CutBank 48
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On the front cover:
Trisha Kyner
When the Duchess Whelped, 1996.
Porcelain, 8" x 5"
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Acknowledgements

The editors of CutBank would like to thank Carol Hayes and former editor Lary Kleeman for their diligent help in assembling another year's worth of our magazine.
The Editors of CutBank are pleased to present

The 1996–1997 RICHARD HUGO MEMORIAL
POETRY AWARD

to

Rande Mack
for his poem "mostly it echoes in manhattan, montana"
published in CutBank 45

and

D. J. Smith
for his poem "Miss Biggs"
published in CutBank 45

Judge: Jack Gilbert


The 1996–1997 A. B. GUTHRIE JR.
SHORT FICTION AWARD

to

Stephen Dixon
for excerpts from Gould: A Novel in Two Novels

Judge: Lucy Grealy

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TAG

I

On my side of the fence there's a pile
of weeds and roots like a dead dog's coat.
Dried leaves take flight, crash in the corners.
Starving raccoons ignore my trash.
The scar on my back is who I no longer am.
Just because I'm not strong doesn't mean
I wouldn't be useful as far as moving your piano.
I know finesse, technique, how to approach.
I'm certain it can be done by three of us.
It will fit in that empty corner, or that one.
My scar is not holy; it's not a design
or the orbit of any planet. I deserved it.
I prefer the dark—to forget all my lies—
you'll see the scar when the time is right—
I'll switch on the light, keep it on—
you might trace it with your long fingernail
again, or your tongue—you might turn away.

II

The neighbor boys and girls play
Kick the Can later than I can stay up.
They whisper and curse through my dream
of escape, they unlatch the gate, they hide
in my trees, the can rings off the curb,
they scuttle to safety, free.
While you trace the ribbon on my back
I'd like you to also kiss the scar on my shoulder:
I'll lie, you'll kneel, the TV on saying
end it all and join us now and improve
yourself, the remote in your free hand,
your eyes on the screen, mine on the ceiling.
—Just so long as you never utter we are planets with divergent orbits, or you’re my wishing-star, or I’m your faithful moon. The black dog chained to the metal toolbox in the yellow Chevy’s bed is not my demon. Nature loves a Tarzan in her trees. Does Tarzan think his hands vine to vine? What do we do when our programs end: sit propped in bed and listen to nature’s squall and children who one day will hope to die? I’m stumbling a little, I’ll be okay, I’m okay. You’ve probably fallen into your deep sleep that sounds like pain. If I eat, I’ll sleep. Inside my fridge a country of beggars sleeps. In my cupboards, behind the row of soups, I hide all the important documents.
LAST SUCCESS

Horse Develkin sat the fence and stared off into nothing. Kaw Liga, John Paul called him as he walked by, and then broke into song, his oboe deep voice driving the cowbirds into flight. They filled the sky over J bar P. In their absence it was Horse at the driveway’s edge and fat John Paul half in the crewcab and John Paul’s wife who was afraid of the sun and John Paul’s daughter who read the paper to Horse when it came on Sundays. Horse, who had been able to read for already twelve of his nineteen years. He liked the way the words came out of her mouth though, or maybe it was just her mouth itself. He would sit and watch her read even voiced over pages of obituaries and comics, until there was no difference, until John Paul found them back by the feed shed or somewhere and gave him a shovel for the buffalo shit. The same tired story: father, daughter, drifter, father on the one side, daughter and drifter on the other. Across the strip of road from John Paul’s section were the blued lights of the new old drive-in, and they’d all seen the movies for free, they knew their roles.

And because of that it was different.

Horse’s role as he knew it now was to wait. It was the handful of days immediately following the crime, when nobody yet knew he was a criminal, the darling child of the media, adopted by the whole Midwest because the drought made them want so bad to look somewhere else than at themselves. Him the criminal, Horse the criminal. He kept it inside because he needed it, ached for it, the not knowing what would happen, whether John Paul would make him work forever to pay it off, whether the daughter would come to him in the night then like she never had, out of some skewed breed of pity. Everything was flat and open before him, rolling steadily away to the bruise colored foothills.

After John Paul had loaded the women into the truck and left him orders what to do he still didn’t come down off the
fence. One of the seven buffalo bulls lowed deep in its chest. In Horse's pocket was the last few inches of pigging string. Evidence. His crime was that he had coaxed each of the buffalo bulls one by one into the chute, then tied the leather tight around the high points of their scrotums. They hadn't caused any trouble. Kitten bulls he'd heard the seller call them once, John Paul's prized breeding stock. J bar P had a restaurant contract for a minimum of seventy hybrid calves, and, aside from the hole in the fence and the thin hipped Limousin already heavy as a result, it was only the second day they'd been let in with the nervous light stepping heifers. In no time now their testicles would be shriveled, the leather expanding and contracting with the dew, and it was during this week that Horse sat and watched.

He could do anything when he found out, John Paul could. The thing about him was that he'd made five fortunes already, and lost them all in neat succession, like dominoes falling. But he stayed ahead of them, so there was something. He was a genius he always said, smart in a corner. He had hired Horse out of the drugstore at town because Doll behind the counter knew Horse was half Blackfeet, that John Paul had him some newfangled buffalos, that it wouldn't look bad at all in the new J bar P brochures, not at all. John Paul had looked Horse up and down and said maybe, maybe. Now Horse wore his hair in stunted rough braids the daughter did. She said it made him look real. He lived in the old house John Paul's parents had pulled there on pine logs seventy two years ago. Tarpaper windows, packrat insulated. Not a tree in sight. For Horse it was a warm place to pass the Dakota winter, a place worth shoveling buffalo shit that still steamed sweet in the early mornings.

On Christmas they had burned the shitpile and stood wetfooted in the melted snow around it listening to John Paul sing his drunken yuletide. The daughter had come out to the old house afterwards and read Horse a newspaper she had from London somehow, and her mouth the words coming out all British was something of a gift in itself.

By the end of the week they knew.
At first John Paul just leaned on the pipe fence of the buffalo trap and shook his head and spat and wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. Horse there guilty beside him, waiting. He waited all afternoon, breathing in and out. The mother watched through parted curtains, the daughter saddled her palomino gelding then took the saddle off and brushed him down. He snorted, his skin jumping in folds. John Paul mumbled to himself.

Twelve thousand dollars, just like that.

He moved his hand in a butterfly motion that never got above his belt.

Twelve thousand dollars. Buffalo burgers, buffalo sausage, fajitas, steaks, whole nine yards.

Finally he went inside to eat. Horse checked the water and oiled the windmill and wandered the barn. The daughter spoke to him out of the darkness of the horse stall.

Dad. He gets like this.

Yeah.

The gelding's eyes glowed iris green.

So, you know, why'd you do it?

You mean the string?

What else.

Horse pawed the ground.

He won't make that contract now, I don't guess.

This doesn't only hurt him, Horse Develkin.

Horse watched her there with the haydust tynsdaling golden all around.

I didn't really mean to hurt him.

You should have maybe thought about that some beforehand. About me, or about Mom. She's got eczema, you know. God—goddammit, Horse, I am his daughter after all.

She was all of sixteen. He looked away and when he looked back she was gone, only the gelding there staring. He cupped a hand to it and it shied away.

That night he woke to the tiled white ceiling of the county hospital and the pastyfaced nurse told him he was lucky John
Paul hadn't used the business end of the shovel, or he'd be dead for sure. She handed him a piece of pigging string in a ziploc bag, and said in a hushed voice they were lucky too to find that. It had been a lucky night all around. She smiled a pearly white smile and when she was gone Horse tried to remember any of it, the night, but it was somewhere else. There was white tape tight around his chest though, and his lips sat wrong against his teeth, the left side of his face heavy and numb, pulling his head down.

Soon there was a gaunt faced man by his bed, mouth like a wolf or a librarian. He introduced himself as Jim Something from the Dakota Star. He was up here for the story about the outdated pharmaceuticals, but then he had heard about the string. Everybody had. He asked could he take a picture of it maybe.

Horse looked from him to it and back.
The pig string, you mean, right?
Jim Something smiled.
Nothing else, hoss.
Twenty two dollars.
How bout ten.
They settled on eleven fifty and a coke with a straw, and then Jim Something with a latex glove on arranged the string on the light blue blanket over Horse's stomach and the flashes went on for days it seemed, and when they were over Horse finally stumbled into the bathroom and felt to see was everything okay.

This is the Horse Develkin who didn't scream when he peed: he was born to a redhead father and a Blackfeet mother, the mother left when he was thirteen and became for him birthday cards from the reservation, the Indian Preserve as his dad called it, the Petting Zoo. Horse learned to drink beer and whiskey at fourteen, and knew girls two years later in the abundant form of a woman named Rita at the five and dime. Stockroom love, hot and cramped. He didn't write his mother about that. The same year as Rita, his older brother got his death money and drove drunk into a snowdrift and they didn't find him until
late spring. He looked just the same. When Horse got his death money two years later he drove drunk into a snowdrift too, but the snowplow found him and rode him slow in the cab, back to the living. It still had to clear the roads though. His dad when he was sad in his coffee would tell Horse stories about how beautiful his mom had been, how he never should have chased her off like he had. It was a tragedy, goats in the street and everything. When Horse got enough money to put a new front end under his car he drove it down into the Dakotas, where he traded it for he’d already forgotten what. Probably something dumb like hot meals for a week, magazines to read, someone nice to look at. It was all a cliché, his life already, a cheap book. He didn’t write his mom about that either.

Horse heard about it in the paper first, his crime and the crime that had been done on him: the beating, the string squareknotted around his balls. He was all the time afraid the daughter would appear around the corner and catch him reading. But he couldn’t help it, it was him, his name, there in the Dakota Star, right below the low pressure system dangling moisture over Texas. Front page already, down at the bottom, “The White Man’s Buffalo” in bold black letters. The pertinent excerpt from column b was:

In the later part of that century James H. Develkin’s forefathers were on that starving reservation, specifically, his great-great-maternal grandfather, Grey Elk, and great-great-grandmother, Walks in the Trees, as well as their pair of young bucks, Last Success and Standing in Place. (for more see 3a)

The rest was about the Reader’s Poll on 2b concerning whether John Paul’s actions were justified or not (63% yes, 37% no). These dead Indians were names Horse had never known. As he wandered the sterile halls looking for a machine to take the last of his eleven fifty, his lips kept mouthing grey elk walks in the trees, last success standing in place, until it became for him a sentence and he couldn’t forget it.

The second way Horse heard about the crimes done on
him was from the crewcut BIA lawyer, who had the story from the daughter. He said he was interested in James' welfare.

Horse, it's Horse.

BIA smiled, and set on the silvery bed tray a micro-recorder, asked if it was okay, for purposes of legal counsel. The pertinent excerpt of the interview here was the part that never made it to the radio:

BIA: Your tribal registration, James. (angry sound of papers shuffling).

HORSE: I know I'm Blackfoot, okay?
HORSE: Where's John Paul?
BIA: You've got to remember something, James.
HORSE: What did she say about it? (lots of tense staring noises)

BIA: Her story is that her mom got her out of bed because of the noise, because of you screaming. Out beside that place they kept you. We have pictures of the ground. The house too. She says that over dinner her dad Jonathan Rutlegers kept all the pieces of string by his plate. That he was mad, that he gets like that. And that's all. She says the next thing is running out to you and Jonathan Rutlegers. You were of course unconscious by then. And we have the shovel, don't worry. She said she tried to stop him with the leather string. He already had your, your pants down. She was the one who called the ambulance. Her voice is on tape, James (delicate sound of a smile). It's beautiful. It says, and I quote, Hurry, I think he killed him. I think he killed him. (long pause, for effect) Tell me what you remember though, James, Horse.

HORSE: What's John Paul have to say?
BIA: James, you have four broken ribs and a skull fracture. Not to mention your, the close call. You could have easily died.
HORSE: Tell me again what she said.

The rest of the interview that did make it to the radio in bits and pieces was about how Horse had tied the seven strings that one day, how yes the buffalo were tame, yes the buffalo was a significant animal in some ways he guessed, no, these were the first he had ever seen, no, he didn't know where his
mom was, try the reservation, maybe his dad would know. Then it all came down to sperm counts, average sperm counts for young Native American men. How a sample was required. There was the cup, virgin white and cold. When the BIA was gone, Horse sat with it until it became too large and too empty, and in retreat he stared out the window to the north where it was still flat in places, where campfires burned small and angry against the night, just outside the city limits. His mouth moved over and over the sentences grey elk walks in the trees, last success standing in place, he killed him, I think he killed him. Her mouth. He filled the cup two times in spite of the pain.

The next morning the campfire people were in the hall, the jobless Indian men who had seen the news through plate glass somewhere and drove to it, Blackfeet and Cree and Sioux and more, even a Mescalero from New Mexico. Through the rectangled doorwindow they were all denim jackets and truckstop bandannas, their shoulders hunched over. For a while there was only the sound of their bootsoles, but then suddenly there was no noise at all, no buzzers, no gurney wheels, nothing. It had all stopped: John Paul stood in the door and filled it side to side, a pair of old jeans over his shoulder, piece of paper in his hand. There was a lilt in his voice like bourbon.

Don't it just make your brown eyes blue, Kaw Liga?

Horse watched him approach, saw how he didn't watch his back.

The piece of paper was the hospital bill, stamped red and paid. He gave it to Horse: $1,478.34.

Horse stared at the receipt for minutes, counting the dollars. The only breathing was John Paul's rasp. When Horse looked up to John Paul, John Paul nodded once and spit a brown stream into the nurses' flowerpot. Horse shook his head little enough not to hurt. But enough. John Paul tossed the old jeans onto the foot of the bed. They were starched thick and smelled like the daughter, and then Horse saw her at J bar P waiting for him, leaning on the porch railing like in a painting over a motel bed. He slipped into the jeans as best he could, taking care of his ribs, then walked the gauntlet of staring black eyes.
in the hall. He answered their silence by remembering how she looked ironing the early mornings away, framed by her gilt white window, delicate columns of shit steam holding up the sky. He kept a hand on John Paul’s shoulder, so he wouldn’t fall.

On the way out of town they stopped for a shiny new shovel, and John Paul told Horse who had been quiet that in the paper they’d started in calling him the Pope, John Paul, the Great White Father of all Great White Fathers.

Yeah, so what do they call me?

John Paul laughed out the side window and finally broke into song again, Werewolves of London. For reasons no one bothered with it had become the anthem for both sides of the 63/37 split, and it was on every station by request at least five times an hour, a war waged in the static land of radio waves.

When it got to the howling part John Paul had his head out the window and almost ran them off the road altogether.

This is the Horse Develkin who hid from phone calls the next three weeks in the old house, listening to the AM news and watching the Indians settle into the parking lot of the drive-in: he learned that his last name alone meant related to the devil, but when paired with Horse, a name which when unproper carried with it running, really meant the demons of genocide chase him across the plains of his ancestors, the plains of America. He learned that the buffalo he’d emasculated were also a symbol, that if allowed to breed they would have been just one more instance of Native American culture as roadside novelty, another menu item for the guilty to stomach. It was just talk though. He had just done it; emasculation was a word, and words were far from the thing at best. They hadn’t had the balls in one hand, the string in the other. And he wasn’t running. He walked from wall to wall in the house instead, trying to breathe a full breath. He wrote letters to his mom on the back of bean can wrappers and then burned them in a tin bucket to watch the moths dance. At night he heard the ghosts of John Paul’s parents chasing things across the wooden floor, their long fingers scrabbling after pennies and beer tops and anything

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shiny. He watched the reflection of his face in the window become him again, except pale and sunless, like his brother's the day they pulled his car out of the snow and counted how he still had seven hundred dollars and change in his wallet, money that nobody wanted. When it was day he watched for her to walk by the kitchen window of the big house. All the while the farmland sat fallow and the AM radio crackled, making it feel even more dry. The letters came a dozen at a time and John Paul rubberbanded them on the windowsill. Horse was afraid of being caught reading them, so didn't. And it worked. One day towards the end of the three weeks, the night after John Paul had slept on the porch his ancient ten gauge stuffed with rock salt, she saddled and unsaddled her gelding three times and finally came out to the house, to Horse. She said she felt sorry for him.

The first thing she told him was that most of the letters were from the same group of women in Florida. Horse wanted to say something but all he could think of was the cup over and over. She read him one, which was a photocopy of a book page about Blackfeet legend, but her voice was distracted. She flipped through some more and told him maybe the whole book was there, twenty cents at a time, probably a hundred dollars' worth. After reading him a couple of stories about Napi and about Bloodclot she was on her knees behind him, braiding.

You know your mom's on TV now, with all this.
She says she named me after that one movie.
She's so pretty, Horse.
Thank you.
Dad's going to sell one of the bulls, you know. They're famous now, stars. A couple of days I think.
She finished the braid and messed it up and started over. Her fingers in his hair. She danced all around the question the sperm count hadn't answered—what it had felt like—talked instead about the hospital the nurses the news reports. Horse remembered then that it had been her.
They say you saved my life.
Who?
I don't know, somebody.
She laughed.
No, Dad says you're tougher than that. He said Indians don't die that easy. That's why we had the Old West, Geronimo, Sitting Bull, all that stuff.
But I heard that recording of you on the radio, on the phone.
He said that that stuff about your grandparents is made up, too. He told it to Jim in the first place.
The reporter Jim?
She finished the braid and began arranging the letters by zip code. Most of them 32301–32306. Jim jim jim. When she stood Horse told her thank you again.
For what?
For reading these to me.
It's nothing.
No, really. Thanks.
Horse.
She said it through her teeth, her cheeks smiling. Horse smiled a little too, and when she was gone and it was night he hid in the closet and read more about Napi and about Bloodclot. When the chants rolled across the pasture he could smell meat roasting, and for a few minutes in a row he wanted to go there, close his eyes, lower his head, and dance.
The next night was the closest he got. John Paul was in town yelling for the reporters about the bull he'd lost to the thieving Indians at the drive-in. It was a thing of no evidence though, or none that anybody wanted to look for anyway. There hadn't even been any gunshots. The feast made the state news too, Indians in tepees stalking and eating buffalo again, the seeds of revolt, the Ghost Dance ninety some years later. The ratings were through the roof. The mother was glued to the TV. The daughter was brushing her gelding down. Horse approached her and they stood at the door and watched the movie flicker blue in the distance. She was the first to say anything.
Which one is it?
Can't tell.
And there was the gelding right there. They rode him double and bareback out to just shy of the highway, where they could see a spliced together White Buffalo playing, Charles Bronson thinlipped and full of anger and love, but mostly anger. They sat the gelding and she watched the movie and Horse watched her there in the extra light, and it was over hours too early.

Two days later right on schedule John Paul sold one of the now historical buffalos to a Plains Indian museum, who planned on mounting it for exhibit, actual string and all. Five thousand dollars, tax deductible. In an effort to raise the price of the remaining five, John Paul said he was going to make of them an endangered species. Horse was repacking the bearings on the J bar P stock trailer before breakfast when the white Dakota Star van coasted in. Jim Something kneeled down and watched Horse clean his hands in the diesel.

How's them ribs, hoss?
Good.

Horse didn't look up. When John Paul climbed down from the windmill where he'd been watching the Indian women bathe, they leaned on the trailer and discussed business arrangements.

Well let me see it already.

Jim came back from the van with the longest rifle Horse had ever seen, even longer than a goose gun: octagonal barrel, elevated sights, ancient stock twisted like a tree root.

Sharps. The real thing, JP. What they used back when.

Shit, Jimbo, anybody can buy themselves a fancy ass gun.

