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ANATOMIES

by

Thomas F. Orton

B.A., Seattle University, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

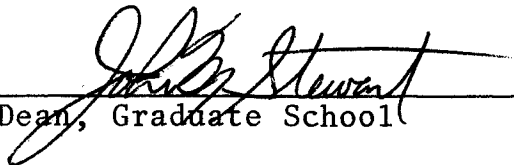
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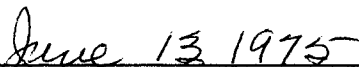
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PART I

POEMS

THE ROOM

It was a song that saved you
like a key bruising a new lock.
You had built the door,
I had bored the air, whistling
till you were lost in the music.
But you brought each note back with you
and placed them in my mouth
so I wouldn't forget who you were.
I find them in the wood
huddling like ants in the cracks and holes.
They die here suddenly
and I can't remember the room
where the tune was yours,
where that song turned a handle
and I could move inside.

WOMEN LAUGHING

My fingers shift in the dirt.
Among walls hands move,
buildings die in front of me
and behind my work is its long print.

Echoes roll up to the stones
and women touch their throats
to show where a city ends,
mile after mile,
their laughter sinks in my skin.

What I polish
topples on the ground
in the moment just before
the voices of young girls
turn to soil where cities go
when they are over.

TRAIN WINDOW

You slide off the glass
in a tremor none of us sees,
the picture of you
shows how still I am.

It is clear where the window stops
and the train begins.

Glass grown into my face,
the color fading,
an edge of you meets
the flat wet night.

I watch my large eye
cover your body
and the space between us moves.

I'm standing next to you.
The train runs through me.
In the whole car
there is no place I can go.

MID-MORNING

A bell in the tower collides
with a train whistle.
It is another blue day,
flags yawn above a building.
The train heaves into its station.
There is wind among pine trees
when the bell strikes
trumpet cold on the ground.

Near the large clapper
a few deaf birds keep
to the careful building of nests.
A few die each time
the tower collapses into order.
Music waits in every tense place,
the rustling among branches
and the still pines.

THE DRIVE HOME

The only thing about to happen
is a train nearing a trestle.
I crawl out of my mouth.
Looking home I swallow my tongue,
feel that place
something will always come apart.
One narrow line where trains slow
to play out their clattering
dangerous ballet. It shines
with ways out. A bridge falls
to strained dancing,
all ways I move
have a single plan.
Engines tighten like wires
pulled to keep me upright.
I walk against myself
in a bad year, I go back to you
and your hands are somewhere else.

WET SEASON

It is dry for some time.
I've carried water
to hold things apart.
I've drowned all rooms.
The house rolled up
something half-alive, some mouth
you boiled at my back.
Each time I came up,
floundered in my own shape,
I called the old sounds
and floated near you.
My hand swam toward you.
This house was a boat
with sand in its hold
waiting like an ocean
and the movement of tides.

"PORTAL OF THE NORTHWEST": A BRIDGE

I

You make the long sounds
of a gun and force them
into my lungs. I scream
your words in a loud tunnel.
I pour myself into your mouth.
It is hard to lose
only two ways of leaving,
drowned in a dark roll of wind
and something healing over the ears.
No fight to the bridge, riding out
the tunnel's one long crash.
You say it is only air
between us, my eyes burn away,
the tunnel spits us
into a hole of light.

II

I can feel this road like a body
stretching out its thighs, its head
rolled back into the sun.
The shadow of its hand moves

along your leg, what is young,
the young woman in you.
Those small fingers hold you
for a moment but always
your voice funnels toward me
and my mouth shapes
the needed thing I can't kill.

WOOD

I lose what I am.
The life drops out of my head
and rolls like an eye
over the rough mahogany.
I forget what I look like,
search for hours in the wood,
lose my shape, the face
falls from my head.
My fingers wear down.
I go on working
till I have no hands
I can remember. They will appear
in the bark of a tree somewhere
clutching toward the center, the soft core.
I will come too late.
The trunk will stand open
like a door, the outline of a body
inside, a path of footprints cut
in the ground. And gouging
the shape of my eye
in the red-brown grain
is the last thing I'll do
before going blind.

CRIPPLE

Nothing feels good anymore.
I want to give up my hands.
You ask for one of my arms
to put around you
in my absence, the cold winter.
For its warmth and the being alone.
I give you a foot instead.
You think the foot is me, a sign
of the feeling between us
and you promise to feel its lonely step pressing
in on your heart. When I leave my toes weep
at your door. The arch falls.
Miles away there is nothing but air
at the end of my leg. I feel your fingers
soothing the skin of my ankle,
I can't shake you off, your hand
follows the paths I leave in the snow
where every other footprint has the shape of your face.
In the spring when I return, you carefully
hide the foot in a large chest,
offer your body like a gift
and I know I do not belong to you.

NIGHT HANDS

This is one of the nights I send
my hands out alone into the fresh snow.
The night is beginning to freeze
to the surface of snowdrifts and press
its face to the windows.
I am by myself, helpless, staring back. It is clear
and because of the white and the moon
it glows, my hands flit, shadows,
small bare animals running
across the slow curve of snow.
They are moving toward you,
your old friends forgetting
the careful gesture, the studied turn of the wrist--
frisking like pups for the expanse
of your cool body. I can only imagine
you, arms open, your mouth curved
into that dry smile I gave you--
my hands touch you and the same smile
grown cold, more dangerous with distance
settles onto the cold teeth of the snow.
And every window, a mouth
numb, thin with icy silence. Each one gapes

at your absence growing like aches
at the ends of my arms. I watch
outside, watch my face in the glass
and in the eyes are the patterns of ten fingerprints,
each small snowy step filled
with a darkness like notes of music.
The hands return. A crisp distant ringing
grows nearer. The hands are covered
with the rings and small bells of your kindness
and they dance like Gypsies
in the moonlight and the snow.

PART II

THE SENTIMENT OF THE BALLOON

THE SENTIMENT OF THE BALLOON

The whole damn thing over again. And again and again. I've given up trying to catch hold of you, balloon. I can't be fooled that way anymore. I will master you someday-- I will begin to have hope. You won't follow me as you have. You will not last.

