1973

Counting my change

Edward Harkness

The University of Montana

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COUNTING MY CHANGE

By
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B.A., University of Washington, 1970

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1973

Approved by:

Madeline De Trees
Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

May 29, 1973
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems first appeared in
The American Review, Cafeteria, CutBank,
Intro, Poetry Northwest and Quarry.

The Flaw was first performed on April
26, 1973, by the University of Montana
Drama Department.
POEMS

I. LOOKING OUT
LOOKING OUT

It's morning,
or something like it.
I go to the window
but I don't get there.

Unable to make a shadow
the birch tree grows white with fear.
Starving crows dance through the garbage.

As I look out
I'm led to believe,
but not much.
Places I've stayed in
choke me with secret twine.

Elizabeth May
must be gazing out
one window or another,
her tinted red hair
bent in my direction.
When they accused me of stealing
women's purses,
she was the only woman
who said I didn't do it.
She let a big cop
know what he could do with it.

But later,
in a dank room,
I watched a violet light
well up inside her.
I walked home in the rain.
It took all night.

Liz,
there are ties that bind.
Your wounds had much to say.
By this time
I'm sure you've learned to die
without any help.
I look out.
It's convincing:
a tow truck tows a tow truck
past the charred remains
of a Presbyterian church,
and the torn curtain
that touches my arm
whispers goodbye.
COUNTING MY CHANGE

The moon has no calming effect on daffodils. Like everything, they are almost blue. They sway because nothing is guaranteed.

I go to the library basement and blow more dust on the books.

Back home, I count my change for the last time. Nothing's missing.

On plains of the moon dead buffalo search for water. Under the eaves dead sparrows are trying to fly.

It is still March.
LEAVING THE MARRIED GIRL

It's nearly midnight,

nearly another lifetime.

Your yellow hair grows sad.

You pull at your ring

until you think your finger is stuck.

Outside,

the snow falls.

It falls again,

trying to erase itself.

I look at your thin breasts

depth in the folds of your sweater.

I think of the years

but say nothing.

I'm going to Spain.

I want to go to Spain

but say nothing.
WALKING THROUGH THE GRAVEYARD, CURSING

I am like my father.
I urinate like him,
shiver like him.
I am destined to burn paintings.

As I move down the hall
in the arms of my teacher,
Mrs. Blanchet,
girls gaze up at me,
giggling, amazed.
Blood from my forehead
runs into my ear and drips on the tile floor.

I have no pants.

Robbie Loftis has beaten me up again.
He knocked me cold in the boys can.
He pushed me in the urinal.

Robbie Loftis,
may you sleep soundly
in one of the many open-air dungeons
we have in this country.
May your singing be angelic.
May you count stars backward.
May you go mad.

A man is cleaning
the mortuary windows.
SIGNING MY NAME

It is nearly twilight.
Nearly.
I'm signing my name.

I sweep away the broken brooms,
I lock the storeroom of useless hinges.

At the edge of the prairie
I dig up my shoes.

Already it is July
and dusk falls on one side of the mountains.
This is another side.
I'm signing my name on the skull of a hawk.

It wasn't so long ago the stars were real,
and the cherries fell.
Nothing could stop them.

So I confess again:
what I label owns me--
the buried spoons, the shells,
the sadness of doors,
the shadow my hand makes at night.

I keep spelling.

I pass from one dark thing to the next,
subtracting my footprints
until I arrive at the starless,
dense middle of my name.

I hear myself shout,
Where are the guitars?
Why this hunger for salt?
LAUGHING

We should laugh at the idea of a plant 
or an animal inventing itself. 

--Jung

We should.
But we don't.
At night,
behind trees we walk by,
animals are inventing themselves,
inventing claws and powerful hindlegs,
growing coarse fur over almost human forms.

And plants in our unweeded gardens,
altered by a sunspot 
or too intense moonlight,
suddenly develop large gazing eyes 
at the end of long stalks,
while harmless vegetables 
become muscular and mobile,
like carrots unearthed from the unconscious 
making obscene gestures at us from our plates.

We are not liked
by plants and animals that invent themselves.
If we must laugh
it should be nervously, choked,
with a hint of dread.
Then, if they heard,
with their grotesque new ears,
they would be glad.
SITTING DOWN

Outside it is April.
Apricot blossoms
drop on the neighbor's car.

The neighbor's dog cries in pain.
Ash from a chimney
settles everywhere.
This is no way to live.

I answer the phone,
talk calmly: I see, I see.
My friends are begging
for help.

Back at the table
I put on my glasses.
The vase is empty.
The rain is perfect.
RETURNING TO THE WORD BELOW

I flip through page after page.  
It serves no purpose.

Below the moss,  
below the explanation.  
Below.

Knives wince in the cupboard.  
Evening begins.  
My shoes cringe in the closet.

I twist uncomfortably in my chair  
in honor of the fear  
that has nudged me  
since November.

Small price to pay.

Stars are pinned to the corners  
of a black rag  
and Ned Houston  
leaps once more  
over his own grave.

My hand is transparent.  
Another word comes into view,  
below the word below.  
The word belt.
II. ALL THIS TIME
ALL THIS TIME

Because of the witnesses, because things of enormity.

Because voice.

A rhinoceros crosses the highway, followed by its shadow, followed by the children of its shadow.

High in the trees, the moon stays the way it was.

Later, more of the same, then less of the same: night falling off the sunflowers with a color emptier and sadder.

All that spelled backward.

I walk through summer wearing the only black coat.
IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN

There is nothing so beautiful as that which does not exist.
--Valery

Things happen at noon.
When I put my new shirt on inside out
sun and moon change places.
I say candle.
I say rocking chair.
The day ends.

Branches are wracked with indecision.
I say brick till it is light for the simple reason.

Now and again
there is nothing to say.
At the meadow's edge
a cricket sings
of the coming ice age.
I scatter salt.
I dig for a ruby.
Slowly, slowly,
things blow away.
TODAY FOLLOWED THE WRONG ROAD

The wrong order.

A woman drags a blue tooth
out of the ashes.
She does not smile.
This is a warning.

Once upon a time.

Faced with defeat
the moon leaps from the tip of a leaf
into the open.

Elsewhere,
the number seven
hovers over the word obliterate.

All through the cold,
empty morning.
THE DOOR

Now that door rhymes with sleep
I step outside
my body.

Bandages of wind
hang from the bruised clouds.
I button my coat
but everyone knows this makes me
ashamed.

A sparrow falls into its shadow.

I return and bandage my head.
There's no place to sit.

I take off my coat
and put it on because it must leave.

It won't leave without me.
THE KEYS

Put the keys under your tongue. They will not die there.

You are what the chair said from its place of green secrecy. You will not die there.

On the long wall the clock of rags chimes Wind Wind. The minutes wake up.

Now you remember how the calendars of defeat were engraved in pollen.

I accompany you with my passport of water.

Now you remember. You have resided here all along locked with mice in a glass guitar. Live for my sake.

Now you remember your tongue.
THE MIRROR

The mirror refuses everything. 
It is not a container 
of what has abandoned you
but rather a sign that warns you
you do not understand the terrain
you have arrived too soon.

Now you are on time.

The moon is the first mirror. 
It predicts you will wander
through the regions of your palms
until the hills wither.
Then
grown ancient as bone
you enter the cave of your hollow eye
with only the eye of the moon at the end
lighting your way.
III. THE FOREIGNER
THE FOREIGNER

A foreigner crosses my path.
I remain calm.
In his dim brown eyes
I am the stranger.

He gestures wildly
but I don't let him
give up hope.
He's asking directions.

I turn him around
and point to a snarl
of deep woods.
The sun begins to set

but doesn't. When it does
I point to the sunset.
I point to my shoe,
to my own eye.

Then I point out.
Why am I so cruel?
he wonders.
He wants to speak

but is suddenly afraid
of his native tongue
which even he has never heard
at a time and place like this.

And now the terrors of night
dawn on him,
while for no reason
a rage grips me

and I tell him where to go.
He whimpers--
I raise my fist.
He cowers--

I reach for a stick.
He leaps into unknown bushes
and starves to death
as the dew lies down
on the foreign soil around him.
The moon rises over the prairie.
I forget his face, his eyes,
and I am far away.
AFTER VISITING A MENTAL PATIENT

It is summer and the birds maintain their silence.

