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In Bad Tolz, Germany you are stationed with the 82nd. It is November, and Novembers in Germany remind you of the sadness and despair of a fallen woman. Let us say, also, we know of your fondness for heroin. You want to shoot up. This is how you do it:

There are three floors in your barracks. You get your three buddies, Johnson, Simmons, and Cabot. You go to the top floor where there are storage rooms and broom closets. To Johnson you hand the key. He has taken the padlock from your wall locker and now locks you in a room with your two buddies. Johnson will stay in the next room until you are done. When you are done you will bang on the wall twice and he will come by and let you out. There is an advantage to this. Should a noncom, Sgt. Lee, for example, come by on a sudden inspection of the barracks, he will pull the doorknobs of each of the sixteen rooms in succession. He will look in the rooms of the doorknobs that surrender their secrets willingly, but he will not look in your room because that room is locked and your buddy is in the next room with the key.

Or you can do this: You may prefer shooting up in the open. If you do it at night no one will see you. You go to one of the rooms, again on the third floor, and open the window. The windows are tall, but narrow, and you lean out backwards, hanging on with your fingertips to the edges of the frame. There is no light in the room and there is no light outside save for the few pips that appear around the base; and it seems at those times when you are silhouetted only by darkness, that you are climbing in the middle of nowhere. You gather your legs underneath you, and, sliding your fingers along the sides of the window frame, you straighten your body up. When you are standing, it is an easy matter to reach from there to the roof. Your legs fly out from the windowsill, your combat boots act as a counterweight, and with your arms you pull yourself up to the roof. That is the easy part. The disadvantage is climbing back down when you cannot distinguish your head from your ass. If you were a fireman or climbed trees as a youth you will not be in trouble, because hanging on and moving around with nothing but space to cushion your fall is as habitual as drawing your next breath. But, for instance, for Parsons McCovey, who was up on the roof a week ago, these things were not natural, and when he kicked out to find the windowsill on his way down, his fingers slid off the edge.
like they were greased. He fell three stories and landed on his head and died.

So you choose the room. You are in there with Simmons and Cabot, and your buddy Johnson is next door with the key. You take out your kit which is a small pouch you store next to your scrotum. You take out the Saran Wrap bag and put it to the left, next to your foot. You must remember not to move your foot. You take out the spoon from your mess kit, which is as deep and big around as a tablespoon. You take out your silver Varick lighter, which if you hold level with your navel can shoot up a flame that can singe the stubble on your chin. You open up your bag and tap the small brown granules into your spoon. It is only in Europe, you know, that you can buy heroin of this strength and quality. You hand the spoon to Cabot and take the bag. You seal it by taking the Varick and having the flame lick the open edges of the Saran Wrap. It melts and seals the heroin in until the next time. You take the bag and put it in the kit next to your foot. You do not want to kick it when you space out. You open your lighter and turn up a high flame. Then you take the spoon from John and cook it with the same studied casualness you would use when reheating coffee. Your buddy Simmons has taken out the syringe. He works in the dispensary and can sneak out as many syringes as he wants and so you will use a new syringe each time, and then sell it to somebody less fortunate. He has an adjustable tourniquet with Velcro clasps to wrap around your arm to make your vein swell up big enough for you to hit it cleanly, and you are pleased at this trapping of civilization. When the crystals have turned to liquid in the spoon you have Simmons draw it out of the spoon with the syringe. He taps the air bubbles out, holding the needle up in the air like a tiny missile. Your other buddy, Cabot, takes your arm and wraps the tourniquet around it, and you both wait for the vein to pop out. On older addicts there is a deterioration process which causes the veins to collapse, but you have not been in the Army that long, and your ropes show nothing but a few freckles of penetration. You take the syringe from Simmons and hit the vein, cleanly, pushing the plunger part way down. Then you pull it back up pulling blood out of the vein and mixing it with the heroin in the syringe. This is good. If you had pulled back and gotten nothing, it would have meant that you had missed the vein and hit meat. But you have not hit meat, you have hit the vein, and now you push the plunger down all the way and send the liquid through your body, getting a second, better rush than the first. You sink back, and Cabot finishes it by taking the syringe out of your arm. You kick your kit as you relax, but everything in it is closed, so nothing is spilled.

