoppers, let's go down to La Paz for more wine," Che said.

"Che is enlightened," I said.

"Only the wisdom of Mao will save the revolution," Coco said.

"And Lao Tzu said, 'Scramble your mind,'" Che said.

"Onward to La Paz."

Still I wanted to touch Rosita who was lying on the ground resting back on her elbows, laughing and telling Coco how fun it had been to join forces with the great Che Guevara though he was destined for defeat. We finished our wine and made our return into the dark woods and we all became lost together since no one had brought a lantern. But I knew where I was going and felt secure since Rosita's pink slacks were lighting the way for where I was even though Rosita herself asked Che and Coco where they were and they answered that they were lost and Rosita said Uncle Ho would find the way. Che said he lost his matches and how could we expect to find a black dog in the star light. Maybe Che's beard would sparkle and find Uncle Ho waiting for us
in the bushes. The dog barked a short ways from us and Coco's match found the grinning teeth. The dog was standing on the other side of the barbed wire fence on the trail leading down the hill to the little log bridge across the creek to Fredenberg's house. Still, except for Rosita ahead of me, who touched me, helping me across the fence so I wouldn't rip my pants any further, I didn't know where I was. It was a question of geography. Bolivia, Montana. On down the muddy trail, tripping over the tree roots, Coco remembered that we had forgotten our rifles at the battleground, and Che cried, "Shit on the rifles, let's make our way to La Paz and more wine," and I knew where I was going following those bright pink slacks stumbling down the trail ahead of me.
I have never met Sylvester, and according to Maynard, our tour guide, I'm not likely to ever meet him. "Besides," Maynard said, his voice hidden in the darkness behind his jittering flashlight, "Who needs Sylvester when you have before you evidence of six months of his well intended work?" I stepped over a rumpled portion of mildewed carpeting carefully surveying my path with my flashlight. Then I noticed where the floor boarding had been broken away revealing choppy little waves beating against a rotting timber. Needless to say, I was astonished at these crumpled left-overs from Sylvester's nightmares.

Around me in the livingroom were five other curiously obsessed flashlights picking out at random distorted details. A new though dusty refrigerator was tilting at a dangerous angle with one large dented tear at its base. Next to the refrigerator was a coppertone electric range with bent burners spiralling into the air. A young woman
with our tour picked up a milk carton off the stove, blew away some dust, sniffed at the spout, and mumbled distasteful noises. A drop of water dripped from the ceiling hitting my nose, trickling to my lips, and lapping it with my tongue I tasted the rust. The ceiling sagged damp and stained tiles, haphazardly pounded together looking like a child's effort at a jig-saw puzzle. Beside me stood a bench saw buried in wood chips and saw dust scattered with broken rotary blades. The upholstered furnishings in the livingroom had not been covered up and they too were buried in a fine silt of saw dust, and a pile of veneer panelling lay warping on the sofa and ripping into the fabric. As our party walked about, we unsettled dust throughout the houseboat clouding all the rooms making our criss-crossing flashlight beams look like ray guns shooting about for an invisible alien.

"And over here I want to bring to your attention the power box," Maynard said, pointing his flashlight to a jumble of wires sculpted into bizarre shapes suggesting somewhat the form of naked women. As I walked over to the power box for a closer view, the floor beneath bent and gave way and bounced like planks on a suspension bridge, and I could hear the jostling of the water forced against the timbers beneath my feet. As we all gathered into the corner by the power box we could feel the houseboat dip at a startling
angle into the water. Indeed, as Maynard had warned us earlier, if we took more than six along on any tour of the crazy house, the odds of capsizing or even sinking it would be dangerously increased. As it was, Maynard said, there could be no guarantee that our tour would not yet end in tragedy.

"And look in here," Maynard exclaimed, pointing his flashlight beam into the bathroom. Each of us, quietly buried in the anonymity of darkness behind our flashlight beams ripping through the dust, found the rusted toilet bowl in which was stuffed a soaked sleeping bag smelling badly of putrid urine. There were long slices of shit in the bathtub built up upon each other like bumper sculptor. "Imagine the mentality that did all this!" Maynard laughed at us all. What could we say?

Returning to the living room, our steps bouncing along the vacillating floor, we made our way to the bedroom where the houseboat began to dip into another direction. Feathers were floating about the room after one of our party tripped over a torn pillow on the floor. Here the veneer paneling had already been installed, but I noticed how jagged the fittings were and how the boards themselves were warped and nailed crooked to the wall. Over the bed, on which was piled molding pots and pans and broken dirty dishes, was a framed photo of a rosy cheeked woman beam-
ing the smile of a travel agent. Below the photo, ragged letters cut out from holiday wrapping paper spelled out M-O-T-H-E-R. "Is that Mother?" someone asked.


