Fish story and other American myths

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FISH STORY AND OTHER AMERICAN MYTHS

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1996

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Chair, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

6-18-96
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FISH STORY

So one time I'm sitting in my room smoking a cigarette. I have this really comfortable chair, and I like to sit in it because it's near the window, so I can blow the smoke out, and my mom won't smell it and come up here to tell me not to smoke in her house. Outside I can see light from the neighbor's and I know it's Heather's bedside lamp.

A few years ago Mom got this cabin in the divorce settlement. Heather's lived here all her life. Heather's dad has this bass boat. When I first met her, all I wanted was to get in that boat on the lake. So I hung around, saying things like, wow, what a rad boat, and finally she said, okay come on. Back then all I wanted was to use the boat. Then I saw her bait her hook. And she cast that thing about a mile. And the fish, they just jumped on her line. I looked at her hunched over in the boat, fidgeting with her gadgets and thought, wow, what a chick. So I start hanging around her dock on the weekends. And since we live out here in the country, and neither one of us has a car, she pretty much had to get used to me.

So one time after she started taking me out in the boat, I gave her a pair of gold handled forceps and some nail clippers hung on a
purple shoe string, and she smiles and says, thanks, purple's my favorite color. She hung the tools around her neck, carefully, like it was a pearl necklace. When she used the tools the first time, she pinched the hook with the forceps and with one snap of her wrist the hook let go of the fish, and she plopped it back into the water. Nice, she said. Then she did something really surprising. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. So now we're boyfriend and girlfriend, and it's really cool.

Her parents' house is on the hill below ours. Lakeside property. Along the back of their house there's a deck, and all the rooms have sliding glass doors that open out on to the porch. Our house faces theirs. My room is in the front on the second story. I keep my binoculars right there on the window sill where I can pick them up and sweep the woods, not really looking for birds, just passing the time while I finish my cig. They're high power glass. At that's how I find out that in late fall and winter, I have a pretty clear view of what's happening down there. It's an okay view at the beginning of summer too when the bushes and trees are still bare. That first time she didn't even have anything interesting to show. Mostly I just used the binoculars to spy when her girls friends came over.

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Her face is really the best anyway. Mostly she wears this surprised look. It's her natural face, not some adopted look like the one my mom got when I gave her the heart, carved from Ivory soap in the fourth grade. At first I couldn't believe a girl could really look like that. It must be a big effort to hold her eyebrows so high on her forehead all the time. They must cause some sort of a chain reaction. Or else there's a tiny little line that connects the arch of her brows to her eyelids to open and close the eyes as her brows move up and down. I figure that's the only way her eyes could stay so wide open all the time. It seems like they'd get dried out, especially in the wind off the lake. Mom calls her Betty Boop. When she does blink, she keeps them closed a second longer than it takes a normal guy to blink.

*Jeepers creepers, where'd ya get those peepers.* Sometimes when her light's off, I think of her and sing that song to myself. I heard Rob Petry sing it on one of my favorite episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. It helps him get out of a jam and look like a good guy in one easy swoop. I part my hair like Dick Van Dyke now, on the side, instead of in the middle like I used to. When I watch Rob and Laura dance, I put Heather's head on Laura and my head on Rob. My palm's
right on the low part of Heather/ Laura's back. I can almost feel her press against me while I watch Laura and Rob whirl around their living room. Man, what I wouldn't give to squeeze those boobs. Man. Can we ever dance on Rob and Laura's legs.

So I'm sitting there, one time, in my chair, bored shitless. I pick up my binocs and point them at Heather's window, and I'm just about to look away when she walks in wearing nothing but a towel. And when she drops the towel, I think, whoa, the payload.

I see her reach over and press the button on her disc player and she starts to dance by herself. Then I feel a little embarrassed. Like the time I saw my own reflection in a window and thought it was somebody else, so I smiled but it turned out to be me. And I felt my face turn red, so I looked around to see if anyone saw me. I drop the binocs and look around my room even though I know I'm alone. Nothing can keep me from looking. I'm hooked. If my mother walked into the room, I'd look. If my father walked in, I'd look for sure. If I pointed my binocular's toward Heather's window and saw her standing there with her own binoculars, watching me, through her
big green eyes, I still wouldn’t be able to move away from my window.

When Heather moves, she floats. No up and down movement. Just her shoulders and chest move, like she’s sitting and dancing with just her upper body. Her hips swivel. When she walks, she sort of levitates. She dances back across the room and stops to kick the towel with her toes. Her black hair is wrapped up in another towel, so it’s like she’s wearing a turban. Then she sort of hops to the bed. Sits down. Squirts lotion into her hand and rubs it up and down her leg, on her thigh. Man, she’s got long legs. I was always a boob man before. She squirts more lotion into her hand and rubs it into the other leg.

I have to adjust. I think about jacking off, but I feel creepy already. She sits up straight and rubs big circles of lotion into her stomach and ribs. She dabs a bit on each nipple. Holding one breast with both hands, she massages herself. While she rubs the first one, she cradles the other in the crook of her elbow. I can’t seem to help myself: I unbuckle my belt. She leans back against her pillows, stretches her arms above her head. I imagine laying next to her. I can’t hold it any longer, so I go ahead and do it, and then at least I
can look away. I pull my jeans up and walk over down to her house to see if she wants to go out on the lake. She puts a baseball cap over her wet hair and we go out to the dock.

They're not hitting, I say after we've been fishing for a while. She says, that's why they call it “fishing” and not “catching.” My thoughts wander, and I get the brilliant idea to take a series of photos of her blinking and set them up like the time elapsed picture of a rose blooming at the beginning of *The Wonderful World of Disney*. I get out my camera, but she turns away until I put it back in its case. She’s flirty. When she sees that I’ve put it down again, she turns back and flashes a toothy smile—sort of a reward, I guess, for not taking her picture. I realize that her special plum line must extend to the corners of her mouth, where it turns up naturally. She almost never smiles, so I'm a little surprised. I just smile back, and she keeps smiling too, with her surprised look and a little open-mouthed laugh. She wears a slick lip gloss. I look at her so hard it’s like I’m caught up in the line from her forehead to her eyebrows to the corners of her mouth, and straight to me.

Then I get lucky because we’ve drifted into somebody’s trot line, and I have to concentrate on maneuvering her dad's boat around
the point and into the cove without a major entanglement. He's had this boat since he was a kid, so he's very particular about how we use it. Every time we go out, he winks and reminds us to use the life jackets. No skinny dipping, he says. No sir, I say, no sir. Heather says, oh Daddy.

Before I get settled again, and drop anchor, and before I get my chartreuse plastic worm onto the end of the line, and my line back into the water, she sucks in her breath and shouts, fish on! Then she's reeling like crazy. When the end of her line pops out of the water, her face opens a little bit more, and she really looks surprised because the hook and sinkers and minnow are gone, and she's left with nothing when she was expecting a big bass.

Heather's a real sport fisherman--knows all the tricks because her dad's been teaching her since she was just a kid. Her dad acts really cool. Sometimes he tows the neighborhood kids on a tractor tire innertube behind his speed boat. On Friday nights, when he fishes off the dock, he brings out a six pack and a full bottle of whiskey. I drink four and he drinks two and the whiskey. Heather just drinks Dr. Pepper. When he sees me coming down the path between
our houses, he waves and hollers and motions to the chairs. Ready for Fishing with Mitch, he says. That's his name, Mitch. He calls the plays all night like he's some sort of bass master with his own T.V. show. He's hilarious and I'm always laughing, but Heather just rolls her huge wide-open eyes and diddles with the fringe on her cut offs. So he's usually a pretty cool guy.

This one time Heather and I were on the dock setting up the lawn chairs and he comes out of the kitchen door and hollers for Heather to come on up the house. I feel pretty dorky, after a while, standing around on the dock by myself, so I go up to the house to see what's keeping them.

The door's open. Light from the kitchen splashes out and looks like maybe it's a portal to a parallel universe. I almost expect Captain Kirk to walk through. But he doesn't, so I step up to plunge in, and I see Heather's dad holding her by the upper arm. Her skin is white where his fist squeezes, but his finger tips and nails are red. She's really tall. Almost as tall as her dad, so she could easily look him in-the eye, but she's staring off into space, somewhere over his shoulder. I hear him say, look at me when I'm talking to you, and he grabs her chin and shoves her face around. I clench my fists in case I
have to go in there to break them up, but he lets go. So I step away from the door where I'm sure they can't see me. I see a half empty bottle of whiskey on the counter. I hear him clear his throat. Young lady, he says, don't let me catch you lying to me again. Go wash your face, he says, and come down to the dock.

That's it. I scramble back to the lake and, by the time they come down, my line's already in the water. They act like nothing happened, and I sure act like nothing happened. Mitch starts talking to the fish, saying things like, come on you big fish, get on my line. Come on Mama. Then Heather's mom drives up the drive way, and we all laugh like anything.

Heather's mom works all day in town at the realty office that she owns there, and she doesn't get home until late. She wears dresses that look like suits to her job. They're dark and the skirts stop above her knees. She always has a little jacket to wear over her blouse. Her fingernails grow to long points that she paints pink. She doesn't fish, which is a good thing because she could never tie a knot with those nails.

Heather grumbles, says the fishing in this lake has gone straight
down the tubes. She grabs the broken off end of her line, ties on again and casts. Stick Fish, I say, when she reels in a water loged twig. She shrugs like to say she was fishing for trees the whole time, and leans over, reaching into the bottom of the boat for the plastic box full of lures. I can see down the front of her swimming suit where her cleavage shows, a shadowy tunnel that reminds me of the gully that directs overflow when the lake's too high. When she looks up, I see her see me looking. She ignores me and pretends to be preoccupied with picking out the perfect lure to catch the big daddy of them all.

I feel a little awkward at being caught that way so I say, changing strategies, eh? She shrugs and fiddles with a spinner, then changes her mind in favor of a hula popper. She ties it on and spits on the line. Her tongue curls around the loose knot and saliva glints in the sun, like stained glass. She pulls the knot tight with the tips of her thumb and forefinger. When she casts, I see dirt underneath her short pointy nails. I like this about her. She doesn't mind a little dirt. I get a little rush, like standing on the dam when the gates are open and the waves slam through the openings and wash the sloped sides. I can feel the water pounding through the dam in my chest. So
I try to think about fishing. She chunks and winds, chunks and winds. Each cast jiggles her boobs.

