CutBank

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Winter 1992

CutBank 37

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CutBank 37

Winter 1992

Fiction by Rick DeMarinis, Kate Gadbow, Robert Olmstead • Poetry by Christianne Balk, David Romtvedt • Art by Nancy Erickson, Deborah Mitchell • And more.
The editors
are pleased to announce
the winner of the 1990-91
Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award
Greg Pape
"Wijiji"
published in CutBank 36
Judge: James Galvin

and the winner of the 1990-91
A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award
Kellie Wells
"Telling the Chicken"
published in CutBank 35
Judge: Lynn Freed

The Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and the A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award are granted once each year to work published in CutBank. Submissions are accepted from August 15 until February 28. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for writers' guidelines.
CutBank 37

where the big fish lie

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where the big fish lie

CutBank, a Montana magazine with a longstanding tradition of literary excellence, invites you to help continue that tradition. Recent contributors include Stephen Dobyns, Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, Patricia Henley, Pattiaann Rogers, and William Stafford. Published twice a year; perfect bound.

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CutBank  ·  Department of English
University of Montana  ·  Missoula, MT 59812
Sharon
Augusta
Mitchell

A Portrait
of #20
Intaglio and
chine-colle.
Our farm is on the four corners. My old lady’s got nothing better to do than sit around the porch waiting for accidents to happen. And they do. Fender-benders, side swipes, nose-to-noses, minor head-ons. Once in a while there’s a real lambasting. Because the way the roads go, it’s usually into the passenger’s side so it’s no big deal unless someone is along for the ride.

“Arlene,” I say, “how can you sit around like this just waiting for accidents?” I hear my voice but don’t recognize it in the heat. It clots in my throat as if the words were blood.

Her name’s Arlene but she always wanted a name like Cherokee, something with a little pizzazz. My name’s Milton, but she doesn’t call me by my name. She just says you or calls me by my last name, Wylie. She says I should be named Slocum because I take so long.

“It’s about all there’s left to do since you stopped loving me,” she says. “Since you started chasing that little chippy around.”

The little chippy she’s referring to is a girl I knew in the past, long before we got married. Her father was a pilot and she was smooth as a wing. She was like a little foreign sports car with rack-and-pinion steering in her hips. Acceleration on demand. She had green eyes and sometimes she’d make them go like the dashboard lights. She owned red underpants and she’d show them to me. But that’s in the past.

Hell, I knew that woman before my old lady was even born, and why not. I’m past forty. I’ve been around. But my old lady don’t know nothing. She’s only twenty-five. How can you know anything when you’re only twenty-five?

It’s her way, though, to throw shit like that up in my face. We
got enough trouble. We're farmers. We buy retail and sell wholesale. Me, I say let sleeping dogs lie, don't kick a man when he's down.

"I suppose I could strip the piano," she says.

It's a job she's been talking about doing for a long time. But it's only talk. She gets up and stretches. I light a smoke and watch her housedress rise above her knees. It keeps going until it gets to where her rump starts and just then she drops her arms and the hem falls back down like the iron curtain.

She goes over to the porch railing where the sun is. The housedress is threadbare and I can see right through it as the light pours around her hips and from between her legs. She looks over her shoulder at me and then goes down the step to where the spigot is. She turns it on and leads the hose to the hedge that lines our corner. Dousing it a good one, she works her way to the lilacs that have grown to embrace the stop sign on our corner.

She's down there watering her garden and it will bear her the fruit of wreckage. I tell her this.

"Go to hell," she says.

One night I caught her out there, lugging five-gallon buckets across the road to water the sumac and poplar growing up around the other stop signs. There are four and she waters every one of them. If you asked her, she'd deny she ever did it, but I saw her.

I wish she wouldn't douse those signs because it's an awful waste of water and it seems like it hasn't rained in three years. I'm afraid the well will go dry and we'll be up the old shit creek without a paddle.

A few years back an animal fell into the well and I had to pump it and then go down inside and dredge out the muck. Thirty-two feet of laid-up stone. Let me tell you mistah man, that was an
experience. When you are down there, the air is cold and the opening at the top doesn't look any bigger than a fifty-cent piece. All that for a dead possum and then alls I could think was, how in hell do you know if those things are really dead or not. If it's really good at being a possum, there's no way you can tell if it's dead. Even if the god damn thing were on fire or flatter than a pancake in the road. It might be just one real good possum.

Anyways, I'm down in that well and she starts dropping stuff on me, acorns, bolts and D-cell batteries.

"Ain't so wily now, are you," she kept saying. "Ain't so wily now, are you?"

I can't imagine what she was thinking but it gave a whole new meaning to a cold day in hell.

Now I just pump the well and chlorine it. Chlorox bleach will do and when it goes dry I shoot it with the ought-six and it opens a new vein. Works every time and that's just fine with me.

She's really pouring it on that lilac bush. I try to get her to take up a hobby, chair caning or rug braiding, something that could bring in a little pin money. I tell her that.

"Go to hell," she says and shoots me with the hose. It feels like something from the sky and then goes dry just as quick.

I can hear the pump kick on. Now it'll have to work overtime to keep up because the cows will be off their feed soon and want a drink.

"You've got to shut down that hose," I say, but she doesn't. She keeps watering the hedges and the lilacs.

The sound of that pump grates on me worse than a dentist's drill. Women don't get bothered. They have no touch with machines, something men are born with. Men can feel the high wail of RPMs, see that red line in their mind's eye. They cringe at the
dry throaty hum of a pump sucking air or begin to shake with the vibration of water hammer. All women know is how to shift, accelerate, brake and flush. Some don't even know how to shift. She doesn't. She won't have a stick.

Past the porch rail, there's only half a sun left and that's going fast. The corn's burned up in the fields. It dented early and wasn't waist high. If we'd been of lesser stuff we wouldn't have made it this far. The feed can't last but we both knew when we got together that love's a hard luck kind of thing. She was coming off a man who used to slap her around and I was coming off a woman who needed to be slapped around. That one shed me off like an old coat. So me and the old lady got married and took on a mortgage that would choke a Rockefeller.

So here we are, me sitting on the porch in my socks and her watering the hedge. Here we are doling out the winter feed in September while the cows wither and their milk dries up, waiting for the young punk from the Federal Land Bank to call in our note, to sell us out, and shut off the lights. And right now with this weather we'd be like to spit on the sun.

She comes back to the porch, her hose trailing behind her, her legs wet and beads of sweat on her upper lip and forehead.

"The pump's running," she says.

"I know. The cows are at their water bowls."

"I have figured out what we are to do," she says, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips and one knee bent forward just a little. I try to listen, but even in this light it's plain as the nose on my face she isn't wearing anything under that housedress.

"Jewish lightning," she says and when she sees I don't get it, she says, "We'll burn the barn and collect the insurance."
I laugh at her. I can't believe she'd be that stupid. I know what burning barns are like. I've been in them. Timbers lit up like phosphor, breakers and fuses going off like gunshots and cows waiting to die. Burn a hank of hair sometime. See what it smells like. Multiply that smell a million times and you'll know something. Not much, but something.

"We'll burn the barn," she says again, but I don't say anything. I only sit there sucking the nicotine off my fingers.

Our first date was to a wedding. Arlene's sister was getting married in Windsor, Vermont, to a guy she wrote to in prison. He'd been her pen pal when she was a high school senior. Arlene talked me into driving her because her Olds was laid up in the shop. An engine mount had busted free and the thing rode like a cement mixer. So I said, what the hell.

We drove two hours on the interstate and I was having trouble with the gas pedal sticking. She liked that. I'd lift my foot clear off the gas and we'd surge ahead. She liked that a lot, the sinking feeling she got every time it happened.

"My old man had a car like this," she said. "It was a Charger. He had the ass end jacked up and he could lay rubber in every gear."

I smiled and nodded. The last time my car swallowed the old pumpkin, I lost the muffler. Eighty-six bucks and a bunch of grief.

"He had a standing bet you couldn't snatch a fifty off the dash when he punched it."

"Cars are transportation," I told her and she nodded like I'd just said something smart.

So we got to the wedding and the bride was wearing white,
even though she had a shelf in front of her that’d carry a dish drainer. It was one of those things.

And then a little while after that, when me and the old lady got married, some little chippy from her side of the family came up to me and said, “It seems more like a funeral than a wedding. I don’t mean people are sad, it’s just all the flowers and the way people are dressed. I guess I say stupid things. It’s that I just went to a funeral and I was thinking about it. By the way, are you a friend of the bride or the groom?”

I guess I should’ve known something was up then, but I didn’t.

We hit the whiskey and gin pretty good that first night. Myself now, I’m a big man. I can pound them down when the urge hits, but she kept right up, one for one, six for six. She likes her gin. She says when it’s good it’s like biting into a Popsicle stick.

We woke up the next morning in Burlington and the sky was bloodshot, the sun a color I’d never seen before. She opened the curtains in the motel and stood there without any clothes on.

She said to the window, “I dreamed I woke up in the night and said to you this must be what valleys feel like. And you said, what? And I said they get to be next to mountains.”

Then she says, “Jesus Christ, Slocum, you about broke me in half on that last one.”

“Well,” I said, “tender or not, the valley and the mountain had better get back to the four corners because we got a load of cows getting in tomorrow.”

We rented cows from out of Texas for the first few years. Every trailer load came in with shipping fever and then all the rest would get it. Heavy breathing, raspy cough and blowing snot. We used a triple sulfa I.V., but I tell you, the best cure is death.

Now I wish we’d gotten into veal calves.
“Wishes ain’t worth shit,” she says. “We’ll burn the barn.”

I shake my head. She has that look in her eye. She wants to burn the barn, I can tell. I’ll have to keep an eye on her.

“What about the woman up the lane?” I say.

“That old woman? She’s a fossil. She’s been around since the earth cooled.”

I like the woman up the road. She’s about the only one I haven’t been accused of running around with.

She told me a real whopper once. She said, “My cousin’s name is Richard Frost but we call him Jack. He sent me three tarantulas from Arizona. He’s a real animal nut. But he didn’t send any feed and I didn’t know what tarantulas eat. First the two ate the one and then one of the ones that’s left eats the other one and then that one dies. It took forever. I watched it all. What I don’t understand is that the one left should’ve been three times as big as it was, but it wasn’t. As far as names go, Jack Frost is nothing. My first husband’s name was Adam Baum. He died in World War II. It’s just like deja vu isn’t it.”

So when I got back to the house I told this story and my old lady says the woman is senile. She says it like it’s a dirty word. This is all she says because she doesn’t like the old woman. She’s got it in her head the old woman is trying to get us to kill her. Sometimes late at night when we come home from the gin mill, either alone or together, that old woman is standing in the road. We’ve both almost hit her, almost plowed right into her.

So once I said to the old woman, “Why do you get in the road whenever we come home?”

“It’s because when I’m walking I always wait to hear a car coming and then I go like hell, but these legs are old. I do it that way because I’m afraid of getting hit by the one I don’t hear. They
say you never hear the one that gets you and I don't want that to happen to me.

The old woman spies on us. She's got a pair of binoculars up there and she pretends she's looking at her mailbox. It sits on the same board next to ours. Her mailbox has a little cup attached to the door. There's a red ball in the cup and when the mailman opens the door, the ball falls out and hangs by a string. She uses those binoculars to spy on us. I think that's why some nights, the old lady drags me out of bed and onto the porch, just to give the woman a thrill. The old lady will do a regular strip tease and then look out.

But not since it hasn't rained. I miss those times. I counted on her not to fall apart. But in a way she has. She's willing to say the things I only think.

"Listen," my old lady says. "We burn the barn and we could clear sixty or seventy thousand."

The way I figure it, it's more like fifty-eight or so, but I don't say anything.

"If we don't burn the barn, or even if we do I want to get a glider for this porch," she says moving inside her housedress, stroking the porch rail. I count five buttons and think how it's all that's left to do and then she sits down beside me.

"My uncle told me how to do it," she says. "Diesel fuel and fertilizer. It's called a farmer's bomb."

"We don't burn diesel," I say, trying to open a button with one finger, but it seems to be stuck.

"Then we can do a Mrs. O'Leary's cow number. A lantern in the bullpen."

"No," I say. "He won't read by anything but 100-watt GE

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softlights. He told me himself."

"Listen," she says. "They sock it to us pretty good on this insurance racket."

"That's because we live so far out of town. When we get ahead a little, I'll have a hydrant put in and that will cut the premium. We'll dig an artesian well and put in a submersible pump."

"I'm saying it's time to collect."

"Now you listen," I say standing up, wanting to raise my hand. "Those volunteers could get here and they'd see right through all your little methods. Some of those guys are farmers, too. And besides, what about the old woman?"

She's laughing at me so hard she bends at the waist and holds her hands to her chest. When she straightens up a couple of buttons have come undone. That leaves three.

"Don't worry about those guys," she says. "They're a bunch of incompetents. One time they had a chicken barbecue and burnt down their own firehouse."

I hadn't heard that story.

"My old man. He'd do it. He'd do anything for a buck. Last I heard he was in some service contract scam. Selling the contracts and then disappearing with the service."

"Your old man ain't shit," I say.

"Maybe that man used to slap me around," she says, her eyes on me, "but he knew how to love me too."

With that she gets up and goes in the house and I get up and go to the barn.

The cows are settling in for the night. It's cool in the barn. I keep them in because the pastures are burnt down to brown stubble, not being more than tinder and the brook is dry. These are all my
Holsteins. Fifty of them, all second and third generations, black and white and even the young move like royalty, slow and graceful. I sweep in the mangers, stopping to hold their heads and feel the bottom jaws making circles, working crossways against the top one as they chew their cuds. These cows have the blood but the feed is poor and you can't live off love.

I say that out loud and it's my voice, my words. You can't live off love and expect to come out alive.

I stop next to the panel box outside the milkhouse and have a smoke. Underneath I can see where the conduit has come loose and dropped four inches. Bright, copper wires shine up at me from where the electrician stripped them a little too low when he wired the barn. I take a broom handle and push them together.

Another cow has aborted. The fetus lays in the gutter, the size of a walnut. Another one is in heat. She's the one I've been waiting for. She's in silent heat, no crying, no strings of clear mucus. I let it pass.

We'll burn the barn, she said to me when we were on the porch. How stupid, I wonder, can one woman be?

I check the bred cows, those six or seven months along. I make a fist and gently bump into their right sides near the flank. I feel a hard lump come back at me. These are the calves.

So I shut off the lights and the barn goes dark except for the glow I made around the panel box. It's green and white and I can see it growing with heat.

Outside it's dark. I stop under the black hull of the night and try to smell rain. I think of the moon pulling tides and how strong it must be to do such a thing. It brings tears to my eyes, because what I've just done with those wires is like a marriage vow or a funeral service.
In the house there’s a big puddle on the floor next to the piano. It’s eating away at the finish. It’s boiling and the fumes are rising and they stink like a cross between burning rubber and drain cleaner. She’s in the kitchen and she’s naked to the world. She’s got the cat under the faucet and it’s yowling and screaming because it doesn’t like the drenching it’s getting.

I go up to her and move in from behind, reaching around her body and that’s when I start to burn. My hands and my arms, as if the dogs of hell are eating my flesh. It’s like a friggin’ blast furnace on my skin. She’s laughing. She’s bending at the waist, bumping me with her hind end and laughing. She’s telling me she was going to strip the piano and spilled a pan of Strip-EZE all over herself so she ripped off her housedress and while she was doing that the damn cat walked through it.

But I don’t stop. The cat keeps screaming and scratching her arms and chest and the backs of my hands. She keeps laughing and I keep going while out in the barn, the green and white luminous light grows from the bridge arcing between the two wires. The heat in between is at ten thousand degrees and climbing. Copper is melting.

I think how if I’d touched it, the electricity could have entered my hand, traveled my skin and blown out my kneecap or my heart. I think I can even smell the smoke. I take hold of her, my hands on her hot flesh and we go at it like that, doing the slow burn, waiting for the fire wall to cave in.
David Loewenwarter

Boiled Ice
This Year’s Wood

This year we cut up rotten fenceposts and old boards. We left the fallen branches on the ground, to be buried under winter’s snow. It was so easy, no setting choker cables around logs and winching them up out of the wash to the bank where the saw was set up. One after another, we pulled the fenceposts off the pile and cut them. We filled the horsetrailer top to bottom and front to back. At the house, unloading, we realized we’d cut two years’ wood and where would we stack it? It’s in the garage, along the fence, outside the shop, beside the sheepwagon, in the garden. There is wood everywhere. Outside the smell of cedar slams into me. I sit down and take a breath—one breath after another, counting them and feeling the cedar filling my lungs. When I am dizzy I stand up and wobble from woodpile to woodpile, touching each stack, thinking how beautiful it is until I notice I am walking and forget the wood, so equally beautiful is putting one foot in front of the other.
Summer Softball

Just before sunset the orange brick
of the Mission shines in the orange light
as the Jesuit priest might have seen it:
the summit of human escape rising
into the centuries above buffalo skin lodges,
gone now to tract housing. Gabrielle
plays shortstop with her back to the church.
The score is eleven to eight, her team
an inning from becoming valley champs.