There is the smell of raspberries that proves to be my birthday,

and the gathering of certain dust which I find encouraging,

and Jesus Loves Me again and again on a vague piano.

This I know. I pass myself the salt.
ACROSS HALLER LAKE

Through the cedar trees
the old Givan House.
Rising back of it,
the green air raid siren.

The old Givan House,
deserted twenty years.
The green air raid siren
goes off each Wednesday noon.

Deserted twenty years.
Harry hears an alarm
go off each Wednesday noon.
It seems like yesterday.

Harry hears an alarm.
Harry Givan is dead.
It seems like yesterday.
Remember the Alamo.

Harry Givan is dead,
but he can't seem to
remember the Alamo.
Many years pass.

He can't seem to
sing these days.
Many years pass.
Many years don't pass.

Sing. These days
anybody can see
many years don't pass.
Nobody can hear.

Anybody can see
the old Givan House.
Nobody can hear
the green air raid siren.
TO THE WOMAN IN GERMANY

I lie to everyone.
My glasses sink
to the bottom of the lake.

In summer
you wrote a letter
at the end of the dock,

your hair dark as dead leaves.
In fall
you always wore that green coat.

Believe me.
When you are still
you wave your arms.
MANHUNT

My two great-uncles
got sent to the state pen at Walla Walla
and broke out.

Lyle can write,
Rex is an addict.
They both know how shouts
come from the part that's not ready.

They're laying low in some woods
in Oregon,
some cabin whose floor
must be climbing the walls.

In Bremerton, Washington,
where I was born,
they ran a whorehouse
and a cardroom
behind a good bar called the Crow's Nest.

They made me what I am
so now one color becomes mine forever.
I can appreciate a windstorm.
They taught me to say a few words, like
Use your think-tank, okay?

Almost everything
leaves much to be desired.

From this moment forward
my great uncles will never get caught.
Their faces were dug up years ago,
covered with moss, unchanged.
But their names crawled into the Snake River
and washed out to sea.
THE MAN IN THE RECREATION ROOM

The man in the recreation room is screaming again. From season to graveside the moon turns blue. How unhappy. How his mind goes dreaming something blue with passion: three wings combing space beyond a valley. What a view! The man in the recreation room is screaming.

His hands have a mind of their own. He's palming a gravestone. The moon has nothing to do. How unhappy. How his mind goes dreaming beyond a blue valley. His wings are flaming. He's afraid his plans have fallen through, the man in the recreation room screaming.

Past apples another starlight tries claiming his eyesight. Flowers die. All untrue. How unhappy now? His mind goes dreaming his hands slowly become his feet. The humming in his head grows beautiful. Just for you the man in the recreation room is screaming. How unhappy. How his mind goes dreaming.
TWO STORIES
I lifted the heavy wrought-iron knocker. It was shaped like a divining rod. It fell with a dull clung. A maid answered, dressed in black and white.

"Yes?"

"I'm here about the ad in the paper."

"For the job? Come in."

The livingroom was big and dark and had a glossy black piano in it that had never been played and never would be. I don't know how I knew this. Antiques were everywhere: a small stone fountain near the broad fireplace, Greek vases, stuffed eagles hanging in corners. The fireplace looked clean enough to take a bath in. Above it a salmon stared, its mouth gaping, mounted on an oval frame of charred wood. The fountain was dry. The furniture smelled like it once belonged to a great early American like Thomas Jefferson. Thin shadows bent gloomily along the floor.

"This way please."

We entered a small den that had a few sailing trophies on the mantle and tarnished rifles on a gun rack.
like mementos from the Civil War. There were photographs of sports figures and politicians and famous businessmen, all shaking the hand of the man I was about to meet. At the bottom of each picture was scribbled, "To my old friend Lyle," and signed "Babe Ruth" or "Herbert Hoover" or "John D. Rockefeller."

And there sat Lyle Branchwater, his splotchy face like the planet Mars, his hair like the first newspaper. He was watching a color TV from a wheelchair. Occasionally he pressed a button on a remote-control channel changer which he held with his good hand. His bad hand held a burning cigarette. He frowned. Something was wrong with the channel changer. He glared at it.

"Shit on a stick!"

"Mister Branchwater? A young man is here to see you about the job." I stepped forward and looked down at Mister Branchwater. He made the color TV go off.

"Hi, I--"

"What's your name?" Branchwater's voice snapped like a broken chain saw.

"Beavers, Albert Beavers."

"Know anything about physical therapy?"

"I'm afraid not."

"All right, all right. I'll teach you a few things so you can help me use my legs again." A bent old woman shuffled into the den. "This is Mrs. Branchwater."
"Hi."

"How do you do." The woman looked at me for a moment, shook her head sadly, then went into the livingroom to a dark table where I could see a deck of cards. She eased into a chair and dealt a hand of solitaire. I wondered why she looked at me that way. Lyle Branchwater began telling me what was wrong with him.

"I've got paralytic arthritis. My legs. Frozen up. You are to put me in bed at night, sleep in the bed next to mine, turn me over when I need to be turned over, and get me up for breakfast. You are going to be my arms and legs for a while. What you do during the day is your business. How about it? I'll give you three hundred a month. That's not too bad."

"It's fine."

"I'll see you tonight then. At ten o'clock."

When I got there the maid was just leaving.

"Good night, Mr. Beavers."

"Call me Al."

"All right, Al. I'm Mrs. Hopkins. By the way, Al, try and understand Mister Branchwater. He's not a well man. Sometimes little things upset him. That's all I wanted to say. Another woman will be here in the morning, Mrs. Jones."

She left. I went into the livingroom. Mrs. Branchwater sat playing solitaire at the dark table.
"Good evening, Mrs. Branchwater."
"Good evening, Mr. Beavers."

In the den Mister Branchwater fiddled with his remote control channel changer. He had on an orange bathrobe and was smoking. His slippers were baby blue. The house seemed clammy like a castle with Mister Branchwater as King of Color TV and Mrs. Branchwater as Queen of Loneliness.

"Hi, Mister Branchwater."

"Don't stand there. It's late. Get me to bed."

"Right." He tried to make the TV go off. It wouldn't. He rattled the channel changer. His face smoldered.

"This damn thing!"

I pulled him from the couch where he sat and kind of flung him into a wheelchair. He groaned. He was heavier than I'd expected. I sweated.

"No, no, no! You did it wrong! Put me back on the couch, put me back!" I strained and got him back. Mrs. Branchwater scuffed in.

"I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night, baby!" Mister Branchwater's voice sounded like a choir of gravel singing in a cement mixer.

"Good night, Mrs. Branchwater." She hobbled off and took a long time climbing the stairs, her thin green robe trailing.
"All right, get a bottle. I have to pee."

"Where is one?"

"Open your eyes! It's right in front of you!"

I unzipped his fly and he peed into the plastic bottle. I washed it out like he told me. I sweated.

"Now put this harness on me and wheel me over to the stairs. Can you do that?"

"Sure." The harness was nylon cord mountain climbers use. I fitted it around his legs and crotch and butt and took him over to the stairs in the wheelchair. A mechanical chair ran on a rail up the stairs. Over the chair hung a kind of hoist that had a lever. Later I found out Branchwater had invented the hoist, lever and chair. I saw the patents. The hoist was electric. He showed me how to hook the harness to the hoist so he could be raised up out of the wheelchair and lowered onto the mechanical chair that sat higher up. My palms were wet. I knew I would push the lever wrong. I switched it on with one hand and the hoist began to growl. I raised him while my other hand held his legs to keep him from swinging around. His face looked scorched.

"Ohhh." He groaned. His eyes watered.

"What's the matter?"

"My balls." The harness had pinched his testicles.

"Should I let you down?"

"Never mind, never mind! Ohhh."
When he was high enough I swung him over to the mechanical chair. I pushed the lever the other way. He went down and sagged.

"Ohhh."

"Are you all right?"

"Hurry up, hurry up! Ohhh."