"Where is she anyway?" someone else asked.

"A . . . Mo-mo-mo-mother? A . . . a . . . she left several months a-a-a-ago for Ha-aawai . . . a . . . for a-a-a-a much needed and . . . a . . . extended vacation."

"Does she know about this?" I asked.

Maynard smiled uneasily as someone aimed his flashlight onto his face. "A . . . a . . . no . . . not yet . . . but she's due back a-a-a-any . . . a . . . time . . . a . . . now."

"How did all of this come about?" the girl asked.

"A . . . well . . . you see . . . a . . . Sy-sy-sy-sy-l-l-vester offered to make some household improvements a-a-a-and . . . a-a-a-a . . . some remodeling . . . to surprise Mo-mo-mo-mother when she ca-a-a-ame home . . . a-a-a-a-and . . . . . . ."

"Does he hate his mother?" someone asked.

Maynard grinned. "A . . . no . . . y-y-y-you see . . . a . . . Sy-sy-sylvester loves his Mother very much . . . I-I-I-I-I-I mean . . . loved . . . a . . . or . . . a . . . I-I-I-I-I don't know a-a-a-all the a-a-a-answers . . . . . . ."
"Why is the floor so wobbly?" another asked.

"Well . . . Sy-sy-sy-l-vest er wanted to save Ho-mo-mo-mother money . . . so-o-o he tried to replace the st-st-st-s-ringers beneath the floor himself. They were a-a-a-all wa-a-a-ter logged a-a-a-and the hou-ou-ouse wa-as sinking. But when he pulled out each old st-st-s-ringer, th-th-th-e house broke into i-i-i-i-t-self."

None of us had ever heard of the crazy house before. It was Maynard who at the party back in the city said he was going to conduct tours of the crazy house limited to six a visit. And, for that matter, apparently none of us had ever heard of Maynard let alone Sylvester. And for the most part we were all strangers to each other, meeting at the party, intrigued by bits of gossip about such and such crazy house. We had followed Maynard single file down the dock to which was tied an entire neighborhood of houseboats with lights on in the windows, and then we came to the crazy house, bent in three places from the removed stringers, making a zig-zag in and out of the water.

"Where is Sylvester?" I asked. "It would be neat if we could meet him."

"Why do you keep asking me for explanations?" Maynard sounded irritated. "What do you need an explanation for? Afterall, this is a work of art. It is finished. What more
could you do to it? What more needs to be known than what you can see?*

Everyone seemed as startled as I was to notice that Maynard didn't stutter when he was talking about art, or for that matter earlier when he was pointing out certain things in the crazy house. It made a tremendous impact since we met it only with silence. Suddenly I felt hyper-conscious that we were floating precariously. The smell of fish seemed to be pulling us into the water. Maynard's voice sounded heavy as water as if we were listening from inside a fish bowl.

"Where's Sylvester?" someone insistently asked despite Maynard's declaration that we were touring an art object.

Maynard did not appear disturbed. He smiled more comfortably as if this was a question he were prepared and willing to answer. "Ah, ta ta ta, no one knows for sure. Come. I will show you."

Maynard led us to the front door which opened out to a deck facing the lake. We bobbed along the floors until we had gathered on the deck sagging and creaking beneath our weight. Maynard told us to point our flashlights into the water. There we found the bow of a motor boat nosing towards the surface of the water.

"A . . . you see . . . Sy-sy-lvester sunk the boat
while he was trying to install new stringers under the house."

"And Sylvester?"

"A . . . yes . . . he sunk with the boat I'm afraid."

"No one has found him?"