She'll be fourteen in August, the granddaughter
of a Salish girl and a Scottish trader
who came here because he thought he might
do without city traffic and bosses. Some
Indians drank with him all night, aloof
from petty gods that chafed like collars.
Someday he'd go back to Missouri with enough
to buy the city. He saw himself in a dream
laying down terms, but stayed
with the woman who drank with him, who
rode her horse north from the Mission
to the next creek where he built his cabin
and almost understood how easily the little
that life offers could be had. Except
he could never figure the stars, all intoxication less wild. It was too lonely to see the edge of what he could never say. Gabrielle drops a pop fly, recovers and tags the runner at second. On her way to the dugout she grins at three boys in the bleachers behind me. Their adolescent chatter gets louder. The priest moves the sprinkler nearer the red petunias surrounding the statue of Christ. She is so lovely the first moves of love might come too easily, blinding her in the dark.

Last night tufts of hair from the mule deer still floated in the air when I made it back onto the road. The stars surprised me—so bright that far from town. I wondered where the deer had gone and how to call a wrecker. A woman I'd been able not to think of for three years came to mind. An owl moved through cottonwoods into the open above me, crossed the empty highway into dark pine, without a sound.
One thing I never
told her, or anyone, was that I’d found
a forest so deep I trusted
no edge to it: walking, praying
to be exhausted enough to sleep.
It was there that one summer a tree fell into another
and held. My brother began sawing the second,
a twenty-inch larch. His smooth engine
whined up to a roar and his sharp chain
showered fragrant chips in a gold heap
at his feet. He was eighteen,
his body lean and damp, his hard hat
holding long hair from his eyes, drops
of sweat tickling his face. His arms and chest
burned with the good hurt of good muscles.
He may have never seen the tree he forgot.
“Instantaneous,” the coroner said.
It wouldn’t have mattered. She didn’t see it
as her job to hear from me. “It’s late
and I just want to sleep.”

And it was there that the priest who imagined
this town must have been. He got it all wrong.
He heard evil in the alien songs
the Indians sang to communal drumming at summer
fires by the creek. St. Louis was across
the divide, an impossible half-year's journey back. He knew no way to join the dancers, so he stayed up late, drew plans by candlelight. They filled the smoky cabin where he hid. Earth turned to brick and rose toward the stars.

Gabrielle hits a triple, beautifully moves past third then hesitates, taunts the catcher with the threat of coming home. She can't imagine either building or fleeing cities, poised as she is on the far side of freedom ringing like a scream.
Saturday Night Overtime

Rodney yells *Rat*, shoots
nails with a clamping gun
at a five-inch rat jumping
onto our rails. I drop my door,
bash after the rat with my mallet.

Five hundred rails cascade,
crush redwood panels. Rodney shoots
my feet and I'm dancing until the foreman
chews us out, his left eye flinching
like a turn signal. Between my earplugs
I hum *Love it here, Love it here*, don't hear

a word the foreman says, his head
shaking like a souped-up Dodge.
I want to rob his pen, caricature
his chin on a panel. The tape
wound around his glasses is brown
as the chew in his teeth. He X's

black ink across a work form,
points to it with fingernails
cracked like dried earth. Our foreman's
so backlogged he can't fire us.
Twenty minutes and the rails are stacked. Rodney clamps, shoots me into dancing.

I'm gluing doors, watching the rat jump on the glue bucket, dance his Saturday dance.
Kevin Boyle

I Didn’t Do It

All I love now, finally, is the sound of concrete still mixing at red lights as the truck revs in gear on the hill to stand still, the clicking of gallons and dollars and cents at the pumps, a hand drill whose noise cringes in pine and spins wildly when through, the weak give of the rain-sagged, haphazard plywood that covers the slip in the earth dug for further wires, the pit I look to, its mud floor beyond even the pleasure of the heated machines frantic in motion: there is a world made of earth and nothing else—no heart, no thought, no sense, no wonder.

I just stand there rescued nearly to sleep with machine grease, becalmed by mechanical church chimes, sent away from myself with the memory of cash registers’ tumbling, voided numbers, let alone where I shouldn’t want to belong.

But in the distant sound of a bus braking to stop I imagine the exhaust of blow dryers and then fleeing hair, and find, even in all these engines and motors, something as simple and unwanted as your face looking into a mirror,
and your body weighing in naked on the scale, the whole back of you looking toward me, then your voice slicing out through showers, your hair snarled up in a spat.

I try not to feel anything nearly, my mind hurried toward the earth sides I see dug away, the moisture along the walls laced with white cable, and at the bottom a heads-up watch someone lost, or tossed there to change luck, or just trashed. Is it a woman’s watch or a child’s Disney watch with pleasing animals in it?—it’s something thin from this height—and I think of jumping down into its face with my boot heels, grinding its gears to a halt. I think of its delicate hands pointlessly circling inside the circle of glass, how I’d like to ruin their day, stop whatever silicon chip inhabits it.
Marjorie Maddox

Just When I Think I Am Comfortable, the Doorbell Rings

Or a man from Greenpeace knocks.
Instead of whales, he talks kangaroos shot,
rolled into tennis shoes and worn (he claims) by us all.
A toenail on his left foot bruises blue and

he's someone else, arm bobbing with balloons (red, white, puce),
rattling the names of ten congressmen.
He wants me to vote for them all.
I quote encyclopedias I buy for children I don't have,
hand him suckers from the bank, cry. He looks too much like my mother,
standing there in that apron,
a stack of Girl Scout cookies by his side,
a $9.99 diamond on his neck.

He knows my birthday, the make of my car,
what I like most for breakfast.
I could shoot him, I could

let him in, let him
fix the spots on my rug.
polish what's left of the silver,
share my Tupperware dinner
(if he lets me, if he lets me). Please,

all I want is a free Bible,
a winning lottery ticket,
a door not slammed in my face,
not now, not ever.
Eating America
The night is busy, one call after another. Jack Dempsey Cliff's cab smells of cigarette smoke, and his pockets are tight with money. A roll of bills in one, a pound of change in the other. He orders fish and french fries at the Beachcomber but gets dispatched to 1818 Mission again while waiting for the food. He picks up Evey and Marie and begins to drive them across town to Alder for a house call. Both wear stylish dresses, a lot of jewelry, and high, thick-heeled shoes. They look very nice, Evey and Marie. A little tired, but kind of sophisticated, like chesty models. Their conversation covers a wide range of topics, such as:

- How Marie cut her bottom on the spring sticking out of the seat padding in the last cab she rode in.
- How she should be able to sue the cab company for a lot of money, but the legal system is fucked so she probably wouldn't get a penny.
- How Evey's getting too skinny.
- How Marie's a smoker, so even though she's in good shape she doesn't jog well.
- How Evey has given up gin because of her stomach, but when someone offers to buy, well, what's she supposed to say?
- How Marie is glad she doesn't have that problem.
- How they all ought to jog together, get matching sweatsuits that say Eighteen Eighteen Camp for Girls and jog early in the morning along the bay.
How they could make up hilarious songs to sing while they ran.
How Marie wishes she could get a nice tan.
How Evey doesn't think Marie needs a tan, being Mexican, or whatever.
How the pizza they had for dinner wasn't sitting well with Evey.
How pepperoni will do that sometimes, but Evey should maybe go to a doctor for her stomach if it stays bad.
Then Marie says to Jack, "Haven't I seen you some place before?"
"I ate a cheeseburger next to you at Solly's yesterday." It's true, but it's also true that Jack threw himself on the floor to look up her dress at the Pier Pub, his first night in town. He doesn't mention that.
"A what?" Marie asks Evey. "What did he say?"
"He said a cheeseburger."
"At Solly's," Jack says. Just thinking about it makes his mouth water again. "I was sitting behind you guys yesterday. That's the last thing I've eaten."
"What are you, fasting?" Marie asks.
"No," Jack says. "Just working and sleeping, I guess. You were eating clams."
"Oh," Marie says.
"Were they good?"
"What?" Marie asks Evey. "What's he saying?"
"He wants to know if the clams were good."
"Yeah," Marie says. "They were fine. You know, something's wrong with your car. Noisy!"
"Bad injectors," Jack says.
"Bad what?"
"Bad injectors."
"Injectors?" She giggles. "That's awful!"


"You mean when you're not sleeping or going around with a bad injector!" Marie laughs. "You really ought to eat something besides cheeseburgers, you know."

"I do."
"What?"

"He eats something besides cheeseburgers," Evey says to Marie. "Yeah, I heard him," Marie says. "That's very nice to know, but—"

"I like spaghetti too," Jack says.
"Clams are best," Marie says. "I really think you should try the clams."

"Clams are expensive."

"Damn right they are," Marie says. Then, "Oh, now I know where I've seen you!"

After he threw himself on the floor between her legs that first night at the Pier Pub, Jack traced with his finger the inside of her calf and thigh up toward her black underwear. She could have stepped on his face but she didn't. Instead she said, That's an expensive touch, and he said, No problem, I'll do it for free, and she stepped away, over him, smiled nicely but said, You're broke, right? Well, I work for a living.

Then Jack stood up and walked back to the bar, stared again at the wall above the mirror, the photograph of the Kodiak Island Boxing Champion, July 4, 1953, his father. A close-up of Kid Cates 27
Cliff's face, everything but his immediate features was slightly out of focus. The light gray of his cheeks melded with the lighter gray behind until in some places Jack couldn't tell where the man began and the background ended. His head tilted forward, and his dark gray eyes looked up almost seductively from under bushy eyebrows. His shiny hair was combed neatly back and plastered close to his head. A suppressed smile curled the corner of his pale lips.

Jack stood at the bar and looked at the picture and imagined his father hearing laughter. The irony galled him. There he was, Kid Cliff, just three weeks after he'd left his wife and infant son in Wisconsin. A soldier, a farmer, a fisherman, dirty tattoos plastered the length of his body, and hands—the bartender told Jack—he had hands like chunks of raw meat. Sure he did.

Yet in his photograph for posterity they have him looking like John Barrymore.

In the cab, Jack can see Marie's dark eyes staring at him in the rear view mirror. Last time he was lucky to get away unhurt. This time, he's got money to lose.

"Boy," he says, "I'm hungry."

She smiles. "That's your problem, Mister."

"You know," Evey says, "if I drink just one glass of OJ when I get up then I don't have to eat again until evening, sometimes never."

"Listen to her," Marie says to Jack. "She's worse than you with your cheeseburgers. She's going to starve herself."

Jack says he heard on the radio that a person can be overweight and still starve to death without the right vitamins and stuff.

Evey says that hunger can be gotten over with your brain—
there’s a point where you don’t care anymore—and besides, her stomach hurts even more when she eats.

Marie says she’s heard about that brain stuff, but doesn’t see much point in it, or think anybody should push it.

Evey’s sister had cancer and meditated her way out of it.

Marie can’t even imagine that shit.

Evey says that a person never knows what he or she can do until faced with one of those big things.

Marie says that’s true but still.

Evey doesn’t have time to see a doctor anyway, at least not a stomach doctor.

Marie says she’s feeling good tonight, feeling invincible.

That reminds Evey of the time someone laid a line of coke along the entire length of the Pier Pub bar.

Jack says he heard that too.

Evey says, “I could use a good bump right now, that’s for sure.”

At Alder, Jack drops them off and watches as they hustle up to the house. Under the porch light by the front door, Evey sags, puts a hand on her bony hip. Jack wonders if she’s dying—and then he can see in the dark hollow under her eyes that she probably is. Marie lights a cigarette. She lets it dangle from her mouth while she giggles and straightens Evey’s pale lavender dress.

Gil, the dispatcher, has radioed Jack that the Beachcomber called and his fish and fries are ready to be picked up. Jack’s stomach hurts. He drives toward town, fast because he thinks he might start drooling. He thinks about the guy he met with the Chinese warlord tattoo on his back and wonders if anybody ever gets a hamburger and french fry tattoo. He wonders if Evey’s stomach feels like this all the time. He takes a left on Mill Bay and is start-
ing up the hill when he sees three people on the side of the road raise their hands to flag him down. Jesus. He wants to drive by but it’s raining and he can’t.

They’re Filipinos. Filipinos never tip and some of the cabbies won’t pick them up, but Jack likes them, generally. These three smell funny. The old man wiggles his nose like a rabbit and can’t even get into the cab. He keeps stepping up onto the seat so the women, maybe his daughters, show him where to step so he can sit down. Foot on the floor, now lowering his hips, twisting slightly—that’s it—ducking the rest of his body through the door, yes, and sitting. Poor guy must be sick or something. Only three fingers and a thumb on one hand, two and a thumb on the other. Maybe he’s never been in a car, but that’s ridiculous. What is it they smell like? Some kind of greasy vegetable or spaghetti-fed dog meat. Eating dogs is the one thing he doesn’t like about Filipinos. But it’s possible the old guy was at the Death March and saved Kid Cliff’s life and was crippled by a Jap bayonet. Tortured. It could be Jack owes his life to this old man. It could be, and yet there’s no way of knowing. Only doubting, of course. Millions of things could have happened to keep Jack from being born, to keep him from living as long as he’s lived (thirty years in some cultures is old age) yet here he is anyway! When he thinks about the odds against any specific person being born . . . against himself . . . well, he’s either a miracle or a fluke. But if certainly Jack is (and he is), when the odds were so stacked against his even being born, then this old man who probably didn’t save Kid Cliff’s life, certainly must have saved Kid Cliff’s life. And therefore he saved Jack.

For if this old Filipino’s great-great-grandmother had died of some disease along with the rest of her family when she was ten,
then she would never have become the mother of X, who became the mother of Y, who became the mother of Z, who became the mother of this old guy, who saved Kid Cliff’s life by giving him water during the Death March, sure, an act that cost him three fingers, which allowed Kid Cliff to make the sperm that he would eventually deposit in Lorraine one autumn evening when nothing else in the world mattered except the sweaty union of two mortals in an upstairs bedroom of a Wisconsin farmhouse. And now here is Jack, sitting in his cab not not-being. A possible fluke, but he just can’t chuck the possibility of a miracle either. Like the ideas of falling in love and being happy, the idea of a miracle is tenacious as hell.

Mary could still be in Wisconsin. Mary could be waiting for him . . . Maybe Jack came to Alaska to realize only this: there’s no such thing as an answer, only hope.

But there’s more, he thinks. Of course. Kodiak is his father. He came here to put his face against his father’s strong chest, feel his father’s arms wrap around his back and shoulders. And more too, which perhaps is the problem. His father is dead. Jack came to Kodiak to dig a grave and bury him.

But how? he thinks. And where? And how will he even know when he has?

All three passengers are dressed in their go-to-cannery clothes—rubber boots, colorful scarves, sweatshirts, cloth gloves on their laps. Maybe the old man is farting and that’s what the smell is. He’s wiggling his nose like a rabbit, so perhaps he smells it too. His daughter has to pronounce the name of the cannery three times before Jack can understand. Jack’s very polite—What’s that, ma’am? What’s that, ma’am? Oh yes, ma’am—imagining the sound of a bayonet slicing off a finger, another finger, another

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finger. The sound a man makes. Is enduring pain in itself an act of bravery? Is dying? Or is bravery risking pain, risking death for what you love or believe in? And where does Kid Cliff stand in all this? Did he sacrifice Lorraine and Jack, long before he came home from the prison camps, in order to survive? Or did he sacrifice himself one sunny day in June 1953 so that they could survive? Was it painful for him? Or easy? Was he lonely? Or simply forgetful?

The questions. They go on and on. After the Death March, Kid Cliff had three and a half more years of starvation and capricious torture to endure. Would the fingers of this heroic old Filipino man have been wasted if Kid Cliff had died on the Hell Ship to Japan, throat slit by a thirsty comrade? Those things happened. There are lots of people who weren't born because their fathers died on those ships in 1944, regardless of any heroism or providence that might have kept them alive until then. Does Jack's existence validate the old man’s sacrifice? Don’t think of it! They can ride for free, sure, and Jack himself is going to help the old man out of the cab.