Fat yellow balloon. Who'd have believed it. You accused me of being completely crazy, you fired me from my job, disgraced me; and for two years you've followed me everywhere like a starstruck lover. For two years you've floated above me just out of reach, tracing my movements like a hated yellow shadow. You made a crazed hermit of me and all I wanted was to grab you and kill you...but I have to agree. Climbing over furniture, knocking down lamps, flailing my arms about; chasing you vainly...I must have looked like an idiot.

No more of that, though. I was sunk in your sticky, yellow bog, the quicksand of my own violence. Right where you wanted me. But now, the picture of calm middle-age, I sit in my armchair in my small rooms and look into your curved, yellow surface. The battle's become more subtle now. It's all in the wits, nothing physical.

We're progressing. The texture of our struggle is changing. It becomes clear: after two frustrating, lunatic years it looks as though there's a logical conclusion in store. I'm pulling myself from the mire. And I find my one weapon is still strong now. The objectivity of the scientist is what my former colleagues at Franklin called it: intact and forceful-- carefully inbred for most of my 39 years-- that same clear objectivity rises from the solipsism and obscene self-pity of the last two years. I've put my store in it. It will pay off, give me the answers I need and again I'll enjoy that old feeling of resolve.

Mystique is the term I've heard whined and wailed when solutions to situations like mine were not to be easily found. I bought the balloon two years ago on the day my mother died.

Symbol is another. Two years ago to this day. In a park. As I turned a corner somewhere, the string dangling from its inverted navel brushed across my face. I thought I'd run headlong into spiker's silk and I jumped back, stumbling into the balloonvender who was chasing after this maverick, this yellow balloon which had gotten away from him. It bobbed around in the air like a playful vaudevillian. Of the vender's herd of balloons: the only one that had freed itself.

Talisman. I never touched it again. It followed me home, tortured me. I bought it on impulse. My mother had just died.

A Sign. Wrong. I left all those ugly words stuck like religious whimpers in the mealy mouths of my former biology students. The day I was let go from my post at Franklin.

Sign. Wrong. I would find my young daughter years after deserting her. Take the balloon to her as a gift. Attempt to explain.

Sign. I said I got it for my mother.

For Whom? Wrong! I do nothing on impulse. I don't chase the balloon anymore. No impulse.

For Whom? Wrong! For my daughter! Mother! I mean Mother! Damn it! Damn it.

Sweet Jesus, do I ever want to lay hands on that thing. Bury a scalpel in its tragi-comic yellow face. Look at it. Just hovering there by my ceiling like a moron. Come on down here, Cutesy. I've got some candy for you, some nice yellow candy. Come to me, my bright yellow Poosyaht. Here, Poosy-Poosy. Here you go. Come on. Come down here to me. Razor blades in your candied apple. Here, Poosyaht.

You still get my bile up, damn you. After two years no less. But I won't be cowed, won't be sucked down again. Poosyaht. "Don't cry, Poosyaht. You must not weep. Eet ees no goot, no goot et all, my Poosyaht." I could set my clock by your glossy, yellow skin, balloon. There's Mother appearing on your surface. Out of the mist of a lemon crystal ball. Very predictable, just in time to calm me down.

But there's Father too. Hi, Dad. Go to hell, Pop, you and your boxing gloves. "Gertie-girl, if there's another war, the young pip won't be ready. Doggone if he won't! An' looks to me like we got plenty more wars in store too. Won't be ready, he just won't. Only the fittest survive and if the boy can't be a man now and learn to handle a few little harmless school-boy scuffles, why he just ain't gonna make it, Gert, he just plain and simple ain't agonna make the grade, what with this Hitler fella and his buddies kickin' up such a fuss. You know how it had to be for us to lick Kaiser Bill and his bum-ugly Huns...beggin' your pardon, of course, Gert, but whatthe-hell, you're American now, but the Heinie was and is a fact and there's no way to cope 'cept bein' fit..." Good old colloquial Father. Again, Dad, to hell with you.

"But he ees joost a boy, Petrick, joost a pup. Leef heem be. Plees, he vill be okay."

Mom. Mother. A warm, ample, kitchen sort. Never appeared without an apron. I think of her constantly, but here she is again, clear as crystal. Trying to make it alright again. A credit to her species.

Nearly 40 years of attempting to keep the peace, the first ten years of my own life undoubtedly taxing her warm diplomatic ways to their very limits. She would consume me in those distressing times. Many occasions, as a child, I would trundle home from school, desperate, desolate; open the dutch-door to

our kitchen and stand there sobbing until she floated slowly above me.

Only infrequently was she not moving about the kitchen when I returned home. Sometimes she would be busy with a grinder or vacuum-cleaner and would not hear me right away. At such times I would sob louder. When that failed I used to arch twigs or pebbles at her until one of the small missiles made contact with her head.

Her attention thus directed away from her work, an innocent surprise would fall over her face like a thin veil. Almost immediately a look of pity dissolved the surprise. She would drop whatever was in hand and loom toward me, the warm smells of cookies, bread and potroast preceding her like an aura until she was upon me, directing my head to her soft bosom. The weight of the universe sagging my narrow shoulders, I continued sobbing against her, murmuring "Ping, Oh Ping" until the demon was spent.

"Vut ees eet, Poosyaht? You hef trobble vit a teacher?"

No. I was always a good student. Always. The troubles I endured as a young lad never involved schoolwork. My childhood suffering centered mostly around the attitude taken by certain classmates regarding, of all things, the inordinate size of my head. As often as twice a week I would become the receptacle for their abusive energy. They would tug at my clothes, scatter my books, taunt me with mild blows to the

head, and these one-sided fracas were nearly always accompanied by such lucid brilliance as: "Where's that punkin goin' with that kid?" or "Why don't cha git a cart for that thing!" or "Hey Mellon-head, the moon's out early!"

"What'll I do, Ping?" I pleaded. "What?"

"You must iknore dem, Poosyaht." She stroked my thin hair as she spoke. Softly. "Pay no heed, no heed."

"How come I have to have such a big head? I don't want it, it's not fair!"

She would then hold me close to her plump, smiling face and exclaim in a hushed voice, "Vy, vit zuch a noodle, Eddie, joost tink uf all de beeeeeeg, beeeeg tings you cahn poot een eet!"

Dad, good old Dad made things even worse at birthdays and Christmas. Always a toy machine-gun, rubber knife, plastic hand-grenades, footballs, basketballs, mallets, bats-- and subtle old Pop couldn't understand my tears when the caps, helmets and assorted new head-gear failed to squeeze over my cranial bulk.