Jim smiled and in his pocket had a finger long Big Fifty cartridge. He slid it in the breech and asked what was there? John Paul looked around at all the nothing that was too close and his anyway, and finally pointed his chin towards the drive-in screen. He held his binoculars towards it and said the first footlight on the east side, barely a dot. Jim smiled and sighted for a long time over the trailer tongue. Horse backed away and stood by the daughter who had come to watch, still in her nightgown, her hair everywhere. When the gun finally spoke
it spoke with a deep authority, and a few seconds later John Paul with the binoculars again to his face said goddamn, boy. Jim turned towards the daughter, her hands over her mouth, no sleep in her eyes.

Ma’am.

He tipped his co-op hat to her. She smiled and rushed back inside, holding her nightgown around her legs. Jim told John Paul he guessed he’d get full coverage, pictures of course, maybe a hot meal or two, and John Paul just said it again, goddamnmit, boy. Jim smiled.

I’ll just sleep in the van, back to north somewhere.

As he was pulling away John Paul yelled to just dust them at first, just dust em, be careful for God’s sake, and Jim waved his hat out the window and was gone into the north pasture where the heifers were, opposite the drive-in. Horse stayed in his house for the rest of the day, until the daughter came out and read him a handwritten letter he said looked important, was from one of the book ladies maybe, probably. It said over and over in a nervous hand, Girl I love don’t worry about me, I’ll be eating berries on the way home. No address. At dusk she rode off on her gelding with supper for Jim Something, pork chops and biscuits and gravy, still warm. Horse waited up until she came back with the dishes a full hour later, and then stood out by the trap until something thumped into the dirt at his feet. In a few seconds he heard the voice of a .30/.30 rolling over from the drive-in. Return fire, hours too late. He could feel it in the ground though, how it could have landed anywhere. He stood there with the buffalo until their sluggish movements told him it was time to go back inside.

In three days it was even in the big city papers: there was a buffalo hunter again in the Dakotas. The front page picture was a mushroomed slug of the past, a thing leaden and undeniable. John Paul stayed mostly inside, making up things for Horse to do: scrape the stock tank, dig out the feed shed with the new shovel. The shots came at regular intervals, maybe four in a day, starting around eleven in the morning. The buffalo stood nosing the grass, their bovine eyes not registering danger.
Sometimes Horse would throw sweetcake or dirtclods at them, to keep them moving, but they either didn’t feel it or thought it meant feed time again. The daughter made two trips a day out to Jim’s camp, in shorts and boots, her legs shaved clean for the saddle. Horse read the trickle of letters himself, the whole book of legends twice over, in duplicate. He helped load a pair of the endangered buffalos up for the Los Angeles Zoo, $12,000 altogether, John Paul said, it was worth losing that one.

That one was the small bull that had finally made the Zoo listen. Jim had had to put six into it before it finally staggered to its knees and fell, trying to get through the hole in the fence. Horse finished it, with a piece of rebar that took days to grind into a point. Jim took pictures of him doing it, the killing, but the film didn’t come out, just two vague bodies blurring into one. To make up for it he got a series of shots of the dead buffalo over the next few days, bloating up in the sun and finally sagging back to the ground, the ground mottled with cowbird shadows.

One night a rented helicopter hovered over the drive-in, standing on its beam of light, getting historical footage of a camp being pelted with wind and dirt. A rock clanged in the blades but there were no voices across the pasture. The next day the drive-in Indians began their final retreat, and John Paul called Jim Something in and explained the situation: if everything was the same come Wednesday, put the two slow bulls down. Maybe he could get something for their hides if there were enough fifty caliber holes in them. Jim just said he was hungry out there all alone. He said it for the daughter and Horse stood there and looked back and forth from one to the other, but couldn’t remember what he was supposed to do right then, his role. But it had to be something.

That night he walked out to the drive-in and talked to an old Sioux woman picking all the silvery beer cans out of the asphalt. Her back was bad and she had to push the cans into a pile by the speaker and then follow it down for them. Horse helped her until there were no more, and standing there with her plastic bag of moonlight she told him she never thought
she would eat killed the old way buffalo before she died, it was her little girl dream, real medicine. She asked Horse if he'd had any.

No.

Horse didn't say his name. White Buffalo played on the screen without any sound, without any love and without any anger. From a pouch at her side that looked like a bull scrotum she gave Horse some dried meat crushed with berries, and told him it might be his last chance for it, chew it slow and don't ever forget.

That night Horse ate the bitter meat and opened his eyes onto turnip holes that dangled green rawhide ropes into other worlds. He followed hand over hand, and was reborn in the dirt of a wounded buffalo. When his people found him all he could ask was Grey Elk?

Walks in Trees? Last Success Standing in Place?

They just smiled and opened the smoke hole on his tepee so he wouldn't cough any more. There was no one there he knew. At night he would sometimes crawl out against the starflecked darkness and his fingers would be looking again for that turnip hole home. When he finally found it it was late late morning and the radio had forgotten that werewolves ever roamed the earth. He clicked it off and rubbed his eyes. In the trap he fed the last three buffalo with shaking hands, because as much as he looked away, there was still something green and thin at the outside edge of his vision. This is the Horse Develkin who caught the scent of turnips for a moment and closed his eyes tight.

That night the narrow Limousin went into labor and John Paul was already into his second bottle and singing from deep in his belly. To the east there was lightning and on the weather radio word of tornadoes. Farmers for miles around stood sober and waited to be carried away. The last three buffalo turned their faces into the wind and leaned into it. Horse led the momma cow breathing hard into the barn, and she was too scared to hook him away. He whispered into her ear.
It'll be alright momma, we're here momma, just hold on now, hold on.

In the barn it was Horse and drunk John Paul and John Paul's singing and by eleven when the power went out the daughter too, and even the mom, standing far in the corner and crying for the cow, who could only low in pain and roll her eyes. The daughter circled them with the lighter, all the candles blowing out over and over. By two when the calf should have come more than it had, John Paul held the momma cow's ears closed and said that this was trouble, he'd be sober in thirty minutes. He took his shirt off carefully and went and stood in the cold rain coming down, and in the quiet he left there was Jim Something in the door, backlit by the electric sky. He was covered in mud, but the gun was clean in its fringed sleeve. He looked at the cow panting on its side and looked at Horse lying there with it in the shit she'd let. He smiled his empty mouthed smile.

You want I should finish her?
He held the gun around the middle. Horse shook his head no.

It's breech I think. Maybe locked.
Is it one of them?
Half.

Jim nodded and went to a corner to dry his camera. He stood the gun by the door. Horse said everything he knew into the momma cow's ear. The mother was gone, maybe back inside, maybe holed up in the feed shed hiding from the moisture and the birth. The candles blew out one by one and the daughter didn't relight them. They were talking in whispers, Jim and the daughter, and then nothing. Just darkness and cow breathing.

Horse held his hands over his ears when the noise of them started, but in his head it was worse: wet sounds, mouths like they were hungry. He whispered words over and over to drown them out and even sang to himself John Paul's dumb mechanical songs, but still he heard when she made a small sound like no.

Horse stood in the darkness. They were quiet again, just hay crunching, cow pain. He thought of Charles Bronson.
thinlipped and then he remembered walking the hospital hall, guilty, a traitor, the black eyes staring after him. His hand lighting the candle was steady but already when he was walking to their corner he knew he couldn't talk words. Jim was on top of her and she was half-fighting him, half holding on. Jim shook his head and said it:

Get the hell out of here, hoss. I ain't joking now.

Horse's first kick caught Jim in the lower side of the back. He dropped the candle into the damp hay with his next kick, which rolled Jim off the daughter. She was holding her mouth to scream but no noise. Her shirt unbuttoned, a breast bone white in the haydust. As Horse kicked Jim over and over he remembered for the first time that night, waking to John Paul standing over him with the shovel, unsmiling, whiskey and anger in his eyes, mostly anger. The sweated wood taste of the handle coming down out of the darkness once twice and more, his blind hands trying to fight the string. When it was over Jim was lying in a balled up pile by the door, tears and red rain coming down off his new beard. He was screaming mist and it filled the wooden place. He started to say something about a hole the size of a fucking pie melon but threw up on his legs instead and couldn't say anything. Horse reached for a bridle on the wall and Jim stumbled off into the night, long gun in tow. John Paul spat in his trail and walked inside.

Never much liked that son of a bitch.

John Paul knew his part. The wetness steamed off him. He walked soberly to the smoldering hayfire with a bucket of rainwater and killed it. The daughter had her shirt buttoned up wrong and was crying, trying to fix it. John Paul stood over her and didn't say anything, which made her cry more and harder. Horse couldn't look in her corner.

It was already just an hour and a half til dawn. They fought with the momma cow, John Paul and Horse. John Paul was too fat so Horse had to lie on his side with his arm up in her and try to turn it. It felt like nothing else, like another world in there. He blew birth out of his mouth and the veins stood out in his neck and still he couldn't get it turned. They gave her some time to do it herself, let it happen, but she was weak and
this was her first. When dawn was just a handful of minutes away John Paul finally decided it was her or the calf, goddammit, and the calf was probably already dead anyway, half breeds were never that strong.

The mother brought a bowl of sugarwater from the house, for the cow, and when she was gone John Paul and Horse drank it and spilled it down their shirtfronts and closed their eyes. John Paul wasn’t singing. Horse was holding his side where his ribs were again separated.

You okay there?

Horse looked John Paul in the face and nodded yes. What about her though.

John Paul breathed a few times slow and then got the rope out, made a small loop. Horse hooked it to something inside the momma and they doubled it around a smooth post and pulled the dead thing unkicking into the world. John Paul severed the cord with the toe of his boot and threw it end over end up into the rafters. The momma cow licked the caul off and it would have been beautiful, brown and front heavy like its daddy, thick shoulders, short face.

John Paul held its head up by the right ear, ran his hand backwards along its wiry soft hair, making it look bigger than it was. He was nodding to himself, looking to Horse and then back to the calf. Finally something inside him shifted and he started in laughing without smiling.

I’ll be good and damned if this was all for nothing, now.

He walked away and came back with two gallons of bleach, dragging a half whiskey barrel filled with rainwater, sloshing up his arm. He said he figured he must be some kind of genius.

Horse stood covered in green birth and shit and blood. He watched and didn’t watch as John Paul mixed the bleach and cradled the calf into the barrel. The momma was too weak to fight for it. The smell in the air was heat. John Paul closed the calf’s eyes with his forearm. The bleachwater beaded on his starched shirt and rolled off. When a few minutes had passed the hair fading stopped just short of white, just shy of the last thing that might bring the whole world to the barn. The mix
was too damned weak, John Paul said. He held the calf body
under and pointed to the house with his chin.

Go tell her to give you that other bottle, Kaw Liga. One
under the sink.

Horse didn't move. John Paul turned his wide back on
him, and his voice was large off the tubwater and the empty
part of the barn.

This ain't no time for no Indian bullshit. Not now, not
from you. Now get.

Horse didn't say anything, couldn't, didn't know what there
was to say. He rubbed his eye and turned around. Somewhere
out on the highway were the drive-in Indians, going somewhere
else, maybe home, maybe just going to keep driving until the
blacktop quit. He walked slow through the mud to the backdoor
of the house and the mother handed him the bottle when he
asked. Her face was dry and cracked. Horse was almost back
to the door of the barn when he heard her, the daughter, coming
around the house on her gelding. She was running hard for the
north pasture, her hair floating golden white behind her. Horse
held the bleach up for her to see him before she left but it was
pulled from his hand and splashed in the empty spaces behind.
The report of the Sharps rolled in what felt like minutes after.
Horse stepped forward, and there it was again in the ground,
the breath of dust, the slug in the ground, close enough to feel,
to ache for, with the sound a long time later. He stood still,
watching her, mouthing the words.

I'll be eating berries on the way home.

He had watched a movie once with her, and as she rode
the flatness north he breathed the feeling in and held it.
SPEAKING ASLEEP

1

A woman pulls a welcome mat from her cart, places it at the mouth of the subway. She does not see me. The leash deadens my fingers. I check my pockets: a postcard, a piece of gnarled lace. I laugh and taste vermouth. My face slides across the window of a clamoring shop. It isn’t the man with the gun but someone pulls at my face. I tell them, surely I have a home.

2

The butterfly drowns in my cup. Mother won’t take me to the doctor. My tooth hangs from the doorknob wrapped with thread. My mouth is red, flooding. She can’t understand. I can’t speak. Wasps gather in the eaves.

3

Water lips my shoes and spills into the hole
in the sand. I'm digging
for a man I heard singing.
The waves are wrong,
full of fur, and they lift me
to my feet. A glove burns
on the highway. Lightning
careens through the snow.

4

I read Kant at the zoo,
the words a tangle of gaffs.
The keeper shot himself
last night. The elephants
can't weep. I'm not sure
what to tell the snakes.
How can I justify?
They look at me as if
they've forgotten.
I look back to the Preface
and read aloud.

5

There's too much of me.
The room won't give,
nor the doors. I rest
my nose in the crook
of my arm, suffocated
by my skin. I have
squeezed out one eye
and can see a dog
at the window pacing
nervously.
INHERITANCE

Every night the same, you make me you
twenty years ago, your older brother
shucking down to skin, his hips a bruise
against your fragile mouth my mouth the other
mouths you’ve taught to Listen, this is love.
Why we take the blood from bed to bed;
why you know the way to stand above,
to balance, stiffen, guide another’s head
when each of us is born alike: all heart?
Our chests have let the beating in before
we breathe. Our wet-blind passion fades; we start
to speak the desperate monologue of more.
We learn to live by leaving. Still, your hands.
Always your rhythm of commands.
Listen. I will tell you two things: the first will be a jumble—but quick—while the second you might not even notice. I want to tell you about sex and death. It is likely this will not be the first time you have heard this story told this way. Of course, I will use props. You can imagine.

Now I am twenty-six. The day I turned ten was the first time I talked with her alone. As I ate some pineapple bundt cake, Mrs. Welsimmons stomped down the stairs of our apartment building, after a phone call from St. Louis, and related to me, because my mother—her Avon Lady—was in the shower, all the ways in which Mr. Welsimmons was, bar-none, the dullest man in the world. Do you have any idea how that must be for me? she asked. Yes and no, I told her. She sat down and ate some cake. She touched my shoulder. All at once, Mrs. Welsimmons lit a cigarette and asked me if I wanted one.

My mother was an insomniac. To cure herself, she played Albert Collins records at low volumes in the kitchen, at night. Sometimes I danced with her. She drank wine and sashayed in flouncy dresses while my father watched. While I danced with her. You understand, my father was an ugly man, a poor dancer. He sold cigars. Or else he sat in the kitchen chair. He told my mother, you are too pretty for me, Lily. Too pretty for me. Sometimes he clapped along. Before you, she said, I slept with a lot of men, you know. No, he said, I didn't know that. She kissed him. He kissed her. They groped out of sequence. Now I am an insomniac. Safe to say, though, I would have been a poor seller of cigars. My mouth gets dry and I mix up words when I speak. I sweat. Sometimes at night, though, I think I
could sell cars. Mrs. Welsimmons was the Human Razor Blade, so to speak.

23

Didn’t my father talk more than most fathers about old American cars: Edsels, Studebaker Hawks, Hudson Hornets, the old Nash Rambler? Certainly he missed spots shaving. He hit his head on things. He got fat. For all I know of my father, he might have sold both cigars and cars. He might have done it secretly, at night.

22

I stole money from my father’s wallet and bought a Kodak camera to take pictures of her. I climbed the fire escape through mist. Her bathroom lights were on. On the wet ladder, my hand slipped, my shin slammed the rung, and I dropped the camera, which shattered on the head of a parking meter below. Fuck. I held still. My shin bled through my pant leg.

21

I saw Mrs. Welsimmons with her clothes off every night for two years in a row. It was her idea. She asked me—point blank—if I wanted to see her naked, and I said that I did. She just asked, stepped out of the shower, and showed herself to me. Of course, I memorized parts. She had long sandy-blond pubic hair. Her thighs touched. Her belly-button poked out. Wrapped in a towel, Mrs. Welsimmons told me all the things she wanted to cook me for dinner. She offered a quick tour of her apartment. I said I had to go. She said she would call me later. Wait. No, she didn’t. This is all wrong. Mostly wrong. She hemmed my pants. I asked her to undress for me and she said maybe, if I came back around eight o’clock, but maybe not.

20

For years, it seemed, she baited me.

19

He ripped up her favorite dress. He said she would rot in hell.
In retaliation, Mrs. Welsimmons threw his golf clubs at him. He called her a slut. O.K., fine, when was the last time you wanted it? she asked. I have no idea, he answered. Answer this! she said. She threw the telephone at his head. It missed, broke through a window—the cord jerked tight but held in the wall—and after the pendulum arc of its fall the phone smacked into the side of the building, exploding, while the receiver, still swinging from its own cord hooked into the remnants of the phone, smashed through a window in my parents’ apartment one floor below. My mother stopped flouncing. What the hell? she said. Then, before she could stop herself, she asked, should we—how do you say it?—call the phone? My father sat up. Don’t move! he shouted. It might be the police calling us! But I knew and ran upstairs with a knife and kicked at their front door, which didn’t open. Hey, it’s dark out here, I said. Let me in.

18

The first time we understood each other, we sat in my parents’ kitchen and ate soup. The more she slurped, the more I slurped. I remember the way she slid the spoon into her mouth. Would you like some crackers with that soup? I said. A glass of milk? This orange? But she kept tapping her fingernail against her bowl, while I just ate soup and waited for her to stop.

17

Invariably, it was the way her hips swivelled that amazed me.

16

This I overheard, later: Mrs. Welsimmons said to Mr. Welsimmons, Henry, where the hell are my panty hose? You said they were on the radiator, but they’re not. They’re just not. What Mr. Welsimmons said back sounded like dench, my neck. I bumped my head on the door. Mr. Welsimmons called out, it’s open! Mrs. Welsimmons said, Jesus, Henry, Christ. Who is it? Mr. Welsimmons called out, come in! God-dammit, Henry! Mrs. Welsimmons hissed, whatever you do, don’t get up! What? said Mr. Welsimmons. You’re fucking deaf, Henry, said Mrs. Welsimmons. You’re fucking deaf, Henry, said Mrs.
Welsimmons, you just stay put! I'm the bare-naked one! I'll go answer the door! But I ran downstairs. On the fourth step from the bottom, I jumped.

15

At eight o’ clock, Mrs. Welsimmons squeezed into my pants and walked like a duck around the kitchen. We both cracked up. Mrs. Welsimmons looked more like a duck than anyone I had ever seen. I told her so.

14

I stood above her at the apartment pool deck, dripping water on her breasts. Hey, she said, cut it out. I shook my head. She hooted, whooped, grabbed my ankles. I tried to hop. To walk through her apartment it went: hallway, kitchen, hallway, bathroom, bed.

13

Mrs. Welsimmons had the skinniest ankles I had ever seen. Nobody ever understood how she could stand. She was pigeon-toed, too. As a consequence, she swaggered. Yet her kneecaps were perfect circles, her thighs thick. On top, she had heavy, low-slung breasts. In the summer, I made love to her for the first time on the fire escape while my parents watched TV. She licked my ears more than I expected. She said, fuck, fuck. She was so wet. I came. Later I was standing on a chair while she put pins in the cuffs of my favorite pants.

12

Mrs. Welsimmons taught me a card trick where all the jacks and queens end up face to face, all the kings disappear. After that, I always wanted to play twenty-one. She never did. Instead, she liked to turn the TV on loud. We watched game shows together, before noon. After noon, she took naps. In her sleep, she spoke in short bursts of words. *The heels of her boots, she'd say, or Eisenhower, panty hose, shoot.*
In August, unexpectedly, Mr. Welsimmons took his own life. With his own hand.