In a book Jack read about the Death March, a veteran told about a 30-year reunion of survivors back in the Philippines. Hanging on the side of their bus was a banner that said, Defenders of Bataan. When the Filipinos read that, even the children, they held up their fingers in a V. “What do those kids know about us?” one of the veterans asked the bus driver, who answered, “Joe, they may not know English, or how to read and write, but they know about Bataan.”

No matter how strange this old guy is, Jack thinks, if it weren’t for him Jack wouldn’t be alive. Sentimentality can be as seductive as pornography, so thinking this is irresistible, and by now Jack's
almost convinced of its truth. Oh boy. It pleases him no end to feel goose bumps rising on the back of his neck. Sitting in the back seat between a couple of Asian princesses is a veritable king, a mortal god, a nose-twitching rabbit of a seven-fingered man in whose common-suffering corpse-reek lies the naked seeds of miracles. Yessir.

When they arrive at the cannery, Jack hops out and runs around to open the door. He lends a hand to one of the princesses, but she’s already standing, so he bends to help the king. Standing next to him now, on the gravel, Jack leans over and whispers “Bataan” into the royal ear. The king cocks his head, straining to hear. One of the princesses points to her own ear, then to the king’s.

Jack whispers it again, Bataan, louder; then thumb to his chest, Jack points at himself.

Wrinkling his nose, sniffing, shuffling uncomfortably, finally the king breaks into a grin. Jack feels flushed. King extends his three-fingered hand, and Jack shakes it, thinking of miracles and torn flesh, falling in love with dog meat.

“José,” the old man says. “Vedy, vedy fine, thank you.”
Polar States

From the suite "Some Antarctic States."
These hands, crooked by the icy wind,
hold two fistfuls of smelt.
Steaming, hardening as they freeze.
Each pulled from the five gallons
of Lake Michigan, where the smelt stream,
circling, towards some point up river,
unbroken, the pupil of an eye.

I watched the net disappear
as the tow line rubbed the hand,
out where the weighted edge
plunked the water like a skipping stone.
Habit coiled the line back through the fist,
the net jumped sideways as fish sparked
beneath the skein. The fist raised
the gnarl of the twitching net.
This urge, dump them back in the water, but no
—see here they are—in these bent, shaking fists.
For days, I felt the blister
growing, swelling until
my hand held only itself, fingers curled
around the globe of injury, and when
the doctor cut it open and the warm saltiness
ran down my wrist, I looked into
the peeled-back, naked face of my palm
and it seemed to wear
an anonymous expression. The yellow
lines of fat and the veins bluely
transecting the raw crimson
were maps without a country, and it took
a long time for my hand to remember
its address, to recollect its usages
of the steering wheel, the hammer, the ink pen,
to recompose its white tranquil face, and to forget
how a stranger had held it
like a bowl of milk, the skin souring
on the surface. For months afterward,
I woke to a burning inside
my arms, the nerves firing their way
back to the fingers, and the hand
at the end of my wrist
reaching for the light switch, measuring
its way back to the living
like one mistaken for dead.
Small bells have gone off
through the planet's night to find me.
A pulsing charge hung with moonlight is
humming in all the resistant lines
criss-crossing anonymous country, dim
timbered hillsides and slowly dying towns,
trailing cutover and poisoned swaths
bulldozed through scrub oak and brush,
humming in scalloped lines strung at the edge
of fields plowed richer and blacker
than the dark space settling down
from black-furred sky into the long furrow.
Humming like the black empress of blues.

The still-unbroken spool of light
which could tell him the story of his life
is ravelling out, sailing out to meet itself
in far stars again. And sucked into the black
hole, will turn to radio, the spank of static
sparks we might hear again if we all come back
to tune in.
I hear the tentative buzz
in the whiskery distance. A family voice.
My mother saying it's getting real bad.
Asking if I own a decent suit,
have what it costs to come home.
Then my voice. Wanting a last talk, to lift
his bony weight alive in my hands.
Not the service performed by a stranger,
the ring of lies, the lump sum of stone.

So I book the earliest reservation.
Stirred up like flies around the mule's head
when he shakes, my anger fills as the moon pales.

2.

Red boundaries of daybreak, searchlights
splayed on the tower, strands of blue lights
rushing, each remembered blur: I fasten on
last things. Whatever I touch shivers
as I'm lifted up, wholly delivered
into the company of strangers. I seem
misplaced. I concentrate, becoming purely
this transient feeling, marooned in my body.
I press cold fingers to my branded eyes
and pale squadrons swarm, like grief.
Thrown back, the body shrinks, readied for jettison, the brain case tips out its history, the caged heart tears loose, an engine rocketing into a void. Climbing, I sink into the serviceable fabric, the loud American plaid, jagged patterns I saw, stitches streaming, as a child counting backwards into ether.

I slip from the tangle of my grounded self, sleep place to place, wake to myself flying, having dreamed the plotted landscape beyond the window's hollow womb, having made my grandfather murmur out of his last dreams an answer why fields are still laid out that way, why worry now with raising anything:

Some things a body's got to do.  
Now don't bother me again.

His business, you know, is dying.

The white bird skims the one smoky cloud, moves off. Outside, torn winds roar.
The long descent begins. Under me, clouds march, closing ranks, shadowed. Earth tones, tans bleeding to brown, turning to mud, black where the rain drives home. Spring is late in this late dry year—and will shine in every empty hoofprint, but the season takes its due. The weight comes on with the drop in altitude.

I will make a pallet on the floor near his bed. I will struggle, slipping at the edge of sleep’s white frozen pond. Falling through, I’ll wake to deathwatch, clawing for breath, his voice raw in my throat: I can’t seem to get right. He will say it all night.

I will give him the pill at four. I will put on his shoes in the morning.

The clouds close ranks. Forced upright and tense before being swallowed whole, I wait for each rift to glimpse broad quiet islands in the undulant river,
the charcoal trestles of a railroad bridge, 
plowed black fingers of fallow bottomland 
grappling strips of frail yellow-green corn.

4.

Clouds sock in; droplets spurt and silver 
on the glass, mapping troubled streams. 
The flapped wing groans to bring us down; 
it dips and banks for the final approach.

Cloud cover breaks over scarred roads 
surveyors have stitched with stakes, 
the unavoidable future of these precincts, 
and those dots scrambling over the face 
of the dice must be concrete slabs 
of children at play in a suburban storm.

Again the grey swirl, thunder drumming, 
mist, a cymbal's hiss. Before I'm ready 
the heavy air clamps down, pain 
squeezing into my facial mask; my ears ring. 
We sideslip, drift in the last adjustments. 
The ragged veil whips away, a terminal 
appears in Midwestern fog, then the catch 
as we hit, just before the high-pitched
whine when the engines are hurled against themselves. Already I see, hung for a heartbeat in that second skip, the further journey that will take me west and deep into the welcoming backroads of death, coming into my own, putting on the face of it, falling and rising like any rain: airborne now, and now, earthbound.

—in memory of my grandfather, E.C. Friederich, Sr.
Late Gift

On Valencia Street
in the Mission District
in San Francisco
in the hot October sun

I eat the sweetest orange
of my entire life.

According to the facts, I am in midlife
and you, Papa, have been dead for five years.

But tell me, if you will, that I am not a child,
tell me the orange did not come from your open hand.
Susan Aurand

Once in the Woods
Charcoal on paper.
Susan Aurand

Cranes (Night)
Charcoal on paper.

Dancing with Cranes (Night)
The doctors said my mother died of kidney failure, but I know what really killed her. She started dying a year ago, when my father's heart stopped and he fell dead in the snow trying to carry a sling of logs from the bin in the back yard. After he died my mother didn't touch anything of his: not his tools in the basement, color-coded and arranged with an artist's attention to size and function; not the bottles of blood pressure pills on the rotating tray in the kitchen. She stopped using the car then, taking her warped and rust-covered Schwinn to the corner store or paying the young boys who skateboarded by the house to run errands. She told me she was afraid to drive alone. When she called, every odd day at six-fifteen, she would talk about Dad in the present tense, as though he were standing there about to come to the phone. It was eerie in a way I had no control over, a device my mother used to endure what time was left in the cycle she once told me life is.

Over the next several months I worried she might live forever in that distracted state, stuck in a place and time she couldn't bear to let go. But then the call came from the neighbor, Mrs. Tackett, to tell us she found my mother slumped on the kitchen floor when she was supposed to be at a potluck. "Sixty-three is so young," Mrs. Tackett kept saying. "Sixty-three. Your mother was some spring chicken."

It sounds corny in light of the folder full of medical data the hospital kept on her, but sometimes they miss the obvious. Those little bean-shaped filters were only one of many lesser failures doctors and such like-minded folk attribute my mother's death to.
They don’t have the instruments to detect the real cause, namely, the evaporation of will from her brain and the longing manufactured in her overworked heart.

My son, Korey, and I got here yesterday. There is no truth to the claim my ex-wife, Lynne, has made about us: that I am a criminal and Korey a kidnappee. When I came to get him I told her I needed Korey with me to help “get things together,” that it may be his last chance ever to see the house, or the things my parents put in it. Lynne was irked by this. She had all sorts of words, including abduction and piracy. She tried to prevent Korey from coming here by threatening to talk to her lawyer, and then to certain friends in jobs that mattered, corporate types and people with stock. It was too soon after the funeral to drive him all the way back there, she said. She is convinced the trip will threaten his emotional stability, but I think she is really bothered by him spending another four hours in the car with me.

The hardware store I help manage has given me indefinite leave. They understand these things, how, sometimes, cleaning up takes longer than expected. Since Korey and I arrived I have done my best to stay busy. Yesterday, I spent the afternoon at the kitchen table making up lists and jotting reminders to myself. This morning I was out at seven cutting the grass, dew and all, sweeping the clumps from the sidewalk. It was an auspicious beginning, but since then I have dusted my mother’s bureau three times, polished the clocks on the mantle twice, and basically done nothing more than those preliminary tasks children of the deceased are apt to do, most of which has been to wander from room to room and stare.
Upstairs, in the space that decades ago was our attic, Korey is playing pachinko. His weight rocks on the floorboards and his laughter washes down the stairway into the kitchen. He likes the game, but he knows nothing of its history. Korey doesn’t realize that the pachinko machine came all the way from Seoul where it is played in gambling parlors as obsessively as love and money are hoarded. He doesn’t know that I brought it back after navigating a Douglas C-130 transport around Vietnam, how the pachinko machine was a gift for my parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary; a gift and a kind of apology for missing it by two months. I haven’t told him that I slipped the game past customs wrapped in a parachute to avoid the surcharge, or any of the deeper secrets, like how, the first time I played the game, I was so wired on hashish I sometimes saw elephants the size of house cats walking around the room.

In the years we were together, Lynne was as passionate about avoiding pachinko as others were about getting their turn. She cautioned me repeatedly about its influence on people, about how we would play all open-mouthed and bleary-eyed. She made claims about its dubious nature; called the machine wily and disruptive. She went on to say that, like the domestic slot machines and pinball games it is related to, it is associated with such evils as greed and avarice and an interest in one’s self. When Korey was born, she made a public declaration that the game was off-limits to him. She seemed to think he needed to be protected from it, separated, as if it were an ornery dog or a busy street. For some reason the game spooked her. Maybe she thought it would suddenly, unpredictably, shoot an electric current up our arms and into our brains. Or maybe she worried it might speak in tongues or that devilish images were hidden in the patterns on the
front. She never said. And through it all, I never had the courage to ask.

I see in the paper they’re calling this an Estate Sale, which makes me laugh because the house is pretty small, and there isn’t much furniture or impressive landscaping. Its virtues are two huge trees, one oak, one elm, out front, and a moderate-sized eucalyptus in back. And there is also the half-acre lot it sits on outside of Cincinnati, part of a time-ripened neighborhood with the kind of weathered, shadowy aesthetic people will pay good money for. But really, it’s not much more than a postage stamp of land, a well-insulated box of a house, and a few rooms filled with the kind of curios and doodads that accumulate when people stay in the same place for so long.

Nothing has been moved since my mother went to the hospital. It’s as though my parents have driven down to Scottsdale or Tucson like they always talked about. I try to think of the house as deserted, but that doesn’t work. The clocks my mother collected chimed on the hour and a familiar smell is here—part tobacco, part Vitabath—as strong as any memory. Worse, there is still food in the refrigerator. I keep filling glasses of milk and only drinking half, as if out of fear that it could spoil at any moment. I try to rationalize, but it only makes me feel bloated and guilty.

On the tin doors of the pantry there is a flock of abandoned sewing spool magnets. My mother used to make them, several each year, to mascot holidays and family homecomings. Some resemble cylindrical mice, others tubular kittens, and one, I think, is supposed to be a dachshund. They stare at me with their tiny plastic bubble eyes, with pupils made from coriander seeds.
When I walk through the kitchen they follow my steps as if demanding an explanation, as if I should know what’s going to happen to them now. I’ve tried running past, but their eyes are stuck like people in paintings or photographs. You can’t shake the gaze.

In between the clock chimes and the noise Korey makes upstairs the silence is enormous, stellar even. It’s as though I can hear things known only in theory, quasars popping and the spin of positrons. I am comforted when the larger sounds return: the lever at the bottom of the machine cocking and flinging those steel marbles up into the game’s faceboard, Korey’s squeaks of delight, his sighs. There is only one shot which wins in pachinko, one small latch the marble must hit to release the jackpot. Perhaps because we can cheat it by reaching behind and retrieving the marbles it takes from us, our game seems easier to play than the ones found in casinos, but this is a deception. It is as frustrating as anything we can pitch ourselves against, including golf and the math used in quantum mechanics.

My father had a theory about pachinko, one he shared with me during a visit Lynne and I made years ago. He believed it was fortitude and not chance or lunar alignment which won the game; that the mind, on some plane too thin and far out of reach for most of us to notice, made a finite number of calculations involving weight and friction and the way our fingers bend. He told me a formula containing angles of trajectory, ball velocity, and barometric pressure. It was time, he went on, time which distracted us from winning, which kept us from truly examining the nature of the game. I was lost, I confessed, but curious and I told him so. I wanted to know if it worked. He looked away then, studying the floor or something deeper. “Not yet,” he said.
Later, when Lynne and I were trying to save ourselves by having a baby, the game got moved upstairs where it sat forgotten and dormant for years, as much an overlooked part of the house as any doorjamb or electrical outlet. To my knowledge, my father never did find the right shot. In his years of playing, he never won the game a single time. Nor, during all the visits that followed, did he ever discuss it again except once, while Lynne and I were there showing off our new son. Dad and I were alone in the family room, half-watching the Bengals getting routed by Miami. At half time I asked if he ever played pachinko anymore. No, he said, he had stopped cold turkey. He had just finished rolling a cigarette and for a moment, in the matchlight, his face went soft and entirely ageless, as easily mine or Korey's as his own. "It was doing something strange," he told me, and, in the last breath he spent on the game, he said he had stopped thinking of ways to play and began to think only of winning, a condition he likened to a virus, or consumption, a force which feeds on itself.

If Lynne knew I was keeping the pachinko machine, or why, I feel confident she would find some way to have charges brought up. She would claim it represents the same types of obsessions and vices that stir around in my head. Children, she has told me, should live tempered lives. Too much involvement is unsettling, even dangerous. And she may very well be right. She could point to my mother as an example, who, childlike at the end, was destroyed by her want. Or, she could say, as she has been known to do, that Korey is in line to inherit the compulsiveness my father was subject to—that force which turned the attic into my bedroom in less than a week, and, as he vaulted past his fiftieth birth-
day, caused his blood vessels to swell and strain and require medication to keep from bursting.