"Oh, the fish I'm sure." And Maynard grinned with great satisfaction. I watched the bow of that boat bob ever so slightly with the weak currents running through the water. Maynard a stranger, perhaps too strange for us to know well yet. I listened to the house creak and sag as if it wanted to break entirely apart and return to the water to join its creator. And then, immediately, the deck did break with a frightening crack and we all went splashing into the cold lake waters. When I surfaced treading the water and gasping for air, I heard shouts for help and Maynard somewhere laughing hysterically and calling for Mother. People from the neighboring houseboats came to our aid, throwing life preservers to us, which they pulled in with ropes when we had grabbed good hold. Once pulled onto the deck and as soon as our rescuers were assured that all who had fallen into the water were safe, they started lecturing us about our carelessness and negligence and accused us of being drunk and maybe even of being doped up on drugs, and they told us how that horrible house broken in three places violated every building code the city had in the
books, and that they were going to have it towed away and sunk in the middle of the lake, to hell with Mother and worse curses to art. Maynard was weeping where he sat dripping water on the deck and mumbled occasional cries of "Mother," and there was nothing we could do or say to persuade him to come along with us to shore. No one knew where he lived. We had simply met him at the party back in the city and he brought us here. Did he live in this houseboat? Maynard mumbled "Mother," his eyes were fixed onto the glimmering surface of the water. We determined to take him back to the party where we could all at least dry out. And we carried him back, heavy like a dead man in tears.
Mother's letter disturbed me and detonated an arsenal of nightmares which I had long since forgotten. My old childhood friend, Mark Fitz, had disappeared on a hunting trip and had been missing for over a week, she said. The word was more frightening than the accidental discharge of a shotgun in the neighbor's apartment earlier in the week. My eyes tried to digest the spindly weak-lined handwriting on the envelope which spelt my name -- Mark Getz -- triggering spasms of frightened energy as if my friend Mark were holding a shotgun to my head. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw only the confusion that tormented me until that day when I quit hunting ten years ago. Mark Fitz looked at me with the eyes of one possessed by a demon with the power of the sun behind them ready to ignite the dry cold tinder of my skin.

"We're like twins," Mark said.

"Even our last names rhyme," I said.
"I'll bet we even like to do the same things," he said.

"I like to fish, do you?"

"Yes," but I hesitated, "but my father is dead and I don't often get to go."

"You can come with us, I bet. I'll ask my dad right away."

In the mirror I saw him for the first time since he left for the seminary ten years ago. But the face in the mirror was five years younger than that, as it was that day in the eighth grade when we last went hunting together.

"Of course, you did it, didn't you? You always wanted to pull the trigger, didn't you? No?"

"No, not me, I saw you do it," I cried aloud to the mirror. "It was your hand on the trigger." How ignorant I was to believe I had freed myself from these horrible visitations. I felt as though the last had occurred not ten years ago but yesterday. Mark Fitz was laughing at me as one accustomed to hell. I grabbed my jacket and ran from the house and down the street dead still with traffic as if time had stopped. I ran until I came to the railroad tracks. I rested and watched the clouds race through the sky as if in a hurry to join forces with a hurricane. I ran on down the track bed being led by the blinding glare reflecting from the worn steel that always glided away
from reach. I ran on until I was in the open country.

We had climbed over a barbed wire fence and into a hilly pasture empty of cattle and lightly covered with fresh snow. We were hoping to come across quail and pheasant, but the field looked absolutely deserted, with everything alive hidden and hibernating. I didn't know much about hunting then, but I was encouraged when Mark's flushed face father insisted, "They're there alright. You can bet on it. And they know we're coming and they know what we want. Step quietly. We'll all split up as far from one another as we can, but keep in sight of the next guy. Don't wander off alone." Mark's older brother Jim flanked far to the right. Next was Mr. Fitz. Then me, then Mark flanking the left. We started splitting up like Mr. Fitz told us, and it didn't seem like there'd be any trouble keeping in sight of one another, except maybe for Mark who would be heading for the hillier parts of the pasture. Still, I figured I'd be able to keep a good eye on him even if he might wander from his father's view.

My heart was beating excitedly. I could feel my fingers sweating in my gloves as I held my shotgun rubbing my index finger across the trigger. I felt very alert, my eyes pin-pointing every rock, every bush, every clump of
tumbleweed where a bird might be hiding. My eyes scrutinized every grain of snow searching for the branchy little foot prints scampering invisibly across the field. The snow helped me to keep quiet. My ears were cocked to aim my eyes at the slightest sound. I couldn't hear Mark at all who was already sixty yards to my left. Mr. Fitz stepped silently farther away to my right. Jim stocked along a fence at the far end of the field. Despite their red vests, they looked so faint beneath the low overcast sky. But I wanted some birds, so I didn't pay them much attention. I wanted my shotgun to be the first to shoot into the sky and bring down from its gracefully frightened flight the limp body of a bird. But we scouted through the field for the longest time without coming across so much as a rabbit which I wouldn't have cared to shoot anyway. The field was so still that it must have been alive with thousands of creatures who turned into rocks and bushes and clumps of snow arresting their breathing until we had passed. Mr. Fitz was right. They knew we were here and they knew what we wanted. The first creature I saw was a tiny brown sparrow lifting off a ragged boulder as I passed by. He looked like a fly as he disappeared behind a short ridge. I heard a small branch crack in a thorny bush beside me and I turned on it like lightning aiming my shotgun into the bush, and I waited still as a statue. I
waited for two minutes, and nothing, until I heard **blam** of one shotgun and then the **blam-blam** of what had to be Mr. Fitz' double barreled shotgun. I turned around and looked. Three pheasants were flying away from them and towards the car. I knew there was no chance I might catch one. Jim and Mr. Fitz started walking towards an area between them. There seemed to be two feathery bodies there. I knew for sure when one of the birds struggled to fly away with one fluttering wing. Only feathers broke free. It looked so far away, as if I were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. I couldn't hear Jim and his father talk it over. Yet they were so overjoyed that they seemed to have forgotten us. Nothing moved in the bush in front of me. It must have been snow too heavy for a branch falling to the ground. I stepped farther away, more anxious now than ever, convinced that there had to be more game in this desolate field.