While my mother was in the bathtub, Mrs. Welsimmons asked me to undress for her, but I was too shy. My mother is in the bathtub, I said. So what? she said, and tugged at my sleeve. She wore a button-up sweater. She tried to unbutton it. I panicked, grabbed the phone, and ran out of the room. That night, we kissed on the love seat.

I stood with Mr. Welsimmons on the fire escape, pinched between the brick wall and his belly. I found your underpants in my bed, he said. I asked my wife about it. She said to ask you. No she didn't. She wouldn't have. I knew better. Those are your initials written on the waist-band, right? he said, pointing. Yep, I said, that's me. The F stands for Frank.

Here is a recurrent dream. Dreams pique only the dreamer, I know this, still: I sit on a toilet, with a tuxedo on, in the middle of my parents' kitchen during a cocktail party. Mrs. Welsimmons—who looks unexpectedly savvy, her hair is done up, she wears black—sort of bursts in through the swinging kitchen doors with a parrot in one hand and a platter of vegetables in the other. The whole thing—the whole dream—somehow takes on the trappings of a bad joke. To stop it, I shout—Give me that parrot! or Give it! or Hand it here! from the toilet. Suddenly, it is only her and me. Can you imagine being frozen alive? Mrs. Welsimmons asks me. The slowness is what she means. The calm. I ask again for the parrot. She ignores me. I can, she says. Every time.

Mr. Welsimmons' appendix burst in his sleep. In the emergency
room, Mrs. Welsimmons told me it was a close call, her husband is a heavy sleeper. I trusted her. She had thick, almost purple lips. We stepped into the shadows.

6

You fidget too much, she told me, stop fidgeting.

5

Once every summer there was a heat wave. Everything dripped. In the midst of record-breaking humidity, Mr. Welsimmons’ lungs collapsed one night in his sleep and he died soundlessly.

4

Disclaimer number four: In the absence of a good excuse to think otherwise, Mrs. Welsimmons was my lover through the best of my post-pre-pubescent years, even though she told me it was never any good for her. Is that it? she would ask me. Is that all? I, of course, denied it, and, in turn, now deny my disclaimer. Hurry up, I would tell her. You move too slow.

3

At my parents’ anniversary party, Mrs. Welsimmons sat with her legs crossed in an old wicker chair I had never seen before. She spoke and smiled with two fat men who hovered over her, eating pretzels, men I had never met. The heel strap of Mrs. Welsimmons’ high-heel shoe had slipped off her foot, the foot that she kept pointing, on purpose, I thought, at the two men. But now she bobbed this foot distractedly, and sort of shook it, in order to get the strap to slip back on. And she kept failing. The shoe had no hope, no hope at all, until, I think, everyone in the room expected Mrs. Welsimmons’ ankle to snap.

2

Mr. Welsimmons shattered his clavicle in a car crash. Prior to that he spent hours pacing in front of a church wearing a mis-buttoned coat. Eventually, he was arrested. In turn the local
paper ran an article. When he read it, Mr. Welsimmons said, good Christ, I look fat.

1

Mr. Welsimmons died, it's a shame to say, after losing a long bout to melancholia and old age. The whole apartment building attended the funeral. We will never forget him, we all said, not ever. Night fell. There was a phone call from St. Louis. Hello? said the preacher, Hello? Hello? My father passed out cigars. After a while, he ran out. My mother went downstairs to find another box. The cigars weren't where she thought they would be. Nine times out of ten, they never were. Hold still a minute, Mr. Welsimmons used to like to grab me by the ears, what we're talking about here is: look at you.
DOES IT 'TIL IT HURTS

A light moves over the pasture and interrupts
a meditation of ducks and a serious-minded philosopher.
The serious-minded philosopher holds aloft his gavel.
"Darling," he shouts, "I've forgotten your name."
A lowing of cattle and a pause for dramatic effect.
The ducks hold a colloquy and smoke a pipe.
A naked woman is caught in a flattering breeze.
The serious-minded philosopher collapses in the grass
and thinks about windsocks. The idea of a fluttering.
He thinks, "Behind each unexplained event
there is usually the placement of an electric fan."
The ducks raise their brows. They aspire
to a semblance of bliss but are thwarted.
They are becoming glassy-eyed and confused.
The naked woman finds her clothes in a neat arrangement
beneath a pine tree. She is tired of the pasture.
She suspects the ducks have been faking their devotion to her.
"Alas," she says, "an excretion of white fills my mind."
She hurls a pine cone at the philosopher,
but he is already dead. In the distance,
a swing set creaks and casts its shadow across a sandbox.
Stephen Morison, Jr.

HAPPY DAYS WITH THE MUJAHEDIN

The talibaan militia, the most recent group to join the internecine fighting in Afghanistan, has alarmed human rights groups with its desire to return Afghan women to life beneath the veil. Described by the Associated Press as “a movement of former Islamic seminar students,” the group took Kabul on September 27, 1996, exactly seven years from the day I met Amun Khan and his friends as they traveled to Darra, Pakistan to join the mujahedin. Amun would be twenty-four now, still a young man by most standards, but perhaps not so young in countries fallen to internecine warfare. Perhaps he has stayed with Gulbidin Hekmatyar’s forces. If so, he would be moving now, in the mountains most likely, readying for the inevitable counter-attack. It is possible, of course, that his religious convictions have swung him into the ranks for the newly formed talibaan. With that in mind, I flip on CNN occasionally, hoping they’ll show some shots of Kabul. Maybe I’ll see him, kneeling with a heroic grin, in front of the bloated body of the ex-Soviet puppet, Najibullah, who the talibaan hung the day they conquered the city.

As a reporter in Washington, I once overheard U.S. Rep. Robert K. Dornan, a member of the congressional committee that approved billions of dollars in military aid for the mujahedin, explain that there were “good and bad mujahedin freedom fighters in Afghanistan.” He seemed to be implying that the “bad” ones were the religious fundamentalists, which was odd because Gulbidin Hekmatyar, the most fundamentalist of the mujahedin warlords, received the bulk of American aid for nearly fifteen years.

Certainly Amun Khan and his friends: Asif, Aziz, Said, and the rest, were fundamentalists. But having enjoyed their hospitality, having attended Said’s bachelor party, having danced with the ijellah, having drunk their tea and laughed, it is hard for me to see them as “bad.”

The war is bad, as is the fervor with which the talibaan
have enacted their revenge on their fallen leaders. Certainly their hard-line Islamic beliefs have contributed to their ruthlessness, but sadly, America has contributed as well. It was American money that paid for their weapons: their machine guns, rocket launchers, tanks, jets and Stinger missiles. As the militia groups near their goal of turning Afghanistan into an Islamic theocracy, perhaps it is finally time for the American public to take a closer look at the faces beneath the wool caps on the CNN broadcasts from Kabul. Perhaps it is finally time to react, not with tax dollars and weapons, but with understanding.

Afghanistan became personal to me on September 26, 1989, the day I boarded a bus from Peshawar, Pakistan, the headquarters of the Afghan mujahedin militias, to Darra, a border town where the Pakistani government permitted an open trade in weapons. It was ten months after the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, a time when the fall of the Soviet puppet, Najibullah, seemed imminent and American aid was still an undisputed $300 million a year. Relations between Americans and the fundamentalist Pathans, who inhabit eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, were never more amiable. The bus, when it arrived, was packed. The narrow seats were filled with families, the aisle crowded with standing men. Chickens squawked beneath plastic laundry baskets, bundles jammed overhead racks, and passengers crowded the open doors. To avoid the crush, I climbed onto the roof with the younger men and spent the ride among a cloud of broken English questions.

One group of teenage boys was persistent. They started with the typical line of questions—stuff I'd heard a thousand times during travels in Asia and the Middle East—but they carried themselves with an air of self-confidence and pride that was often difficult to find in poorer countries.

"What name?"
"How old?"
"Where of?"
This last was asked by a young man whose bristly mustache
punctuated his sharp words. He spoke sternly, but his narrow forehead, receding hairline, and small, rounded chin made him less than intimidating. The boys around him grinned behind his back.

“American,” I told him.

They spoke Pushtu to each other and chuckled happily and confidently before turning back to me. When they did, a handsome boy with a stern expression edged forward across the slats of the roof rack.

“Pakistan beautiful city,” he said without a smile. “America baad city.”

I stared at him briefly. He was confusing the word city with country and he was insulting mine. “America beautiful city. Pakistan bad,” I said.

“America bad,” he said.

“Pakistan sucks.”

He answered in Pushtu, but I heard America and Oosa among his stream of invectives. His last word was clearly intended as his sharpest barb. “Ijellah!” he said. His friends, bareheaded in neat white kurta pajamas and leather sandals, laughed approvingly. Their outfits identified them as middle-class urban kids. The rougher inhabitants of the outlying districts, the deserts and the mountains, wore wool brimless caps and mismatched, ill-fitting clothing with vests.

I pointed back to the boy before me and said, “Ijellah.” Unexpectedly, this too drew laughter. Even the target of my insult smiled. I felt my guard dropping and I asked, “What ijellah?”

The handsome boy glanced around, nodded toward his balding friend, and said, “Asif ijellah.”

I repeated the phrase curiously. “Asif ijellah?”

They got a tremendous kick out of that one, all except the shorter Asif, and Amun reaffirmed his statement. “Yes. Asif ijellah!”

“What’s an ijellah? Benazir Bhutto ijellah?” I asked. They laughed even louder. At the time, Bhutto was the Harvard-educated prime minister of Pakistan. I’d finished her autobiography and discovered that Pakistan’s prime minister
retained a fond remembrance of Harvard Square and Brigham’s peppermint-stick ice cream.

“Bhutto not ijellah,” Amun admitted.

“Benazir good?” I asked, wondering how devout Muslims viewed their female leader.

“No,” Amun answered without hesitation.

“No?”

“I am not woman. How she lead me? I am a man!” He smiled and thumped his chest then added, “Zia ul-Huq beauootiful man.” General Zia ul-Huq was the military dictator of Pakistan before his plane was blown up by a bomb in 1988. Zia had been a staunch ally of the United States and had coordinated the delivery of American arms to the mujahedin from 1978 until his death.

“Okay, Bhutto isn’t an ijellah. What’s an ijellah?”

The three looked at Amun for advice and finally Amun looked about to make sure nobody else was watching then he said, “Ijellah,” and shook his upper body like a belly dancer. We laughed until we choked on the clouds of dust being churned up by the rumbling bus.

When we arrived, Darra looked like one of those rickety cowboy towns portrayed in Hollywood Westerns, with a single main street that inevitably became the sight of the movie’s concluding gunfight. I followed the boys—the oldest was eighteen—as we disembarked and headed south past the line of one-story buildings. They quieted, and it was easy to see why. A lanky man in light blue kurta pajamas stepped out of a store to our right and discharged a double-barreled shotgun into the sky, then snapped it open and peered down the barrel. Another tall skinny man in a loose turban and the white beard of an old mujahedin passed us with a rifle perched on the notch of each shoulder. There were weapons everywhere. Rows of perpendicular machine guns lined the storefront windows; a trailered rocket launcher stood in a nearby alleyway; another storefront proudly featured an anti-aircraft gun; and a few doors down, a mortar launcher was assembled on a shop porch.

“Beauootiful collection,” Amun said to me. His grin sparkled through the dust haze of the street as he spread his
palm wide and gestured at the storefronts we happened to be passing. "Beauootiful Kalashnikovs! Beauootiful collection." The others nodded in agreement, but I couldn’t help wondering if they weren’t really just as happy about Amun’s sudden remembrance of a difficult English word like “collection” as they were about the enormous array of guns.

Despite the boys’ admiration, we didn’t stop in any of the shops along the street. Instead, we walked past them to the ruins of a small house at the end of the shop lane. Atop the remains, a portly kebab maker had set up shop. The boys seemed to know him, and they introduced me as we stepped up into the structure. He looked to be in his mid-30s. He surveyed me warily but didn’t complain as I sat down with the boys and waited while he prepared lunch. With a heavy iron butcher’s knife, he sliced a great slab of meat off a hanging calf’s leg, chopped the beef to the consistency of hamburger, and used his thick hands to mix in a variety of greens and herbs. When he was done, he started a fire by adding chunks of dried dung to embers glowing on a blackened spot in the middle of our loose circle. Once the fire was glowing, he arranged a brazier over it, then balanced a flat skillet atop it. The meat sizzled for a bit, then was replaced by a couple pancakes of flattened dough.

As brown-haired Amun talked solemnly with the chef, balding Asif did his best to explain to me what the business was all about: the man was more than a kebab maker. His real job was to recruit soldiers for Gulbadin Hekmatyar, the commander of what was then the strongest and most fundamentally religious of the factions fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The boys signed a small book that the recruiting agent carried in his breast pocket. They would cross the mountains and join Hekmatyar’s army in Afghanistan. In return for their enlistment, they would receive one Kalashnikov rifle upon arrival. As each boy finished signing the register, the others joked and slapped him on the back.

At the time of my trip, American money bought nearly a third of the guns entering Pakistan. The United States had been supporting the mujahedin since 1979 and Hekmatyar’s
Hezb-e-Islami militia had always enjoyed the lion's share. By 1986, U.S. aid had grown to over $300 million a year and included Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Two new Stingers were provided for every Soviet jet brought down.

Although the taliban has drawn international condemnation for its fundamentalist beliefs, the Hezb-e-Islami's fundamentalism has never been in doubt. Hekmatyar first gained notoriety by throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women in Kabul in the 1970s. But after the Soviet invasion, the United States was prepared to overlook such troubling incidents. In an interview before his death, Robert Gates, the former Director of the CIA, revealed that he had no problem funding Hekmatyar provided that he accomplish his main goal of "killing Russians."

As the possibility that Afghanistan will become a radical theocracy emerges (shades of Iran circa 1976), the U.S. government has begun to deny culpability, seeking to distance itself from former allies such as Hekmatyar. Officials claim that there was little direct American involvement in the distribution of weapons in Afghanistan. That duty, they say, was handled by the Pakistanis. However, if the accounts of CIA supporters like James Risen (a staff writer for The Los Angeles Times) and Rep. Dornan are to be believed, American agents have often played a more direct role.

In Risen's January 4, 1997 article entitled "In Defense of the CIA's Derring-Do," he asserts that "CIA officers operating out of Pakistan sent their Afghan allies out to scour battlefields and supply depots" for Soviet military hardware to steal and examine. Risen goes on to refer to CIA efforts to entice Soviet-backed Afghan pilots to defect by flying their Soviet jets into Pakistan, and even details an instance in which American agents traded a Toyota pick-up truck and "some rocket launchers" for a captured Soviet Sukhoi-24 fighter-bomber. Clearly, the CIA was more than a passive observer constrained by the decisions of their Pakistani allies.

Imagine their concern in 1993 when CIA investigators of the World Trade Center bombing discovered links between the terrorists and Hekmatyar. Imagine their irritation with the
suggestion that a Stinger missile might have contributed to the recent crash of a TWA flight off Long Island.

The next day, Amun’s grinning face greeted me at the door of my sparse, windowless hotel room. A fifth boy had joined the group, a square-jawed fellow who had a couple inches and a couple years on the others. Amun introduced me to Aziz Khan, then explained that Aziz’s brother was getting married and they were planning a party for him to be held later that evening. We went downstairs, and Amun flagged down a tri-wheeler. As the light failed, I found myself zooming through the back alleys of the old section of the city, a warren of stone-paved streets overhung with two-story medieval facades complete with studded and chained doors. Amun turned and shouted back to me, “Rambo or Predator?”

“You guys have movies here?”

“You video,” Asif corrected.

Moments later, the tuk-tuk paused in front of a store the size of a walk-in closet, and Amun ran in and returned with the most recent Schwarzenegger release. There I was, as far as I had ever expected to be from home, tucked away in a fundamentalist Islamic neighborhood in a city that looked unchanged since medieval times, staring at Schwarzenegger’s tanned pectorals on a video box.

After a series of social calls, we eventually arrived at a quiet street before a door with light peeking out its edges. Aziz flipped the driver seven rupees, about 28 cents, and knocked on the door, then we stood on the street and stared at each other. Five minutes later, we still hadn’t moved. It was getting pretty cold by this time, and I asked Amun what was up. He nodded at me. I pointed at the doorway we were waiting in front of. “This your home?” I asked.

“Aziz home,” he said.

I nodded, but nobody moved, and it occurred to me what was going on. I was in Peshawar, a desert town that didn’t open its windows, even during the heat of the day, because its women were in Purdah, the Islamic holy law that forbids women to be seen by any male except her closest relatives. In order to move
around outside, women are required to ensconce themselves in heavy black chadours, tent-like garments with single eye-holes. We were waiting outside because the women inside needed time to clear out.

Sure enough, when we finally followed Aziz into his family’s house, the place was immaculate and empty. Not even the scent of other humans remained. The home was sparse. The only furnishings were carpets and two bright electric lamps. The windows had thick shutters on them and looked like they had never been opened. Their interiors were painted the same color as the walls, which were off-yellow and naked but for an Islamic calendar decorated with Persian script. I looked around but couldn’t find a television. A few minutes later, two men arrived carrying one. They were followed by a thickly mustached man with a VCR. Men kept arriving and the room slowly filled with slightly older, more heavily-set Pakistani men. They were the uncles and fathers of Amun, Asif and their friends. They were dressed like their boys, in clean kurta pajamas and sandals, but with Japanese watches and pens that glittered in their breast pockets.

Asif introduced me to a man who had been to Germany and Singapore. We exchanged polite words until Amun returned and led me to a man seated in the most recessed corner of the living room. He was wearing a turban and vest. “This Mohammed. Mujahedin,” said Amun, clearly impressed by the mysteries of war trapped within the stoic figure.

The man lifted his eyes and stared at me distantly. His upper lip was naked but his cheeks were covered by a full beard. I nodded my respect. We sat next to him in awkward silence until the arrival of Aziz’s brother, the bridegroom, Said. Amun joined the swarm to greet him, while I stayed behind and watched the reaction of the war veteran beside me. He stared contemplatively into the commotion for a brief moment, then dropped his head and examined the hem of his tunic. Asif hooked up the VCR, and we leaned against each other on the floor and watched Running Man. I’d been traveling for several months and was excited by the prospect of a Western film, until I discovered that the rest of the party was more intent on
watching my reactions than actually trying to figure out what Schwarzenegger was doing. Perhaps they were excited by an opportunity to confirm in the flesh what they'd only seen in celluloid. Would I enjoy the movie, which seemed to be more of a running gun battle than a coherent story? I didn't know how to respond, and in any event, it was difficult to pay attention to a vapid film while being stared at by a roomful of men. I was happy when the food showed up.

A half-dozen new arrivals carried in bowls filled with steaming curry and bamboo baskets loaded with thick chepatis. As the scent of rich spices filled the air, Amun grabbed my sleeve and directed me to the doorway. Outside stood a burly man with a box under his right arm; behind him was a slighter man carrying a taballah drum set, and between the two was a skinny, hirsute man with down-turned eyes, a big nose and a nylon wig. His face was covered with blush, mascara and lipstick. His chest was adorned with a stuffed bikini top, and he was wearing a pair of silky pantaloons, the type Barbara Eden used to wear when she played Genie. "Ijellah!" Amun shouted with an innocent laugh and shook his upper body like he had on the rooftop of the bus. An ijellah was not just a belly-dancer; in fundamentalist Peshawar, an ijellah was a transvestite belly dancer.