I pushed the button on the wall and the chair went up the stairs. At the top another wheelchair waited. I leaped up the stairs. The mechanical chair stopped and I slid him onto the other wheelchair. I noticed on the wall a blue charcoal drawing, a portrait of a girl. Her hair fell to one side and her eyes seemed to be looking over my right shoulder.

"Is that Mrs. Branchwater when she was young?"

"No! Get me to bed. Hurry!"

I stared at the girl. What was she gazing at? I carted him down the hall past Mrs. Branchwater's room. The door was closed.

"Good night, sweetie!"

He showed me where his room was. At first the door stuck.

"Open it."

"I can't."

"Open the God damn door!" I yanked. It quivered loudly and opened.

My bed was a double, about ten feet from his. The
room must have belonged to a girl, maybe Branchwater's daughter, the blue girl in the drawing. The flowered wallpaper had faded so that the pink roses were a gray-green. A vanity stood in one corner next to a dormer window with stiff dusty curtains.

I had to undress Lyle Branchwater in a precise fashion and put things away in strategic locations. He demanded exactitude. Sometimes I made mistakes.

"No, no, no! Use your think tank, use your think tank! Take off my trousers first before you get my pajamas. Now hang my trousers there and my socks over there. Hurry up, hurry up. Put my slippers by the bed."

"Here?"

"Not there. I said there! Come on, come on."

In the adjacent bathroom he brushed his teeth with an electric toothbrush. After I wheeled him to his bed and clumsily threw him onto it I nearly fell back into his wheelchair. He then explained to me a device he had rigged up to my bed, a barber's scalp massager but half taken apart. It was to lay beside me, near my pillow. In his own bed Mister Branchwater had a child's rubber ball with wires running out of it that connected to the modified scalp massager. When he squeezed the ball, the scalp massager would start to vibrate and shake my bed until I strangled in my sheets or woke up. A nasty little
instrument, but effective. Mister Lyle Branchwater had once been a famous inventor, a mechanical genius in his day. One of the maids told me that.

"Lie down and I'll try it out. When I need something at night I'll squeeze the ball. You'd better wake up."

I stretched on the bed. He squeezed the ball with his good hand. The scalp massager thumped around until the entire bed shook like the terrible San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

"It works."

"Hah! Of course it works! Think I'd make something that didn't work? Turn off the light so I can get some sleep."

That night Mister Branchwater had to pee and crap and be turned over and covered up eleven times. I had eleven different dreams where everything would be going well and then the bed would shake and the world would blow up and I'd pop out of sleep like burnt toast. I'd be making out with Jenny and she'd turn into a fire engine. I'd be having fun at the circus when the big tent would flip over and turn into a colossal frying pan.

The next morning I woke up for the twelfth time and went through last night's procedure in reverse. I dressed Branchwater and put away his pajamas. I wheeled him through the bathroom and into an adjoining library that had a huge oak desk, the executive model, in it, and a
small card table. The library looked out over the backyard and an old oak tree. I went downstairs and the morning maid, Mrs. Jones, had breakfast ready on a gold tray for Branchwater and a silver tray for me. I took the trays one at a time up the stairs.

I sat at the desk with a poached egg. Mister Branchwater sat at the card table with some kind of mush he ate for his failing bowels. He also had a glass of brown juice and a small paper cup of multi-colored pills and vitamins. Red, yellow, blue and white.

I tried not to talk to Branchwater. But every morning I would ask one question to find out a little more about him. The first morning I thought hard for the right question.

"Mister Branchwater, how long have you lived in this house?"

"Since the Great Depression. This house was built in 1931 when I invented a refrigerating machine that keeps fruits and vegetables fresh in boxcars. During World War II, I was the largest manufacturer of vitamin B complex in the world. Take this tray away and light my cigarette. Get me downstairs!"

The fall days got short and cold. It rained. The leaves came down from the big oak out in back. On some of the clear mornings frost glittered on the lawn.
One Saturday morning after I had shaved him with his electric shaver and combed his hair and placed him in front of his TV, he looked up at me.

"Well?"

"Well what, Mister Branchwater?"

"Jesus Christ, haven't you got eyes? The leaves! They need raking!"

"I'll get to it."

"Hurry up!"

Raking the leaves was the best time I ever had at Lyle Branchwater's house. It was cold but the sun came out. Some frost still covered the grass and the dead leaves stuck together. I whistled and thought about the three hundred bucks that waited for me at the end of the month. I finished the leaves and stuffed them in the garbage can, picked a few acorns off the lawn and left. Whatever I did in the day was my business.

At breakfast that morning I had asked another question.

"Are you from around here, Mister Branchwater?"

"I was born and raised in a town you've never heard of. I was taught by my father how not to waste time, how not to make mistakes. I learned how to be useful with my mind and hands. Now my hands aren't worth shit. Get me downstairs!"

Mister Branchwater would sometimes moan and cry in
bed. I would lie there and listen and wonder if his legs hurt or if he was having bad dreams. Once he woke and called me.

"All!" I went to him. "Quick, the house is going to catch fire!"

"No it isn't."

"Quick, pick up my cigarette! I dropped it!"

"You're having a nightmare, Mister Branchwater."

"No I'm not, God damn it! Pick up my cigarette! It's near the bed."

"Ah, I see it. Here it is. I'll put it out." I stooped and picked up the dream cigarette. "There, everything's okay."

"Thanks, Al."

On another morning the rain bounced hard off the window in the upstairs library. I was eating a bowl of peaches. Mister Branchwater ate the usual mush.

"Mister Branchwater, how long have you been in a wheelchair?"

"Since my last heart attack nine years ago. My legs froze up while I stayed in the hospital. I never exercised them so now they're no good. I'll teach you how to exercise my legs with traction weights. If I can walk again I'll go out on my boat. We'll have some good times. What do you know about boats?"

"Nothing."
"Light my cigarette and take me downstairs. Now!"

Even though I washed him each morning and sprayed his armpits with aerosol deodorant, Mister Branchwater began to smell. He knew it.

"You're going to give me a bath this Saturday. I'll show you how." I began to sweat. "Don't stand there! Get my breakfast!"

"All right, relax."

"RELAX?? DON'T YOU EVER TELL ME TO RELAX!!"

"Okay, okay. Good morning, Mrs. Branchwater."

"Good morning Lyle, Al."

"Good morning, baby!"

When I left after pushing Mister Branchwater in front of his color TV, Mrs. Branchwater was well into her third hand of solitaire at the dark table.

Saturday came and after breakfast I took the old man's pajamas off and wheeled him into the bathroom. Over the tub hung another hoist type apparatus and a sling. I filled the tub with hot water and maneuvered him into the sling in a sitting position. My back hurt. This wasn't going to work.

"Now push the lever and guide me up." The electric hoist went on with a grating sound. Steam whirled thicker than smoke. Branchwater rose out of the wheel-
"Like that?"

"No, no, no! Down, down!"

"It won't stop."

"Put me down, put me down!"

"I'm trying."

"Down, down! Ohhh."

There he swung, up by the light fixture, naked as a baby, howling. I ached all over. I slipped on the steamy floor and stepped into the bathtub. The water was hot as lava.

"The lever is stuck, Mister Branchwater, don't let go."

"Please put me down, God damn it! Ohhh." He started to spin and began to lose his grip on the cord he held. I reached up and grabbed him and let go of the lever. He came down fast and sloshed into the scalding tub.

"God damn you! Ohhh, ohhh."

"Are you hurt?"

"God damn you, God damn you!"

"Mister Branchwater, stop screaming or else you'll have another heart attack."

"You can't do anything right! Christ! Ohhh."

"I'm sorry. I've never done this kind of work before. I'm not a professional physical therapist. Why don't you hire one?"
"Now look! Do you see this water pump? It's for my joints. I want you to turn it on so that it pumps water under my right arm for a few minutes and then under my left arm. Is that too difficult a task?"

"I'll try and—"

"Don't try, God damn it! Do it!"

The powerful electric pump made the water jump around like Niagara Falls. After shooting water under his right arm I did like he told me and tried to slide the pump quickly under his knees, which were drawn up in their frozen position. But it got caught between his legs and began pumping hell out of his worn out testicles.

