1989

Land on either side| Poetry and short stories

Jay Treiber

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2806

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

This is an unpublished manuscript in which copyright subsists. Any further reprinting of its contents must be approved by the author.

Mansfield Library
University of Montana
Date: 1989
THE LAND ON EITHER SIDE

Poetry and short stories

by

Jay Treiber

B. S., Northern Arizona University, 1982

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

1989

Approved by

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date June 5, 1989
CONTENTS

POEMS:

Fingerprints.............................................1

I Fool's Hill

Hands....................................................3
Fool's Hill.............................................6
Bantam Hens...........................................8
Whose Side God is On................................9
Pa Jonny's House, 1963..............................11
Bloodtrail.............................................12
Wetbacks..............................................14
Our Lady of Club Las Vegas........................15
Crossings.............................................16
Lori....................................................18
My Father's Watch...................................20

II Tucson Swelter

Stealing Cigarettes....................................22
Counter-Culture.......................................24
The Lady Ahead of Me...............................25
Pissants...............................................26
Laundry...............................................27
Rigor Mortis..........................................28
Ice Box...............................................29
Tucson Swelter........................................30
Tucson Revisited.....................................31

III Transitional Living

The Fortune of One Sperm............................33
Perspective...........................................34
Gravity...............................................35
Cleaning Beans......................................36
Dream Walker........................................37
Transitional Living................................38
George Has a Wooden Face........................39
This World's Unkempt..............................41
### IV Aunt Minerva's Pasture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn in Triple Haiku</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mule Thief</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When an Old Man Speaks</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunnigan's Daughter</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt Minerva's Pasture</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Horse Named Shiloh</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colors in Missoula, Montana</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SHORT STORIES:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flower of Eden</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neon Flamingos</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Snake Tattoo</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Unhoused Spirit</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I'll just come right out
and say it. I've turned it over
and over again and there is just no
other way. A dozen cigarette butts
and the last beer in a six-pack
of Old Milwaukee. You see I'm
getting desperate. I've watched
the afternoon outside the window
turn into my reflection, and it's
making me nervous. A few minutes old
and the face is already distorted
against its darkened backdrop.
I'm tired of farting around.
I've tried feeding the cat,
sitting in complete darkness,
closing off the world with the hunk
of Bee's wax I'm rolling between my
fingers. Nothing works. So far I've
made several figures: a turtle,
an elephant, a turd, the body
of a middle-aged woman. I've tried
everything: walking backward to take
out the trash, closing one eye
to see the world from a different
perspective, putting one ear to
the ground for distant footsteps,
anything. I've performed such
mental masturbation that my brain
has developed corn flake scabs.
Still, nothing comes. Don't tell
anyone, but I've even tried melting
down the wax and letting it harden
again. An old trick that doesn't work.
It just comes out the same old wax,
but without my fingerprints.
I Fool's Hill

***************************
Hands

I

Over The Still Pool

Once, bent over the still pool
at the creek, I discovered
by pressing my fingers
tightly enough together
a small measure of water
could be retained in my palm
and just as easily dropped back in
becoming nothing.

And I saw the magic
of my reflection
just under the smooth surface,
and heard my own voice
as it echoed off the jackwood
and cedars,

and learned that the hands
coming together never
really touched,
that the face sang
in a voice too close
to itself for harmony.
II

Under The Moon

I grew suspicious my first morning of school when the moon, still protective of me, followed me all the way through class. It hung over my left shoulder, suspended in the sky like a lighted egg.

The teacher, a fat lady, told us the moon had a face. But so did the clock. And its face, enclosed in glass, was harder to see than that on the moon, and less important than that on the nickle for milk in my pocket.

Later, the fat lady taught us the span of a foot was twelve inches on a ruler, how to measure out hands from our thumb to the tip of our little finger, how to put round things into square boxes. I was beginning to understand.

The clock squealed again and we fell away from our places like factory workmen, free for half an hour. The teacher gave up a graham cracker and some kind of homemade jam.

Along the far wall, windows hung like empty portraits. I sneaked a look. Outside I found the moon was gone, the sky scraped clean of it. Reflected in the panes I found the globe of the light behind me and the generic eyes of children peering back in.
Behind The Glass

The light bends so swiftly
around my face I see one cheek
go dry as I touch it.

I look down at my hands.
They have unfastened themselves
from the wrist, grown surly
and independent of me, yet do quickly
what others ask of them
like hands on an assembly line,
moving with routine poise
and accuracy.

Looking back up, pressing
closer, I see not only a face
but three hands behind the glass.
With one I touch a graying temple.
With another I measure out minutes
by tapping my fingers on any solid
object. With the last I wish
only to go back--to a time
when I had the few seconds it takes
to spread marmalade across half an hour.
Fool's Hill

Along the south wall of her back yard
in Phoenix, my great grandmother
had a small garden, a half dozen rows
of vegetables which she tended daily.

When I was ten I helped her work
in her garden for an afternoon.
We broke off every hour.
Dirt to her elbows, she lit a cigarette
drawing smoke on top of emphysema.
"Soon You'll be going over Fool's Hill,"
she smiled, watching the end burn down.

I remember smoking my first in the darkness
of my room with a friend, how the two
cherries looked like eyes in the night,
the long two hours I spent in a cemetery
at the Mexican border, waiting for two friends
to walk a kilo of pot and a fifth of apricot
brandy across the line. I remember the hard
angles on the face of the big Papago Indian
in south Tucson who slapped the fat end
of a cuestick against the palm of his hand.
"You boys don't bet money you don't have
around here," he told us.

Too old to tend her garden,
my great grandmother spent her last
days in the twilight of her room.
Before needlepoint and a black and white TV
she watched Vietnam do its shadow-dance
on her walls. On white pillow cases
she embroidered rows of identical dark flowers.

I spent an afternoon not long ago
searching my high school yearbooks for the faces
of classmates who had died. Afterward
on a long walk, the walls of my neighborhood
turned black, dark barriers too high
to climb, too long to go around.
Out the corner of my eye was always
that line of perfect headstones.
I recall the cold lines
of my mother's expression the day the old woman
finally died. "It's the one thing
we can always be sure on," she said, her voice
tight as guitar strings. The bass notes
of a score that plays itself to me again
and again; in the dark ring
under every coffee cup, in the impressions
of extinguished cigarette butts on linoleum,
in the smell of last night's wine on a woman's
breath. There is a single black thread
which draws us all together.
Bantam Hens

I read some journal about war.  
It did not tell me exactly this:  
(I don't think it could

A sharp machete lifted by any  
frail arms can sever small appendages  
from small bodies with one downward  
sweep.  
Any fingers can splinter bones  
as easily as they could the legs of  
sparrows with two pounds of backward  
pressure against the crescent edge  
of an objective steel trigger.

And I thought about how easily poised  
that hatchet was in my young hand,  
as my mother's brindle feathered  
chickens, with blood streaking their  
shoulders, writhed and doddered  
so innocently in their own manure,

when my glass of bourbon fell  
from the desk and shattered to pieces  
on the floor like silver coins  
tinkling at my feet.  
In an unconscious moment (the time  
it would have taken to draw a narrow  
red swath across the tender part  
of my wrist) my hand caught the bottle  
and brought its uncapped neck to my lips.
Whose Side God is On

During Vietnam
  I asked my mother
  whose side God was on.

She squinted at the stoplight
  through a crack in the windshield
  of our car. "God," she said,

"Doesn't take sides."
  When I told Art Thomason
  that I had not been saved
  or baptized, and that God
  was not on anyone's side
  he told me

I would go to Hell.
  That Sunday the organ's squeal
  wound through the pews
  and rattled the stained glass
  windows on the south wall,
  which Aunt Geniel

always claimed was a sign
  the power of Christ
  was moving over us.

Perhaps it was the lure
  of the preacher's words,
  or my fear of Art's condemnation

that tempted me to the front that day,
  tempted me to my knees,
  and then to my belly.

What kept me in my seat
  was instinct,
  a reluctance

to give myself over
  wholly
  to anything.
I concentrated on the floor,
on the gaudy mural
    of the crucified Jesus;
    eyes fixed toward the heavens,
        rivulets of blood
            streaming down the face.
I studied the back's of heads;
    Mr. Fullen's thin places,
        his wife's neatly folded French braid.
    I thought about
        a photo I had seen;
    a smiling soldier, who looked like
        Joey Carillo's older brother,
            posing with a severed head
he held by the hair.
When the organ trailed off in its thin moan
    and the preacher raised his hand
        like some holy guillotine,
and he spoke of the valley
    of the shadow
        of death,
for me that valley
    filled from edge to edge with dark
        and dead bodies,
prostrate and headless--
    no medals of honor,
        no crowns of thorn.
Pa Jonny's House, 1963

Once every minute or so, 
my great grandfather spits phlegm 
into a two pound Folgers coffee can. 
His house is moss green inside and out 
and even smells that color; green floor 
green curtain, green chair where the old man 
sits and wheezes, bathrobed and barefoot, 
rolling his mutated toes in a kind of rhythm 
like that of lapping water onto a shore. 
The TV is on, some parade in Dallas. 
My parents sit rigid on the couch, 
my mother's arms folded nervously 
across her peach colored blouse. All I can think 
is that I have been to Dallas; a three day drive 
across New Mexico and the putrid smell 
of the Texas pan handle. A city where everything shined, 
a shopping mall where we rode a glass elevator 
and I learned my lust for the smell of new possessions. 
My mother holds one hand over her mouth, 
In two long strides, my father 
crosses the room and turns up the set. 
My two year old brother, chided by the oblivious 
old man, races giggling through the house 
until he falls and smacks the bridge of his nose 
avgainst the coffee table. For a full ten seconds, 
face contorted, he holds his breath 
then finally begins to cry as blood, like tears, 
streams down either side of his nose. 
My mother will not let my father 
take the squalling child from her arms. 
Her peach blouse is smattered with blood. 
The old man spits and mumbles, gawdamn communis, 
My mother is crying, but I'm not sure why. 
Sensing I should remain still and quiet, 
I curl up small where I sit on the floor 
and study the throw rug, 
its rope-like rings wrapping tight 
as they reach its center. 
And I am only certain of a few things— 
someone is dead in Dallas, 
my mother will not stop crying, 
and traces of blood are everywhere.
Bloodtrail

You see the deer when you close your eyes
to sleep; flickering ears,
the tensed lean haunches in dreamlight.
Between your eyelids
and the back of your skull
are layers of folded landscape, miles long.

This is the place where that first gutshot
yearling wandered too long in pain,
where the bloodtrail, left in smatterings
on rocks and the tips of galleta grass,
always dwindles to nothing.

Here, your twelfth birthday,
your father lays a new rifle in your lap.
The shiny black barrel
catches your reflection in a ring.
You check the bore. The rifling
spirals toward the light.

This is your first season.
You follow your father
through the vein of chaparral choked canyons
to the thick heart of the Chiricahuas.

Here is your first encounter.
The small forked antlers catch the light.
Your right hand, already slave to instinct,
chambers a shell.

This is where the order falls
backward: the low thump of lead striking flesh,
the recoil, the bark of the rifle,
then the acute metallic snick of the bolt action.

Here is a hindquarter, here a loin.
You will unravel the weave of muscles,
fashion them into steaks and jerky.
Here is the row of sunbleached antlers,
each set a pair of hands, gesturing its story.
Somewhere between your eyes' rapid movement and the dark edge of this place, between the pound of backward pressure and the point of impact, you have hunted that old mossy horn for years. Your affection for him has grown deep, and you know only one way to show it.

This is where it begins and ends. This is where you always go too far back into the hills. Lost, always in the deepest brushy canyon, spreading itself wide, inviting you in, you find what you've hunted all these years.

In the sight you find your own chest, huge behind the crosshairs. But still, you relish that quick resolution—the tenderness with which your bullet flies.
Wetbacks

Maybe it was something
about his crow-footed eyes
or the way the sun slanted
through paneless windows
and cracks in the old tin roof
which caused him just to stand
undisturbed, smiling a little
and straight as the new pine
studs—-even after his friends
had scattered like unbushed
Scaled quail—knowing maybe
that we had seen the footprints
outside and that this big
gray-streaked gringo with the
toolbelt and quiet, unstartled face
and gun laid peaceably
in the crook of his elbow (and me
behind him, just to his right
enough to see) would not shoot
him that morning.
Our Lady of Club Las Vegas

Maracas in either hand
bells on her ankles,
Graciela would appear,
a vision from behind
the yellow bead curtain.

A jaded nineteen under
pancake make-up, she had
long ago translated her body
into pesos—danced naked
we fancied, just for us.

This is what you little
gabacho queers have been
waiting for, would snort
the earringed M.C. with
a bearded salt-pepper smile.

We were too drunk to see
where the cultures crossed,
too enamored of what we
couldn't touch to translate
the words or take offense.

Maybe he told us how easily
the price of curios is
marked in american dollars,
the sweet jingle of dimes
in the dirty palms of children.

Perhaps he philosophized
on the paradox of candle icons,
or the borderline distinction
between a saint, and condescending
worship of a fifty dollar whore.
Crossings

Shot half a dozen times by frustrated neighbors for raiding grain bens, alfalfa fields, harassing the mares, this lanky, hump withered gelding didn't know he'd been cut, never heard that fences were man's peculiar habit of dividing himself, never accepted that he was also someone's property.

If you ran your hand along his flank you could feel the lumps from rocksalt pellets. On his hip the moon shaped scar where my father once dug out a slug with his pocket knife. His tattered ears wore the marks, the makeshift anesthesia of human teeth.

"That no good yellow bastard is out again," my father would shout. Hiding rope behind our backs, apple halves, a show of empty hands, my brother and I tried everything. One indignant twitch of that Roman nose and he was gone.

We lied to the old man sometimes about where we went in his beat up truck. Across the border, to the pink lights of las zonas. Club Las Vegas, where they started the show with a business worn whore named "Si, Si" who could twirl her long breasts, like dueling gyros, in opposing directions.

On the corner of Calle Dos and Amor if you closed your eyes fast enough the disappearing leg of the neon flamingo remained a second behind the lids. If you listened, the north bound shriek of the Southern Pacific swallowed up the cries of mariachis, then spit them back in the Agua Prieta allyways.
My father once put a twenty foot chain on that horse's right front ankle. A neighbor called one night and said that he couldn't see the horse, just shot in the direction he heard the chain rattle. The palomino came back a week later with a small caliber bullet in the meaty part of his neck.

Where my brother and I would take our 22's east of the house, the mesquite and creosote break into patches of tall grass. A few miles south of there White Water creek serpentines along the border and between the two towns. Though they look like one from the air, the fence between them is straight and stands nine feet.

There are family holes in the chain link where generations have crossed. Wet summers the creek drifts slow as an old tale, and cuts the land on either side.
Lori

So you’re twenty two this morning, three thousand miles away with a hope chest you dragged clear across the Northern Hemisphere. For years that box just sat in the corner of your room, gathering dust and trinkets, porcelain ballerinas too delicate to even smile.

I imagine you now, behind the pane of your kitchen window, staring out as you drink coffee. Your expression is mature. I think, a little tempered. I recall your expression the day your cat died; fists pressed to your forehead, your skinny arms and legs trembling. The sobs came in such slow rhythm I could tap my foot twice between each one.

Adolescence grew over the poppy and lace of your bedroom like wild grass; record albums, posters of bare chested young men, and more shoes than one person could possibly wear in a lifetime. The movie was some Italian dub in the night I caught you and your friends drinking T.J. Swan at the drive-in. Each of you had your own bottle. Your flavor was strawberry like the flush of your face.

No one should have expected you to spend your nights confined to your room, practicing your pirouette. You forgot your ballet when the wink of the city lured you to dance under the spider web lights of discos. In a black dress you painted the night like a red hourglass against some dark belly. You built a network of lies so complex even you became entangled.
One night while I was away at school
you pushed some things through
your bedroom window and hitched to town,
intending never to return. "She ran
away," stammered mother's voice
over twelve hundred miles of telephone
cable. From the window of my room
I watched the first snow scatter from
the sky like loose feathers. "We all
run away," I said.

Outside a desert monsoon has settled
into murky puddles and I have sat
watching the day pass, startled
that it is almost dark.
There is so much I don't understand.
I wonder if I ever fooled you, little sister,
with my gallant poolroom wisdom,
pretending I could sew life together
like a patchwork quilt.

That night after the movie
I sneaked you into your room and poured
your body's dormant grace into bed
along with the cheap wine in your belly.
I teased you for being afraid to sleep
without the night lamp on your dresser.
I never told you that I too feared the dark.

Sometimes I flip through my photo album
finding stills here and there of childhood
and adolescence. I do my best
to assemble this labyrinth of years
into some design, perhaps cat's cradle,
which you could put in that cherrywood
box of yours, where I trust the ballerinas
are still kept. I hope the other things too.
My Father's Watch

I'm about six, or seven maybe. My mother's in the hospital with labor pains. I'm not even sure what they are but I'm scared and high as hell from the sugar I've had all day. My father is sitting on the edge of my bed. He has just told me that he loves me for the first time. We are both nervous. He has always been uncomfortable saying these things. He fiddles with his watch and stares at the wall, as if the shadows in its texture held answers; love, fate, death. Because I am a child, you see, my mind easily eludes uncomfortable notions. And because I'm at an age where I wonder about such things, I ask him how to tell time. He raises a brow, smiles, and wraps his big work-fat knuckles into a fist, then rolls the underside his wrist upward to see his old watch, a family heirloom, its scratched crystal covering the face like spider webs, the needle thin second hand, elusive behind the glass. But as he explains how time is divided in seconds, minutes, hours, and that the Earth rotates continuously—a circle moving within a circle like stubborn faith— I am distracted by his crooked tobacco stained teeth, and the thick smell of beer on his breath. "Will I still be scared when I grow up," I ask. "No," he lies. "No you won't." Later that night, I am no longer afraid with the light off. And I wonder, if I lay there long enough, could I feel the world move, or see the light bend its way through the dark again. And somehow I am alive, alone with my heart's small ticking.
II Tucson Swelter

********************************************
Stealing Cigarettes

I'm having misgivings about lighting this stale Vantage I stole from the table next to me. My teeth squeak with the sooty taste like biting down on a brick of chalk when you're just a stupid kid. And I could be wrong about the look in the eye of the frumpy waitress. A hesitant glance over her left shoulder as she nervously tucks the wisps of dark hair back into her falling bun, charming in its gracelessness. Doesn't she know, damn her, about her own two jelly filled breasts as she bends forward to pick up those clinking glasses that squeak when some twit tries to carry more than three of them at a time? But it's not so boring, because I'm leaving out the dull shit--like the way the artificial plastic wood is peeling from between the booths when I rest my elbow, or the scrape of the cook's spatula as he turns another burger, or the ivory twitter of the faultering light out the corner of my left eye, the smell of mindless insects frying on the hot glass of a floodlamp, or the taste of this coffee over the thin peppermint in my mouth. A pimple-faced steward battles the soda pop dispenser, trying to clean it. And with the tinkling sticky grates, the 3:00 a.m.
rails past, rattling the window,
shaking to pieces,
the nervous edge in the air.
I'm too old to be up so late,
so unoccupied, stealing things.
Counter-Culture

Here at the Dairy Queen on 4th Avenue
the counter-culture lives.
A middle-aged hippie is feeding
his little boy ice cream,
while at another table
a group of punk rockers
hold powwow over cigarettes
and Dilly Bars. Sue and I,
sitting between them,
celebrate my 26th birthday
with lemon sundaes.
And we wonder
if we can find any faith
in our decade of adolescence.
One of the punkers has "FUCK"
printed on his T-shirt.
So do I. But now I wear mine
inside out.
The Lady Ahead of Me

Half of her face
looks at me in the rearview
mirror. The other half
is somewhere I can't see.
The two children in the truck
with her, girls, are pestering.
She snaps and they get quiet.

The light is still
red, and that half of her
face still stares in at me.
The other half is looking
straight, I think. The girls
are sitting still now. The bumper
sticker on her pickup reads:
TRUCKERS MAKE BETTER LOVERS

I am not a trucker.
Outside, car engines idle
as though grinding the hot dusk
finer. And I just want it all
to go away; the woman, the light,
the afternoon heat so solid
I could pull it through my window
and smell its greasy sweat.
Pissants

My folks are up from the valley.
We're all on the front porch
drinking beer. Mother is reading
aloud; a book of poems she thought
I would like.

My father, who never saw much worth
in poems, is hunched over a long
stream of Pissants. He pours Budweiser
on them. "Take that, you little bastards!"
he says. His big body shakes with laughter.

Mother sees something deep in one poem
but she can't quite explain it. Daddy
follows the thread of ants carefully
down the walk. "Hey, look," he says.
"They're raising hell over here too!"

We all look at him. Mother scowls him
back to his place on the porch. He fiddles
with the bill of his cap, puts a big wad
of chew in his mouth, then spits tobacco juice
on them. He just can't help himself.
"Pissants!," he marvels. "Pissants!"
Laundry

Sue's gone on business and I've volunteered to do laundry. A mistake.
Hung over as hell. The place is hot and smells of old soap. The machines droning between my ears--won't stop for a simple headache. People reading, waiting, don't want to talk, just want to get this over with. My clothes refuse to become fewer.
And the more I dig through the warm pile, the more little things I find.
Sue's lingerie is folded in a neat stack, although I never saw much point in folding underwear. I guess I just love the feel of them, the way they seem to want to cling to my fingers. The lady using the dryer next to me points out that my jeans are still a little damp. And I tell her that I love the smell of mildew in the morning, and that if she really wants smell she can come over and have a wiff of my dirty dishes which have set unattended three days in the Tucson heat. She shuts up and tends to her laundry, her business.
This place is filled with constant meaningless racket and I just want to get out.
But I find something that pleases me; a mate to a sock I always figured to be a renegade. I love it when things come together.
Rigor Mortis

On the television
an airliner has crashed
into some ocean. It doesn't matter
which ocean, airliner, or country
it came from. This freight of bodies
is salted, each one stiffened
for the long trip home.

The National Guard
is hauling them up on a cable
into the belly of a thumping chopper.
The girl they're sending up now has long
dark hair. She is all but naked
and reaching for a hug.
Ice Box

To hell with the old man and his tough pride. It was a job for two men with two arms, and I could no longer watch him struggle, as he tried to walk that dolly up those steps one wheel at a time, the straps straining with the dead weight of the machine.

He didn't ask and I didn't offer. But I did not feel right just going on about my business. After three good heaves we pulled it through the door. I heard snatches of his breath, and saw the crown of his hat just over the square edge of the ice box.

We rolled it to the kitchen. On either side we pushed that thing back into its hole. His wife gave me a beer and insisted a wrinkled dollar at me. His payment—his only arm to shake my hand—a grip so strong it pressed the bones together.
I can't remember the last August
this hot, when rain clouds packed themselves
so tightly in the sky and never delivered.

The tendons in her neck rise red
when I spill my tea. "Let me," I say,
though she's already on her knees.

The mountains which surround this city
have become walls, broken edges of a horizon
where lightning coils, and we wait for it to strike.

"How about a hug?" I say
against the drone of the swampbox cooler
which does no good.

She makes egg salad and I feed the cat
who turns up his nose and slinks back
to his place on the couch.

"A little more time," I say. "Maybe we
can start again. Maybe I'll go back to school."
She cries, childbearing years getting away like the summer.

In lieu of tears, I've
learned to sweat, my side
of the bed made yellow for it.

Dishwasher, my domestic lot, I grow annoyed
that she saves every butter tub, every
jelly jar. She complains that the sheets
need washing so often.

So we go on, both to the elbows
in soapy water. And I find myself
making room in the cupboard for empty things,
waiting for the rounded sky to fill them.
Tucson Revisited

I could care less if you don't believe me. I saw it.
It pushed its spiny fists right through the pavement of a K-Mart parking lot and thrust its huge body up through the hole.

That's right. A giant Saguaro cactus, big as a cliche'.
It shook the rocks and dirt from itself, flexed both bicepts, then hawked and spat clear to Ina road. "What the hell is going on here," it demanded.