After we ate, we left Aziz's home and walked a block to a much larger room whose rugs had been rolled away to reveal a naked concrete floor. While the musicians set up in the center, a group of older men broke open a bag of party goods. They pulled out stacks of glittering paper hats, streamers like you might wave for New Year's in the States, and necklaces made of gold paper and flowers. Their last spangled trophy was a broader necklace that they put on the bridegroom. It hung down to his waist. Amun brought me over to examine it, and I discovered that it was crafted entirely from folded one-rupee notes. The musicians on the floor warmed up quickly. The box under the larger man's arm was a small pump organ, a harmonium, similar to a Western accordion.

Moments later, Asif arrived with a chair. He explained that Westerners weren't accustomed to all this kneeling,
standing and squatting. I protested and said that the guest of honor, the bridegroom, should have the chair. Said assured me that he was not the guest of honor but the host, and he would be dishonored if I did not accept the chair. And so, enthroned like a lord in some medieval mead hall, I watched the musicians came to life and the festivities began.

The ijellah spun in, looking like an actor snatched from the set of *South Pacific*, stolen from the number where the sailors are spoofing the showgirls. Still, he did his best to mimic a sexy starlet, wriggling seductively and ignoring the hoots and derisive laughter from the packed room of men.

Tea was available in small glass cups, and Asif handed me one then insisted that I eat a pink ball of something from a tin that he had just opened. I hesitated, and he showed me they were okay by popping one into his mouth. I took a bite. They were incredibly sweet and tasted a bit like soft macaroons. Amun added to the revelry by dumping perfume on my head. A bottle of scent was making its way around, and the guys were having a good time anointing each other with it. Meanwhile, the ijellah was grinding with abandon, trying to lose himself in the squeal of the squeezebox and the beat of the taballah player. When he was moving about as fast as his body could take him, he made a beeline for Said and began rubbing against his body, swiping at the rupees on his chest like an unkempt termagant. The bridegroom took this for a few minutes, to the general enjoyment of the assembled crowd, then yanked off the necklace and hung it on his brother. Aziz laughed and accepted the physical attention of the ijellah. The ijellah, for his part, seemed none too happy about his role or the derisive cheers, and he chopped away at the money necklace with heavy hands.

When the money ran out, the men began chanting Aziz's name, and Amun pushed him into the ring with the dancing ijellah. He was pretty good, a bit better than the poor guy in drag, and he took it fairly seriously. After a minute or two, a new cry went around the room with various names being suggested. I think it was the guy who had been to Singapore who started chanting, “Steve Khan!” At some point during the
day, my friends had flattered me by adding their surname to my Christian name. Soon the room was filled with it. Amun nervously assured me that I didn’t have to dance, but I was already on my feet. “Don’t worry,” I told him, trying to talk like Arnold. “I’ll be back.”

Afterward, Amun and Asif pounded me on the back and assured me I was an acceptable dancer. I glanced around at the swirling shadows of the room and laughed to myself. I was in a room packed with men of all conceivable ages who had gathered to drink tea, eat macaroons, smear each other with perfume and watch a transvestite dance. It was quite a party.

The national sport of Afghanistan is a game called Buzhashi in which over a hundred men on horseback compete to carry the slicked-down body of a headless calf into a marked circle for a cash prize. Guns and knives are outlawed, whips are permitted. A warrior culture still prevails in Afghanistan. Over the millennia Afghan people have seen armies of just about every race and religion troop through their jagged mountain passes. The Peshawar museum, which I visited with my friends on my last full day in Peshawar, was a testament to these conquests. One hallway was devoted to a long line of life-sized Ghandaran sculptures. The Ghandaran culture evolved from the remnants of Alexander the Great’s army and the armies of the Buddhist general, Ashoka, who conquered the region four centuries later in the second century A.D. Theirs was the first culture to make Buddhist figurines. As we walked down the hallway in the dusty museum, Amun and Asif competed to see who could slap the wooden faces of the sculptures the hardest. I tried to frown my displeasure, but they egged each other on until thousand-year-old paint chips fell from wooden chins.

News reports have indicated that the talibaan, the latest militia to join the internecine battles for control of Afghanistan, arrived on the scene in 1994 with an arsenal that included over a hundred tanks, two dozen jets and truckloads of rockets. None of those weapons were for sale in Darra. Clearly, outside forces continue to take an interest in the region. Despite conflicting reports in French newspapers, the United States government
claims our involvement ended in 1992. Whatever the current truth, American money contributed to the civil war still raging in Afghanistan. American influence brought captured Kalashnikovs from Lebanon to Afghanistan. American advisors oversaw the distribution of rocket launchers and sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles. As the area continues to disintegrate beneath the rubble of a seemingly endless war, what is our responsibility? Are we accountable?

I think we are. In Darra, I watched Amun Khan sign away his future for a machine gun. His culture was as foreign to me as any I had seen in my travels, yet the gun awaiting him on the other side of the Khyber Pass was financed, in part, by my tax dollars. No matter how distant Amun’s world is, the people I voted into office have affected his life. As if that isn’t enough, Hollywood continues to reassure him that the ascetic life of the fearless warrior is a worldwide aspiration. In the U.S., we chuckle at movie heroes who fire missiles from their hips, but we stop short of letting the CIA sell Stingers to our kids. In the heart of Islamic Peshawar, American movies and arms continue to stir up a hornets’ nest of trouble, not only for the locals, but through the long arm of international terrorism, for the world.

My friends assembled the next day to put me in a tuk-tuk for the train station. I gave Asif a special grin as we shook hands then turned to say good-bye to Amun. He waited for me with his hand outstretched and a confident grin on his face. I ignored his hand for the moment.

“You go Afghanistan?” I asked him.

He lowered the hand slowly and cocked his head to make out what I was asking.

“You go Afghanistan?”

He got it, and his smile returned. He nodded his head happily. “Yes, yes. Afghanistan,” he said.

“Fight in war?” I asked pointing my hand like a gun.

“Yes, fight.”

“In war, people die,” I said. “You will die. Don’t go.” His smile dropped. I climbed into the back of the tuk-tuk. The
others were waving, but Amun just stared at me. “Don’t go,” I said and the tuk-tuk drove me away.

I live in Missoula, Montana now, amidst the arid peaks of the northern Rockies. It’s pleasant here. The streams are cleaner than they were thirty years ago, and environmental groups are fighting to preserve the forests and the wildlife.

Thirty years ago, before I was born, things were different. In the 1960s, when this was still a logging and mining town, the government co-opted a firefighting facility on the west side, near the airport, and used it to train Special Forces units, Green Berets who were heading into Laos and Vietnam. Ten years later, those Green Berets returned and, in an effort to save some of their allies from the aftermath of a war the United States had helped provoke, they brought several planeloads of Laotians back with them. On the outskirts of town now, Hmong villagers from the tropical hillocks that surround the Plain of Jars cultivate small farms in the cold, infertile soil of western Montana.

People don’t like to talk too much about war anymore. Each day it seems to grow more distant. The Am-Vets bar has been turned into a gay nightclub, and the town’s most visible veteran is a man who asks for spare change in the parking lot of the Safeway. In the diners and bars, young snowboarding and rock-climbing hippies, employed by eco-tourism companies, are slowly replacing the cowboys, miners, foresters and pulp mill workers. The hippies are mostly under thirty. That’s my generation, the so-called Generation X. I’ve heard it said that we’re apathetic, that we don’t care, that there’s nothing that we’re willing to fight for... but that’s bullshit, of course. The other day, a group of friends chained themselves to a gate at the entrance to a logging road in an effort to stop the logging trucks. They unlocked themselves when a frantic lumberjack convinced them that he was going to be late for a child support hearing.

The mountains that hang over Missoula often take me back to the days I spent in Peshawar, where the towering Hindu Kush looms over the downtown like a row of giant earthen
teeth. It's mid-October here. Already, low clouds are tracing the peaks with snow. I thought of Amun yesterday when I stepped outside to watch winter move in. I want to imagine that he's not in Afghanistan now, that he's not cold and scared awaiting the next assault. It's night there now, and I want to imagine that Amun is alive and in his home in Peshawar. I want to imagine that his friends have gathered, that Asif, Aziz and Said are all alive, and that the rugs in the room Amun shares with his mother and sisters have been rolled up and pushed against the back wall. I want to imagine that right now the taballah player is keeping the beat and the harmonium is wailing and Amun is dancing furiously with the ijellah. I can see him, powdered sugar dusts his light mustache, he stinks of perfume, and his eyes are creased with a nervous smile because tomorrow he will begin a family with a woman he has never seen. I want to imagine that the war is forgotten, and all the romance he will ever need is hiding beneath a veil, is dancing in pantaloons, is slapping him on the back, is in his laughter, and is dusting the mountaintops with snow.
INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM KITTREDGE

William Kittredge was born in Oregon in 1932 and grew up on his family's rural ranch. After attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1968-1969, Kittredge joined the faculty at the University of Montana, where he founded CutBank and taught for 27 years. Bill had taught his last class the day before I spoke with him. He had a golf game at ten, so we met at eight a.m. and had coffee next door to the copy shop where he had just dropped off his latest manuscript, Reimagining Desire, to be photocopied before sending it to his editor. We sat at an outdoor table. It was the first spring day in Missoula.

You’ve just finished your last class. How are you feeling about retirement?

Well, I’m feeling real good about retirement. I may get morose later on, but so far I’m handling it. Probably that’s because there are lots of things to do coming up. I’m going to France tomorrow for a writers’ conference, then to Hungary where Annick [Smith] is doing a piece for Islands Magazine, then I’ll have thousands of hours of revisions on the manuscript I just dropped off. In October, I’m going down to Oregon to write about the Klamath River, which is like a microcosm for all the ills of the Northwest, and also it’s where I went to high school. It’s a great story. Also in October, I’ve got to fly back and drive the hundredth meridian from Canada to Texas, which sounded like more fun at the time than it does as it actually gets closer. I looked at the map, and there’s nothing at the hundredth meridian. The biggest town is about three hundred people, you know, so it’s very rural. I asked Annick if she wanted to go and she said, “Well...” She’s hemming and hawing, and if I don’t get her to go I’m going to be all alone at the hundredth meridian. So that carries me through almost a year, until mid-March, and then God knows.
How has Missoula, and the West, changed since you founded CutBank when you first began to teach, in 1969?

Missoula’s very different—it’s become more upscale. I mean, we’re sitting here drinking espresso in a nice little shop on Higgins Avenue. I had never had a cup of espresso before I founded CutBank, and nor had anybody else in Missoula that I knew! Missoula was a little logging town with a university connected to it when I came here. And yet it’s getting to be a lot better town in ways. I think it’s a lot more diverse. You can still go down to the blue-collar bars, like the Trail’s End—places I used to go when I went to bars a lot—and they haven’t changed any. More amenities, and that’s nice. I wish they’d figure out how to have a really good restaurant some way or another!

What is it about Missoula that attracts writers?

Historical accident, mostly. There’s a whole history, of course. H.G. Merriam came here in 1920 and started the first Creative Writing program in the West, the second in the country (after Harvard). He started the first literary magazine in the West, called Frontier and Midland. He published Stegner and Guthrie, and he really worked for fifty or sixty years encouraging writers in Montana. In 1946, there was Leslie Fiedler. Then Dick Hugo came in 1964. Hugo’s first class had Rick DeMarinis, Jim Welch, and a bunch of other people in it, and James Crumley came in 1966. I came in 1969, and slowly there’s just more and more writers here. It’s a good town! It’s fun, it’s pleasant, lot of variety. On the same day you can go to a dance recital and the Trail’s End bar. They’re ten blocks apart and it’s like changing worlds. That’s one of the things that I’ve always like about Missoula, that you’re not stuck.

I’ve heard you say that fiction isn’t connecting to readers anymore. You point out a problem of technique—the relationship of the writer to the reader. Is nonfiction more reader-friendly, do you think?

Nonfiction right now is much closer to poetry. It works like
poetry. It’s like you’re having a conversation with somebody about maybe this is possible. It’s conjectural. Fiction is basically not conjectural. For instance, a Raymond Carver story just says, “This is what happened.” Good nonfiction says, “This is sort of what happened, though maybe it got fucked up in the storytelling, blah, blah, blah.”

Do you think that says something about our society, that we’re not willing to make that leap anymore?

Yes. This is a very ironic, postmodern society. Every time I read fiction, in some way or another I think, Oh horseshit, you know? And a lot of nonfiction I read—like Jon Krakauer writing about the expedition to Everest—I don’t think, Oh horseshit very often. I think if Jon Krakauer were writing a novel about an expedition to Everest, I would be thinking, Oh horseshit.

But I don’t think it necessarily has to be that way at all. I think Milan Kundera transcends all that perfectly. Garcia Marquez is writing about another culture, and we’re willing to say, yeah, OK. But what about our own culture? You’d have a lot of trouble trying to do magical realism in Missoula. As soon as any American starts seeing ghosts, we kind of check out. We say, “Oh, sure, ghosts.” I think it’s about the relationship of belief in the reader. We just have a very hard time believing when somebody presents us with a fiction that says, “This is true, this is the real thing,” or it’s supposed to be—not true, but an object you’re supposed to believe in without horseshit. Because a nonfiction writer (a good one) says, “No, you should question this all the time. I’m full of shit, watch me.” And the poets are saying the same thing. Again and again, the best nonfiction writers don’t come out of fiction or nonfiction programs, they come out of poetry programs. It’s the same forum—a kind of conjecturing about the world. Pulling down the wall.

Where do you see fiction headed?

Probably in that same direction, towards nonfiction. When I was in graduate school, I worked with Bob Coover. And Coover
said directly to the class, "We're reinventing the narrative. We're reinventing the whole thing." And it turned out that the people who rejuvenated narrative were people like Tom Wolfe and all the new journalists. They started telling narratives that counted. And now you can pick up any copy of *Harper's* and there's seven articles and maybe one story, maybe none. Or *The Atlantic*, or *The New Yorker*. Fiction will have a huge resurgence, I'm sure, in ten or fifteen years; somebody will figure out fictional storytelling.

Another reason why fiction is on bad times is that it doesn't address most of the problems that really concern us. What fiction traditionally addresses is love affairs. And at my age, really, I couldn't give a shit. I'm tired of busted affair stories! I worry about money and firewood and all those things that novels by Dickens used to attack. Somebody pointed out once that Faulkner and Dickens were the same writer. They're both generally complaining about being turned away from the big house, from the mansion on the hill, not allowed to get in, and they spend the rest of their lives seeking justice, trying to get even with the rich people.

*What about the need to escape, though, by picking up a novel? Picking up a statement about our environment is not going to serve that need.*

That's true. The hardest books to sell right now in New York are environmental books and books about Vietnam. Someone once said, "It's like having bummer tattooed on your forehead!" People want to escape, people want to go off in another world, another time, and the trouble with a lot of serious fiction is that it's almost by definition difficult.

*You've made the comment that writers early in their careers work in a social storytelling mode, and later in their careers work in a religious storytelling mode. How does your work relate to that paradigm?*

I'm trying to tell myself a story about why I should enjoy being alive and not be afraid of dying. I mean, I'm 64, and it becomes
a little more apparent on the horizon. I'm saying it's a hell of a deal we've got here, and in some way that's religious. That's what I'm trying to do with this manuscript I'm getting photocopied next door. What we mustn't do is to allow all this other stuff to descend on us like a great miasmic fog. For Christ's sake, look at this, how bad is this? In one of those books, I think *Hole in the Sky*, I have a quote which is, "paradise is all around you, can you not see it?" Of course that ignores endless political injustice, unhappiness, sadness, sure, despair...on and on. But it is, in a sense, all around us.

One of the problems with society is that there are specialized roles like stockbrokers, for instance, which give you permission, when you go to work, to be as selfish as possible all day long. And that's not very good for society.

*But doesn't the writers' role also give license to be selfish? To be drunk all the time, for example, and to screw up relationships?*

When I first came here we always used to sit around and say, "God Bless Dylan Thomas, he paved the ground for all of us." He was a terrible drunk, we were all drunk all the time. The graduate students are very conservative now. Christ almighty, when I first came here it was an endless bacchanal—it's a miracle anybody got anything done. But being drunk is something to hide in. The guy who really broke the ground was Coleridge, "disassociation of the sensibilities is a sacred thing," you know? Take drugs, get drunk, and see. It's a political role: writers want to see freshly, and they don't think they can see freshly through the same old eyes that everybody sees through, so they want new eyes. Which is the same as saying, "Let's get drunk all the time." The only problem with that is a lot of the time, the only thing you see is spooks and ghosts. You can see freshly without that. You can disassociate your sensibilities in all sorts of other ways. Mostly what you do when you're drinking all the time is just sit around with a hangover. Believe me, I've tried that mode, a lot. It's a great place to go hide, to go play.

I love games. I play golf now, all the time, and the thing I
like about it best is that I go out there and I never have a literary thought! I'm playing with guys who are mostly retired, and one guy who's a professional gambler. They're sweet guys, really nice guys, and once in a while one of them will say, "Well, Bill, still writing those books?" and I'll say, "Yup," and they'll say, "Isn't that something."

**Do you think melodramatic people are drawn to writing, or do writers become melodramatic?**

I think writers get away with murder. Like, hey, we're supposed to be this way, so we can do whatever we want. And probably writers do, in fact (if they're any good) see freshly, and do see through all the pretense that goes on. I don't know many writers who partake in the Missoula high society, for example, because they think that's dumb. It's a lot of pretense, a lot of status stuff, all this class stuff, writers just won't take part in most of that. They say that's bullshit and walk away. But writers encourage each other too.

Richard Ford's wife: she's pretty melodramatic, but she's down to earth too. She won't put up with his antics. She's really practical and she's really smart. Richard will start in in the morning, and Christina will be cooking something and he'll be going on and on and she will look over her shoulder and say, "Oh, Richard, for Christ's sake, pull up your socks!"

You're considered a gifted and inspiring teacher. What makes a good teacher, do you think?

Well, the thing I learned after a while is you don't try to fake it. If you don't know, just say so. And try to treat the writers' intentions as if they were sacred. In other words, don't try to teach people to write stories like you write, or to think like you think, or to be like you. Try to encourage them to figure out who they are. I don't think anybody can teach anybody how to write; I think all you can do is help people teach themselves. I always say it's a whole discipline made up of tips, you know? And you can save people time, you can say try this, or revise this, or think about this while you're doing it, but they've got
to go do it themselves. If they’re ever going to be any good, they’re not going to write like you or like anybody else, and what you’ve got to do is encourage them to get their ducks in a row. When you find your subject matter—your real obsession, your way of telling—then you’re set.

I do think that in America, there’s this theater that we act out, over and over and over again—the drama of masculine sadness, masculine loss—and we’re so used to it that we buy it automatically. Meanwhile, we’re used to women writing sentimental romances or something, and we interpret it differently. We’re putting a different spin on each one of them. That’s probably true in this society; it’s unfair but it’s true. I think you follow your nose and find the stuff that’s yours.

Ray Carver always wrote great stories; he’d send them to me—Xerox copies—and I couldn’t believe it when Ray got famous. I thought, For God’s sake, what’s going on? Why Ray? He’s a wonderful writer and a wonderful friend, but I could not account for why Americans, particularly young Americans, were so bewitched by the voice. And people were, everywhere. Annick’s kids, when they were 12 and 13, would read Ray Carver stories and be knocked dead by them.

Raymond Carver was a lucky person. Early on he found a way of telling the story he was good at telling. It’s like, bing! He could do that when he was 20, 21, 22, and he worked hard, but for a lot of people, that takes a long time. It sure did for me. Christ, I was in my forties before I figured out that I could write these essays, and I’ve had better luck with them than fiction, probably because I was always didactic in fiction. I was talking to David James Duncan last night and telling him I was going to go back to writing fiction—like Kundera essayistic novels. And he said, “That interests me too—that’s a form I really can work with.”