Boxing gloves were among the last of his attempts, attmpts which grew crueler, more overtly violent as his desperation increased. I was ten years old. I was anxious, but truthfully, a little bored with his campaign to make a man of me. But boredom dissipated feebly into outright fear when I caught sight of the menacingly large box beneath the

Christmas tree. The box contained my gloves but also contained a larger, more bulbous pair which floated luminously in the white wrapping tissue. Another pair. Reckless hostility. How much farther could he go? I gazed stupidly at the hazy reflection of my head, my horror-stricken face staring out at me from the smooth shiny leather. Two pair. One meant for himself. He meant to hit me, wanted to hit me. As I sat there, stunned and silent, I sensed that even Mother (Peacemaker) felt all this had gone too far: she uttered what I knew were the first words of a mild, roundabout protest but had to check herself in the face of potential friction. We were both in danger. I couldn't tear my eyes away from my reflection.

"Well, sonny-boy, what say we go a few rounds, what d'ya say, hunh? How 'bout it, Ed?"

I slowly lifted one of the larger gloves from the box, uttered a primitive sort of scream and pushed the thing away from me as though it were a large ball of excrement. It landed with a dull plop at his feet.

Dad didn't look much surprised somehow. A spiteful confidence was all I could detect beneath his enormous anger. He hit me anyway; lost his patience, maybe wanted to lose it; couldn't or wouldn't wait, I suppose, to do it legally, according to the Pugilist's hand-book accompanying his gift. The bastard bloodied my nose.

Between sobs in my upstairs room I heard my mother's tranquility let go.

"Dot vus a no goot ting, Petrick. Eet's joost no goot! Vy you do zuch a ting? Tell me dot!"

"Gertrude, goddamn it, that boy's a goddamn sissy! A goddamn rubber-assed fairy! No guts, no backbone-- nothin' but a goddamn fairy! And goddamn it if he ain't!"

"Fairy! Fairy!! Vut a ting to call! Your own zun! Zuch a ting!! Vut is 'fairy'?"

"Oh for the sweet love o' Mike, Gertrude. Fairy. A Faggot! A goddamn faggot!! Jesus Christ, Gertrude, your son's a goddamn sissy-assed faggot!!"

When I learned what a faggot was, I suppose I had to prove him wrong somehow. Not long after puberty, still willowy and looking much as I did at 8-years-old, I began to seek avenues toward a confident sexuality, arenas for the nebulous manhood which had begun to stir within my groin like a large heavy bird.

So Marie, her enormous bulk widened impossibly by this yellow curve of reflection-- her many rolls of fatty tissue nearly unable to squeeze into a single mind-- so Marie squats like a planet on the edge of a blackened brass bed, the single bare lightbulb dangling from the ceiling on a long cord. So Marie pulls that cord now-- just as she tugged on my

manhood-- and like a memory the yellow light fills the yellow room with its dim yellow walls; exposes like something faded with age and forgotten the dark side of Marie's lunar terrain.

But of course I don't mean Marie. I'm being fooled always. People and things are becoming what they are not. Marie was never in that room. It is Marie on the bed, but it was not Marie to whom I paid my money, demanding that I be given what was male in me. It was not the mammoth wife-and-mother; not fat Marie: Francine was skinny as a bean-pole.

Francine (never Marie!) was also the whore's whore. Every fantasizer's, every day-dreamer's, every cliché-abuser's-- every balloon's-- everyone's ideal prostitute. Every detail, from the chewing-gum slang to the dingy, unkempt boudoire. Francine came out of the movies and now, correctly, it is she who sits on the brass bed's edge in the yellow room of hers.

"Your buddy sittin' between your shoulders'll have to wait his turn, soldier." Gum-popping, brash laughter. "Should charge extra for him, but I'll just keep the green stamps instead, OK? God, kid, what a noodle."

I stood shaking before her, forgetting what she'd just said and the bony narrowness of her body; forgetting the dubious friend who had arranged the meeting, forgetting even the night-long desire to die; shedding my past, my self like

a skin in the face of the proof I needed.

"With a noggen like that I should take out insurance. Call my agent, will ya, Hon?" All night abrasive laughter rattled like a freight-train along the thin rail of her body. I too finally rode her boldly.

That laughter vibrates, shivers through the balloon. So there's Mother again, holding my head, concerned for the bird-like trembling of my body; and Dad off in the kitchen somewhere, sulking over a beer or sports page. "You doan hef to tell me a ting, Poosyaht, not a ting" and I kept weeping.

With a lame excuse keeping him company, Dad stayed home from the wedding. Amid the shabby splendor of a small Presbyterian chapel, Marie and I were wed. Marie, the weighty one. Mother did well hiding her disappointment with Pop. She did not let embarrassment show through her calm joy. I doubt really whether she had any cause for embarrassment, Marie's people being rather insensitive to that sort of thing: a couple of low-lifers, he with an ancient smear of toothpaste on his lapel, mud spattered on his well-worn, gum-soled shoes; and she with several stains down the front of her turquoise chiffon dress.

The only thing I had in common with Marie's father was that I was marrying fat, the way some people marry money. Or at least that's how it appeared. Like myself, he was unbearably

slender and, when standing next to the chiffon dirigible of his wife, the two of them looked like the number 10. She had the superficial personality of a tooth-fairy; he seemed not unlike a pervert:

"Hee? Hee? Yew goan git a little tunight, eh, Iddie?" He giggled as though asking a question, contorting his sweaty, bespectacled face. But it was his thin, wet hand on my sleeve that made me sick, the fingers squeezing and kneading my arm as though it were dough.

"Sammy, you odd bird," his wife broke in, "don't bother the boy. He's gonna git married in a couple minutes. Aintcha, boy." She winked and nudged my arm knowingly. An operatic giggle romped over the expanse of her body, the turquoise gossimer rustling as though it were alive and wishing it weren't. I had the precise same wish, obviously not for the first time.

Marie, then, wisely choosing a blue suit over the traditional white gown-- on her it would have ceased to be a gown-- Marie, then waddled down the isle toward the future she so dearly welcomed. As I waited for this creature, I glanced over to my aunt and next to her, Mother, a stranger somehow, looking proudly upon the blushing hulk that rolled toward me. Unwillingly, I had to remove my eyes from Mother, submit to Marie's grasp and never see my own Mother in the same way again.