The last I saw, it was lumbering off toward the downtown area.
No, I wasn't drunk. Let me warn you, it had the look of a plant that could eat tract homes like hors d'oeuvres. Rumor has it that it's come to clean up this town.
III  Transitional Living
The Fortune of One Sperm

False alarms are fatal in my business. What most of these jerkoffs don't realize is that contact with air means immediate death for me. Think about it. Trained all your life for one mission, then on an afternoon whim... I won't go into details, but I nightmare frequently about the palms of hands, bathtub drains and dirty walls. Then again, consider the alternative. It's a long stretch of road between the chute and the big room. I won't even quote you the odds of my making it there, let alone the fat lady being home if I do. If she is, can you see me leading the pack? I hate to be a skeptic, but it's a little pretentious for me to believe that I'm that one in five million, that da Vinci, Shakespeare or Woody Allen even. You see it's a paradox. You're screwed if you do, screwed if you don't, and "To be, or not to be" isn't even a question at this point. You people go on and on about your Darwin, your Genesis. Let me tell you, your Natural Selection, your Creation; it all starts right here--with the "outrageous fortune" of one sperm.
Perspective

Because I sit today,
I feel naked before you for the first time,
the soft white bulb too honest with my imperfections.

Because I am not perfect
you hold your paper to the light.
Because you are skillful
you turn my body in your charcoal lines.

Because you are honest
you study my parts like a tray of fruit.
When I fidget, you say be still.
Because I am vain, you leave nothing out.

Because you wish perspective,
you hold your pencil at arms length.
You see me as an ear, a furrowed brow,
a tendon in the neck.

Because you are director of the light
your shadows couple with my skin.
You know the twist of muscle.
You know that length of bone.

Because I am your subject
you render all aspects of me with a cold eye.
In spare lines,
you complement each limb.
You re-create my better side.
Gravity

At the Special Arts Festival
four long tables have been pushed
into a square. Susan, in the middle,
pivots between her clients
directing their endeavors.
Gilbert, mongoloid, spits big wads
of phlegm into his clay
to moisten it. Jeff, quadriplegic,
watercolors a landscape with his mouth.
Mariann, cerebral palsy, has fashioned
a clay globe the size of a softball.

On the other side of the ballroom
a folkband plays sing-alongs
on everything from a lute to a handsaw
to the most forgiving audience
they ever had. Invited by my wife
to join in, I try my hand
painting a field of flowers. She smiles,
tells me Monet is turning
in his grave.

Sitting beside me, Mariann labors
to lift a paintbrush,
labors to color her world
a pleasant teal. From the discord
of bagpipes, gravity closes its fist
around us all, dragging us earthward.
As with the force of G's, the body
twists, the face contorts.

Mariann's slaved over lines of longitude
and latitude, the rounded ears
of Danny's horse, the pink mountains
of Jeff's sunrise. We struggle for our
separate voices. And though each of us
sees something different, our visions meet
at the center, spokes on a single hub. Look,
we whisper, see what I see
Cleaning Beans

So far I've culled an interesting group of misfits from the clay colander of pintos. I have rescued a bullhead sticker, a few dark pebbles and a worm-eaten group of geriatrics.

Again, my objective fingers crane into the pile. Later I will immerse the ones saved in water. Through me they will rise up in a new form, a single voice in their own pungent harmony.

I will allow the others to take a different route back home.
Dream Walker

One hand curled around a doorknob
the other on the arm of his wheelchair,
Barry raises himself, his body
from the shoulders down,
shaking fitfully with the strain.

He wants to show me something.
He wants to prove a theory
he’s tested in the basement,
to which he's crawled down stairs
backward every night for a month.

"Sometimes I hear him screaming
at himself down there," the night trainer
shakes her head. "Then the weights
start clanging again. I mean
the exercise doesn't hurt, but he'll never
walk normal and he knows it."

The cap he wears to cover the soup-spoon
sized dent in his skull is pressed
down to his eyebrows. He looks only
forward as he mule-kicks the wheelchair
which skitters backward
and falls to its side in the hall.

"Now watch this," he says turning
his head to smile. Slowly
he lifts his right leg
and drops it like a dumbbell
a foot forward. He rests
and deliberates on the left.

I shove my hands in my pockets
and watch the wheel of the fallen chair.
Still turning slowly, its spokes glint
with light from the kitchen.
I want him to know this is not my problem.
I want him to know I won't catch him
when he falls.
Transitional Living
--for Cara

I've read the file on your "home" background: incest, cigarette burns, the little finger on your left hand cut off at the second knuckle when you were sixteen. Again this afternoon I listen to your dream--
cable TV, a home video. The material with which you intend to make your life meaningful.

You bring me a doughnut and coffee like I'm a friend, and not paid the little I am to be here.

"Re-tard, man," you shake your head. "I hate that word. You know what I did to this kid, once, when I heard him call me that: re-tard. You don't wanna know what this girl did. I'm serious, you just don't wanna know."

You tell me how you'll mainstream in a couple months, how you'll pass your driver's test. "Easy, man."

"Then I get out of this Transitional Living dump. Get my own place. Do whatever I want."

You cross your legs and draw angrily on your cigarette. "Then I lock it up tight, see?"

"You know what I mean? So tight no one gets in."
George Has a Wooden Face

We could practice more as men leaning over game tables might imagine their carved pawns to sound battle cries for them.

George plays ball with the kids on the block sometimes. He wears the pointed helmet--the souvenir from Germany he got before their parents were born.

We could ask the printed page, but it would remain mute. Some of us stumble out of pubs and search for it in Capricorn and Leo like the simple picture in a dot-to-dot. No answers come.

George stays with his niece who cleans him after he wets his pants. The children grow angry with him as he doesn't know whose side he's playing on this time.

We may trudge to either pole of the Earth and chisel back its hardened layers of flesh, only to find old wounds like fractures on a skull.

George sits on the curb now, grinning, the helmet pushed forward on his head. The children have left him now and moved across the street.

As we look skyward and beseech the little light we think we see asking, "What happened?", children laugh as they shoot marbles into a small circle of flat ground.
Soon, George will wet his pants and walk back home.
This World's Unkempt

The midday sun has shaved
my neighborhood clean of all ambiguity.
I see that the house across the street
is cream, not white, and needs paint.
Some children up the street chant
a lazy Spanish rhyme
while the woman next door waters
the stubble she fancies her front lawn.
A bum with a pushcart walks a slow beat
while a slight wind is causing the leaves
of a eucalyptus to wink, each one
brilliant in its own time.
And I'm so sure of the rhythm
I count four beats between each event.
This world is unkempt
but I understand its music;
a theme returning to itself.
So I don't worry about the earth's
afternoon shadow, moving over me
slanting like honed blades
between that row of elms in the dooryard.
I don't have to watch the light
recede into bare darkness
or beg it to return.
IV  Aunt Minerva's Pasture

******************************************************************************
Autumn in Triple Haiku

A small scrap of light
cuts a slug's path on the floor
of my study room.

A scatter of leaves
has made its way through the door
I try to keep closed.

I'm afraid of death,
and keep repeating myself--
about death, that is.
When you were ten years old
you watched your grandfather kill a wetback
for stealing a pudden-footed mule.

What you remember--
more than the crack of the 30.30,
or the spent brass whistling
by your nose, or the grim conviction of your
grandad's leathered face as he loaded, aimed
and fired, the slow smell of gunpowder
unraveling in the morning air,
the sound of bullets striking ribcage,
leaving exit holes in the chest
like bitten plumbs--

"What I remember most," you say,
"Is that wet just kept on walking."
Even after your grandad had called the man's name
Ramon, three times, even after he had cocked the rifle--
the mule tethered to the Mexican's pack, its back
loaded with things not worth a man's life--
even after the warning shot and the three
which came after. He just kept walking.

And you remember that his legs
wobbled and gave out under him, and that
he went to his knees, sat there just a second,
then slowly put his hat back on his head.
Before he crumpled face down, you saw the quiet look
he turned across the pasture, not at the spooked mule
but like he'd had a thought of something far off;
a small memory, an old regret.
When an Old Man Speaks

as the only other sound in the room is the crackling of a nervous fire, consuming first the pitch and then the wood itself.

He tells old stories

his patrons gather in a circle of generations about the room. The children are restless, the young polite and the middle aged entrallled.

as if to grass or gusts of wind.

Whiskey smells soured on his breath sucking him dry but allowing him fertility, in words, like a casually thrown handful of seeds.

So he rattles on,

desperately knowing he can own nothing, save the dust he's gathered on the soles of his feet from walking on plain earth.
Dunnigan's Daughter

A woman with brown skin squints and bares the back of her hand to visor the sun from the deep green of her eyes.

This is the rancher's wife.

She sits undisturbed as the gentle gelding she rides shifts a hind leg. From the side of her mouth she makes a sharp clicking and nudges the reluctant bay up the steep bank of a dry wash.

She cannot see her husband.

She only hears the rhythm of the steel driver as he lifts and drops it onto rigid fence posts, cutting into ages of sun-labored earth.

She hears the driver clearly now,

and she thinks of that spring she rescued a robin trapped inside the old water tank. She'd heard the tired flutter of wings and the soft pounding of its body against rusty walls.

She cocks her head and listens,

searching the fold of the hills and carrying a small satchel of hard tack and dried meat over the slope of her shoulder.

She smiles now and her face creases,
remembering the afternoon she
happened on her wedding dress
in a box, buried in the hot smell
of the tack room. She cradled it
across her windburnt arms
while her husband wiped the blood
of dehorned yearlings
across the front of his shirt.

She later tells someone,

a passer-by looking for work,
gesturing toward the land
her husband tends, "He's got it
turned around, you know."
Then she laughs and spits hard
across the threshold of shade.
"He fancies himself the owner."
Aunt Minerva's Pasture

They say old Joe Watson
had drunk enough cactus Bacanora that day
to come undone inside and fly clean out of hisself,
and that he ended up on his barn roof
preaching the Gospel all afternoon
before an invisible congregation. Afterward
he must have gathered up his rifle
and all the ammunition he could find
because the neighbors claimed they could hear
the gunfire for near an hour,
and I suppose it would take that long
to shoot and kill 27 prime milk cows,
150 white Leghorn hens
and save one bullet for hisself.

When I was a girl, Joe delivered
fresh eggs and milk around the valley.
A talkative man with a face like a unshaved
toad, and pink half-moon eyes Daddy said
was from drink. I see people now, my age,
get old, curl up like fall thistle
and take with the first good wind,
like they was never there, and I understand
old Joe a little better;
that he just wanted to shout hisself
to the edge of the valley before he went
to nothing, that he just wanted to wipe hisself
clean of all that could be called his
so as not to burden the rest of the world
with his leavings.

I seen 81 turns, 82 maybe.
But I don't measure it by years anymore.
My life is pure time wrapped up in a whirling
little ball, and I can feel me moving everywhere
in this pasture; gurgling in the wet ground
that trys to suck me down by the heels,
in the rattling of the tumbleweeds
that move through the high galleta,
in the twittering of the meadowlark
I scare out ahead of me.

With the failing of my ears I can hear things,
like the Earth's low roar as it turns round
and round, moving fast and slow
at the same time, so giddy under me,
like a green mare, I can hardly stay a'mount.
To the west, over the Mule Mountains, 
the clouds gather, always the same always different 
but regular as churchgoers in their pews, 
and just before I hear the hum 
of the last bell's peal and the last bit of light 
going out like the earth closing its lower jaw 
around the sun, the thunder claps its hands 
just to keep an old woman from dozing off.

Coming to the north windmill 
I stop to rest im my husband's old Model T 
that has been left here, and since, spit full 
of bullet holes from my sons' target practice 
over the years. This old shell was once his prize. 
I see him now, throwing back his curly head 
and laughing because the wind has blown my hair down 
driving to Bisbee on Saturday night. 
His big frame shifts around as he drives 
like a man needs to riding a horse. 
This automobile was alive for him; 
now it makes him alive for me.

Now I feel the rain falling on my lap 
through one of the rusty holes 
and the water soaking through my shoes. Outside 
the dirver's window the last slip of sunlight 
seems to hesitate a moment before it drops 
behind the Mules. The storm walks away 
down the valley, fast and slow, like 
a man with broad shoulders, leaving the air 
a little chilled. The first star blinks 
like someone looking through a hole 
in the sky.

If anyone is looking on me today 
I want to say this: I am not just an old woman. 
I am a mother nursing her first son 
and an infant suckling her mother's breast. 
I am a compassionate child discovering 
sadness for the first time, and a girl 
come of age, spinning and spinning 
on a ballroom floor. I am small and bent 
like an unborn child, but I am proud 
as a mountain. I am more that the span 
of this valley and less than this spear 
of sacaton grass. I am everything. 
I am nothing.
A Horse Named Shiloh

upon the death of my grandfather

When the doctor told us
there was nothing else she could do
my mother's nails bit a row
of marks in my arm which stayed
it seemed, for fifteen minutes.
My grandmother's slow sobs broke up
the city's rattle outside. My uncle's
welled eyes finally loosed a single tear
which—if you believe in such a thing--
could have salted for keeping
the whole of this precious land.

And ultimately there wasn't much
to say about the little sunbaked
physique on the third floor
of St. Joseph's Hospital where they had,
for me, packed all of the Southwest
into one small bed. The son of a Cherokee
squaw, he had endured much; fifty years
of hard drinking, ten years of cancer,
the life of a cowboy carved like notches
in the cold skin.

I could not help but smile
at the tips of the tacky old boots
he insisted upon--if you understand
such a thing--pointing to the heavens
from beneath the covering sheet.
I remembered the appaloosa stallion
he had raised from a colt no one else
could ride; the horse that could buck,
as he put it, high as hellfire.

I know, had he a choice,
he would have taken a bottle
of Old Crow out to high desert,
run off his horse, and laid down
among the manzanitas. Fed his carcass
back to that which he was closest;
because life to him was a private thing,
because this asphalt was only an illusion,
because these sterile walls were never
as real as the open pasture and the good
clean dirt.
The young doctor, spent of medical euphemisms, played a nervous finger around the button of her white smock. Someone should have told her not to feel uncomfortable; the old man didn't simply expire. He has ridden off on a horse named Shiloh, his saddlebags packed with a few mysteries we shall never know. In the interim he will beat a long path across chaparral country, to a West—if you believe in such a thing—which will not end at the sea.
Colors in Missoula, Montana

You may stop if you like, but to live here
you must know the town's dead poets.
You must see the river run fat in spring,
and trail out thin as a ribbon by August.

You must wade thigh deep into it,
catch a brown trout
and examine his speckled sides.
You must release him, send him
twisting back into a current bent
on taking you by the knees.

You must see the color that winter
carries from the mountain,
the snow packed streets, and the gray
in the eyes of old men who drink
at local bars.

You must go to the shabbiest tavern,
order the cheapest hooch in the place
and chase it with a draft.
You must eat greasy food at the Ox
and puke it in the Higgens Street gutter.

You must eat it again, and play poker;
fold on a bluff with a pair of kings,
win a hundred dollar pot with threes
and blow it all at the Hat the same night.

You must let the merchant
at the corner store spot you 50 cents.
You must invite to your home a local loon
and feed him till his belly's full.

You must visit a Salish graveyard.
At each mound of dirt, you must envision
the grieving women. With clarity
you must see the burnt orange
of their shawls, and hear the wails
with which they sing their dead away.
Each year you must play for blood
at the summer softball tournament.
Every game you must eat dirt
as though it were the World Series.
At bat, you must aim, every time,
for the left field fence.

And when the player's wives,
who you thought were too far gone
to do so, bounce in the stands
like excited children, you must know
the importance of their screams,
the urgency with which they sing
their men back home.

You must run the Blackfoot
in a thin canoe when it's high,
drink beer and drift down
its narrow winds in a rubber raft
when its low. You must press your fingers
into your belly's loose flesh, study the white
impressions left in your sunburnt skin.

You must feel the ongoing motion
of wilderness, winding back into itself.
You must realize it all as a whole
in the span of a moment, and at the same time
notice particulars; the blue and yellow
lupin, the various pines and firs.

You must study the habits
of the birds of prey; the ferruginous
and rough-legged hawks, the golden
and bald eagles.

And when the tamarack is gold and the snow
is ankle deep, you must go to the mountain.
You must kill a bull elk
and carry down his tan and rust colored hide
as well as the meat.

You must stop at the Milltown bar.
You must drink until you see ghosts--
gorge yourself with every indulgence
until the shadow of a fat man
rises in the doorways.
In the spring, you must again
brandish your flyrod at the water's edge.
For the first time, you must notice
how the sun blades deep into jade colored pools.

And when the yellow eyed bird
lights on the dead pine across the creek
you must offer all your fish
and nothing less.
Off of work for the day, Evan Boswell opened his first Coors and considered what he should do about Allicia. More and more lately he thought about dropping her. Even though she had been a major part of his life for the past four years, she was beginning to become troublesome. There was the time at the Buggywheel tavern that she had thoughtlessly walked into the men's room. Then there was the incident with the fat fingered cowboy at The Maverick who found something peculiar when he had tried to fondle Allicia on the dance floor.

Three years ago, when Evan had quit the police force, he was content with his decision. He no longer worked nights and had more time to take Allicia out dancing. Now that he was thinking about cutting her out of his life, he missed being a cop. His job as a delivery man for FTD Florists had become tedious and boring. He needed a change in his life, maybe a a different woman. The possibilities were endless. Besides, his involvement with Allicia was dangerous. It was only a matter of time before their precarious liaison would be discovered.

Allicia's outgoing personality had won her many friends, though, where Evan's aloofness seemed only to put people off. She had enhanced his social life in the
past four years. Certainly, there were some benefits to keeping her around.

Because she loved so much to dance to country and western music, many of the nightlifers who hung out in Tucson's various honky-tonks had gotten to know Allicia rather well. Most of them called her Alli. Fat Jack, the bartender at The Maverick, always welcomed her with enthusiasm when she came in. "Hi, Alli," he would say, leaning his huge stomach against the bar across from her. He would fold his stumpy arms and prop his chin on them, looking up at her like a puppy dog.

"Gosh you smell good!" he said to her one night.

Allicia lit a cigarette, sexy as she could, then exhaled the smoke just over his right shoulder, leaving him in suspense. "My perfume," she said finally, wrinkling her nose at him. "It's called Flower of Eden."

Jack moved back over to the liquor shelf to build her usual drink. "Flower of Eden, huh?" he said thoughtfully. "Flower of Eden. I'll have to remember that."

Evan came from the kitchen with another Coors. He tapped the top of the can with his knuckles, watching the tawny muscles constrict in his forearm when he opened it. He walked to the mirror in the livingroom and watched the muscle play in his right upper arm as he took sips. Then he turned facing his reflection and gave it his best
Eastwood, "Go ahead punk, go ahead," he said into his own narrowed eyes. Boswell was a small man, but he could get pretty nasty when he wanted to and everyone damn well knew it.

Again Evan's thoughts drifted toward Allicia. On his second beer now, he was getting a little sentimental and began to reconsider letting her go. They first had met in the Prim Rose Cafe. Evan was alone one morning, drinking a cup of cafe latte. It was just after Howard, his partner on the force, had been hurt and Evan was desperately worried. He also needed some company, just someone to talk to. It was then that Allicia suddenly appeared, standing in front of him on the other side of the table. She did not avert her eyes when he looked at her. She did not even blink. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"May I sit?" She asked.

Evan hesitated, "Sure," he said finally. "Of course, have a seat."

Evan called the waitress over, a dowdy middle-aged woman whose uniform was too tight. "I'll have another cafe lattee and a..."

"Cappuccino," Allicia said.

"And a Cappuccino for the lady."

Writing the order down, the waitress paused, "I beg your pardon?" she asked.

Evan repeated the order. The woman simply stared at him, blinking. She looked at the table, then over her
shoulder toward the coffee counter and shook her head.
"Another goddamn crazy," she said. "You know you're the second one I've had this morning."

Evan regarded the waitress contemptuously. "Just bring it," he said.

The woman shrugged again and shook her head, "Alright," she said, writing the order down.

He and Allicia talked for almost an hour, learning all about each other. She knew Howard and seemed to have an abundant interest in him. She also knew Howard had been hurt and wanted to know how he was doing.

After they had finished their coffee, Allicia set down her cup and immediately shouldered her purse, "Are you ready?" she asked.

Evan just stared at her, "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Why, back to your place, of course." She stood up from her chair. "I know the way," she said.

Evan walked back to the refrigerator for another Coors. He had just cracked it open when the phone began to ring. This time of day on a Friday—it had to be Howard. Evan took a long drink of the beer, allowing the phone to ring on the wall behind him. "Howard," he muttered, shaking his head. "Howard, Howard."

He pushed closed the refrigerator door and caught his reflection in the glossy white just above the Amana trade
mark. It was Allicia who stared back at him, whisps of hair hanging around her face. After a moment she winked, and her delicate features gathered in a slow smile.

... "Just a minute!" Allicia shouted at the phone in the bedroom. Howard must have called now for the twentieth time, but Allicia wouldn't answer until she was ready. She looked in the mirror one last time, then walked to the phone. "Hello," she said.

"Allicia?" Howard asked.

"Yes?"

"Good." Howard said after a moment.

Howard wanted to meet at the usual place. He needed to talk because Cherryl had left him again. This was the fifth time in two years. Allicia was deliberately hesitant, although she knew she would give in. "OK," she said finally. "We'll talk, but I'm sure she'll come back, Howard. She always does."

After she had hung up the phone Allicia opened her closet, the one she kept locked. She examined the row of wigs as they sat on the faceless styrofoam heads. Each head was a different part of Allicia, a different persona. And each empty face came to life for her as she examined the wigs. In light of Howard's current crisis, Allicia would have to be careful about the way she dressed. There was the wig she had ordered from Paris, real hair of course, which gave her sort of a saucy look. No, she
would not go with that one tonight. She did not want to be the temptress, or the madonna figure, not in the mood Howard was in. The innocent look was no good either. She had to be the willful, steady woman tonight.

When Allicia had finished dressing, she checked herself in the mirror again. She picked up her purse, ready to leave, then paused to look around the bedroom. Evan's clothes were scattered everywhere; boots and a pair of jeans on the floor, a dirty undershirt tossed on the bed. "God, I wish you'd clean up after yourself," she muttered.

As she walked into the livingroom, Allicia glanced at Evan's poster of John Wayne. It was a blow-up, color photo taken from the movie, Big Jake. Atop a big bay horse John Wayne sat, stern eyed, a Navy Colt 45 in one hand and a sawed-off shotgun in the other. Allicia's annoyance with Evan was suddenly replaced with a surge of affection. "Evan, you silly little boy," she said.

Allicia walked up to the poster. "Hi, handsome," she said to "the Duke." He had a strong masculine face which gave her a certain comfort, like a warm blanket on a chilly night.

She kissed her index finger and put it to the lips. "Goodbye for now," she said to John Wayne. She turned, catching her reflection in the living room mirror. She walked closer to it. Finally she was face to face with the person on the other side.

"You be a good girl," she said, kissing the
reflection, seeing the lips on the other side meet her own in the middle. She pulled away as if, in fact, she were looking at the person she had just kissed. On the glass was the red impression of her lips left by her Red Rose lipstick. She mused at the mark, thinking it looked like a painter's signature on his work.

... 

Allicia finally found a place to park in front of The Renegade. She opened the door on her Subaru and stepped out. A slight breeze picked up and laced through her hair as she locked the car and walked toward the entrance of the tavern.

The band was on break when she walked in, but the jukebox was going. It played an old Patsy Cline song, Crazy Arms. Allicia looked for Howard inside, imagining him to be sitting alone in a corner somewhere, head down, clutching the same old Jack Daniels on the rocks. The poolroom was immediately to her left. Howard wasn't there. He seldom felt in the mood to shoot pool when he was upset. She walked by the bar to the tables surrounding the dance floor. Most of them were full, but Howard was not among the people who sat there. A few of the men eyed her as she stood there, but she did not pay them any mind.