"Ohhh, ohhh, ohhh! Turn it off, turn it off, turn—ohhh!"

Finally I managed to get it in the right place for his left arm. Water had sprayed all over. I rubbed him with a soapy washcloth, rinsed him and lifted his rubbery body out of the tub and into the wheelchair. Branchwater could not speak. The veins in his forehead were ready to burst forth like the boiling geysers at Yosemite National Park.

Branchwater was eating mush. So was I. It tasted awful, a special brand for people who are about to die.

"Mister Branchwater, who is that girl in the drawing?"

"Lilian, my only child. Our yacht caught fire and she
drowned."

"God."

"That was many years ago. Get me downstairs. Let's go, let's go!"

"Good night, Mrs. Branchwater."

"Good night, baby!"

"Good night, boys."

I was in an apple tree. I picked the most beautiful apple in the world. It turned into a green bird. The bird flapped out of my hand and someone called for help. The tree shook. An earthquake! I fell through the branches and woke up. My bed heaved.

"Al! I have to pee!"

"Huh? Oh, right." I stood over him holding the plastic bottle and for a moment I climbed back into the apple tree. Green leaves blew in my face. I came to and discovered that Branchwater had peed all over himself and the bed and me. He had dozed off. A stinking mess. I wiped up as much as I could with a towel and went back to bed. There was a road. A car went by with no one in it. The dust made me gag. No air. Water, water! I could see someone in the car. Me, waving. The car drove into a forest fire and someone cried in pain.

"I'm burning, I'm burning, I'm burning."

I woke up. The old man was whimpering.
"Mister Branchwater!" I jostled his shoulder.
"I'm burning, I'm burning."
I pulled back the sheet. It smelled hot and terrible. I turned on the bed light and saw that where he had urinated on his legs, and underneath his soaked pajamas, the skin was red and raw, like a rash.
"Just a minute."
"I'm burning." He said it softly, nearly weeping. In the bathroom cabinet I found some baby powder and dusted his inflamed groin. He drifted back into an uneasy sleep.

On my last Saturday, Mister Branchwater told me he needed a haircut and that I was to drive him downtown to his barber. I sweated trying to lift him into his old blue Cadillac. I revved it up. We took off.
"Which direction, Mister Branchwater?"
"Take this street."
"Okay."
"Slow down, God damn it, slow down!"
"Now where?"
"Turn, turn!"
"Which way?"
"Right, right! How many times do I have to tell you?"
"Now left here?"
"No, no, no! Straight ahead! Speed up, for Christ's
sake, we haven't got all day!" We came to a stoplight. It was red. "Oh no! Stop, stop!"

I hit the brakes hard. Mister Branchwater went forward and banged his head on the padded dash. He bounced around. His dull yellow hair stood straight up.

"Sorry."

"You idiot! You tried to kill me! Ohhh."

"Didn't you tell me to stop, Mister Branchwater?"

"Just get going! Christ!"

Each night the same ridiculous story would repeat itself. I would get Branchwater upstairs and push him down the hall past his wife's room and he would holler out good night in a way that sounded like a cat eating a record. We would get to his room and always the door would stick just enough to make him mad.

"Jesus Christ, can't you even open a door?"

"It's stuck."

"Open that door!"

"There it goes." Sweating freely, I would ease him through. The stuck door routine went on for several nights. I lay in bed. I dreamt that Branchwater was going to squeeze his ball and flip me onto my feet and tell me to fix the God damn door. I woke and went over to him. He was about to squeeze the ball.

"Well?"
"Well what, Mister Branchwater?"

"Fix the God damn door!"

"Now?"

"And don't wake Mrs. Branchwater! She's had a hard day."

"Where are your tools?" Groggily, I pulled on my jeans.

"Right where they've always been, in the basement. Get a plane and a large screwdriver. Hurry!"

As I stood on a chair planing that door, far past the hour of midnight, it suddenly dawned on me. Branchwater was insane.

"Come on, hurry it up. And be quiet!"

I tried the door. It squealed and stuck.

"Still doesn't quite work."

"Jesus Christ, take the God damn thing off!"

I twisted the screwdriver until my wrists pleaded for mercy. It finally came off. It was heavy. I removed the hinge plates and slid them down the jamb a ways. The door went back up. My back screamed stop, stop!

"Got it."

"All right, all right! Turn off the light and let me sleep!"

On my next-to-last morning with Lyle Branchwater
I poked at a bowl of figs while he slopped away at his mush. Outside, the oak tree stretched over the frosty lawn and into a solid gray sky. It would snow soon.

"Do you think you'll ever get out on your sailboat again, Mister Branchwater?"

"No! Get me downstairs!"

I hooked him up to the hoist at the bottom of the stairs to get him down to his wheelchair. But first I made him swing a little. He screamed like Tarzan.

"Ohhh. Put me down! My testicles! Ohhh."

"Sorry."

"Get me to the TV! Ohhh."

I arrived that night around the usual time. Some snow had fallen. I stamped my feet and came in the kitchen entrance like always. In the den Branchwater watched the late news. He didn't know I was there at first. He laughed at something. I had never seen him laugh. His false teeth flopped and jiggled. I came in and started to laugh. Mrs. Branchwater put aside her solitaire and padded in. She began to laugh. Branchwater kept changing the channels so that the color TV became an electronic rainbow gleaming off the walls and trophies and photos. Sounds and parts of words from the TV blended together in a collage. The swirl of patterns glistened in Mister Branchwater's eyes. I even thought
I could make out Mrs. Branchwater and me and some of the photos in those wet old eyes. We stopped laughing. He switched off the TV.

"Good evening, Mrs. Branchwater, Mister Branchwater."
"Good evening, Al. You're wet."
"Little snow out there."
"It's past my bedtime. Let's go!"
"Okay. Good night, Mrs. Branchwater."
"Good night, boys."
"Good night, baby!"

When I got Branchwater to the top of the stairs things went back to normal.

"Come on, come on!"
"Take it easy, Mister Branchwater."
"TAKE IT EASY?? MOVE!!"
"I'm moving as fast as I can."
"Like hell! Open that door!"
"It's stuck."
"Stuck! By God, I thought I told you to fix it!"
"I thought I--"
"You thought, you thought! But what do you do?"
"I try."
"Oh Christ!"
"Say, Mister Branchwater, why don't you shut your mouth!"

He did. I couldn't believe it. Something was
wrong.

In the morning I ate cornflakes. Branchwater ate mush. The sun shone through the library window and cut squares on the oak desk. Rows of snow lined the oak tree branches.

"Mister Branchwater, how old was your daughter when she died?"

"You're fired." He was calm. "I thought you'd work out. Take me downstairs and then pack your things. The maid has your check."

Mrs. Jones led me to the front door. The check was for less than three hundred dollars since I hadn't worked a full month.

"I'm sorry, Al."

"Thanks. Don't worry about it."

"Good bye, then."

"Good bye, Mrs. Jones." Mrs. Branchwater glanced up from her cards. "Good bye, Mrs. Branchwater."

"Good bye, Al."

Mister Branchwater changed channels. He didn't turn.

"Good bye, Mister Branchwater."

"Good bye!" How delightful his voice suddenly sounded. I went into the backyard for a last look at the old oak. My shopping bag of clothes ripped at the bottom.
I walked. A Rolls Royce thumped by through the snow, rattling its chains.
MOVING IN

Me and Jenny moved into a deserted house the city builders' association had condemned. It sat on the edge of a thick, overgrown park where a girl had recently been found murdered. They picked up a young sailor who pleaded he didn't do it, then said he did but couldn't remember why. One night me and Jenny dragged our mattress out onto our broken balcony to sleep under the moon when there came a loud crack! and the end by our heads dropped about six inches. Another time we pried into the boarded-up basement and crept around with a flashlight like cave explorers. The cement floor was slick with moss. We found some crates, pulled the damp boards off one. The thing was full of Chinese dictionaries.

I entered the cafe first and tried to look nervous, glancing at the dozen faces along the counter. Greasers, late nighters, a cab driver, a bum with a patch on his eye.

"Coffee?" the tired woman in white asked me.