But it was Marie's hand-- the fat one, now tinted as yellow as anything else-- this moody, day-dreaming hand adjusting the microscope's knobs, preparing slide samples in my biology class. Marie's shy hand, softly, clumsily leading its mind toward a very limited, but so forgivably limited knowledge; making "love-circles" instead of periods, instead of dots over all her "i's." And years later, in a sit-down hamburger stand, she takes my hand, trembling, takes my heart into her soft, new palm. I tell myself: This must be it.

But it wasn't it. Her hand turned out to be a pudgy version of her father's. I was fooled by the softness of her fat, by the warmth her fat gave off. Lacking fat, I lacked the warmth. I was deceived. Beneath the soft layers, the bones were hard and cold; she became a fat bog and I sank.

Marie went wild in the bedroom on our first night. Rumbling like an earthquake, she burst out of the bathroom stark naked, exclaimed, "Well, Ed, how do you like it?"; and incredibly for such weight, she spun nimbly around, that I might have the total view. I gasped loudly and staggered backwards into the motel-room bureau, upsetting my toilet articles.

Raw sex fell over her. She oozed toward me, caressing herself the way movies had taught her. She neared, and I

could smell the cheap perfume failing to disguise her arm-pit scent of death. Approaching. Then she was upon me, the rolls of lard closing around me, dissolving my clothes. She rolled us slowly toward the bed, sucking air in through her teeth and murmuring low "ooo's" and "mmm's"; she lay down on her immense back and partially released me from the envelope of fat. I was stricken, trapped. She pulled my head to her mammoth bosom, caressed, rubbed, squeezed and crushed it into her galactic cleavage as though wanting to make it her own third dug. My body flapped away from the head like a meaningless flag. She held it in a death-grip, oozed her cow's tongue along the face and rasped through her teeth: "Oooo, I've wanted to do that for so long!"

All night she fondled, mutilated the head until I thought the hair would fall out. In the early morning I lay awake listening to her grunt and snort in her sleep. After what seemed like only a few minutes, I awoke to a slobbering sound and two giant frankfurters descending toward me. I winced and felt the hot moisture of their kiss against the hot, sore skin of my head. "Good morning, lover-boy," she lowed, pinching, kneading my cheeks with the perverse power of her father's hands. And like a manic aria, her mother's arpeggio giggle, kept secret so easily and so long in Marie's expansive flesh, decrescendoed crazily in its new freedom,

jiggled through every inch of blubber and nailed me squarely to my life.

Two-and-a-half months after this and an unbearable number of carbon-copy episodes, Marie announced that she was going to give birth. I didn't understand what this meant. After such bizzare sexual rites, I truly did not know what sort of offspring to expect.

Two-and-a-half months also provided me ample time to observe that Marie became somewhat more sane with her clothes on and a lot more sane when in public. Protean madwoman. A whale out of water, stripping away every vestige of the grace her more natural element provided.

But even in the stark face of her sexual bedlam, I could not help being drawn on occasion to the almost lyrical way she floated back into her shyness, into the warm murkiness of her small, day-dreamy life. The calm after the storm. Once in a while, at restaurants, I could even make her blush. Sometimes when her eyes went watery and she seemed to swim into herself, I felt myself becoming a stranger to her.

But as time went on, she swam less. After eight months of pregnancy even her expansive fat could not hide the massive island floating in the ocean of her hulk.

"Oh Punkin," sighing, "I want our kid to be just like you." Stroking the top of my head. "But Christ, I hope it

has a body." Forthright, brash laughter, then with another breath, her mother's descending giggle. "Did you hear me, Punkin?... Eddie?... Hey Ed, are you listenin' to me?!"

Oh yes. Yes I am, fat one.

"Good, that's good." Fingers sinking into the scalp. "Oooo, I just love this head of yours." Heavy cheek-kneading and I know where it will lead. She squeezes with such intensity. From the corner of my eye I can see the pinch of my flesh between her thumb and forefinger. It doesn't seem part of me. Marie tugs at it and it feels as though it will pull away from the face like taffy. She pinches so hard that a lobe rises on the tight, yellow surface. The balloon wriggles to get free. The balloon figits like a child. The balloon is so cute. The balloon begins to float free. The balloon would not get away from me so easily. You hear that? You wouldn't get away from me, you bastard. The lobe sinks into the shiny surface.

But this pinch, this tweak of memory triggers Marie's labor and she begins to give birth to our child. Huge spasms undulate through Marie's flesh. Through her mother's flesh too, but in a milder dose (the loud, bird-like laughter) like a recollection of her daughter's own birth, its power faded with time; that melancholic recollection of Marie dropping round and new into the world brings tears to the older woman's

eyes as she becomes a grandmother and begins to relive with her daughter the spastic jerks and groans of birth.

Her father too (not like mine) is never to be left out and he "Hee? hee? hee?'s," kneads and squeezes my arm to induce vicariously the massive, animal contractions in Marie's canal.

And Mother. Always pushed to the background, forced out of every room by the enormous squeeze of fat: "I em zo prout, Eddie. You mek me zo prout end heppy."

Proud of what. Of this woman, Marie, through whom your only son is passing on your name and the memory of you? The child will carry a bit of you, Mother, but are you ever ashamed, hurt or even frightened by thoughts that the space you share with Marie in this child would grow smaller; your memory squeezed quickly out of existence by these deceptively soft rolls of fat?

Teresa, little Tessa was born and I left. My child was three-years-old and in some other situation could have begun to entertain thoughts and fantasies of slenderness. Marie's hold was firm. "Keep your goddamn hands off my baby, fathead." Tessa was as trapped as I was and it tortured me to observe the little child sinking as I had sunk into that soft, warm deathbog. I hated them both for it, for all the food and obese love the mother shovelled into the

child; despised the child for accepting it carelessly, heedlessly. Three-years-old and already hating me, I left for good.

I bought the balloon for her, for Tessa. I wanted to find Tessa after the years I was away and take the balloon to her as a gift. To see her. To make her understand. Make myself clear and explain many things to Tessa in my grief. My mother had just died. I bought it...

The balloon has become a poison to me. I must sit and stare at its yellow surface, hoping it will leave me. I must sit and think of myself bringing the balloon home to my small rooms, think of reasons; sit and watch myself sitting and watching myself in its reflective, yellow skin.