Finally she found him sitting at a booth by the windows, closer to the door. When she saw him there, he
had already been watching her. A dim smile emerged on his face as she walked up to the table.

"And how long have you been watching me trapse around this place?"

Howard smiled down at his drink. He shrugged. "I saw you walk in. I just wanted to see what you would do."

Allicia put her purse on the seat and slid into the booth. She looked across the table at Howard, who still stared into his drink. "Buy a girl a drink?" she said, putting her hand on his arm.

"The usual?" Howard asked. He knit his brow. "Say, I smell beer on your breath."

"Evan had a couple earlier."

"Some arrangement," Howard said. "Evan drinks and you get drunk."

"Well," Allicia said. "Evan is a subject better off dropped tonight."

"I agree," Howard said. "I agree completely."

Allicia hailed the cocktail waitress who soon walked up to the table. "Hi Alli," the girl said. "How are you?"

Allicia winked at the girl. "Sassy as ever," she said. "How about you?"

The girl shrugged, "A little better now, thanks," she said.

Allicia had been somewhat of a confidant when the girl was having boyfriend problems a few months back. They had met a couple of times at the Prim Rose to talk.
The young woman, it seemed, was in quite a fix between two lovers and she just needed to get a few things off her chest. But that was Allicia, anyone's friend. And she always had an ear to listen.

"So how are you?" she asked Howard after the waitress had left.

Howard looked as if he were about to cry. "I don't know, Alli."

Allicia sat back in the booth, squaring her shoulders toward Howard. "So, do you think I'm overdressed," she said, touching her fancy blouse at the shoulders.

"No, you look fine, Alli," he said. "You always look wonderful." Again, Howard look dispairingly down at his drink.

Allicia took his hand, holding his large knuckles between her fingers. "She'll come back," she said.

For a few seconds Howard said nothing. "I don't want her to come back this time," he said finally.

"She always comes back," Allicia said, still playing with Howard's hand.

"I said I don't want her back," Howard said, raising his voice to almost a shout.

Allicia leaned back pulling her hands away, "Ok, Howard. I'm sorry," she said.

Howards face had grown red, "I'm not going back, not even if she wants to," he said, raising his voice again.

"Ok, Howard, just calm down."
Howard regained composure. "I just know we're through this time, that's all," he said.
"You've said that before."
"But it's true this time."
"You've said that before, too," Allicia said. She was turning her drink in her hand, looking down into the glass.
Howard looked away, toward the dance floor. "I don't want to fight about this, Alli."
"I don't want to either. I just wanted to make you feel better, that's all."
"I understand. Just don't try to talk me into going back to her."
"I won't."
"You will."
"No I won't, Howard!" She took his hand again and squeezed it hard until he looked at her. "Please, Howard," she said.
Howard nodded, closing his eyes. They were quiet for a little while.
"I don't blame her for leaving me," Howard said.
"I do!"
"I hadn't touched her in months, Alli."
"It doesn't matter that much to a woman."
"Allicia," Howard said. "You don't know..." He paused.
"I don't know what?" she said, irritated. "I don't know what?"
"Never mind," Howard said. "We won't get into it."
"We'd better not."
Howard took a drink of his Jack Daniels, "I understand her leaving me," he said.
"Oh, Howard," Allicia said, exasperated. "She's a first class slut and you know it."
"You're the only one I've wanted for years," Howard said. "She knows that."
"Oh, I get it," Allicia said. "So to right this wrong she seeks affection elsewhere; from your friends, your employers, door-to-door salesmen, andy rag-tag scum in a honky-tonk she can get her hands on when your're not around...the telephone man. You know Howard, Ma Bell has your house circled on the map. A few years ago Evan, like all your other friends..."
"Shut up! Shut up!" Howard shouted. A few people along the bar turned and looked at them.
Allicia looked down, squeezing her eyes closed. "I'm sorry, Howard," she said.
"Please don't do this to me," Howard pleaded.
"I'm so sorry," Allicia said, touching his face. She began stroking his hair. "I didn't mean to, Howard. I didn't mean to."
"Forget it," Howard said. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry!"
"It's all right."
They sat like this a moment, Allicia stroking his
hair, Howard looking sullenly into his glass.

"You know, I can be a real bitch sometimes," Allicia said.

Howard nodded and chuckled, "Yes you can," he said, smiling up at her.

The waitress, walking by, paused at their table. "Refills?" she asked.

"Yes," Howard said. "Two more." He looked at Allicia then and started to say something but caught back the words.

"What?"

Howard hesitated, "Remember what we talked about...about going to Mexico?"

Allicia sat back in her seat, "I don't care to talk about that tonight, Howard."

"Why not?"

"Just because, that's why not."

Howard looked down at his drink a moment. "In Mexico no one knows us," he said.

"No one knows us here, do they?"

"No."

"Good."

Howard reached across the table and took Allicia's hand. "In a few weeks I have a month's paid vacation," he said.

Allicia pulled her hand away. She stared down into her vodka gimlet, "Why do you wish to leave so badly?"

"Because," Howard paused, "Because we're different,
"And you're ashamed?"

"I'm not ashamed," Howard said. "It's just that we'd be better off somewhere else."

"And how do you know there's not a lot of other people just like us--right here in this town, right here in this bar?"

"For Christ's sake, Allicia, you're missing the point."

"No I'm not," Allicia said, looking over his shoulder toward the bar. "I just don't think it's the right time yet, that's all."

"Right time! Right time!" Howard said, sitting back in the booth. "Alli, how long have you been saying that?"

"Not long."

"Four years. That's how long."

Allicia wouldn't look at him.

"How old are you, Allicia?"

"Twenty-nine," Allicia said.

"You're thirty-three," Howard said.

"What's the difference?"

"What's the difference!" Howard said. "In seven years you'll be forty. I'll be over fifty. It's time to act now!"

Still, Allicia would not look at him. As she stared off toward the dance floor her eyes began to well up. Finally a tear made its way down the bridge of her nose. "I just want to dance, Howard," she said in a
"I know, Alli," Howard said. "Just don't cry, Ok?"

"I love to dance," Allicia said in a distant voice.

"I know," Howard said. "I know." He was quiet as Allicia stared out toward the dance floor. The waitress returned then and set down the drinks.

Howard handed the girl a five. "Keep the change," he said. Howard fixed his eyes on Allicia, who was still staring out across the barroom. "Hey," he said, finally. "When they start playing again, we'll dance."

Allicia shook her head, "You don't have to, Howard."

"It's no problem."

"That's Ok."

"I want to dance with you."

"But it's so hard with your," Allicia paused. "...with your leg," she said finally.

"It's called a prosthesis," Howard said. "And I'm not ashamed of it."

"I know you're not."

"I've gotten good with it too."

"Maybe a slow dance."

"We could dance a fast one if you like."

"Yes, maybe," Allicia said, taking a sip of her drink. She looked around the room, avoiding Howard's eyes. Across the billiards area she caught the eyes of a man she had danced with a few weeks before. He returned her smile and waved reluctantly, holding a pool cue in his other hand. Allicia waved for him to come over. After a
brief hesitation, the young man began to amble toward their table.

"It's Evan, isn't it?" Howard said suddenly. "You won't go away with me because of Evan."

"We're not talking about Evan tonight," she said through a smile directed at the young man just stepping up to the table. Allicia turned in the booth, facing him. He still held his cue stick. "How are you, Allicia?" he asked.

"Fine," she said looking up at him, realizing now what a handsome young man he was. His features were subtly masculine, almost to the point of being feminine. Yet there was a strength in his demeanor, a steady, willful presence which came out in the way he would lead while dancing. Allicia squinted at him, "Sonny, isn't it?"

"That's right," he said.

Allicia remembered then what she had liked most about this man. It was his smile, an almost boyish sort of grin. "This is my friend, Howard," she said.

The men shook hands.

"You had a business if I remember correctly," Allicia said.

"Yes," the young man said. "I'm a roofing contractor."

"Oh, that's right," Allicia said. "A roofer!"

The young man chuckled, "Ok," he said. "A roofer if
you like." Then he looked over his shoulder at the pool tables. "I've got to get back to my game. But maybe we can dance later." He looked at Howard, "If you don't mind, that is?"

"No, I don't mind," Howard said.

After the young man had gone, Allicia faced Howard again. An awkward silence ensued between them as Allicia stared down into her empty glass. "I need another drink," she said.

"Why do you insist on holding on to him?" Howard said.

"I just met him."

"I'm talking about Evan."

"I told you we weren't talking about him tonight."

Suddenly the waitress was at the table again, setting down two more drinks. "Sonny bought these for you guys," she said, smiling at Allicia.

"Oh," Allicia said, looking for him by the pool tables. She waved. "Thank you!"

Sonny smiled and waved.

"Wasn't that nice, Howard?"

"Yes, very nice," Howard said, his eyes riveted on Allicia.

"He's thinking about letting me go, anyway," Allicia said.

"How do mean?"

"I mean Evan. I think he want's to cast me off into oblivion."
"He can't do that!"

"He can," Allicia affirmed.

"Well, can you do something about it?"

"Of course not," Allicia said. "He's got a mind of his own."

"Let me talk to him."

"You mean here, now?"

"Yes."

"Impossible, Howard. This my time, not his."

"Jesus," Howard said. "This is ridiculous, Alli."

"You're right," Allicia said. "It's silly, so let's just drop it."

"For Christ's sake," Howard groaned, more or less to himself. "I can't believe he wants to do that."

The band members began moving back onto the stage then, picking up their instruments. Allicia glanced at Howard, "They're getting ready to play," she said.

"Good," Howard said. "You know, you're beautiful."

"Thank you," Allicia muttered absently. Howard told her that every time they were together. She took his hand again.

"He doesn't deserve to be part of you," Howard said.

Allicia released his hand and looked away contemptuously. Then the guitar player began to warm up, picking out a tune Allicia didn't quite recognize. She sat back, closing her eyes, letting the music sink into her pores like a warm bath. Yes, that was what she
wanted; the music and nothing else.

When the band decided on a song it was a slow one. Eyes still closed, Allicia felt Howard take her hand.
"Dance?" he said.
"Yes, please!"

They rose, Allicia hardly noticing Howard's limp as they walked to the dance floor. Having had a few drinks she could feel the alcohol warm inside her. The faces at the bar just seemed to float by as she walked, or maybe she was floating. Yes, that was it. She was floating by, the center of attention, everyone's eyes upon her, her beauty and majesty. She felt good and warm and protected. And she didn't want to think of anything but the music and the rhythm her body made of it.

Several couples were already on the floor. Howard turned facing her. They began to move slowly with the music, Allicia keeping step with Howard despite his handicap. This was the first time they had ever danced together.

The next song came, a fast one, and they stayed on the floor. Howard laughed and smiled, moving fairly well to the more rapid beat. And they stayed for another song and another until the last of the set, a slow song.

Howard pulled her to him, both arms around her waist. "Think about it," Howard said, looking down at her.
"Think about what?"
"About just me and you in Mexico or Europe."
"Oh, that's a nice thought, Howard," she said, laying
her head on his shoulder.

"Think about it," Howard said again.

"Think about what?" Allicia said, smiling, going along with the game.

"Think about me and you and no more Cherryl."

Allicia was silent. She had no come-back for this one.

"It should have ended a long time ago, you know."

"It makes me sad to see things end, Howard."

"Things need to end, Alli," Howard said. "Things need to end so new things can begin."

They danced a moment, neither of them saying anything.

"Think about me and you," Howard said. "Me and you and no more Evan."

Allicia felt herself go limp as they danced, Howard simply pulling her along. When the song ended, they stood on the spot where they had quit dancing. Allicia could only look down at Howard's shoes, knowing the left one had nothing in it but a piece of man-made plastic. She felt Howard's fingers under her chin, tilting her head up to look at him. The other people were moving off the dance floor.

"You know he's got to go," Howard said. "He's got to go sometime, Alli."

"I just can't," Allicia said. "I can't let him go right now."
"Are you waiting for him to grow up!" Howard said, raising his voice. "Is that it? Are you waiting for him to become a normal person somehow?"

Allicia felt dizzy now. She just wanted to get away from Howard, but he was much bigger and she had trouble pulling herself away from his grasp. She struggled harder now.

"Evan is sick, Alli," Howard said, gripping Allicia's elbows tightly. "I knew him long before you came into the picture. Long before."

Finally Allicia pulled herself free and took a step back.

"Don't you understand, Alli," he said. "Don't you understand?" There was a tremor in his voice. "Evan is so in love with himself that he created you. Something he could love without being ashamed."

Allicia raised her hands, covering her ears. "I'm not in the mood for this, Howard," she said.

Several people had risen from their seats and now stood around the dance floor.

"But what happened," Howard continued. "What happened--don't you see Alli--is that Evan created something very beautiful, something spectacular, like a blossom fighting its way up from the rubbish. Don't you see--something beautiful has come of it!"

Allicia put her hands on her hips. She felt her body shaking with anger. "God damn you," she said evenly. "Are you calling Evan a faggot?"
Allicia noticed one of the men at the edge of the dance floor was growing more concerned. He had taken a couple of steps toward them. He stood behind Howard; a big square faced man, wearing a cowboy hat and a silver belt buckle.

Howard took a step toward her and Allicia drew away. His limp had grown more exaggerated. She remembered that Howard often forgot how to use his new leg when he became upset. "Alli!" he said. "Alli. Evan is my best friend. I lost this leg trying to save his life for Christsake!"

The place had grown almost quiet. The most prevailing sound was the jukebox, droning in the corner. Howard limped closer to her, apparently oblivious to the fact that everything had stopped. No more click of pool balls. No more rattling of glasses. No more laughter. Everyone's attention was focused on them, the two people on the dance floor.

"I don't think Evan is a homosexual," Howard said, unaffected by the guffaw of laughter which followed his remark. "But Alli, don't you understand? You are the best part of Evan, the part that should be kept, and the other thrown away."

The big cowboy was just a step behind Howard now. "Alli," Howard said. As he began to take another step toward her the cowboy grabbed him gently by the elbow.

Quickly, Howard turned facing the man, poised to fight. But the cowboy held up his hands, palms out, "Wait
a second," he said. "I just want you to cool off a minute. Give the lady room to breath."

Howard looked pathetically over at Allicia. She said nothing, nor did she change her expression. Then he looked back at the cowboy who's hands were still up, "I don't want to fight you, friend," the big man said.

Howard looked once more at Allicia. Then his head dropped and his shoulders began to shake. Allicia couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying. Finally, Howard lifted his head. His face was contorted with what seemed to be laughter. Yes, he was laughing. Howard shook his head then and moved around the cowboy, limping off the dance floor, the eyes of everyone in the room on him as he made his way back to the booth.

"Are you all right?" asked the cowboy, now looming before Allicia.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm fine." She looked up at the man.

He smiled easily at her. "I think you should come over here and sit with us awhile," he said. "Let your husband cool down."

Allicia looked over at Howard on the other side of the pool-room who sat hunched over his drink. "He's not my husband," she said absently.

"Well, who ever he is," the cowboy said. "He needs to cool down a little."

"Ok," Allicia said, still looking over at Howard. "I think I will sit down awhile."
The big man took her by the elbow and led her off the dance floor. He waved a big hand toward the onlookers, "Show's over folks," he said. He picked up an empty chair on the way and set it down at a table where a group of four people sat. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Allicia," she said, the sound of her own name seeming to reverberate in the midst of the silenced group.

"I'm Cliff," the man said, shaking her hand. "This is my sister, Glenda," he said, pointing to the dumpy, middle-aged woman across the table, "Her husband Ray. And his two brothers, Jeff and Charley." Still, although she had been introduced, the people seated seemed a little apprehensive.

"Have a seat Allicia," Cliff said, motioning to the chair he had brought over to the table.

"Call me Alli," she said, sitting down.

"Okay, Alli,"

Just then Allicia felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the waitress, Julie. "Are you all right?" the girl asked.

"I'm fine."

"What's wrong with him anyway?" Julie asked.

"He's just tired," Allicia said. "Maybe a little drunk."

"He has no right to treat you like that."

"It'll be alright," Allicia said. "Don't worry yourself over me."
"Well, how about another drink anyway."

"Yes, Please," Allicia said. "That would be fine."

When the girl had left the table Allicia could see the cowboy out the corner of her eye, staring at her.

"Tell me something, if you don't mind," he said to her.

Allicia looked at him, "What's that?" she asked.

"Why are you taking crap from a guy like that?"

"He's my friend," Allicia said defensively.

The cowboy looked sheepishly down at his big hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know. Your boyfriend?"

"Not exactly."

Cliff nodded, taking a sip of his beer.

Soon the band began to return to the stage. The break was short, probably to draw attention away from the earlier disturbance. When the waitress came with Allicia's drink, Cliff pulled a thick brown wallet and tilted the opening Allicia's direction. She could see it was filled with bills; tens, twenties and a couple of fifties. After hunting a moment Cliff fished out a five and handed it to the waitress. "Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks!" Julie said. She seemed surprised. She looked at Allicia then, and motioned her head toward where Howard sat. "He told me he wanted to talk to you," the girl said to her.

"Do me a favor," Allicia said. "Tell him I'll be there in a little while. That I just want him to clam
down a little."

"Okay," the girl agreed, then left.

Alli looked again to the table where Howard sat. He was no longer alone. The young man, Sonny, had joined him. They seemed to be having a rather serious discussion. This didn't worry her though. Howard would never tell anyone too much. She was just glad he had some company in his distress.

When the music started again, Allicia nudged Cliff. "How 'bout it?" she said, raising her chin toward the band.


They rose and walked to the middle of the dance floor, Cliff's hand on the small of her back. As they began to dance Cliff was easy with her, not doing anything too fast or abrupt. But as the song progressed he discovered she was capable of many complicated, fast dance moves. Cliff wasn't the best Allicia had ever danced with, but he was good and their bodies moved well together.

"You're a good dancer," Cliff said.

"You're not too bad yourself."

The next song, a slow one, she danced uncomfortably with one of the brothers, Charley. To her gentle resistance, he kept trying to pull her close and nuzzle his face along her neck. Periodically she would look over at Howard who still seemed deeply engaged in conversation
with the young man. The two of them were playing pool now and seemed to be talking between shots. Allicia danced every song of the set, and at least one time with every man at the table. The last slow song was with Cliff. They danced the two-step. Unlike Charley, Cliff held her at a respectable distance. They moved together in almost perfect unison. Allicia felt as though she could dance with him all night, but soon the song was over.

Cliff held her hand as they walked off the floor. When they sat down he put his arm around her, stroking her shoulder with his thumb. Allicia didn't really mind this. She looked over at Howard once in a while. He was still playing pool with Sonny.

Allicia couldn't help but remember how Howard was before the accident. He had looked older ever since. It was as if losing his leg had aged him ten years. She always tried to separate herself from Evan when she came out. But very often Evan's consciousness crept into her own and she couldn't help but have some of his memories. She thought about that overcast afternoon when Howard was hurt in South Tucson.

He and Evan were answering a breaking and entering call. They pulled the squad car up beside what they knew was a dead-end alley. They took out their revolvers and Howard glanced at Evan as if to ask, are you ready? Allicia remembered Evan's surge of adrenalin. He had never fired his Dan Wesson in the line of duty, but had always secretly hoped that day would come.
When they went in, weapons brandished, they found themselves face to face with a blue sedan, surging toward them. That's when Evan froze.

"Goddamnit!" Howard had shouted, pushing him out of the way. Evan had cleared the vehicle's path, but Howard had not.

Howard had sustained multiple injuries, the most severe of which was to his left leg and ribcage. Unconscious for six days, he awoke to find himself without his left leg. Also, the impact had shattered several ribs and he was in terrible pain.

While Howard was in the hospital, Evan could only bear to visit him twice. Though Howard insisted the accident wasn't Evan's fault, Evan felt otherwise. For the four years he'd been on the force he'd waited for some action, for the opportunity to test his metal. But in the up-shot he'd frozen under pressure. Though he felt terribly for Howard, he felt even worse for himself. For several days Evan barely came out of his apartment, hardly ate and never answered his phone. That was about the time Allicia came out. Until then she'd only been an idea, a fantasy.

Eventually Howard and Allicia met. It was inevitable. She had just stepped out of the apartment when a taxi cab pulled up. The back door opened and Howard, with his crutches, struggled out. He paid the fare and made his way down the walk. Allicia's first
impulse was to run, but she just stood there, watching him struggle his way to the door.

Finally, he stabilized himself before her. "You a friend of Evan's?" he asked.

For a moment Allicia was silent. "I..." she paused, stumbling on her words, "Yes, yes I am."

Howard grinned, probably thinking Evan had gotten lucky on a date. "I'm Howard Davis," he said with a smile, "Evan's partner."

Allicia nodded and looked at the ground. "Nice to meet you," she muttered.


Allicia ran then. She still remembered the horrified expression on Howard's face as she started her car and drove away.

For weeks Howard struggled to convince Evan that he needed professional help. Because of his injury, he most often called the apartment, sometimes getting Evan and sometimes Allicia. Once when Allicia answered the phone Howard demanded to speak with Evan, but Allicia refused. After ten minutes of conversation Allicia convinced Howard to speak with her instead of Evan. They agreed to meet at a dive honky-tonk called the Renegade on the west side of town. After a few months their periodic meetings became a habit, and Howard began to treat Allicia like a sane, intelligent human being.
The group at Cliff's table were quiet for the most part. When any of them did say something it was usually quite dull. Allicia was beginning to get bored. Cliff's sister, sitting directly across from Allicia, looked about the barroom, apparently lost in her own thoughts. After a moment she turned and faced Allicia squarely. "I'm going to the bathroom," she said. "Why don't you come with me, Allicia."

In the ladies' room Cliff's sister bent over the sink in front of the mirror, putting on lipstick. She glanced up at Allicia who she could see standing behind her in the reflection. The woman had not spoken to her since they were at the table. "Don't you have to go?" she said finally.

"No," Allicia said.

The woman retracted the lipstick and dropped it in her purse. "Cliff likes you, you know," she said examining her face in the mirror.

"Oh?"

"He's been looking at you since you walked in the door." The woman turned facing her now. "I don't know what kind of problem you and your old man are having. I don't want to know. It's none of my business anyway."

Allicia nodded, looking toward the ground.

"I can understand," the woman hesitated. "You wanting to stay away from him and all. Especially if he's rough with you sometimes." The woman took a package of
cigarettes from her purse and moved a step closer to Allicia. "Honey, I have nothing against you," she said lighting one of the cigarettes. Then she shook the pack, offering Allicia one. Allicia put it in her mouth. The woman lit it. Just then the door swung open and another woman walked into the bathroom.

"Excuse me," she said as she passed them on her way to the stalls.

"You see," Cliff's sister continued in a lower voice. "Cliff looks at things straight and narrow. You know what I mean?"

"I don't think so."

"I mean Cliff is a good natured sort, a good man and all, but he just sees things one way. If you dance with him all night he'll start to thinking that you are his and that's it."

"I see," Allicia said.

"Cliff's got a short fuse and I just don't want no trouble," the woman said. "I just don't want no trouble."

"I understand," Allicia said. "But Howard is not aggressive. I don't think it would come down to that."

The woman took a long draw from her cigarette and smiled as she exhaled the smoke. "Honey, I been around a little longer than you have," she said. "And it can always come down to that. I know men, and it can always come down to it." The woman ashed her cigarette on the floor. "No offense, honey," she said. "But your man, all crippled up like he is, would be no match for Cliff."
Allicia stared at the cigarette between her fingers then ashed it in the palm of her hand. "Okay," she said. "I need to talk with Howard anyway." She looked up at the woman then and smiled; "I'll make a tactful exit."

Smiling, Cliff's sister took a step closer. "Thank you," she said, putting her hands affectionately on either side of Allicia's face. "Like I say," the woman said. "It's nothing against you, girl."

Still Allicia smiled, looking down at the floor. She felt comforted by the woman.

Suddenly the woman withdrew her hands and took a step back. They stared at each other a moment. The woman's face was expressionless yet somehow disturbed. "Thank you," she said again, but distantly this time. Then, without another word, she turned and walked out the door.