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"Black," I tried to throw an edge into my voice. I sat, took a quick scan of the street through the foggy window. There came Jenny, running. I stirred sugar into my coffee, tinging the cup noisily with my spoon. She burst through the glass door, her hair moppy, and searched, frantic, the length of the cafe. I slurped the coffee.

"Oh God, Charlie! Give me a fix, please!" I tightened, then smiled sheepishly at onlookers, the startled waitress. Still smiling, I grabbed Jenny and whispered loudly, "Jesus Christ, Delores, not now, not here."

"Is she all right?" the waitress asked, frightened.

"Sure," I said. "A little hysterical, that's all." Jenny started to laugh and stuck her head into my chest. The others thought she was sobbing. She regained control.

"Where's Harry?" I whispered loudly.

"Harry's coming for you," she sputtered. "He knows it's your kid and he's got a gun!" When she screamed the word gun, people's heads jerked up. She pushed me away and rattled out the glass door, nearly cracking it. I slapped a dime on the counter, laughed weakly at the audience and followed her. We howled all the way home and rolled around till dawn on our rotten mattress.
I woke up and found Jenny, her scented candle lit, peering at herself in a small rectangular pocket mirror. I put my arm around her and told her she was really pretty. She said I was lying. She was right. Her thighs and butt were heavy, her breasts small and knobby. She had a slender nose that didn't set right on her husky face.

"Look," I said, "I'm skinny, my nose has been flattened, my teeth are all chipped, my eyebrows run together, I've got fungus on my toenails. So what the hell?"

She didn't answer. The candle made her arms gold. Her hair shone red and the flame glistened in her eyes. She flashed the mirror around the room. Squares of light fell briefly on a dimestore photograph of us close together, leering, looking crosseyed, and then it caught her plastic cuckoo clock. The bird inside was broken and on the hour it would pop out and go "cuck." Never "cuckoo," just a thin "cuck," as though it didn't have the strength to sing about the passage of time. At four o'clock, which wasn't remotely near four o'clock, the bird went "Cuck, cuck, cuck, cuck," dangling on the end of its stretched spring. The plastic door snapped shut too soon and the bird got hit.

"Poor little creature," I said to Jenny.
"I'll fix him for dinner." She blew out the candle and I put my arm on her back. Later I woke again and she was crying. The third time I woke I could hear the bathtub faucet like a distant waterfall. Then Jenny swept her wet hair over my face and I smelled shampoo and bath powder. I heard my belt buckle jingle as she pulled on my jeans. She stepped over me across the mattress and crawled through the window. Then the ceiling creaked. She was walking on the roof. Is it Thursday? Is it still July? The rafters sighed like sad ghosts.

We went out for Chinese food. The place was about two miles away so we cut through the park, following the stream and the banks of blackberry bushes. It had rained and the wet cedars gave the air a heavy smell. The cedars and alders grew thick enough to make the park shadowy and gloomy like deep woods. When we came to an open rise of purple wildflowers we climbed into them.

At the restaurant, wet, muddy, purple flowers squashed in our clothes and hair, the waitress, a plump woman with glasses low on her nose, eyed us doubtfully, then came over with menus.

"What'll it be?"

"How about you?" I looked up at Jenny.

"Chinese food."

"I know that. Be more specific."
"Sauerkraut."

"No."

"Tacos."

"That's enough, Jenny." The waitress tapped her foot, wrinkling her smeared red lips.

"Fish and chips." The waitress left.

"Stop, damn it!"

Finally we ordered the usual cheap stuff. This was our first time out to dinner. Until then we'd survived on phoney food stamps and what Jenny could lift from the markets and raid from their garbage bins. I went back to the cash register for a toothpick and grabbed a heap of newspapers from a cluttered table, sat down at our booth and spread out the sports page. It was a week old, a little crisp.

"Let's see," I sighed. Vida Blue was shaking hands with his teammates in the locker room after having won his tenth game in a row. Quite a pitcher. Suddenly Jenny yanked the front section out from under my sports and snapped it open before her face. "What's the problem?" She lowered the paper and gave me a glare and a twist of her mouth.

"Bastard." She lifted the paper. Nixon, grim-faced, was announcing another troop withdrawal.

"Jenny, what in hell's with you?" She didn't twitch. I reached across the booth, rattling our glasses of ice
water, and chopped through the paper. It ripped sharply. The waitress peeked over the swinging kitchen doors, adjusting her glasses. "Look, if you don't tell me what's on your mind, I'm taking off. Right now."

"You read that paper like I wasn't here." Her chin quivered. A family down the aisle turned. "You're using me, you bastard."

"No I'm not. Be quiet."

"You're using me!"

"Shut up."

"Fuck you!"

The waitress came up, nervous. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave." Behind the kitchen doors a bulky guy, who must have been the cook, leaned smoking. He smiled. We left. The pavement was drying in the warm sun. Jenny stepped quickly ahead of me down the street.

"Where in hell do you think you're going?" I shouted. She began to run. I went back to the house.

A friend rode over on his cycle one evening and I asked him if Jenny and I could go for a spin. He told me to take it easy and handed me the key. It was a quick bike, Suzuki 250cc and we roared off around town just at twilight. We toured for several hours. In the cool night air Jenny squeezed my rib cage. Her breasts pressed against my back. Her hair whipped around and beat my
neck. The wind pulled tears out of my eyes and they rolled straight back into my ears. She yelled something but I didn't hear. As we flew down a long hill into a ravine, the night air got colder and damper. Climbing again, gravity drove us deep into the soft cushion seat. I pulled over. The light bounced off some trees. Above the tail light the exhaust rose red.

"What did you say?"

"I want to drive," she shouted.

"Oh no."

"Teach me."

"Shit."

"Ah come on, Al."

"Christ."

I took the bike to a nearby gravel parking lot, threw it on the stand and got off. "This is the foot brake pedal. This is the hand brake lever. This is the hand clutch lever. This is the foot gear shift pedal. This is the twist accelerator."

"Right," she said. I went over it again. She slid on, revved the engine, practiced the brakes and ran through the four gears.

"For God's sake," I pleaded. "Slow."

"I will." The engine idled and I pushed the bike off the stand. She dropped it into first and started to move. Circling in the dark, the eye of the headlamp
shone on an occasional piece of glass. She laughed and shifted badly into second. The bike lurched and her circle became erratic, spiralling outward. She screamed. The sliding rear wheel spit gravel. She'd forgotten how to brake.

"Your left foot!" I tried to yell over the cry of the engine. I was still at the center, wondering what I would tell her mother if Jenny were killed. I ran after her, my adrenaline pumping, but couldn't keep up. She cried and began to accelerate. Panicking, she hit third gear.

"The other way! Left foot, left foot!" Several times she gunned it and the front wheel jumped in the air. She was halfway across the lot, the light darting and disappearing, when I heard her fall. I caught up to her. The bike had hit a log and had thrown her into a bed of shrubs. Jenny sat there gasping. I picked her up and brushed twigs and sand off her elbows. "You'll be okay, Jenny, it's all right."

In the movie I made with an old eight millimeter camera Jenny is standing on a gray desolate strip of beach. She wears a huge glossy black fur coat she said belonged to her great-grandmother way back in Ireland. From the back, her blond hair hangs in stiff strings down the coat while small waves wash over her bare feet,
wetting the bottom of the coat. I remember calling for
her to turn and face the camera. She yelled she wouldn't.
It was early morning when I shot the footage.

"Come on, turn. The camera's winding down."

"God damn camera," she muttered.

I shot some more of her on a big rock with her
back turned. Interspersed are scenes of a military
cemetery at sunset. The grass blazes yellow. An Amer­
ican flag hangs limp over the rows of white markers. I
also used my brother as actor. He is shown helmeted and
carrying a rifle as he runs along the beach, only on a
different day. You don't know if he's running to or from
something. Or both. Then a cut to the cemetery. Cut
to the rear of Jenny's coat. He disappears. She dis­
appears. The cemetery is left. That was my anti-war
flick.

Jenny didn't hate my poetry. It just made her
sleepy. I would stay up all night clacking on my
typewriter till I'd finish something that looked like
a poem. High on coffee and fatigue, I'd light the candle
and nudge her shoulder.