I drag my worm along the bottom. I cast again. The boat sways. The lake slaps against the bow and the wind dies to a hot breeze. The sun shines warm, so I take off my shirt and stretch out to catch some rays. But I really just want to see if she looks at me without my shirt on. I think I feel her eyes on me, so I smile just in case. I'm thinking I feel water splash onto my arm and think the wind's coming up. But no, it's Heather pouring water on me with my own hat. I jump and catch my breath and wake up fast. The boat rocks.

She backs up and sits down again, laughing, and I grab at her. The boat sways, and I feel a little sick. I don't know why because I'm a good swimmer, and I've never been sea sick before. I feel puke pushing at the back of my throat, so I try to will my stomach back to normal. She splashes me with more water and that seems to help. I figure it's the sun making me feel so dizzy. I shake my head, crank on the Evanrude and move closer to the bank into the shade of the branches.

It's cooler in the shade. I move around from the stern to the bow to sit next to her. I turn my face toward her and we seem very
close together. I move a strand of her hair off her shoulder, and I know she knows that I want to kiss her. And then I figure what the hell? What have I got to lose? So I go ahead and kiss her and she doesn’t stop me. We make out for a while and I feel better. I keep my hand glued to her boob and push my tongue into her mouth. She seems to like it because she finally lets me pop her boob out of her swimsuit top. Yeah, second base, and summer hasn’t even started. I look out of the corner of my eye and see it—all white and firm and gleaming in the reflection of the sun off the water. One greenish vein, one lone tributary, traces its way across her sloping boob leading to the wrinkled nipple—an island paradise. I raise my eyes so I can see her face. It isn't, like, her usual look. Everything is closed—brows, eyes, mouth. Her breath pushes through the straight line of her mouth. I bend toward that fascinating world, ready to cover the tip with my mouth.

Then it hits. Just about the time I’m going to ease my mouth onto her, the biggest bass I ever saw hits her line. She's been holding her rod the whole time we’ve been kissing, calls it her lucky pole. When she feels the tug, her surprised look flashes back onto her face. In one motion she pushes me off and jumps to her feet, setting
the hook. She plays him--reeling him in, pausing, pulling her rod toward her head--moving fluidly like a ballerina. Her one bare boob heaves and gleams and sways to the rhythm of her reeling. Her chest begins to flush a mottled red and it travels up her throat to her cheeks. O my god, she says, O-My-God, and the fish bucks and pulls.

Just about then she shouts my name. It takes me a second to realize that she means the net. Get the net, she says, for God's sake, get the net. So I get the net and lean over the edge, and I'm trying to keep our lines from getting tangled, and I'm kind of dazed, but I keep leaning over, reaching the net toward her fish, holding my own rod and reel with my other hand. The fish's belly, taut and white, sparkles off the water when it jumps, reflecting the light towards the sky. That white belly flashes in my eyes, and I'm leaning way too far over the edge. The boat tips. I lose my balance and we flip into the lake. I see her face just before we go over. Her surprised look is gone again, like maybe she's seen this coming.

When she comes up again she's laughing, so I know she's not mad. A slimy piece of alae is stuck on her head, and she looks even more beautiful wet than she did reeling and hanging out all over. Shit! I scream and slap myself on the forehead, splashing water into
my own eyes. Did you see him? Did you see him? I say, treading water, Did you see the size of that bass? She laughs some more and lifts her arms out of the water in a big shrugging motion. I can tell she really doesn't care, but I still feel bad for her. Man, what a fish. She swims toward me, picking up her net and her goggles, floating near the boat. Then she dives under to look for her favorite tackle box. It takes us a long time, but we find almost all our stuff.

The water's cold and we're pretty hungry after our swim, so we decide to head back toward our own cove. I help her tie the boat and we say, so long, see ya later, see you in the funny papers, and she walks up the boardwalk her dad built two summers ago and into her back door. I go up the stone path to our cabin. Mom's sitting on the deck reading like always, so I tell her how we capsized before I go inside to change into dry clothes.

In my room I take my binoculars and look across the way into Heather's room. But all I see is her collection of fancy kaleidoscopes arranged on her shelves. She's crazy about those things, and I usually see her at least once a day pointing one up at the sun and twisting it slowly in front of her eye. Sometimes she makes me look, and I like it, but I'm not crazy about it the way she is. I mean, they're just
broken up bits of glass or shell or beads in a cylinder with mirrors at both ends. Big deal.

So then I look into the other windows just to see if maybe she's taking a shower. But she isn't, and I'm about to give up when I see her standing in her parents' bedroom, next door to her own room. They have a huge bed, covered with a black and white bedspread. Everything in the room is either black or white. The phone is black. The carpet, white. Dark pictures in black frames line the white walls. In the corner, her dad keeps a weight lifting set. I see him sitting on the bench in his shorts and a muscle man T-shirt. Man, is he ever muscle bound.

Heather stands still near the closed door. Her head is down and I think she must be in trouble. Maybe for tipping the boat. I see her flinch, so I shift back to him. He's sitting there on the weight bench, his elbows on his knees, holding his hands in a single fist the size of a small anchor. Watching Heather get in trouble seems almost as weird as watching her when she's alone. I will myself to put the binoculars down. But nothing happens. My brain says, don't do it, but my arms are paralyzed. I think they must be possessed.

She never moves from the doorway, and I see her dad walk into
my field of vision. He lifts her chin like Rob Petry lifts Laura's when she's lost her wedding ring down the sink or in the cake dough. I feel funny. He wipes the tears off her face and kisses her cheek. I have never seen Heather stay so still. He begins to unbutton her blouse. And I have to put the glasses down and rub my eyes. My face feels red and hot and my blood pumps in my ears.

When I look again her blue shirt is on the floor, her thin bra straps hang halfway down her arms. I hear my own breathing, like so much water breaking out of the tubes. He presses his hands into the cups of her bra, below her breasts, pushing them up and out of the lace web. Her eyes and mouth are straight lines. He pulls up on her breasts so hard that she rises up on her toes. He presses her against the wall.

I watch as he moves his mouth down to cover her breast. And my cock is hard. And I know I'm a shit, so I think mine's as hard as yours, you bastard. I cry, and that makes me mad. You son of a bitch, I say. I throw my binoculars on the bed, and slam my fist into the wall beside the window. Ouch. Fuck. My knuckles are bleeding, but at least my hard on goes away. I shake my hand in the air, and pick up the binoculars with my good hand, and I watch as he moves her
toward his bed. My stomach hurts. But I watch as he steps out of his shorts, pushes her skirt up and spreads her legs. He moves over her, up and down, like enormous waves guiding a small boat to sea.

I drop the binoculars and pull my chair away from the window. Then I just stare at her house, waiting. Sometime later I see her come out their back door. But I still can't see her face, and for some reason I really want to. I mean, I really want to see that surprised look. She turns toward my house, but then she keeps walking, away from me and into the little woods that surround our neighborhood. And I leave her alone because, I mean, how can I tell her I saw it all?
They were screwing when the phone rang. She straddled his hips, and her knees rubbed against the rough fabric of the navy blue sheets. She flexed her aerobically trained inner thighs with each small thrust and pushed her palms into his chest, lifting herself slightly and pushing him against the bed. Her Really Red nails dug into his skin, leaving half-circles like tiny, upside-down smiles. His thumbs pushed against the bony indentations of her hips and then his fingers pressed the fleshy curve of her buttocks. Her shadowy figure mimicked each move on the white wall.

On the first long ring her eyes opened. She paused in her rhythmic grinding. Lights glared, and her green eyes blinked—once, twice, three. She had no intention of actually answering the phone, but the sharp bleat seemed to break her fantasy of tying his arms and legs to the four corners of the bed with a thin piece of baling twine. She punctuated the second ring by sliding down quickly and drawing up. On the third and fourth rings her movements quickened to a tango as they rocked to the rhythms and cadence of the silent music behind
the peal of each ring. From somewhere, her own recorded voice answered when the machine picked up the call.

“Hi. We can’t come to the phone right now, but leave a message, and we’ll call you right back. Bye.”

A moment more and she heard elevator jazz and then a Marlboro Man voice drawled, “Hey you guys. I hope I’m not,” he paused for effect, “interrupting.” His voice sounded spent, like he’d just smoked a joint after making love.

“Just ignore it,” she murmured and leaned forward to stretch her legs down the length of the man beneath her. The soft hair on his legs tickled her smooth thighs.

The voice persisted, “I wanted you to hear my new c.d.” More faux-jazz hummed through the phone line. She could almost see him holding the phone in front of the stereo speaker. The music faded and the voice asked, “What are you two up to tonight?”

She leaned forward and flattened her breasts against the man’s hairy chest, clenching the muscles in her legs and abdomen. “I thought we might get together to watch a... film. I’ll catch up with you later.” Babe looked down and saw that the man was ready. She lifted her ass and scooted down over his knees, placing her face near
the warm pumping stream. "See you," the caller said and hung up the phone.

"Bye, bye," she said softly, looking into the camera.

"Great shot," the director said. "We'll pick up from there again on Monday. Thanks everybody." The heat from the lights faded, and the crew began rolling up cords, stowing the cameras. One, she saw, was unplugging the cord from the answering machine.

She rolled away from the man in the bed, swung her legs over the edge, stood up and pulled on her terry cloth robe. Her leading man knotted the sash of his own robe around his waist and walked away. Someone stepped up to the bed, stripped the navy sheets off and stuffed them into a pillow case. The director strode briskly by, shouting orders at the crew. "You were great, Babe," he patted her cheek as he passed. She stepped out of her red heels and padded barefoot across the floor.

In her dressing room she pushed her legs into bluejeans and buttoned a blue work shirt over a black tee, leaving the tail untucked to cover her butt. She slipped into her black flats and gathered her
hair into a rubber band and pulled a black baseball cap over her head, threading the pony tail through the opening between the material and the leather strap. Tugging on the strap to adjust the fit of the cap, she glanced in the full-length mirror, settled her sunglasses over her eyes and blew herself a kiss.

At home her roommate, Nickie, snuggled under an afghan on the couch reading a magazine. When the door opened, she looked up and smiled, “Hi, Babe, how’d it go?”

“Same old, same old.” She crossed the room and leaned over to kiss her friend lightly on both cheeks. “How’s things here?” She took off her hat and threw it onto the coffee table.

“Oh, you know.” Nickie answered. “Go take your bath. Salmon steaks for dinner.”

“Great. See you soon.”