Returning from the bathroom, Allicia turned the corner and noticed Howard standing by the dance floor. He had obviously been waiting for her. As she past, ignoring him, Howard began flanking her as she crossed the floor. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Alli?" he said.

Still, she ignored him as he limped along beside her. As she approached the table Cliff stood up from his chair and met them at the edge of the dance floor. He looked at Allicia, then over at Howard. "I still don't think she wants to talk to you, friend," he said to Howard.

"It's alright," Allicia said to Cliff then looked over at Howard who stood a few feet from them. A few feet
behind Howard stood the young man, Sonny. She had not noticed him there before. "I want to talk to him," she said to Cliff.

Howard took a couple steps toward them. He shook his head and smiled at Cliff. "You're making a big mistake," he said to the big man. The manner of his speech was condescending, as if he were talking to a child or an idiot.

"You're making the mistake, friend," Cliff said.
"You don't understand," Howard said. He took a step closer to Cliff, as if to speak with him in confidence. "Things aren't like you think they are."

The big cowboy stood fast, his body squared defensively at Howard.

"You don't understand," Howard said. "You're being deceived," He nodded toward Allicia. "This woman here..."

"Shut up!" Allicia interrupted, her hands over her ears. "Shut up! Shut the hell up!"

Then, quite suddenly, with no forewarning, Cliff struck Howard, landing a blow to his left temple which sent him abruptly to the ground.

On the floor, Howard raised himself a moment on one elbow then went back down.

Allicia walked up to Cliff. "You son of a bitch," she said. She pushed him once, then hit him in the face with a hard right cross.

The force of the blow jolted Cliff backward.
Stunned, he stood with his fingers pressed against his bleeding lip, looking down at Allicia.

Again, Allicia attacked the big man, this time with a series of combination punches to the midsection, ears and face, Cliff warding off the blows as best he could without hitting back.* She continued punching until she felt an arm around her neck and her left hand twisted up behind her back. Cliff's sister was pulling her away. Allicia struggled for a moment then found an open area and elbowed the woman hard in the ribs. The blow sent the woman to the floor on her rear end, where she sat buckled over, holding her stomach. Two men grabbed Allicia then, quite literally lifting her off her feet. She struggled fiercely as the men pulled her, fighting all the way, off the dance floor.

After a moment the men let her go, releasing her almost simultaneously. Allicia pushed one of the men roughly on the shoulder, but he made no further effort to restrain her. He simply backed away, staring at her. The other man did the same.

Allicia felt something brush her on the back. She turned quickly, ready again to fight. Then something on the floor caught her attention. She looked down. On the floor, between her feet, lay the wig. For that moment, perhaps five seconds, she could only stare down at the flaccid hairpiece. Slowly, she raised her hands to her head, running her fingers across Evan's close cropped
The crowd which had gathered, now all stared silently at her. She saw the faces of people, it seemed to her, in better detail than she ever had before; Cliff's distinct eyebrows and prominent, handsome jaw, his sister, who's expression still had not changed, the two brothers, side by side, staring as if they had witnessed a miracle, more men and women than she thought were in the place all stood, staring at her. There also seemed to be no sound in the place, no music, no glasses clinking, no whispers. Allicia felt almost relieved that her life was without secrets now, for this few moments anyway.

Calmly, she bent over for the wig and replaced it carefully on her head. She made the part right with her fingers and smoothed it down at the sides. She did not feel ashamed, awkward and embarrassed, but not ashamed.

From the onlookers, one of the brothers, Charley, took a couple steps toward her. He drew on his cigarette, as he regarded her with a squinting smile. "Queers," he observed with amazement. "A pair a goddamn queers."
Bill Kelly stepped out of McNeil's pickup and slammed the door so hard it made Pete Gayton's ears ring. With a dumb grin on his face, Kelly took off his hat and cut loose a hoot and holler that rolled conspicuous as gunfire across the dusty courtyard of the red light district in Nogales.

"Jesus jumped-up Christ," McNeil snapped. "Tear the door off the goddamn hinges, why don't you, Kelly?" Pete Gayton had ridden between them, and had listened to them bicker all the way there. Though he hadn't seen them in over a year, nothing had really changed. They had argued like this since the fifth grade. Gayton scooted across the seat and hung his head out the passenger's window. "Shit, Kelly," he said. "You want every federale in Sonora over here?" Gayton hadn't been to this place in a long time, but he was still cautious. He remembered the stories about guys who were thrown in jail for something as minor as breaking a beer glass.

Kelly rocked drunkenly back and forth on his heels as he stared out across the courtyard. He glanced over toward the truck, "Hey college boy," he said. "Gimme a dip."

Gayton took a tin of Copenhagen from the dashboard and tossed it to Kelly who, drunk as he was, caught it
with one hand. Kelly slapped the top of the can with his fingers as he continued his expectant gaze past the green and pink lights of the clubs on the north side of the courtyard. "Weren't them kids behind us?" Kelly asked.

"They were when we left the bar," Mcneil said. He leaned his elbows on the hood of his truck and took a long draw from his cigarette. "Don't worry, Bill, they'll get here."

Gayton opened the door and stepped out. What struck him first was the familiar smell of the place, mostly woodsmoke. Up north in Flagstaff, where he had gone to school, the faintest smell of it from someones chimney had brought him right back to the whorehouses in Nogales; all the wild, drunken nights he'd spent here when he was in high school, all the mornings he'd spent puking his guts up, the taste of Teqate beer lingering in the back of his throat.

Gayton leaned against the bed of the truck and studied the row of clubs directly across from him. Except for the dulling of the various pastel colored paint, none of them had changed. Even the names were still the same; La Bonita Vista, Paluco's, El Rancho. The disappearing leg of one of the neon flamingos over Paluco's was still broken since the night Kelly had smashed it with a rock ten years before.

For a reason Gayton could no longer remember, a whore, with the assistance of two bouncers, had kicked Kelly out of the place. Ostracized and angry, Kelly stood
in the courtyard, his stocky body barely visible at the edge of the light emitted from the clubs. Restrained by the two bouncers, the woman stood in the doorway of the place cussing Kelly with rapid-fire Mexican profanities. At some point Kelly picked up a rock and threw it at her, but his aim veered high and struck one of the pink birds, first from the left, over the awning above her. Gayton still remembered the surge of fear when he heard the breaking glass, and saw the sparks fly. In no more than ten minutes, all five or six of them (Gayton had forgotten how many and who they were) had piled into a car and made it back across the border.

Ten years later the poor flamingo still stood inert while his two partners, their blinking legs still intact, continued their slow synchronized dance beside him.

The clubs were all connected, plaza fashion, leaving a dirt courtyard in the middle. In the center of the courtyard, on a ten by ten concrete foundation, someone had erected a copper statue of the artist's interpretation of Venus. Long hair spilled over her shoulders and clear to her knees. In a half hearted, teasing manner, Venus was frozen in the act of trying to cover her naked body with her long, thick hair.

One night, when they were in high school, McNeil pointed out the fact that the statue was of the Roman goddess.
"That's Venus," McNeil said. "She's the one them gladiators always used to fight over."

Gayton had always been impressed with Mcneil's intelligence. Though he had never graduated high school, Macniel was a voracious reader and his breadth of knowledge was far more vast than that of Gayton, college degree or not.

Gayton watched as a man and two women stumbled out of the Palomino club. They laughed and reeled as they ambled across the courtyard toward Paluco's. A microphoned voice rose and fell from inside the Club Las Vegas and Gayton recognised it as the voice of the same pimp who had always M.c'd the floor show there. From Paluco's the notes of a trumpet roiled through the courtyard, and the rest of the Mariache band picked up the beat as they began a discordant version of La Cucaracha. From one of the cafes the smell of chile rellenos laced through the overbearing woodsmoke, and Gayton felt a tinge of nostalgia. Somehow he was uncomfortable with the feeling, kind of ashamed of how he liked his memories so much.

Kelly moved up and leaned against the bed of the truck beside him. "Been a long time since you been here Pete," Kelly said.

Gayton nodded, looking across the square.

Kelly turned and leaned his back against the truck, "Where the hell is Charley," he said. "He's the birthday boy."
"He'll be here."

"Seventeen years old," Kelly said. "I bet that kid's never been laid." Kelly spit between his boots and chuckled.

McNeil flipped away his cigarette and strode to the other side of the truck bed. He removed his glasses and cleaned them with his shirttail, then held them up, checking them against the light. "Let's go inside, Petey," he said. "Been a while since you've seen a floor show here."

"I think your pinhead little brother chickened out anyway," Kelly said contemptuously.

"Maybe," McNeil said. He put his glasses back on and stared at Kelly a few seconds. "I think you just came to see your wife, anyway."

"You play hell, too, McNeil," Kelly popped. "She's just a bag of bones to me."

"You a regular customer, Bill," Gayton chided.

"No, but you gotta see this girl, Pete," Kelly said. Inside the Las Vegas were the familiar odors of urine, booze and perfume. A drunk middle-aged Mexican man danced La Cumbia with one of the whores on the plywood runway, which was raised from the floor on cinderblocks. The man ogled his scantily clad partner, clapped his hands and hooted as onlookers, sitting around the runway, shouted encouragement. The bored looking bartender, maybe twenty, leered up at them from behind his magazine.

They took a table near the runway where the whore now danced alone, stamping her feet and rotating her near-middle-aged hips in the mechanical manner brought on by too many years of this kind of work. As the three sat down with their drinks, she immediately moved toward them. She gyrated on the edge of the runway above their table, and with a practiced left hand, loosed her negligee which dropped at Kelly's feet, leaving herself clad in only black panties.

Kelly picked the garment up and raised it triumphantly over his head, then emitted another high pitched cowboy holler that, for a moment, drowned out the music on the jukebox. A chorus of laughter rolled among the men at the tables as Kelly buried his face in the negligee, and the whore laughed so hard she lost a couple of steps to the music.

Gayton ordered another round of drinks as "Chubby", the owner of the place, set up his microphone and bongo drums for the floor show. Chubby always scooted one of the whores out on the floor before the show in order to prime the customers for the coming attractions.

The microphone in place, the old man tapped it a couple of times with his finger. "Oyes, Vaquero's!" he shouted, opening his monologue. With a showman's prowess he pinched his salt and pepper goatee and looked at the floor as though in deep contemplation. After a moment, he began to rattle off a variation of the same spiel he
had always used, stressing the fact to his customers that
they had come to the finest stable of women in northern
Sonora. Periodically he made a joke which brought
laughter from the men at the tables. As he spoke, his
ruby earring glinted, catching light from the different
colored show lamps above him.

Gayton could only understand about a third of what he
said. Having lived away so long, his Spanish had
faltered. He used to enjoy being in on Chubby's little
jokes while his friends at the table with him were shut
out.

As Chubby had begun his monologue, one of the bar
whores had sat down at their table. At the moment Kelly
was buying her drinks and trying futilely to communicate
with her in broken Spanish. "Graciela," he said. "Donde
esta?"

The whore scowled and raised her empty snifter.
"Corvasielles" she said.

Kelly nudged Gayton. "Ask her if Graciela is working
tonight."

"Va a bailar Graciela, hoy?" Gayton asked her.

The whore shrugged then leaned forward, putting her
hands on Gayton's thighs. "No quieres sucky-fucky con
migo?"

"Graciela, you stupid bitch," Kelly shouted, slapping
his hand on the table so hard the rest of them flinched.

McNeil, used to defusing trouble when Kelly was
around, grabbed him quickly by the collar. "Shut the fuck up, Kelly," he said. "You want to get us all in a lot of trouble." McNeil kept hold of Kelly's shirt until the tension went from his shoulders.

"Okay, Goddamnit," Kelly said grabbing at McNeil's hand, "I'm alright now."

After McNeil let go of his shirt, Kelly pulled a wad of bills from his pocket. He held a five in front of the whore's face. "Tell her I'll give her this if she just takes me to Gracie's room."

Gayton told her. The girl stood up and shrugged her shoulders, "Vaminos," she hissed at Kelly. Bill stood up and followed the girl. They wound through the tables and out the side door which led to the whores' cribs.

"What the hell's with him?" Gayton asked.

McNeil took off his glasses and began to clean them with a cocktail napkin. "He's just an asshole," he said, checking the glasses and putting them back on. "Just like he's always been."

Gayton and McNeil sat quietly as Chubby announced the next dancer onto the runway. She wore a powder blue evening gown that billowed around her as she moved. This effect was achieved with the assistance of a portable electric fan which the girl had placed on the runway specifically for her routine. With a magician's slight of hand, she loosed the gown which tumbled to the floor. Perhaps in her middle thirties, the woman wore her dyed blond hair in a stiff bouffant which rose some three or
four inches above her head. Though quite homely, she had such poise and confidence that she exuded a certain attractiveness.

"I think they're getting uglier," Gayton said.

"No they're not," McNeil said as he lit a cigarette. "You've just remembered them prettier for homesickness."

McNeil was right. He never failed to surprise Gayton with his quick and incisive honesty. Though the years Pete had lived away from home had put a kind of distance between them, McNeil never seemed uncomfortable around him when he came to visit. Gayton, however, always felt a little awkward for the first few hours he was around his old friends.

Gayton had moved away from Nogales when he was nineteen to attend college at Northern Arizona University. After five and a half years he had earned a BS in English, not so much for any structured ambition he had had toward the subject, but simply because it was what he had the most credits in.

After high school Kelly and McNeil both took jobs in Nogales, AZ, McNeil at his grandfather's cattle ranch, and Kelly at the power company. After two years of his grandfather's rigid and outdated work ethic, as well as wages, a good word to the boss from Kelly got McNeil hired on at Southwestern Gas and Electric. They had worked there together ever since.

Both Kelly and McNeil, in different ways, harbored a
tinge of resentment for Gayton's college status. Subsequently, they teased him unmercifully for it.

"How bout that college panocha," Kelly would ask enviously, "them girls know how to treat a guy."

If the truth was known, Gayton had never dated what he considered a "real" college girl. Those smooth skinned debutantes were usually willing to let him take them to a movie or two, but tended to lose interest after a couple of dates. In retrospect, Gayton realized that they probably sensed his lack of direction in life and general disinterest in any kind of professional career.

After college, Gayton lived with a girl named Amy, from Detroit, for a year and a half. They had dated a few months during his last year of college, but after moving in together their relationship soon began to fall apart. That was the closest Gayton had come to marriage. Both McNeil and Kelly had already been married and divorced.

In the five years since his graduation, Gayton had held a number of worthless jobs in Tucson and Phoenix; construction worker, waiter, bartender. The reason he had come back to Nogales was to try to land a good paying job with the county, for which his uncle had been a foreman for many years.

When it came down to it, Gayton figured he was no better off than Kelly and McNeil, certainly not financially, despite his college degree. And McNeil, in some ways, was still much brighter than he, something he had secretly hoped the degree would change. With a
little applied concentration, though, Gayton could scare up a couple of lines from Shakespeare. That was about all he figured he had on his old buddies. And for all of it, Shakespeare didn't carry much weight in a bar full of Nogales rednecks.

Finished with the first part of her routine, the woman with the dyed blond hair gathered up her blue gown and stepped off of the runway. To Gayton's surprise, she walked right up to their table. For a moment she stood there, arms akimbo, apparently undisturbed by the fact, except for a rhinestone necklace, that she was stark naked. Her uninhibited gaze shifted between the two young men a moment, then she reached over and plucked McNeil's hat from his head.

"?Que pasa, Yonny?" She said to McNeil, donning his red and white John Deer cap. It took a little effort to get the hat on her head for the hairdo. When it was snugly in place, she gestured for a smoke with her fingers.

"Que pasa yourself, Yevonn," McNeil said, handing her a cigarette. "What you been up to?"

She shrugged, and despite the effort she had made, she removed the hat and put it back on McNeil's head, shoving it playfully down to his eyebrows. It appeared to Gayton that the woman had kidnapped the hat for the small ransom of one cigarette.
"Who is jor fring?" she said. As she bent over the table for McNeil to light the cigarette, her breasts swung forward, a few inches from Gayton's face. They struck Gayton as looking awkward, somehow sad, worn with stretch marks.

"He is hansing," she said, looking at Gayton, though still addressing McNeil.

"Well, the son of a bitch knows that," McNeil said. "You don't have to tell him."

Her stare was so lecherous that Gayton himself felt naked. Many of the whores there, especially the older ones, had no qualms about looking a man over, but her stare was so imposing that Gayton was a little unnerved.

Without asking, she picked up Gayton's beer and took a long drink off it. "You Mescan or white boy?" she said, setting the beer back in front of him. The tone of her question was a mixture of contempt and curiosity. It surprised Gayton so much that, for a moment, he wasn't able to answer.

"Neither and both," McNeil said. "He's a halfbreed."

"I can answer my own questions," Gayton said resentfully. McNeil always teased him about being half Mexican when he wanted to make a dig.

"Suit yourself," McNeil said.

Yevonne tweeked Macniel under the chin and put his arm around her waist. "You come here to see me?" she asked.
"Just to see you dance," McNeil said, patting her on the hip. "I'm entertaining my friend tonight."

"Jou take me on a big date again," she asked, her tone becoming uncharacteristically girlish.

"Sometime."

"Sometime," Yevonne said, with a trace of contempt. "Manana, manana y manana." With this she turned and ambled back toward the runway.

As Yevonne moved between the tables a group of three young men on the other side of the runway tried to hail her. She ignored them, slapping away their hands as they reached for her.

"She's something, isn't she?" McNeil said.

"Yea," Gayton agreed. He eyed McNeil a moment. "You getting to be a regular, too?" McNeil smiled down at the table. He looked embarrassed. "Came in here drunk as shit one night right after me and Joy broke up. No money and horny as hell. I ended up promising her a date."

Very often the girls there would freelance on their nights off to make extra money. Sometimes, on these nights, whores would take payment in the form of a promised date in lieu of money. And they made sure the date cost at least double what it would have up front. If you took the merchandise and welshed on the date, you were better off not to set foot in the Nogales red-light district again.
"I imagine you were lonely, too," Gayton said.

"That, too, I guess,"

Though Gayton had known him for almost twenty years, McNeil was always aloof when it came to personal matters. "What's the story with this Graciela and Kelly?" Gayton said, changing the subject.

McNeil shook his head. "He's got it wall crawling bad for her Pete." Mcneil took a drink of his beer and leaned his elbows on the table. "He comes here three or four times a week."

Gayton raised his eyebrows. "That's a lot," he said. "Daytime too," McNeil said, "Takes her shopping, out on dates, the whole shot. He's even been trying to talk her into not seeing other customers."

Gayton shook his head. "Good luck."

"I had to lend him fifty bucks last month for rent. I'm seriously worried about him, he's like a goddamn junkie."

"Remember Joey Hartman?" Gayton asked.

McNeil nodded. "Yea, poor little bastard."

Joey Hartman, who they had hung around with in high school, fell in love with a whore named Gloria when he was sixteen. Gloria worked at Club Flamingo. She was well into her forties, could not speak English and had a large protruding mole on her left cheek. Hartman considered her quite beautiful.

"Hartman had the clap so many times he forgot what it was like to piss without pain," McNeil said.
They laughed, more comfortably now. Gayton felt he was beginning to loosen up more with McNeil.

"You think Kelly found her," he asked.

McNeil nodded, "You bet. He'd be out by now if he hadn't."

"Does he stay all night?"

"No. She won't let him," McNeil said. "He'll be out directly, looking happy as hell. He'll try to talk her into sitting at the table here, and she'll be trying to get away."

"What's she like?"

"Good looking, but a little sour-faced. I think Kelly's mostly an annoyance to her. But she'll take him for all the poor dumb bastard's worth."

"He never had the brains God gave a box of rocks," Gayton said.

After the floor show Gayton and McNeil waited around a few minutes at the Las Vegas for Kelly. When he did not appear from the side door after a while, they figured he had bought another couple of hours worth of time from Graciela. With this, they left and started across the way to the Flamingo.

As they walked across the dirt courtyard, Gayton noticed the old familiar click of billiard balls from the pool hall perpendicular to the Las Vegas. Inside the quiet building, the most lighted in the plaza, men bent
seriously over the tables. Outside the pool hall in the
cool air stood three transvestites in a circle, all
smoking cigarettes. One of them came on to Gayton and
McNeil as they passed.

"Oyes, white boys," The transvestite hailed in an
affected falseto. "Barato, muy cheap!"

"The goddamn pickles are thick anymore."

"Pickles" was the nickname long used by the U.S.
locals for the transvestites who solicited in the red
light district. Though the idea was detestable to Gayton,
men often purchased the favors of a transvestite less
expensively. It seemed it was enough that they merely
dressed like women.

"Peso devaluation," McNeil said. "Some of these
vaqueros can't afford real pussy."

Just as they walked up to the entrance of the
Flamingo club, McNeil stopped and eyed a pair of
headlights just turning into the parking lot. "My
brother," McNeil said. "I didn't think the little pecker-
head was coming."

They waited in front of the club while Charley
parked. McNeil waved the two boys over when they stepped
out of the car. In Charley's hand was a bottle of Jim
Beam. "That's why they're late," McNeil said as Charley
trotted up to them. "Had to booze up enough for courage."

"Well I guess it's too bad for you, Charley," McNeil
said to his brother. "All the the whorehouses are
closed."

"Really?" Charley said, a trace of panic in his face.

Gayton and McNeil laughed at the boy's disappointed expression.

"You still gonna pay to get me laid, aren't you?" Charley asked, still a bit out of breath from his little jog.

McNeil took the bottle from Charley's hand. "I guess so," he said, taking a drink of the whiskey.

After a moment Brian Kiel, Charley's best friend, walked up to them. Gayton had not seen these boys in a couple of years and was struck by how grown-up they looked.

"How you doing, Pete," Charley asked, affecting an adulthood in his voice.

"Alright, I guess," Gayton said, shaking Charley's hand. "Jesus, you guys were yard apes a couple years ago."

"They're still yard apes," McNeil said.

"Do I get my pick, John?" Charley asked.

"Nothing less," McNeil said.

"Brian might buy him a whore, too," Charley added.

"That right?" McNeil asked Brian.

Kiel fidgeted, jamming his hands into his pockets.

"Maybe," he said.

"How much money you have?"

"Eight," Kiel said as though it were a lot, although
there probably wasn't a girl in the square who wouldn't settle for eight dollars if bartered with properly.

"Oh, that'll get you a beauty," McNeil said. "She probly have just a couple warts for that much."

"Well, lets do something," Charley snapped.

"A little patience would suit you better, Chuck," McNeil said to his brother. "I think you ought to have a look around at some of the girls before you make your decision." McNeil turned then and started down the walk in front of the clubs, the whiskey bottle dangling from his hand.

Gayton knew McNeil was up to something and fell in beside him. "What is it?" he asked.

"Thought we'd stop by the Tarantula."

"All the pickles still hang around there?"

McNeil nodded, a faint grin on his face. "Just a little fun," he said. "That's all."

The four of them stood outside a few minutes to kill the bottle, then stepped inside. Gayton could see immediately that every ostensible woman there was a transvestite. When he and McNeil sat down at the bar the boys did the same. No more than a minute had passed before a transvestite in a blond wig and wearing a vinyl minnie skirt slinked up to Brian. He slid his hand along the youth's shoulders and fixed his most sensual gaze on him.

"Buy me drink?" The transvestite said.

Surprised and somewhat at a loss, Brian just
stared at him. After a moment he reached in his pocket and pulled out a wadded dollar bill. Immediately, the bartender snatched the money from his hand.

"You don't have to buy them drinks, Brian," Gayton said, feeling a little sorry for the hoodwinked youth.

Kiel looked at the bartender, his face drawn in a regretful expression at having lost one of his precious few dollar bills. But the bartender had built the drink quickly and already set it down in front of the transvestite, whose lecherous stare had not yet wavered from Brian.

"Hey," Charley said suddenly. "I think I see the one I want right now." Charley was pointing his finger, as if aiming a gun, across the room at the most obvious transvestite in the place.