"Jenny, listen, this one is good. Jenny, wake up."

"Very nice," she'd yawn. "Get in bed."

"I haven't read it yet." She'd go to sleep and I'd
read it aloud to myself out on the balcony and show it
to the stars. I'd fold it into an airplane and sail it
down under our dying cherry tree where stacks of newspaper rotted among old tires. At least a dozen of my poems must be buried under those cherry leaves.

I checked out some fairy tales from the library and read them to her in bed. I read "Beauty and the Beast," the myth of Demeter and Persephone. She would fall asleep halfway through. I really wanted her to like the story of Tristan and Iseult. I started reading silently at the point where Iseult sees Tristan for the first time under the spell of the magic potion and falls hopelessly, tragically in love with him. When I finished I closed the book, leaned over and kissed her. Nothing. Fuck it, I thought. I ain't no prince. I rolled against her. Through the slit in the curtain I watched the moon slide between the branches of the cherry tree. Later, she woke crying, and told me about her dream of walking down a dark road until she reaches the end, the last dim street light. She sees a man slumped against the base of the light. It is her father, who she once told me was dead. In the dream she sees him beaten to death.

"Weren't you frightened?" I asked.

"I felt so sad, really sad. Blood was crusted in his eyebrows."

"Yeah?"

"Then, as I'm looking at his face, all swollen, he
"turns into you."

"No!"

"Al, do you love me?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're such a klutz."

"Oh?"

"Such a klutz."

"What the hell is a klutz?"

"An asshole."

"Then we're even. You're a bitch, so stupid you can't even understand my poetry."

"Your poetry sucks."

"Well fuck you, Jenny."

"Fuck you, Al." I jumped out of bed. It scared her. "Where are you going?"

I dressed, grabbed my sleeping bag and went off into the park. I came back the next day while she was at work, packed my junk and left a note saying she could keep my poetry books and our picture. I asked her to return the library books before there was a fine. I signed it, "Love, Al," and dated it August 29th when in fact it was September 2nd.
THE FLAW

A Play in One Act
Characters: AL

BETTY

BETTY'S MOTHER

BETTY'S FATHER

MAILMAN

Time: The present. Morning.

Place: BETTY's small apartment, with sofa, table, two chairs. A vase with plastic flowers and a telephone are on table. Painting on wall. Entrance door stage right. Window with curtain stage left. Door to bedroom rear center stage. Light switch to the right of entrance.
THE FLAW

(AL and BETTY are sitting in sofa, relaxed, joking, as lights come up. BETTY, age thirty, smokes a cigarette. She's very amused by AL's story. AL, fifteen years her senior, sits to her left, holds a drink. Neither character is attractively dressed.)

BETTY
(Laughing.)

Then what did he say?

AL
(Shrugs.)

Something about the nature of reality. (He laughs.)

BETTY

What? Oh no! (They both laugh.) That's hilarious! (She suddenly stops.) What was that?

AL
(He stops, listens.)

Jesus, they're here! (BETTY quickly snuffs cigarette, goes to window, opens it, throws out butt. AL moves toward entrance door, glances in passing at something in the middle of the floor, exits, returns without drink, approaches BETTY who now sits stiffly in chair. He is about to speak to her when his eye is caught by something in the middle of the floor. He squats, curious, and examines it. BETTY waits, grows nervous. She whispers loudly.)

BETTY
(With quick looks at audience.)

Al. Al, start talking, for the love of God! They're waiting!

AL

Hm. Interesting.
BETTY
(Nervous, she gazes at audience.)

What is it?

AL

A flaw. Hole. About the size of a dime.

BETTY
(Shes goes to him.)

Let me take a look. Where?

AL
(Irritated.)

You're in my light! (She steps back. He points.) There.

BETTY
(Unconcerned.)

Oh. (She straightens while AL continues to gaze into flaw.) Al, I can't tell you how relieved I am that you're here. I nearly went mad. I just had to talk about--

AL
(Snapping upright, he cuts her off.)

We'll talk about that later.

BETTY

Yes, yes! (Pause. Yes. (Glancing toward window.)

What's it doing out?

AL
(He goes to window, pulls curtain.)

Raining again.

BETTY
(Shocked, she goes to window, sees no rain.)

Raining?

AL

Weather's worsened.

BETTY
(Confused.)

But they were supposed to have changed the season.
It's the same. The dark one. (He goes back to check flaw.) Hm. (He sits on sofa.)

BETTY
(Brightening.)
Do you recall our walk in the park?

AL
There were many. Which one?

BETTY
(Oblivious.)
How brisk the air was! We threw crumbs of bread to the ducks.

AL
But they wouldn't eat, remember? They wanted nothing to do with us. (Pause.) Betty? Come sit here.

BETTY
(Doesn't hear.)
We lay together on the decaying leaves, my breath rising above you, through the branches. I dug my heels into the wet earth.

AL
Sit here. (She goes to him as though to sit,) Sit here.

BETTY
(Is about to sit, then rises.)
Shall I make coffee?

AL
Ah, that would be fine! (She turns toward bedroom.) Oh Betty?

BETTY
Yes?

AL
Come here. (Pause.) I want to talk to you. (She doesn't move.) It seems you left something out. (He prods her
memory.) Later that afternoon? The assassination?

BETTY (Stunned.)

Assassination?

AL (Torturing her.)

And his horse ran into the ocean--

BETTY (Rising fear.)

No! No!

AL --and his wife leaped from the tower? You can't have forgotten.

BETTY (Resigned.)

No. Things changed. (Pause.) It was a turning point.

AL (Pausing.)

They were all turning points.

BETTY (Cheerful.)

Er, what's it doing out? Good or bad?

AL (Cheerful, he rises, goes to window, pulls curtain, sees weather, grows morose.)

Very dark. With some lightning. May shake us up a bit. Listen. (They listen. Nothing.)

BETTY

Must be far away.

AL (Slight anger.)

No! Directly overhead. Claps aren't as loud as they used to be. Maybe it's our ears. Or our age. (He goes to flaw, crouches.) Hm.
BETTY

Is it the hole?

AL

Grown larger.

BETTY

I'm expecting my mother to visit any time now.

(BETTY'S MOTHER enters, haggard, exhausted, wearing a hospital gown and carrying an intravenous fluid bottle over her head like a lantern. A plastic tube runs from the bottle and connects to her arm. She goes completely ignored, implores silently, tries to speak, tries to be seen.)

She said she'd be here sometime this afternoon. I'm beginning to worry.

AL

(Checks watch.)

Why? It's still morning. (BETTY'S MOTHER, helpless, goes to wall light switch, flicks it off.)

BETTY

I suppose you're right. There's no need to worry as long as it's still morning. (MOTHER flicks light back on, sees it's useless, sits on sofa, weeps, composes, and quickly exits, dragging her bottle.) What's it doing out?

AL

(To window, pulls curtain.)

Hah! Bit of hail. Very nasty. (He sits on sofa.)

BETTY

Let me get some tea.

AL

No, no! (Laughs.) No. (Laughs.) Not for me, thanks. (Laughs.) Glass of water will be fine. (Suddenly begins to gasp, hangs out tongue, massages throat.) My, er, thirst has suddenly come up. (He gags.) Water, water!
BETTY

Sure about the tea?

AL

Water, water!

(BETTY exits. While she is gone AL rushes to flower vase, throws out flowers and gulps down contents of vase. Satisfied, he sits on couch, pulls out a diary and makes a frantic entry, glancing desperately at the flaw. When BETTY returns he quickly hides the diary.)

BETTY

(Shes now wears earrings, bright rouge on lips and a different dress. She brings in a small burning candle which she presents to AL.)

I thought you might like this.

AL

(Looking at candle.)

Well, what a surprise!

BETTY

(A pleasant surprise?)

AL

(Thinking.)

Not pleasant...

BETTY

(Unpleasant, then?)

AL

No...

BETTY

(I am a human being.)
AL
(Half-hearing.)

Um?

BETTY
(She rises, begins calmly, becomes increasingly distraught. This speech should be spoken clearly, rhythmically.)