You bought, in your first month in Germany, a Volvo. You had money left over from when you were stationed in the States, and so you put down a sizeable down payment, and now pay in monthly installments. You get better whores with a Volvo than with a Jeep, or stepping off a bus. However, you do not have the money to buy insurance, and you do not have the time to apply for an international license. So here is what you do:

You drive your car into town at two in the morning. You pull up to a car sitting by the train station. You get out and in your hand you hold a screwdriver. It takes five minutes to switch plates and, before you know it, you are back on the road, the screwdriver in your glove compartment. You cannot, of course, park your car on base, but instead hide it in a blind, you, Simmons, Cabot and Johnson created about half a mile away. And you walk the rest of the way to the barracks.

Your job on the base is that you are battalion secretary. You are directly under the command of Colonel Berman, and you write out reports, requisitions, and proposals. You are also in charge of sending a personal note home to the family of each man who dies. This does not happen often. For Parsons McCovey you sent this note:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. McCovey:

I regret the death of your son immensely. He was personally known to me and there was nobody in the battalion I would have trusted more with my life. In him were resplendent the virtues of honor, and loyalty to his country and God that are what keeps the core of our civilization together. He fell off the rooftop of his barracks while trying to make technical repairs on the antennae that we use to guard against the enemy. He died, though not in combat, still in the line of duty, and he had his country uppermost in his mind.

My deepest regrets,

Colonel William C. Berman
Commander, 82nd Battalion. U.S. Army

"‘Cross out ‘resplendent,’ Madison," said Col. Berman.

"Yessir."

You show Col. Berman all the mail you send out to grieving families. He has kept you as his secretary simply because there is nobody better at writing letters of bereavement, and he has already been sent letters by several congressmen who have heard of his thoughtfulness from their constituents.

"You kept this one a little short, Madison," said Col. Berman.

"Yessir." You have kept it short because you did not know much about Parsons McCovey. From what you do know you understand he was a jerk.

"Well, it's fine, except for that one word, ‘resplendent’. Make sure that word doesn’t leave this base," Col. Berman said.

"Yessir." Col. Berman always has one objection to each letter, as if it is a way of keeping them under his control. He never gives a reason and you suspect he is a fool.

It is that night after dinner. It is dark. You have gone to Johnson's wall locker. It is eight feet tall, and has two sides. On one side there are shelves.
They contain his underwear, his T-shirts, belts, books, and records. On the other side there are hooks, and they hold his dress uniform, his fatigues, his boots, shoes, and helmet. You take all these things out and pile them carefully under his bed. Once emptied, a wall locker is light, and you and Cabot take it up to the third floor. Simmons has gone to get the lock from your wall locker. You have given him the key. Your buddy Johnson is involved in a fight on the third floor. You do not interfere, because it has been discovered that Johnson is not your buddy but an informer. He takes money for telling who shoots up. You and Cabot take the wall locker into a store room. Johnson is brought into the store room by three men. He has been subdued and gagged with a piece of medical tape Simmons has provided. By turning him sideways the men are able to squeeze him into a wall locker and close the door on him. When they close the door and take the padlock and push the arm through the door handles, they do not give Johnson the key. They give it to you. Johnson’s muffled screams from inside the wall locker sound humorous, like the gruntings and snortings of a hog. The men push the wall locker towards the open window. It is heavy ammunition. The gun is heavy, but balanced, and you have been taught in from inside the wall locker sound humorous, like the gruntings and snortings of a body in a free fall. The crash sounds, you think vaguely, like other side there are hooks, and they hold his dress uniform, his fatigues, his underwear, his T-shirts, belts, books, and records. On the third floor. You pull the gun to your side. You are alone. You go to the barrel and feel the smoothness of the metal and you notice it is dark; dark like the night time that is just now beginning to lighten. You step out of your kit next to your scrotum and you go to the window and open it up, and climb onto the roof. There is a full moon that lights your fumbling with the bag, your Varick lighter, and the syringe. You put on the tourniquet, pop the vein, but it takes three stabs to catch it, and you imagine the wall locker tumbling end over end and you think of the grace of a new Russian tank.” His voice is bitter rather than sarcastic, and you feel, rather than see him looking at you. “We have found out about it with a minimum of casualties, and we know it is impervious to all but steady rifle fire. You will hitch your weapon to your shoulder and open fire at my command.”