He leaned over the jukebox in the corner, making a show of moving his hips to the music as he pretended to study the grid of lighted selections. He was a good six feet and wore a colorful flowered dress and a pair of bright red pumps.

Gayton felt his diaphragm flex and bit down hard on his lower lip to keep from laughing.

Deadpan, without a hint of a smile, McNeil turned to his brother. "Go get her, Chuck," he said.

Charley ran his fingers back through his hair and pushed himself from the bar. "I like 'em tall like that," he said. As though to gather his courage, Charley hitched
up his pants and began weaving between the tables toward the jukebox.

Gayton was no longer able to hold back. Quietly as possible, he let go his restrained laughter.

"What the hell is going on?" Kiel asked.

Not able to speak at the moment, Gayton simply shook his head. After a moment McNeil touched him on the shoulder. "Look here," McNeil said, pointing toward Charley who now stood just behind the transvestite. Gayton and McNeil began to laugh out loud.

"What the hell is it?" Kiel demanded.

Charley had heard their laughter and looked over at them a little puzzled. Still, intent on his endeavor just the same, he tapped the transvestite on the shoulder.

A little startled, he turned quickly around to face Charley. For a moment the transvestite had lost his feminine guise, and Charley was almost slugged.

Startled himself at this reaction, Charley backed off a step. After a moment he said something to the transvestite which the others couldn't hear. Then the transvestite smiled and stepped up to him. He took Charley by the hand and led him to the middle of the floor where they began to slow dance.

Gayton and McNeil howled as Charley hugged him close. Hearing their laughter, Charley grinned at them innocently over the transvestites shoulder and gave the "thumbs-up" sign.

McNeil giggled and shook his head. "You dumb
bastard," he said.

With a befuddled expression Kiel watched on, "I don't get what's so funny," he said.

The transvestite began running his hands along Charley's back and then down his buttocks. After a few more dance steps he began squeezing Charley's rear end, kneading it like a bowl of dough.

"I don't know if I like that," McNeil said.

Then they were kissing, the transvestite's tongue plunging greedily into Charley's mouth. The ribald humor of the moment had suddenly fled, leaving in its wake a sobering quiet that dropped like a rock between McNeil and Gayton.

McNeil rose and walked over to them. After a moment Gayton and Brian followed. McNeil took Charley by the arm and pulled him away.

"What the hell," Charley said.

McNeil and the transvestite glared at each other for a full ten seconds.

"Pinche baboso," the transvestite spat. He kicked off the red pumps which clattered across the floor, then poised himself in what seemed to be a well trained fighter's stance.

As McNeil raised his fists, Gayton stepped between them. "Jesus, John," he said, taking his friend by the shoulder.

But the two men continued their warlike stare even
as Gayton pulled McNeil away.

"Valla sen, pinche gringos," the transvestite said, pointing at the door. "Valla sen,"

They stepped out of the Tarantula into the neon lit courtyard. Gayton and McNeil walked silently ahead while the two boys shuffled along behind. Gayton didn't know if Charley and Brian understood exactly what had happened, but their mood had changed from excitement to quiet disappointment. The four of them were moving toward the Las Vegas club where the truck was parked.

As they passed the Bonita Vista, McNeil stopped, peering through the entrance into the smoky club. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the two boys. "Come on, you guys," he said. "Let's get you laid."

"Yea!" Charley exclaimed, clapping his oversized hands together.

Inside the Bonita Vista a haze of cigarette smoke hung just above the scattered folding card tables and aluminum chairs. Among the tables and along the bar sat late night customers, drunks and tired whores. A song too fast and lively for the mood of the place rattled from the jukebox and an old man, almost too drunk to walk, danced as though the song were a waltz with an apathetic girl a third his age.

Gayton ordered four Teqates while the others stood stiffly, facing away from the bar. After a couple minutes, a whore in her late thirtys walked up.
"Sucky, fucky, chimacos?" she said to the two boys with an ironic grin.

Brian and Charley, dumbfounded, looked at each other and giggled.

McNeil sat down on a barstool and took out his wallet. He removed fifteen dollars and held it up in front of the whore. He nodded toward Brian and Charley. "Los dos," he said to her.

The woman turned down the corners of her mouth and stared at the bills as though she doubted their authenticity.

"No way," Charley interjected. He nodded toward a pair of teenaged girls sitting a few seats down the bar. "We want them two."

McNeil looked thoughtfully at the money in his hand. After a moment he folded the two bills in half. "I'll tell you what," McNeil said. "I'll leave the money and let you two shift for yourselves."

"Sure," Charley agreed.

"Pete and I gotta see if we can go dig up Bill. You be finished when I get back."

"No problem," Charley said.

As they walked to the Las Vegas, Gayton could tell that McNeil was still upset, but could think of nothing to say to him. Finally McNeil spoke. "God, that still bugs me about that pickle," he said. "It gives me the creeps to think about it."
"Don't," Gayton said. "Charley hasn't figured it out anyway."

"He will, though--some day."

The Las Vegas was all but empty. The stage lamps were out and the plywood runway rose tackily in the middle of the floor. A couple of late customers dickered with annoyed whores while a man at their table lay asleep on his folded arms, his tattered Fiadore Stetson askew on his head. At a table close to the bar sat a young Mexican and a very drunk young whore.

Gayton described Kelly to the bartender and asked if he had seen him.

In the process of closing down, the bartender merely shrugged and continued washing glasses.

It annoyed Gayton that the bartender acted as though his Spanish was indecipherable. It was a common trick that Sonorans pulled on Spanish speaking Americans.

"Bullshit," McNeil said to the bartender. "You know who he is. He's in here all the time."

The bartender quit washing glasses and looked thoughtfully at McNeil. But after a moment he shrugged and resumed his task.

"Your friend that stocky guy in the cowboy hat?" said the young Mexican from his table.

When Gayton and McNeil walked up, the Mexican ordered the girl from the table and told her to wait for him in her room. With a scowl the girl wobbled to her feet, then stumbled out the side door to the whore's
cribs.

"Do you know where he is?" Gayton asked.

"No," the Mexican said. "But I know he's in pretty bad trouble."

McNeil took off his glasses and began to clean them with a cocktail napkin he had taken from the bar.

The Mexican took a draw from his cigarette and blew a funnel of smoke into the air. "He beat shit out of one of the girls tonight," he said. "Hurt her pretty bad, I guess. Broke her arm or something."

"That's bad news," McNeil said, checking his glasses against the dim fluorescent light behind the bar. "It doesn't answer our question, but it's bad news just the same."

"Chubby doesn't like his girls banged up very much," the Mexican said, "especially by white boys."

McNeil nodded and put his glasses back on. "I understand that," he said.

"I don't know a lot because I'm not from around here," the Mexican said. "I'm from Douglas and it's not very good for me to know a lot."

"And that's what we'll tell anyone who might ask." McNeil said. "We'll say that you didn't."

"Then if I was you," the Mexican said. "I would look for my friend in the jail. But like I say, I really don't know."

Gayton glanced up, surprised to see Yevonne standing just inside the doorway of the side entrance. Though
apparently not drunk, her eyes were red-rimmed and her dyed blond hair in disarray. She wore a fancy kimono type bath robe and guarache sandals. She looked as though she had just climbed out of bed. "Ven te," she hissed angrily at Gayton. "I want you pinche putos to see something."

They followed Yevonne outside where the girls rooms were located. The rooms where set up in two wings which connected in an L shape to the main bar, like a cheap single floor motel or apartment complex. Yevonne moved along the sidewalk while McNeil and Gayton straggled apprehensively behind. Scraps of conversation, music and general noise spilled from open doors and windows as they passed.

Through one of the windows Gayton caught a glimpse of a girl sitting on the edge of her bed. Though he wasn't sure why, he paused to watch her a moment. She sipped on a Pepsi and stared across the room. For a second Gayton had the deja vu sensation that he was standing in Allen Hall, a girls dormatory at NAU. It wasn't that much different, really. She could have been any coed he'd ever seen, relaxing after a long day of classes.

McNeil and Yevonne stood in front of a room a few doors down. Yevonne knocked and waited, then entered after a faint voice had come from inside.

When Gayton reached the room, he saw McNeil standing just inside the doorway. He was looking at something. As
Gayton stepped inside he saw what it was. In the corner, on her bed, sat a girl of about 19. She sat with her knees against her chest and was rocking slowly back and forth. Except for a blanket draped around her shoulders, she was completely naked. Her long dark hair spilled over the blanket to veil her small breasts. On her right arm she wore a splint, wrapped tight in a dirty yellow gauze. Clinched in her right fist was a rosary, its tiny cross dangling just below her tightened knuckles. As she rocked back and forth, the girl muttered an incantational string of Spanish words. It took Gayton a moment to realize she was reciting The Lord's Prayer.

On the floor below the bed Yevonne sat on her knees, looking up at the girl. She had joined her in her prayer. For a moment Gayton, having recited it so many times himself in church as a child, felt compelled to join them. He looked over at McNiel whose expression indicated very little—perhaps something that lingered between bemusement and pitty. Gayton could seldom tell what he was thinking.

The girl's room was very small, maybe 12 by 14. Her few meager belongings seemed to fill it entirely. A Godseye, a tacky print of Christ, posters of Mexican celebrities, photographs of family members hung on the yellowed walls. In the corner, opposite the bed, was a small hand built vanity and a chest of drawers. Though inchoate, the furniture was skillfully built. One of the framed photos on the vanity was of a young man in uniform, although Gayton couldn't tell which; police or military.
He was likely her brother, perhaps a lover. Another photo was of a man in late middle-age, maybe her father. Gayton fancied him the same man who had built the furniture.

The most striking thing in her room was a twelve inch color television set. Raised from the floor on a wooden crate, it peered over the foot of her bed like an alien intruder, incongruous with the other things in her room. Though it had been almost ten years since Gayton had been in a whore's crib, he couldn't remember any of them having a television set.

The set was on, but the volume had been turned down. At the moment a Merryl Lynch commercial played. A glamorous looking woman in fancy clothes trotted down concrete steps and across the street where and equally fashionable young man waited for her in a sports car. As the happy couple sped away, the camera zoomed back to a high view of the shining skyscrapers in the posh urban background. The closing shot was of a black bull loping to the crest of a grass covered hill. The caption read: Merryl Lynch is bullish on America.

"Me duele," the girl said suddenly. She looked up at McNeil and Gayton as though it wasn't until this very moment that she was aware of their presence in her room. She cradled the injured arm to her smooth belly and repeated herself, "Me duele," she said, it hurts me. Though she didn't say it like she was whining, but simply stating a matter of fact.

"She needs a doctor," McNeil said.
"He came," Yevonne said to him, though still looking at the girl.

"What about the pain?" Gayton asked.

Yevonne looked over her shoulder at him. She narrowed her eyes in a hateful glare. "Pinche gabacho," she spat. "Fucking white-boy."

The girl shifted in her bed then. A little selfconscious, she pulled the blanket down to cover her breasts and crotch. With her uninjured arm, she pulled her hair back behind her shoulders and examined the two strangers in her room. Though her right eye was almost swelled shut and her upper lip protruded irregularly, Gayton could see she was quite beautiful. Rather indifferently, she studied them both, her brown eyes shifting from one to the other. Then with a wave of her hand, she motioned toward the door. "Vallanse me casa," she said. "Vallanse."

The sky was just turning blue with the approaching dawn when they walked back to the Linda Vista to pick up Charley and Brian. The place was completely empty except for the bartender who was closing down, and Charley and Brian with the two young whores sitting at a table in back. Both boys had an arm proudly around the shoulders of their respective girls, as though they were their dates at a junior prom.

"Hello, hello," Charley said to them with a cocky grin.
"You boneheads get your business done?" McNeil asked.

Charley looked at Brian with a smirk.

"Hell yes, we did!" Kiel slurred boisterously, obviously very drunk. By the neck, he pulled his girl toward him and nuzzled his face in her ear. With a consternate smile, the girl freed herself from his headlock and pulled away.

"This one's name is Margarita," Charley said, nodding toward the girl beside him. The girl averted her eyes. Fourteen at the very most, she kept her hands folded in her lap and her hair was pinned back on either side with barretts. She looked almost as if her mother or an older sister had primped her for her first date.

Charley motioned to Brian's girl. "That one there's Mercedes," he said. This girl, a few years older, eyed McNeil and Gayton suspiciously as she lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the side of her mouth. Though not over 18, she wore the jaded veneer of a woman 20 years her senior.

"Hell yes," Brian slurred again. "We tore 'em a new one, didn't we Charley?"

Charley looked up at his brother apologetically. "You should have seen it, John," he said. "It was awesome. Brian drank half a bottle of tequila all by himself."

McNeil nodded impatiently. "Fine," he said. "If you've paid these girls we need to go."

"Okay, John," Charley said. But he didn't move from
his chair. Instead, he sat there confused, looking back and forth between the two girls. Finally, he looked up at his brother. "I just don't know how to say good-bye, that's all," he said.

"They don't care if you say good-bye, or fuck you," McNeil said, "long as you've paid them."

When they stepped out into the courtyard it was almost dawn, light enough to see the truck parked in front of the Las Vegas a couple hundred feet away. McNeil walked quickly to the pickup and waited there for the rest of them.

When Gayton reached the truck he leaned his elbows on the tailgate while Charley and Brian, chattering noisily, walked up after him.

"I wan't you and Brian to get back across the line, Charley," McNeil said.

"What for?"

"Pete and I have to go get Bill and I want you back across."

Gayton rubbed his eyes and thought about what he had to say. The booze had worn off a while back and he could already feel the approaching hangover lingering just behind his brow. His stomach was a little upset and he felt drowsy. He didn't feel like having a confrontation, but he had waited long enough. "John," he said. "I'm not going with you to get Bill."

Slowly, McNeil walked around to the side of the truck. He leaned against the bed and stared off into the
distance, his jaw working like a pulse just below his ear.

"Hell, I'll go," Charley said. He had sat down on the sidewalk in front of the Las Vegas.

McNeil ignored him. He removed the round wire-rimmed glasses and began to clean them with the flap of his shirt.

Meanwhile, Brian Kiel had wandered out to the statue in the middle of the courtyard. He sat at the base, hugging one of her copper legs at the ankle and muttering something the rest of them couldn't hear.

"Jesus," McNeil said. "Talking to a goddamn statue. Charley, go do something about that."

Immediately, Charley rose and started out to the middle of the courtyard.

Though the situation was kind of amusing, Gayton could only muster a faint smile.

McNeil pushed his glasses back on his head and spat into the bed of the truck. "You know, Pete," he said. "I feel as bad as you do about what happened to that girl. But the sad truth is that she's a whore, and in her business--especially down here--she's going to get beat up once in a while."

"The sad truth is that Kelly's the one who did it."

"Pete, if it wasn't Kelly, it would have been someone else."

"That doesn't wash, John."

"Well, what the hell do you want to do, just leave
him there? They'll either kill him or keep him there for good unless someone comes after him."

"He deserves to be there."

"Shit!" McNeil said, exasperated.

Charley returned then, sitting down at his place on the sidewalk. "Brian says he ain't coming," Charley said. "Says he's not leaving the pretty lady."

"To hell with him then," McNeil popped. "We'll just leave him here."

Gayton pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He lifted out his last five dollars and threw the bill in the bed of the truck. "That's all the money I have left," he said. "But you can take it if you think it might help."

"That's not the point, Gayton," McNeil said. "I need your help. You speak better Spanish than I do."

"That five dollar bill is a lot more bilingual than me."

"That's still not the point, goddamnit. I have plenty of money. I don't need your fucking money."

Suddenly, Brian began to vomit, his wretching audible from the middle of the courtyard. He sat at the base of the statue with his head between his knees, his long dishwasher hair hanging around his face.

"That's all the help I can offer, John. I'm sorry."

"Hey, John," Charley spoke up from the sidewalk. "I'm going with you to get Bill. I made up my mind. The only way you can stop me is kick my ass."

Still staring at Gayton, McNeil nodded. "Give Pete
your car keys and get in the truck."

Quickly, Charley rose and scurried around to the back of the truck. He gave Pete the keys, and with a renewed energy, climbed into the passengers side, slamming the door.

"I might just kick your ass anyway—for good measure," McNeil said to his brother through the open window on the driver's side. McNeil opened the door then and looked at Gayton. "Go ahead and take your money back, I don't need it."

"I'd feel better if you took it anyway."

"Suit yourself," McNeil said. He started to climb into the truck, but stopped in mid-motion. For a moment he just stood staring at the ground. Then, with a quick backward movement, he slammed the door hard, opened it and slammed it hard twice more. After that he began kicking the truck. He laid his boot half a dozen times into the door and sidewall, leaving several dents. Startled, Charley piled out the other side.

McNeil turned and took a couple of steps toward Gayton. "Pete," he said, restraining his anger. "We've known Kelly since we were ten years old."

Gayton had raised his fists, ready for McNeil's attack.

"Put your hands down, Pete. I'm not coming after you."

They stood there looking at each other a second. McNeil's glasses had fallen to the ground when he was
kicking the truck. His pale blue eyes looked naked and vulnerable without them.

"That girl wasn't just slapped around a little," Gayton said. "She was hurt bad. I'm tired of Kelly's bullshit. That bastard deserves what he gets."

"I agree with you. And if you help me get him out, you can kick his ass, personally. Hell, I'll even hold him down for you. But this is Mexico, Pete, Mexico."

"I know," Gayton said. "And a quarter mile north is the United States."

McNeil looked at him like he was crazy. "Let's just take a moment to contemplate this profound thought," McNeil said sarcastically. "Am I supposed to make some kind of elliptical connection here? I don't get it, Pete. College boy like you ought to do better than that."

Gayton looked at the ground. He felt stupid now for having said it.

McNeil opened the truck door. "I guess this is what happens when you educate a good Mexican."

The comment stung at Gayton's insides. "That was beneath you, John," he said. "You'll feel like shit for having said it." McNeil lifted his cap and ran his fingers back through his hair. He looked at Gayton a moment more, then climbed into the truck.

Gayton didn't watch as McNeil drove out of the courtyard. The rear tires chirped as the truck pulled onto the paved road that headed south toward the prison. Gayton walked to the middle of the square where Brian
still sat dry heaving beneath the statue of Venus.

"I'm not leaving," the kid said, spitting into the foamy puddle between his feet.

"I think we'd better," Gayton said patiently. "It's already morning."

Brian just stared down at his vomit. Then, quite suddenly and without warning, the kid began to cry—slow deep sobs as though his heart would break. "You know that whore, Peat," he said, catching back his breath. "that girl I was with?"

"What about her?"

"I didn't do nothing with her," Brian said. "Not a damn thing."

Pete couldn't help but smile. "No crime," he said.

Brian teetered to his feet then, and Gayton caught him under the arm. "Well, I'm coming back," the kid said. "You can be damn sure on that."
The Snake Tattoo

As he stood in the kitchen, Tony Garcia watched a certain girl through the window. She was mingling with the college boys in the backyard. As she flirted, she tossed her blonde hair and canted her hips from side to side. He had not spoken to her yet, but he intended to before the night was over.

At the same time he watched the girl, he could see his own reflection in the windowpane. The t-shirt was just tight enough to enhance the muscles in his upper body, and the right sleeve covered about half of the new tattoo. Although it was just an inky blur in the glass, he could imagine the colors and how it had taken form right there on his arm a few nights ago. The tattoo had been a birthday gift from his brother, Eddie. He felt a surge of excitement as he remembered the smell of the ink, the sting of the tattoo gun and the black and green snake curling up around the dagger. He thought about Pantillo, the best in South Tucson, his greasy hair sticking out from the sides of his bald head, lips pursed and eyes squinting down through his bifocals at his work.

When Pantillo had finished he dabbed the stray droplets of blood off Tony's arm with a kleenex.

"Es Arte," Tony said very seriously.
Pantillo thumped the tattoo with his middle finger, and turned down the corners of his mouth. "Es nada, pindejo," he said. "It's nothing."

Tony propped his shoulder against the wall and cracked the plastic beer cup between his fingers. He could no longer see the girl. She was lost somewhere in the swarm of college kids; twenty dollar hair cuts, pastel colored clothes, expensive tennis shoes. They all looked the same when there were a lot of them in one place.

He began to look around for his brother, Eddie. When they had first gotten to the party, Tony felt more comfortable in the house. Now that the kitchen had become crowded he felt stupid and out of place, standing there by himself. He walked into the living room trying to act smooth and relaxed, but he could feel his movements were self-conscious, mechanical.

Rock and Roll music pounded off the walls, and the place was full of noisy, chattering people Tony didn't know. Two girls sat playing backgammon on the floor in the corner. A noisy group of frat boys, all wearing the same color sweaters, passed around a bottle of Cuervo as they stood talking by the stair-well. Half a dozen people sat around the coffee table, passing along a joint. As the tart odor of marijuana laced itself through the room, Tony thought about earlier:

"When these college kids want the good dope, man,"
Eddie had told him, "that south-side shit, they know where to look." Not knowing north Tucson well, it had taken them a little while to find the place, driving up and down the streets near the university.

"Right here. This is the place," Eddie had said.

Tony parked his Chevelle in front of the big brick house. It had a lot of windows, a big front patio, and a lawn that looked like it was mowed every week. Above the front doors were some words in French: *Dieu, Les Dames, et Le Vin.* Above that were three Greek letters, large and painted in white. "What do the letters mean?" he asked.

"Gamma culeros, man," Eddie said. They burst out laughing. "Gamma ass-fuckers," Eddie repeated as if the joke would be funny a second time in English.

The girl was there when they walked into the house. She had very green eyes, and long blonde hair like a lion's mane which she occasionally swept behind one shoulder. Getting things ready for the party, she occasionally walked through the living room where Tony and Eddie sat with the two frat boys, Ross and John.

"Sweet," Ross said, sniffing the fat baggie of pot Eddie had handed him. "Lots of buds." Ross glanced over at John who held a small grey strongbox in his lap.

John opened the box and pulled out a stack of bills. He walked over to Eddie and counted several twenties out into his hand.

Because of the girl, Tony was glad when Ross invited
them to stay for the party, but now he felt uncomfortable and just wanted to go back to the south side. He'd been too shy all night to talk to her, anyway. His cousin's wedding would be starting about now, and Lupe, his fiance, expected him to be there. Moreover, he just felt the urge to be around people he knew.

Tony walked into the hallway, looking for a bathroom. He also hoped to find Eddie somewhere. As he crowded by several people, two girls stared at his tattoo. Standing there with them was a large, stout young man. "Nice tattoo," he said.

Tony's heart raced as he heard the sarcasm in the guy's voice. Though the young man's words were an understood challenge, Tony merely smiled. "Thank you," he said.

"I bet you even have a butterfly on your left asscheek, don't you?" the big guy said, grabbing his buttock. The two girls giggled.

Tony stared at him, more angry now then he was afraid.

"Do you want to make something of it?" the big guy asked.

Tony continued to stare back long enough, he hoped, to make this guy think that he wasn't afraid. Then he smiled and shook his head as if to say, why bother. He turned and began walking toward the back of the hallway.

"Next time I go slummin', mother fucker," The big guy said behind him. "I'll look you up, ok?"
In the bathroom Tony stood over the toilet, relieving himself of the four beers he had drunk. The pulse in his temples raced as though his heart were between his ears. He thought about a fight he had been in at the Paddock Bar behind the dog tracks. Joe Romo had accused him of shooting the eight ball in the wrong pocket. The game was only for ten dollars and Tony would have let it slide, but Eddie and three of his friends were sitting at the bar right behind him.

"Tu Madre," Romo finally said, leaning his cue stick against the pool table.

As soon as Tony hit him everyone began to fight, Romo's friends and his. The fight lasted only about three minutes but Tony remembered it was like slow motion in the movies. Eddie and the three others in a circle around the fallen Romo, kicking and kicking. Romo groaned again and again as Eddie's booted feet, as well as those of his friends, landed blows to Romo's chest and midsection. Tony knew Eddie and the others would have kicked him to death if the approaching sirens hadn't stopped them. Tony raised his sleeve so he could see the Tattoo in the bathroom mirror. The snake was very real looking. He thought about it crawling down his arm and wrapping around his wrist like the stories Dona Sanches used to tell him when he was small, and his family lived in Nogales.