I no longer think of what it could want. That's too spontaneous, somehow. Too impulsive, and that bloody impulse makes me embarrassed, disgusted with myself. I can hope, I have cause. I have cause to hope. I'm progressing and I can think of the future when I will have again made another end. Another solution. When the balloon has left me and I think of it, I will only remember that it was once here.

PART III

PEACEFUL MEADOWS

PEACEFUL MEADOWS

There are a few faces at the ivy-outlined windows of the Peaceful Meadows' facade. Sam's hands are shaking. Young and old faces framed like yellowed photos. As he strains to see them, Sam realizes that he sits tensely on the edge of the taxi's rear seat. How to pull himself together. He begins to ease himself against the back of the seat, but before turning away from the window he catches sight of his ancient, wrinkled face reflected in the glass. He touches the soft, creased flesh and thinks of Benny Malone and those last pitiful years, Benny going slowly crazy, Sam growing quickly old, a parody of his former self-- and Sam's shoulders droop and a fear runs through his stomach.

But what the hell. This is Big Sam Hatchett, after all. Tough-guy. Super Detective. Lady's man. A little older, greyer, sure, but still tight enough where it counted, still cool enough when it counted-- still the two-fisted, stony-faced hero of a long line of detective novels by the great Benny Malone. A lot of tough scrapes, a lot of hard knocks. Murder By Moonlight, for crying out loud. Appointment With Death. The Reaper Of Sixth Avenue, and those other early greats. And Big Sam Hatchett was not about to let this change, this interruption get in his way. You better believe it, pal.

Then Sam was jerking the wheel of his sleek black '32 roadster so hard to the right, the front wheels didn't get the message fast enough and chirped along the way they'd been going before shooting his car toward the curb. Hatchett screeched to a halt, whipped out of the car, up the stairs and into the apartment building like a sleek bull on fire. Ice-fire. And without wasting a motion-- his face as calm as dawn at the Grand Canyon-- Hatchett rammed his iron fist through the sleazy-looking oak door, his free hand slipping cleanly into his tailored silk suit jacket to grip the nonsense end of a shiny, snub-nose .38.

But the feeling in his hand was not that of a gun-- only the loose flesh of his chest against his palm-- and the door dissolved before him, stood open, clean white with many panes of glass; his other hand clenched around the handle of his suitcase. Now all of the faces came from behind their windows, and spread out before him, the entire group smiling oddly, no single face standing out. They knew him. Hatchett stood in front of them, stunned for a moment. He heard them murmur but could not understand what they said. In that silent, uncomfortable moment, Sam felt a pity rise from the crowd, felt the mockery of Benny Malone's increasingly insane typewriter turning his legs to rubber.

A fat ageless little man with a bald head, red nose

and a flask in one hand waddled forward smiling uneasily and breathlessly introducing himself as Boscoe Bigg, his free hand offering a welcome. Hatchett focused on Bigg but heard nothing.

"...early 50's? Every Wednesday, 9:00 PM sharp, floating out on the television airways? The friendly town drunk? Ah. Yes-yes. Perhaps you don't recall. But what a mountain you are, lad, Peaceful Meadows welcomes you. Hmmm, you're sure you don't remember? Lasted only half a season. The louts claimed we corrupted the youth..."

Hatchett took a deep breath, pulled together a semblance of his former nonchalance. Who's this three-cent lardo think he is, anyhow? Instead of returning the welcome, Sam hung his suitcase on Boscoe's out-stretched hand as he sauntered by slowly, a little shakily. Bigg, disgruntled, turned quickly toward Hatchett, his fat jowls swishing with the movement. With much air and effort: "Ahh. Yes-yes. We've been patient, breathbated, as the saying goes, for such a dignitary as yourself, and we again most humbly and, with what decorum we can here muster, welcome you..."

Another uncomfortable silence. Hatchett surveyed the expansive, light-filled entrance hall as indifferently as possible. Then, with his back to them all: "I wanna see the boss."

His voice quavered. An adolescent girl with pigtails and freckles giggled. Hatchett's left knee buckled and he nearly lost his balance, but continued looking away, a wave of crimson, terrifying, oddly new, washed over his face. A few members of the crowd began to move off.

Boscoe's voice was suddenly edgy: "Well, suit yourself, my fandango." Bigg then dropped the suitcase and Hatchett, startled, jerked around grabbing clumsily for the gun that was not there. The fat little man waddled slowly off, grumbling and pulling at his flask.

The light, airy room emptied, became silent. Hatchett sat down to wait, not knowing what else to do, what he was waiting for-- not knowing what was now expected of him.

Christ, Benny, Sam thought, what the hell happened? What in the name of holy hell happened?

Hatchett's hands would not stop shaking. He wrung them rudely, angrily to keep them from trembling. He wrung them until they turned red and a spark of strength began to enter them. As the power surged into his fingers, the hands found their way around the throat of a two-bit greaser, shaking that greaser's throat, throttling him until the little bastard fell to the floor unconscious. Hatchett looked up and his eyes again caught the frightened stare of the pregnant girl dressed in the tattered rags who stood in the corner,

terrified, clutching at her breast. "'Bout eight month," Sam thought.

"Any more of the vermin?" he asked, his voice like arctic velvet. She shook her head as though stunned. Probably on drugs, he thought. Sam'd seen that kind of thing before, you can be sure.

Just then another greasy punk lunged out of the shadows screaming like a banshee. Sam icily bore a hole through the little jerk's throat and the scum dropped to the floor like a bar rag.

"No one else, huh, Sweetie?" Sam leveled his glinting heater at the girl's heart. Terror, disbelief poured from her face. Hatchett allowed his diamond-blue eyes to slide down over the girl's breasts and rest for a moment on her bloated belly. Feeling compassionate for the waif's delicate condition, Sam drilled her in the shoulder instead. She slumped to the floor screaming. "Wouldn't wanna mess up them nice tits, anyhow."

Nurse Benson, in the tight white uniform, blushed deeply and moved off a step or two.

Hatchett, too loudly: "What!?"

"Mr. Hatchett," said Nurse Benson, trying to smile at the floor near Hatchett's feet, "Mr. Hatchett, I merely want to welcome you to Peaceful Meadows and I think in order to

make your stay here as comfortable as possible it would be in your best interest to cooperate with us in any way you can just to make things easier all the way around--"

Hatchett hauled himself and huffed: "Yeah."