In the bathroom she stripped her clothes off and dropped them in a heap on the floor. She swabbed her eyes and mouth with make-up remover and tossed the dirty cotton balls into the trash. One tug and the rubber band slid off the pony tail. On a dark desert highway, cool wind in your hair she sang, leaning over the bathtub to adjust the
water temperature. While the tub filled, she flossed and brushed her teeth then lit a couple of candles and turned off the light.

She eased herself into the almost too hot water until it completely covered her head. The metallic tinkling underwater sounded like wind chimes. Then she straightened her legs, pushing off the end of the tub. Her head emerged, hair plastered around her face. “Poooo.” Water sputtered out of her mouth. A wave splashed over the edge of the tub. With a soft sponge she soaped her body. Beginning at the toes, the sudsy sponge traced the bony spot on her foot, up the hard ridge of her shin and over the cliff edge of her knee. Her hand guided the sponge down the slippery thigh and passed over her mons, taking the opposite route to reach the other foot. She raised each arm in its turn and squeezed water over the sensitive skin beneath. Lifting first one breast and then the other, the sponge swung along the arc of skin until, finally, it circled the entire circumference. Pressing the sponge in the crevice between her breasts, she pushed them together, forcing the water over her belly. Water trickled from her fingertips on to the dark halos of her nipples. The brown skin tightened when she covered the tips with soap suds. Letting the sponge float between her knees, she soaped a
long handled brush, leaned forward and plunged it up and down the length of her back.

Back against the sloped end of the tub, her body floating slightly above the rubber non-slip fish on the bottom. She pushed her pelvis toward the surface in a fluid mermaid movement and watched as the water slid off her body, and the hair sprang into a curly pillow. Placing the sponge between her legs, she closed her thighs and held it there.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" Her roommate tapped on the door and stepped into the bathroom, holding two fogged glasses of white wine. "Whew," she tried to wave the steam away. "You must be a prune by now."

"I am. I'm getting out pretty soon." Babe stood up in the tub, and the water ran down the length of her body. Reaching out with one foot, she pressed the drain open. The water gurgled and eddied. She snapped a towel off the rack and began patting herself dry. "I'm off tomorrow. I thought we'd go down to the barn for a little ride."

"Sounds good to me. I'll fix a picnic lunch, and we can spend the whole day together. Maybe catch a few rays."

Babe propped her leg on the counter and slathered it with
Lubriderm. When she'd finished, she looked at her roommate in the mirror. "Will you do my back?" she asked, handing her the plastic bottle.

Nickie sipped delicately at the rim of her glass and got up. "No problem." She squirted the cold white stuff into her palm and warmed it there for a second. Then she began massaging it into her friend's skin. "Babe," she started, "I wish you'd quit." Babe's shoulders tensed under Nickie's hands.

"You like money too."

"I could get used to it. I could get a job. I could go to the Vo-tech. Maybe computer repair school."

Babe snorted. "I'm starving."

"I like you more than money."

"Nickie." She sang the name, breaking the two syllables and making it sound like a children's song.

"Dinner's almost ready." Nickie wiped her hands carefully on the wet towel before bending over to pick Babe's clothes up off the floor and carry them over to the hamper. "Come on when you're finished here."

"Okay. Five more minutes." Babe covered the rest of her body
with a slick layer of lotion. "I'll be out in five minutes," she repeated.

The next morning Babe dressed in jodhpurs, a T-shirt and her new black riding boots. When she emerged from the bedroom, Nickie let out a long low whistle. "Va va va voom," she said. "You look great."

"Thanks," she laughed a little and snapped her riding crop against the leather covering her calf. "Let's go. I've been waiting for this all week."

Inside the barn they led their horses to the alley between the box stalls and fastened cross ties onto the halters. Babe stood at her horses head. She lifted up on his halter and rested her top lip on the skin above his nostril. With her mouth half open she breathed into the opening. The horses' nose and mouth quivered and she felt and smelled his pungent breath on her cheek as he answered with his own warm breath.

As they worked, the owner sidled in followed by a bevy of barn dogs. "That's how they talk to each other, you know," she said from
around the stem of a Virginia Slim. Frannie always clenched a thin cigarette between her lips, ignoring her own rule of no smoking in the barn. A trail of thin ashes grew off the end and periodically fell onto Frannie's generous, sagging bosom.

Babe looked up and smiled, "I know, Frannie. You've told me that before." The old woman laughed her wheezing laugh and shook her head. She slapped Babe's horse on the rump and scratched the turn of his croup with her stubby fingers.

"They're looking good, girls," she said as she surveyed the horses. 
"Looks like you've put some work in here."

"Thanks, Frannie," Babe said.

"Thanks, Frannie," Nickie echoed.

With a curry comb in each hand and starting from the neck, the two young women began to work circles onto the horses' hides. Dust and hair floated toward the dirt floor. As Babe worked back toward her horse's haunches, he leaned into the brush and groaned. Babe smiled.

"Well," Frannie croaked, "looks like you've got a good day for a ride."

Babe picked up a hard bristle brush and smoothed the nap of the
horse's hair down in long strokes, flicking her wrist at the end of each movement to toss the dust and dandruff into the air. She stood at his head tickling and scratching the pointy slope of the joint between his ears. She set the brush against his forehead and held it there as he nodded his head against the rough bristles.

"How's things around here?" Nickie peered at the old woman from the off side of the grey.

"Well, a little rheumatism. Making it hard for me to get into the loft. But I manage." She coughed a phlegmy cough without removing the cigarette from her mouth. She scratched the dirt floor a little with the toe of her worn out cowboy boot. With one hand she plucked the dirty baseball cap off her head and smoothed back thin white hair. She adjusted the hat on her head with the bill pointing up.

Babe picked up a soft bristle brush and began again at the horse's neck. She moved slowly and methodically, smoothing and brushing until the red hair shined in the pale light of the barn. From his neck she moved over the withers and across the sensitive back. Bending over, she brushed the front legs and the wrinkled skin between the legs. She paid careful attention to the place where the
girth would set. She swept the path from his shoulder to the long stretch of his barrel and over the curve of the croup. The horse relaxed under Babe's brush. He lowered his head and half closed his eyes. He stood on three legs and Babe could see his penis lolling out of its sheath. She moved to the other side and started the process again. One more swipe and she stepped back to consider her work. Satisfied, she dropped the brush into her tack box and rummaged around for a flathead screwdriver. She stood parallel to the horse, facing it's rear end and bent over. She slid her hand down the length of the horse's leg and gently pinched the fetlock. The horse lifted its foot, and she propped it on her knee. From this squatting position, she looked at Frannie, leaning against a stall. “How'd you get in the horse business, Frannie?” she asked without looking up as she cleaned manure and rocks out of the ridges in the hoof.

“Liked horses better than men, I guess.” She laughed her wheezing laugh and ground her cigarette into the dirt. “Girl didn't have much choice in my day. Get married or stay home with Mom and Daddy. I stayed home.”

“You've never been married?” Moving in a square around the horse, she repeated the process until each hoof was free of debris.
The pungent odor of hoof drifted into her nostrils, mixing with the thick molasses smell of sweet feed.

“Nope. Had the chance once, but, well, things were different then. I was a looker, and that was part of my problem. Boys come around grabbing and pushing. My daddy didn’t want none of that on his front porch. After he died, I'd had enough of that nonsense. Sold off most of Daddy’s land. They built I-35 right across it.” She shook her head and laughed. “Beautiful grassland back then. I used to ride up Roe Avenue to watch the sunset.” She put a cigarette in the corner of her mouth. “Kept the pastures this side of the creek for the horses and started giving lessons. She pulled a plastic lighter from her jeans pocket and lit the cigarette. “Well, you girls have a good ride now.” She turned and shuffled toward the house, the dogs trailing behind her.

They stared after her for a second then Nickie headed for the tack room.

“Bring my saddle too, would you?” Babe peeled a chestnut off her horse’s leg and threw it to a dog. “Good boy,” she said and patted his neck.

The grooming done, they set the light English saddles on the
horses’ backs, pulled the bits into their mouths and led them to the
front of the barn. There they cinched up, snapped the stirrups down
and tied on the saddle bags. With one foot in the stirrup and one foot
on the ground, they hopped in unison and settled in their seats.

“Tally-ho!” Nickie giggled, waving her crop in the air.

“Keep your mind in the middle,” Babe answered and nudged her
horse through the gate and down the dirt road toward the strip of
fields and woods that hadn’t been developed yet.

They held their horses to a walk until the path curved out of
sight of the paddock. Then, leaning slightly forward, they urged their
horses into a brisk trot-- posting, rising and falling to the rhythm of
the gait.

As the horse’s outside leg moved forward, Babe’s buttocks
followed, lifting slightly out of the saddle. Her hips hinged forward.
As the leg traveled back, she settled lightly into the seat, so that
the horse’s hindquarters propelled her own movements. She held her
shoulders straight, her chin up, like she’d learned as a little girl in
riding lessons. Her knees supported her entire body by pressing
inward toward the horse and she held the ball of her foot lightly on
the stirrup.
They rode in this lilting rhythm until they reached the ridge. Looking behind them, they could see the prairie’s hills and draws undulating in the sunlight. They reined to a walk and turned into the woods, jumping the horses over a narrow creek. A meadow rose in a gentle slope above the woods, and they headed toward it to let the horses run.

Anticipating the gallop and tugging at their bits, the horses stretched their necks forward and threw their heads, trying to break free. Foam dripped from their mouths as they skittered sideways, graceful as thousand pound ballerinas. At the edge of the meadow, knowing Nickie would follow, Babe gathered her reins and settled her legs firmly against the horse’s barrel, and the horse lunged into a canter. Babe opened her mouth and drank the wind in huge gulps. Rolling with the strides, she guided her horse around the perimeter of the field.

She turned out of the track, and as they topped a small rise, the horse hesitated just as Babe saw a man’s naked butt, shockingly white and out of place among the weeds. Babe clenched her knees, stood in the stirrups, urged the horse into a gallop and for a second they hung on the air above the earth. She nudged him into a path
headed directly toward the man.

Babe leaned out over the bay's neck and pushed her hands forward, clucking him into a jump. Feeling the release, the horse took one final stride and plunged into the air. As they passed over, Babe glanced down and saw the way the woman's hair fanned out across the bright red blanket, the way her mouth was a black O of pleasure or surprise just over the man's shoulder.

When the horse's front hoofs hit the ground, Babe slid to the left, her weight shifting from center. One more long stride and Babe was jarred farther down the saddle. The horse felt the shift in Babe's weight, gave a tiny buck, and Babe fell to the ground.