"I once knew a man who dreamed of snakes," she told him when he was nine years old.
Before he had met Dona Sanches, Tony would walk by her house everyday after school. Other kids were afraid of her, but Tony was curious about the old adobe house that sat way back, far from the street. "She's a witch," Lisa Romero once told him. "If you make her angry she'll put a spell on you." But Tony was more curious than he was afraid. Sometimes, on his way home, he would even stop and peek at her house through the ocatillo fence. A little footpath wound from the gate to the front door through the weeds and grass which had overgrown the yard. You could hardly see the front of the house for the leaves of two huge eucalyptus trees which stood at either side of it.

"Nino," the voice said from the dark behind the screen door when Tony had stopped once. "You there, little boy. I see you looking."

Tony was ready to run when the old woman stepped out of the house. She was not at all like he had expected. Her hair was not grey, but coffee brown with a tinge of auburn at the edges. She wore a sleeveless dress with brightly colored flowers on it. Tony looked in amazement at the woman who's name his friends would only speak in a whisper. She stepped off of her front porch and moved down the winding footpath toward him.

"Queres dulces?" she said, standing in her yard, the grass and weeds as high as her waist. "Come, come. I have made you sopapillas."

Senora Sanches told him about the man who dreamed of
snakes a few weeks later:

"And when he dreamed of them he would wake-up. And when he woke-up, he would find these snakes in his bed," she said, leaning in her chair toward Tony. She had a bowl of dough in her lap for bread. As she continued her story, she began kneading the dough.

Because the Dona Sanches knew remedies for such things, this man came to her for help. "I gave him the eye of a grey cat," she said. "Sewed into a small leather pouch. Cats will chase away snakes. But these were no ordinary snakes! They could only be driven out with very powerful medicine. For they were the serpents del Diablo."

Tony swallowed, "The Devil," he whispered.

Dona Sanches looked up from her bowl at him. She pushed her glasses back on her face with her middle finger, leaving a white dot of flour in the middle of her forehead. "Yes," she whispered, nodding head very seriously. "The Devil."

Dona Sanches looked thoughtfully into the bowl on her lap, then back at Tony. "Of course," she said, squinting through her bifocals at him. "This man had committed many sins against God. He drank a great deal of liquor and indulged in illicit drugs. This man could say Hail Marys until his Last Rights, and still not atone for all of his sins."

"Equela!" Tony said, thinking how he hated to say
"Equela is right, young man!" She looked at him sternly a moment, then began kneading her dough again. "Of course the snakes went away. But a month later the same thing happened again." She sighed and shook her head very slowly. "This time it was rats."

A month or so later at Wyo's Grocery, Tony's mother looked at him and Eddie after she had finished shopping. "You have been fine today. Very good boys," she said. "I have some change left. Go pick out what you want for under ten."

"Pesos?" Eddie asked.

"Yes, Pesos!" she snapped.

There was no decision for Tony. He had seen what he wanted the week before; a set of twenty marbles, and a vinyl pouch to carry them in. Each of the marbles in the plastic package had a different design frozen inside it. One of them was green, with a yellow design. This was how he imagined Dona Sanches' cat's eye to look.

"This is what you want?" Eddie said.

Tony nodded.

Eddie was ten, two years older than Tony and tall enough to reach the marbles. He took them off the metal hook and handed the plastic bag to Tony. The marbles were 49 cents. Under that was marked "5 Pesos." "You can get two if you want," Eddie said.

Tony shook his head, peering down at the one marble with the greenish oval design inside. "This is all I
want," Tony said.

"Look what I have." Eddie held what looked like a closed switch-blade in Tony's face. When Eddie snapped it open Tony flinched only to see a plastic comb in place of the blade. Eddie grinned as he ran the comb backward through his black hair. "Pretty chingon, huh?" he said.

For weeks after that Eddie had teased him about his magic marble. So much so that Tony regretted having told him the story about the man and the snakes.

"Oyes, Tony! Go Look! There are snakes in your bed," Eddie would say, putting his hands in Tony's face and wiggling his fingers. "Old lady Sanches is a liar," Eddie whispered to him once. Tony began to cry, and their mother became very angry at Eddie for what he had said about the old woman.

"Have some respect for your elders," she said to Eddie.

"Una mentirosa," Eddie said, his lips curled away from his teeth.

For several moments Eddie and his mother just stared at each other. Finally, their mother pointed her finger down the hallway, so angry she was shaking. "Go to your room," she ordered.

Eddie stood there smiling at her for a moment then turned and walked out the back door. She did not try to chase him.

...
"It's real, I swear," Eddie said one Saturday afternoon in front of their house. He was holding their father's hammer in his hand.

Tony studied the marble between his fingers. He held it to the sunlight to see the design inside more clearly. "How do you know," asked Tony.

"Dona Sanches told me," Eddie said. "She said it was from a real cat's eye."

"You said she was a liar."

"That was last week," Eddie said. "I changed my mind."

Tony let the marble roll around in the palm of his hand as he looked at the design more closely. The yellow-green oval inside looked as though he could touch it if it weren't surrounded by the glass. "But it's not a real cat eye," Tony said.

"Maybe not," Eddie said, holding out the hammer to him. "But you can see what it really looks like under the glass."

Tony looked again at the marble, then at his brother. After a moment he took the hammer and squatted to his haunches. He put the marble on a crack in the sidewalk so it wouldn't roll. With both hands he raised the hammer over his head and brought it down hard.

He stared down at the shattered lump of glass a moment, then began to dig through it with the clawed side of the hammer. There was nothing inside. When he looked up, Eddie was in the neighbor's front yard backing away
from him. Finally, Eddie stopped and put his hands to his belly, then doubled over and went to his knees. "Hey, Tony!" he said, laughing so he hardly could speak. "Find the cat's eye now! Find it!"

***

Tony finally found Eddie with several other people in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Where the room was located, at the end of a long hallway, you could barely hear the party downstairs. Eddie sat cross-legged on the floor beside the bed. On his lap was a lady's hand mirror where he was cutting lines of cocaine. "Que tal, little brother?" Eddie said, glancing up at him. "Where have you been?"

"I'm ready to go," Tony said.

"Close the door, please," someone said. It was Ross. He was sitting on the edge of the bed. Lying on her belly beside him, a pillow bunched under her chin, was the girl with the blond hair. Tony felt himself flush when she smiled up at him. Leaning against a desk on the other side of the bed was John. "Please," John said. "Go ahead and close it."

Tony pushed the door shut. On the floor, either side of Eddie, were two other girls. Neither of them were especially pretty or bad looking. The one to his right, wearing a sweatshirt with pink and purple polka dots, had her hand on his thigh just above the knee. "This is your brother?" she asked Eddie. "He's my brother, alright,"
Eddie said, looking up at Tony as he lit a cigarette. "I'd recognize him anywhere." Then he put the cigarette in his mouth to free up his hands and tipped his fedora to the back of his head. With his pinky finger extended, and a razor blade between his thumb and forefinger, Eddie measured out two thin lines of the white powder in the middle of the mirror. "How about it, Tony," Eddie said. "Something to celebrate your birthday?"

Tony nervously sat down on the edge of the bed a couple feet from Ross. "I didn't know you had any," he said to his brother.

"Just a little surprise, man," Eddie said.

"It's your birthday?" the blonde girl said. She lay on her side now, head propped in her hand as she looked at Tony from behind Ross.

"Two days ago," Tony said.

"Alright," said Ross, standing up from the bed. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-Three."

Ross walked to the portable refrigerator which sat beside a TV set on the counter. He withdrew a kind of imported beer and handed it to Tony. "The least I can do," Ross said, "is offer you a primo beer."

"Show what I got you, Tony," Eddie said.

Tony raised the sleeve of his t-shirt and showed them the Tattoo. He turned his shoulder so Ross could see. "That's great," Ross said.

Tony could tell that Ross was just trying to be
polite. The two girls on the floor with Eddie just glanced up at it. They were more interested in what was on the hand mirror cradled in Eddie's lap.

The blonde haired girl scooted closer to him on the bed, putting her face so close to the tattoo Tony could feel her breath on his arm. "It's interesting," she said, looking up at Tony. "I noticed it earlier." She looked back down at the tattoo. "The detail here is just wonderful." The girl had an accent, somewhere from the East or Midwest.

"Pantillo, from south Tucson," Eddie said, carefully handing the mirror and a plastic straw up to Tony on the bed. "He's a genius."

"He sure does nice work," The girl said.

Tony looked down at his face in the mirror he held. His eyes were still a little bloodshot, and he could feel the slight ache from several nights of party behind his brow. Although he couldn't figure out why Eddie had brought cocaine just to drop off an ounce of pot, he was glad he did. A little bump would pick things up, and they could always go to the reception later. He drew in each line steadily, feeling it pack with a bitter sting then numbing the back of his throat.

Eddie cut lines for the girl in the polka-dot shirt, then for the blonde girl after that. She laid the mirror on the bed then rolled to her stomach and snorted both lines quickly. She looked up at Tony. "I was
going to get one once," she said, her index finger daintily over her nose.

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know," she said, sniffling and pinching at her nostrils.

"I know why," Ross said. "Uncle Walt would have kicked your ass out of the house."

"Oh, bullshit!" she said, looking up at Ross. As everyone laughed the girl rolled her eyes at Tony. "My goddamn cousin," she said, shaking her head.

"He would have, and you know it, Joan."

"Ross! Kiss my ass."

Everyone laughed again.

"I thought about a rosebud," the girl said to Tony.

"Where were you going to put it?" John asked.

"None of your business," she said, as a round of giggles coursed through the room.

"I thought a rosebud was a little cliche, though," Joan said, pulling herself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

"What's cliche?" Tony asked.

The room fell silent a few moments and Tony knew that he had asked a stupid question. But the cocaine had made him more confident and he felt their silence was goodhearted.

"It's just one of those stupid words you learn in comp class," the girl with the polka-dot shirt said. "It has nothing to do with real life." She had her arm around
Eddie's waist now and was nuzzling her cheek against his shoulder.

"Cliche," Joan said, pushing her brows together, thinking as she looked down at the beer in her hands. "A cliche is something that is overdone. It's kind of like a style, like a haircut everyone is wearing." Joan paused, concentrating. "Remember those plastic shoes every girl had a couple years ago," she said to Tony.

Tony nodded.

"Those became cliche after a while."

Tony nodded again as though he understood.

"I get it," Eddie said, bent over the mirror. "A cliche is a shoe." A round of laughter pealed through the room. Eddie giggled to himself and handed the mirror to the dark haired girl on his left.

"I thought Jellies were cool." said the girl in polka dots.

"They were a corporate scam," Joan said. "Overpriced plastic."

"Cliches are expensive," Tony said, playing off Eddie's joke.

Eddie cut lines until the gram was gone. Everyone in the room had had at least two turns. They were all drinking the Heinekens now, and Ross put another case in the refrigerator to cool. The numb buzz of the cocaine seemed to fill the room with a common high, kind of making everyone there quick friends. Eddie sat on the floor
At one point the girl in polka dots asked Eddie if there was anymore cocaine. Eddie smiled at her and narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute, what's this?" he said, pulling a folded rectangle of paper from behind her ear. "Another gram of toot!" Everyone was impressed with the trick except Tony. He had seen it many times before.

Tony was leaning back on his elbows on the bed talking with Joan who lay curled on her side next to him. He felt comfortable, as though they had known each other for a long time. She was from Chicago. Her father was some kind of business man there. She tried to explain what her father did, but Tony's attention was focused on the smooth skin of her face, and the dimple that flashed on her right cheek as she spoke.

Tony thought about telling her about his father who had died ten years before. Around Tucson he had been a well-thought-of building contractor, but he didn't tell Joan about him because he thought she would be unimpressed.

Joan had gone to school three years back in Chicago, but after coming to Tucson to visit Ross, her first cousin, she decided to stay and attend college at the University of Arizona. "I was mostly trying to get away from my father," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't know, he's always trying to direct my life. Always trying to guide me into upward mobility," She
rolled her eyes. "Fuck him," she said. "I want to do it my way. You know what I mean?"

Tony nodded, but he was thinking about what Eddie always said about white girls; that they were all whores because they had filthy mouths and gave the goods away to too many guys before they were married. He wondered how many guys Joan had slept with, but the thought of it upset him and he shut it out of his mind. Fuck Eddie, he thought. Eddie doesn't know everything.

"Hey Ross," she said. "Hey cuzz, SAE treasury boy. Could you bring another beer for your wonderful cousin."

"Kiss my ass," Ross said. "Get it yourself," but at the same time he said this, he was opening another beer. He walked over to the bed and handed it to her, smiling.

"Fucking Ross," she said quietly to Tony. "I love him. But the young entrepreneur has his sticky little fingers in every pot."

"You use alot of big words," Tony said, feeling slightly insecure. "What's your major in college."

"Sociology," Joan said. She averted her eyes. "I'm not trying to intimidate you," she said. "They're just words."

At that moment a sharp almost violent series of raps rattled the door. Everyone went suddenly quiet. "Ross," said the urgent sounding voice on the other side.

Ross bounced quickly up from his chair in the corner. "Hide the dope," he hissed at Eddie. "What is it, Rick?"
he shouted to the voice on the other side.

"I got to talk to you, man" the voice said. "It's important."

Ross slipped quickly out the door and shut it behind him.

"What's going on?" Tony asked.

"Nothing," Joan said. "Ross and his little frat rats are probably taking some bullshit too seriously again."

Tony noticed Eddie had moved away from the polka-dot girl. On his hands and knees, Eddie was gathering up what remained of his drug paraphernalia. He stared at the door with an anxious expression as he stuffed the paper and joints into his front pocket.

"Que pasa!" Tony demanded.

Eddie glanced at him, then fixed his stare back on the door.

"You guys aren't leaving are you?" Said the girl in polka dots.

After a moment Ross peaked his head through the door. "Eddie," he said. "I got to talk to you. Now, man."

Eddie rose immediately, as though he knew Ross would call him. Tony followed him and shut the door behind them as they stepped out into the hallway. Crowded in the narrow space was Ross, the big guy with the crew cut, and two of Eddie's friends; George Rosales and Juan Carillo. Rosales had been in a fight. His shirt was torn and he held a paper towel, spotted with blood, to his nose.
"Rick here," Ross said, gesturing to the big guy, "caught him in my room. He was digging through all my shit."

Eddie fiddled with the brim of his hat as he glared at Rosales. "What the hell do you think you were doing?" he demanded.

Rosales shrugged, holding the paper towel gingerly to his nose. Eddie shrugged to Ross and John, then shook his head.

"I told you you could invite some friends, but this is not cool, Eddie."

"I don't know what got into him," Eddie said. Then he looked at Rosales. It was a little grey box, he said in Spanish. Rosales shook his head.

What did you get Eddie asked.

Some watches, a little jewelry, Rosales said through the bloodied paper towel. It's in Tony's car already.

Eddie shook his head and breathed through his teeth which caused a slight whistling. He turned to Ross and John. "I don't know, man," he said, shrugging innocently. "I guess I can't take these guys nowhere."

***

You like to shit on our father's good name. Tony said to his brother from the passenger's side of Joan's Karmann Ghia.

"Callete. Just drop it," Eddie said, gesturing with a jerk of his head toward Joan who sat between them.
The convertible top was down on the Karmann Ghia and Tony felt the wind tossle his hair as he glared at Eddie. What you stole probably didn't even pay for the coke.

They were driving through downtown. Eddie glanced out the driver's side at two hookers working the street in front of the Sheraton. "Not even," Eddie said in English. "Not even."

"You guys don't worry about it," Joan said. "Those guys are a bunch of elitist pigs. They had no right to kick you out."

As they approached South Tucson, murals began to appear more frequently on the walls of buildings. Most often they were depictions of saints and religious icons. But sometimes they served as advertisement for small businesses.

Eddie geared the car down to second as they approached a stoplight. "This is a nice car," he said to Joan. "Thanks for letting me drive it."

"No problem," Joan said. "Where are we off to, anyway?"

"Tillo's," Tony said. "It just a bar on the south side."

"Sound's adventurous," Joan said.

"There's a wedding reception there," Eddie said. "One of our cousins got married tonight."

"Were you guys invited."

Eddie giggled. "Everyone's invited to a Mexican
The light turned green and Eddie made a right onto 4th avenue. They passed La Ventana, a fancy restaurant in one of the oldest buildings in town. The adobe brick was now stuccoed over and on the side facing the street, where there were no windows, was a huge mural of the Virgin. She wore a blue robe which billowed cloud-like around her body. Her arms were splayed slightly to her sides, palms outward. Head slightly canted, her holy gaze was directed downward, toward the passing traffic on 4th avenue.

"I've always admired the murals down here," Joan said as they passed. She flipped her blond hair behind her right shoulder. "You know," she said. "I've always wanted a closer look at that particular one."

Eddie geared down into second and made a right turn. "You got it," he said. He drove around the block and pulled into La Ventana parking lot where he stopped the car. On its stucco backdrop, the mural rose above the cars in the parking lot.

"God," Joan said. "She's even looking at us from this angle."

As the car idled, Tony looked down the throat of 4th avenue toward South Tucson. "The home-land," Eddie always called it jokingly. The old fashioned globe street lamps lined either side of the street. In their soft light he could make out the shops closed for the night. About half a mile away 29th intersected, and he had watched the
light turn from red to green to red again.

"Shit," Joan said as they pulled back onto the street. "That still pisses me off about Ross. What a prick. Just because one of your friends fucks up he blames every Hispanic at the party." Joan shook her head. "No crooked lines for elitist pigs, I suppose."

Tony glared at Eddie, who returned a slight sideways grin.

"St. Francis," Joan said, pointing at mural as they passed.

Tony didn't want to tell her, but the mural was actually of St. Patrick. Dressed in bishop's robes the old saint held the raised crozier over his head, his eyes looking staunchly forward.

"St. Francis," Joan said, giggling to herself. "I love the Irony!"

When they arrived at Tillo's there were so many guests that the parked cars extended down the block. "My God," Joan said, "You're not kidding about Mexican weddings."

Eddie managed to squeeze the Karmann Ghia between a cherry red Chevy truck and a 1959 Cadillac, the kind with high back fins. The music and festivity spilled out into the parking lot.

Inside, the chairs and tables in the big room of the restaurant had been removed for dancing. Eddie immediately moved off and began shaking hands with some of
the men sitting at the bar. Tony recognized old Jose Borelos, George Sepulveda, and Pete Rios sitting together along the old style bar. All of them were old south Tucson businessmen, and all of them had been involved in shady deals at one time or another.

Sepulveda stirred his drink with a swizzle stick as he talked with Eddie. After a moment he gestured toward Tony and Joan. Eddie glanced over, smiled then spoke to Sepulveda, close to his ear. The old man chuckled and stirred his drink.

Joan was a pretty girl, and blond hair was always an attraction among Mexican men. Tony felt proud to be seen with her clutching his arm at the elbow. The band was on break and people highly dressed, were mingling on the dance floor. Joan looked a little bemused as she watched the chattering crowd in which every word spoken was Spanish. After a moment Tony recognized two of his girl cousins and an aunt. All three women were staring at them. He started to move toward the crowded bar but it was too late. His aunt Louisa was already crossing the dance floor.

"How are you Tony," she said hugging him. "So nice to see you here." She spoke English.

He introduced them, but could tell by his aunt's stiff handshake, and the way his cousins glared from across the room that she didn't approve. "Such a pretty girl," his aunt said, blinking, her gaudy makeup almost florescent in the half light. She looked up at Tony
then. "Lupe's here," she said with a false smile. "You might want to talk with her."

After Louisa had moved off, Joan looked at him. "It seems I'm a little underdressed," she said. After a moment she squeezed his arm just above the elbow. "Who's Lupe?" she asked.

Tony didn't answer her. He lead her through the crowded room to a table close to the dance floor. After a while Eddie joined them. A four piece mariachi band drifted around the place playing for individual tables. Several relatives and acquaintances stopped by the table where they sat. As they chatted in Spanish with Eddie and Tony, they glanced at Joan. Though they seemed curious they did not ask about her.

"I saw Lupe earlier," Eddie said, looking into his rum and coke. His eyes rolled up to meet Tony's. "I think she's angry,"

Tony looked blankly across the room and nodded his head. The band had reassembled and began to play a slow old-fashioned Mexican song. Tony asked Joan to dance. They rose and walked to the middle of the dance floor, the first couple out there. Joan was a good dancer and her body conformed warmly in his arms. But Tony was too preoccupied to enjoy the dance. He cursed himself for forgetting Lupe would be there.

"You want to Talk about it?" Joan said in his ear.

He stared passed her blond hair on his cheek. "It's
"nothing," he said. "A family thing."

Joe Rosales was at the table when Tony and Joan returned, his right eye swollen shut where the guy at the frat party had hit him.

"Where's my car?" Tony asked him immediately.

"Outside in the parking lot," Rosales said.

Tony looked at Eddie.

"It's cool," Eddie said, then in Spanish; He dropped the stuff off at our apartment.

Tony shook his head and looked around Tillo's. He felt disgusted with the whole evening. Everything, it seemed, was moving against him except for Joan, who sat with her hand on his knee under the table, smiling as she accepted drinks from different men who were buying them for her. The cocktail waitress set another round on the table, then pointed to old man Sepulveda who sat at the bar, still leering at Joan.

"He's been buying all night," Tony said, raising his full beer in respect and thanks for the old man to see.

"Tony," Eddie said. "Rillos just saw Lupe."

Tony took a pull off his beer and nodded, as though Eddie had said nothing important.

"She want's to meet you out by your car."

"Why?"

Eddie shrugged. "Just to talk, I think."

...
You bring your whores for me to see? Lupe asked evenly as she leaned over the hood of Tony's Chavelle. The sequins on her evening gown glinted with the red and green light reflected from the neon sign over Tillo's.

Tony stood rigidly on the other side of the blue coupe. He looked at the ground. "She's just a girl I met at a party, not a whore, Lupe."

"Just a girl, Just a girl," Lupe said, raising herself from the hood. A soft breeze played in black hair and her brown eyes popped with anger. Have you even forgotten how to speak Spanish also?

Tony shook his head, looking at the ground. He thought about how complicated everything was, how everything he tried seem to fall apart at his fingertips. He and Lupe had known each other since they were children, had been going together since 17 and had been promised now for two years. There had been other girls. He and Lupe had never made love, something she reserved only for marriage. She had always told him that she didn't mind an occasional indiscretion with less moral women, but that she didn't want to see or hear about it.

Lupe stood on the other side of the car, arms folded, staring at him. He knew she was angry only because Tony had had the nerve to bring Joan to the south side, to a family gathering, her territory. She wasn't so much jealous as her pride was hurt.

"What does she mean to you anyway, Tony?" Lupe said.
Tony shrugged, "I don't know."

_I don't think you know also_, she said, resuming her Spanish. _I think you have been confused since you moved in with your brother._

"Right," Tony said, looking away from her.

"Tony," she said, the anger easing up in her voice. "You are a good, decent human being. You're not like your brother. You could make something of yourself."

"What," Tony said, the frustration rising in his voice. "What? Go to the north side and get a degree? I'm one of them south side Mescum boys, remember," he said, imitating a drawl. "I'm a nail pounder. Probly never be anything else."

"Remember when you talked about getting your contractor's license?"

Tony didn't answer, staring off into the darkness across the parking lot.

"You could do that, Tony. It wouldn't be a problem for you." Lupe leaned against the car again. "I don't want anything fancy, Tony. A nail pounder is good enough for me. You know," she continued. "Everyone says how Eddie looks like your father. But you are more like him, responsible and honest."

With a groan Tony kicked the dirt at his feet. He laced his fingers behind his head and stared out at the night-sky, starless beyond the city lights. "Why are you doing this to me?" he begged, though not sure whether
Lupe shook her head and lifted herself from the car hood. Almost mournfully she began to walk back across the parking lot, then turned around. "Tony" she said. "There is so much about you your father would be proud of: your honesty, your hard work."