I am a human being. (Pause.) What do you want from me? (AL begins startled, becomes scornful, frightened, then compassionate.) I have arms, don't I? I have legs. (Pause.) I have clothing. (Pause.) I have teeth. I have fingernails. I have hair, I have eyes, I have memory, wound, mother, father, tears, love, murder, voice, spoons, dancing, hope place horse glass reason distance night! (Pause.) I have breasts. Breasts! (Pause.) Stop laughing! Stop crying! Stop talking! (AL rises toward her but she turns on him.) Stop! (She is near tears.) My hands. They were never this empty. (To AL.) Do you know who I am? (He begins to speak, is cut off.) Wrong! Wrong! Al, my own mother was just in here and I didn't even see her. She was like a presence. I never knew anything about her. She knew nothing of me. (Pause.) What do you know about me? (She asks herself.) What doesn't he know about me. Once mama told papa something that made me cry.

AL

What was it?

BETTY

"You'll understand when you're older," she said. Now I'm older and I still don't understand.

AL

What was it?

BETTY

I'm sorry, but I'll never repeat it. To you, or anyone.

AL
(Tenderly, moving close.)

I remember you as a girl, how skinny your legs were, the way you'd flit like a sandpiper on the beach, hunting agates. The first thing you said to me was, "I'm going to marry my papa."
BETTY

As a child I was terribly lonely.

(AL and BETTY embrace awkwardly, kissing, fondling one another with longing. They part almost immediately and straighten.)

AL

Er, will you excuse me for a moment?

BETTY

Why certainly. (AL exits.)

(Enter BETTY'S FATHER, dressed as chef, carrying a frying pan. He goes ignored, implores, but soon resigns. He moves to phone, turns off light and begins dialing a fifty digit telephone number. When he turns light back on, one chair is missing, as is the vase. BETTY is seated on sofa.)

BETTY'S FATHER

Betty? This is papa. (Pause.) Yes, dear, that's right. (Pause.) It's--it's your mother. (Pause.) She's--well, she's dying. Of complications. (Pause.) No one ever answers. (Pause.) The lizards are healthy. (Pause.) I've got to return to the hospital now. Please take care of yourself. Eat properly. Good bye, sweetheart. (He hangs up phone, moves toward exit, bumps into AL who is just entering. AL is in a different jacket, wears a false moustache, carries binoculars around his neck.)

AL

Oh, excuse me.

BETTY'S FATHER

No no. My mistake. (He notices binoculars.) Well now, did you have nice weather?

(Phone rings. BETTY answers, talks while AL and FATHER converse.)
BETTY
(In disbelief.)
Father! Is it you?

AL
(To BETTY'S FATHER.)
Oh yes indeed. We saw trees and rivers and some lovely, lovely birds. Why, I could have sworn they were real.

BETTY
Why have you returned?

BETTY'S FATHER
(To AL.)
How nice. Did the others enjoy it?

BETTY
(Shocked.)
What's the matter with her?

AL
Not as much as I. (Lifts binoculars.) No one else had these.

BETTY
My God, why didn't you call me?

AL
With these I could see everything. The good along with the bad.

BETTY'S FATHER
Ah ha! Er, I really must be going. My wife is dying. (He removes his chef's hat, daubs his eyes.)

BETTY
But I've always been right here. I don't travel, I don't go out. I live a sheltered life.

AL
Dying, eh. What seems to be her problem?

BETTY'S FATHER
(Shrugging.)
Oh, nothing out of the ordinary. (He replaces hat.)
BETTY

Yes, father. I will.

AL

I hope her condition changes, one way or another, the poor woman. The poor, poor woman. The poor, poor, poor woman. (He sighs.) In any case, it was a pleasure to meet you. (He extends hand. BETTY'S FATHER extends his frying pan, catches his mistake, and they shake heartily, laughing.) Good bye.

BETTY'S FATHER

Good bye. (He exits.)

BETTY

Good bye, father. (She hangs up phone.)

AL

(He goes to exit, follows FATHER with binoculars.)

At that rate he may never leave.

BETTY

(Wistfully, to herself.) I wish I were a girl again. I wish I spoke a foreign language. (Pauses.) I do speak a foreign language. I wish I was a stone at the bottom of a river. I wish the stars were a different color. I wish, I wish.

AL

(Joining BETTY on sofa.)

Well, how have you been?

BETTY

The same.

AL

(Tenderly.) That's encouraging. (Pause. Notices expanding flaw, peers down with binoculars.) It's become an abyss!

(By now the flaw has grown to a diameter that the actors must consciously, and cautiously, step around, teetering, feigning dizziness at its vast depth.)
BETTY
You must never leave me like that again.

AL
Like how?

BETTY
Like you did.

AL
Show me.

BETTY
Like this. (She exits. Seeing she is gone, AL pulls out a huge, brutal-looking knife from beneath a cushion on the sofa. A rage begins to build in him. He jumps up and is about to slash the painting on the wall when BETTY re-enters. AL hides the knife in his coat.) You won't do it, will you?

AL
(Guiltily, frightened.)
Er, do what? I wasn't doing anything. I swear.

BETTY
You won't leave me?

AL
(Relieved.)
Oh! (Laughs.) Hah! Of course not. Not me.

BETTY
I nearly went mad.

AL
(He goes to flaw, adjusts bi-noculars, peers in.)
Go into the bedroom.

BETTY
Who? Me?
AL
(Rises, pushed BETTY toward bedroom. He continues to look back at flaw.)

I want to show you something interesting.

BETTY
(Nervously,)

What it is?

AL
(Long pause. He moves back toward flaw. She continues toward bedroom.)

Extremely interesting.

BETTY

Is it big?

AL
(Looking at flaw with binoculars.)

It will be.

BETTY

Is it empty?

AL

Beyond your wildest dreams.

(Al goes to BETTY, leads her to bedroom by the elbow. She is anxious. He turns off light. While they are gone the cries of jungle animals are heard. When they re-enter, he hits lights. She wears a different dress, binoculars around her neck. He is in a different jacket and is applying a different colored moustache. They don't immediately notice that the sofa is gone, that the table has moved much closer to the center stage flaw. There is only one chair. AL goes to window.)

Ah! (He adjusts his pants.) That was delicious! Must be something your father showed you.
BETTY
(Straightening her hair.)
No, not him. (Pause.) What's it doing out?

AL
See for yourself.

BETTY
(Goes to the window, peers out with binoculars. AL sits in chair.)
The grass looks parched. (She looks off in another direction.)
They're demolishing something. A woman is holding up her baby to watch. He's so pleased. (Pause. She gasps.)
He's begun to gag on the dust! Oh the poor child! (Her horror mounts.) He's stopped breathing! My God!

AL
(Glancing nervously at flaws.)
What's happening now?

BETTY
I--I've lost them in the dust. (She tries to focus binoculars.) Or they've gone out of focus again. Ah, there! (Pause. She gazes off.)

AL
Well?

BETTY
Still nothing. But very sharp, clear. (Pause.) What's this? A...hearse? Cars, their headlights shining through the dust. There's father. (Pause.) He's sobbing! Oh father! (Near tears,) He's leaning out the hearse window, dropping roses! Oh no! His chef's hat has fallen off and the other cars are running over it! (She drops binoculars, tries desperately to open window, fails, slumps to the floor in tears.) Al, Al, what's happening to the world?

AL
(On his hands and knees, he crawls along edge of flaw to her aid.)
Betty, listen. Everything will be all right. (He looks at their situation.) All this is only temporary. (At flaw,) And it's becoming more and more temporary. Let's
be like we were in our younger days. Let's fall in love. Let's live in the past, starting tomorrow.

BETTY
(Grabbing his hand.)
But Al, tomorrow was yesterday.

AL
(Snaps.)
Don't say that!

(BY now, the actors are moving toward the extremities of the stage area, away from the flaw.)

BETTY
(Looking around.)
The sofa. It's gone!

AL
(Looking around.)
That's not all. (Points into flaw.) Down there, I would imagine.

BETTY
(Goes to rim, leans over.)
What an appalling depth! (She sickens, shakes it off.)
Pure black. No, not even that, exactly. (She looks at her feet, then shrieks.) It's widening under my toes!