Once, I asked her point-blank if she was ashamed that my father was never anything more than a park maintenance supervisor, or if it embarrassed her that my mother rented putters at the park’s miniature golf course so she could be near him during the day. Lynne wanted to know what kind of questions those were supposed to be. Some years later, during the last tumultuous weeks of our marriage, the topic came around again. I asked if she believed in a connection between the life my parents led and what she once called my hapless and insufficient style of managing things: the hardware store, the money we would spend, our family. She was quiet for a while, then started in. Yes, she said. Yes to this and yes to that. And the rest came out in such a rush that I couldn’t help but imagine her head as a balloon full of grievances, her mouth a nozzle suddenly untied. She told me, in the way that she has, with her upper lip arched the way some people can raise an eyebrow, about the relationship with our dentist she was in the midst of. She talked about love: where she found it, and where she did not. I learned how secure our dentist was and how much he could offer our son; what opportunities would be afforded and where Korey could get his schooling. All the while I was trying to picture the man who had crowned two of my teeth and replaced one, the man who had been inside both of us, and what his hands looked like against her skin. I wanted to tell her how his Jaguar was likely to threaten Korey’s emotional stability, but I never did and now fear it may follow me, unsaid, into oblivion.
Korey has come to get me. He stops in the kitchen doorway, jeans furled at his sneakers, hands on hips, and tells me with a thin reed of impatience touching his voice that one of the pachinko marbles is stuck. Standing there, he looks like a shrunken man. The way the light hits him, it swallows up his boyish softness and leaves behind the gaunt, skeletal shadows of adulthood.

“Dad,” he says, “c’mon.”

So I do. I sweep him up and play sack of potatoes over my shoulder but he isn’t laughing. He insists we go upstairs.

The marble has stuck on the uppermost pin, trapped in the small space between the glass and the mosaic of pins and baffles and ornamental buttons on the faceboard. It doesn’t take much to get it going again, a rap on the top of the machine and the marble is dislodged; Korey could have done it himself if he were a little taller. Sitting Indian style, I am his height, and together we watch the marble bounce and ricochet down through the patterns. At first, it starts out too far right, but it strikes another pin which sends it hopping back to the left.

“Oooo,” we say. “Oh!”

It could work, I think. This could be the one. The marble plunks down another few steps, sets a small aluminum flower spinning. Korey’s fists are clenched into oversize golf balls, and he’s crouching now, as if that might help. The marble rebounds again, traveling floorward. It skips once, dances, then shimmies to a pause as it settles between two pins. Korey sucks in a breath and holds it.

Like so many times before, like always it seems, the marble squirts between the the two pins, roles left off another directly below and misses the latch holding all the other marbles in their cup. Korey throws up his hands and topples back into my lap.
He's grinning now, showing me all of his tiny teeth. I think that he is lucky to have gotten Lynne's looks; it will help him someday.

"Rats," he says to me.
"Close," I say.
"Why doesn't Mom want me to play?"
"She thinks it's bad for you. Like television, and candy."
"Is it?"
"I don't think so," I reply. But when he's quiet I remember what my father said about the game, how it finally affected him.

Korey's mouth stretches into a yawn and he settles a little more deeply into my lap.

"Are we going to sell it?" he asks.
"Not a chance."
"Will I be able to keep playing?"
"You can play any time you come over."
"Good," he says.

Downstairs, in the kitchen where I was sitting, is the stack of lists I have spent the day writing and revising. I think of them, with their cryptic doodles and abstract borders, with their catalogues and columns of furniture and appliances and craft supplies, and I feel the enormity of the task we are here to do press against our space. It strikes me how quickly the first five years of Korey's life have passed, how one day he won't be able to remember my parents without pictures. Soon, the halls have to be swept and the fireplace shoveled out. I have to pack the tools and clean windows. Final decisions have to be made: what should be sold and what kept, what can be given to neighbors and charity, and what should be thrown away.
Korey reaches over and places another chrome ball on the firing arm. He shoots it up to the top of the game and this one starts its way down on its own. It moves right and keeps going that way until it finally hits the side and drops to the bottom, the equivalent of bowling's gutter ball. Korey sighs and sits back in my lap.

"Do you think I'll ever win?"

"Well," I begin. "Um."

"Um?" Korey says. He's squinting at me, scrunching up his nose.

"Right."

"What does 'um' mean?"

"It means I don't know. Maybe."

"Oh," he says frowning, and curls closer for warmth.

I hold him, his body all lightness and bend, and I think of Lynne with her dentist. I think of my mother assembling her magnets and the fury my father displayed when he hammered nails. They all seem to be just outside the room, orbiting past our window and staring in with the hundred different faces they could, at times, share: dismay and bewilderment, pride and loathing, joy and its companion, loss.

Korey yawns again and I feel his exhaustion in my own skin, worming its way down to the center of me. In the back of the house, tiny and far away, my mother's clocks start to chime.

"Here," I say, reaching around behind the game and scooping the cool steel marbles. "Let's try again."
Lost Child: Drift
Ink on paper.
As if skimming bare-skinned on this fifty
mile glacial trough filled with liquid
ice, the girls in wet suits fly by, waving—

tied to their speedboats, they dig
their heels in and ride in circles
around our tourist barge. Just lean

back, lock your knees! their bodies grin.
The lake feeds on delft-blue
springs which seep from rockbed cracks.

Trout sleep in the silt. The common
loon moves through easy currents. Along
the shore, flame-colored moths falter,

fall open-winged, plaster themselves
on shallow pools. The yellow jackets
move in. Swing down, pick up the moths

and carry them, dangling, all the way
to mud nests clenched like hidden fists
in the scrub, high on the talus slopes
that hold this lake in place. The girls
turn graceful flips on the waves, spinning
spiral somersaults, falling, rising,
walking on the lake. The water
is as black as crankcase oil. The sun
pours ropes of molten brass around
the girls as it sinks low, tangles
their feet in silver cords, copper wires,
and braided strands of spun glass light,
tightening the knot as it goes down.
Separation

This is the world
round and wet
rafted with dirt
peopled with parents

whose daughter closes her eyes as she sits in the bathtub
feeling the water abandon her legs
as it leaks down the drain
in the house whose big windows face south

sucking in sunlight
expanding the rooms
where her Father cared for the plants
when he lived here, touching the dirt

to see what they needed, the roots of the aloe
suspended in baskets of hand-knotted twine
crowding the panes, pots heavy with water
stems curved by the weight of the leaves

chewed by the cat who slept on the shelf
swayed by books next to the mugs
stained with coffee, cracked by the stove
loaded with slabwood from the forest out back
crammed with trees that scratch the sky
bloated with snow
seen by the girl who sits in the tub
naming each thing in the house
to make things stay
while she waits for her Mother to take her
to the bed swollen with pillows

as white as the claw-footed, sparkling, stainless, white,
polished, porcelain
tub that does not

hold water, the bathtub that holds nothing.
Things Moving

She knows these fields, cut from old family lines,
how the earth breaks its promise,
clots wet-frozen along the furrowed throats,
how the stubble tries.

The silo monument is half-empty.
Coffee calls her husband to the winter town,
whiskey keeps him there past supper.
The children have been marketed in the city—
only March, whining in the drying crib.

In the morning she watches
for winter crows, for things moving.
She gave up quilting, buys her bread at the store—
the hands tire of putting up hours.
When the afternoon pales,
she lights the lamps and stove,
sets the table for quiet.

Light smokes from the lamps.
Above the ticking fields,
above the blackened ribs of the grove,
the moon yellows and falls away, dried skin.
In the evening window she rocks,
turns the darkness over in her lap.
In Iowa there are islands
where winters are sharper than memory.
Loretta Gets Toreador Pants

Like Oni had known me all my life,
the first time he gave me yellow toreadors,
pants tight as spring buds, trimmed
with black ric-rac but flaring to open.
In Oni's eyes and the Amoco mirror,
I liked the way his gift of painted skin
rounded my family's tame thighs.
I was still green, at the center
stretching to prove my mother's words right.
"Slut," she'd said, and I was
"looking for Trouble with a capital T."

When Oni spoke his name rolled between
lips and teeth, a sharp cinnamon breath mowing
my ready lawn. When he said my name
Loretta spilled out
a song I'd been wanting to hear,
a country I'd been wanting to see
explored. A dream picking me up,
he twirled me, a baton
over chainlink fences and playground swingsets.
He carried me into a bar,
whose silent faces yelled, "Hey, Wetback,
where's your green card?" And Oni came back
at them, his pockets empty, hands and smile widening,

*por favor. No preguntas*, if you please.

Only the joke was on them. Hey, Amigos,

he was not asking. I settled myself,

the wings of his shoulders,

thinking we could protect each other:

a gold saint’s medal to bless his skin,

a thick brown song to cover my femaleness.

*Que sueno*

what innocence.
Bear Series #24:
Bear Dreaming
Oilstick on paper.
Nancy Erickson

Bear Series
#32: Many Polar Bears Paddling
Oilstick on paper.
On the third day of the ash, the children grew quiet. Three-year-old Ira sat on the couch and sucked his thumb. Carrie, the baby, refused to stay in her walker. She whimpered softly, wanted me to hold her. It was hot too and the air in the house was stale and humid from keeping doors and windows closed. And though the sky began to look blue again, we still couldn’t go out. A man from the health department interrupted television programs at half-hour intervals to tell us that.

“The urge now is to go outside,” he said. “But there’s still a lot of small stuff in the air, invisible stuff. It’s the volcanic glass we’re worried about. Once that glass is in your lungs, it’s going to stay there.”

The first morning, the town looked bled of color. A gray smog hung in the air and powdery ash coated the grass and sidewalks. The few ghostly cars that passed the house kicked up swirling, gritty clouds. The darkness and eerie silence excited us. We took pictures of the ash-coated garden. We made popcorn for breakfast and turned on the television.

The announcer said school had been cancelled and all but essential businesses were closed. Ted called his editor to see if a sports reporter’s job was considered essential. The editor said Ted should come to work and write a story on all the track meets the schools were calling off.

I watched television those first three days. Experts from the university and community came on to discuss the situation. One said the pollution had been measured at twelve times the federal maximum, although pollution monitors were so clogged with ash
it was hard to tell. There were pessimists who warned of silicosis and other lung damage, and optimists who thought the minerals in the ash might be good for the crops.

Between experts, the local station showed a silent film clip of Mount St. Helens exploding. Over and over we watched that still, snow-capped cone come alive, mutate to a mushroom cloud, billowing and frothing. Then they showed maps and charts with little arrows marching across Washington and Idaho to Montana where a penciled storm of ash was falling down on us.

We were escaping to Billings where they’d moved the state track meet. We kept the children in the house until we were set to go so they wouldn’t breathe too much of the volcanic glass. Ted put on his bandanna and took the dog to the Shaws’ next door. He came back wearing a surgical mask and carrying three more for us. Arnie Shaw was a postal worker and they gave out extras at his office.

I put my mask on and we loaded our car, the grainy smog stinging my eyes. I thought I’d packed lightly but our luggage and baby gear completely filled the compartment behind the back seat. Ted didn’t say anything, just sighed loudly and shoved at a paper sack I’d set on top of the load.

“Careful,” I said. “There’s food in there.”

“What did you bring food for? We can stop to eat.”

“It’s crackers and juice for the kids—to keep them happy.”

Ted picked up the sack and put it in another spot. “Now the hatchback won’t close,” he said.

“Give it to me,” I said. “I’ll put it on the floor.”

My voice sounded hollow and strange to me inside the mask. I glanced at Ted’s eyebrows, knitted over his mask, and had a
sudden vision of surgeons bent over a body, arguing about the placement of a clamp. I laughed. Ted didn’t ask me what was funny. He shook his head again and walked back to the house.

Ted had been quiet all morning, chatty and determinedly cheerful. I’d outmaneuvered him the night before when he announced he was going to Billings with a photographer, just the two of them. Pure panic at being left in our clammy house—as well as resentment that he seemed to want to leave us—gave me the edge. I felt so suffocated that the eight-hour drive Ted dreaded seemed almost appealing to me. We could take our car; it was bigger than the photographer’s. We could stay with my aunt and uncle in Billings—they’d been asking us to visit them for years—and the newspaper would only have to pay for a single room. When I began looking up my uncle’s phone number, Ted gave up.

Denise, the photographer, was ready to go when we got to her duplex. Before Ted could get out of the car, she stood on the porch wearing a ski mask and carrying two bags.

“Oh Christ!” Ted said. “Where are we going to put those?”

“We can put one under Ira’s feet,” I said from the back seat. “Ira can hold his toys.”

“No I can’t,” Ira said.

Denise got into the car and took off her mask, then twisted around in the seat to say hello to the children and me.

“Here, give me a bag,” I said.

“That’s okay, Anna,” she said, smiling. “I can put them both under my feet. It looks like you’re full-up back there.” She had a sweet, large-toothed grin and dark hair that fell in a gleaming sheet to the middle of her back.
We drove through the university district where grayed cars edged tree-lined streets. On some windshields, “nuke” had been written in the ash. As soon as we left the canyon east of town, the sky grew clearer.

“The sun!” Denise said. “It’s still there.”

I gave each child a graham cracker. Carrie chewed the corner off hers then mashed the rest on the side of her car seat. When her head started to loll, I wedged a blanket in the window to shade her. By the time we stopped in Drummond to have the ash cleaned out of the air filter, she was asleep.

The car ran smoothly after the stop. Ted rolled down his window. “Air,” he shouted into the wind. “Fresh air!” He glanced in the mirror and grinned at Ira who’d put the Walkman on and silently mouthed the words of a story tape. When I scooted forward between the seats to ask Denise a question, Ted put a hand on my knee and gave it an apologetic squeeze.

“Where are you from, Denise?” I asked.

“Seattle. I just got out of school there.”

“Oh well then,” I said. “You’re not used to sunshine anyway. You probably didn’t even notice that ash cloud.”

She gave me another of those smiles then turned around again.

“Are you married?” I asked, though I was quite sure she wasn’t. She looked too young. And there was something else—a prick of interest when she looked at Ted, a subtle change in her voice when she spoke to him that said she was unattached, looking.

“Not me,” Denise said.

“Smart gal,” Ted said. He’d kept his hand on my knee and gave it another squeeze.

“Oh you’ll get married,” I said. “It’ll sneak up on you.”
Ted and I were going into our married couple act. We seemed to do it most often with my younger brother and other singles. We made ourselves out to be these wildly original people—these characters—who had somehow, inexplicably, been trapped into a cartoon life of convention.

"I don't know, Denise," Ted was saying, shaking his head. "We've got the boy. We've got the girl. We've got the mortgage. We've got the dog . . ."

"We have no cat!" I interrupted, holding up one finger as if making an important discovery.

"That's right!" Ted said, as if excited by my revelation. "We do not have a cat." He said it grandly, with a sigh of relief. As if, for now, we'd been saved.

Ted and Denise began discussing their strategy for covering the track meet and I sat back and looked out the window at the greening hillsides that flanked the highway. Ira had fallen asleep in the corner of the seat. I settled him under my arm and covered him with Ted's jacket.

I listened to Denise talk. She had an odd voice, low with a throaty catch to it and a trace of some regional accent I couldn't place. But there was something I recognized in it too. I'd sounded like that when I was her age, especially when I talked about my job the way she did now. Pleased, full of self-satisfied power. I couldn't seem to muster that voice when I talked about the children, my home, the other things I did now. Instead I used an exasperated, ironic voice. The cartoon mother.

The day grew unseasonably hot for May. We stopped for lunch in Butte, then Ira began to whine and made us stop at every rest area. He had to go to the bathroom. He was dying of thirst. Ted turned on the radio to drown out Ira's complaints. The chairman
of the chemistry department was discussing the ash. "It's very abrasive and slightly basic," he said. The night before, an expert on TV had described it as slightly acidic. "More acidic than a pumpkin, less acidic than a banana," he'd said.

We didn't reach Billings until after six. At Denise's motel, Ted and I watched enviously as she got out of the car and walked to the door of what was surely a silent, air-conditioned room.

On the way to my aunt and uncle's, I began to worry about our decision to stay with them, especially since Ira was still whining and Carrie too had grown fussy. They had children, three girls, but theirs were in high school now. I really didn't know any of them very well. I'd known my uncle Andrew best when he was single and in law school and spent all his holidays with my family. He was handsome and funny then, and more than a little wild. I'd had a child's crush on him. I hadn't seen him or his wife Sarah since our wedding when they'd given us a Belleek cream and sugar set they'd bought in Dublin. Ted had picked up the delicate pitcher, pearly white inside with raised figures and flowers on the outside. "I could break this just by looking at it," he said.

"Oh, use it," Sarah said with a little wave of her hand. "We have a whole set of Belleek and we use it all the time."

Both Sarah and Andrew came out to greet us when we finally found their house and began unloading ourselves from the car. Sarah looked marvelous, slimmer than she'd been during her child-bearing years. Her honey-colored hair was pulled back in a smooth roll behind her head. Andrew held a newspaper in one hand as if he expected to go back to reading it momentarily. Middle age hadn't been as kind to him. He'd grown thick around the waist and his cheeks were sagging into jowls.

74 CutBank
They were gracious and enthusiastic hosts. They showed us to comfortable rooms, fed us a good dinner while we caught up on family news and told them about the ash.