"Mark!" Mr. Fitz shouted. It sounded like a single faint echo with no real source behind it.

I turned around and waved my arm in recognition as if I was the Mark he wanted. I didn't want to have to shout all that distance with my high pitched voice unless I had to. I didn't want to startle any game that might be nearby.

"Can you see Mark?" the echo reaching me said.

The question startled me. I looked over to my left where the hill crested about fifty yards away. No, I couldn't
see Mark. A shiver ran through me as if the snow was creeping through my nerves. I was supposed to keep my eye on Mark and instead I let him wander off alone. I nodded my head as obviously as I could that they might see it all the way down there. Mr. Fitz seemed to understand why I didn't want to shout, and he waved his arm in acknowledgement. He returned his attention to the pheasant. I saw Jim take a long knife to the struggling pheasant. From their vantage point Mr. Fitz must have figured I was close enough to the top of the hill to still be able to see Mark. I decided I would reach the top of the hill and find him. I wasn't much worried that anything might happen to Mark. I was only afraid of getting Mr. Fitz angry with my carelessness for losing sight of his younger son. As I trudged up the slight slope to the top of the hill, a bird might have lit off in flight without chancing to find me ready and aiming. My heart throbbed with worry all of a sudden. Still I was confident that once I reached the crest of the hill I would find Mark stocking game on the other side. But when I reached the top and looked down, my heart fell still and my eyes paralyzed my entire body.

Mark was sitting on a boulder not more than thirty yards away and he was holding his shotgun between his legs with the end of the barrel tucked snugly beneath his chin. I opened my mouth to shout, but my vocal cords had turned
into ice. I watched helplessly as his birthmarked right hand slipped like a caress down the slender black barrel to the trigger. He rubbed the trigger like it was a favorite toy over which he had become sentimental. I could sense the pressure he was exerting. I was terrorized at the thought that the safety switch might be off. I imagined his face flying off into the sky like the mask of the devil. I tried to shout at him, but only my numb mouth moved. I waited while he rubbed and pressed that trigger and I began to reason that it would be best not to startle him. I intuited how serious this instant of privacy was. I feared suddenly that if he saw me, he might just turn the gun on me and shoot and tell everyone later how I was a quail skittering along the hill top. So I ducked and hoped for the best, but never taking my eyes off my friend who looked about to kill himself. Slowly Mark turned his head towards another boulder not far to his right while still keeping that shotgun barrel tucked beneath his chin. He seemed to be looking at something. Yes, I could see it too, a small sparrow which seemed to be looking at him. He turned the gun from under his chin and set it in his shoulder and took silent aim at the sparrow. The sparrow just kept looking at Mark's aiming eye as if trying to stare him down with the only weapon the bird possessed. Who was hunting whom? Ten yards at most separated the two.
Blam! That tiny bird blew apart as if the explosion had come from within, the head shooting upwards like a fizzling firecracker, the two wings flying away by themselves in opposite directions, the body dissolving into specks of dust and smokey floating feathers. At least the crisis was past. The shot had been fired. My shotgun felt like a carcass in my hands. I wanted to drop it in the snow and bury it while I waited a few moments before asking Mark if he got anything. Mark just looked at the boulder.

"Get anything, Mark?" I shouted as I walked towards him. I was surprised that my voice had come back.

He turned to face me slowly. His face was horrible as if indeed it was a mask one might want to blow off. His cheeks were red as fire as if someone had been pinching them for hours. I tried not to show that I saw anything unusual. "No," he said with an aged voice. "He got away."

"We better get back in sight of the others," I said. "I think they each got a pheasant."