I can’t write stories like Richard Ford, like Rock Springs. You have to recognize what it is that you can do. With students, you have to encourage them to go their direction, whatever weird thing it is—where their writing comes alive. Encourage them to look at those moments and say, “Why does this come alive?” I think Ray found a way to do that all the time. Basically,
what worked for him was writing about himself and Maryann, his first wife. His first published story was “The Student’s Wife,” and it’s about he and Maryann in Chico, and it was published when he was a junior at Chico State. It’s a perfect Ray Carver story. Of course, his teacher was John Gardener at the time, so...

You often talk about the need for each writer to find his or her own story. What’s your story?

Oh, I guess it’s the story about growing up in eastern Oregon, my childhood there. It was a place that was like paradise familiar. We owned a huge acreage, and we didn’t have any idea there was anybody else in the world. The nearest town was roughly the size of Hamilton, Montana—smaller than Hamilton—and it was 40 miles away over a range of mountains. There’s no law out there, no nothing, literally. The deputy sheriff might come out once every six months and drive around, killing time. People took care of themselves. The way in was the way out. There was no way to go on through, at that time. That turned into agribusiness, that kind of thing, commodified commercial enterprise that was finally hard on people, hard on the land, hard on the animals, hard on everything and it was very exploited, finally. And you get disenchanted. When I first started writing, I always wanted to celebrate the people I had known, but eventually I turned from writing celebrations to kind of lamentations (that kind of masculine story we were talking about), and then to writing essays which are really cautionary tales: watch out for this. But now I’m going back the other way.

Why do you think you’re “going back the other way”?

I want to make something that isn’t an argument, that isn’t a complaint. I want to do something that celebrates the world. I’m having a good time—I’m having a great time—and I want to say, “Well, this is great. If we can treat each other nicely and decently and fairly, justly, we could all have a hell of a good time.” You know? It’s just that everybody trashes each other.
Do you have any advice for the next generation of writers?

Find your obsessions and follow them. Be outraged about the things you’re outraged about.

Lastly, what is your favorite book?

Oh, Christ, I don’t know. I have hundreds.

Later, in the English office, Bill hailed me:

MILK

From time to time the placid shrugs its shoulders—
earthquakes, for instance—

but still the world depends
on placid things' resistance.

The fire requires
its trees,
the sea its hem of boulders,

the wind
without its halls
would howl in silence;

for everything that
flares up, something lowers
itself, digs in

for an existence
in the long haul, slows.
It may well be the placid knows

its worth. The cow whose
calf was taken
eats again—but do not guess

too quickly at the meaning
in the red hips’ unbent squareness,
the large-jawed head

half-buried in the grass:
with each fly's weightless
bite, the thick skin shivers.

The placid, unlike us,
lives in the moment.
Something must;

like chairs,
or painted dressers,
on an earth where loss

is so all present
that we drink it without thinking,
blue-white in its early morning glass.
FIVE ALLS

A knife frees the burnt cornish hen
delicately from its strings.

Upstairs, an overbred, idiot dog
races dust under beds.

Next door, a child polishes; his mother
sets the hawk’s missing foot in gold.

Blood knots a flower to the epicure’s temple.
_Do you remember how I showed you?_ Mon amour

propre swallows the bird, drags the sage twigs,
one by one, out of the crumbling palace.
Janet Whaley
*Conversation*, 1996
Porcelain, 20"
Renuka Pillai
*Mother and Child*
Oil

CutBank 66
Collins Bonds
*Lucky Bunny*, 1995
Oil, 3' x 4'
Suzy Kitman

*Flying Baby Series #III*, 1996
Charcoal, 38" x 50"
Chris Chapman
Untitled
Black and white photograph
5" x 6.5"
John J. Arnold
*Untitled, 1994*
Infrared on black and white
13.5" x 19.75"
Carmen Malsch
Higgins Street, 1996
Wood engraving
5.25 x 4.75"
J. M. Cooper

*Mouse*

Black and white photograph
IMPROVISATION ON SUNDAY

The day was sparkling and endless
like depression in Heaven,
the water sparkled
and the land shelved down beneath the water;

portrait booths were humming everywhere,
people stood idly outside them
and stared, trying to dispel
the glowing coin of blindness
laid on everything from the flash;

the day like an abandoned factory,
the day like a strawberry
bitten through to the white center;

the portrait booth spooling out citizens
and razoring one from the next—
with their faces in their hands
they stare down at the damp white curl of paper,
like a priest's collar removed—
they get their wallets out
to look at their loved ones, and add themselves in.

The sun like twenty kites,
the sun broken by gulls,
the sun like writing
on the papery skin of the old.
DISCLOSURE

1

The poem that begins as a sound,
aiming for the center of your life,
takes all day to climb to the rooftop,
looking out over the land, a vacant lot at dusk
water trucks are spraying to keep
the dust, to keep arid
desires—a boy down the street, a major
American prize—under wraps. To breathe
such desires might narrow your focus.
You'd see yourself as an insect,
buzzing interminably between despair
and despair. Caravaggio
was an insect, airbrushing,
centuries before the airbrush was invented,
the metaphors of his life
onto canvases so perfectly distilled,
you wander museum rooms
grateful for the heads
that stand in your way. How
delightful the snakes of unwashed hair
twining down a young man's neck.
You could eat them. You could eat
the pale soiled blouse
on his girlfriend's body, which you could eat
for the moles on her shoulders and sores
on her legs. But this is just
a romantic idleness, the easy
escape into detailed, everyday,
meaningless ugliness. Now
you're getting scared. Now the stuff
you don't want to talk about
surfaces. You'd like
someone you could ask,
Is this ok? does it matter to anybody besides the little jerk in my chest who repeats in a two-beat stroke he knows the world and he knows who has no place in it beyond the imaginary. Friend, come to me now. I'm ready to talk.

2

The poem that ought to know better thinks that it does, informing you with a wink that the color of your pants this evening has a history in Manhattan homosexual circles of signaling you're ready for action. Flattered, despite your practiced modesty, you begin to flirt in this room of high tan walls and white leather couches, a party at a friend of a friend's, though no one interests you particularly. It's just that the whole world has a decidedly sensuous aura now, the air above the glass end-tables shimmering indefinably, iridescent as the pale metal wings of insects who've waited decades to emerge in such numbers, in veritable clouds, their life-cycle in high mountain soil a ten-year burrowing to the stratum where darkness is so complete each dreams itself a solitary universe—all stories begin with "I" and end in tears; then a ten-year journey to the surface, the weary flight north a poignant awakening: their fate is a shared fate after all! As you undress, they surround you, fitting seamlessly to your skin—you are luminous, a god—but nobody notices, nobody cares your intentions are no longer metaphorical. Take me, you want to say, the room opening out around you, the room so suddenly vacant you hear a sound at your temples, a sound you can't quite place, a rhythmic, disabling emptiness as involuntary as the color blue.
The poem that never finds its subject is sexiest.

You meet it on walks with your dog early in the morning, mist kissing your cheeks.

It has a room that’s not well kept, but the mild bodily odor mixed with cooking smells, onions and allspice, caresses you like fresh sheets.

You wrap them around you, suddenly naked, removing your clothes took nothing, a slip of the imagination.

The bed has just the right firmness, but before you test it in moral terms, you stretch your legs, feeling languorous, the covers molding to your every hill and rivulet.

To walk all day like this over your own body! you’re in heaven!

God sits just above and to the left, admiring your postures, your saunter, all the many discoveries: fire from the loins will warm you in winter; the wheel you fashion from the palm of your hand, given time, given just the right downhill angle, will roll across the continent, transforming raw materials into factories, bullets and lipsticks as interchangeable as bodily fluids at amusement park beaches.

And the litter washed up under the boardwalks?

How easily you gather school children to perform public projects.

They love the rubber gloves that protect them from germs.

Their teacher helps each write a letter to you, the new Parks Commissioner, who finds their sentiments oddly thrilling, the smear of inks on the little pages more than you’d bargained for.

These must be hidden.

If your lover ever sees them, he won’t know how to read them the way you do.
The poem that runs underground as a river runs
takes the shape of horses galloping at midnight
or potatoes cooking, cut up, punch-drunk from
all the pressure, the lid firmly sealed
these past ten years in a manner that drains
your skin of pigment in the already-palest places—
at the crease of an armpit, or where the thigh
attaches to the trunk next to your scrotum,
the flesh transparent, your clothes no longer
a song your body’s instrument plays
for the masses, each shirt and sock like shades
on windows into you. How you long
to draw them back. How you long to swim out
from under the gravities of arousal and family
you thought middle age would release you from.
*Flying* is all you can think of now. You dream
your are a Renaissance city hovering above
the actual, its reflection. You are Venice
but better, weightless, the incorruptible image
of Venice in the heavens. Those who come to you
pass right through you. The blues and ochres
of your waters and architectures are substanceless
as laughter. Now the people you love most
and absolute strangers—all are equals
who come to know you as effortlessly as
the very oxygen trapped in their blood.
The poem that speaks to God speaks in a grammar
whose form is as incomprehensible as it is tangible,
a grammar of membranes sheared from the muscles of a heart
neither weary nor invigorated, simply present, in a present
tense as transparent to someone in the past
as someone in the future.

_Dog_ is _potential_, if one so desires, and goes with blessings.
_Tension_ begets, standing on a rocky hill, _evergreen_,
which we recognize immediately as _song_ in the service of
_nothing but itself_.
They go with blessings, the condition of blessing the only river
on the continent.

If yellow poppies be the popular belief in corporate intractablility;
if pus stand in place of marble kitchen counters;
if mastectomy assume the last-minute demeanor of a favorite seasoning
whose fragrance sums up a life,
take a breath, take a deeper breath, of this sound you’ve become.

_for Matt Gabrielson_
LOVE LIFTED ME

A shotgun blast at dawn separates night and day. I come awake awash in adrenaline before the echo has faded and roll off the bed to sprawl on the nappy motel shag, where I hope I'll be safe if war has broken out between the crackheads in the next room and the pimp downstairs. The carpet reeks of cigarette smoke and spilled perfume. I press my face into it and wait for another explosion, but there's only this dog somewhere, putting together long and short barks into combinations reminiscent of Morse code. I imagine that I'm able to decipher the gruff pronouncements: *He who feeds me is a liar and a thief. His hand upon me is a curse. God sees all and does nothing.*

The parking lot is quiet when I finally muster the guts to crawl to the window and peek between the drapes. The other rooms are shut up tight, and a perfect mirror image of the neon vacancy sign shivers in the placid, black water of the swimming pool. So I guess I dreamed the gunshot, or maybe it's Simone again, my dead wife, trying to drive me crazy.

Tracy is still sound asleep, too, but that doesn't prove anything. A stone speed freak, her standard routine is 72 hours up and 24 down, and when she crashes, she crashes hard. Right now she looks as serene as an angel or a sweet, dead baby. A blanket hides most of the damage: the tracks; the scabs that keep her nervous fingers busy; the bruised skin stretched thin over her ribs and spine, elbows and knees. She's 16 years old and has been raped three times, and I'm like an uncle to her, like a big brother, she says, because I let her stay in my room when it's cold outside. No, I'm not fucking her. I'd like to, but then Simone would kill me for sure.

I rejoin her on the bed, careful to keep to my side, and watch the walls go from blue to pink to white, until the river of grief twisting through me unexpectedly swells and jumps its banks. At the first rush of tears, I get up and shut myself in the bathroom, and it's as rough as it's been in a while, but by the
time the liquor stores open, I'm showered and shaved and empty enough to bob like cork on the surface of another day.

The listless winter sun doesn't do much to warm the chinky concrete of the pool deck where I sit sipping beer and tomato juice, my feet dangling in the frigid water. The pool is the heart of this place. From here, I can keep an eye on all of the doors and windows. I can see everything coming at me. I work on a letter I've been meaning to write. *Dear Simone, please leave me alone.* Relaxing my neck by degrees, I let my head fall back until I'm staring up at the sky, which is crawling with choppers and blimps and spectral silver jets. The wind steals half of every cigarette I light.

The bad guys sleep at this time of day, so the kids who live here are running wild, making the most of the few hours when it's safe for them to be out of their rooms. While their mothers cluster around the Coke machine, as vigilant as nursing cats, they play hide-and-seek among the cars in the parking lot and pedal tricycles in sloppy circles. I ignore them as best I can. They make me nervous. I'm afraid that at any moment they'll go off like a string of firecrackers and disintegrate into acrid smoke and drifts of shredded newspaper.

A couple of them, little boys, rattle the gate of the fence that surrounds the pool and beg in Spanish to be let in.


Undaunted, they snake their skinny arms through the bars and strain to reach the lock. I scoop some ice from my cup and fling it at them, and they fall back laughing as a police car eases into the lot, no lights or sirens. Before it has come to a stop, the boys' mother is herding them back to the family's room, and the other mothers, too, gather their children. Within seconds the parking lot is empty. The sudden silence makes my palms itch. Mrs. Cho, the owner of the motel, leads the cops up the stairs, and I lift my feet out of the pool and stomp some feeling into them in case things get ugly and I have to run for cover.

When the eviction party reaches the second floor, it's round and round she goes, where she stops, nobody knows.
210: old guy, Mexican, Cuban, something. Wears a cowboy hat and plays the radio loud late at night to drown out the whores' noisy comings and goings. The kids and their mothers watch from behind half-closed doors as one of the officers knocks with his baton. His partner cups his eyes to peer in the window, but the glass has been covered over with tinfoil. Mrs. Cho dials her cellular, and the phone in the room rings and rings and rings. After a bit of discussion, she unlocks the door with her passkey and moves off down the walkway so the cops can do their stuff.

"Police!" they shout in unison as the door swings open. Guns drawn, they roll into the room, one high, one low. Such caution is unnecessary, however—has been for a while, judging by the stench that billows out and settles over the motel like another coat of stucco. Mrs. Cho backs away, covering her nose and mouth. She bumps into the railing and slides along it toward the steps. Then the cops reappear on the walkway. One of them says something snide to the other and both laugh, but they're not happy, and neither am I. I'll be smelling death for days.

Are you happy now? I promise I'll take the blame, if only you'll let me be.

My shadow lies beside me, a wan and shapeless stain in the gutter. I drag it into the liquor store, to the beer cooler, the register and out again. The effort leaves me winded. Twisting the cap off my quart, I drop onto a bus bench, but I'm barely settled when a passing car's backfire sends my heart wheeling with the pigeons from the telephone wire overhead.

Eightball rolls up on his bicycle with Tracy perched on the handlebars. Eightball, because that's how black he is. He doesn't care for the name, but so what, the little dope fiend, the little thief. I don't care for how he professes to love Tracy one minute and pimps her the next. She's welcome in my room, but he is not allowed.

"S'up," he says. He feigns interest in a billboard across the street, a giant hot dog adorned with a bolt of yellow mustard. He can't look me in the eye.
Tracy slides off the handlebars and sits beside me on the bench, then immediately pops up again like something has stung her. She stands on one foot, using the other to scratch the back of her leg. She’s tweaking, every hair of her platinum crewcut in frenzied motion, her nostrils rimed with dried snot.

“Fuckin’ that dude killed himself,” she blurts through clenched teeth. “We saw’em carryin’em out. Smelled like fuckin’ I don’t know. Like shit. You see it? Blew his fuckin’ head off. C’n I have a hit of your beer?”

I give her one, and she tries to sit again, but is soon back on her feet, rocking from side to side like a metronome marking loony time.

“They took’em away in an ambulance, but he’s dead for sure. What they do with guys like him, with no family and shit, they take’em to the hospital and give’em to the students there. They’re learnin’ to be doctors, and it’s a law they c’n do experiments and shit on your body if you’re poor. That’s why I made a will and left it with my mom. If I die, they got to burn me and spread my ashes over Hawaii.”

A car sidles up to the curb, driven by a kid with a mustache that looks glued on. He rolls down the passenger window and calls out to Tracy, “You for sale?”

“Yeah, she for sale, she for sale,” Eightball says. He pedals to the window and practically climbs inside. “How much you got?”

The kid speeds away in a panic, tires squealing, and Eightball’s lucky his head doesn’t go with him.

“You fucker,” Tracy wails. “I can’t believe you.”

“What you mean? I’s just joking.”

Eightball drops the bike and hurries to put his arms around her. She hugs him back. Don’t ask me why people do what they do. After Simone jumped off the freeway overpass, taking our baby girl with her, the cops brought me to the station and wondered aloud what drove her to it. I was her husband, they reasoned, I should know. I didn’t, and I still don’t, and I think that’s what pissed her off.

“We gettin’ married,” Eightball says over Tracy’s shoulder. He grabs her wrist and forces her hand my way. I glimpse a
ring. Tracy's face ripples like the motel pool in a downpour, translucent and impenetrable all at once.

"My mom signed the paper," she says.
"And my daddy comin' to sign mine tomorrow," Eightball boasts.

"You can drive us to the place, can't you?" Tracy asks. "If I give you gas money?"

"Sure," I say.
"First thing tomorrow morning."
"Whenever."

I won't hold my breath. We've been through this before. Eightball slides his hand under Tracy's thin white T-shirt, up under the black bra showing through it. He squeezes her tit and stares at me like, "What the fuck are you going to do?"

This kid. This fucking kid. I pretend to doze off and picture him dead in the street.

"He all fucked up," Eightball snorts.

Tracy climbs back onto the handlebars, and the two of them wobble their way down Van Nuys Boulevard. When they're good and gone, I open my eyes. Traffic whips past. There's a loose manhole in the street that bucks and clatters whenever a car passes over it, and it's bucking and clattering like crazy right now, as if to remind me that it's Tuesday, 3 p.m., and everybody has someplace to be except me.

"Stop it," I say to Simone. "Please."

I wish she'd just get it over with. Hiding in palm trees and broken-down taco trucks and stray cats, she haunts this whole city, lashing out at me, dismantling my life piece by piece. My job, the house—I can't even keep a decent pair of shoes. Two days after I buy any, they're gone. They disappear right out of the closet. She wants me to suffer, and I have obliged, but the price of peace remains a mystery. I've offered to take the blame for her death and for the death of our child, but that's not enough. I'm beginning to think she wants me to die too.

The bar still reeks of Pine-Sol or whatever they swab it out with before opening. The TV's off, and Cecil is the only other
customer, at the far end, intent on the newspaper crossword puzzle.

"The hell's Jimmy?" I ask.

"In the can."

I slip behind the bar and draw myself a Bud.

"What a ruckus at your place today," Cecil murmurs.

"Somebody said suicide."

"Sounds about right. I smelled it way the hell down the block. Must have been a loner, to get that ripe."

"I don't know. I try to keep to myself with those people. They have problems."

Jimmy returns from the bathroom, collects for the beer. Nobody has much to say after that. I sit listening to ice melt somewhere for as long as I can, until I think I might start talking to myself. Then, feeling as brittle as improperly tempered steel, I get up and walk to the pool table.

The balls drop with a thud, and I arrange them in the rack, stripes, solids, bury the eight. Circling the table, I ignore the easy shots and try for miracles, and I'm on, I can't miss. The incontrovertible laws of physics have been declared invalid. Balls smack into other balls and assume impossible trajectories that always end in corner pockets. What goes up doesn't necessarily come down.