“You poor dears,” Sarah said.

Ted told them about the pumpkin and the banana and made it funnier than it had first sounded on television. All of us laughed. Andrew disappeared to his study immediately after we’d eaten. We didn’t see him again until the next morning.

In fact, in the three days we stayed with them, everyone seemed to disappear regularly. Andrew was at work or in his study most of the time. Ted spent all his time at the track meet, more often than not calling to say he’d find a meal downtown. I think I’d had some kind of hope that the cousins, even if they were too old to play with my children, might want to babysit. But they were busy with their own things—school, dances, friends, endless hairwashing and dressing. Their play amounted to stopping briefly to tickle Ira, or picking up Carrie and saying she was “the cutest little thing.” Sarah was home more than the rest and she was always gracious, always pleasant. But she too seemed to be on the run all the time—to her class, errands, volunteer work.

I began to feel that I’d traded one prison for another, only this one was more difficult than the ash-suffocated house we’d left. Carrie was fascinated by the stairs, which we didn’t have at home. Over and over I’d follow her as she crawled up them, then catch her as she tried to go down. At the same time, I had to keep Ira from touching things. The house was beautifully decorated and filled with precious objects—vases and tiny cups from China, bones and artifacts collected by Sarah’s archaeologist brother. Ira tried to be good, but he couldn’t resist handling the bones, looking at their undersides. We took long walks when I’d scan the
clear western sky, looking for signs of ash, worrying that my
garden was suffocated, the lawn dead.

Our last evening, I followed Sarah into the kitchen after din­
nner. We were discussing a class she was taking, 19th Century
British Lit., which had been my field in college, and I was enjoy­
ing myself. I couldn’t remember when I’d last talked about Yeats
and Hardy. We bandied about other names until Sarah inter­
rupted me to show me how she filled her new espresso machine.

I realized then that I’d lost track of the baby. I could see Ira
seated at the dining table eating a bowl of ice cream, but I hadn’t
seen Carrie since I put her down on the floor right after dinner.
At the same instant that it struck me she had probably gone for
the stairs, the sounds came—a series of soft thumps, then a wail
that dissolved into silence as Carrie ran out of breath.

When I got to her, she still hadn’t breathed. She lay on the floor
at the foot of the carpeted stairway, her face bright red and her
mouth open in a silent cry. Danielle, the middle cousin, stood
over her wringing her hands. I put a hand behind Carrie’s head
and gently picked her up. When she was upright, she caught her
breath with a great ragged gasp, then began to howl.

“I saw her fall,” Danielle said, dancing nervously from foot to
foot. “I mean, I was just walking by and she was, you know, fall­
ing before I could do anything.” She had to shout over Carrie’s
racket. She watched me feel the baby’s head all over for bumps.
“I don’t think she hit her head on anything. She just sort of slid
down the stairs on her back.”

I tried to smile at Danielle. Carrie continued to scream and I
rubbed her back. “I don’t think she could howl like this if she
were really hurt,” I said. “I think she’s just scared.”
All of them were there then—Sarah wiping her hands on a dish cloth, Andrew holding a file folder. Both of them studied Carrie and, I thought, carefully avoided looking at me. After all, I hadn’t been doing my job. Ira stood beside me with one arm around my leg and tears standing in his eyes. He jiggled Carrie’s foot. “Stop crying,” he shouted.

“Should we call the doctor?” Andrew asked. “Just in case?”

Sarah had me hold Carrie’s eyes open so she could look into them. “I think she’s fine,” she said. “Just scared, poor babe.”

She led me to a rocking chair in the corner of the living room. “You sit here and rock her and I’ll bring you your coffee and something for the baby to drink.”

“And me to drink,” Ira said. He crawled into the chair too.

“And you,” Sarah smiled and winked at Ira.

Andrew patted my shoulder and said something about kids being tough. Then he escaped to his study. The girls drifted up the stairs. We sat and rocked until Carrie’s wails became soft, shaky sobs. I glanced down at Ira, at his serious little face pinched tight with worry, then I buried my face in Carrie’s damp neck. And then I was crying. It was as if something had broken open inside me, releasing unending sobs. I couldn’t stop—not even when Ira, in tears himself, began shaking my shoulder saying “Mommy, you stop that!” Not even when Sarah came into the room carrying a tray.

“Oh my goodness!” she said.

“She’s crying!” Ira shouted at her, his voice squeaky with panic.

I went to bed early, with the children. But the events of the evening had worked on me in such a way that I was stupid with exhaustion but unable to sleep. I tossed in bed then finally got up
to wait for Ted. He'd called earlier to say the meet was over and, if I didn’t mind, he was going out for a beer with some other reporters. He called when I'd just managed to stop crying, but didn’t notice anything was wrong—or, if he did, he ignored my shaky breath and thick voice. “Sure,” I said. “Go ahead. I'm fine. We're all fine.”

Sarah was in the room when he called and she frowned at me when I hung up the phone. “You should have told him you need him here,” she said.

“Oh I’m not sure I do, right now,” I said, forcing a smile. “I have you to talk to. And by the time he could get here, I'd probably be asleep. I'm beat.”

We did talk then, after a fashion. Sarah did most of the talking. She told me about little accidents her children had had as babies, about another class she was planning to take, her plans for their house. I'm sure she went on and on about those things to help me relax, to calm me down. And I did grow calmer but I only half listened. When she stopped talking and took a sip of her coffee, I blurted out, “Is Uncle Andrew happy?”

I glanced at her and realized at once how rude I'd been, how accusatory that must have sounded.

“What do you mean, Anna?” she said, her fine features stiff.

I backpedaled immediately. “Oh I guess I don't mean happy. He just seems tired. Overworked or something,” I added lamely.

“He's working on an important case right now,” Sarah said slowly. “And he does work hard. We all work hard.”

I'd made an awful mistake. Sarah wore the same forbidding look my mother had when, shortly after my marriage, I decided that—since we were both married women—we could discuss her relationship with my dad. The same little wall had gone up then.
The kitchen clock said one-thirty, later than I'd thought. The bars would be closing at two, then Ted would be home. I poured myself a glass of milk and went to a corner of the family room that adjoined the kitchen and sat in an armchair. I drank the milk but felt too tired to get up and look through the books lining one wall of the room. Instead, I sat there in the dark and watched the clock in the dimly-lit kitchen.

I heard someone coming down the stairs and realized I must have dozed. The clock read three-twenty. It struck me with a little jolt that Ted still wasn't back. He'd have had to walk right past me. I'd have heard him.

Andrew didn't see me when he shuffled into the kitchen. He wore a bathrobe and slippers and his thinning hair stuck out wildly in tufts. He opened the refrigerator and stood for a moment studying the contents. He found a glass and poured himself some milk. He drank it, still standing in front of the open refrigerator door, then poured more. He turned back toward the dining room and I sat very still in my shadowed corner of the family room. The moment for announcing myself had long passed and now I wanted only to avoid inevitable questions—what was I doing up? Where was my husband?

Andrew stopped and turned around suddenly and crossed the kitchen, setting his glass on the eating bar that separated the kitchen from the family room. He began digging in the cookie jar on the bar, then stopped and peered in my direction. I raised one hand in a silent salute and he squinted and leaned forward, his hand moving from the cookie jar to the knife block beside it. “Who's there?” he said.

“It's me, Uncle Andrew,” I said. “Anna.”
“Christ! You scared me.” He skirted the end of the bar and walked toward me. “Can’t see a darn thing without my glasses. What are you doing up? Didn’t those babies wear you out?”

I shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“I didn’t hear Ted come in,” he said.

“Well, he hasn’t yet.” I looked away. “He went out with some sportswriters and I guess they got carried away.”

Andrew rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “He do this often?”

“No. Hardly ever this late.”

Andrew went on as if he hadn’t heard me, “You’ll have to put a stop to it. I used to do that. When Sarah and I were first married. I’d go out with a bunch of lawyers after work on Friday nights. This was in Helena. We used to go to this old bar downtown where all the legislators hung out—what the heck was the name of that place?” His face softened as he sank into the memory and he put a reflective hand over his mouth. “It’s on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, there was this great old Irish bartender.”

He shook his head. “Can’t remember.” His eyes focused on me then. “Anyway, Sarah put a stop to that.” He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Good night, little Annie.”

He turned and scuffed into the living room, a blurry, wavering shape that crossed the room and faded. I’d teared up when he kissed me, when I smelled on his cheek the combination of Old Spice and cigar smoke that had been his scent since he was in college. At least time, and Sarah, hadn’t changed that.

He came back a few minutes later carrying a book. He wore his glasses now but looked at me over the top of them. His head was tilted to the side and the humorous, ironic twist of his mouth was an expression I remembered well from my childhood. “If you’re
going to have a fight," he said, "do it in the living room. This room is right under ours. I don't think I want to hear it."

I sat in the dark another ten minutes after Andrew went back upstairs. Then I went to the telephone in the kitchen and looked through the directory for the number of the Billings sports editor. I'd thought about looking up Denise's motel but didn't have the nerve. I told myself I was worried about Ted's safety. That was all.

I woke the editor who told me Ted was at the Sheraton watching television with a bunch of newspaper people. "They're all in one room," he said, "having a few beers, watching a movie. It's all right . . ."

"No it's not," I said icily. I hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

When I called the room at the Sheraton, a woman answered. There was laughter in the background and television noise. I asked for Ted and she said, "Righto. Here he is. Oh Ted," she lilted. "It's for you, Ted." Somebody laughed. I could hear Denise's unmistakable voice. Then—as the receiver changed hands—I heard the woman hiss, "I think it's his wife." A man chuckled, "Or his mother."

There was another pause. I could picture the party. A cigarette haze, beer spilling on garish hotel bedspreads. The sudden weird nostalgia it gave me only fueled my anger.

"Who was that?" I asked when Ted said hello.

"Oh, crazy people, they're all crazy people here. Journalists, you know." He was performing for the people in the room. Then he spoke more quietly. "I'm sorry it's so late, Anna. They have cable here and we started watching this great movie. Why don't you go back to bed? I'll come right home as soon as it's over. I'll sneak in—quiet as a mouse."
“Listen to me,” I said. “You be here in fifteen minutes or don’t come at all. Ever. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

“Oh Anna, for God’s sake . . .”

“I mean it, Ted.” I kept my voice low and hard so I wouldn’t cry. I slammed down the receiver before he could answer.

In the minutes that followed, I worked at my hurt and anger. Everything Ted had said and done in the last month began to seem suspect, fraught with meaning and menace. I kept seeing Denise’s gleaming fall of hair, that wide carefree smile.

It was twelve minutes from the time of the phone call till he came in the back door. I’d gone into the living room and sat in a chair in the far corner. He was starting up the stairs when I called to him. He walked over to my chair, smiling drunkenly, hands out at his sides in a helpless gesture. He was ready to pacify me, to laugh it off.

“You make me sick,” I said.

“Whoa,” he said, throwing his arms up as if to shield himself.

“Who do you think you are—some kind of teenager? You think you’ll come home a little late and charm Mom out of being mad?”

Ted squatted beside my chair and put a hand on my arm. He was still grinning. “I have never for one moment thought of you as my mom.”

I pushed his hand away. “You’re drunk and you smell like something dead.” I knew that was weak but also knew it would make him stop grinning like that. It did. He stood up and turned back toward the stairs, shaking his head. “I’m going to bed.”

“Sure. Go ahead. Go to sleep and then you won’t have to think about how I feel—or what my relatives think of your staying out all night.”
Ted turned around and walked back to my chair. "I'm sure," he hissed, leaning close, "if you weren't sitting here shouting at me, they wouldn't have to think about it at all."

"Andrew was down here a little while ago. He's probably still awake."

"Oh. Mr. Cheerful." Ted straightened when he said this and smiled slightly. But it was the little curl of his lip that set me off. I began spewing accusations and insults, anything I could think of that would wound, anything that would make him feel as alone and out of place as I'd felt for the past few days. I didn't stop until Ted grabbed my shoulders and began shaking me.

"Shut up, Anna," he said between clenched teeth. "Just shut up. Now."

I looked down at the cords in his arms as he grasped my shoulders, then back up at his face. For the first time in our marriage, I felt he wanted badly to hit me. And, for some reason, I was casting around in my head for something else to say that would make him do it.

But words didn't come to either of us. We stayed like that for long minutes, eyes locked together. Confounded. I had the dizzy sensation I was in the wrong place, eye to eye with a stranger. Then Ted turned his head as if he'd heard something. I heard it too a moment later. Carrie was crying.

"I'll go," I said, pushing him out of the way. I took the stairs two at a time. She was getting louder. They'd all be up.

I tried to quiet her in the bedroom, but she continued to cry. She seemed frightened, as if by a dream, and my presence didn't comfort her. I took her back downstairs so she wouldn't wake the others. Ted stood at the window with his back to the room, hands in his pockets, swaying side to side. Carrie had been quiet com-
ing down the stairs, but when I sat in the rocker and tried to nurse her, she pushed me away and started crying again.

In a few minutes, Ted walked over to us. “Let me try,” he said. He picked her up and danced over to the window singing a little made-up song he always sang to the children—something about birdies and airplanes. Carrie quieted gradually and rested her head against his shoulder.

“I'm going to bed,” I said.

Ted nodded and continued to jiggle and sing. I paused halfway up the stairs and looked down at them. Ted was seated in the rocker with Carrie stretched in the crook of his arm. He still sang softly, rocking the chair in time to his tune. Then the chair turned with his rocking and I could see Carrie staring at him, wide-eyed and calm in his beery breath.

When Ira woke me, I felt as if I hadn't slept at all. I'm not sure Ted had. He was packing bags when I opened my eyes. We said our farewells to my relatives who smiled and kissed us. If they'd heard us in the night, they didn't let on.

Denise wasn't ready when we stopped to pick her up. Ted drummed on the steering wheel as we waited, frowning. When she finally came out, she said a husky hello and gave me one furtive glance as she got into the car, then lapsed into silence. I didn't offer to drive, though, for our safety, I probably should have since both Denise and Ted obviously felt wretched. Denise looked pinched and pale and her hair was pulled back into a greasy ponytail that made her look about twelve.

I felt fragile—as if something in the delicate structure of our life together had shifted and now tilted dangerously out of whack. I didn't want to move or talk. Ira seemed to sense my mood and he
was quiet. Careful. I put an arm around him and we looked out
the window together at the Yellowstone River that flowed beside
the highway. Carrie fell asleep.

When we'd been on the road about an hour, I looked in the
rear view mirror and saw Ted's red-rimmed eyes studying me. I
met his gaze, held it, until Ted raised one eyebrow and looked
back at the road.

In that meeting of our eyes, I had my first small inkling that
some day this might become one of those stories we'd tell at
parties. I'd describe the panic of the ash in hilarious detail. He'd
exaggerate the heat, his drunkenness, my fatigue. But what would
we say about the scene in Sarah and Andrew's living room? How
would we deal with that moment, that trembling instant when
our anger had felt too much like hate?

As we neared home, we began to see traces of ash beside the
road and in the ditches, but it had rained hard while we were
away and the air remained clear all the way into town. We would
spend the next few days hosing ash off the grass and sidewalks
and out of the rain gutters. We'd have to spray all the windows
and the sides of the house. Still, for what seemed like years, we'd
find bits of the gray powder in the oddest places—inside storm
windows, on boxes in the basement, in the crevices of the Irish
Belleek stored high in a kitchen cupboard.
David Van Buren

Women in Chairs
(Four paintings by Edward Hopper)

11 A.M.

The nude in the blue
velvet chair, black
slippers, long brown
hair, leans
toward the open window.

She sees the sun move among
skyscrapers, crowds
cross avenues.

Inside her hands, a prayer:
a tiny bird
she will toss into the sky.

The Barber Shop

A woman passing through Life
magazine, men discussing football.
A shadow splits the face of the clock
on a once white wall
into light and dark.

88
No words tell her story.
No hands hold the time.
Outside two stripes climb
the pole, never reach
the top or touch.

Chop Suey

Two ladies out to lunch
in another language
ask each other
and themselves
what's gone wrong
with their lives.
No waiter is in sight.
A pot of tea, one empty bowl
between them
but no knives.