As the dust settled around her, Babe sat up, tried to stand, stumbled and sat back down on the trail. She looked back toward the couple, and the naked man stood over her, eclipsing the sun. "Son-of-a-bitch," he said, "Son-of-a-bitch." He kicked a clump of grass near her head, then screamed louder, hopping up and down and holding his stubbed toes. His flaccid penis dangled and danced in a small imitation of the rest of his body. She held her scraped hands in front of her face. "Shit," she said.
Nickie came galloping up. “Babe, are you okay?” she called down from the saddle.

“Yeah. Just a minute. Some water maybe.” Babe laid back in the grass at the edge of the trail and groaned. Nickie grabbed a water bottle out of the saddle bag and jumped down. She knelt and put her arm around Babe’s shoulder, offering her the water.

“What kind of stupid stunt was that?” the man screamed. “You could have killed us, you stupid bitch.” He turned and stomped away, back to where the girl scrambled around looking for her clothes.

Babe started to cry. She touched her lip gingerly and cried harder at the sight of blood staining her fingers. “My face. Nickie, my face is bleeding. How am I going to work like this?”

Nickie poured some water from her canteen onto her kerchief and blotted Babe’s bloody lip. “It’s not so bad,” she said. “Just a lot of blood.” She patted Babe’s shoulder, “You’ll be alright pretty soon.”

The man strode back and forth, flapping his arms against his bare legs and kicking at the ground. He kicked again, and dirt showered the two women. Keeping her eyes trained on the man, Nickie scraped her hands along the ground until she found a dirt clod with one hand and her crop with the other. She struggled to her feet and shouted at
the man, "Hey Asshole!" She pelted his back with the clod. He spun around, ready to fight, then saw Nickie’s red face and the crop clenched in her fist. Her eyes bulged, and she took a step toward him.

"Whoa, lady," he held up his hands. "Calm down, calm down." She took another step toward him. His girlfriend appeared from behind him, holding his jeans with one finger crooked through a belt loop and offering him a package of cigarettes with her other hand.

"Get dressed, John," she said.

He took his jeans from her and slipped first one leg and then the other into the pants. "Just back off," he said to Nickie, eyeing the whip. He backed slowly out of her range, lit a cigarette and scuttled into the woods.

Nickie watched him disappear into the trees before she returned to stand over Babe. "Don’t worry, Babe. He’s gone" she said. She tilted Babe’s face up and kissed her forehead lightly. "You’ll be fine. No scars at all."

The other woman stood above them, tucking a t-shirt into her jeans. She looked down at Babe and Nickie sitting in the tall grass and began to laugh. At first it was a small laugh like the cold engine of a car turning over or the grumble of thunder from a long way off
in a summer storm. Babe and Nickie stared at her. She chuckled and covered her mouth, but she couldn’t stop the laughter from spilling out from around her hand. She giggled and guffawed. She held her breath but the laughter broke through. She howled and held her stomach and fell into the grass beside the other two. Babe stared and Nickie smiled a bit and began to laugh along with the other woman.

“Hey,” Babe licked tears off her upper lip, “this isn’t funny.” Nickie and the other woman stopped laughing for a moment and looked at each other. Nickie hiccuped and the two rolled over in the grass and laughed and stomped their feet, tears squeezing from between their closed eye lids.

“Hey,” Babe said, but her word was cut off by the panting and snorts of her own restrained laughter, escaping from her body--her mouth and nose and throat and her eyes, especially her eyes.

On Monday Babe went back to work above the man’s body, her eyes fixed on some point beyond the set. Her swollen lip glistened red. Beige cover-up hid her bruises and scrapes. Lights glared. She cupped each breast in her own rough palms, hips rocking up and down while
the man's breath came in short quick bursts until she finally released him and the director shouted, "Cut! That's a wrap!" Babe wrapped her body inside a terry cloth robe and fingered the cut on her lip.
TURTLE MOTHER

Amelia's mother weighed close to two hundred pounds. She had barely enough wispy grey hair to cover her head. Her tiny eyes were practically hidden in the folds of her face. I don't know what color they were, probably brown like Amelia's. All of her skin hung down, the victim of 79 years of fighting gravity. Her hands were doughy and veiny at the same time, translucent with a faint greenish tinge. Her wedding ring had almost disappeared between the folds of her finger, but she refused to take it off, or even to have it sized up to fit properly. Her legs were twin oaks— even bigger than that. They were never free of each other, constantly rubbing together when she struggled around.

She kept Amelia pretty busy running back and forth, up and down fetching a clean handkerchief, a fresh glass of tea, the tube of Ben-Gay, her glasses, the large print Reader's Digest.

Amelia is my mother's best friend. They met when they were both young mothers in the late 60's. Their husbands worked for the same huge insurance company. Both husbands had affairs with their even
younger secretaries. Amelia and my mother split the cost of the lawyer. It was a double divorce. The husbands both married their secretaries. My father told me I was lucky because now I had two mothers to love me. I cried. But Mother and Amelia didn't cry much, they got drunk instead, and laughed.

Amelia's mother came to live with her in 1987 after Amelia's step-father died. At first Amelia wanted to put her mother in a rest home that cost two thousand dollars a month. But Amelia's mother cried and said that it was too bad that Amelia didn't love her after all the sacrifices she had made in life for her only daughter. So Amelia chickened out and let her mother move into her daughter's vacant room. My mother said that if two thousand dollars each and every month wasn't love then she didn't know what was.

1987 was a big year for all of us. I graduated from college with my masters in anthropology. I also got my own divorce. My husband had been studying for his doctorate in Microbiology. We had planned on joining our church's youth ministry after we graduated. We were going to go to Africa to save starving children who were infected with sub-cellular tropical diseases. But my husband fell in love with his research assistant instead. They went to Las Vegas
together to get a quickie divorce. While they were there they
decided, what-the-hell, and got married in a little chapel in the
lobby of Caesar's Palace. He showed me the wedding photos. The
minister was a Liberace look-alike. The good thing was that they
didn't go to Africa either. Her father gave him a job in the family-
owned diaper service company.

So instead of going to Africa I got a job at Gates and Sons Bar-B-
Que in south Kansas City. Usually they only hire young African
American women, but they said I had a profound understanding of the
culture so they thought I could be an asset to the company.

I also moved back into the pink room my mother had painted for
me when I was sixteen. I hate pink and when I finally told mother
that I hate pink she looked at me with her lips pressed together and
said, "Well, that's gratitude for you." But then she went to the
Sherwin Williams store and brought back four gallons of Shetland
White. I tried to stop her. No, no, I said, waving my hands. There's no
need. I'm only going to be here until I find an apartment near work.
She looked at me from the ladder where she was taping woodwork
and nodded. Sure you are, girl, she said and nodded again. Sure you
are.
And I cried a lot. One Saturday afternoon Amelia and my mother stood, arms folded, in the door of my pink room watching me and shaking their heads. My mother wrinkled her brow and said to Amelia that she had told me not to marry that guy, but kids these days won't listen to a thing you tell them, especially if you're their mother. Between hiccoughs I told them I wasn't crying because of him, that I hated him, no I didn't even hate him and he wasn't worth crying over. In fact I hoped he was happy working for that twit's father. I told them I was just storing up some good, strong, salty tears against the next time I had to deal with the high-stress big-business world of bar-b-que. They looked at each other and rolled their eyes, and Amelia said why didn't I come with them down to the Red Lion because what I needed was a good, strong dose of Crown and water.

They had never invited me out with them before, and I admit I was curious, so I sniffled and said okay I would go with them if they really wanted me. Yes, yes, they said, they really wanted me, but hurry it up, they couldn't wait all day.

I drank vodka on the rocks with two olives, and Mother said she didn't know why I wasted her money on cheap liquor. I just shrugged my shoulders, and she told me to sit up straight or she'd be buying
me a back brace next. After a couple vodkas I felt happier. I danced the polka with a lot of little old men who my mother said were my grandfather's friends. They all sat at our table and told jokes that I couldn't understand because they were speaking Serbo-Croatian. I still thought everything was hilarious. They bought us more vodkas and Crown and waters.

Pretty soon I had to go to the ladies' room. I stood and shuffled my way past the tables full of people. I polka-ed the perimeter of the dance floor until I reached a door with a silhouette of a voluptuous woman stuck to it. She wore spike heels and a tight dress with a ruffle at the bottom. Her body was twisted as if she were perpetually about to sit down. She's got to go, I thought, and laughed as I pushed the door open. I stepped in and the door swung shut, muffling the noise from the barroom. A familiar face stared out of the mirror at me and I jumped and laughed. It was me. I scrunched my hair and tried to smooth the lines forming between my brows. I stuck out my tongue--AAaghrrrrrr. I rinsed my mouth and brushed my teeth with my index finger.

The thought of bodily functions tickled me, and I chuckled and giggled as I stumbled into the mauve stall. Sitting there with my
chin in my palms, I heard the echo of my own laughter bouncing off the walls. My God!! I thought. That sounded just like Mother's laugh. Then Mother's voice was calling me, telling me to hurry it up. We had to leave right now, the home-care nurse who stayed with Amelia's mother every Saturday had called. I stood and fumbled with the buttons on my jeans. Amelia's mother was looking at the big nursing home in the sky.

When Amelia had first introduced her mother to the home-care nurse, her mother was suspicious. She told Amelia that the nurse was trying to poison her with all the drugs she was being forced to take. Amelia told her mother not to be ridiculous, but got her a new nurse anyway. Then Amelia's mother said that the new nurse spent all of her time watching T.V. and talking on the phone to her boyfriend. Amelia's mother said she was lonely on Saturdays and wouldn't Amelia please stay home with her? But my mother told Amelia not to pay any attention to what her mother said. It was all just a ploy to make Amelia feel guilty, when in reality Amelia was doing the best she could, and besides Amelia needed time for herself. I shook my head in agreement. But it didn't matter. Amelia really felt bad.
Mother drove Amelia's car so fast that it bottomed out when we crossed the railroad tracks at Seventh and Central, but Amelia didn't say anything about it. I laughed a little, and they both ignored me.

When we got to Amelia's house, the men from 911 were struggling to carry Amelia's mother down the narrow stair-case. They were gasping and talking each other through it. It reminded me of Laurel and Hardy trying to move a grand piano, and I wanted to suggest that they set up a pulley system and lower her down the side of the house. I felt a little tipsy and one side of my mouth begin to curve up into a lop-sided smile, but I forced myself not to laugh.