Hatchett's room is white and narrow, spacious-looking. There are windows at the far end, ivy inter-twined with the iron filigree so that the sun splays out in long, mottled patterns on the floor. The room is full of light. It always seems to be late afternoon at Peaceful Meadows. The room and all the things in it are old-looking. Comfortable and clean.

All afternoon Hatchett sits on the edge of the old wood-frame bed, not bothering to unpack. He stares out the sunny window. Benny Malone's face appears in the window covered with splotches of ivy and sunlight. The light shines through Benny's head and the window frames him like an old movie.

Christ. Benny.

Benny is talking to someone about his books. He is being interviewed about his latest book, Flash Flood Murder. Starring Big Sam Hatchett, as always. Benny is talking about movie rights, his first movie rights. And Sam's. Jesus. Four smashes on the best-seller list and now the Silver Screen. Benny is letting out for the first time the names of top

Hollywood leading men, potentials for the role of Big Sam Hatchett. The Top. The Best Hollywood has to offer. Finally, the Big Time. Malone grins and a craziness shines in his eye.

Benny disappears, the glint in the eye turning to a shaft of sunlight, and Sam feels the need to use the bathroom down the hall where Nurse Benson has shown him. With a sigh Sam heaves himself up from the bed. He is relaxed, loose. Like the way he felt after cracking a tough case: glad to be done with it but missing the excitement. More than that though. Hatchett is old and this is resignation bearing down on him, sagging his shoulders as he pulls himself to his feet.

Hatchett yelped involuntarily. His door stood wide open. Aunt Prattle, a tiny, wizened old lady, stood framed in the doorjamb. She smiled distractedly, her eyes missing Sam's by a good yard.

Aunt Prattle held an enormous blue-glass bottle which her arms seemed barely able to contain; yet she bore her awesome burden with the heedlessness and seeming abandon of a child with a huge rag doll.

Those Dwarves. Hatchett half lay on his bed, paralyzed with fear. Murder Comes In Small Packages. Half-pints popping out of barrels in a warehouse-- Sam snuffing a whole army of the crazed midgets, all smuggled into the country

by a political fanatic (a borderline book-- approaching the ludicrous-- for the then borderline Benny Malone). Sam thought he'd smoked them all but here was another of the tiny bastards, big as life.

He tried to pull himself together, but could not tear his eyes away from the mindless grin creased into Prattle's face. She began to move slowly toward him, each foot shuffling across the wood floor. When she came to the embroidered carpet, she stopped, carefully lifted one foot, then the other onto the rug as though climbing a stair. And all the while that same ironic smile remained fixed, unchanging, dulled but recognizable like the faded magenta velvet dress which swayed slowly around her thin legs like a collapsed bell as she continued her shuffling movement toward the stunned Hatchett.

She was getting too close. Hatchett gripped and twisted the spot where his gun used to lay on his chest but only felt his heart beating wildly into the palm of his hand.

"You goddamn dwarf." His voice quavered. She was scarcely two feet from him.

With a jerk of his entire body Hatchett executed a clumsy, backward half-flip and clattered to the floor on the opposite side of the bed. For a moment he lay there, listening. The awful shuffling sound had ceased. He looked under the bed

and saw that the tiny slippered feet had come to a halt on the other side. Cautiously Hatchett lifted himself and peered over the mattress. The bed came nearly up to the old woman's chest. She just stood there, still as death, hugging her bottle, smiling into space.

"You goddamn dwarf." His voice cracked into a whisper. "You're-- you're one of 'em." Prattle seemed to be rehearsing in her mind a few kind words to a corpse.

Hatchett noticed Boscoe Bigg standing at his door, a look of curiosity glinting through the drunken haze of his face. Shaking and cautious, Hatchett got to his feet and began gesticulating so frantically that a whimper accompanied each movement of his arm. Boscoe seemed hesitant, but pulled once at his flask, pulled also an innocuous smile onto his porky face and bumbled into the room.

"Ahh. Ahh. Yes. All is well here and, as we say, conducive to life, I see, in this charming, little love nest. Charming. A charming, enchanting couple, indeed. Have you met?"

"Shut up!" Hatchett almost squawked and before Bigg could erase another disgruntled look, Aunt Prattle was slowly raising her huge bottle to the level of the bed, setting it gently down, its neck resting on Hatchett's pillow.

Sam moved back a pace or two. Bigg beamed, stepping

closer to the minute woman and placing an arm carefully around her thin shoulders. "Ahhh. The inevitable gift of welcome. All for you, my nimble young Apollo. You must return it, of course, just a gesture, lad. Nothing lasts, they say."

The bottle looked like a tuna asleep on Hatchett's bed. Sam stared numbly at its label:

All New Improved
PRATTLE'S LAXATIVE
New Chocolate Flavor

A pause. The three of them are stark still for a moment: Hatchett standing a few yards from the others, rigid, straining to keep a semblance of order about himself; Bigg, flask held near his expansive belly, drunken grin of kindly approval directed toward the miniscule Prattle who, eyes adrift from their moorings, bears the pudgy arm of Boscoe Bigg across her shoulders like a fat yoke she is not aware of. The shadows of ivy leaves moving slowly in the sunlight on the floor point to the stillness, the silence of the room. For this brief instant there are no more words and the room becomes a sigh resigning itself to the madness of memory. Hatchett sees this sigh on the faded, smiling lips of the pair across from him. In the quiet, that sigh builds up in the pit of Hatchett's stomach and works its way out of his mouth in a loud, piercing scream. As he screams he thinks to himself: I never feel as much like blood and bone as when I scream.

Hatchett, frenzied, screamed something approaching: "Get the living hell out of my sight." Prattle seemed oblivious to the noise but her eyes took on a ferocious curiosity when Hatchett snatched the blue tuna-bottle from the mattress and lifted it high over his head, seemingly intent on smashing it down on the tiny woman. Prattle, moving only her head, nailed him with a savage, animal glare. Hatchett staggered. Tearing his eyes away from the old woman and whimpering with the effort, he threw the bottle toward Boscoe with as much strength as was left to him.

Bigg, agape, had broken through his alcohol blear, backed off a few steps and was rushing forward to protect the endangered Prattle, but instead met the huge bottle half way, caught the missile squarely, nearly engulfed it in the ample mattress of his belly. He doubled over as much as lard and bottle would allow and fell to the floor with a monstrous grunt and a tornado expulsion of alcohol-wavey air.