Room in Brooklyn

Three windows let
late sunlight in.
Pink flowers fill
the white vase
on a blue tablecloth.
At the edge of her bed,
where daylight ends,  
the widow in the wooden chair  
watches the roof  
of a red brick building  
where the sky begins.
Family, Easter Portrait, 1952

1.
Looked at one way,  
it's as though someone took his hand  
and rubbed it across us  
while the print was still wet.  
We blur into one another, into  
the redemptive sky, into both  
memory and belief. We squint  
into spring sun, grouped like  
reflections in a department store  
window, squeezed together and tentative,  
brash, but not ready for  
what we're in the middle of.  

2.
The gals wear corsages, the guys  
their clean shirts and forced smiles  
like Sunday next-to-best.  

There, leaning out of the picture,  
someone's dog. Here, leaning in,  
a grandchild or slow cousin, birds
on a wire, fields of chicory, 
a brand-new Pontiac with a wooden heart 
dangling from the rear view mirror:

Forever is carved there. And 
Always. I was seven years old. 
Abstractions amazed me.

3.
Looked at another, 
this is what I have to offer up, where 
I come from, what I prize.

My friends and lovers 
see me in all the noses and postures 
and visions, the personality.

But especially they see 
the long holiday stretching 
out, and the weedy grins, 

and the small space that seems 
to separate each and every one 
in the photo, that little gray patch

that serves as edge.
Poem with Cattle

What cattle do, they do with a terrible patience. It snows and they stand there under the snow, not bawling, in a ring, as it feathers their flanks.

When the calf with the white face dies they grieve with an icy grief, as though winter itself were grieving, not them,

with a glitter deep down in their nerves, like the glitter of stars, like the wisdom of amputees. And when they calve they do that far away.

Cows are not like us, they do not eat what we eat, or get sick in the same way, or lie down so easily.

They are all stubbornness and sudden fear, too dumb for anything but death. This farm is like a cow, and the fields are the stomachs of cows.

It is Tuesday, the year my grandparents wintered in Florida. Twelve below. Steam from the mouths of the Herefords dews the barn roof.
Downstairs they are happy over their chop, 
a sea-scum of drool on their faces. In the loft 
I am falling, breaking my ankle, feeling stupid

as I watch a week’s egg money litter the straw
in moist yellow blotches.
Next week, when the power goes off,

I will read in a copy of True
how UFOs land in Vermont, take some cows and leave,
searing the grass in a circle. The Air Force covers up.

I will dream of the wheels of Ezekiel, dream
that I am lifted up from my bed by the woodstove
to be eaten like Christ, muscle by muscle,

that weevils slide through the rooms
of my organs like ghosts, that the farm is chewing
its foot off like a dog in a trap.

Now there is nothing to do but crawl home
over the head-high drifts
glazed with ice.

On my knees I glide past the fences.
The farm announces itself in my bones as I rise.
Mine! Mine! Each step is a victory.
You wake up as a parent.
You have had the last good night's sleep.
People older than you used to tell you
about the softness in these years:
the skin behind the knee, the powder,
the bath. White clothing rests lightly
in your palm, fits perfectly
in the clean drawers. You see comfort
in your own eyes as they look in the mirror,
your head shaking slightly.

Before too long the cushions on the chairs
in the kitchen begin to harden. When a July
storm comes from the west, it hits
the house at a different angle,
the rain chipping away at the eaves,
the lightning clipping the tops
of your neighbor's trees. You hear footsteps
in the middle of the night, feel them
along your headboard when you are half asleep.
In the morning no one eats breakfast.

At times, when you run your fingers along your jaw,
you remember the questions strangers asked,
the ones about resemblance and grandparents.
You begin to see odd profiles all around you
and consider the origin of chins.
An electric razor is in the medicine cabinet.
For some reason, curly hair is the topic
of conversation, the way it behaves in public,
the texture between thumb and forefinger.
You are puzzled as you look at old photos.

When you least expect it, words become
unnecessary. The bannister is smooth
and the back door closes softly.
Someone else is worried about taking
the pictures at all of the reunions
and pulling the weeds in the flowerbeds.
You find an old comfort in the upstairs,
where the carpet is worn in familiar spots,
the curtains are full of the wind,
and someone has turned down your bed.
Seedtime

Grey afternoon left in a huff,
crushing out its spit-ragged butt
between the rows of broken stalks.

November dark fell hard, and now,
as greasy and cold as the winter mud,
on his back beneath his first John Deere,
his kidneys aching with cornstalks
and a mortgage, lies the boy
who played first base for Leesburg.

He’s not thinking, as you might—God,
I’m weary—let the damn combine
fall off its blocks. Nor is he hoping

that the girl will have herself—
and that means you, too—fixed.
Tired and twisted, he wishes only

to wrench the Visegrips out of his back
Levis pocket, scrunch them around inside
his coveralls, up and through his front
zipper, then to lock them around this one stuck nut. That done, to buy this farm and a dozen others.

Tonight, he's the old grey mutt that howls in your dreams, barks at the slowness of your rising,

as you were another seed, bitching in his thighs, making him ache for a new plow and a thousand acres, always for spring and sowing.
Her Alabaster Skin

This is my study, there is my desk, and that is my chair, and on the desk is my manuscript, the great yawning bulk of it, waiting for me, but I am not ready. I'm not Veronica LaMonica yet. I need one more can of Jolt, one more stroll through the rooms of my house, one more argument with myself about my life and the dead end it has stumbled into.

I need another fifteen minutes to project myself into Veronica. It is 9:00 A.M., and I need to get twenty rough-draft pages of *Moist Days, Dry Nights* written today. My editor, Cadmus Xenedes, is getting nervous about me. "You're slowing down, you're losing RPMs, Gregory," he says. "We have a schedule for Veronica. You are off the schedule, Gregory."

I write three Veronica LaMonicas a year. It's October and I've turned in only two. *Heart Murmurs* and *Savage in My Bed*. Cadmus sent me a Macintosh to speed things along but I haven't uncrated it yet. Veronica, a true Victorian, doesn't understand, or approve of, high technology. And there's no need for her understanding or approval. *Rough Hands* sold ninety-five thousand copies in six months. Veronica is a star visible to the naked eye in the romantic universe.

"Rough Hands has torque," Cadmus said when he read it in manuscript. "Torque, and high compression. Subtlety too, you know? Like you can't hear the valve lifters. I read some of these junkers and by God you can hear the valve lifters, Gregory. Once you hear the lifters, you begin to hear everything—tappets, timing gear, piston slap, the works. You can hear the carbon chipping
off the cylinder walls. And then the suspension goes. I mean suspension of disbelief, right down the old grease hole.”

Before he became a top romance fiction editor, Cadmus was a mechanic. A literate mechanic who got tired of black fingernails, split knuckles, and coveralls. Now he wears laid-back uncon­structed double-breasted suits by Ronaldus Shamask at a thou­sand dollars a copy, and gets his nails done twice a week.

Poached eggs, bacon, toast, and Jolt—my breakfast. Jolt gets Veronica into high gear. A second or third can flips her into overdrive. Carlo, my son, says I’ve ruined my talent and now I’m killing myself. Carlo won’t eat the food I cook. He eats poached fish for breakfast. Clean protein sources and Omega-3 are his obsessions. He has grown up fearing cholesterol and the triglycer­ides. He belongs to the Overinformed Generation. Educated daily by Donahue, Oprah, the evening news, and weekly by 20/20, 60 Minutes, and the network specials designed to alarm and depress, the Overinformed Generation know the thousand paths to per­sonal and collective catastrophe. They know who is poisoning the air, what they are poisoning it with, and they know the economic downside of cleanup. They are privy to the timetable for the destruction of the ozone layer. They understand the global trag­edy the elimination of the Brazilian rain forests will produce. Alzheimer’s, AIDS, acid rain, the Greenhouse Effect, the poison­ing of the aquifers, and the extinction of humpback whales, rhi­nos, elephants, and the California condor define their future. Even so, they tend to be a cheerful lot who cling to the hopeful notion that we have not floundered past the point of no return, an op­timism I don’t share.
Carlo jogs to school wearing a smog mask. He buys expensive, organically grown vegetables with his allowance. He puts a tablespoon of cider vinegar into every glass of water he drinks—water that has been filtered by reverse osmosis—to enhance digestion. He reads excerpts to me from articles in *Organic Living Now*, his favorite magazine. He wants to discourage me away from eggs, red meat, french fries, whole milk, cheese, butter, caffeine, and white bread. Which is to say, my generation’s notion of *real food*. He’s a bore, but a beautifully healthy bore. His mother moved out a year and a half ago, unable to put up with his organic-living extremism and my sad-sack end-of-the-road pessimism.

Veronica won’t come again today. I hope she’s only being moody. I fiddle with *Moist Days, Dry Nights* for an hour, trying to trick some life into it while fighting off a caffeine-fueled headache. “Her alabaster skin seemed cool as rare porcelain to Victor Carrenaga,” I write, trying to get the first love scene into gear. But once in gear, the engine dies. Could be a fuel problem, could be the electrical system. Could be both. Out of gas, out of juice. (Cadmus’s lingo is catchy.) “Palpitating in the delirium of anticipation . . .” Jesus. These Latinate multisyllabics are like sugar in the gas tank. The engine gets gummed up and freezes, the plugs fouled with smarm. Carlo comes into my office, eating yogurt. “Stuck, huh, Dad?” he says.

“ Aren’t you going to be late for yoga practice?” I say. Among other things, Carlo is a kibbitzer. When Veronica is here and cooking I don’t mind. But when she’s on the rag, dismal in old bathrobe and carpet slippers, hiding from the world, every interference is a major roadblock with no detours.
"Why don't you write a real novel sometime, Dad?" Carlo asks. "I mean, isn't that what you set out to do twenty years ago?"

I swivel around and regard this yogurt-slurping teenaged hypochondriacal repository of moral wisdom. "You've got a complaint, Carlo? Correct me if I overstate the case, son, but didn't Veronica just buy you a three-year-old Celica? Doesn't she provide you with a steady supply of wheat-germ oil, oat bran, pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, organically grown rice? Are you sure you want me to fire Veronica? Do you really want me to join the mainstream of starving writers who drag Integrity around with them like dead whales? 'I'm poor, but I'm clean,' they say. 'Nobody fucks with my dead whale,' they say."

During this speech, Carlo has been scraping the bottom of his yogurt container. "I think you protest too much, Pop," he finally says. "I think there's a real novel in you dying to get out and that's why Veronica is out of town."

"Bullshit."

"Veronica would never use three multisyllable words in one sentence," he says, peering at the page in my ancient Smith Corona. "She may write hog slop but she's still a pro."

"Carlo?"

"What, Dad?"

"Get out."

He ignores me, caresses the uncrated computer. "If you're not going to use this Mac Cadmus sent you, how about giving it to me?"

Two hours later and the first love scene is still parked at the curb. Victor Carrenga is the biggest tongue-tied klutz when it comes to seduction since Miles Standish. "Oh, my dearest Flavia," Vic says,
stroking her hand or arm or shoulder. He wraps his sinewed arm around her waist—they are in Flavia's [ ] (plug in: garden, drawing room, studio, etc.), the moon is full and partially shrouded in clouds—night-blooming jasmine wounds the air with sweetness—in the middle distance the sound of a [ ] (plug in: cello, violin, harp, etc.) can be heard. His arm is steel, her will is weak, her cool alabaster skin in the moonlight stirs his manhood. She feels something move within her, something warm and [ ] (plug in the euphemized bodily secretions).

Where the hell are you, Veronica?

The thunk of mail falling from the slot in the front door gives me an excuse to bail out of my office. A fat letter from Cadmus plus a thin letter from my ex-wife's lawyer.

"Gregory, for Christ's sakes," Cadmus begins, "what is going on here? I read the crankcase sludge you sent me. I'm asking you this—who wrote them for you, Fulton Foulbreath Muffdiver? It reads like something out of the Journal for the Society of Pudpounders, Dingleberries, and Buttpopppers. Where did you pick up all those lacy words and pussywhipped sentence structures, from Henry Hollownuts James? Where is my ballsy Veronica? Look, Gregory, I'm telling you as a friend, not just as your editor and spiritual mechanic, this lemon has no torque. You've blown your head gaskets, hombre. Also, your timing gear is stripped. If you had made it to the top of the hill you could coast home, but you're still in the parking lot, kid. Okay, never mind. You'll come through. You always do, don't you? Especially when the mortgage payment comes due. This is just a rough spot in the road. Take a detour, or go back and start over. I like your first sentence. Start from there, throw the other ninety pages into the dumpster. 'Flavia Lockridge decided once and for all to leave Plainfield, New
Jersey, and try her luck out west as a landscape photographer.’ Now, Greg, old cock, that fucking drives. And keep in mind, you are not Emerson. (Fittapaldi, I mean; though you’re not R. Waldo, either.) Oh, by the way, Veronica is on a tour. She’ll be in your B. Dalton’s next Saturday. Go buy a book. You ever read the shit you write? It ain’t all that bad.” A wad of manuscript pages is stapled to the letter, each page heavily scarred with red ink.

The letter from Jasmine’s—my ex-wife’s—lawyer is blunt. He wants—and will sue to get—a modest increase in the monthly alimony check, having discovered that Rough Hands was a modest success. When I get back to my office, Veronica is there. I can almost smell her. “Flavia Lockridge decided once and for all to leave Plainfield, New Jersey, and try her luck out west as a landscape photographer. It was just one more thing her husband would object to, but Roger’s objections no longer mattered to her.” Elated, I jump out of my chair and head for the kitchen for another bolt of Jolt, but when I get back, Veronica’s gone again: “Purposefully, and without a modicum of regret,” I type, “Flavia envisioned a rehabilitated life-style.” I take my hands off the keyboard and look at them, as if they are to blame for this godawful prose. But it’s a vapor lock of the brain. I pull onto an off ramp and coast to a dead stop in the middle of nowhere.

Saturday at the mall is like medieval Budapest. A covered street of shops, throngs of shoppers and idlers, street performers—mimes, jugglers, string quartets, beggars in the guise of fundraisers for worthy causes—becomes a thriving example of human commerce at its cheeriest. I love the damn places, but regret that they have sucked the life out of the city center. But the city is a dinosaur, grown too large and inefficient and dangerous for sur-
vival. The mall is the return to safe and colorful village life. Artif-

cial? You bet, like everything else the hairless big-brained con-
genitally moody bipeds do. The mall is one of our little last gasps,
a quaint invention, much like the romance novels of Veronica

LaMonica.

“Veronica” is on time, seated at her card table in front of B.
Dalton’s, a stack of Rough Hands in front of her. She is stunning.
Literally. I carry a mental image of Veronica that has evolved over
the years since her first book. She defined herself gradually for
me, moving from the generalities of cliché (tall, willowy, full-
breasted, chestnut hair cascading down her splendid Sigourney
Weaver shoulders, her alabaster skin seemingly illuminated from
the interior by moonlight, and so on) to the specifics that imply
an individual (intelligent eyes the gray-green of the sea under a
bright overcast, eyes that often have a slightly self-deprecating
smile in them; the prominent aquiline nose of old Florentine
aristocracy; a generous but not foolish mouth implying a sensu-
ality that is sophisticated yet childlike in its ability to appreciate
every experience as new and original). And so when I saw her—
the woman hired to play her on this book-signing tour—and saw
that she conformed almost exactly to the ghost I’d been carrying
around in my head for six years, I was stunned. I knew my pub-
lisher, Candelabra Romances Inc., had been sending surrogate
Veronicas out on signing tours for several years, but I’d never
been interested enough in the scheme to go check one of them
out.

“Hi,” I say, approaching her card table and picking up one of
the gaudily illustrated paperbacks. “Selling many books?”

She smiles up at me, and her Veronica LaMonica teeth are just
as I had envisioned them. “Oh, yes. Quite a few, in fact. Rough
Hands has been one of my most successful efforts."

For her sake, I don’t want to let this go too far. “Look,” I say, “I’m Gregory Pastori.”

She gives me a blank look, her smile still in place, and I realize that she hasn’t been told who writes these trashy teasers. “I’m the real . . .”

But I’m cut off by a customer, a woman in her forties, hausfrau all the way, who sweeps up an armload of the luridly illustrated paperbacks and says, “I’m getting six for some friends, and another one for me. I’m afraid my copy is worn out—I’ve read it at least a dozen times!” The woman, humble and tongue-tied before celebrity, is silent as the books are signed. She practically genuflects when she leaves. “Veronica” looks up at me with those incomparable eyes and says, “I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“I was just going to say that I’m a writer, too.”

This doesn’t interest her. Her eyes become horizon-gray. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I am unable to help you.”

“I . . .” My jaw hangs agape. I hadn’t expected pity. It’s as if I’d told her I had some incurable skin fungus.