Amelia's mother had every kind of old-age illness I could think of: arthritis, bursitis, anemia, high blood pressure, low blood sugar, cataracts, a bad back, and dentures that didn't fit. I mean, its not as if this turn was a surprise.

When the men finally got Amelia's mother to the ground floor, I thought she was already dead. She was wearing a green tutu my mother had given her for last Mother's Day. Her face was sort of pale, and the vein on her forehead was tinged like an old bruise. Her eyes were wide open. She squinted and held her hand out to Amelia. Those two hung on to each other like snapping turtles hanging on a
stick. Two large tears rode down Amelia's face. I was surprised, really shocked, and looked to my own mother for a sign of what to do, but she was crying too.

Amelia's mother kissed her daughter's hand, and told her not to worry, everything was going to be fine. As they carried her out to the ambulance, she saw me standing in the middle of the room. She must have recognized the confused look on my face. Or maybe she felt as scared as I looked and knew there was nothing left to do. She smiled her toothless smile at me, and what could I do, but smile back?

FLAPDOODLE

At the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, Winona Verte and Mupemba Mputu pose for photos together on a life-size model of John Wayne's horse. Behind them a sunset glows pink and blue as it sets over a prairie backdrop. They step down the ladder that leans against the off side of the horse and shuffle past the still photos
taken from the Duke's movies. Mupemba never recognizes the star, so Winona points him out in each picture. "He's the tall one," she says pointing to the picture from *The Cowboys*. "He's the man in this one," she says in front of The *Quiet Man*.

"Of course, of course," Mupemba gazes at the photos and strokes his chin thoughtfully. "You know, you white people all look alike. And which is he here?" He gestures with his head and purses his lips, as if they were fingers, capable of pointing at the tiniest object. Winona pauses with her index finger extended toward a photo of *The Sons of Katie Elder* and looks at Mupemba's face for hints of sarcasm, but his expression is intent on picking out the western hero. She smiles at his honest confession of confusion. For the first time since they'd met nearly a month before, Winona notices his milk chocolate eyes. She hopes he asks more questions because she loves to hear the English accent he'd developed during his graduate studies at Leeds. The theme from *Rooster Cogburn* swells in the small exhibition hall. An electronic voice intones, "Please watch your step," and Winona and Mupemba step back onto the flat escalator that propels the tourists by each display. They glide into the general store in a life-size model of Dodge City, circa 1860.
From Dodge City they file back into the bright Oklahoma sun where the group of men and the two women pose for photos in front of the tour bus that has been chartered by the sponsoring embassies. Student Transportation Services is painted in black lettering on both sides. The seats are black naugahyde, and the torn places have been repaired with grey electrical tape. Fading graffiti covers the backs—Joan gives good head, Tess + Shawn = Love, Rock and Roll Will Never Die—in magic marker and finger nail polish. Globs of gum speckle the bottom surface of the seats like a pox.

The first time Winona saw the bus, she was shocked. “It’s a fucking dinosaur,” she said. Nearby a row of new buses gleamed silver, their aerodynamic noses pointed toward the electrical outlets where black extension cords snaked into each engine. A metal skirt hovered just above the blacktop at the four points where the tires should have been, and Winona tapped the skirt with the toe of her boot. The metal crinkled under the pressure. Winona jumped, looked stealthily around to see if anyone noticed and casually moseyed away.

By the time they made Oklahoma City they’d already visited The Alamo in San Antonio, the National Rodeo Championship and
Livestock Show in Denver and a Native American reservation outside of Taos. They were making their way toward the mid-west and the jewel of the trip: Hannibal Missouri, the birthplace of Mark Twain, and a riverboat ride down the Mississippi.

In honor of the election year, American Embassies in several African countries gave the trip as a prize in response to an essay writing contest entitled, “What I Would Do Over Summer Vacation In America.”

Winona and her former companion, Jean Brown, are the group's guides. They are also English teachers employed at Pencil Crick, a large metropolitan community college in Kansas City, Missouri. They both teach American Literature and want to win Scholarships to teach “Westward the Women: American Women's Travel Writing from 1860 to 1900” in Uganda or the Central African Republic. But right now they have a contract with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct the American-African Cross Cultural Summer Seminar Coalition. They hope this experience will lend credence to their future projects.

Before the Africans arrived in the states Winona and Jean spent weeks together planning the activities. They generated maps
and name tags on the school's computers. They typed up itineraries
and then revised them. They made reservations and put the finishing
touches on lesson plans. Each evening when they finished their work,
they stopped for a drink at a vintage bar called The Point. Winona
didn't really mean for it to happen, but they became lovers. In the
smokey light of the bar, Jean placed the olive and its blue iridescent
sword from her vodka martini against Winona's lips and pressed
slightly until they opened, and the green fruit lay on her tongue, and
she closed her mouth over it as if tasting the communion host. Jean
slipped the plastic sword from between Winona's lips and kissed her
lightly. She didn't press, but lingered a second longer than the
decorum of social kissing allows. Billy Holiday crooned I Get A Kick
Out of You in the background as they gathered up their things and left
the bar.

The next day Winona raised her voice over the whir of the
stationary bikes as they pedaled together at the gym, "I'm actually
about seventy-five percent sure that I'm heterosexual." The
electrodes connected to her thumbs and forehead beeped
couragement.

Jean panted. "Don't fight it. If it's meant to be..." She pedaled
harder, anticipating the final electronic hill and didn’t finish the phrase.

“Propinquity,” Winona shouted back, but Jean didn’t hear.

Winona’s long auburn hair cascades down her back to her buttocks. She often sits on it as if it were a pillow. Her large blue eyes drive Jean crazy, especially the thick lashes that she bats when she feels flirtatious. In the spirit of the trip she sports Western Wear: flounced skirts in southwestern patterns and blouses with pearl snaps instead of buttons. Sometimes she wears Wranglers stuffed into red Ropers and sequined t-shirts.

Jean’s hair is short and blond. She always wears pants because she thinks her thighs are too fat. An eating disorder during her adolescence left her pale and wan, but she’s fully recovered now. She lifts weights four times a week and likes to show off by flexing her biceps.

So the two women and fifteen Africans, including Mupemba, board the bus toward Hannibal. The air inside is hot and stuffy. Winona kneels on the first seat and tries to pinch the metal brackets
to lower the window. Sweat grows in a thin mustache on her upper
lip. The window is jammed and Jean elbows her out of the way to
man handle the brackets. As she lowers the window one side at a
time, it squeaks, dry metal against dry metal.

The Africans gather around the bus door, smoking cigarettes
and speaking to each other in British English. Mupemba's speech is
peppered with archaic American slang, "Hey dude, be handing me
over some fire please. I must smoke this fag quickly before we board
the bus." He speaks slowly and distinctly, pronouncing his ts and ds
with care, coming down hard on the -ing endings. "There is no
smoking allowed on this bus."

The men dress in dark slacks with the creases pressed sharp
and short sleeved button down shirts in polyester or rayon. Gold
chains sparkle against dark chests. A few men wear the cool,
colorful booboos of their home countries. Mupemba wears slacks, a
hawaiian print shirt and new Birkenstocks, but most of the others
shuffle along in plastic sandals or dress shoes. Their ages vary from
very young to very old. When they take drags off their cigarettes,
they haul in their breath like fat dogs in August and their thick nails
glint yellow in the harsh Mid-western sun.
Hanging on to the silver hand rail, Jean drops out of the bus, "We're almost ready to leave gentlemen," she says in her modulated classroom voice. "Please extinguish your cigarettes, cigars and pipes before boarding the bus." She strides to the front where she opens the hood and checks the oil. All the African men and Winona crowd around to watch. The men make comments in their own languages that Winona doesn't understand, but she understands from body language that they are talking about Jean. They say, "Her ass is very small and flat. It is no wonder she has no man," and "The ass is no matter. She is still a woman." They chuckle. Winona stands in the background biting the skin around her fingers. Her thumb begins to bleed and she sucks it, trying to plug the flow with her tongue.

Jean slams the hood shut and the men take it as their cue to load up. Everyone is sweating and their hands leave greasy prints on the seats as they balance themselves in the aisles. Jean drives and Winona sits behind her in the seat beside Mupemba. The engine revs and Jean pumps the pedal to slow the idle. She shoves the bus into first gear and they start off with a lunge. They drive one block to a Conoco station where Jean gets out, rams the nozzle into the gas tank and begins to pump. The Africans struggle with the windows.
Winona chews on her fingers. Mupemba grins and tries unsuccessfully to think of something to say, so he just continues to grin. Several men go into the store part of the gas station and purchase cold bottles of Coca-Cola. Jean jumps back in the bus, smiles and gives everyone the thumbs up. "Okay, now we're ready!" She acts enthusiastic. Jean takes her place behind the wheel; they jerk into traffic, and she exclaims a little too loudly, "We're on our way!"

Everyone, except Jean and Winona, begins to talk at once. Once in a while Winona can make out an English word or name. "Twain blah blah. Blah blah blah Hannibal" and "Blah Huck, blah blah Jim." Winona thinks it sounds like comic strip language. Their enthusiasm pleases her.

The sun shines off the windows and the traffic races past the rambling bus at a smooth and rapid pace. Mupemba turns to Winona, "Tell me, Winona," he says, "about the American phenomenon of putting men in jail who did not commit a crime."

Heat and motion have hypnotized her. She turns sluggishly, as if caught in slow motion photography, toward his face, "What?" Her voice lags like a record set on the wrong speed.
He motions toward an ancient *Newsweek* that he'd found stuffed in the cushion. The pages lay open on his lap. Mike Tyson grins from the wrinkled photo as he leaves his jailers and steps into a limousine.

"He raped a beauty queen," she says.

"She should not have been in his bedroom so late at night," Mupemba smiles. "At home women are expected to say no, but when a young man perseveres, the girl gives in and her *no* means *yes*. If she had meant *no*, then she wouldn't have been in his room." Winona flinches. Gooseflesh erupts on her arms and the nape of her neck.

The bus careens down the highway. Some of the men sing along with Michael Jackson on the radio, *Beat it, beat it*. The road curves gently around a berm of grass and wild flowers planted and impeccably maintained each spring by the highway department. An overpass hangs above the highway, lining the road with a shadowy stripe. The bus rushes toward the shadow as if it were the finishing line of some important race.

On the other side a crooked line of cars is stopped in the road, and Jean breaks hard. Winona hangs over the seat and watches her let up a bit on the gas pedal and pump the brake.
The bus lurches to a rough halt, and a group of women surge forward surrounding it. They beat on the sides with their fists, and some of the older ones even wield sticks and two by fours. They begin rocking the bus like it's some top heavy boat on the ocean. “Wait!” Winona shouts.