Mark didn't respond. He didn't bother to re-load his shotgun either, and together we made our way to the top of the hill from where we saw Mr. Fitz and Jim waving at us with a bloodied knife in his hand. I never let Mark know that I had seen everything that had happened. Maybe that's why I had the dreams.
Anyway, that's how I remembered it happening. For a week afterwards I had nightmares every night of Mark pulling that trigger while the shotgun rested beneath his chin, and I would be terrified whenever I saw that it was my face staring above the barrel filled with buckshot. But I wouldn't wake up until the dream panned down from the face to the hand gripping the trigger guard, and each time that hand would be splotched with Fitz' purple birthmark. The dream recurred less and less after that until it ceased altogether when hunting season ended. But the next autumn after my first hunt, the dream recurred again, essentially the same as before. Sometimes, though not as often, it would be Mark's face and my hand. Other times the dream happened essentially as I remembered it actually happening with the sparrow being blown apart, but the face would be mine and the look would be so horrible that I wanted to blow it off. Each year variations of the dream would recur, but only during hunting season. I remember that on mornings when I went out hunting after having had the dream, I would be strongly tempted to lose my companions and find myself a rock to sit on and set the barrel beneath my chin. Once, three years after the first incident (if I remember it right
but now after all these years I'm no longer certain, I did set that barrel beneath my chin, but I'm sure, as I remember it now, that I had the safety switch on. I was hoping that by doing it I might actually get rid of the maddening dream, but the dream merely recurred with more vivid and terrifying details. After shooting off my face, my head would spray blood like a palace fountain. I tried it again, going so far as to turn the safety switch off and even pull the trigger, but I had made certain, obviously, that there was no shell in the shotgun. I would become very paranoid and wonder if one of my companions might not be watching me from some fearful distance just as I remembered watching Mark Fitz who must have himself been wondering if somebody wasn't watching him. Often times I wondered if Mark didn't continue to do this and if he had these dreams like I did. Other times I wondered if he ever did it at all. But I'm sure I remember. It was so long ago. The dream recurred so often during hunting season that I wonder now if I ever tried it at all, if what I remember isn't really the dream, or I wonder if maybe Mark Fitz never did it at all, if that scene wasn't just a dream so powerful that I remember it today as more real than whatever I experienced as a child, that is, if I remember experiencing anything. Sometimes in my dreams I would leave the safety switch on and pull the trigger and the sparrow would laugh at me. In
my wildest rages I would feel for my face to see if it wasn't still there and wonder if I ever had the dream at all since it might have actually happened over and over again. But how can one shoot his own face off more than once? I don't know what I remember anymore. The dream hasn't recurred for ten years since I stopped hunting altogether -- at least until now. I thought that to stop hunting would bring an end to the dream, and it seemed to have. Sometimes I wonder if I still don't dream the dream but that I no longer wake up in time to remember it. When I last saw Mark Fitz, also ten years ago, he also said he had stopped hunting, but I'm no longer sure that that wasn't a dream also. I never did ask him if he had the dream if it ever was a dream. I wonder if it isn't me who has disappeared in the woods alone and is fantasizing about what my mother and my friends would be thinking and whether or not they had given up hope. I keep looking to find the birthmark there. Sometimes there is, but I can't remember if that's during my dreams or when I'm awake. I keep looking in the mirror to see whose face is there. Sometimes it's Mark Fitz, sometimes it's Mark Getz, but I can't tell which one is mine. I wish my mother would write me more often, because then I might know which mother is mine. But the mailman doesn't deliver mail to missing persons in the woods, if that is where I am, and I'm not
sure, because I don't know if I'm dreaming or if I'm awake. When I am alone I wonder whether the sparrow I remember Mark Fitz shooting is still dead or if he was ever dead or if he was ever alive.
WOLVES

The wolves stop howling. I am too dizzy to lift my head. But the wolves have stopped howling. Coward, Dianne's voice crackles like water in my ears. I push myself aside so as to lift my face from the pool of warm vomit seeping into the warm earth. I wash my face with dirt. I feel good. I feel sure that Dianne has been telling me lies. I clean my mouth out with dirt. The dirt tastes clean. I realise that I have also been telling Dianne lies. When my stomach relaxes, I roll over on my back and look into the foggy sky, and I feel at one with the earth. I close my eyes and blue wild flowers grow from my mouth.

* * * * * *

Dianne was racing us around town in her smashed-up Karmann Ghia convertible, its sputtering engine backfiring like an ambush. Dianne had miraculously survived a roll-
over accident with the roof down some months ago. Since
then the roof never went up again, and the breeze was
freezing as we dashed about. Dianne was running through
red lights and stop signs and screeching around corners.
One headlight was blackened and the other quivered like
a strobe light. Dianne doesn't say much to me except in
whispers — Donald's leaving me, you know. Leona was sit­
ting on my lap terrified as she looked at the windshield
which had been shattered into a spider web by Leroy's head.
Dianne shifted the grinding gears often so as to run the
back of her hand along my thigh. Dianne said, "Let's find
Leroy. Where's Leroy?" I told her she knew damn well where
Leroy was. I felt the sweat in Leona's hand freeze. Blam.
The car jerked to a stop like a fumbled football. Flat.