And if Simone had been given a moment like this? I wonder. Why, she'd have flown when she jumped, instead of falling. She and our baby would have sailed off that overpass and glided toward Pasadena, traffic glittering and roaring beneath them like a swift, shallow river in the evening sun. Oh, shit. Here I go again. I've also dreamed that I was there to catch them, and other times I've been able to talk her down from the guardrail; I've convinced her to give me the baby, then to take my hand herself. Next I'll be Superman or something. That's how stupid it's getting. I'll build a time machine or rub them down with Flubber. Whatever it takes to keep them alive. Whatever it takes to make things different than they are.

Eight a.m., and someone's knocking at the door. I shake myself
the rest of the way awake and pull on a pair of pants. Most likely it's one of the girls from down the hall, wanting to bum a cigarette. If so, she's out of luck. Those whores never have a kind word for me. It's always faggot this and chickenhawk that just because I'm not interested in buying what they're selling. I check the peephole to be sure.

A black guy wearing a purple suit leans forward to knock again.

"Wrong room," I shout through the door.
"I'm lookin' for Deshawn. Goes by Little D. He with a white girl, Tracy, and they gettin' married today."
Deshawn is Eightball's real name.
"So?" I say.
"I'm Deshawn's daddy. He give me this number to meet him at."
"They aren't here."
"But Deshawn give me this number."

Something in his voice makes me want to help him. He sounds civilized. I open the door and step outside, join him on the walkway. The sun is high enough to catch the second floor, where we're standing, but the first floor and the pool remain in shadow. It'll be a while before they warm up enough for me to move down there.

"They said they'd be by, but not when," I inform Eightball's dad.

"You know where they stay?"
I shake my head. In addition to the purple suit, he's wearing purple leather shoes and purple socks. By the way he keeps tugging at his clothes, constantly adjusting and straightening, it's obvious he's not used to being so dressed up.
"Well, then, how about where to get some coffee?" he asks.

"There's a doughnut place. Hold on and I'll show you."

I have him wait outside while I put on my flip-flops and a T-shirt. It'll be my good deed for the day, walking him over there. He's whistling something. I press my ear to the door and catch a bit of "The Wedding March."

* * *

CutBank 85
He dumps a packet of sugar into his coffee and stirs it with his finger. The coffee is hot, but he doesn’t flinch. He raises his finger to his lips, licks it clean, and asks if I’ve accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior. I swear I’ve never heard as much Jesus talk in my life as I’ve heard since I hit bottom. For the sake of my daughter, I’ve held on to heaven, because I like to picture her snug among the clouds when I close my eyes at night. But that’s as far as it goes, that’s all I need of it.

“What’s it to you?” I ask Eightball’s dad.

“I just want to share the good news with you about God’s plan for your salvation,” he replies.

“Forget that, man. That’s alright.”

Eightball’s dad chuckles and taps his tie clasp, a gold crucifix. “Oh, so you that rough and tough, huh? I got you. Just let me reassure you, though, you are loved.”

I pick up a newspaper someone has dropped on the floor and pretend to read.

One of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling has burned out, and the Cambodian who owns the shop stands on the counter to replace it. He slides the cover of the fixture out of its frame and passes it down to his teenage son, but the tube itself is jammed. His son hisses instructions at him while he struggles to remove it.

“Deshawn’s girl, she saved?” Eightball’s dad asks.

“I couldn’t say.”

“Deshawn saved. He was raised in the church.”

The owner finally gives up. His son takes his place on the counter. The kid jiggles the tube and twists it. His baggy pants slip down to his knees, revealing Harley-Davidson boxer shorts. His father tries to pull the pants up, but the boy slaps his hand away. While he’s distracted, the tube comes loose on its own and falls in slow motion, like a bomb dropped from an airplane. It hits the floor and shatters with a glassy pop, but none of this phases Eightball’s dad. He’s deep into something about the Israelites. Saliva thickens in the corners of his mouth, and he grips the little red table between us like it might try to run away. I interrupt with a question.

“How long’s it been since you’ve seen Deshawn?”

CutBank 86
"Deshawn? Four, five years. Five years it must be. His momma brought him up to Bakersfield to visit."

"And what was the last time before that?"

The guy’s smile goes mushy at the edges. It’s the kind of reaction I was looking for. I’m fucked that way.

"Alright then," he says. "Enough of that."

The Cambodian brings out a broom and begins to sweep the milky shards of the broken tube into a pile. Eightball’s dad suddenly turns to him and crows, “Jesus loves you, you know that, brother?”

“Okay, okay, good,” the Cambodian replies. He sounds like he’s had a bellyful of that shit too.

“What’s your name?” I ask Eightball’s dad.

“Donald.”

“You drink beer, Donald?”

The sun is useless for warmth at this time of year, but I like the feel of the light on my skin. Its gentle pressure keeps me from thinning into nothing like a drop of blood lost to the sea. Donald thanks me for freshening his beer and tomato juice, then reclines again on the webbed chaise and goes back to humming complicated tunes under his breath. He seems content to lie here and drink and watch the kids hard at their morning games on the other side of the fence. They don’t make him nervous at all.

Room 210 has been cordoned off with yellow police tape. Mrs. Cho can’t get in to clean up until the coroner certifies that the death was a suicide, so we live with the stink, which lingers one tiny step behind everything else. You fool yourself that it’s gone, but then the wind shifts and you get a snootful and almost puke.

A syringe floats in the pool, spinning in slow circles whenever the breeze ruffles the water. After a while, it strikes me how disgusting this is. Someone has stolen the long-handled net Mrs. Cho uses to scoop trash out of the water, so I have to strain and stretch and splash to force the syringe to the side of the pool where I can reach it.

“What you got?” Donald asks.
“Nothing. A bug.”

There’s blood caked inside the cylinder, and the needle’s bent. I slip it into an empty beer can and toss the can into the dumpster. Donald pipes up again while I’m washing my hands in the pool.

“Deshawn should be here by now. I could of taken a later bus if I’d known, Been up since 3 a.m.”

I don’t tell him about the last time Eightball and Tracy were supposed to get married, or the time before that. He’s removed his purple jacket, hung it on the back of his chair, and loosened his tie. Now he untucks his shirt and unbuttons it. He has a big old belly, and a dull pink scar puckers the center of his chest from the top of his breast bone to right below his rib cage. None of my business.

I slide into the chair next to his and pick up my drink. The children screech like wounded rabbits, and the beetle-browed motel that surrounds us declares with a groan and a fresh set of cracks that it can’t take much more of this shit. A junky steps out of a room on the second floor. He flings his arms up before his eyes to protect them from the light and staggers along the walkway to the room next to mine, where it seems they’ve been expecting him. The door opens onto blackness, and he’s sucked inside.

Dear Simone. Dear Simone. Dear Simone.

Donald reaches over and shakes my chair. I flinch so hard, something in my neck pops.

“What you need to get for out here is a radio, put on some good gospel for these children. Some of that ‘Love lifted me, love lifted me.’”

Tracy and Eightball slink out of the same room the junky disappeared into. They know we’re here. Tracy waves as they walk toward the stairs, but Donald doesn’t notice. I don’t say anything. Let him be surprised. I light another cigarette and open another beer.

Eightball throttles the gate and shouts, “Yo, old man, you drunk already?”

“Little D. Lord, my lord.”

Donald pads over to let them in, buttoning his shirt on
the way. It looks like the wedding is still on. They’ve even gone so far as to dress for it this time, Eightball wearing a white turtleneck and an old suit coat, Tracy a pale green minidress.

Donald embraces Eightball. “Look at you,” he says. “My little man.” Then he turns to Tracy and holds out his arms, “Come on, girl, we all in this together.” She moves forward and lets him hug her too.

He drags more chairs over, arranges everything in a circle, and Eightball and Tracy sit reluctantly. It’s too much for them, as high as they are. Eightball fidgets and Tracy gnaws her lips. They lie shamelessly in response to Donald’s questions, and at first I’m impressed that they even make the effort, but then it just becomes ridiculous. I laugh out loud when Tracy claims she’s been offered a job as a nanny to some rich doctor’s kids.

Donald wants to say a prayer. Tracy bows her head, and I can see right down the front of her dress. The crack and speed have gobbled up most of what was there, but what’s left is right out in the open. Eightball catches me looking and drops his hand to the inside of his thigh to flip me off where his daddy can’t see, and I close my eyes and grin like that peek at his girl’s titties was the biggest thrill I’ve had in ages.

A flock of gulls descends upon the motel from out of nowhere. Some strut stiff-legged across the parking lot, running to avoid the kids, while others eddy overhead like trash caught in a whirlwind. They say this means a storm is coming, when they travel so far inland. Or maybe it’s the smell that’s drawn them, room 210. It’s a fact they’ll eat just about anything. I knew a kid once who fed them bread wrapped around fishhooks. The hooks were tied to 50 or so feet of monofilament, which the kid staked into the ground. It was a neat little trick, practically turned those birds inside out. And the sounds they made. My fucking god! It’s like I used to tell Simone: You want nightmares, honey? I’ll give you nightmares.

I said I’d take them to the County Clerk’s office, so I do. Donald rides in front with me, and the happy couple slouches in the back seat. It’s good to be away from the motel. The freeway sweeps up out of the Valley and swings us past Hollywood,
and the traffic zipping along in all four lanes makes me feel like I’m actually part of something that works. Donald fiddles with the radio and tunes in an oldies station, “Rockin’ Robin,” stuff like that.

Eightball has the window open. He holds his hand out, palm down, fingers together. The hand banks and swerves like a jet fighter in the air rushing past. “Red Team Leader to Red Team One,” Eightball says, “prepare to engage.” He purses his lips and makes machine gun sounds, tapping his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Tracy watches, irritated, then finally says, “You’re trippin’, boy.” She imitates his make-believe plane, exaggerates it into ridiculousness, until Eightball yanks his hand back inside the car and rolls up the window.

We pass over the four-level interchange where the Hollywood, Harbor, and Pasadena cross, the very one Simone jumped from. It’s the first time I’ve been here since it happened, but, okay, I think, I can handle this. I keep my foot on the gas and my eyes forward, away from the guardrail. I treat it like any other stretch of road. Simone’s not going to let me off that easy though. We haven’t gone a hundred yards further when the car begins to shimmy and grind. What? I want to yell. What? What? What? But she won’t answer. She never does. I manage to pull the car to the side of the freeway before it dies completely.

“I said I’d give you money for gas,” Tracy whines.

“That’s not it, I don’t think,” I reply.

I pop the hood and Donald gets out with me to see what’s wrong. I’m lost looking down at the smoking engine. I was a salesman, for fuck’s sake, stereos, TVs, etc. Cars are not my thing. Donald pulls out the dipstick, wipes it on his handkerchief. When he reinserts it and removes it again, it comes out clean.

“When’s the last time you put oil in here?” he asks.

I admit that I can’t remember, and the way Donald looks at me, almost wincing, it’s obvious that he’s finally figured me out, and I am filled with shame. I try to explain in a whisper. “It’s my wife,” I say, but right then Eightball pokes his head out of the window and yells, “So what we gonna do?”
Donald turns away from me to reply. “We’re going to get us some lunch.”

It’s just as well. He wouldn’t have understood anyway. That this was the car she rode in, and my baby too, and that now she’s ruined it and left me nothing from our time together. But it isn’t over yet, is it? I ask her. No, it isn’t. I know what she wants.

The four of us walk to the next exit and come up off it on the edge of Chinatown. That sounds fine to Donald, a little chow mein, some eggrolls. To get there we have to cross the freeway on an overpass, and they pause in the middle to watch the cars gurgling by beneath them, but not me. It’s all I can do to keep from running.

There’s a fountain in the main square of Chinatown, tucked in among the empty restaurants and the stores crammed full of dusty souvenirs. Dirty water trickles down a rocky hillside studded with small gold bowls labeled LOVE, LUCK, MONEY and the like. The coins people have thrown at them glimmer so hopefully, I almost have to turn away.

Donald passes out pennies and dimes, and he and Eightball and Tracy line up at the rail and take turns tossing.

“Ooooh, yeah,” Eightball crows when he hits his mark. He raises his hands over his head and does a victory dance.

“You cheated,” Tracy insists. “You leaned.”

“Bullshit, woman. Ain’t no leanin’ involved.”

I sit on a bench a short distance away and watch the red paper lanterns strung overhead twist in the stiffening breeze. The gulls were right, a storm is coming. I can feel it in the air.

“Hey,” Tracy calls to me. “Thanks for screwing everything up.”

“Come on, now,” Donald says. He takes Tracy by the shoulders and turns her to face him. “We’ll figure something out. Don’t you worry. You’ll have your wedding yet.”

I let my eyes drift to one of the store windows, and I swear I catch a glimpse of Simone reflected in it. It’s the first time she’s revealed herself, and a leathery strap of panic jerks tight around my chest. When I blink and look again, she’s gone, but
I know what I saw. The day takes on a dead, gray quality, like someone’s thrown a shovelful of ashes on the sun.

Tracy and Eightball and Donald approach me. They’re talking and laughing, but I can’t understand them anymore, and I don’t feel anything when Donald lays his hand on me, I’m as numb as a tooth. I gurgle some kind of nonsense and pull away, and the next thing I know, I’m running down an alley and all the signs are in Chinese and the buildings are Chinese and everything smells like rotting meat. The wind in my ears is a woman screaming, and the clouds are boulders rolling in to crush me.


Dizzy with fear I stumble upon a pagoda with a neon beer can in its window. They’re churches over there, aren’t they? Temples or something. That’ll do. The door swings open before my hand even touches it, and sure enough, Buddha smiles down from a shelf above a dark and quiet bar. I take a stool and order whiskey. Its heat spreads through me, resoldering all the connections. The bartender lights some incense, and my heart slows to normal. I’ve got fingers now, I’ve got toes, and that makes me okay, I think. I wipe away the tears on my face and take a deep breath. It’s close enough to hallowed ground that she can’t set foot in here, and there’s twenty dollars in my wallet. I’ll just wait her out.

A woman steps out of the shadows and goes to the jukebox, and soon the music starts. She motions to the bartender, who picks up her drink and carries it over and places it on a fresh napkin next to mine.

“Is this too weird?” she says.

Ha ha ha!

We’ve cut through the crap by the time Donald comes in. We’re laughing and telling jokes, and I’m resting my hand on her thigh.

“I need you outside,” Donald says. “It’s an emergency.”

I have every right to ignore him. Number one, there’s nothing between us—no money has changed hands, no vows of friendship. He merely showed up at my door this morning.
and by nightfall will be on a bus back to Barstow or Bakersfield or wherever he's tumbled in from. And number two, I haven't forgiven him, and won't, for that moment back there on the side of the freeway, when, suddenly struck by the truth of me, his eyes showed nothing but scorn and disappointment. I don't demand understanding, but I do believe we're all entitled to a little tact.

So I hesitate. I sip my drink and let him dangle until he sucks in his bottom lip, rubs his open hand over his face from forehead to chin, and squeezes out a "Please." Only then do I say to my new drinking buddy, "Gina, don't move a muscle," and motion him to the door.

The clouds have thickened and swallowed up the sun, and the first fat drops of the storm splat onto the asphalt of the alley. Eightball is sitting on the ground, his back against the pagoda. His eyes are closed, and he clutches his stomach. Donald kneels beside him, reaches out to touch him, but hesitates as he's about to make contact.

"The girl stabbed him," he says.
"Who?" I ask. "Tracy?"
"They was fussing in the restaurant, and she up and took a knife off the table and stabbed him."

The shakes begin in my knees, and I worry that I'm about to lose it again. I need to get back inside where Simone can't see me. All I can think to say is, "So he's dead?" and as soon as I do, Eightball scrambles to his feet and rushes me, furious.

"I ain't dead, you stupid motherfucker, and I ain't gonna die."

Donald tries to hold him back, but he breaks away and gets right in my face.

"And you best tell that little ho she better watch her motherfucking' back, 'cause I'm goin' to fuck her shit up when I catch her. I'm goin' to cut her a new pussy."

"Deshawn!" Donald shouts.

Eightball pushes me and turns to him. Spit flies from his mouth as he shouts, "And you can just step off, jack. I still owe you a fucking up for runnin' off and leavin' my momma all alone."
Pain finally gets the best of him. He grits his teeth and bends over at the waist, his hand going to the flower of bright red and deep black blood on his shirt. A jet screeches somewhere above the clouds, and the rain comes down harder.

Donald stands slump-shouldered, staring at nothing. Where are the hymns now? I wonder, and I don't know why I didn't see from the beginning that he's just as undone as I am. I head back to the safety of the bar, but he stops me with a hand on my shoulder and a beseeching look. What more can he want? I brought his goddamn son back to life.

“I got to get him to a hospital,” he says.

“Try Union Station over on Alameda. You can find a taxi there.”

“Could you help me?”

It's cold in the alley, and wet. Greasy puddles have begun to form where the rain splashes off the eaves of the buildings. Very faintly, I can hear the jukebox playing inside the bar, and I'm glad I don't believe in anything anymore, because that means I won't go to hell for saying, “No, I can't.”

“Fuck all y'all,” Eightball hisses. He lurches away like some wronged and wounded hero, and I think how funny it is that he gets to play that part.

“Deshawn,” Donald cries. “Son.” He hurries after him, but I don't wait to see what happens. I've had it up to here with tragedy.

When I've finished off my twenty, Gina takes up the slack. She works for the post office, and is in fact wearing her uniform, having come right over to get blasted after a particularly nerve-racking shift.

“Do you think they'd hire me there?” I ask.

“Sure. I'll tell them you're a good guy.”

“But am I?”

“Sure you are.”

We drink for hours, through the quitting-time crowd and the before-dinner crowd and the after-dinner stragglers. It's so nice to be warm and full of beer and whiskey, to watch the people come in out of the rain and shake off their umbrellas.
In a little while I’ve forgotten all about Donald and Eightball and my dead wife’s vengefulness. Buddha smiles down on me, and I smile back.

Gina and I move to a booth where it’s easier to kiss and cuddle. She keeps making me put my mouth on a certain spot on her neck—her G spot, she calls it—and she keeps making me put my mouth there and bite down hard. When I do, she rolls her eyes and moans “Oh, yeaaah.” I get confused a couple of times coming back from the bathroom, because of her uniform. Once I think she’s a cop, and another time a sailor.

“Anchors away!” I shout, and she laughs so hard, she spills her drink, but then the song playing on the jukebox makes me cry, and I lay my head down on the table and bawl like a baby.

“Do you love me?” I ask Gina.

“Sure,” she says.

“Can I live with you?”

“No problem, no problem.”

She gets up to go to the bar for some napkins so I can blow my nose. When I open my eyes again, she’s gone. I sit and wait for her until the bar closes and the bartender tells me to leave.

Things have gone to shit in the last few hours. The buildings that line the alley are crumbling, the mortar between their bricks eaten away by the rain, their nails rusted. They lean into each other, forming a dripping, black tunnel that is the only way out, and I know what Simone is up to, but what else can I do? I throw my arms over my head and make a run for it. I say, “Okay, fuck it,” and enter her trap. I just want it to be over with.

There’s a grating sound, metal on metal, and the heavy crash of collapsing masonry in the darkness all around me. Louder still is the slap slap of footsteps approaching from the rear. Simone, broken-boned and wormy, cracked and oozing like a rotten egg, pursues me with awful purposefulness. Her dirty fingernails clutch at my hair, and her graveyard perfume brings bile to my throat. My screams echo off the concrete
that closes in as I rush deeper into the slippery blackness. “Yes, I fucked her,” I say. “Twice. And it was fan-fucking-tastic.”