“Writing is a difficult, solitary profession,” she says, touching my wrist, a nurselike gesture. “Most fail. I do not recommend it. On the other hand, if you feel you must write, then, by all means, write. But do not ask other writers to provide shortcuts for you. If you have real talent, then your work will eventually be published. And even then you may find your work does not appeal to a large audience. No, it is a difficult, solitary profession, and I do not recommend it.”

She has not only learned her speech well, she has the acting ability to give it authenticity. She looks world-weary and jaded now, as she lights up a Pall Mall and blows smoke into my chest.
The cigarette is a prop—she doesn’t inhale and she stubs it out after two more frowning puffs. “Well,” I say, “I only do it as a hobby. I hardly ever send my little stories out to publishers and such.”

“There are more satisfying hobbies,” she says, “than cooping yourself up in a little room typing prose fiction all day long. Why don’t you take up golf or fly fishing? It’s much healthier.”

It’s easy for writers to be cruel. We live in a constant state of self-doubt. We carry an unborn twin next to our spleens, a sneering monster who lets us know how elegantly or comically we fail. Sometimes we can let this monster twin speak for us. I’m a little surprised that Candelabra Romances Inc. coached her in that little-known peculiarity of the trade.

“Though I regard writing as my hobby, I am a published author,” I let my snotty twin say, his words friendly as honed steel. “I’ve had work in Over the Edge and in New Age Cannibal.”

“Really?” she says, her writerly veneer mottling. “I didn’t realize, Mr. … I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your …” She’s all goofy and out of synch. I can hear her valve lifters kissing her rocker arms. She’s losing manifold pressure.

“Pastori,” I say, extending a coolly elegant but forgiving hand. “Gregory Pastori.”

“It is always a pleasant surprise to encounter another published author while out in the field,” she says, reading her invisible cue card.

“Isn’t it?” I say. I decide to strike while her timing gear has jumped its grooves. “How about lunch, Miss LaMonica?”

For an instant I can see behind the mask—the cool, evaluating eyes, the full lips pursed in judgment. She could be an executive secretary at Candelabra, which would make her a boss without
portfolio or the power to kick ass. Responsibility without authority. One of the civilized world's best-kept secrets is that nothing in it works without executive secretaries or administrative assistants, also known as Girl Fridays back in the primitive days of unashamed sexism. "Why not?" she says gamely. "I've just got one condition—no shoptalk, okay?"

"There's a great Thai joint upstairs," I say. "My treat."

"The signing is over at three. How about an early supper?" she says, her sea-gray eyes pulling me in like a friendly riptide.

The magicians who keep Candelabra Inc. at the top of the pulp-romance field know what they are doing. "Veronica" not only looks the part, she has the qualities of mind and heart of someone who might have written *Firestorms in the Blood* (Veronica's first effort, written with the innocent joy of a beginner), and we hit it off instantly. After our early supper we get slightly bombed at a place that hires old gray-haired rhythm-and-blues artists of the forties and fifties. We dance to the mellower numbers, the Ivory Joe Hunter-style tunes, and even though our era was the sixties, we get sentimental and misty-eyed and we hold that mood all the way home to my bed, where [ ]

Plug in one of the following:

(1) Her alabaster skin, in the soft glow of moonlight that fell through the casement, inspired his urgent manhood to complete the bonding of kindred souls.

(2) He hadn't felt this hot for a woman since the night his ex got loose on Pernod and wanted to do it standing up in a Parisian pissoir, front to rear.

(3) His crankshaft never knew such RPMs. His super-charged turbine was a tornado of power. She opened her throttle wide and
her engine roared, putting out almost more torque than he could handle.

(4) All of the above.

I wake up alone the next day and am tempted to believe the worst: schizophrenic breakdown. Daylight dreaming in 3D. Brain-cell fission. The Veronica I have been piecing together all these years has reached critical mass and has come to life, a Frankenstein creature of the half-real world of psychotic delusion. I pull the blanket over my head to shield myself from this line of thought, then I hear her voice, laughing in the kitchen.

Veronica and Carlo are having a breakfast of sliced mango and yogurt. Carlo is enjoying himself immensely. The sappy grin on his face is not typical. Usually, at this time of the morning, he’s brooding over the newspaper, collecting more evidence of mankind’s dark fate.

"Dad!" he says. "Veronica’s terrific!"

"I know," I mumble, exchanging a quick glance with Veronica, who is wearing—appropriately for an alter ego—a pair of my pajamas.

If Carlo picks up my meaning, he’s playing innocent. “She’s into organics,” he says. “Not just superficially, either. She knows her nutrient chemistry!”

"I know," I mumble again, the taste of her chemistry still with me.

Veronica pushes a bowl of yogurt-buried mangoes in front of me. “Have some of this,” she says. “It will start to clear your system.”

“I believe my system is clear, thank you,” I say significantly. “I’d rather have eggs and bacon, if it won’t make you two gag.”

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“That’s the sort of diet that will guarantee you’ll be spending the last ten years or so of your life in and out of hospitals,” she says. “Eating properly won’t necessarily extend your life, but it will improve its quality. You’ll die healthy.”

“I’ve got no complaints about quality,” I mumble.

Veronica excuses herself then from the table to get dressed. She has to catch a ten-o’clock plane. When she’s gone, Carlo leans toward me and whispers, “Dad, she’s sensational. Are you going to marry her?”

It is not a recommended feature of quality parenting to tell your teenage son that he has his head up his ass. I dip into my yogurt, giving myself time to restructure my response. “Carlo, do you know who she is?”

“Sure, Dad! She told me. She’s Veronica LaMonica, the real one. I mean, the fake real one. The public one. The one that doesn’t write soft porn, and you’ve got to give her credit for that.”

“Did you tell her, wiseass, that I am Veronica LaMonica?”

“No way! You can do that later. But that’s no big deal. No one takes that garbage seriously anyway. What difference could it make to her, or to anyone, who actually writes the fluff? The whole series could be done by a computer. Why do you think Cadmus sent you the Mac? They’ve probably got software now that can do three-quarters of the work.”

In spite of my own misgivings about what I do for a living, Carlo’s little demonstration of ingratitude annoys me. “I am an artist,” I say, mustering dignity. “Oh, not a great artist, not even a mediocre one, but I am an artist just the same. Words, Carlo, don’t come that easy, even the old worn-out ones.”

Carlo, by way of apology, waves an impatient hand across the table a few times. “Okay, okay. But think of the advantages, Dad.

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I mean, you could write the books, and Veronica—or whatever her real name is—as your wife could do the interviews and signings and such. You guys could get supercoordinated.”

I head for the fridge for my morning can of Jolt. My brain isn’t working fast enough to keep up with Carlo’s hyperactive nervous system, which he must have inherited from his mother. Why is he suddenly playing the marriage broker? Because she knows her nutrient chemistry?

“Are you feeling all right, son?” I say.

“Dad, I like her. She’s the neatest lady you’ve brought home since you and Mom split.” His impassioned, clear-eyed face makes me wonder if I, as a child, ever had such intensity, such belief. I decide, no, nothing approaching Carlo’s directness and honesty ever troubled my sly, trouble-dodging path through life. I am a professional taker of the Easy Way, and have been ever since I learned that my parents, my teachers, and most adults gave you what you wanted once you gave them what they wanted. This matured into a Philosophy of Life. Some call it Pragmatism, such as our current leaders. It is sold to the world, these days, as Virtue. Why else did I allow myself to become Veronica? Why did I give up my small but impractical dream of writing from the heart? The sigh I release has more meaning in it than I want Carlo to grasp, and I cover it with a phlegmy fit of romantically tubercular coughing.

“Well, hell, I like her too, Carlo—”

“Besides, Dad,” he says, blurting out the secret of his attraction, “she’s a professional accupressurist! She’s actually studied holistic healing techniques. You’d never have a caffeine headache again! And don’t tell me you don’t get them. You’ve got one right now.”
I am relieved as well as saddened by this. Carlo’s budding pragmatism will diminish him a bit, but it will also secure the quality of his life just as effectively as nutritive responsibility. “Jesus, Carlo,” I say. “What did you do, interview her for the job?”

“Talking about me?” Veronica says, dressed and stunning in the doorway.

“Dad has a caffeine headache,” Carlo announces.

“Poor baby,” Veronica says. She stands behind me and touches my temples with her fingertips. She finds the hard, choppy pulse there, and applies a slowly rotating pressure that seems to siphon off pain instantly. She slides her fingertips to the back of my skull, then down my neck to my shoulders, the dull ache trailing after them like the brats of Hamlin after the Piper. She picks up my hand and squeezes the pad of flesh between thumb and forefinger and a bolt of pure pleasure passes through me, as if all my endorphins have been dumped into my bloodstream. Orgasm without friction, sweat, sticky residue, or romance. There might be a market for it.

“Don’t stop, Veronica,” I beg, without shame, when she returns my hand to my lap.

“I’ve got to get to the airport,” she says. “I’ve got a signing and a couple of personal appearances in L.A. tomorrow. This may surprise you two, but it isn’t easy being Veronica LaMonica.”

Not much surprises me these days. The nation is shocked to learn that the captains of oil tankers will lie drunk in their cabins as their ships drift toward the gutting reef, or that airline crews often get hammered in an airport bar before takeoff. But the suicidal irresponsibility of those charged with guiding our delicately structured world seems entirely reasonable to me. Oh, our

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postmodern devices are indeed the wonders the technocrats make them out to be. Unfortunately, the hairless, big-brained, congenitally moody biped is always behind the wheel—drunk, below or above deck, distracted, poorly trained, recently divorced or two-timed, underfucked, overdrawn, doped, delusional, or just sleepy. Eventually, in one way or another, he’ll allow the front tires to hit the soft shoulder and we’ll all go screaming over the cliff.

I want to be wrong about this. But the caveman who invented the ax probably dropped his first redwood on his family. When I think of Carlo and his Overinformed Generation, I get mildly optimistic. Generally inept as parents, we have nonetheless raised a generation of kids—with excellent surrogate parenting from Donahue, Oprah, Geraldo, 60 Minutes, 20/20, etc.—who are too scared to go to sleep at the wheel. I would trust Carlo at the helm of the Exxon Valdez, or in front of the control panel at Three Mile Island. I just don’t want to sit in a bar with him for the greater part of an afternoon.

Carlo is behind the wheel now in fact, taking me to the airport. I don’t know whether he talked me into this or whether I’m just escaping his nonstop, logically impeccable harangue, which has gone on now for two days.

“I can’t just go to L.A.,” I told him. “I don’t even know her itinerary.”

“You wily devil,” Cadmus said, when I asked for “Veronica’s” schedule. “Mr. Goodwrench to the rescue, eh? You won’t regret it, Gregory. The lady—Paula Voorhees—has great torque, even in overdrive. Measurable in foot-pounds, buddy. That’s what they say around the shop. Fantastic gear ratios. And if that isn’t enough, she’s also got the classic lines of an XKE Jag. But listen,
you’d better keep both hands on the wheel with one eye on the tachometer and the other eye on the road, if you follow me."

I didn’t follow him at all, but then I hardly ever did. Cadmus can be as arcane as a Zimbabwean diviner of chicken entrails. Besides, I wasn’t looking for anything that needed a lot of long-range planning, Carlo’s arguments notwithstanding. Even with a thing as predictable as a romance novel, I advance the plot one day at a time, hoping for little surprises that make the morning’s work fun in spite of the fact that I’m following a road map. You take what you get, and sometimes what you get is not a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. Which is my humble hope for the world.

Carlo wants to carry my bag into the terminal—to make sure I get on the plane—but I tell him, “Don’t worry, be happy, we’re all going to fall off the edge of the world anyway,” which makes him frown because he knows better than I do how close we are to the brink. I give him a bear hug and a kiss, for he is my son and I love him more than Donahue and Oprah do and he needs to know it. He wants me and the planet to have a second chance. And a second chance is the sweetest blessing any of us can hope for.
Dennis Kern

**Portrait of Barry Kitterman**


From the collection of Bryan Spellman.
The Middle Of Nowhere: Stories
Kent Nelson
$18.95; cloth.
Reviewed by Claire Davis

"Imagine living every day wondering whether you had done the right thing, whether you ought to go to some new place, whether you still loved your wife." That question, posed in the concluding story, "Invisible Life," defines the movement of The Middle of Nowhere.

Nelson is a writer coming into his prime, and these thirteen stories reflect that. In his first collection, The Tennis Player, Nelson's craft was already evident; in this book, Nelson exhibits an empathy and respect for his characters—an affection for their fallibility—that was less evident in the earlier collection.

The title story, a Pushcart Prize winner, introduces a young man who is literally in the middle of nowhere. He lives at "the end of a dirty road which petered out into the Baboquivari Mountains" southwest of Tucson. He occupies a trailer home with his father where "the previous tenants had seen fit to throw their trash into the steeper ravine." From this remote station, he has a chance to take shelter and come to terms with his past—his failure to save his mother from herself—and with the present, his father and his father's women.

"The Trogon Dish" chronicles an older couple's attempt to escape the fate of most retirement couples, an "old age house on Bellaire playing solitaire and listening to game shows on television." They buy a trailer so they can "pull the camper onto a stretch of deserted beach and live from the land—gather bananas and papayas, shoot jungle fowl and fish in the sun." In Mexico they find the jungle less accommodating than anticipated. Aiken, the elderly man, is a carefully drawn character, a man of questionable generosity. The reader is gently let in to see how little this man is capable of giving, until the moment when a merciful and generous gesture toward an in-
jured animal brings Aiken face to face with what he's always feared. Nelson makes this couple live and breathe. We believe they are enmeshed in each other's small failures, and we come to understand how they survive and still love.

If Nelson's characters are complex and vivid, so is the landscape he sets them in. His love of the land and wildlife is evident in many of the stories and the details are brightly rendered and pertinent, especially in "The Mine From Nicaragua," winner of an O'Henry Award. The setting is an island beach where a "few live oaks and pines had been preserved amidst the huge houses, and several rows of accreted sand dunes protected the houses from the water as well as from the riffraff who sunned themselves there on the beach." A group of people find themselves examining something washed up on shore. But it is the lives of the characters washed up on the beach that become the artifacts of greatest curiosity.

There are few missteps in this collection, although some of the stories do not come up to the same standards of excellence. "I Had To Do Something" is a good, solid story, but the device of a woman coming to grips with the unfaithful husband's leaving, by means of chopping her own firewood, seems a little too heavily laden with inherent symbolism. The story is predictable despite the charming invention of a young child who wears a snorkel throughout. "The Tarpon Bet" is a chilling story of two men making bets for each other's wives on a fishing trip. But the narrative fails to take a clear stance where one is essential to an uncompromising reading of this morally frightening tale.

Still, the collection is a strong offering by Nelson with a clear thread moving throughout, holding it together for a more satisfying read than most short story collections offer. Nelson knows story and how to tell it. He may start us out in the middle of nowhere, but we don't stay there for long.
Mary Clearman Blew's new book of personal essays, All But the Waltz, can be frustrating. The writing is consistently sharp, often poetic in its precision, but is strangely unfulfilling. The strength of the writing often highlights the problem in the book; by evoking the past so strongly, Blew sacrifices the development of a strong present. Without this objective setting, little resonates.

The essays that do resonate include “Dirt Roads,” an account of the death of Blew's father, and the title piece. They are powerful because the author is a participant in the events. “Dirt Roads” works because Blew's analysis of the events and mythologies surrounding her father's death never overwhelms or replaces the importance of event. The events are so powerful and mysterious they require analysis. This essay, like most great personal essays, would work as a short story; all the great story elements are in place. When Blew allows herself to become a character, the work soars.

Unfortunately, Blew's conception of the book—an extended history of her family and its relationship to the landscape of central Montana—limits her presence in the book. Often, as in “Reading Abraham,” Blew exists only to describe piecing together the life of an ancestor through fragments of his letters, journal entries, and other assorted jottings. The character Abraham is fascinating, a man who feels compelled to write an account of every event in his life, and then saves all of these scraps. Blew pieces these fragments together and tries to reconstruct a life from the written artifacts. The idea is fascinating, but Blew can't seem to find the essay's heart. It moves awkwardly between two frames, between Abraham's documented life and Blew's present-day research. Blew is reduced to a detective in the piece, and this slights both her work and Abraham's life. A film analogy helps clarify the flaw: Abraham's scenes are real
action, runaway carts, encounters with Native Americans, and the like; when the film cuts to Blew's story, the camera pulls back to reveal little more than the author poring over scraps of paper with fading ink. For the essay to work, Blew's story must be as compelling as Abraham's. Otherwise, Abraham remains nothing more than an oddity, an alien figure from the past.