Leona told me earlier in the evening when we were at
the tavern that she almost left me that morning. She said
she had hunted through the classified ads for a cheap
apartment she might afford for herself. She accused me of
using her as an alarm clock. "Every morning I wake you up,
you say, 'Let me sleep another ten minutes.' Then ten minutes
later you say, 'Let me sleep another ten minutes.' And again.
And again. It takes me an hour to wake you up every morning." What she tells me is true, but I tell her she is exaggerat-
ing, then I apologize that I didn't mean for her to feel like a clock wound so tightly it was ready to burst springs and dials and gears all over the mattress. I told her I had been having strange dreams, that I had asked for ten more minutes so that I could dream them out more. Leona said, "You're just a coward. Why dream them out when you just forget them? You just want to dream so you don't have to be awake. Well, Mr. Coward, the next time you want to sleep for ten more minutes, I'm going to let you sleep forever." I assured her that she was in my dreams, but she didn't seem to believe me.

We were too loaded to jack up the car. We walked-staggered-danced our way to Leroy's apartment, a one room affair in the attic above his widowed landlady who slept lightly and attended Mass every morning at six. We bobbed up through the stairwell like we were trying to sway a suspension bridge high over some allegorical river so far below that no one with any sense would believe in it. We were making a terrible noise.

"Sh-h-h-h," Dianne said. "We'll wake up Mrs. Murphy and we might get Leroy evicted."

"Where's the light," Leona said. "It's so dark in here."
I heard one of them knocking on a door, but I felt like I was still going up.

"He's not home," Dianne said. "I wonder where he would be at this hour."

"He's probably getting loaded," I said.

"Not Leroy," Leona said. "After all, he's the model of moderation."

"He's probably out with another married woman," I said. Dianne giggled like a little girl, then said to Leona in a tone I was meant only to overhear, "Leroy's no coward now, is he?"

"Certainly not," Leona said.

Too much. I had to piss badly, and since Leroy had locked his apartment (trusting friend that he is) I disappeared outside behind the house and into Mrs. Murphy's rose garden full of wilted roses which felt like crepe paper. I heard Dianne's voice trickle through the air, "Marvin! Where are you?" I didn't answer back for fear of waking Mrs. Murphy, or so I would tell them later, but when I returned to the front of the house, I didn't see Dianne or Leona anywhere.

"Coward," Dianne had said, smiling, pouring me another beer from the pitcher which she had bought and had been buying all night.
"You don't even remember that night, do you?" Leona said.

I sipped my beer. "Of course I do."

"Like a dream that doesn't bother you, huh?"

"I was disturbed, Leona. What's up with you?"

"Why didn't you do anything about it then? You just sat there and watched as if it was nothing more than another stupid bar-room fight."

"Well, you didn't do much either except sit there and turn red with high blood pressure and scream at me to do something . . . as if I was supposed to be Tolstoy's hero."

"Coward," Dianne smiled at me. Have you had many affairs? . . . we could have an affair . . . Donald is divorcing me because I'm always having affairs . . . isn't that funny . . ?

I remember that the old man looked like the Tolstoy I once saw in an old film who was walking alone through a garden when he was eighty years old. He was short and thin with a long white beard and stood at attention with his bony fist attached firmly to the squat baby-faced man's coveralls.

"Where are my wife's food stamps, bastard?" the old man said, his fist quaking in terror, shaking the railroad cap off the baby-faced man's pink head like he was a villain in a comic strip. "He sold them," the old man's young wife said. She stood composed like a noble woman, her dark angry eyes glaring into the helpless man's conscience with such an auth-
ority that no one in the bar moved to break the confrontation up. The bartender merely asked the woman rather shyly, "Shall I call the police?" and the woman said no, that such farcical intervention would only be to the little man's advantage. "You disgusting human being," the old man said, "You flirt with my wife until she buys you a drink, and then, and then, when she's not looking you steal the food stamps from her purse, then you sell them for half of what we paid for them, and then, you loathsome human bastard, you have the gall to come up to my wife and offer to buy her a drink." The woman spit into the pink man's tiny eyes as if to simulate tears, but he shook with such painful fear as the old man's grip pinched his chest that his dentures broke loose in his mouth and he struggled desperately to spit them out before he choked trying to swallow them. He looked as if his entire face was falling apart before a bombardment of invisible fists. The dentures fell to the floor with a clap. The teeth looked so brown and dirty with specks of meat and tobacco that they might have been constructed from rotten teeth pulled from a dozen men. The old man loosened his grip on the man's chest as if afraid his eyes might pop out next. The little man took advantage of this pause to creep towards the door, leaving the dentures on the floor. "I'll call the police," the bartender said. "No, let him go," the woman said. The little
man slunk his head into his shoulders as if waiting for a pair of strong hands to grab him by the neck, but none did. Once he was by the glass door, he turned around without looking at the old man who looked like Tolstoy and his wife but looking instead at the floor at his teeth. Tolstoy lifted his foot over the teeth as though ready to smash them, and then set his foot on the floor and slapped the teeth like a hockey puck. The teeth banged against the door nearly hitting the little man in the face. He picked up the teeth from the floor, watching carefully for movements from the man with the long white beard who didn't move at all, and he put the teeth into the pocket of his coveralls.