Tony folded his arms across his chest and stared at the ground. The beer had begun to wear off and he felt the crudo, that hangover sadness and anxiety moving over him.

"It's not just the girl, Tony," Lupe said, her voice tightening as though she would cry. "It's you. I call your job sites. Half the time you are not there. You have been on the pedo for a week now. Tequilla, beer, who knows what kind of drugs. How do you make a living anymore?"

Tony stared toward the ground, not answering her.

"Don't tell me", she said. "I don't want to know. I don't want to hear what kind of filth you've had your hands in." She gave him a long hard glare and adjusted her dress. "If you keep going around with him, he will suck everything good right out of you. Then everything bad will stick to you like disease. And all the lime in the Mother Mountains won't wash it off, just like that filthy tattoo on your arm."

Her glare softened and she looked down. "When you really want me," she said. "When you're really ready for me, I'll take you, filthy tattoo and all. But not until
When he went back inside Tillo's Tony felt a great emptiness, as though he had been stretched in all directions. Even more he felt angry, ashamed, emasculated. The chatter of people and the music was annoying now rather than fun.

He went to the table where he had been sitting before. Without speaking, and very little eye contact, he took Joan by the hand and led her to the dance floor. Without speaking either, Joan reciprocated his affections to the music of the slow song. They kissed passionately, as though they were alone, and he allowed his hands to wonder over her soft curves. Over Joan's shoulder he could see Lupe at a table across the room, her back turned to the dance floor. Her two older sisters and her best friend were there consoling her.

Eddie was sitting at the table when they returned. "I like the way you dance," he said to Joan. "I like the way you dance alot."

"Thank you," Joan said.

Amid the noise of the place Tony heard his name being called. He looked around, hearing it again, Garcia, Tony Garcia. Finally he spotted Sepulveda, waving him over from the bar. He left Joan with Eddie and told her he would be back in just a minute.

"Where did you get that nice piece of ass," the old
man said as Tony stepped up to him.

Tony glanced over his shoulder at where Eddie and Joan were sitting. He felt better now, as though he were not as bad as Lupe made him sound. "The north side," Tony said.

Sepulveda put his hand on Tony's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "You're a good lookin' kid, Garcia." A cagy smile glowed on the old man's face. "I bet you can pickup those little Gabachas like a magnet. Let me buy you a drink, okay," the old man said, turning to look for the bartender.

"That's allright Mr. Sepulveda, I'll get it."

"Nonsense," the old man said. "I'll buy. Just bring a little wera like that for everyone in the place next time." The men along the bar burst out laughing.

Sepulveda held up his money for the bartender to see. "You know Garcia, you'll make something of yourself someday. I'd bet money on it." He waved the bills in front of Tony. "American money. You're not like that coyote son of a bitch brother of yours. You have some integrity. I like that." Sepulveda knit his brow and poked Tony gently in the chest with his forefinger. "Be careful of your brother," he said. "You can bleed a long time before you know he's cut you."

The old man's face suddenly grew impatient and he slapped the bills down on the bar. "Service," he shouted. "A tequila and a beer for Don Juan here. None of that Mexican shit either, Michalob."
When Tony woke up the next morning the sun was hot on his back from the uncurtained window just above his bed. Outside on the street he could hear talk and laughter; Eddie and a few others just hanging out.

He rolled to his back and looked at the shadow on the ceiling. Images from the night before began to rise in his clouded memory. How many tequilas had he had with old man Sepulveda? He had lost count. But he began to recall the motion of Joan's hips as she danced la cumbia with Eddie. They had danced together as he sat drinking with the old man. Though her partner was Eddie, Joan glanced over at him as she danced. Some of the men had even begun to clap their hands and hoot as Joan began to move with more and more confidence.

He grimaced, remembering Lupe; her sad and angry glare as she passed the bar on her way out. For at least ten seconds she stared at him, as her sisters walked by, pretending he wasn't there.

She'll get over it, Sepulveda had told him, shoving another tequilla into his hand. They always get over it. Tony wondered if he still had the crumpled twenty the old man had given him to "buy her something nice."

A slight breeze filtered through the window and rippled the curtain, causing the shadow on the ceiling to slither like a snake defying gravity. The only other thing he could remember about the night before was Joan...
tucking him into bed like a little kid. She had had her clothes on, but still he mused about what might have happened.

In the other room, Tony could hear footfalls. Then Eddie opened the bedroom door and leaned against the frame, his hat tilted to the back of his head and his shirt unbuttoned. Eddie smiled and shook his head. "I don't know, hermanito," he said. "You were pretty fucked up last night."

Tony sat up and put his feet to the floor. He could feel the dull ache the tequila had left behind his eyes. "What happened to Joan?" he asked.

"She took off a few minutes ago." Eddie pointed to Tony's dresser. "She left you a note."

After Eddie turned and strode to the kitchen Tony read the note: "Tony, Had a great time last night. I hope you're not too sick this morning. Please give me a call sometime. I want to talk with you more about your going to school. There are a lot of ways you can if you really want to."

Tony read it over three times. Despite his hangover, the note made him feel good. After looking at the phone number again he carefully folded the slip of paper and put it back on his dresser. Below on the sidewalk he could hear Eddie and the others laughing. The note had made him feel good and he wanted to join them, so he dressed and went outside.
"Que ondas Tony," his brother welcomed him as he walked up. Eddie, Rosales and Gaytan leaned in their usual row along the short brick wall beside the sidewalk. They often drank and hung out there for hours, like vultures waiting for something to die.

Stiffly Tony approached them and seated himself on his haunches, back to the wall. On the sidewalk was an open case of Michalob, and each of them held a beer. "Pobre cito," Rosales chided. "Got himself a hangover." His left eye, completely swelled shut, looked like a ripe plum just below his forehead.

Every kind of car from a Mercedes to a 57 Chevy cruised by on Calle Alvarado, a small thruway between the north and south sides. When one of the more expensive cars motored by, especially if an attractive woman was driving, Eddie and the other two shouted and catcalled.

Eddie pulled the last drag off his cigarette and flipped the butt into the street. "You know what I think," he said. "I think my little brother needs some medicine." Eddie pulled a beer out of the cardboard case and twisted off the top. He crooked his elbow and used it like a gunsight as he aimed the pop top at a passing car. He flipped the top spinning into the street. It skipped once and bounced beneath the moving car, clattering along the chassis. The driver didn't even slow down.

"Chingon," Eddie said, handing the opened beer to Tony.

After the first few sips, the beer tasted good going
down. Tony finished the last swallow and walked over to the case for another.

"What did your note say?" Eddie asked.

"Not much, just some bullshit and a phone number." Tony opened the new beer and eyed his brother who now sat, his legs dangling from the wall. A smirk glowed on Eddie's face as he stared across the street.

"I don't know," Eddie said. "You shouldn't have passed out little brother. You missed out on a pretty good piece of ass."

For a few seconds Tony stared at his brother hoping his expression would change, anything to indicate that he was just joking. But Eddie just smiled and stared across the street.

"You can go to school," Eddie said after a moment in a high pitched parroting voice. Gaytan and Rosales snickered. Rosales leered down at him with his good eye, a malicious smile on his face.

Eddie took a pull off his beer and shook his head. "I don't know, little brother," he said. "You got to learn to take what you can get."

Tony felt a pang in his stomach. He rose and walked over to where Eddie sat on the wall and stood facing him.

"All she wanted was a southside boy," Eddie said, looking straight into Tony's eyes. "I was just her second choice, man."

"Mentirosa!" Tony said.
Eddie shrugged. "I'm not lying, man. You got her phone number. Call her up and and ask."

Eddie's two crones doubled over with laughter. Tony glared at them until they stopped. Rosales jumped off the wall, a cold and hostile expression directed at Tony. "You want to throw blows man," he said.

"Be cool," Eddie said to Rosales. He looked at Tony and shook his head, then stared at the ground a moment. "We're brothers, remember?" he said putting his hand on Tony's shoulder. "I do things for you, you do things for me. That's how it works hermanito, you understand?" He pointed at the tattoo, half exposed from the sleeve of Tony's left shoulder. "I even buy you nice things for your birthday. I'll tell you. Next time we party on the north side, we'll get two white girls. You can have them both."

Without even thinking about it, Tony pushed him. Eddie fell backward off the wall, but was up quickly. Before he had even stood back up to full height he thumped Tony against the ear with the flat of his hand. Just as quickly he grabbed the back of Tony's neck and shoved his other elbow under his chin. As Tony struggled to free himself someone kicked him hard in the right kidney, sending him to his knees. A moment later he felt a blow to the back of his head.

Though dazed, Tony knew to quit fighting. If he didn't Gaytan and Rosales would only issue more blows. Grimacing with the pain in his head and back, Tony look up
at his brother's face. For a moment they stared at each other, Tony smelling the beer on Eddie's quick warm breath.

Finally, releasing the back of his neck, Eddie pushed him away. Tony fell backward and lay resting on his elbows. After a moment he stood up. He and Eddie stared at each other over the wall.

Eddie removed his fedora and threw it violently to the ground. "Fucking gabacha bitch," Eddie said, a slight tremor in his voice. "I wish you'd never have seen her." He grabbed a handful of hair on either side of his head, then turned around, elbows out, to look across the vacant lot.

Tony glanced up at Gaytan and Rosales who were still poised to fight, who would be glad to attack him at Eddie's slightest command. After a moment he turned and began to walk North on Alvarado street. He had gone about half a block when he heard Eddie approaching him from behind, the taps on his shoes clicking along the sidewalk.

"Hey Tony," Eddie shouted. "I was just bullshitting you, couldn't you tell?"

Tony walked on as though Eddie had not spoken. After a moment the heel taps quit clicking. "Pinche fresco," Eddie shouted behind him.

Tony ignored the insult and kept walking. It was a little after 10 a.m. and already the heat was
everywhere, seeming to lie on his back like a shawl, and
giving the sidewalk and asphalt a washed-out look. Though
he did not know where he was going or when he would stop,
he walked on, his legs moving numbly beneath him.

"Tony," Eddie shouted behind him, his voice flippant,
almost desperate sounding. "Baboso, I want my fucking
tattoo back."

Tony touched his shoulder and grimaced. The damn thing still itched.

"Go ahead," Eddie shouted. Then he began laugh, a strange desperate laughter. "Take it off!" he shouted.
"I want it back!"
An Unhoused Spirit

Three years later, looking out our front room window for the rain to let up, I thought about the night I was baptized with whiskey. And it was on the morning of that same Sunday, just before the service was to begin, that the reverend Harlo Level emerged naked from the front doors of the First Baptist Church. Now I never went forward officially, even once, but some of the people in our congregation had themselves saved a second time by a new preacher after that day the reverend went crazy.

For a moment he just stood at the head of the church steps, his pale flesh sharp in the slant of morning light. Then, without hesitation or self-consciousness, he descended onto the lawn as though his nudity were only incidental to his purpose, whatever it was. I was twelve and my brother was ten. Neither one of us had had much experience with naked adults, let alone a preacher. I suspected, however, that a nude minister was a first for most of us, except for Trudy Wilcox, the minister's girl friend, about whom Mrs. MacBride would gossip garrulously on. And it was she, Mrs. MacBride, who made the first sound among the silenced churchgoers. An emphatic "Good God!" squeezed from the bottom of her throat as the reverend strode intently between us and across the church.
front lawn. He finally came to a halt beneath the branches of a small poplar tree, just slightly green with spring bud.

The reverend turned to the congregation then, raised his bible above his head and declared: "I am an unhoused spirit!"

Raleigh Fullen, biting his lip, his big belly shaking, started to laugh right out loud until his wife, Joann, nudged him and he stopped and looked down at his feet, still biting his lip.

"Mama, what's a unhoused spirit?" my brother asked.

"Be quiet," I said, certain for the moment that my mother had forgotten we were there.

She turned and looked down at us then, thought a moment, then said: "You boys cover your eyes and get back to the car!"

But through the car windows we could still see the reverend Harlo standing naked under the tree. Mother turned around again. Get down on the seats! I saw her lips say.

We waited a few minutes, then raised our heads again. The reverend hadn't moved from his spot and everyone else was in small groups of three or four talking quietly. Once in a while someone glanced in the direction of the apparently deranged preacher, then began talking again.

I wanted to hear what they were saying so I eased down the window one crank at a time. They were talking low
and I couldn't make out any words. My father and Raleigh Fullen were standing by themselves. Raleigh was still trying not to laugh and now my father was too.

The reverend turned around then and began climbing the poplar tree. He tucked his bible under his arm and gripped the low branches with both hands. He edged his feet up the trunk until he could hook one leg around a branch. Finding a place to sit, he raised the bible above his head and began to preach.

"It was on the bank of the river Jordan that Christ first appeared before the baptist John," he started in, preaching the way he always did, kind of singing out the words. Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at the reverend who was just thumbing through his bible like it was any other Sunday. When he found the passage he was looking for he raised one finger and started in again:

"'And John said,'" he paused. "'Behold the lamb of God, come to take away the sin of the world.'" Then he thumped the bible closed. "Notice," he said, "that John said the 'sin' of the world, not the sins of the world. The Lord sacrificed his only begotten son, not like a petty talisman, not like a small keepsake to hide in your pocket, not like a petty way to make a petty wish come true..."

Then the reverend started to rock back and forth. "But to wash clean the sin, the collective sin, of all women, of all men, to wash clean that which
besmirches you in His image."

"Hallelujah!" shouted Mrs. MacBride. Her fervor, however, was met with silence from the rest of the congregation. Her face went a little slack and she looked at the ground. The other adults appeared equally embarrassed.

John Beal pulled up then, parking his truck right behind our car.

"There's the sheriff" my brother said, as if there would be a gunfight.

"I see." I snapped.

Beal was actually just a deputy. Since the reverend was his best friend, his being there was probably personal rather than business. I had told my mother a couple months before that I thought John Beal was a "real neat guy." She promptly told me I shouldn't think that way about a man who drank too much and ran with the wrong kind of women. I never did understand why his doing those things made him such a bad person, especially since he was good friends with the reverend Harlo. They'd been drinking buddies for a long time, and except for Mrs. MacBride, most everyone in church tended to look the other way.

Stepping out of his truck, John Beal tipped his hat to the back of his head. For a moment he just stood gaping at his friend the reverend, completely naked, and just as completely consumed in the throws of his sermon, which he delivered from the upper branches of a poplar
tree to a very tentative congregation.

John was in his deputy's uniform, and as he approached the scene everyone bunched up around him, all of them talking at the same time.

"Hold on, hold on now!" Beal said. He spoke with Raleigh and my father first. Raleigh shoved his hands in his front pockets. He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, still trying not to laugh. My father gestured over his shoulder toward the reverend. He spoke but I couldn't hear the words.

The door handle in the back seat clicked as my brother eased the door open about six inches.


With this prompt my brother bolted out of the car and toward the crowd. He ran up to Raleigh who ruffled his hair and put his arm around his shoulder. I followed David, pretending I had left the car to retrieve him.

No one seemed to mind anymore that we were there. They were more interested in watching John, who was now ambling up to the tree. The Reverend continued his preaching, but at the same time eyed John, who now stood on the ground below him. "And the Lord Lord said unto Nicodemus: 'Ye must be born again to pass unto the kingdom of my father.'" The reverend snapped his bible closed, and everyone was quiet as John and the reverend Harlo stared at each other.
"Well, Harley?" John said. "What the hell's your problem."

Reverend Harlo stared down at John over his bible, "I have foregone my worldly possessions, John!" he said.

Perplexed, Beal just nodded. "What about your clothes?"

"This is the only apparel I require!" the reverend said, holding out his bible. "My walls are as wide as the green earth. My roof is the endless sky, my light, the stars and sun and moon!"

"Harley, come out of that tree please."

"I can't, John," the reverend said. "It's an ethical issue, of course."

John turned to us then, "You people might as well go home," he said.

"It's those hippies over in California!" declared Mrs. MacBride a little later at our house. "They have infected weak souls with their evil influence."

From where I sat on the floor, I could see the dark inside Mrs. MacBride's head through her big flared nostrils just over the rim of the wine glass my mother had given her. "It's that little hippie divorcee, Trudy Wilcox, who's turned him bad, you can be sure on it!"

Every Sunday people came to our house after church for potluck supper and pinochle. The Fullens sat on the couch with Mrs. MacBride. Mr. MacBride was
in the big easy chair. He was always off by himself somehow, always a few feet away from everyone else. But mostly it was his face that was far-off, quiet and always thinking. He fiddled with little things all the time, turning them over and over in his fingers. One Sunday after church I watched him mess with a matchbook for a solid half hour. He bent it at the edges, opened it up, looked at every little match, while the rest of the adults were engaged in a pointlessly circuitous conversation about Scripture. When the discussion became a little heated, Mrs. MacBride shouted a couple of times. Mr. MacBride simply looked at her and said her first name and she calmed back down.

Most of us had finished eating now, except for my brother who was working on his second piece of Joann Fullen's peach pie. My father and Raleigh drank beer. The ladies each had a glass of wine. Mr. MacBride had soda water because he drank too much when he was younger. With a work-fat middle finger he fished a piece of ice from the glass and popped it in his mouth. When he caught me staring at him he smiled and winked, chewing on the piece of ice.

My parents were in the kitchen clearing things away for the game.

"You sure you don't need any help in there, Sandy?" Joann Fullen said to my mother.

"Joann, you just rest," my mother said. "You were on
Joann was seven months pregnant. She moved her hand in small circles on her stomach as she talked. This was the third time they'd tried to have a baby. The first two miscarried after three months. Raleigh had one arm around Joann, and with the other he drank beer.

"It's a sad thing," Joann said, looking into her glass of wine. "That such a thing could happen to a good man."

"As I told Phillip," Mrs. MacBride chimed in. "A bachelor minister is always trouble, you can be sure on it. What with chasing around with John Beal and all I expected no different."

"John Beal is not a bad man," Raleigh said.

Mrs. MacBride looked at Raleigh then, her chin cocked upward. "I wouldn't call him a good one," she said.

"What would make him do such a thing?" my mother said coming in from the kitchen.

My father walked in after her carrying a beer and a deck of playing cards. "When I stopped by the store," he said opening the beer, grinning slightly, "Someone told me John and Trudy Wilcox were still trying to talk him out of that tree."

Raleigh laughed, looking up at my father. Then Joann took his arm off her shoulder. "I wish you two would quit making fun," she said. "This is a serious and terrible thing."

"A man gets tired," Mr. MacBride said, not talking to
anyone in particular, just looking down at the ice in his empty glass, rolling the glass in his big hand. "Harley Level hasn't had an easy life. A man just gets tired enough and something comes loose, that's all."

I had asked my mother once if the MacBrides were old. She told me they were middle-aged. He sure looked old now. Turned to the floor, his face was as cracked as the bottom of a dried water hole. At one time he had owned one of the most successful ranches in the state of Arizona. But with a few years of drought and a little bad luck, he'd had to sell out. A vegetarian couple from Jerome and their three kids now owned the place. They ran a few chickens, and operated a large garden in back of the house. With the equity from the land he'd actually owned and money he'd saved, the MacBrides were able to retire comfortably. Still, anyone who knew him could tell Mr. MacBride missed his work.

My father sat down on the couch and lit a cigarette with a kitchen match. When he shook out the match the smell of the sulfur made me think of that burning hair and hide during roundup, and a particular day six years back. I not only remembered, but many details came back, and that entire afternoon swept through my head in the fifteen seconds I sat looking up at Mr. MacBride.

My father and Raleigh had worked for Mr. MacBride several years. Because the men worked ten to twelve hours a day, and it wasn't practical for them to drive back to
town, we stayed out at the ranch during spring roundup. It was on one of these afternoons that one of the Mexican hands went crazy. As if on a screen behind my eyes, I remembered the blood, dripping dark from the Mexican's nose after Mr. MacBride had hit him.

It took my father and Raleigh both to hold down one of the bigger, bawling calves while Mr. MacBride sunk the iron deep into the animal's hip. The thick blue smoke would rise between the men like a ghost, then drift out of the corrals, and disappear before it reached the cedars.

David and I, being very small, ran errands for the men, bringing tools, and water in a leather bag when they were thirsty. After castrating a young bull Mr. MacBride would toss the testicles into the dirt, smiling slightly as David and I gathered up each pair. By noon we had filled a two pound coffee can, and cooked them for lunch in one of the iron-fires. David, four then, ate so many he threw up on Mrs. MacBride's living room rug an hour later.

At dinner time everyone was at the kitchen table except for David, still sick from lunch. Mr. MacBride had just said the blessing over the food when David rushed into the kitchen from outside, the screen door popping closed behind him.

"The man's gonna burn!" My brother announced, eyes wide.

"What man?" Mr. MacBride asked.
"The wetback!" my brother said. "He's getting ready to burn!"

Mr. MacBride stood up from his chair, looking out the window. His face went suddenly slack. "Gawddam!" he said, throwing his napkin to the table, and rushing out the back door.

About a hundred yards from the house a Mexican hand had surrounded himself with tumbleweeds and lit them on fire. The rest of us watched from the back porch as Mr. MacBride strode to his pickup, opened the door and pulled his 30.30. from the rifle rack. He went about halfway to the fire, stopped and shouted something in Spanish, then waited with the rifle in the crook of his elbow. The Mexican just stood, obscured behind the flames, his arms raised toward the heavens as though he was in prayer.

Mr. MacBride stood there a moment more, looking at the Mexican, then walked the rest of the way to the fire. He put one arm over his face and, with the heel of his boot, began kicking at the burning tumbleweeds until there was a hole big enough for him to walk through. Then no one could see either of the men in the fire for the smoke and flames, and Mrs. MacBride was saying over and over again: "Oh, dear Lord, Oh, dear Lord, Oh dear Lord..." until there was a loud pop which all of us standing on the back porch could hear. Then Mr. MacBride walked out of the fire with the Mexican over his shoulder
like he was stepping out the front door of a house of smoke.

When Mr. MacBride was almost to the porch, I saw blood on the butt of the 30.30. And then my mother kept shouting "Is he dead? He's dead isn't he?" Mr. MacBride, taking short, fast steps for the weight of the man, was shaking his head, "Hell no he ain't dead!" and Mrs. MacBride was still saying "Oh dear Lord, Oh dear Lord!" And Raleigh just stood there with his thumbs hooked in his pockets. And my father ran up the front steps and opened the door for Mr. MacBride. I saw the blood dripping from the Mexican's nose then, falling in red drops that turned dark on the back of Mr. MacBride's faded denim shirt.

He carried the man through the living room and into the kitchen where he laid his limp body on the floor. Blood ran down both sides of the man's face. His nose, where Mr. Macbride had hit him, was a big purple lump and he didn't move except for eyelids which periodically fluttered.

"Is he alright, Phillip?" Mrs. MacBride asked.

Mr. MacBride put his hand on the man's neck just below the jawbone. "Just out cold," he said. He started digging through the Mexican's pockets. After a moment he held out something for us to see. In his palm were three little pieces of what looked like dried up chicken droppings.

Mr. MacBride smiled and shook his head. "I knew it,"
"Peyoteed to beat the Devil."

I fear for immortal souls! Mrs. MacBride kept saying that evening as the adults played pinochle.

I liked to sit in the corner on the kitchen floor while they played. I could see the whole hand of whoever sat at the end of the table. Even better, they forgot I was there after awhile.

Mrs. MacBride sat on the end that night. She held her cards like a little fan by her shoulder.

"I always thought salvation..." My father started to say.

"Trump!" my mother said.

"Oh, hell," he said grimacing at the cards he held. "What do I do now?"

Under the table my mother's hand tightened around his knee. She didn't like him to cuss in front of Mrs. MacBride.

"Sorry," he said to her, although no one else at the table knew exactly why. He looked down at his cards. "I always thought salvation," he said, throwing one down. "Was a personal thing, between the individual and Christ."

"Well," Mrs. MacBride said as she thumbed through her cards. It was her play. "I fear for some of you young people who were saved by him."