A young woman in cutoffs and a tank top clings to the front grill, her hand claws around the window frame. The Africans shout and shake their fists, “What is the meaning of this?” “What is happening?”

“The road is blocked,” the woman shouts back, spit flying out of her mouth. “The road is blocked,” she insists, her voice rising.

Winona’s face is tight; her eyes wide open. “Run them over,” she growls at Jean. The bus surges forward and rocks back. “Wait, don’t run them over,” she says.

“The road is blocked,” the young woman shrieks.

“We can see that. But why is the road blocked?” Jean uses her authoritative teacher’s voice, but her hands grip the steering wheel tightly.

“The road is blocked,” she repeats her mantra. Her eyes shine at Jean through the window.
“Why? Why is the road blocked? Why?” Winona’s voice crescendos and the last word explodes out of her mouth in a scream. The volume brings the clawing woman back to herself.

“Haven’t you heard? They elected O.J. president!” The words echo in Winona’s ears. She sits motionless on the old leather seat. A rip in the upholstery scratches against her bare thigh.

“O.J. Simpson?” She asks, a stunned calf look on her face. She tries to remember, who the hell’s his running mate, but can’t. The women scream obscenities at the innocent men, crouching inside, “You fucking assholes!” The men lean away from the open windows, crowding the aisle like a swarm of bees defending their hive from the beekeeper’s prodding smoke. A big boned gal swings a baseball bat with all her body’s weight at the emergency exit. The men’s shouts mix with the cracking glass and the shrieking of collapsing metal.

The messenger tears at the windshield wipers. Jean turns them on to catch her attention again, but the woman is excited and disoriented. She can’t hear Jean shouting. She grabs at the wiper blade like a cat grabs for a dangled string. She finally catches it and with one final heave rips the blade off the bus. Winona and Jean
stare through the windshield, their mouths opens. The woman jumps
off the bumper and waves the wiper in the air--Sweet Victory. She
runs through the crowd and they can see the black and silver blade
swaying above the clutch of women like one long antennae, growing
out of her head. Winona silently slides off the plastic seat and
crouches below it.

“Let us out,” a man shouts in Jean’s ear. “Open the door and let
us out!” he grabs the shiny bar and tries to swing the door open, but
Jean stops him with her hand on his.

“Man, if you go out there, you’re a goner for sure. These women
mean business.” The bus rocks and pitches, and the men push and
shove toward the door until Jean screams.

“Okay, okay! Back off! Now!” Her tone startles the men, and
everyone takes one step backward. Jean calmly slides the bar
forward and the door opens halfway, then jams. From the other side
hands push against the glass. Diamond rings and Really Red nail
polish glint in the sun, and the door heaves open. The crowd of
women stumble onto the first step of the bus, and the African men
rush them, screaming and scratching. Arms and legs tangle and slide
down the steps. From Winona’s position beneath the seat, the pile of
people looks like a huge boiling pot of arms and legs. Her face is smudged with dirt and a piece of gum from underneath the seat is stuck in her hair. She's whimpering a little, but not crying. “Mupemba,” she says and watches as two women drag him out of the bus by his hair.

“Come on out. The coast is clear,” Jean reassures her when the bus is empty. Winona crawls out of her hiding place. The other women leave off rocking the bus to chase after the stream of hysterical men. The two creep out of the bus together. They look around. Jean’s hands hang at her sides as she watches. “Shit,” she says.

One group of women has the linguistics professor from Senegal by the arms and legs. They are swinging him back and forth. Each time his body reaches the apex of the arc, they let out a collective “whew” to mark the motion. Three or four women tackle the American Lit. man from the Cote d'Ivoire and tickle him relentlessly. He screams and cries; the screams sound like laughter. He is exhausted and sometimes his body shakes, but he makes no noise. A third group stands in a circle and pelts the ESL man from Ghana with rocks. In the ditch beside the highway, three woman stand waiting
their turn as another woman rapes a Botswanan poetics instructor with a crow bar. He tries to protect himself, but her friends drop to their knees to hold his arms and legs spread eagle. He cries and begs. They only laugh.

Jean and Winona run hand in hand away from the bus. More women appear and begin to abuse it again. They pour gasoline on the seats and throw matches in. The bus smokes. Large black billowing clouds waft up from the destroyed vehicle. The fire crackles. Flames stretch longer and hotter until Bang, the gas tank explodes. Jean and Winona shudder from the reverberations at their backs and turn to watch the fire. They scurry down the embankment and duck behind the huge cement block holding up the highway. The ditch is full of tall grass and a stand of old oak trees survives on the slope opposite the highway. They run for the woods and duck into the shady circle.

Sirens scream toward them. Black and whites roar to a stop, and riot police jump out. They begin to beat the women with clubs and spray tear gas toward the melee. Winona and Jean crouch down in the ditch. They crawl through the grass until they can no longer see the action. Jean stands and motions for Winona to follow. They light out, into the glare of the setting sun.
MAY DAY

Mary Conrad wanted to be a nun. She was my best friend in the eighth grade, and she took her name very seriously. Strangely enough
none of the eighth grade boys at Queen of the Holy Rosary taunted her with nicknames, no Mary Mary quite Contrary, no Mary Moooo, no references to her negligible bra size. Despite her round glasses and the small pool of saliva that flooded her lower lip as she breathed through her open mouth, despite the range of white tipped zits spread out along her chin, some sacred taboo protected Mary, and her name, like a shield covering her flat chest. The eighth grade boys at Queen of the Holy Rosary, while they didn’t quite bow before her, refrained from a full frontal attack.

One spring afternoon in the bedroom she shared with two of her ten siblings, as we twisted construction paper into cones for May baskets, Mary confessed: she knew why the boys didn’t mess with her.

“It’s because my name is Mary, like Her name.” She pressed her lips together and swallowed. “It’s a sign that Mary Mother-Of-God wants me to be a nun.” I looked up from gluing a paper handle over the mouth of my basket.

“Naw,” I said. We had studied thinking critically in Mr. Hare’s English class all year, where I had become a devout skeptic because I carried the weight of a secret crush and hoped to impress my
teacher with the sharp wielding of a counter argument. She nodded solemnly.

"I've been praying for a sign for a long long long long time," she said with hushed voice. I shrugged.

"But how do you know that the boys leaving you alone is a sign? They don't even make you a saint unless you got more than one miracle under your belt. You better pray for another sign just to be sure. Best two out of three maybe." Mary stuffed a paper cone with green plastic Easter grass.

"Why else would they ignore me this way?"

Ever since I could remember, Mary'd looked forward to May Day, when we'd ring and run, leaving a cone-shaped construction paper basket full of candy hanging from the door knob. Our hearts beat faster as we crept up, thinking all the while of pushing the bell, jumping off the porch and ducking round the side of the house. My legs numbed a little when I imagined running away.

Mary's cat leapt to the bed and purred, so I set the baskets out of the way, and the cat crawled into my lap and we fell onto the pillows. I scratched her ears, and when I paused, the cat kneaded my chest and the breasts that grew there. Each time the cat's paw
pressed on one of my miniature peaks, an electric shock shivered through the mound of flesh, and I adjusted the paw toward the smooth valley of my sternum. I spent most of that year with my arms crossed over my chest, dodging a wayward kickball or a stealth boob punch launched by one of Mary's sisters. I noticed boys sneaking looks, and only felt a little self-conscious when the boy who sat behind me in home room whose name I've forgotten snapped my bra strap on his way to the football field at recess. That year we felt almost too grown up to hang May baskets.

Mary draped a white bath towel over her head like a veil and in a procession of one, paraded across the bedroom.

"I'm going to be Christ's bride," she said with awe in her child's wispy voice. She shivered and clutched her hands together, one in the other, like Judy Garland singing. Every Wednesday the eighth graders attended mass. We knelt side by side in our pew and prayed and I watched as Mary leaned toward the altar and strained her ears, listening for the second sign, listening to hear his voice between the high notes of the organ's wail. After mass Mary lit candles at the altar of the Virgin and prayed for the Good Mother to be an advocate as she had at the wedding feast. And she prayed.
She even made suggestions, asking God to send her message in a dream, reminding Him of the little notebook next to the bed where she recorded all the minute she woke up. The towel slipped a bit but Mary ignored it and pressed her palms together, fingers pointed toward heaven and turned up the aisle between two of the beds. “I am going to be May Queen and that will be my second sign.” The cat walked across my chest, leaving a trail of tender pain.

Mary was my best friend in the eighth grade because my real best friend--John David Buzan--feared reprisal. Had our classmates even considered the possibility of a much younger John David driving Barbie and G. I. Joe across the highway of my mother’s livingroom carpet in Barbie’s red convertible, they would have freaked, gone mad with the pleasure of so much ammunition. Long before the spring of our eighth grade year, John David had sworn me to secrecy--I’d zipped my lip, and in the incongruous gesture of ceremony, I tossed the key into my magically unzipped mouth and swallowed hard against the metal I could almost feel sliding down my throat.

Warts spread across one of his knees and every so often over the years he’d adopt an authoritative voice and say, “Surgery, Nurse”
then lead me into his parent's garage where he'd brace his foot on
the bumper of his father's Mustang and scrub at the flowerettes
with a square of rough sandpaper. John David's knees stayed dirty
even when he'd come over on summer evenings after his bath to
catch the popsicle man on our street and to play pajama clad Kick-
the-Can. On surgery days blood mingled with the grime along the
edges of the warts until the clusters flapped open like doors in a
strong wind. Then he'd pinch the loose edge, snap the last fleshy
hinge off and toss it away.

On Monday the boys filed out of homeroom to some destination
forever unknown to the eighth grade girls who stayed behind to cast
secret ballots for May Queen. The elect were those girls who best
personified the qualities and traits of the Virgin Mother. Those girls
would form a procession to celebrate her month. I imagined Mary
pause and step the length of the church behind the other five or six
girls as they scattered red rose petals in her path. She placed her
imaginary bouquet at the base of the statue's bare toes. I saw her
genuflect and cross herself. Her knee bent with the memory of the
steps that led to the altar. I stretched, too, as I watched Mary's body
lengthen. She reached to place the wreath of flowers on the Lord's Mother's head. I heard in my mind the falsetto voices of the choir singing the Ave Maria.