Prattle, indignant, plastering Hatchett with her eyes, raised her arms, the faded magenta drapery of her sleeves swinging slowly like wings. Almost mechanically her mouth opened and a high-pitched crackling sound whispered, then gradually wailed, the ancient vocal cords rattling like a loose bundle of twigs.

Minutes seemed to pass before the long dry screech came to an end. Hatchett could only stand by and watch himself

succumb to a power which he could not understand. Prattle screeched again.

Then Sam was crawling on all fours across the blistering deserts of Blood And Sand, cursing the dirty so-and-so who set him up for the fall guy and dumped him on this burning, pancake-flat, this-man's-notion of one holy hell on earth. Big Sam Hatchett. On all fours. Some body would have some kind of hell to pay.

But this was the way to end an adventure. Edgy tension. Hopelessness right before the final curtain, right before the flash-and-dazzle ending where the Big "H" pulls it out of the hat once more, comes through ahead of the game once more.

Just leave him there, dehydrating rapidly but more plain full of vinegar than scared. Scared. For Sam looks up, his face covered with sweat, sand and determination-- he looks up and destroys that perfect moment, the moment before climax which found every reader tearing ahead to discover the fate of the fading Hatchett... Hatchett struggling there on the page, primed for the final triumph-- and he looks up into the eyes of a force wailing down to him over an ocean of words, a buzzard-dry screech rattling through sage and cactus. And the look on his face is too pitiful. The former Grand Canyon visage suddenly shows 10,000 years of erosion. The worst kind of fear smooths those stony features into innocence and Big Sam whimpers in the face of something he has never known.

"She came here to us a ten-year-old. No strippling, no child, mind you."

Hatchett pretended to read a magazine but was listening intently to Aunt Prattle's story as related by Boscoe Bigg. The difference between Hatchett's ego and Bigg's cracked ribs was a good deal greater than the narrow margin separating their beds in the small Peaceful Meadows' infirmary. But the week-long rest and the close proximity gave rise to small talk for the sake of comfort.

"The cameras, lights, the hustle and bustle of studios still fresh in her soft, old cheeks."

Visitors drew them together more than anything else. During the first week, the young and old of Peaceful Meadows filed steadily into the small room: all speaking first to Bigg, inquiring after his health; some staring at the terrified Hatchett while feigning conversation with Bigg; a few visiting Bigg solely, making clear a disdain, a disregard for Hatchett's existence; all more than mildly curious about Sam Hatchett who, too shaken to speak, pretended to sleep or read during visits, and who later would grunt sullenly when addressed. Gradually, between visitors, Sam and Boscoe, with some discomfort, would pick up loose threads of conversation, the bits and things of chat which Boscoe took as unspoken apology.

Bigg was now revelling in what seemed a fast friendship.

"Hmm, Yes, no stripping. Knowledgeable in the ways, as is said, of the world. And imagine: she's never spoken a word. Came to us three years ago, silent as night, our Prattle, a spinster princess."

Hatchett never lost his fear; only became resigned, partially resigned. He was living with it, trying to gloss it over with toughness, indifference. The fear: in each visitor's face, a parody of himself, an insult; in each eye, the madness of Benny Malone, curious, probing. Pushing Sam beyond his limits-- molding, twisting, pulling him apart like a lunatic sculptor. Malone. But unlike the hard, definite sculpture, Hatchett became unfixed, unpredictable, unrecognizable at the hands of Benny Malone; almost completely unlike the former, younger Hatchett.

Malone, in a demented search for stability, came very naturally to the stability of death. And why not. He'd killed someone nearly every day of his life, written thousands of deaths into scores of stories, built a fortune and became famous on death. Now it would become the handle on his life, the one thing he could be sure of.

Gradually Malone became obsessed with anything negating the life force (thus does Hatchett-- heedlessly at first-- approach the murder of pregnant women); obsessed with the final solidity of the corpse.

It was not within the character of Big Sam Hatchett to catch subtle drifts, changes in mood-- especially since he'd acted pretty much the same way for years before the decline of Malone. Promising Young Corpse-- Hatchett grotesquely overkilling a young hood-- began to nurture thoughts in Sam's mind that things were not as they should be. It also drew letters from the publisher. Raw Corpse, Sweet Corpse-- Big Sam dancing with a pusher he's freshly strangled-- Hatchett was worried. More letters, heavy editing before publication. And Sam, horrified, found his worst fantasies not bad enough: Big Sam Hatchett, a gimpy, machine-gun-toting, death-obsessed Ahab in Moby Corpse. This, the first real parody (finally published posthumously as such), the first full-faced laughter into the face of Sam Hatchett; one in a painful series of Malone's grotesque self portraits, Hatchett, his medium.

Malone's public life came to an end. Publishers abandoned him, he became unreadable, intolerable. Malone closed the doors on the world: just he and Sam; days, weeks pounding out collosally long, intricately detailed scenes describing Big Sam Hatchett on the john. Page after page Hatchett screamed himself horse chanting thousands of times all the four-letter words left out of a lifetime of novels. Just Malone and Hatchett, Malone staring at Malone in a mirror, brutalizing,

butchering himself nearly twenty-four hours a day, the crazed pace finally too much for either of them: Hatchett freed by suicide.

Freed for Peaceful Meadows, the final insult, each face like another mirror, paying respects, reminding Hatchett that he'd been cheated and that he was thus deserving of pity; reminding him of his dejection, of his age. Finished.

This Aunt Prattle-- Boscoe reminded with each of his breathy words-- Prattle, salt in the wound, the culminating injury to Hatchett's deflated self: This, Hatchett thinks, is the final failure.

"Imagine it, my thunder-struck Praxiteles, for ten years our own Prattle, our dear Prattle of national network fame, foremost in the minds of the constipated multitudes. When the bowels clogged, the foul airs of that intestinal swamp rising into the stomach, causing nausea, heartburn, who do you think came to mind, whose grandmotherly smile beaming from the TV screen, whose sympathetic silence bred by an understanding of the ins and outs, so to speak, of the sludge-bogged, bile-choked, lower colenary tract?"

Bigg paused, patting perspiration from his forehead with his bedsheet and taking a swallow from his flask.