The tunnel narrows and the ceiling descends. I hit my head and drop to my hands and knees, and still she jerks and slides toward me. Scrambling over broken glass, I cut myself to ribbons, and the passage squeezes tighter, so that I’m forced to squirm on my belly with my arms pinned to my sides as Simone giggles and licks my heels. Down and down I go, my blood slicking the way, until the rubble finally clenches around me like a fist and forces the last bit of air from my lungs. I gasp once, twice, but it’s no use. Simone’s teeth work at my calf. She tears loose a mouthful of flesh and gobbles it down. Utter darkness descends over me like a condemned man’s hood as I dig my toes in and give one final push, as I wedge myself even further into the tomb.

And then there’s the rain again, cold on my naked body, its drops spreading across my eyeballs like spiderwebs. I lie on my back and run my fingers lovingly over the sidewalk beneath me, ignoring the police cruiser that jabs me with its spotlight.

A cop pulls himself out of the car and steps up onto the curb. He nudges me with his boot and asks, “Do you know where you are?”

“Chinatown,” I reply.

“And your clothes?”

I point to the drainpipe I spat out of, the one that now dribbles bloody water and the sound of Simone’s frustrated weeping.

“My wife took them,” I say.

He doesn’t get it, and I really didn’t expect him to. Trying not to laugh, he turns to his partner and says, “We’ve got a Godiva here, Pat. Dig that blanket out of the trunk.”

So everything’s okay for now, but I don’t kid myself that I’ve beaten her. I’m not that crazy.

I open the bottle of pills they gave me upon my release from County General and shake a few of them into my hand. They’re as blue as the sky is sometimes. The psychiatrist I talked to during my stay was a very busy woman. She ran quickly down
a list of questions only a lunatic would give the wrong answers to, and then asked if there was anything I wanted to discuss. I said no, not really, that I'd been under a lot of stress lately, thinking about my wife's suicide, and maybe that and the booze had led to what she referred to as my episode. She nodded understandingly and scribbled something in my file, and after 72 hours they cut me loose.

I swallow the pills without water. Tracy is looking at herself in the mirror. She moans and falls on the bed and starts to cry. Two black eyes, her nose probably broken—this is Eightball's revenge. He caught up to her this afternoon over at crackhead park and beat the piss out of her, and not one person stepped in to help her.

"They said they was my friends," she wails.

I dip my cup into the cooler to fill it with ice and pour whiskey over that. I'm living it up because this is my last week in the motel. I've run out of money, and the county checks I'm due to start receiving won't cover the rent here. Things are finally going to get worse.

Something crawling on the carpet gets my attention. I walk over and step on it. When I bend down, I see that it's a false eyelash. Where the fuck did that come from?

"Want to watch TV?" I ask Tracy.

She rolls over and reaches out her arms, and here it is again, a chance to get this over with once and for all. "Kill me," I tell Simone as I move toward the bed. "Kill me."

I lie down next to Tracy, and she spreads her legs. The pills have turned my brain into a cotton ball. She winces when I hug her, and says, "Careful." My fingers stroke her crotch, which is as dry as dirt, and I position myself on top of her. She draws the sheet over her ruined face.

"Could you give me some money when we're through?" she asks. "I want to go back to my mom's."

"Sure," I reply, but I won't, because I don't have any to give, and she knows it. She's just setting things up so later she can yell at me and call me a liar, and that's fine. Whatever it takes to make her feel better about this.

I'm pushing my way through the dead leaves between her
legs when the bed begins to shake. A low rumble fills the room, and the TV skips off the dresser and crashes to the floor. Every board in the building creaks with the strain of the wave swelling beneath it. Tracy rolls away from me. She scurries to the bathroom and crouches there in the doorframe as the toilet cracks behind her.

"It's okay," I say, and stand up to prove it. The carpet writhes beneath my feet like the back of some great galloping beast. A chunk of plaster falls from the ceiling, and Tracy screams.

"It's okay," I say again as the window rattles, desperate to be free of its frame.

I'm ready to die. I stand with my arms outstretched, a smile on my face, but we drop back to earth after a final jolt. The rumble fades away, replaced by the wails and chirps of a thousand species of car alarms, and my disappointment almost sends me to my knees. Really, her viciousness is astounding.

"It's just my wife," I explain to Tracy.

"What the fuck're you talking about?"

"She gets jealous."

Tracy looks at me like Donald did on the side of the freeway when my car broke down, like I'm not the same person I was a few seconds ago. While I'm making myself another drink to replace the one Simone spilled, she slips her dress over her head, grabs her shoes, and runs away.

I step out onto the walkway a few minutes later, but she's nowhere to be seen. There's a commotion in the courtyard. Someone panicked during the quake and jumped over the second floor railing. The body is lying in the parking lot, as still as a perfect summer night in the desert, and the blood that's leaked out of it looks like a big red pillow. My throat tightens and tears come to my eyes, and I almost cry out, "Simone!" until I see that it's one of the junkies from the room next door, a guy with long, dark hair. *Some joke, honey.* All of the tenants have gathered around him, the poor families and the whores and pimps and dopers. They're all standing together, staring down at him, while Mrs. Cho calls for an ambulance on her cellular phone.
The sun is hidden behind a thick brown haze, which means that either the whole Valley’s on fire or summer is just around the corner. That dog I hear sometimes is barking more complaints against his master, but I’m the only one who understands. I listen to his snarls and watch a thin trickle of blood slither away from the dead junky’s head, across the asphalt and under the fence to the cracked white concrete of the pool deck. It picks up speed there and spills over into the water, turning the deep end pink.

So now that’s ruined too. Are you happy?

No, she’s not. Not yet.
TOUCHING IN THE HEADLIGHTS

i.
There is a man waiting for me in a red pick-up truck. Our bodies speak a code of older and younger, a code about playing fields and fields where food grows for the people. He has the fields of Iowa in his boyhood. I have a damp Eastern meadow with a loose wooden bridge. He has a gathering of tired cows pushing at the fence and breaking through. I have burrs stuck to my socks and dark leeches thriving in a moss-covered pond. He has a stone bench under his knuckles, etched with declarations of True Love Forever. I have a stone bench pressed with broken marbles by children of the last century. The children were orphans, they mostly ate porridge and soft broccoli from the big, steamy kitchen. They slept on cots and climbed into bed together where their knees touched. Sleep finally came. Or it didn’t come and one or two of them stood at the flat windows and watched the night meadow. The man in the truck does not have orphans looking at his field, he has a farmer watching the snow fall too early again this year, another young crop freezes. He has a farmer with a regular appetite. The farmer hauls fifty-pound bags of sugar from the town just to keep the sweet things coming, the pies and sugar rolls. He has a farmer with rough palms and rough thumbs, still good for mending what buckles with age.

ii.
There is a man waiting for me by the fountain where copper fish bend and wash the warrior in the center. We measure introductions across the skin with dials and clocks, here and there, the needles dip. We watch the needles spin. I put my stethoscope to the man’s torso, I hear his boyhood there. A swimming pool crumbles in New Jersey. Winter comes and statuary guards the pool, stone fingers break in the cold. Whole limbs fall in the grass. Under his ribcage, I hear the whirl of
amusement parks, late night sweeties riding higher and higher above the plot of neon circles. I hear the taxi-cab that picked him up after matinees, a boy alone with a pocketful of money. The fountain is dry, the man lays me down under the oxidized carp. He hangs my stethoscope on the warrior’s outstretched hand. He puts his ear to my stomach and listens to my father racing a car, my brother whistling in the street. He hears the fishing boats moored in New London, the bowling alley rumbling with out-of-work drinkers. He hears rain on aluminum siding. He hears the men who stand close to me on a Midwestern street. I feel like a beauty queen stretched along the basin’s cool spine. The man is a misfit. He holds a finger to his lips for hearing me better.
THE SISTERS

The pool has been cleaned only once, and only once has he had to leave it, to sit white and transparent on the deck tile in the wet strips of a suit and tie. At the end of the hour, with his eyes red from the air, his skin thickening and heavy, he poured himself back into the water and slipped down to the lowest corner. He sits there, still, and lives there, his edges confused, like a body leaking if you happen to look down on him. And looking down on him, as you stand above the surface, you wonder whether he breathes the pool, or eats the insects and leaves that drown there. He lives fulfilled it seems, and I watch every day wondering at how he finds his air.

The pool is our pool, sitting like an open stomach in a ceramic yard. We bought the house, the man, and the pool from two sisters, indelible twins with black lines circling their eyes. They walked in business-tight suits that didn't fit the fatness of their makeup: the skin of their faces moving apart from its paint as if the lipstick, rouge, and eye powder stood on a piece of glass behind which they were standing. Mother spoke loudly to them, as though she had knocked into the glass barrier and knew of it, thinking they might not be able to hear her through it. The lids of their Eyes tightened when they answered for the man living behind the house, their voices narrowing to a single strand, "We know nothing about him."

"Yes, nothing."
"Absolutely nothing at all."

When I was younger, seeing him as a simple slant of color in the water, I tried to draw myself down to him (my knees knocking outside my bathing suit), to put his face in mine and focus him into lines I could understand. But when I met him, I saw only the edge of a bright smile, a crack down so low that contained a strange politeness and nothing more. It was as if he were sitting at a party, smiling, though he was tired in the thick air and wanted some sleep.
The sisters brought us coffee when I was ten, in the house Mother would buy the next day out of the desperation for something large and lonely. "Cheaply haunted," she had pronounced, her face stained with a bedroom of television watercolors, "but not by something dead." The saucers, set on a table of black glass, grew small and delicate within the room, which held dozens of bird prints in heavy frames. I watched the black sauce of my coffee wash the sides of the cup, stirring itself slowly while the sisters spoke.

"How did the husband die, Mrs. Lewin?"
"And when?"
"Yes, if it's not too terrible."
"She's a grown woman, May. She's strong."
"Look at the peace in her eyes."
They smiled, spreading a yellow blur into the air.
"Eight years. Suicide," Mother whispered through a thick mouth of coffee, chuckling at the sound of her voice as she glanced out the window. "The man in the pool?"
"Who knows what he is."
"Yes, nobody knows."
"He is certainly not like us, not like anyone, so there can be no name for him."
"Yes, he is completely uninteresting because there is no name for him, no category or such."
"He might as well be fish, Mrs. Lewin. Just think of him as fish."
"Fish he is; that's all he's ever been."

The sisters bent to their cups, balancing some uneasy thought on the rim, their lips puckered and wrinkled red in the reflection of the thin china.

I met him five years later, sitting beside the water in a delicate tremor as he watched the pool man stir his room. He no longer had what could be called a solid figure; his bones grown lax and muscles gone. His skin kept him together, a skin lined with veins, so that he seemed tightly sown. He could not walk or lift himself, but swung himself along. It would have been
useless, after pulling him from the pool, for us not to have let
him return.

"Do you want anything?" I asked.

"I want new shoes," he whispered after a moment. His
voice like the step inside a puddle.

"Why do you need shoes?"

He smiled then, with a wink, his sticky eyelid falling slow.
"Yes," he agreed, and slipped back into the pool.

It is a year later, and he has begun to write us letters. I find
them as wet pieces of paper on the surface, blank because the
ink has washed away. The water is filling with this bad ink and
the intense scribbling taken on by the dark figure that sits in
the pool. After several days no words can be read, the water
becomes shaded and dark, and I find that his figure is
disappearing to me. I save the letters, laying them under rocks
on the dry tile to be left for him. Maybe, if he chooses to come
out again, he will see they are mostly empty, that nothing he
says is reaching us except for a slow darkening of the pool. I try
each day to focus on his energy in the inky water. The pool
grows calmer as the weeks pass. I know he is dying.

The sisters came often, rushing through our back yard on
sharp heels, to glance at him and scold him with fingers that
kicked at the surface of the pool. They brought little bags of
food, later with paper and pens, and bent down, for some time,
with sharp stares at their brother. Mother and I watched. She
is curious about dry and wet lives since my father's death, and
I wonder, too, how something so soft can suck you down and
keep you there.

Mother's word for it is suicide; because if you let a certain
element in your life overcome you, if you give the power of
your own lines away to whatever collects such things – love,
family, the water in a bathtub that soothes you, a dream at
night – then you disappear. She reads books in a quiet room to
confirm her ideas on this and then throws them away. She
likes the house as large as it is, with few close walls to knock
against. But she watches the pool when she thinks she is alone
(as I slip quiet in and out of doorways trying to find her relaxed
and open to me, seeing her) with such private apprehension, studying the surface for anything floating there. Finding the letters, I think she must, each a small prediction for some last thing, thin and breathless, resurfacing.

She took a broom handle once, running in a fit out to the pool after several hours of having watched for him, and beat into the water with the shaft. Spitting, “Come out. Come out,” she dropped down against the tile and let her hair and arms whip into the pool. She tried to hit him, poke him viciously if she could, waiting for some acknowledgement, some sort of pain, but she was missing him. I could tell because the water by then was too dark to find him in, and he always sat too low to be touched. She tried to strike lower, leaning further, and fell into the pool, beating back at the water because she could not swim. I came over to her, held my hand out from the edge, and drew her in, seeing that the deep blue water stuck to her unnaturally. Watching her scream, “Come out. Come out,” in a watery voice, I could barely hear her whisper.

When she returned to the house she dried herself quickly and closed all the curtains along the back windows.

So I am alone when I see, this morning, a week after she tried to beat him, the man floating at the surface of the pool. We leave him there for days. Mother believes she has murdered him but will not look out to see he lies still, without any marks or wounds. There are letters left in the pool and they encircle him, sticking to him like a cast. He is smiling.

The sisters come and stare uneasily at their brother, the features under their makeup beginning to drip away. I go out to them, to see them better, to wonder at any kind of sorrow they may have as they hold their gifts for him in small, seedy bags. They keep a hollow, guilty face together as I stare. The wind brings the man’s body towards the edge of the pool where the ink streaks across his face so his resemblance to them, in a dazed and painted expression, is shocking. The sisters hear the water stirring against him near their feet. They tighten quickly and say:

“He was a stupid, stupid man”
“A stupid, ungrateful man.”
Robert Firth and Kevin Goodan

DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK GILBERT

March 8, 1997

KG: In the poem "Lovers" you speak about those who call themselves passionate and how hollow their words ring. It reminds me of the current state of poetry in America. Looking at the back blurbs on a lot of books, one reads that so and so is one of the great poets writing in America. It brings to mind the amount of anemic and mediocre poetry being produced in the present age.

Well, first off, you have to accept the fact that in all the arts in all times, mediocre is not a bad word. It means average. You can’t expect to find lots and lots of great painters or lots and lots of great dancers. If you look at the world of almost any period, there’s a small group of people trying to push for something more significant, or special, or new. And the men think they are passionate. They’re not... what did you say, hollow? That’s what they think their passion is. I was telling somebody about one of the times I was living in Athens, and there was a young woman there who had gotten involved with a gypsy. “I’ve got a problem,” she said, “He is so passionate that he crushes my lips, and since we see each other fairly often, there isn’t time for them to heal. And now they’re starting to turn purple. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. I don’t know what to do.” So I talked with her a bit. She came back two or three days later, and she was just all smiles. She said, “I did it just like you said. I said to him, ‘Can I kiss you?’ And he said sure. And I kissed him. He stepped back and his eyes were very large and he said, ‘I didn’t know it could be soft.’” I don’t think these men are not nice people. A lot of them really don’t know that what they call passionate is excitement. So I don’t want to sneer at them, though the poem’s kind of a jokey poem. Anyhow, that’s not an answer. I just want to make the point
that I'm not sneering at men, saying, "Yeah, but I'm really good at it." I really understand them.

RF: It reminds me of something that I was reading in that interview [Lish, Genesis West, 1962] where you talk about the sanitizing of human nakedness and love-making and how it is kind of frightening and dirty. It's not what it's often presented as in popular media.

I guess I would endorse the dirtiness. The danger is that they sanitized it. It's OKAY to have intercourse, as they say. It's healthy, and you can lose weight. That's not what true sexuality is about. There is a strangeness and a darkness. I don't mean a sickness. But a real darkness. A "disproportionateness" to it.

RF: How about that as a subject for poetry? Do you think that's, in a sense, a subject that speaks of some mystery that we're afraid of...

I don't know about the mystery and being afraid of it, but I think it is one of the major subjects. Not just love and gentleness and caring about the woman and such, but it's one of the three important accesses of the world, as far as I'm concerned. Along with God and romantic love and sex, there's almost nothing of that scale. I'm not talking about running to the corners as fast as you can go because there's a spurt of pleasure at the end. I mean darkness in the sexuality, as a way of arriving someplace. The pleasure is nice, but that's not what's important. What's important is where you can get to. That's why I don't want it to be moderate or reasonable or hygienic or endorsed. I want it to be something sort of hidden and kind of scary. I don't mean weird. That's boring. If one can be more excited by making love while the New York Times is burning in the corner, you know, I don't mind if they don't hurt anybody. Anything that helps them to get there.

KG: Would you say that your idea of sexuality, of intimacy, has a sort of duende to it?

Absolutely! Not the kind of duende that's spectacular or
theatrical. But the thing itself, which is transcendent. That's why I think it was partially so often present when we still had romantic love—true romantic love—before we all became reasonable or lustful. I mean, they both are destructive. Lustful meaning just the rush. But the insides of the experience are in some ways duende or transformation, or magical. You go someplace else. It's not just riding a roller coaster for thrills. It's so much involved with what romantic love is. It is extremely difficult to have a romantic love without the body and the body's appetites. You could have decent agape, friendship, tenderness... all those things, and call it love. But if you're talking about true romantic love, it's very hard to think of it without that means of passing over, or as they say for orgasm on the West Coast, to get over. Well, it is like that. You get over. You pass beyond. That's why all these reasonable books on sexuality are like, like what... It's like talking about poetry. They codify it. They quantify it. They regularize it. And it's good poetry if you've mastered the ceasura, and the metrics are good.

KG: Do you see this sort of sanitizing in poetry and sexuality as basically being a culture-wide happening in American society?

You know what I really think. I think the way they see it and the way people are is normal. What I'm talking about is abnormal. Just like classical ballet is abnormal, or liking hot peppers is abnormal. Democracy is abnormal. There's no place in the world that democracy is in genes or molecular something. The guy who thought of democracy was a fanatic—a visionary. Some crazy came down from the mountain and said "You're as important as the pharaoh," and everybody laughed because that's clearly unreasonable. And I think all of this is due to the fact that we've misappropriated our apparatus. Otherwise, how could you get to a Bach fugue? It's not natural. It's like people living under a tyrant have to learn to notice the nuances of what their keeper's mood is for that day and when to and when not to ask for something. We have to have that kind of sense of tone. But, gee, evolution never cared whether we listened to Bach. We had to learn grunts and groans in order to say "The
elephant over there.” And we turn it into poetry, which is totally unnatural. It’s the very quintessence of poetry that it goes against the grain. Poetry is like a man watching two people waltz across the floor, and the man says, “What an inefficient way to travel.” That’s what poetry is like.

**RF:** Do you think that poetry then serves a kind of progressive purpose in that regard, that it allows us to evolve to higher organizations?