Your weapon is hitched to your shoulder as you open fire. You imagine the radiator being punctured, the tires deflating, the windows frosting over with splinters of glass. You fire until your ammunition runs out, and then rest your gun at your side.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Johnson,

I know you loved your son very much and I want you to know I did too. He was the best buddy a man could have and it doesn’t matter that he was weak because we were all weak — it was just he was weak in a different way. If I had to do it all over again I would not have joined the Army and come to Germany. I know everybody says war is such a stupid thing but sometimes I think peace is such a stupid thing too. I’m very, very sorry.

You tear up this letter and write one Col. Berman will sign.

It is night again. You have your kit next to your scrotum and you go to the third floor. You do not have your padlock anymore because it was lost by being attached to a wall locker that went end over end. You are alone. You go to the window and open it up, and climb onto the roof. There is a full moon that lights your fumbling with the bag, your Varick lighter, and the syringe. You put on the tourniquet, pop the vein, but it takes three stabs to catch it, and when you double-pump the plunger you let it lay there in your arm and you know that you have learned. Here is what you have learned:

You have learned that a Volvo hidden in a blind can be a Russian tank, and under those circumstances, may be fired upon.

You have learned a wall locker contains helmets, shoes, underwear, and uniforms, and when it does not contain those, it can contain a man.

You have learned that someone has the key at all times but sometimes they do not have the key at the right time.

And you have learned that death is a constant at all times, but that at any time the constant may be renegotiated by introducing it, in its most moral and liquid form, into the various channels of your bloodstream.

Robert O’Connor

Letters to Home

You march in silence through the gates, through the swamp, and over several hills. You realize, almost too late, that you are getting dangerously near the blind where your illegal Volvo is parked. The sergeant lines the men up single file twenty yards away from the blind. He struts in front of you.

“‘We are about to do some field practice. Behind that blind is the prototype of a new Russian tank.” His voice is bitter rather than sarcastic, and you feel, rather than see him looking at you. “We have found out about it with a minimum of casualties, and we know it is impervious to all but steady rifle fire. You will hitch your weapon to your shoulder and open fire at my command.”

Your weapon is hitched to your shoulder as you open fire. You imagine the radiator being punctured, the tires deflating, the windows frosting over with splinters of glass. You fire until your ammunition runs out, and then rest your gun at your side.
I in the whiteness of appliances
We stand, the light and
Linoleum polished as ice,
The window panes congealing
As this salty day expires.

We lean on gold-flecked formica.
The bones of my face
Radiate heat like sauna granite.
This I want to tell you as I
Listen to the chambers of your heart
Alternately heavy with blood--

I used to help my father
With the Christmas lights,
The wild tree bristling in the corner
Combing the papered air with resin spice.

I'd lift the tangles of wires,
Green and red insulation twined.
The colored bulbs would clack
Like castanets,
I was afraid they would shatter
Leaving naked filaments
Like the stamens of depetaled flowers
Or wasps
Or cobwebs floating on corners

Between my outflung arms
It was the circuitry of nerves,
The network of maps,
That I thinned to a single strand
Snaking clear across the livingroom carpet.

My father would kneel to
Plug them in
And the cocoons of colors
Lit, diffused with coronal light.
The Death of James Pierce

My father is dying. He is not expected to last the night. This is not bad news.

As I write these lines we--my mother, sister, brother and I--are enroute to the veterans hospital where James Pierce, my intemperate progenitor, lies at Death's Door: it is my fervent hope that he gain admission, and soon. He has been near death many times before. But now we have the assurance of James' Indian physician, a dwarf called Pok, that Daddy--survivor of five heart attacks, a stroke, and now in his third month of coma--is in such a bad way that only divine intervention can save him. Pok called this morning and insisted that we come at once.

Mother attributes James' ability to fend off normally fatal diseases to his genetic makeup. "He has," she will explain, "The constitution of a horse." Pok is not the first to be duped by James into thinking he is dying, only to make a dramatic recovery. Not until Pops is immured in Mother Earth will I believe that he is dead, and even then... If there is a God, if there is justice in the world, James will die, resilient constitution or no.