"What difference would that make?"

"No use taking chances with the Lord," she said.
Everyone was quiet for awhile. Mrs. MacBride held her cards up and I could see them over her shoulder. Slowly, she began to pull a Jack out of her hand. It was a one-eyed Jack. For a second she left it like that; the head and shoulders sticking up above the rest of the cards, the one eye staring down at me. Then, slowly, she pushed the Jack back down and played a Queen.

"Go ahead, Phillip," she said to Mr. MacBride.

Mr. MacBride began thumbing through his cards.

"You know, Phillip. I think it would be a good idea if you went forward again," Mrs MacBride said. "It wouldn't hurt for you to be saved under a reverend that we could be more sure about."

"Why in the world?" groaned Mr. MacBride.

"Just to be safe," Mrs. MacBride said.

"That poor man," Joann said.

"Maybe he'll snap out of it," my mother said.

"If they can talk him out of the tree, that is," my father said. He and Raleigh both laughed.

"Would you two please quit!" My mother shouted. "The reverend Harlo is a good man."

"You mean to say," Raleigh said, ready to bust with laughter. "That the reverend is level, but not quite plumb."

My father and Raleigh roared, Mr. MacBride even smiled a little.

"Okay!" Mother said. slapping her cards down on the
"That's all I'm going to tolerate. You guys have had your fun with it, now would you please, please let it alone!"

They were all quiet again for awhile.

"I'd think about my two boys if I were you, Sandra," Mrs. MacBride said. "After all, they were saved and baptized by that man."

My stomach seemed to crawl up in my throat. I hadn't been saved or baptized, and I had been avoiding it for a long time.

Mrs. MacBride laid down her cards, "Come to think about it," she said, "Jeff hasn't gone forward yet, has he?"

They all turned around and looked at me then. I stared down at the floor. I had felt guilty about it for a long time.

"Your time will come," my mother said.

"There's no time like the present," said Mrs. MacBride.

I didn't look up, but I could feel what everyone was thinking, as though their thoughts had weight and they were laying them on the back of my neck. I blinked my eyes to keep from crying, but I felt my face go slack, and my lower lip began to dodder uncontrollably.

"That Jeff's a smart fella," Raleigh said. "He doesn't just jump right in. He's got to think on things a while. Don't ya, Jeff?"
I nodded, still looking at the floor. Then I couldn't help it. A sob rose up in the back of my throat and tears began pushing their way down my nose.

"Jeff, it's alright," my mother said.

"Yep, that Jeff," Raleigh said. "He's a-okay. Just gotta think about things for awhile."

"It's the power of Christ, moving over you!" Mrs. MacBride said.

"Shut up, Lois!" Mr. MacBride said suddenly.

"Now listen here, young fella!" he said to me. "You straighten up right now. There's no need for carrying on like that, you hear."

I nodded my head, but began crying harder, the sobs rising up in my chest like hiccups.

"Take him in the other room, Sandra." my father said.

My mother stood up and came to me in the corner. "Come on, honey. Stand up," she said, bending over me.

She lead me to the other room where David lay on his belly, watching the TV. He rolled over and looked at me when we walked in. "What's wrong with Jeff?" he asked.

"He's just upset."

"What happened, Jeff?"

I shook my head, glaring into the television. My brother shrugged and went back to watching his show.

My mother sat me down in the chair behind David. After she had gone back to the kitchen, My brother looked over his shoulder at me. "What happened?" he whispered.
Again I shook my head, staring forward, my heart still pumping with anger.

Neither one of us could sleep that night. I knew David was awake because I did not hear his steady breathing which usually came soon after we went to bed. Again he rustled in his bed and I decided to quit pretending. I got up and walked to the window, the curtain open just a crack.

Our neighborhood was clear in the yellow light of the half-moon. The elm trees the city had planted before I was born stood in two neat rows on either side of the street. All the houses along Mission Avenue were dark inside, except for the reading lamp in Mrs. Williams' front room which always burned all night. She didn't come out of the house much since her husband had died a couple years before. If I looked long enough I would see her shadow pass behind the curtain.

On nights I couldn't sleep I made a game of watching for the old widow to stand up from her chair, or walk past the light. It sort of turned my mind off, and helped me to feel sleepy.

"You're always looking out the window," David said from the dark corner of the room.

"Can't sleep," I said after a second.

"Me too."

We were quiet awhile.

"Hey, Jeff?"
"What?"

"You still upset about what happened tonight?"

"Hell, no!" I lied.

"Hey Jeff---" He hesitated. "You ought to just go ahead and do it."

"Do what?" I said like I didn't know what he was talking about.

"You know--get saved and all."

"I'm not getting saved, David!"

"It's no big deal, Jeff. You just go up when the music starts to play, that's all. You can't even tell everybody is looking at you."

"I could tell."

I heard my brother swallow before he spoke. "Mrs. MacBride says--"

"Mrs. MacBride is full of snot!"

We were quiet again. "Jeff," David said finally. "Jeff you gotta get saved or else you won't go to heaven."

"How do you know that?"

"Bible says," he blurted. "Jesus says."

"Horse shit!"

"You must be born again to pass unto the kingdom of the Lord."

"Where does it say that, David," I asked. "What Gospel, which verse?"

"I'm not exactly sure." he said. I could almost hear him thinking then. "You must be baptized of water
and spirit."

"What does that mean?" I said, still glaring out the window.

"I don't know. I just know what everybody says."

"That's right, just somebody saying something. Everything is just somebody saying something. Just goddamned words."

"Don't cuss, Jeff."

"I guess I'll just have to burn in those eternal flames they're always talking about."

"Jeff!"

"Well, spending eternity anywhere sounds like Hell to me. Might as well be one place as the other."

"Jeff!" David said, a sob squeezing out from the back of his throat. He started to cry, slow soft whimpers. "You don't believe in God, do you?"

I felt sorry for him now. "I didn't say that, Dave. Honest I didn't."

He kept crying.

"Come-on, David," I said, getting a little irritated. "I didn't say that I didn't believe. Did you hear me say I didn't believe?"

"No," he said.

"I just don't believe God is going to send me to Hell just because I don't want to make a fool of myself."

We were quiet again for awhile. "I don't know," David said. "Maybe you will go to heaven. I'm tired now anyway." He laid down and I heard the sheets rustle again
as he moved beneath them.

"Hey Jeff?"

"What."

"Do you think Mrs. MacBride is going to Heaven?"

"I don't know," I said. "She thinks you get to heaven by reading the directions."

David chuckled. "That's funny," he said.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "I hope old St. Peter makes her do jumping-jacks and bark like a dog."

We burst out laughing, and slaphappy as we were it was difficult to quit. Our giggles would subside, then we would begin again, as though the dark between us was a backdrop for the image; Mrs. MacBride doing calisthenics and making animal noises. Finally we quit, David lying quietly in his bed and me staring out the window.

"You know," I said.

"What?" David said, a little irritated, almost asleep.

"If I ever was to get saved, I'd want the revenend Harlo to do it."

"Reverend Harlo's crazy, Jeff."

"Mr. MacBride said he was just a little haywire, because he's had a hard life."

"Mrs. MacBride says it's because of all his de-bochery."

"What's de-bochery."

"I don't know," David said. "But Mrs. MacBride said it."
"Sounds like something Mrs. MacBride would say."

I'm not sure exactly why we did it. There was never any moment in our long discussion that night, any threshold crossed, whereby a decision had actually been made. After a while we simply began getting dressed, exchanging few words about something which seemed to have been decided apart from our wills. We were going to see the reverend Harlo Level. For what reason, we really didn't know. Ostensibly, we figured the man might be hungry, and we were simply bringing him a bite to eat.

I was standing outside our bedroom window, shivering and waiting for my brother to crawl out after me. "Come on," I said. "Hurry!"

He was fiddling with what was left of Joann Fullen's peach pie, trying to put the aluminum foil back over the top of it.

"Gimme that," I said. I took the pie plate and laid it on the ground. I turned around then, and grabbed my brother under the arms. Head first, I pulled him through the window. His weight took us both to the ground. We got up and started to laugh. But I put my finger to my lips, "We're dead meat if they catch us," I said.

David nodded seriously, then picked up the pie tin. "What about school tomorrow, Jeff?" he said.

"To hell with school," I said. "To hell with everything."
David looked down at the pie tin, then up at me, something wild in his young face outlined by the moonlight. He carefully laid the pie tin under his arm like a school book, then, head tilted, bolted off, running full stride down the alley. I watched after him a moment, the shoots of dirt raised from his running, his rapid footfalls, then took off after him.

A few minutes later we stood against the north wall of the church, our backs flat against the cold brick. We had tried the front door which was locked, and had looked in the poplar tree which was empty. There was no light to be seen inside the church, although we hadn't yet gone around to the back door. Standing still now, we began to shiver. David fumbled nervously with the pie tin, while I stood there thinking about what to do next.

"We could knock on the back door," I suggested.
"I just don't think he's home, Jeff."
"Well, we're gonna try," I snapped.

The reverend had fashioned a makeshift apartment for himself in the church basement; a single bed with no sheets, a few ratty pieces of furniture, and a throw rug that smelled like an old dog. The basement had three small windows about a foot from the ground. If there was a light on in the apartment, we'd have already seen it.

"Can you tell anything?" I asked David, who was now on his hands and knees, looking into one of the dark windows.
"I don't think he's there,"
"He might be asleep," I said. Keeping close to the wall, I crept around to the back of the church. After a moment I heard my brother moving up behind me.

I raised my fist to knock on the back door, then lowered it in hesitation, then raised it again and rapped sharply half a dozen times. I waited, then glanced down at David who crouched a few feet to the side. I couldn't see his eyes, but could tell he was looking at me, the moonlight outlining the apprehension on his face.

After three tries there was still no answer. I looked back down at David.

"Told ya," he said. "Reverend ain't there."

After standing there a moment longer, I simply tried the door. To my surprise it glided easily open, and popped against the inner wall as it went back full swing. The noise made us both flinch. I looked down at David, then we both stepped inside.

He stayed close behind as I walked through the corridor to which all the drab little rooms were connected. Seven years of Sunday school had made me familiar with each of them. Children, juniors, and young adults Sunday school. Age was the only criterion for graduation to the next level. I even knew where the hall light was, and after fumbling for it a moment, clicked it on, David and I shading our eyes against the glare.

I discovered all the Sunday school rooms locked, as well as the reverend's office, and although I knew he wouldn't be there, I walked into the chapel. On the wall
beside the back entrance I found the light switch. I had never walked into the chapel from the back, and it looked somehow very odd. After a moment, I stepped off the pulpit and sat down at the front pew.

My Brother now stood at the back entrance.

"Looks different, doesn't it," I said, a little surprised at the echo my voice made in the empty room.

"Looks smaller without all the people," David said.

I looked around at the chapel. It did look smaller. The stained glass windows, the pews, the preacher's pulpit, even the baptismal font behind the choir section looked small and benign. When I was younger, seeing people baptized there would frighten me; the pearls of moisture dripping from their hair and clothes after the reverend lowered them into the water. You couldn't see the bathtub they were standing in for the particle board prop with the pond painted on it. On the wall behind the font was the mural of a landscape. A river wound down sparse hills and seemed to crash through the wall from the other side. I used to suspect that that was the land where Jesus lived, that a person might just be able to step right into it and find Him roving about somewhere. I smiled at the notion now as I sat, arms folded, at the empty front pew.

"It's worth a try," I argued a few minutes later as I stood over the trap door which led down to the reverend's apartment.
"He ain't home, Jeff," David insisted again.

Together we managed to lift the door which fell open, straining the hinges as it stopped at a forty-five degree angle from the floor. Without hesitation, I descended the steps, and to my surprise, my brother was right behind me. When we reached the bottom we stood for a moment in the light which funneled down from the hallway. That and the glow of the moon behind the three uncurtained windows was the only light in the room.

"It is better to light one candle," said a flippant sounding voice from the darkness, which broke into a slow chuckle. A moment later a lamp in the middle of the room went on with a click. Under it sat the reverend Harlo, though not naked this time. He was clad in an orange bathrobe, and a pair of bifocals. A book which was not the Bible lay face down in his lap and his legs were crossed. The toes of the suspended foot wriggled slightly as a slow smile gathered on his face. "It is better to light one candle," he repeated. "Than to curse the darkness."

Had we been any less afraid, we'd have turned and run.

"What can I do for you boys today," the reverend said, removing his bifocals.

"Why'd you go naked?" My brother asked distainfully.

"You'd be the Thomason boys, wouldn't you?"

I nodded. My brother glared at the preacher, waiting for him to answer.
"There's nothin' down here for you boys."

"Why'd you go naked?" David repeated.

The reverend gave us a puzzled look as he slipped his bifocals into one of the pockets on his robe. "Naked huh?" he said.

I nodded.

He raised and lowered his eyebrows and closed the book which lay in his lap. Then he reached around his chair and picked up a bottle of Sunny Brook whiskey and a glass off the floor. He rubbed his chin, still puzzled, then unscrewed the cap and poured himself a drink. "Naked, huh?" he said again.

He sat the bottle back on the floor, then took a sip off the top of the glass. With a blank expression he stared into the corner of the room for a moment, then looked back up at us. "You boys care for a drink?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, thanks," I said.

For a moment he sat, squinting at us. "Say," he said. "Your parents know you're here this time of night?" He cocked himself around in his chair to look at the clock, in the shape of a singing angel. "Three a.m.," he said, righting himself in his chair. For a moment he stared into the corner as though he was trying to figure something out, then he looked up at us. "In the darkness of men's souls--" His voice rose, and his eyes widened when he said this: "It is always three in the morning."
Then he looked at the floor, as though he were surprised that the words had come out of him.

"Where's that from?" The reverend said.

I wasn't quite sure he was asking himself or us.

"Duder-onimy?" My brother said.

"F. Scott Fitzgerald!" the reverend said, one finger raised, his eyes suddenly popping with life, as though a light had gone on in the back of his head.

David looked at me, "What?" he said.

I shook my head, "I don't know," I said, looking at the reverend who, again, was staring blankly into the corner of the room. After a moment I nudged my brother. "The pie," I said.

Doubtful, he shrugged and pulled the crumpled tin from under his jacket. Slowly, deliberating each step, David moved toward the reverend.

"We thought we'd bring a bite to eat, Reverend," I said. "Thought you might be hungry."

The reverend continued to stare into the corner as though I hadn't spoken.

David set the pie at his feet and backed away. It was then that the reverend slowly turned his stare from the corner to look at the tin on the floor between his feet. He picked it up and removed the foil. "Pie," he said absently.

David and I nodded.

Delighted with this bit of lucidity, "Joann Fullen," I said.
"Oh, Joann," the reverend said smiling, pulling a fat wedge out of the tin and examining it in the palm of his hand. He took a bite. "That Joann sure makes a heck of a pie, doesn't she," he said, still chewing.

Again, David and I nodded. "She sure does, doesn't she?" I said.

"She had her baby yet?" the reverend asked.

"No sir," I said. "Couple more months."

"That's right," he said, taking a drink of his whiskey. "Which do they want, girl or boy?"

"Boy," I said.

"Be a girl," he said as though he were sure. "Isn't that always the way of it?" he said smiling at us.

"Yes sir," I said, smiling back.

"Did you go naked--" my brother chimed in, "because you're crazy?"

"Be quiet," I said.

"I am not the potter, son," the reverend said, staring dead at my brother. "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness." He chuckled to himself then, looking at the pie in his hand. "Pretty nice mixture of biblical metaphor," he said, then winked at us. "Don't you think?"

David and I glanced at each other, then back at the reverend who finished off the pie and poured himself another drink. Still chewing, he replaced the bifocals on his face, then opened the book on his lap and began to read.
"Reverand Harlo?" I said.

He looked up at me over the glasses.

"You preach here next Sunday?"

"I suppose not," he said. "I suppose I'll be carrying
the Lord's earthly satchel, delivering his heavenly
postage."

"Oh," I said.

"Jeff ain't been saved yet," David blurted quickly
with a tattle-tale sort of tone.

"Shut up," I told him.

The reverend's eyes moved to David then back to me.

"That true?" he asked.

I nodded and looked at the ground, "I just don't want
to go up in front of everybody," I said, my face hot with
embarrassment.

The reverend stared into the corner with a
contemplative scowl. "I can understand that," he said.
After a moment he shook his head, "Ritual," he said.
"It's all just ritual."

"Yes sir," I said, not really understanding what he
meant.

He looked at me again. "We could save cutting through
a lot of red tape, right now. You want to do that? I
never was much for the bureaucratic end of the Lord's
work."

"Yes sir,"

"Well, do you take the Lord as your personal saviour?"

"I'm not sure," I said.
"Humph," the reverend said, looking at the floor. "Most honest answer I've heard in a long time."

I looked nervously about the room. My eyes fixed on the angel shaped clock, its porcelain wings slightly bent, its round coffee colored eyes staring blankly forward, its oval mouth frozen in the throws of some silent hymn.

"Well tell me this," the reverend said. "Do you do unto others..." He lost his thread and cupped his hand over his chin, concentrating hard. "As others..." His brown eyes moved wildly back and forth as he thought. "Oh, well," he said finally. "You understand the gist of that doctrine, don't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Good," the reverend said. "That's good enough for me. I'd go ahead and baptize you now but they cut the water on me."

"That's alright," I said.

"Just a second," he said. "I've got something that will work just as well. Come here a second."

I was conscious of each of my steps as I closed the distance between myself and the preacher. Closer, I noticed the stubble on his face, his matted hair and the rancid smell of body odor.

"Bow your head as though in prayer," he said.

I did. Out the corner of my eye I could see the bottle of whiskey poised in the reverend's hand.

"I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and
the Holy Spirit."

I felt the lukewarm moisture spill, and slowly spread on the back of my skull, then the sharp smell of the cheap bourbon as it rolled down the nape of my neck and between my shoulder blades. Afraid to raise my head, I turned slightly. From under my brow, I looked at my brother, the corners of his mouth turned down in a horrified expression.

I turned and walked back over to him, arms splayed away from my sides as though I had been drenched.

The reverend had sat back down, and was now thumbing through his book.

"Reverand Harlo," my brother asked. "Is Jeff going to heaven even if he was baptized with whiskey?"

The reverend looked up, scrutinizing us a moment. Then he reached down beside his chair, snatched up the bottle and poured himself another drink. He held the glass up as though to make a toast. "It'll get ya there as fast as anything will," he said.

... 

"They just keep electrocuting that poor man," Mrs. MacBride said as she sat in our living room, drinking rose wine. "His mind is nothing but mush. I doubt if anyone in that state hospital knows what he's doing."

I stood at the window watching the rain, and thought about that Sunday three years ago. It made me sad that they'd finally had to haul the reverend Harlo off to the
state mental institution in Phoenix.

"You boys better eat before the game," my mother called from the kitchen.

I glanced over at my brother who sat on the couch. His softball uniform, two sizes too big, billowed around his skinny thirteen year old frame.

He put his hand on his belly and shook his head. "Butterflies," he told me.

"Me too," I said. Although, I knew in a few minutes I would probably go in the kitchen and eat.

We were dressed out and ready, but there was nothing we could do until the rain let up. That summer, softball games had been the primary mode of escape from long Sunday evenings of pinochle.

The rain had been falling hard for forty-five minutes. I'd gotten so used to the rhythm of it hitting the pavement that I hardly noticed the sound anymore. The gutters on both sides of the street flowed like little creeks.

"No, no," Mrs. MacBride said urgently behind me. Little Joyce, Raleigh and Joann's two year old, had taken the glass swan off our coffee table.

"No, no," Mrs. MacBride said, trying to pry the child's fingers from around the delicate neck of the trinket. "You might break this."

Mrs. MacBride never had any children of her own. "You can't play with things like that," she said with an awkward sweetness in her voice. She fiddled nervously
with the sleeve of her blouse as the child's face contorted. Then little Joyce began to cry.

Mr. MacBride sat in his same chair. He had glanced over, but otherwise paid little attention to the incident. There was no counting how many beers he had drunk. His eyes had that glazed, distant look. His wide, furrowed face was turned toward the floor, quietly thinking. He didn't seem to notice the sound of the rain pounding down on the roof, something he used to pray so hard for.

Half an hour later, the rain had subsided to a drizzle and I could hear the water from the roof pattering onto the muddy ground as it dripped off the eaves. Having finished my supper, I pushed the empty plate toward the middle of the table, then looked down at my uniform to make sure I hadn't made any kind of a mess on it.

I stood up from the table then and walked into the living room. The men, Mr. MacBride, Raleigh, my father, and Don Sheer were sitting in a circle. They were smoking and drinking beer and talking about old times. Mr. MacBride was mostly quiet while the other men told the stories. I had heard them all before many times. Each time one was told the facts became more exaggerated. It was such that I could no longer recall what the facts were myself, just a few snippets of genuine memory.

I pushed aside the curtain from the front window. The rain had quit completely and the muddy current in the
gutters was now just a trickle. The water from the eaves dripped with a slower tempo and everything outside was fresh and clear.

The women had moved into the front room just after me, each carrying a glass of rose' wine. After a moment David walked in with a plate full of potato salad and sat down beside Joann. The ladies began talking about the reverend Harlo again.

"Trudy Wilcox went up to Phoenix to see him last week," Joann said.

"How is he?" Mrs. MacBride asked.

"Same," Joann said.

"I wonder where the point was," Mrs. MacBride said. "that he went altogether."

"Who's to say." My mother said. "Like waiting for nightfall."

I turned from the window and looked at David who had just shoveled in a huge mouthful of potato salad. Still chewing, he tried to restrain a smile as he remembered the secret we had kept so long between us.

"Butterflies, huh," I said, trying not to smile.

"I'll be able to play," he said, mustering his toughest voice.

Having lost interest in the basket of plastic fruit my mother had given her to play with, little Joyce began to cry. A plastic banana, peaches, apples and oranges scattered on the floor around her, little Joyce sat wailing in the middle of our living room.
Raleigh walked over and picked her up, an arm pressing her tiny legs against his sprawling belly. "It's alright, honey," he told her. "Shush now, shush."

I listened to scraps of conversation from both the men and the women. The men talked about going to our game later. The women, as they always did, discussed a variety of things.

Mrs. MacBride was hung up on talking about her weekly gripe. This time it was with the kids who drove their cars too fast up and down the street in front of her house.

"They go to these disco-tec night clubs," she said to the other women who listened only out of politeness. "They get all doped and drunked up. Lord knows the Helling that goes on after that."

"Well I know I have good, level headed boys," my mother said, taking my empty plate from the table.

"What about the time Jeff come home smelling like whiskey," Joann teased.

"Just on his clothes," my mother added, "not his breath."

"I bet there's a tale to tell there," Joann chided. "Common Jeff. Tell us what happened that night."

I turned from the window, "Nothing," I said.

"My fanny," Joann said.

Everyone laughed. It was a standing joke. Joann would always try and coax it out of me, and I would
resist. The only thing the adults were aware of about that night was that David and I had left our room and that my clothes smelled of whiskey. The rest of it was only known by my brother and myself.

"What time your game start tonight, Jeff," Raleigh asked from across the room.


"I still want to know why just your clothes smelled like whiskey, Jeff," Joann said.

"Me too," said Mrs. MacBride.

For a few seconds the ladies looked inquisitively at David. But he just stared down at his plate of potato salad, refusing to acknowledge them.

"Hell, better on you than in you, anyway," Mr. MacBride said loudly. "I'dnt that right, Jeff." He was very drunk and his words sounded as though he'd spoken with his mouth full.

For a moment Mr. MacBride looked around the room as though he'd made a joke and had expected people to laugh. Everyone was just quiet. Mrs. MacBride tightened her thumb and forefinger around the stem of her wine glass and looked toward the window.

"Wait a minute," Mr. MacBride said, "Maybe I got that turned around." For a full ten seconds he stared at the wall and moved his thumb in a steady circle around the lip of his beer can. "No," he said finally. He looked straight at me then, as though we were the only two people
in the room. "Better on you than in you," he said, deliberating the words. "That's what I meant to say."