Paper shuffled and pencils scratched as we wrote the names of our classmates who were pure enough to be a symbol of the mother of God. We waited while the principal, Sister Lucille, tallied the ballots. Ginger colored bangs sprayed stiff with Aqua Net curled across Sister's forehead beneath the white band of her black habit. When she walked, her rubber soles creaked on the waxed hallways, earning her the name, Sister Cricket. Some of the rebellious ilk suggested that her tight hosiery squeaked rather than her shoes. I could not see Mary's face from my desk when Sister Lucille called her name as first runner up. But when Sister said my name as May Queen, Mary turned in her seat, mouth open, saliva pooling in her wide lower lip. My face reddened with pleasure.

After the bus riders and the car riders left, Sister Lucille dismissed the walkers over the P.A. system, so that we wouldn't get run over before we got off school grounds. Mary and John David and I were walkers. I saw Mary cross the blacktop and tug on the tall creaking door of the church. I followed her. She tip-toed into the
church and dabbed her fingertips against the sponge soaked with holy water. I trailed her and sat down in the next pew. Holy water trailed down her forehead like a tear from a third eye, but she did not brush it away.

"Hail Mary," she greeted the statue.

"Hey, Mary," I started. She stared straight at the Virgin. "Boy, who'd a thought?" I tried again. She blinked. "Hey Mare, I didn't do it on purpose." She turned her head to look at me out of her dirt speckled glasses.

"Isn't that the most beautiful statue you've ever seen?" She gestured. At seven feet tall, the Virgin looked like a super model.

"Hey, Mary," I said, but she turned her head and stared at the statue. It's arms hung open, palms up, as if she'd just finished the last step of a tap dance. I envied the graceful sweep of her robin egg blue garment and wondered what kind of dress my mother would get for me to wear in the procession.

Mary finally stood up and trudged out of the church. I turned in my seat and watched her go. The heavy door swung shut, closing out the afternoon sunlight like a curtain falling on a play.
To get home, I cut across the playground to the football field, and followed a chain link fence where the same mangy dog charged whenever he saw me coming. At the far end of the fence, near one of the goalposts, a hedge separated the nun's house from the rest of the neighborhood. I shoved through a bare spot in the hedge to get off school property.

I walked along hitting the hedge with a stray twig I'd pulled out as I'd passed through until from somewhere above I heard my name. When I peered into the branches, I saw John David Buzan, sitting with his elbows resting on his thighs, above dirty knees where a scab marked his latest attempt at wart removal.

“What are you doing up there?” I craned my neck.

“Waiting for you” His legs dangled.

“Well,” I repeated, not feeling very friendly, “I never said you should.” I threw my stick into the dirt beneath the tree. He swung from one branch to the next until he jumped to the ground and landed in front of me in the soggy spring soil.

“I saw you come out of there.” He tugged on the braided pigtail hanging over my shoulder.”

“So?” I slugged him as hard as I could on his arm. He shrugged.
“Sew buttons on your underwear,” he mimicked my voice. Then, for no obvious reason, I began to cry. At first only a few tears ran down my cheeks in uneven intervals. I licked my lips and tasted the salty water on the tip of my tongue.

“What’s wrong with you?” John David Buzan stood back with his arms hanging at his sides and stared. I was not usually a crier. But standing there under the tree with John David, I sobbed with all the force of a rushing flood. Unable to speak, I shook my head. He stepped up behind me and stretched the wide strap stretched along my back and let it go like a slingshot. Elastic vibrations surged through my breasts and my sensitive nipples jumped to attention against the lace of my bra. I stumbled toward home, and John David followed, disgusted.

“Hey, what in hell’s wrong with you?” he insisted. But when he saw I couldn’t answer, he matched his step to mine and lifted the books out of my arms.

The next day passed slow as eternity. In mass on Wednesday, I scraped my shin on the sharp edge of the naugahyde kneeler when Mary dropped it abruptly to the marble floor in her haste to
prostrate herself. I scowled but Mary didn’t seem to notice because, by that time, she was kneeling with her eyes closed and her lips moving in silent prayer. When Father Hazencamp offered the special intentions for the mass—old Mrs. Kelley, who’d suffered a stroke on the golf course last week, the Mulroneys, who’d just had their ninth baby and all the souls of the faithfully departed—Mary hiccuped.

Then during Father Hazencamp’s sermon, a miracle happened: Mary dozed off. I nudged her awake when Father H. lifted his arms to begin the consecration. Her head jerked and she bumped her arm on the pew as she threw herself to the kneeler. I knelt beside her and whispered into her ear.

“Did you dream? Did you get a sign?” She pressed her index fingers across her lips beneath her nose.

Then I made the fatal mistake of turning my head to look across the aisle at the boys’ side of the church. John David Buzan stood at the end of the third row, mouthing the Hokey-Pokey, putting his whole body in and taking his whole body out in the tiny space of the pew. When the other boys turned to each other to offer a sign of peace, John David turned himself about before he offered his hand to the kid standing next to him.
I laughed, and John David Buzan's ears perked up to the sound of an audience. He Hokey-Pokied toward the altar to receive communion. I exaggerated a frown. I spoke sternly to myself to keep from laughing out loud. I stared straight at the Mary statue and prayed not to laugh.

In my turn, I rose, left the pew and followed Mary toward the alter. When it was my turn to take the host, I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue. If I moved quickly enough, I would just be able to catch a slight taste of Father Hazencamp's finger as he placed the wafer in my mouth. I saw the white chip coming toward me. His fingers closed in on my open mouth.

"Body of Christ," he said.

To respond, I had to press my lips together to pronounce the, "Amen," and as I re-opened my mouth, Father tipped the bread onto my tongue and turned toward Denise Puddle who waited her turn behind me. I closed my mouth, surprised to have missed my chance. Denise P. nudged me out of the way. On the way back to my seat, the wafer swelled and took on peanut butter proportions. The Body of Christ stuck to the roof of my mouth. With the tip of the nail on my index finger, I scraped the dough off. White paste stuck beneath my
nail. When I sat down I dug the glob of saliva covered bread out from under the nail and wiped it on the underside of the pew as if were a piece of Already Been Chewed gum.

In class Mary seemed to have a hard time concentrating on the subjects at hand. When Sister Aurelia, religion and homeroom, asked her to recite Chapter 21 from Revelation during our usual Friday afternoon recitations, she couldn't even remember the first word. John David Buzan crossed his eyes at me from his desk near the windows. Sister decided Mary must be ill and sent her to the nurse's office. The nurse took her temperature, proclaimed her healthy and sent her back to class.

Mary trudged toward us from the nurses office as we filed toward the gym for physical education. The gymnasium took up the entire second story of the building above the classrooms. Before they'd built the new church, the gym had been the church. Tall pink and green stained glass swirled in the window frames. The altar transformed to a stage where bleachers could pulled out of the wall for spectators on Saturday afternoon basketball games. The ceiling arched to a steeple and chandeliers in little cages, to protect against air balls, hung in two rows down the length of the ceiling.
Our English teacher, Mr. Hare, taught physical education too, and since he was the only one, the class was co-ed. The boys changed into shorts and t-shirts with QHR stamped on the front in a locker room. Us girls pulled shorts on underneath our uniform skirts in the bathroom on the first floor.

Mr. Hare waited for us next to a mat in the middle of the gym. I loved to look at him. He front teeth gapped a little in a cute way and sometimes I could see his tongue flashing behind. Mr. Hare's arms bulged out of the short sleeve sport shirts that he wore. His gray shorts rode above his knees and I peeked at the blond hair on his calves. He walked on his toes, leaning forward as if he were always in a hurry to get somewhere.

"You have a long stride," he said to me one day as we walked toward the softball field. "You should run track." I flushed. His complement sang in my ears for days.

Mr. Hare blew his whistle to signal us to pay attention. At the mat I stood next to Mary even though she pretended not to notice me.

"Gather round," Mr. Hare shouted. "Today we'll conquer the rope." In the center, above the mat, a thick rope dangling from the rafters. A knot at the bottom end of the rope swayed in the soft afternoon
light of the gym. I tilted my head and stared at the other end of the rope. Dust floated in a ray of light.

Mr. Hare demonstrated. He wiped his hands on a towel. Then he showed us how we could sprinkle a little bit of talcum powder into our palms for added traction. My heart pounded. I saw me reaching for the top of the rope and then descending, hand over hand, until I dropped gracefully into Mr. Hare's hunky arms.

He demonstrated pulling himself up the rope using only his arms. Then he showed us how we could wrap the rope around one leg for an extra bit of propulsion and strength. When his toes touched the mat again, and he let go of the rope, a spontaneous burst of applause erupted from our little crowd. John David Buzan put his fingers in his mouth and blew a loud whistle. Mr. Hare smiled and held his hands up for silence.

I watched as each boy and girl climbed in their turn. Then Mr. Hare finally motioned for me to approach the rope. I cupped my hands to catch the shower of talc that my teacher sprinkled. Then, with a little hop, I started my journey toward the coupling of hemp and bolt while my classmates, Mr. Hare, Mary and John David Buzan craned their necks to watch. Like a worm, I inched toward the spire, all the
time whispering my own special intention. Please, please, please.

Half-way up the rope I stopped. My hands burned.

“You can come down if you want,” I heard Mr. Hare’s deep voice calling, but I couldn’t answer. Blood pumped through my head.

My arms and legs strained in their thin embrace with the rope, and I hung on like nails. The gathered skirt of my uniform hung around my thighs like the crushed head of a plaid tulip. A flush crept up my neck and a light patina of perspiration glowed beneath my white blouse. I squeezed and relaxed all the muscles in my legs and groin in small rhythmic intervals—flex and release, flex and release—until my thighs finally flushed, and I knew there was no turning back. I squeezed again, and the rope squeezed back, and I wondered was it Jesus? On that spring day, hanging halfway between the ground and heaven in a gym that had been a church, I lost my virginity to a dangling rope leg that I clutched between my own skinny limbs.

“Go for it, man,” John David Buzan’s voice shouted below me, and I unwound my legs from that confusing moment and crawled up the rope toward what felt like salvation. When I reached the bolt at the top, I held on for one more moment, then reversed direction, letting
myself down cautiously, hand over bruised hand.

"Good job," Mr Hare patted my shoulder. My legs shook. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and looked around to see if anyone could see how I'd changed.

Sister Aurelia taught homeroom and religion. On the Friday after I climbed the rope, she herded all the eighth grade girls into the projection room where we would see a personal hygiene film safely away from the prying eyes of the boys.

Sister Aurelia bustled around setting up grey folding chairs and fiddling with the film projector as we filed into the room. Once we settled into the cold chairs, Sister stepped to the front of the room folded her hands together and cleared her throat.