My fingers are crossed.

I have a hunch that this time James really will die. This is supported by Pok: Very grave, said the Scourge of New Delhi a few hours ago. It is because of Pok that we are forced to make this trip, and that little wog had better deliver a corpse.

To amuse myself during the drive, I entertain a playful fantasy: It is James' burial, and the heavy coffin is being lowered into the grave on canvas belts, one of which snaps; Pops goes tumbling down, end over end, where he is fed upon by all manner of subterranean vermin: he is among his own kind at last!

The countryside is bleak and uniformly ugly. We take a secondary road and pass through dingy hamlets, gray and muddy with the first thaw of the season. In one of these towns I ask that we stop, pleading car-sickness. In the gas station bathroom I am unable to throw up, despite the presence of a number of pungent fumes conducive to my purpose.

My brother goes into the bathroom when I return to the car. Judging by the insuing treacly reek, he had downed a pint of something cheap, followed by a fistful of peppermints to freshen his breath. This gruesome aroma catches in my nostrils with his every burp and belch, and I am forced to hang my head out of the window like a poorly trained dog.

This has been a day full of surprises. It began in English, where Greek Week was in progress. I stood in front of the class of fifty, reading the part of Creon. My leading lady was Mary Magdelene Riordan, who, in green keesocks, pleated uniform and blue-rimmed glasses brought great authenticity to her Antigone. We were wowing the class, who for the most part gave us their undivided attention, with only one or two dolts nodding off--a much better response than yesterday's Oedipus.

We were a hit!

A secretary slipped unnoticed by me into the room. She motioned to our director, Sister Phyllis, a kindly giantess who has a great passion for the theater. The secretary stood on tippoe and spoke into the habit: a family crisis--mine, as it turned out. I watched as Syphilis--our pet name for the thwarted thespian--called up my understudy to replace me.

Syphilis took me out into the hall. I feared that she would beat me. "Master Pierce," the Syph went in for archaic formalisms; she also affected an English accent, which she picked up from films seen during her youth in Pennsylvania. "Your mother has called the school. Your father is very ill, and you are to return home at once."

A tiny tear formed behind her coke-bottle glasses, and Syphilis bent down to me, buffeting my face with celluloid bibbing. "Tell your mother she has my prayers, boy." Said the Syph in her London-via-Scranton patois.

"Okay, Sister Phyllis. I'll tell her." I was ingenuous as the soon-to-be-stricken waif. I knew then that James must be nearly dead or they would never let me out of school. I was elated! At that moment his cells were breaking down, a stench rising from his carcass...

I returned to my classroom to collect my things. I wore the expression of one passed in the face by Tragedy. All eyes were riveted on me. A buzz, a clicking sound arose in the room: the nest of vipers had had their interest piqued. I savored their attention, projecting dread and courage: there I was, the poor young lad being lead blindly toward a Savage Destiny.

I was humble, with only the slightest sniffle to point to my true emotional state: shattered to pieces. Bravely, I gathered my books and with a resolute jaw turned the page like a poorly trained dog.

Once again, I was a hit!

Back at the house things were in an uproar. I had never seen such unrestrained excitement: my family is prone to tension-filled silences and angry brooding, so the buoyant anxiety of today was quite a change. I stopped my mother in the hall, full of hope for the worst. "Is Dad...? How is he?" Mother scowled, suspicious of my motives. "Didn't they tell you in school? Dr. Pok called this
I breezed into the room. "Hi kids! What's cooking?" They did not look up at me: I am the thorn in their collective side, which in my sister's case gives me an expansive target to pick.

My brother drums the ignition key against a pewter candle holder, incessantly and uncontrolably. "Is she almost ready? Jesus, we're going to hit all the traffic." My brother is more than usually nervous, which is to say that he quakes in his chair, tap tap tapping all the while. "She's working on her hair—it could be hours." They nodded grimly at my news, accustomed to mother's tardiness. We children had often remarked that for a woman who took such good care of herself—who took such time—her efforts went, in the main, unnoticed and unremarked.