"What could I have done?" I asked Leona. "Tolstoy seemed to be doing pretty well for himself."

"They never got their food stamps back, how were they going to eat for the next week?" Leona replied. "You were just sitting there so detached that the scene didn't seem to disturb you at all."

"Well, why were you so upset then? Because some bum stole food stamps from poor people or was it because I didn't appear moved to you? Eh? Who were you watching more closely?"

"Just admit you're a coward," Dianne said. I don't mind cowards ... as long as they know they're cowards in fact I rather like cowards ... they're easier to live
with, you know . . . we could have an affair . . . Donald isn't living with me anymore . . . you could come over any-
time . . . .

"I just don't believe in you anymore," Leona said. "All alarm clocks can do is tick and ring and be thrown against the wall."

I had not slept while lying in the hallway beside Leroy's door, but I pretended to sleep when Dianne and Leona copped up the stairwell. I heard them whispering to one another, but I couldn't make it out. I had that faintly paranoid feeling that they were holding secrets against me. I pretended to awake when they bent down to shake me awake. Dianne was amused, "We got our flat tire fixed. Two guys."

"Yeah, and we almost took off with them too," Leona added.

"But we told them we left you on a door step," Dianne said. "then after much deliberation decided to reclaim you."

"I just got tangled up in a rose bush," I said.

"We should've left him, Dianne. He's really a male chauvinist. He thinks I'm an alarm clock and he probably thinks you'd make a good fuck."

I smirked a smile they couldn't see in the dark.
Diaime laughed. "Come along now, and we can smoke some grass at my house."

Leona must have told her something about my Uncle Wilber. Dianne asked me to tell her the story about why they locked my Uncle Wilber up in the asylum for the last time. By the time we had smoked two of the joints that Dianne had rolled, I was feeling more and more possessed by an urge to share with her that great and unrecognized moment of comic victory in a family history so shamefully interpreted as being plagued with alcoholics and drug addicts and suicides and broken marriages and schizophrenics and bums and bankruptcies and cowards and conscientious objectors. Leona was already bored, or maybe just tired, lying down on the floor looking blankly at the ceiling. She had already heard the story, especially when told during my more sober moments. But the marijuana energized me and Dianne was eager to listen.

When my Uncle Wilber came home from World War Two after serving in Africa, he brought with him a napsack full of clothes, a photo of his mother, and a large wooden trunk full of Arabian swords and daggers. Dozens of swords, a hundred daggers, straight and curved, plain and jeweled, all placed in richly embroidered scabbards. He never explained.
exactly how he got them or what he planned to do with them all, but one summer he was arrested in Chicago for swinging a sword in each hand at imaginary personages screaming, "Off with the head," swoop," you Commie techno," swoop, "Off with the head, you push button maniac," swoop, swoop.

"You're kidding!" Dianne laughed.

"I tell no lie," I said.

"This is real good grass," Leona said with her eyes closed.

The authorities in Chicago contacted my father, Wilber's favorite brother, to aid in the commitment proceedings. My father was terribly embarrassed and ashamed at this latest outrage to befall a family lineage which he believed with virtually fanatical zeal genetically determined to produce greatness for mankind. But for years my father lived in fear when my uncle told him after the judge signed the commitment papers, "I'll kill you for this." My father was never so convinced of his brother's sanity than when he heard these chilling determined words. He became tormented with guilt feelings over betraying his own brother. But this guilt turned to terror when Uncle Wilber was released from the asylum two years later pronounced a complete cure. Immediately Uncle Wilber disappeared, and for four years my father lived in dread that his brother was devising some
plan to carry out his threat.