"Today we have the privledge of viewing a film just released by the Vatican's department of Sexual Educational Preventative Services." Her high voice stung my ears like the scream of the fire alarm. Sister fingered the rosary that hung from her waist. "The film shows the actual birth of a child." We stared. Mary couldn't resist turning to me to register her surprise. "There is, however, no reason to discuss the film with the boys." The girls giggled. I
squirmed in my chair, trying to smooth my skirt between the metal and the back of my thighs.

Sister bustled to the open door, poked her head out to make sure no boy lurked nearby and pulled the door shut. The metal cooled the back of my hot thighs. She snapped off the light and took a seat at the back of the room.

On the screen a woman reclined on a doctor's table with her legs spread and her heels resting in metal cups. The doctor perched on a stool between the woman's legs with a flashlight on his head, and peered into her. After a while he nodded his head, peeled gloves off his hands and left the woman in the room by herself. Over her knees, Mary could see the round hump of the woman's stomach.

Several nurses rolled the bed and the woman down a hall until she reached another room and the orderly bumped the swinging doors open with the gurney. The lady talked to the nurses and a man who must have been the husband, but I couldn't understand. I think they must have been speaking Italian. In the new room the pregnant lady grunted and panted. The doctor arrived and looked between her legs again, then nodded and held up his arms. A nurse snapped rubber gloves over his hands.
A flash of the woman's pubic hair showed as the camera focused on the passage way between her legs. I saw the baby's head pushing against the stretched skin of the woman's body. With a little burp, the baby's head popped through the opening. We heard it hiccup and laughed a little, glad it was finally over. The mother cringed and pushed, and the rest of her baby slithered into the doctor's glove covered hands. He pinched the baby's ankles between his fingers and smacked it's butt. Screams echoed and spilled out of the single speaker. Then the smiling mother sat propped against a mountain of pillows, holding her baby, wrapped like a pupae in a pink blanket.

Sister Aurelia flipped on the florescent lights. I blinked in the glare. After a moment, we all stood, and in single file, followed Sister back to homeroom. I regretted eating all four of my breaded fishsticks at lunch.

When the last bell finally rang, I looked around for Mary, and when I couldn't find her, I kicked a rock along in front of me and mumbled.

"Ditched! I been ditched!" I walked across the blacktop and pushed through the hedge toward home. As I passed under the big tree a bunch of leaves fluttered down and landed with a slap on my head.
then slapped to the ground. John David Buzan grinned down at me from his perch on a limb. I started to walk away.

"Hey," John David called, "Hey, wait up." He jumped from the limb and jogged the few steps to catch up with me.

"I never said you should wait for me," I said and dug the toe of my shoe into the dirt. "I never said you should wait around."

"I know. You never said so." He ran ahead and scooped up three rocks. "Look," he juggled the rocks until they dropped onto his head, then tumbled after them into the dusty field. I giggled and sat gingerly in the grass beside him. He broke off a piece of grass and split it up the center with his thumb nail, pressing it between his thumbs, and he blew until the blade whistled.

"What'd you guys do in religion today?" he wanted to know.

"We had a film."

"What'd you see?"

"Sister A. said not to discuss it with you."

"With me?" John David Buzan's voice rose with disbelief.

"Not just you. Boys in general."

"Oh. What's so top-secret?" I zipped my lips, then opened my mouth, threw the key in and gulped it down in our traditional vow of
secrecy. "Come on, tell me," he begged. I pressed my lips tighter together and shook my head no. "Please," he coaxed. I shook my head. He pulled up a few blades of grass then pounced. I tried to roll away, but he grabbed me by my uniform skirt until he could jump on top of me. I laughed and struggled to escape, but he was too strong. I kicked and bucked, but he held my arms in the dirt above my head. My knuckle scraped against an exposed root.

John David shifted until he could pin both my wrists in one of his hands. Then with his free hand, he knocked on my breast bone.

"Tell me," he warned. I screamed and kicked at his back with my knees.

"Let me up, first," I bargained.

"No way," he countered. He tickled me under one arm.

"Okay, Okay!" I could barely breathe between the iron stockade of his legs. "In a film. We saw a film." He stopped tickling.

"What's the big deal about a film?"

"Nothing," I whined. "Now get off."

"Uh-uh," he shook his head and leaned closer to tickle my neck with a little nibble, scraping my skin with his slightly buck front teeth. And that was my first kiss. I stopped laughing, and caught my
breath. His mouth traveled up the base of my neck to my lips, and as I lay, my skirt riding up in the back and my panties pressed to the dirt beneath John David, I imagined pressing a wafer of unleavened bread onto my own tongue and, as if I had just popped an Underdog Super Energy Pill, super strength sprang from my body. With one great exhalation and my thumb, hooked in his mouth, I reversed my position, jumped up and ran for it.

By the time I got home that evening, my mother had already left for her night job, leaving a note on top of the tuna casserole in the refrigerator--See you in the morning. Remember it's Friday. Love, Mom. My mother bought all the rules the church preached including the ban on practical methods of contraception, which is how I came to be. As disparate egg and sperm, I had been a warrior. United, we dodged through the lines before the enemy withdrew and hung on for dear life. Soon after I was born, my father withdrew from our lives as well.

Bending into the fridge, I scowled at the tuna and grabbed for a small package of hamburger on the bottom shelf. I popped the cellophane with my thumb and peeled the thin plastic off. I rolled a chunk of meat into a ball and smashed it hard against the counter to
flatten it into a patty. With a spatula, I peeled it off the counter and slapped it into the frying pan. I thought *wipe the counter* but somehow my arm would not obey my brain. I left bits of gristle and fat glued to the formica, turned the heat on low and covered the frying burger with a round cookie sheet.

In the bathroom I turned on the faucet, plugged the tub, and stepped out of my clothes. The phone rang and I ran down the hall hoping to hear Mary’s on the other end.

"Hello?" John David Buzan's disembodied voice sprang through the phone wires. I pinched my nose and said in my most convincing fake Chinese voice, "No body hill. You have long number." I slammed the phone down. My nostrils flared and I smelled the scent of red meat cooking.

In the bathroom, I tested the water with my foot. Very hot. I lowered my body slowly into the scalding water until I finally managed to sit down. Steam covered the mirror. The phone rang from the living room and I sunk lower into the water. I smelled the musky scent of my own body for a moment until it mingled with the odor of frying meat.
Every Saturday evening Mary went to confession whether she'd sinned or not. So I went too. When she slipped from behind the red velvet curtain, I slid out of my pew and followed her to the Virgin's altar. She knelt and began her penance. I knelt down next to her.

"Hey Mary, we never did deliver those May baskets. Want to go tonight?" She looked up from her efforts at absolution and crossed her lips with her index finger.

"Shhhhhhh." She rested her forehead on the bench in front of her. Then she raised up, looked at me and nodded her head.

"Okay. Meet me at my house at six. I've had another sign," she turned back to her prayer and I smiled as I hunkered out the side door before mass began.

I waited at Mary's house that night so we could hang our May baskets, but she didn't show up. At six-thirty I backtracked along her usual route home, hoping to run into her on her way, but she wasn't there either. All the way down her street and around the corner I never found her.

"Ditched again!" I muttered. "Bloody ditched again," I used my British accent. At the football field and I started across, figuring I'd go on home. At the big tree near the break in the hedge, I
hesitated, and looked into the leaves to see if John David hid on the lowest branch, waiting to jump me. No legs dangled; my path proved safe from above. At the gap I peered into the tangled limbs of the hedge. I thought I heard a tiny squeak like an abandoned kitten, and froze, afraid of a trap. I dropped to my knees and crawled along the hedge until I could see one large form, apparently fallen and struggling with itself, unable to get up again. No sooner had my mind settled on that reality, when the supine homunculus melted, finally, into four arms and four legs--two bodies.

And there in the stand of trees near the end of the nuns' yard, muted evening light diffused, until one dazzling ray pierced the foliage, and I saw John David Buzan and Mary Conrad wrapped in each other's arms.

I stood still until they realized they weren't alone. John David scrambled around trying to pull his pants on. Mary sat up slowly and placed her glasses gently onto the bridge of her nose. I turned toward home.

"I never said she should do it," John David called after me. "Really," he pleaded, "she was the one. She said she wanted to!" he shouted and his voice echoed across the empty field.
On Sunday morning I carried a cup of tea into the bedroom and flicked on the portable T.V. As I pulled the dress my mother had borrowed for the occasion over my head, I listened to Billy Graham preach to the Protestants.

Later, my mother dropped me off at the church basement and went to park the car, “See you afterwards, Honey. Break a leg.”

I shuffled down the long flight of steps to the church basement. Sister Aurelia bobby pinned a baby’s breath wreath to my hair. Mary sat still as a statue and I pretended not to see her. When we heard the organ music, we picked up the long skirts of our dresses and marched up the steps--first the attendants, including Mary, and then me.

At the last minute, Sister A. handed me the wreath of woven pink and white roses to crown the Virgin. When I looked up I saw the other girls had already started their slow stutter step march toward the altar. With every pause, they scattered rose petals in my path. I saw Father Hazencamp in his chair beneath the crucifixion and at his right hand, through a sort of tunnel vision, I saw John David Buzan. Hundreds of parishioners turned to watch my pilgrimage. Thick ropes
of incense tangled in the air, and I saw the huge Jesus twitch his fingers and wiggle his toes. And, of course, I hesitated before I took another step and realized that I'd been praying for a sign as fervently as Mary had.

Organ music filled the huge space and the choir's voices rose in the Ave Maria. My legs carried me numbly toward the altar, and I held the woven crown tightly in both hands. Father Hazencamp and John David waited in their square chairs and watched me approach with the crown in my hands. At the communion rail the other girls veered to the left and we climbed the three steps to the base of the statue.

John David rose from his seat next to Father Hazencamp, crossed the wide expanse of the altar, genuflected beneath the crucifix, then continued until he met me at the statue. Unfolding a step ladder, he propped it near the Madonna, so I could climb up and crown the Mother of God with the wreath.

I placed my foot on the first rung of the ladder so my stocking clad ankle showed below the creamy rose fabric of my skirt. John David extended his hand and I rested my fingers lightly in his palm. As I leaned my weight on him to mount the ladder, his arm flinched and I imagined myself falling. But I didn't. Instead I reached
carefully up and set the crown on the Virgin’s head. Then ignoring his
outstretched hand, I leapt off the ladder and, for a moment, I hung,
suspended on air.