"Stop it! Put that goddamned key away and sit still." My sister is authoratative, speaking to my brother as if he were a dog picking her garbage cans. My brother sank back into his chair, his face crimson: he looked like he would hit the ceiling if someone came up on him from behind and yelled BOO!

No specific details of James' most recent calamity had been revealed to us, and at long last mother bustled into the room to deliver a briefing.

"This morning your father's heart stopped. Dr. Pok said that it's a miracle he survived it. He had to have electric shocks to be brought back to life. The heart attack has weakened him and now he's susceptible to complications. He may," Mother glanced contemptuously at me from beneath freshly charcoaled eyebrows, "already be gone."

Mother managed to invest in her concluding line a fair approximation of wifely angst: there was an inkling of genuine emotion in her words. We children were moved; reverently, we looked upon the future Widder Woman, her heart in tatters.

"All right, let's get moving. We're already late." Mother barked this out in the main, unnoticed and unremarked.

Visits with James were a problem: he was unaware of your presence. Even when in good health James was not easy to talk to: he met your eyes and could follow generally what you were saying, but never with more than a bland, pale interest. He had other things on his mind.

James was engaged in a perpetual re-telling of his youth, the epic story taking several hours to unfold in splendid, selective detail. His childhood—the only period in his life James could call happy—was excoriated of all unpleasantness and bathed in a warm, rosy light. In his fantasy his family was not destroyed by the Depression, the Packard had not been sold, and his mother
remained sane and lived a long, happy life: a marvelous reversal of the facts that delighted him to no end.

A logical outgrowth of his creeping revisionism was this: James fell in love with his private world and took up residence there. He turned his back on the present, where he was a notable failure, and with the wave of a shot glass dismissed those of us doomed to exist outside of the promised land. James’ every action and thought were directed backward; he would return to his ancestral home, to the parks and fields he played in as a child, happily weaving about in what had become a dangerous section of town.

James might be nothing but a hollow shell now, but Oh!, when he was young...

Mother clutches the steering wheel and is grim with concentration. Mother chain-smokes and listens to the Muzak station and blesses herself each time we pass a church, Catholic or not, making a grab for all available Grace.

Beside mother in the front seat my sister eats: candy bars, chips, life-savers, gum and lolipops vanish behind her swollen lips. My sister always crosses her legs, perhaps simply to prove that they can be crossed. But I fear for her circulation. Won’t the weight of one of those great, voluminous thighs draped over the other collapse even the most sturdy artery?

In the back seat with me my brother is a mass of tiny, unstoppable movement: a tic sputters above his lip, producing an involuntary Sam Spade sneer; one foot shakes up and down and sideways all at once—such is the effect of James on his eldest son.

It is dark and cold when we drive through the gates to the hospital. There are many old buildings arranged campus-style on wooded acreage. James was in the largest of these buildings, on the fourth floor, in intensive care.

James had graced the critical list, off and on, for years. Between brushes with death he would, with horrible regularity, effect dramatic recoveries. James would then be sent home, only to return a week later in worse shape than ever. He would sneak drinks no matter how closely he was watched, and after his departure, usually in an ambulance, we would come upon his concealed bottles: among the towels, under cushions and rocks in the backyard. His most ingenious stash was this: James would tape a pint of J&B to the inside of the toilet tank, both concealing and chilling his life’s blood.

James was a devious man, a trait I am said to have inherited: that is the extent of his legacy to me.

From the nurses’ desk a figure in white waves at us. I realize with mounting terror that it is Ralston: the relentlessly cheery, unbearably effusive creature who has taken care of James for years. Ralston sees herself as an old family friend; I see her as an employee of no merit whatsoever. She leaped out from behind the desk to trap us in the corridor.

“Mrs. Pierce! Children! So good to see you!” Ralston bellows down the hall in violation of hospital decorum, and I cringe with embarrassment as people turn and look at us.

Ralston is particularly fond of me, I assume because I am the youngest; she lounges at me, planning, I fear, to inflict a bear hug. I evade her by dashing to the bathroom. “I’m going to be sick.” I call out from a safe distance, honestly reporting the nausea Ralston inspires in me.