"Alas," he continued, "ten years of 'Let Aunt Prattle smooth things out for you,' and the agency opts for more

zest, more vigor...if you can imagine zest and vigor in a laxative ad."

Nurse Clifford bustled through the door, tears streaming from her swollen eyes. She handed Hatchett a small paper cup containing his medication and daubed at her eyes with a kleenex as Hatchett washed down the pill and eyed her uncertainly. With a whimper and fresh tears, she bustled out. Boscoe hadn't missed a beat in his monologue, but Hatchett interrupted as he watched the door close behind the young nurse.

"Why the hell is she always bawlin'?"

"Eh? What? Oh, yes-yes," Boscoe answered breathily, "Nurse Clifford, ahhh, the alabaster of my eye."

"Bawlin'. How come."

"From the Soaps, as is said popularly. Soap opera gone belly-up after only two weeks. Sweet Nurse Clifford constitutes Peaceful Meadows' own continuing and re-continuing daily drama."

Hatchett grunted.

"A word to the wise, lad. Never ask her what ails her. You'll never shut her up."

Boscoe chuckled. Hatchett was silent for a moment.

"What's with that bottle?"

"Eh?"

"The bottle. The blue one."

Boscoe eyed Hatchett and answered slowly: "I see that our little Aunt has tweaked your interest."

Hatchett grunted nervously, rustled back into his magazine.

"Hmm. Yes. The bottle. A trophy. Giant replica, the object of her fame. Bestowed upon her by our humble community. For services rendered. For monumental achievement."

"Yeah," mumbled Sam, "a real shit-load."

It began to occur to the sullen Hatchett as he moped, shuffled about the halls of Peaceful Meadows, that he had seen no trace of Prattle. The little old woman had seemingly vanished, gone for months, yet no one seemed concerned.

Hatchett realized also that in some way he was anticipating her. Apprehensive. So much so that he feared asking after her whereabouts.

Hatchett sank into himself, settled into the slower pace and the light-filled, silent hallways. His feet dragged. What color left in his face faded. He ignored kindness and disdain alike, spoke to no one but Bigg-- and even then Sam would speak only when the two of them were secluded in a room or hidden in a remote corner of Peaceful Meadows' extensive gardens.

"Hmm. Ahh. Yes, a lovely day indeed." Conversation

most always went Prattle-ward. "Ahh. Hmm. Yes-yes. The flowers...flowers and, uh, yes, this lovely breeze put me in mind of our dear Prattle, yes I recall the time..."

Hatchett would always perk, then feign disinterest. Bigg rambled on, the flesh of his jewels jiggling emphatically, persuasively.

Months passed; Hatchett: resigned to the fact that this was a waiting game. A tough nut to crack. The old perseverance shining through. Big Sam, waiting, on top of it all. As always. Time for the other guy to make his move and when he does, Slam-Bam, there's Sam to put the nix on the jerk and wrap it up.

Confidence is the name of the game; until, distrusting that confidence, as he does each day, Hatchett steps in front of his mirror-- to make sure he is slick, cool for whatever lady he happens to be stepping out with tonight-- to see if this is all really on the level, that the laughter slaps him squarely in the face as he daily realizes the truth of his balding head and sagging, devastated features.

And daily that laughter becomes more real, pushing Sam deeper into a lifeless haze of dejection-- becomes so real that it crosses that fine line, that Malone line, turns to screaming when Hatchett finally finds Aunt Prattie in his mirror, staring fiercely into his reflected eyes. Life snaps

into Sam's face. As he wails and jerks around to face her: Christ, Benny, what is this joy?

Aunt Prattle stood on Hatchett's bed as though perched on a limb, her wing-arms raised, the huge bottle standing like a blue sentinel on the floor in front of her. The croaking screech clattered out of her like a skeleton. She and Hatchett traded screams, traded them again for an age.

Then another silence. The shadows of the ivy leaves danced on the sunny floor. Strength pulsing into his limbs, Hatchett bolted, again grabbed the bottle, raised it above his head.

"My young bimbo!" Hollered breathily from behind. Hatchett stopped, swivelled his head between his upraised arms. A crowd of Benny Malones had jammed into the room, some peering in from the hallway outside.

Then Sam was laughing, setting the bottle down gently, laughing, clumsily sinking to the floor, hollering until the tears rolled through the deep creases of his face.

"The first time I knew it..." Hatchett was almost whimpering. He paused, then yelled: "You wanna know the first time? I knew when I beat a bunch of old men to death and couldn't stop. I tried to hold back but hit 'em all the harder, stompin' 'em to death.

"Benny looked at that page stickin' out of the typewriter--

he looked at it like he couldn't believe he'd written that. Written that Big Sam Hatchett had just trashed a bunch of helpless old men. What a man, old Hatchett.

"Benny just sat there, starin', and a kind of peaceful look came over his face and he started noddin' his noggen and then-- then for the first time ever, Benny started cryin'. Cryin'! Jesus God A'mighty, I knew I was in a shit-load of trouble then. God, imagine. I was scared, but I pretended nothin' was wrong for a long time, just did what he wrote, couldn't help it, I had to... Big goddamn alligator tears rollin' down his cheeks just like that big sissy fag I smoked in Some Like It Dead--...what the hell was I supposed to do, my whole goddamned life tied up right there in his fingertips..."

The blue bottle was standing next to Hatchett where he'd set it on the floor: to be returned, the momentary gift. The adolescent girl with red pigtails and freckles harumphed and bustled importantly out of the silent room. Aunt Prattle had moved away from Hatchett and now stood near the front of the crowd, half-smile in place, eyes adrift. Bigg was approaching, sunlight and ivy shadows dancing on his legs, pudgy cheeks straining against a wry smile. He bent over Hatchett, offering a hand.

Sucker punched. The Big "H" flat on his fanny. Confused for a minute, then the Police Commissioner bending over him,

laughing. Colors danced before Sam's eyes. Old Redd Butler, the old fox. Really put it to the old Hatchett. "Just returnin' the knuckles you lent me a couple months ago." Hatchett touched his jaw gingerly: "Oh yeah, guess I forgot. You gonna lock me up?" "Are you kiddin'? Come on, up you go." Butler helped Hatchett to his feet. "Thanks," Sam said, brushing himself off. Then the two men laughed heartily and strolled out the door together into the afternoon sunlight. THE END. Piece o' cake.