AL
Betty, hold it for a moment. (He goes to lights, turns them off. Then on. When he does, table, chair are gone. He steps precariously around the widening flaw and goes to window, peers out.) Hm.

BETTY
What's it doing out?

AL
Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes! Disaster upon disaster! (He cranes his neck, straight up through the window, sees something falling from above. It hurtles before him and his head snaps down as his eyes follow it.)
BETTY
What was it?

AL
A horse!

BETTY
(Scornful.)
It can't be.

AL
(In awe, still looking down.)
The horse must be thinking roughly the same thing.

BETTY
Er, what's it like out there?

AL
Fierce blizzard. Everything buried under snow...or something like it.

BETTY
(Stares into flaw.)
Al, let's jump.

AL
(Violently.)
But we can't do that!

BETTY
Then let's get married! I want to bear children, I want a home of my own in the country. I want to grow older and older.

AL
(Moves toward flaw.)
Let's jump.

BETTY
(Grabbing AL.)
No, no. We'll see what it's going to do first. (She looks into flaw with binoculars.) Bottomless! (Reversing them, she looks through incorrect end.) More so! (Sensing something, she looks up.) The phone is going to ring. (Phone rings.) It's for me. (She answers phone. While she talks, AL moves delicately from
flaw to window and back. Then he makes his way to the painting, takes some matches from his pocket and is about to ignite the painting when BETTY hangs up phone. He quickly blows out match and tosses it.) Hello? (Pause.) Yes, that's correct. (Pause.) Yes, I believe it is. (Pause. Her expression changes to shock.) What! Of course not! Don't you threaten me! (Pause. She softens.) Again? (Pause.) Oh, I see. Well, will you accept my sincerest apology? I--I seem to have made a grave mistake. (Pause.) You've called the wrong number. (Pause.) I'm someone else. No, I don't have to check. I'm quite certain. (Pause.) I'd rather we didn't talk about it, not at a time like this. (Pause.) Yes. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. No. No! (Louder.) No! (Louder.) No! (Pause.) Why, thank you. I understand perfectly. (Pause.) Any time, any time at all. Good bye. That's right. Good bye. (She hangs up phone.)

AL
(Blowing out the match.)

Er, who was that?

BETTY
(Nonchalantly.)
Wrong number. (She reconsiders.) No, not a wrong number exactly. A man, with a deep, rich voice, like yours. Why, at first I nearly thought it was you until--

AL

Until?

BETTY

Until he called me Delores.

AL

And then you knew you were mistaken.

BETTY

I was convinced. (Pause.) Have you ever known a Delores?

AL

Never.
BETTY

Oh. (Pause.) Have you ever called me Delores?

AL

(Thinking back.)

Hm. Not to my knowledge.

BETTY

(Doubtful.)

Then that should settle the matter.

AL

For the time being.

(Knock at the door. They look at one another. Knock again.)

BETTY

We can't answer it. There's no way to cross the room.

AL

(Shouts.)

Er, who is it? (No answer. To BETTY.) Who would be calling at this hour?

BETTY

What's the matter with this hour? (At door.) Father? Mother? Both? Neither? (She looks through binoculars, focuses them futilely.) They don't help.

(The door opens. MAILMAN slowly enters, brushing green powder from his shoulders, carrying a large, old-fashioned leather mail bag. Periodically, he gazes into the abyss that is edging toward him. The MAILMAN is ancient, disheveled but recognizable.)

BETTY

May we, er, help you?

AL

(After pause. MAILMAN gazes straight at them.)
AL cont.

Yes, er, there must be something we can do for you. Just name it. (Sweeping gesture over flaw.) Whatever is ours is yours.

BETTY

We'd ask you in but, in this case, (She gestures toward flaw,) it would be impolite.

MAILMAN

(With dignity.)

I am the mailman, come to announce there'll be no more mail. All the birds have died. Look at me. Can you guess my age? You've never been nearer the truth. Nor farther. (Pause.) Once upon a time... (Pause.) Yes, once upon a time. (Wistful, then sudden anger, as if starting from a dream.) Walk! Walk! Watching the shadows gathering dust, carrying my bag, heavy with remorse, explanations, apologies. Such a burden! (Pause.) I am the mailman. I'm leaving on vacation. My feet have begun to swell, my eyes are going, I've been hearing voices. Goodbye, Mrs. Wilcox, you're as pretty as the day is long. Goodbye, Mr. Avery, I hope you can find another talking parakeet. (Pause.) There are only two places where people prominently display their names: on mailboxes, and on gravestones. One fills with hospital bills, the other fills with the reason for hospital bills. (Pauses. Tips hat.) I am the mailman, at your service, but for the last time. (He turns off light. When he turns it back on, AL's shoes and jacket are gone, BETTY's shoes and binoculars are gone.) There'll be no more mail. I'm going on vacation. I am the mailman. (Slowly, painfully, he reaches into the depth of his bag, rummages, then turns the bag over. One letter, weighted, falls out with a thud. He bends, picks it up and flings it across the flaw. He exits.)

AL

(Pointing to the letter.)

Quick, grab it before it falls!

BETTY

(Reaching carefully for letter.)

There! (She stands.) It's from my sister. (She opens letter, begins to read.) "Dear Betty, I just baked a loaf of bread and thought of you. I couldn't sleep. A wind has blown away all our apple trees—"
AL
(Puzzled.)

What apple trees?

BETTY
(Continues reading.)

"--the apple trees Al and I planted when we were first married--

AL

Ah, those!

BETTY
(Reading.)

"--and this evening I noticed a small crack in the middle of the living room floor. I'll get Al to repair it when he returns from the orient. I certainly hope your condition improves. Love, Claire. P.S. Say hello to mama and papa for me." (She puts letter back in envelope, flips it off stage. She looks toward door.) Poor fellow.

AL

Who?

BETTY

The mailman. He devoted his life to the principle that secrets are not to be kept.

AL

Perhaps he was just trying to earn a living.

BETTY

Living is earning a living.

AL
(Studies flaw.)

Growing at a terrific rate. (To BETTY.) Have you ever felt as though you were hindering something?

BETTY

As though you were an impediment?

AL

Or an intruder?
Or a blemish?

An eyesore.

An earsore.

Out of order.

Out of tune.

Lame.

Infirm.

Inadequate.

A drawback.

A loose screw. (Pauses.) Have you ever felt like that?

(With certainty.) No. (With doubt.) At least not until now. (Suddenly desperate.) Al, it's nearly too late. We've got to talk about—

(He cuts her loudly.) Delores, for the last time, I swear to you we'll have it all out in the open.
BETTY

When?

AL
(Angry.)

When? When the time comes!

BETTY
(Hurt, she goes to painting, gazes at it.)

You know, whenever I look at one of your paintings, it fills me with a strange inner peace

AL

Really?

BETTY

This is one of your finest works. (She sighs, then looks over her shoulder at the flaw, shudders and leaps against the wall. Across stage, AL presses against the other wall. BETTY turns, beckons seductively to AL.) Al?

AL

Um?

BETTY

Come over here.

AL
(Suspicious.)

You come over here.

BETTY

Please, Al.

AL

Can't be done.

BETTY

We can talk, in there. (She points alluringly to bedroom. (AL weighs alternatives, slowly edges toward BETTY. She smiles, then stops him.) What's it doing out?
AL
(Moving precariously toward window.)

Stars are shining. Not all of them, of course. I'd say a fair percentage. Ah! The bright moon! (He squints.) Or something like it. (To BETTY.) It's doing nothing out. Nothing unusual.

BETTY

Any day now the first blossoms will open, the leaves will return.

AL (Edging toward BETTY, who opens door to bedroom.)

That may be your opinion. (Together they back away from the flaw into the bedroom.) I'll turn out the light. (He does.)

BETTY (Both characters speak from off stage.)

We're alone now.

AL

For all practical purposes.

BETTY

For better or worse. Al, let's talk about it now.

AL

I'll close the door.

BETTY

For God's sake, we can talk about it, can't we?

AL (Pausing, and flattening his voice.)

What's there to talk about?