The treatment of the past as alien appears elsewhere. "Little Jake and the Old Ways," about Hutterites in Montana, works because this alien quality is justified through point-of-view. When the author first sees Hutterites, she is a child, fascinated and frightened by these "Midnights," a wonderful mis-hearing of Mennonites. Blew also goes further to isolate the Hutterites, using the history of the church to show historical precedent for such isolation. Blew's re-imagining of a childhood perspective is effective because it is a reflection of a real character, which keeps the sense of mystery and wonder grounded.

When Blew removes herself, the pieces lose that grounding. In "Going to Fort Peck," an essay about Montanans working on a New Deal construction project, Blew disappears entirely and lets other characters develop the narrative. Without Blew, the story lacks a center. It is difficult to determine the line of the essay: which character is important, which event is critical, which story to follow. The piece cleanly divides into halves: the interplay of workers in the first half and the struggles of one specific couple in the second. But it never congeals, never satisfyingly connects its two parts.

The feeling of dissatisfaction in "Going to Fort Peck" hangs over the entire book—several essays fail to find their centers. They remain distant and become frustrating reading. The sections that work make the book a worthwhile read, but they also make the weaker essays seem worse than they are. It's like going through the photo album of someone else's family. The images are perfectly captured, but it's as if the one person who can tell you about the people in the photographs has left the room.
Epiphany at Goofy's Gas
Greg Keeler
$9.95; paper.
Reviewed by Ryan J. Benedetti

What is it about this guy? It's not that I'm not hypnotized. Punch drunk is a better description. A literary handbook I have says an epiphany accomplishes "a quick flash of recognition in which something simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light." Well, there you go: Keeler is a master of epiphany. He keeps all his promises.

Keeler goes so far as to give us a new definition of epiphany. His poems show quick flashes of insight but not just from the simple and commonplace. Keeler's lightning insights come from the goofy, the absurd. The whole book fools you with its off-kilter sense, offering such titles as "Pocatello Paranoia," "Swiss Army Sermon," and "A Vast, Dark Winnebago." This goofiness is not the typical cross-eyed-finger-up-the-nose tongue wagging. Instead, it pulls you into Keeler's vision of the absurd in ordinary life. The strength of his poetry: the endings that send you to the mat.

Take, for instance, "Telling Grandma to Shut Up":
She just sat on the hen house stoop
and cried and I tried to explain
how with Mom and Dad it was
well sort of a joke . . .

The poem is about mistakes and attempts to correct them. Each time the speaker tries to correct his blunder, he gets deeper in. He tries to make up for his off-handedness:

. . . but by then all
I could see was her bonnet above
her shaking shoulders and I even
offered to get the strap because
I knew I deserved it even though
I didn't mean it . . .
He picks his grandmother a rose since she won’t stop crying:
   and when she saw it she cried
   even louder because she had wanted
   her friends to see it there on
   the bush . . .

The speaker becomes tangled in his attempts to alleviate his guilt. Just as soon as we feel trapped in his frustration, the ending snaps back and leaves us with a resonant surprise:
   . . . so she stopped crying and
   said o.k. go get the strap.

How about something downright cartoon-like that opens wide in the end and swallows us: “Turkey,” told in the turkey’s voice. (I forced my in-laws to read it over Thanksgiving. Absurdity and the ordinary, what better place for it?) Let’s hear this turkey out:
   If Ben Franklin had had his way,
   I’d be your national bird.
   Screw your bald eagle
   just another pretty vulture.
   Didn’t I feed your founding fathers?

Indignation, Keeler shows us, is the turkey’s dark legacy. It’s the bird’s self-reflection that makes the poem. Or maybe it’s his inferiority complex:
   Perhaps I didn’t spend
   enough time in the bushes.
   Perhaps my head looks too much like a penis.

In the last line, that jerk of insight we get from the turkey’s predicament really makes the poem:
   and I can’t get rid
   of this drawl
   no matter how far north
   Fish and Game tries
   to “introduce” me.
The poem doesn’t turn out to be an easy, goofy monologue from the turkey. It opens up in this puzzling ending. The turkey becomes a specific turkey, a political turkey aware of his own predicament. This turkey starts as a candidate for the national bird. He is almost a universal bird, an abstraction for the plentitude of America. In the end, he is a specific, concrete bird, a bird who is being removed from his roots. Complex problems for a bird who began as a caricature.

Keeler’s endings are not Sunday punches or cheap shots. On the other hand, the one weakness of the book is that some of the endings are not pulled off as well as others. “Homage to Louis L’Amour” is a good example. I like what the poem is trying to do—make the world of the traditional Western open up and get crazy. But the poem seems forced and doesn’t seem to go anywhere, really. The ending is not as satisfying and competent as I know Keeler to be.

Overall, Keeler’s language will wake you, head swimming, into his particular vision of reality. You find yourself wanting to strip down and crawl among Keeler’s creatures: the humans are as animal as you or I. You find yourself shaking hooves with existentialist cattle. Keeler’s poetry strolls into your house like an ordinary appliance repair man. Pretty soon, you’ll find yourself considering Winnebagos and their mythic beastliness. You’ll find yourself chuckling on the floor. The repair man will flash his eyes at you. He’ll wave his rubber wrench. Later, you’ll smash your lawn mower just to get him to show up again. You’ll buy a Swiss Army knife and wear it like a St. Christopher medal. Strangely enough, you’ll stretch your jaw and beg for just one more.
Jim Harrison's *Just Before Dark*, his sixteenth book, is handsomely bound between hard covers by Russell Chatham's Clark City Press. It's a true joy, a door opening up a number of different thresholds to this poet and novelist's sometimes frenetic world. In three sections, having to do with food, travel and sport, and literary matters, Harrison builds up and peels apart a series of fascinating personae. These pieces of nonfiction give us—Harrison's devoted and sometimes unbalanced fans—a chance to hear him unburden himself on any number of subjects. Mostly, though, these essays are bulletins from the different points in our republic where Harrison has managed to rescue himself. Along with his survival, we, too, find one more avenue of escape into the world that actually matters, the separate places we make for ourselves furnished with totemic items, home recipes, and quotes from writers who tell us certain home truths.

In "Part I: Food," Harrison astounds and astonishes with complicated, exacting recipes for everything from a "reduced-calorie Tuscan stew (very savory lean Muscovy duck, *pancetta*, white beans, copious garlic, fresh sage, and thyme)" to "preparing roast quail stuffed with leeks and sweetbreads (served on a polenta pancake with a heavily truffled woodcock sauce)." The point is, as Harrison says, "to eat well and not die from it—for the simple reason that that would be the end of my eating."

With the body handsomely provided for, Harrison goes on to tackle more troublesome matters in "Travel and Sport." Fishing and hunting have restored Harrison's mental balance more than once by his own account. It is the last three essays, though, that speak most plainly to me. "Log of the Earthtoy Drifthumper," "Going Places," and "Don't Fence Me In"—all accounts of road trips undertaken for
their own reasons—close out the sporting middle of the book with Harrison’s peripatetic recipes to cure what ails our dislocated souls these days. From the precise images of “a big coyote with a blood-wet muzzle settling down for a stint of car-watching,” to the good advice of “Leave your reason, your logic, at home,” to the assurance that “Driving into emptiness keeps you at least a few miles ahead of your neuroses,” Harrison’s sure-footed, cinematic prose offers avenues of escape into the back country of our own homeplaces.

Harrison saves his own home ground for the final section of the book in “Literary Matters.” The last two substantial essays key on the metaphor of survival: “Poetry As Survival,” and “Dream As Metaphor of Survival.” “Poetry As Survival” goes on to find beauty and hope in Native American poets’ accounts of the various reprieves they find themselves working their way through. In the poetry of Louise Erdrich, Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, and James Welch, Harrison sees “the kind of poetry that reaffirms your decision to stay alive.” Harrison’s final word on his own survival comes in his definition of the novelist’s struggle “to convince the reader that the nature of character is deeply idiosyncratic to a point just short of chaos, that the final mystery is the nature of personality.” Harrison’s own richly complicated personality, as reflected in his work, “began to revolve around more ‘feminine’ subjects, the acquiring of new voices, and away from a concern with the ‘men at loose ends’ that tends to characterize the fiction of most male writers.”

And that is how Harrison chooses to end this remarkably candid collection of essays—with twenty-one short summaries of sometimes intimate dreams. His own survival as a writer and a human being comes from his ability to “offer my family, my writing, my friends, a portion of the gift I’ve been given by seeking it out, consciously or unconsciously.”

In this collection of recollections, Harrison crosses all his thresholds of perception, exploring himself for his readers. With a single
exception—"A Chat With A Novelist"—these essays enlighten and enlarge the worlds of both reader and writer. This book is that rare treat: a well-marked map of the best route home. It assures us we will arrive at the hour of peace and contentment with the promise of a fine supper and dear friends to share our good stories with, just before dark.
Christmas, 1990
Pen and ink.
Contributors’ Notes

Susan Aurand grew up in the Midwest, studied art at Ohio State University, then moved to Olympia, Washington, and became a devout Northwesterner. She has been teaching art and humanities at The Evergreen State College since 1974, and exhibiting her work regionally.

Christanne Balk’s *Bindweed* won the 1985 Walt Whitman Award. She lives in Seattle with her husband and daughter.

Ryan J. Benedetti is an M.F.A. student in the creative writing program at the University of Montana. He was born and raised in Great Falls. His poems have been published in *Kinnikinnik*. His only regret in life is that he is not Woody Allen.

Kevin Boyle’s work has appeared in a number of journals, including The *Antioch Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The North American Review* and *Another Chicago Magazine*. Poems are forthcoming in *Northwest Review*, *Cottonwood* and, once again, *The North American Review*. He has just finished work on a Ph.D. in English at the University of Iowa.


Sandra Dal Poggetto received her B.A. with honors from the University of California, Davis, and her M.A. from San Francisco State University. She taught painting and drawing at Napa Valley College. Dal Poggetto now resides in Helena, Montana. She is affiliated with the Dorothy Weiss Gallery in San Francisco and the J. Noblett Gallery in Boyes Hot Springs, California.

Claire Davis is the fiction editor for *CutBank*.

John Davis lives on an island in Puget Sound, Washington, and is completing a manuscript of poems which focuses on his experiences in a garage door factory. His work is forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Pennsylvania Review*, and *The Seattle Review*.
Rick DeMarinis has been teaching at the University of Texas, El Paso, since 1988. His most recent books are *The Voice of America*, a collection of short stories, and *The Year of The Zinc Penny*, a novel (both published by W.W. Norton). He is working on a new novel.

Gregory Donovan is Director of Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has poems forthcoming in *New England Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *South Coast Poetry Journal*, having previously published in *Kenyon Review*, *MSS*, and other magazines. "Homing" comes from his poetry collection, *Calling His Children Home*, which was recently accepted for publication by the University of Missouri Press.

Nancy Erickson lives and works in a mountain canyon near Missoula, Montana.

Kate Gadbow grew up in Cut Bank, Montana. She studied at the University of Washington, the University of Montpellier, France, and the University of Montana where she received a B.A. in French in 1974 and an M.F.A. in fiction in 1986. She directs the University of Montana writing lab and co-directs freshman composition. Her fiction has appeared in *Epoch*. She is working on a novel.

Pesha Gertler is absorbed in plans for a trip to Israel and the Occupied Territories where she will present the music and dance performance of her poem, "Sarah and Hagar," which contains a matriarchal vision of peace in the Middle East. Meanwhile, she continues to struggle to find the balance between living, writing and teaching.

Nick Heil is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana. "Pachinko" is his first published story.

Steven R. Holloway lives with his wife and son in Missoula, Montana, where he teaches geography and makes maps, all kinds of maps. His business, Oikos Works Arts, gets light from the north, and is located along the river in town. Besides making maps he swims and plays the flute, pleasures he has enjoyed all his life.

William Jolliff grew up on a farm just outside Magnetic Springs, Ohio. He now teaches and serves as director of the Writing Workshop at
Messiah College. Between classes and committees he edits the *Rolling Coulter*, a poetry magazine, and plays with his kids, Jake Henry and Rebecca Peace. His work has recently appeared in *Galley Sail Review, Negative Capability, Cincinnati Poetry Review*, and other periodicals.

Sara Kelly is a graduate writing student at Brown University and a devoted admirer of the American Road. She hopes to someday drive the big rigs.

Dennis Kern is a native Montanan. He has been at the University of Montana since 1979 where he has worked as Gallery Director of the Paxson Gallery and Gallery of Visual Arts, and curator of the Museum of Fine Arts Permanent Art Collection. He is a printmaker and photographer as well as the proprietor of Rattlesnake Valley Press in Missoula.

David Koehn is pursuing his M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He has work forthcoming in *Painted Bride Quarterly* and *Apalachee Quarterly*.

James Langlas is the English Department Chair at Wheaton North High School in Wheaton, Illinois. His work has appeared recently in *Poetry* and *Spoon River Quarterly*, and is forthcoming in *The American Scholar, Cumberland Poetry Review*, and *Black Warrior Review*. He was a Fellowship Finalist Award Winner of the Illinois Arts Council in 1990, and received an Individual Artist Grant in 1991.

Beth Lo is an Associate Professor of Art and head of the ceramics area at the University of Montana. A member of the Big Sky Mudflaps, she has been awarded an American Craft Museum Design Award in 1986 and a Montana Individual Artist Fellowship in 1989. She is represented by the Mia Gallery in Seattle.

David Loewenwarter has lived in Montana for several years. He has won numerous awards for his photography.

Marjorie Maddox has poems published or forthcoming in *Poetry, Prairie Schooner, Kansas Quarterly, Wisconsin Review*, and elsewhere. A chapbook was published by Amelia Press in 1986. In 1988, she was awarded Cornell’s Chasen Award for poetry, and in 1989 the Academy of Ameri-
can Poets Prize. She is an assistant professor of literature and writing at Lock Haven University.

Edward Micus directs the Learning Center at Mankato State University in Mankato, Minnesota. His poems have appeared in Poetry, Indiana Review, Kansas Quarterly, Vision, Spoon River Quarterly, and others. He has recently finished a book of Vietnam War poetry.

Deborah Mitchell received her M.F.A. in printmaking from Utah State University, studying under master printer Moishe Smith. She lives in Missoula, Montana, where she is the curator of the Missoula Museum of the Arts.

Sharon Augusta Mitchell is a printmaker from Berkeley, California. She was educated at the California College of Arts and Crafts. "A Portrait of #20" has won several awards.

Richard Nester is a native of Virginia and a second-year fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Robert Olmstead was born in New Hampshire in 1954. He is currently writer-in-residence at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He is a 1989 recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and a Pennsylvania Fellowship for the Arts. His books include River Dogs, a collection of short stories; and Soft Water and Trail of Heart's Blood Wherever We Go, novels.

Danny Rendleman teaches composition and poetry at The University of Michigan, Flint, and has received two Michigan Council for the Arts grants since 1986. His most recent book is Skilled Trades, from Ridge-way Press in Detroit.


Teel Sale is an artist and author of Drawing / A Contemporary Approach (third edition, 1992, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich). Her work is exhibited
throughout the United States. She conducts workshops, illustrates books, and writes art criticism.

Rebecca Seiferle's first collection of poetry, Volte, is forthcoming from Sheep Meadow Press this spring, as is her translation of César Vallejo's Trilce. Her poetry has appeared most recently in Indiana Review, Calyx, and TriQuarterly, and is to be featured in the next issue of the Taos Review. She won the 1990 Writers Exchange Competition and the Bogin Award from the Poetry Society of America in 1991.

Peter Soliunas is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana.

Michael Umphrey is principal at St. Ignatius High School, St. Ignatius, Montana. His most recent book is Breaking Edge (University of Montana), winner of the Merriam-Frontier Award. He is a graduate of the M.F.A. program at the University of Montana.

David Van Buren graduated from the State University of New York at Oneonta. His poetry has appeared in Maryland Poetry Review, Wind, Midatlantic Review, and others. He lives with his wife and three children in Ireland, where he writes a weekly newspaper column for The Irish Voice.

Mary Vanek lives and works in Missoula, Montana.

Connie Wienke earned her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Montana in 1991. Her story, "Midnight Dreams," appeared in the Fall 1991 issue of Westering. For the past nine years she has lived in Jackson, Wyoming.

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