“What a shame!” Ralston is stricken. Before I leave the hospital Ralston will corner me for a lecture on my health. “He’s so pale!” she will bleat. “And so thin! A bag of bones!” I ignore her ravings and am perfectly healthy.

Ralston makes me promise to eat more. “Okay, Miss Ralston! I’ll start eating like a horse!” I mock her but she is oblivious. “That’s the boy!”

“Dr. Pok has been expecting you. Go right in.” Ralston waves us on when she has finished badgering me, like she’s conducting traffic, all the while flashing a brilliant set of dentures. “Drop by the desk later if you get a chance!”

Pok is a dark, fat pygmy who looks continually in need of a thorough scrubbing. Pok is wrapped in a too-tight white smock, and brown jowls cascade over his collar: he calls to mind an overstuffed tootsie roll.

James distrusts Pok. He once confided that Pok and Ralston were in league together, engaged in a conspiracy against him.

“Gunga Din and Florence Nightingale are always on my ass, sneaking up on me; they steal my cigarettes and give me a hard time.”

James is a convincing story-teller: For years I believed his tales of meetings with Great Men during the war.

James claimed to have helped Winston Churchill put out a fire in London during the Blitz; side by side they diligently hurled buckets of water as the bombs burst all about them. “When the fire was out, Winny clapped an arm around my shoulder and made me promise to look him up after the war.” The alleged meetings with Mussolini, Patton and Hitler were less plausible.

As the youngest child, I am the last to see James. From out of nowhere Ralston appeared, oozing sympathy for my plight. She took my arm in hers and ushered me down the hall.

“I’m afraid we are going to have to shorten your visit, dear.” Ralston patted my hand, which I could not extricate from her powerful grip.

“You father and I go back a long way, you know.” Ralston gabbled, dragging me down the corridor. “Mr. Pierce and I always got along famously! We would have long talks about your Dad’s years in England during the war. He has met such fascinating people! How I envy him!”

At the door Ralston relaxed her grip, and I am free at last. “He is a very sick man.” Ralston is redundant but does not go away; clearly, she is not through with me.

Ralston looks imploringly into my eyes, trying to impress me with the depths
of her sincerity: I don’t believe it for a second. What is the Angel of Death up to?

"Your father is in God’s hands, now." Ralston is inspirational. "Perhaps He will call your Dad to come join Him in His heavenly kingdom." I gag slightly and the witch drones on. "There your Dad will be eternally at peace and very happy in His presence." Ralston should get herself a tent and take her act on the road.

Then she does a very odd thing: she takes both of my hands in hers and stands there smiling a too-wide smile, her dentures symmetrical and gleaming. I am frightened—Ralston may have a scalpel on her.

"You had better go in now, dear." Ralston drops my hands like I have leprosy and flounces off down the hall, jaunty, assured.

Ralston is quite mad. Mad!

A great noise emanates from the room, which is close and cluttered with life-support apparatus, tiny monitor lights flicker and wink. Moans, sighs, gasps rise from the two beds. James is in the bed closest to the door; there is another bed beyond a partition, and there lies Nurse, who valiantly served her country in France during the first world war. Together, James and Nurse comprise that V.A. rarity, the co-ed room.

Nurse has fallen into a sympathetic attack of some kind, and both roomies contribute their groans to this little corner of Purgatory. Ralston would josh us that James and Nurse were living in sin, and I would laugh along with her, picturing the two locked in a frenzy of geriatric lust, their monitor lights racing about the screen, J.V.'s spinning.

James reclined on his bed in a state of obvious decay. His body writhed about, heaved, it seemed strained for air; James was fighting his last great battle, and I stood at bedside rooting for the opposition. I committed every detail of the scene to memory: his suffering will yield a lifetime of consolation.

James' mouth was covered with a plastic inhalator, and beneath closed lids his eyes twitched furiously; his once-ruddy complexion was now sallow; the purple bags under his eyes extend to mid-cheek: he looks like a jaundiced raccoon. Even the bulbous, scarlet alchy's nose was pale, revealing tiny, broken veins.

James was stunning!

I stood and watched the body struggle, briefly toying with the notion of turning the oxygen off for a crucial moment or two, but then, why interfere with the natural processes at work which were doing such a nice job of killing him? Why get in the way of God’s will?