We were living in Billings when the sheriff from nearby Glendive called and told my father that his brother was in jail there and probably very crazy insisting that he was Sir Charles Hurlbert, Earl of Southhampton, knighted for heroic service to the King during the Great War. The Earl, so the story goes, turned up in Glendive some five days before and flattered all the residents that such an honored personage planned to stay awhile since he found everyone so friendly and generous in that great tradition of western hospitality. Without question, they took and cashed his checks from the Bank of England, and for two nights he turned downtown Glendive into a merry festival of such edenic spontaneity that there was talk of giving the Earl the key to the city. It wasn't until the two local banks collected five hundred dollars worth of the Earl's checks that any suspicion was aroused, and that primarily in the banks. A simple routine investigation revealed that the Earl was a fraud, much to everyone's disappointment. He was jailed, and a finger-print test and the cooperation of the F.B.I. identified the man as the former asylum inmate who had vanished entirely for four years. My father was convinced that this episode was all part of Uncle Wilber's plot for revenge. Uncle Wilber was committed for the last time insisting with a strong British accent that he was
Sir Charles Hurlbert, Earl of Southampton, and during the court proceedings he not once recognized my father as anyone he remotely knew.

"Really, you're joking," Dianne said.

"No, it's a true story," I said. I added, as an epilogue, that my father virtually disowned me when I suggested to him that Uncle Wilber was a comic genius who heroically rose above the depressive conviction that our family was unjustly plagued by an unusual burden of personal misfortunes. But as epilogues tend to do with all stories, this one left me talked out. I sat in silence while Dianne chuckled amusedly and while Leona appeared to be sleeping.

Dianne and I smoked another joint while sitting on the carpet and Leona declined anymore as she lay down resting her head on a heart shaped pillow. I thought maybe Leona would want to go home, but she didn't say anything. I felt like I was under water whenever I looked to the ceiling which wavered from the flickering glow of a candle flame. My legs and arms were beginning to feel numb as if I had been swimming for a long time. Dianne said, "I have something you would like to hear." She took a long playing record from its case and set it on the stereo. I didn't ask what it was. I thought I would like to go home now. I was
fast growing dizzy. I listened as the record plopped onto the turntable and the needle arm clicked its turns and landed with a buzz on the record. Dianne sat down close to me and she blew the candle flame out. Wolves began howling from the amplifiers, first one wolf, then another responding, howling back and forth from one speaker to another. In that dark I could still feel the breath which swished out the flame as if a current of cold water pulling me into darker directions deeper under the water until in my dizziness I could not tell up from down from sideways. The wolves howled, now a pack of wolves — u-woo-u-u-u-u. Other wolves barked like angry dogs. In the dark I saw hairy wolves with the fins and flippers of seals and the teeth of sharks. I could feel Dianne's every move as a confident and graceful wake swimming among them. All I could do was sink helplessly while Dianne and her wolves swam around me howling, u-woo-u-u-u-u-u-u. "You really are a coward, aren't you?" Dianne said. I wanted her to mean that the sea knows neither of heros or cowards, that I was to feel comfortable with the wolves and the caressing wakes of Dianne's faint movements. But I think she meant it more as a challenge. I knew that she was sitting closer to me now than before she blew out the candle. I was so dizzy I had to move. I uncrossed my legs and lay on my back looking hopefully upward but I kept spinning end over end downward. I felt her hand resting on my knee, and I felt
wild impulses which were beginning to rage not within my loins but within my stomach. The wolves suddenly sounded distant as if howling from mountain tops. I no longer saw them swimming around me but instead I saw crisp blades of grass and moist grains of earth making my mouth water. I stood up and twisted towards the door like a top breaking free into the air.

* * * * * * *

Leona will wake me in the morning. I will be slumped over the front seats of Dianne's wrecked Karmann Ghia convertible snoring away my shivers in the thick morning fog. She will smile at me for the first time in weeks. "Wake me up in ten minutes," I will tease, pushing down on her nose.

She will laugh and say, "You've got dirt all over your face."

"Tastes good," I will say.

"Dianne woke me after you left last night. She said you got sick. She showed me a bed, and we laughed wondering who you would go to bed with when you came back in."

"Surprised you didn't I? I went to bed with the wild flowers instead."

"Didn't you freeze?"

"I didn't know about it if I did."
"Come. Dianne is cooking us some breakfast and has coffee ready."

And even as we walk to the house, I will keep saying, "Let me sleep another ten minutes. I was having this strange dream that you went to bed with Dianne."

Leona will laugh. "Coward."

Leona may surprise me, but if my dreams have ended in the past at all, they will end this way in the morning. When I awake my arm will flop numbly like a rubber snake.