I’m not sure. You can make cases for the fact that it makes it harder to survive. You get complicated. Like I said to someone the other day, the Bible says he who increases knowledge, increases sorrow. So poetry can be dangerous. But I think it’s one of the very last hopes to keep this species valuable. We’re losing romantic love. We’re losing the kind of sexuality I was talking about, which is a major invention: the erotic, a huge invention. Just like romantic love is an invention, it’s not natural. Lust is natural. Obsession is natural. Desire for power over the woman is natural. That’s what evolution gave us. It’s the old crocodile brain in the back of our heads. Poetry is about the new brain—what I think about as the Athenian brain in the front of the head. And in that place, all that really practically matters is located. In that sense, we’re really in danger of the death of feeling. It’s like the poem you asked about; you think you’re erotic because you’re lustful. People think that they’re emotional because they get angry a lot or they fight a lot or they’re unhappy. And all of those are the old brain. If we want a civilization that matters, there has to be something to keep the Athenian brain alive. Where else do you turn for a moral of your feelings? Most of us don’t grow up in a family with grandparents anymore. Poetry and the novel and good movies are almost the only things left where we’re going to get it. I don’t think we can get it much from traditional values. What poetry does and the novel does and films and some of the theater do is enable you to experience the good, experience God, experience love. And once you have an image of it, a felt image, not a prescribed image or a logically delineated picture of the
thing, then you can become that thing. You can find it in
yourself. But it’s very, very difficult. It’s like asking people,
“Where is your liver? Where is your kidney?” They don’t know,
because they’ve never seen them. They really don’t know. Do
you know where your kidneys are?

*KG: Not really.*

That seems crazy. We’ve been with them for a long time. The
same thing with all the major emotions. People think we’re
just born naturally kind and warm and all those things. But
you look around and after the twenties start to wane, something
goes out of people. Thank God some people are still kind. But
their kindness is a kind of almost congeniality. It’s not measured.
It’s not monumental capacity. And that’s why the arts are so
tremendously important. Just like if you learn to play a musical
instrument, you can do mathematics better because it wakes
up parts of your brain. It’s not literally one-to-one, but those
aspects of the brain that stimulate neural networks allow you
to appropriate that capacity to do other things: to think, to
perceive the music of poetry or the music of music (which is a
different thing than music of poetry). I think poetry is not an
entertainment. If it is just an entertainment, like it makes you
laugh, it makes you feel good or looks beautiful, it’s so finely
made, it’s intricate, obeys all the rules, it makes you feel
sentiment because it reminds you of what you were like when
you were a child and you were sitting on the barn roof throwing
stones at the geese. There is that shock of recognition which is
very pleasant. But it’s not the major emotions. Nostalgia is
fine, but it’s not enough for adult life. And without the arts,
where are you going to get it from? You can’t get it from
politicians. A lot of people can’t get it from their faith anymore.
What, then, are you going to do if you don’t have the arts?
Engineering will never teach it to you. Science is not meant
for that. You can’t ask science about sex. Scientists will tell you,
“Well, at this point of excitation the woman’s back and torso
will flush and her respiration will do this and that.” Take that
to bed with you, and get anything out of it. They are describing
symptoms, but there’s not understanding.
KG: You speak of romantic love being an invention...

It is! According to the scholars it was unknown in the classical times of Greek and Rome.

KG: When did it become invented?

Twelfth century. By the Troubadours. Arnaut Daniel and those people.

KG: When do you think adult love was invented?

Same time. Except that adult love, as I mean it, is something that gets beyond the impossible love. Most of the Troubadour's love was for the unattainable woman. The performance of love was that she would give you a quest and you'd go out and come back with a certain kind of a rug or golden fleece, or something. But you couldn't have any contact with her because it would cause such jealousy. Even if the shadow man was away from the place, you've got fifty soldiers without wives in that castle, and if she gives her favor to one, all hell will break loose. So you have this kind of theoretical romance. That was a step toward the thing that we have. But we've perfected it. We've discovered it's like mathematics. It never existed until it exists. And then it really exists. Two plus two never equaled four until somebody said that there was such a thing. Then you could create all of mathematics. Or the discovery of the concept of zero, which was fairly late. The Greeks didn't have a concept of zero. We have to have things that will be irrational, and that's why we have to have the arts. You can't have jokes among rational people, because jokes are not rational. Rational jokes are failed jokes. So you have to have the irrationality of the artist to have the ability to have visions. Or like quantum mechanics. You go from here to there and you can't explain how you got there. That's what the danger of criticism is for literature. They explain literature but don't experience literature. Because their training is all in Ph.D. programs, they have learned to look not at the literature but the way of talking about the literature.
KG: Do you feel that this is a problem in creative writing programs as well?

Well, so many of the creative writers came from graduate school, and what I'm talking about is almost impossible to teach. You can't qualify it. You're not going to find many teachers who can do it, because that requires a gifted teacher. There are not a lot of them. Just like there aren't a lot of really gifted poets—aren't a lot of gifted anything. So if you have hundreds of workshops, the chances of having 10% of them with teachers who really understand what they're teaching—you are lucky. And because most poets, the good ones, are basically intuitive, they have to find a kind of program to talk about the poems with, because what they do is just do it. They don't know how, or where that image came from. It came. Or the novelist can't tell you why suddenly the people came alive. But he can make them come alive. He doesn't know how it's done. So we've produced a kind of workshop that's not really about writing poems but repairing poems. Because you can qualify that. You can say, "You have to have the active voice instead of the passive voice. You have to have the line breaks a certain way." Workshops, almost all the ones I've been in, teach about the surface of the poem, the neatness of the poem, the tooling of the poem. But, as I said, you know if you have a poem that is messed up, and you say, "What is good about the poem?" everyone stares at you. They don't notice that a good poem's not necessarily the well-made poem and a messed up poem is not necessarily a bad poem. Look at Emily Dickinson. Every kind of educated person she showed her poems to and wanted advice from all wanted to correct her poetry. Thank God they failed. That's the way people are when confronted by somebody like Shakespeare or Rimbaud, because everybody wants a kind of systematic way of evaluating something. I once worked in Sausalito as a handy man at an antique shop. The owner had some wonderful ancient Chinese bronzes. I asked him, "Well, how do you know if they are good or not because there's been so much fake Chinese art produced; it's been a tradition in China?" And he said, "I've got another friend, an old Chinese
gentleman. I call him up and I ask if I can come for tea. He says, ‘Sure.’ And I go there. As I come in, I hand him the piece I’m interested in. He puts it down on the table and he goes and gets the tea. He comes back and we talk. And sometimes he’ll reach over and touch the thing, look at it, pick it up, and he won’t say anything about it until I’m leaving. As I’m leaving, he will say just, ‘It’s a good one’ or ‘It’s not a good one.’” What interests me is how many masterpieces you have to have held in your hand in order to tell the difference. That’s what’s going wrong with teaching literature, not just poetry—literature in general. They’re evaluated rationally. The novel is taught as finding out what the symbols mean, or this man was influenced by that man, and in such and such a year, he started the such and such group, wherever. It’s understandable why a person trained from a Ph.D. program is like that. When I was in the Ph.D. program at Berkeley, they were quite honest. They’d say to me, “You’re never going to make it because you fall in love with the writers and their work. You can’t get a Ph.D. that way. You have to fall in love with the bibliography and the scholarly issues. Nobody will ever ask you if you think Dickens is good. Ever.” Well, that’s crazy. What’s the purpose of it except to teach more scholars? There should be ways of teaching scholars. I love criticism. But you won’t learn to love books that way. You learn to love books wrongly. Like I was saying about Oscar Wilde, there are two ways to hate poetry; one is to like it rationally. That’s what I’m really scared of. I love workshops. I think anybody who cares about poetry should take workshops, but often you’re trained to see details. You don’t see the poem. You don’t experience the poem, you don’t see it as a work of art. You see it as something like cosmetics. Make it look presentable. Trim its hair. Get it a different color shirt. That’s not about the poem. Those are some of the means the poet needs to use in order to bring you what’s inside the poem.

RF: Do you think, then, it is like a failure or a fear of actually talking about the content of a poem rather than these formulaic aspects, that there is an aversion to talking about subjects that
we don't have these kinds of answers or predicted systems to describe?

There is a widespread discomfort with feeling now to the point in post-modern circles you're not even supposed to be sincere. And you sure as hell aren't supposed to talk about your heart. I go around these people, and the students are starving. It sounds boastful, but people cry at my readings. Now that is not my motive. I don't want to do that. I want to move them. I want to connect with the experience of emotion—not just my emotions but emotions in general. And they can't explain it, but sometimes after we talk, they say it is because I take life so seriously. And people I know don't do that. It's not a kind of fashion. They roll their eyes or they say, "Oh, that's adolescent." You know, I don't want to hear any more about that kind of love... "That's adolescent." That's crazy!

RF: Do you think there's some widespread cultural breakdown in our society, or fear that we don't know where there is to get to? We don't know where the heart lives? Where the soul lives?

I'm not going to blame anybody. There are a lot of causes. Just like I think a lot of poetry has been destroyed because it was profitable. When money came into poetry, poetry changed enormously. I always wished that poetry would fail, so only the lovers of poetry would be left. Now people in workshops that I deal with very often are not really there to become better writers. They're there for a career. And a lot of them are in the MFA programs, and they want to have their poems polished so they can submit them—so they can get the mistakes out and make it look more perfect. But if you want to talk about poetry, what the nature of poetry is, people get very restless and look at each other because they haven't been prepared for that. Nobody's talked about that. Most have been talked about consciously and academically and reasonably and professionally. But they're not talking about essence. They're not talking about the fact that a poem is a vehicle of feeling. And if it's not that, it's a minor art. I mean it's handsome. The traditionalists, they're beautiful craftsmen. Richard... what is his name?
KG: Wilbur?

Wilbur is really a remarkably good craftsman. And if that’s what you want, if you want something to put on your mantelpiece, or you’ve had dinner and you want to sit down to have a beauty experience, he’s wonderful. But if you want somebody who will change your heart, or your life...Well, I am not going to be like Winters, scolding the poets. I’m busy with my life. I don’t want to teach anybody to reform, that’s their business. But I regret what’s happened. Because I love workshops so much and am conscious of how much good they can do, I’m nervous of where they’re ending up. They’re producing poetry that doesn’t have to be written. I mean if people want it as a hobby, that’s one thing. We can’t afford to have poets who are willing to settle for that, or the theoretical things to be deconstructed. That’s really frightening.

RF: Do you think it’s too much like therapy almost, because of the MFA programs?

I think it’s academicism. When you think about how they talk about poetry, they talk about it in terms of its place in the canon, or as I said before, the influences or the dates, or the biography. But they don’t get to the poetry of the poetry—not the information or the analysis of the poetry, but the poetry itself. And they don’t notice. It’s not because they’re bad or criminal. It used to be they were often lazy. They’d just take the money and run. Some still do, of course. And I think, as a matter of fact, it goes back to what I said about money. I think money had just turned everybody in the wrong direction. Journalism is terribly dangerous to artists. Do you realize how much time it takes to be famous? How many dinners you have to go to? How many places you have to teach? How many awards you have to receive? How many prizes you have to judge? How much socializing you have to do? Horse trading?

KG: So, getting back to the idea of true sentiment, in your poetry you talk a lot about Pittsburgh...

Yes.
KG: I'm wondering what your sentiment of place is. Why are you attached to Pittsburgh?

Because of its magnitude. Because I grew up in size. There are three rivers running through the middle of the city. The population is Slavs and Poles and Turks and Jews and such, who just came over to be laborers. You know it destroys almost everybody, the pressure of growing up in Pittsburgh. The weather is tough, and also grand. With the summer rainstorms and the old houses and the setting, it's one of the greatest situations for a city any place in the world. But it was something about the city that was big. I suppose you could just see it as clumsily big and being drunken and all those things, but it wasn't that that got me. I lived almost in the good section when I was a kid and I'd walk all night through the city and there would be these grand houses. Just to conceive that you would build a house like that was a sense of scale. I lived near the park, and I'd go in and listen to the lions at night and the things moving around. I guess one of the dangers is not that you grow up in poverty. Maybe the danger is growing up in ease. Everything is comfortable and safe in most neighborhoods, despite the television. It's nice that people have enough to feed their children, and they work without going down in the coal mines or in steel mills. But that sense of order and decency may be antithetical to great poetry.

RF: I think it's in "Searching for Pittsburgh" where you say something like "only Pittsburgh can be greater than Pittsburgh." Are you talking about that sense of proportion—that to make great art and great poetry you have to have a sense of something being greater than itself?

I didn't have that because there wasn't any poetry. You don't realize what it used to be like. I searched all of Pittsburgh for somebody who had written a book. I couldn't find one in all of my adolescence. It was a primitive place. It was the dark ages. It was not a cultured place. It wasn't that you get to know about the arts, but somehow you get a sense of things having a weight, having duende, not consciously, but the great locomotives, as
it says in the poem, drive through the rain at night and the sound the whistles used to make on trains. Now they have imitation whistles. But those old whistles grow something in you. And growing up with the black and white movies of those times. You sit in the dark looking at that woman looking out at you, and her face is sixteen feet high and luminous. And all the novels you read and popular music—it's always about love. People scorn it, but there is something in the best of Sinatra that is vital—not just sentimental and silly. It's grand!

**KG:** Would you say that bigness went with you to Greece?

There's no way I can get away from it. It's built into me. I lived in Paris for three years. I left because it didn't have duende. It's a wonderful city. It's beautiful. I'm glad I lived there, but it didn't have duende. I moved to dirty London.

**RF:** Did you find duende in London?

Yeah. Those dark rainy days.

**RF:** When we were talking about duende in the class, people were saying an English translation might be along the lines of "soul." What about the idea of tragedy? Is there something that makes duende so involved with life and death and the intractableness of it?

Death and tragedy is duende. One of the things that derives from it is the bullring and the death unfortunately. The cape and the grace, that's not duende.

**KG:** A friend of mine in France went to a bullfight to watch a very young matador. There's an article about him in The New Yorker, or somewhere. Anyhow, the matador lives in his mother's house, has a bed in his room, and that's it. At night, he dreams about the bulls, and the bulls talk to him. When he goes into the ring, he doesn't shy away from the bull. He's not into the big pompous, elegant movements. But, of course, that is part of the ritual. When the bullfight began, my friend said the crowd was so quiet you could hear the bull rub against his clothes, and at
the end of the bullfight, when it was time for the bull to die, the
bull lifted its nose towards him, and the matador went over
and put the bull's head in his lap and was brushing the hair on
the forehead.

That's quality duende. You know it's so dangerous because you
can do that deliberately. That makes great copy. You can make
a fortune doing that. It's because of the Lorca thing. It's so
hard to keep focus on what it really is. And I've read that
bullfighters really believe they have to have love for the bull,
that they're there together. I think Lorca even touches on that.
There's a little thing I heard about the bullfight that I liked,
which was the first thing a bull does when he comes out into
the arena is find his home. You can't tell why. Each one will do
it differently. He will go and stand in that place and will come
out of there to deal with the toreador or the matador. He will
get hurt and tired, and he will go back to his house. I love the
idea of that invisible house.

KG: Would that invisible house be something like Pittsburgh
for you?

It's complicated. You have a capacity for feeling when you're
young that you don't have later. I remember quiet pleasure in
my childhood. It wasn't pretty or anything, but my memories
are of a certain quality of emotional life. I prefer my emotional
life now and in the in-between times. It's not just then or here.
It's then, and then there's being with Linda Gregg, and then
there's living the period of ten years after Michiko's death alone,
being silent. That was a wonderful time. There are different
times, and there are different kinds of having lived. Matter of
fact, now what I'm going to do is see if there is another time
for me to live. It's difficult because it's too easy. Because you
have a little money, a little reputation and such. You don't have
to fight anything. I'm very nostalgic. Not because it's colorful,
but over things like trying to sleep in the middle of winter at
2:00 in the morning. I'd been trying to sleep on this park bench
behind the statue of Christopher Columbus. I was shaking so
hard from the cold that I was making noise. I had to get up,
and I walked down to the old Lavarno, where, during the earlier evening, the whores would be. But it was always so cold. And I would just have to keep moving. About five in the morning, they would start up the great cauldrons in these little tiny kitchens for the fishermen who would go out at dawn, and they'd be filled with some kind of liquid with big chunks of tripe. And they also would make hot chocolate. I would buy a bowl of hot chocolate and I'd be so cold, I would hold it in my hands and my hands would get warm and I would drink it out of the bowl. Tears would be running down my face from pleasure. Now I'm not trying to sell poverty to people. It works for me.

RF: You end one of your poems with a line that says "the two of you."

Yeah, that's the feeling. If you really have a chance to live your lives—I'm sure part of it's already happened for you—you're different people at different times. I miss the person I was when I was with Michiko. I like the person I am now, but I was even nicer—a nicer mix of her temperament and my temperament. When I'm alone and I'm silent, living in those conditions upon a mountain or something, it's silent, but it's a muscular silence and a muscular being alone. That's why I love that. I love being alone. Almost as much as I love being married. I recommend trying it in some parts of your lives.

RF: What about you spending time in Greece? Do you feel that when you go there you are communicating, relating?

No, I don't relate to Greece. I don't try. I don't make any pretense of learning Greek. I use Greece. I go to Greece for the light that Aristotle saw. I go because, as Linda [Gregg] once said, there's a sense of the gods in the earth in Greece. I don't penetrate the culture. I don't respect the culture in that sense. I just use it—the sounds in the night, the quality of the stars, going up and down the mountain, pulling water from the well.

RF: Do you believe that, as a poet coming out of a European
Judeo-Christian tradition, you are accessing some kind of memory there?

No, not at all. The thing about Greece for me is the fact that when I walk around, I'm walking in the same water that the great dramatists walked in when they were seventeen years old. It's still the same water, the same color. I don't feel any attachment to the past. I feel an attachment to the reality of the present—that things are not metaphorical, that you can almost feel the absoluteness of being.

RF: So, it almost has more to do with the light and the water that affected Aristotle or Euripides—that you're participating in the same elements that they participated in?

Well, that's it, but that's a minor thing for me. The major thing for me is feeling myself pull up the bucket—because they don't have a windlass—they just pull it up like in ancient times. While the dawn is beginning, I can feel the difference between morning and night—I notice in between morning and night. I feel the weight of the water when I look down, and I see the funny quality of the water in the bucket being different than the water outside the bucket. And things, the animals, the smell of the fields. I'm almost able to touch reality, and that's hard nowadays. But I don't go to write poems about it. I write poems because I write poems. I don't go there for a topic or to be colorful or have a romantic life.

RF: What do you think it is about Greece that is closer, maybe, to the real than America?

The absoluteness of it. Everything is itself. The stone is rock. The water is wet. The dead goat hanging from the tree, half an hour ago, was something living. That's what I mean about almost touching reality—not to impress anybody, or get some books out of it. It's hard to keep hold of reality—everything is something else. You don't have to process it. You don't have to be intelligent about it. You don't have to make it better.
MORTALITY MIXING WITH THE FRAGRANCE

Back in America, living in a forest with the Baron and his wife. Standing at night on the edge of Puget Sound, waves turning white against the shore. He was telling the Baron he was leaving. He had begun looking at Shirley and did not want to get into something. The Baron said he was in love with Shirley’s mother. Why not marry Shirley and the two hundred thousand she was inheriting from the dying grandfather. “We could split the money,” he said. Two weeks later, the Baron was crazily in love with Shirley. Came into the bedroom one morning carrying a gun. Leaned on the wall, staring down at him in the bed.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sheilah Coleman is a recent graduate of the University of Michigan's MFA program where she concentrated on fiction. *Touching in the Headlights* is from a series of prose poems built around twelve short stories. She likes to play with landscape imagery as something contained in the body, a private history of spaces.

George Estreich has published poems in *Passages North*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *Pivot*, as well as a chapbook, *Elegy for Dan Rabinowitz*. He lives in Durham, North Carolina, with his wife and daughter.

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Poems by Steve Langan have been accepted by DoubleTake, Southern Humanities Review, Green Mountains Review, Poetry Northwest, and The Greensboro Review. His manuscript was a finalist for the 1996 Walt Whitman Award and the 1997 New Issues Press Poetry Prize.

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