Daddy in his bed: this is one of two of his most familiar positions, the other being James in his recliner before the television, swilling beer.

I had been in school a few years before I learned that other fathers did not lay about the house all day long in a stupor, but departed each morning for jobs; but then, James was never a conformist, always did as he pleased, and proudly maintained a nocturnal schedule, ignoring all criticism.

James would on occasion go off on binges, and inevitably when I had built up my hopes that he had run away he would come home and take to his bed. Then he would rise again to walk the night.

James was dying and he was the lucky one: he would be free to spend eternity with his parents and boyhood chums in their own little corner of Catholic heaven; there, the old days could be revived and relived. Separated from his body, his addiction and his earthly family, James will romp and roughhouse with all the other little souls down the block, at night returning to the Pierce family cloud, be tucked in and kissed goodnight and want for nothing. How happy he will be!

"It's time, dear." It was Ralston, who had crept up on me from behind on her noiseless orthopedic shoes, giving me a start.

"Please, Miss Ralston, just another minute." I was the grieving child being torn from the breast of a beloved parent. Ralston nodded but did not leave the room, so any tinkering with the equipment was impossible.

Caught up in my role, I bent over the tortured visage and, Judas-like, kissed him.

"Congratulations," I whispered. "You've won."

Ralston again took my arm as if I were weak with grief, and lead me away.

We remained in the town for a few days. James did not die, but he did not improve, either. Finally, Pok advised us to go home, as we were accomplishing nothing: he said he would call when the great moment came. The body would be shipped home.

We were eating dinner when Pok called from the hospital. It was a Friday, and we paused expectantly over our haddock while mother took the call. The three of us made no sound and sat very still, as if in suspended animation; even my brother was calm. The suspense was killing me.

Mother came in with a neutral expression on her face.

"All right," said mother, her voice weary and flat. "Let's get moving. We're late as it is...."

George Lowery
Peeling Dead Pine in January

With the steel of the axe
ringing against them in the cold;
I knock the knots off clean.
I straddle the Norway log,
propped between the wood pile and a saw-horse,
and brace my feet on either side.
The draw-knife gouges deep into the dry bark
with the first quick pull
and rips up a long brittle strip
that balances itself momentarily,
then falls into the packed snow.
I reach to pull the blade again
but I'm startled to see
a small, segmented worm on the bare wood.
Stiffened with sleep and the bright cold,
it twists its body into a hard white curl.
It is amazing to see a naked thing alive,
if only for a moment,
in a time so harsh as this.

William Durbin

Back Mountain Sadness

Coal runs in thin veins
through these hills
and young men,
with new beards just darkening,
drive old junkers down these rattling dirt roads
and spit tobacco juice before they smile
and dream of their mothers
at work in dark factories in Ohio.

Children pedal rickety bikes across twisting highways
and grin at the cars sometimes
and drag stringers of trout, stocked through June,
home
and split wood in September
with aces whose handles are chin-high.

Young girls dangle white legs
over the edges of weathered porches
and wonder continually at the slowness of time.

Men ride flat-bed Fords at dawn
deep into these mountains
and make chain saws scream,
kicking wood chips till the light dies
and stop in town and get roaring drunk
and ride into the darkness--
the embers of their tail lights
disappearing around curve after curve.

William Durbin
Untitled

Christmas came and went,
with mother cooking her ham with pineapple,
and complaining that she never got any appreciation,
or a chance,
to sit down.
We opened our presents with the memory of her words:
"There ain't gonna be much for Christmas this year,
just one present or two for each of you--that's enough."
And it was,
the usual brush and comb sets and slippers;
but really,
it's all too commercial, anyway.
Christmas is truly Christ's birthday celebration.
My tipsy brother reminded us of this,
on the way home from my married sister's first holiday party,
when adding his own choice words,
gave his version of Hark the Herald Angels Sing:
and they did,
as mother told him he ought to be ashamed of himself,
everybody heard them,
and we continued to tell him to shut up at the red light,
the stop sign,
all the way home;
They hung above us in the air.

Peg Maloney

#5 to Main

Mr. Bean,
rides downtown with me every morning,
getting on three stops after I do,
and I'm anxious,
because he has a hole in the center of his face,
where his nose used to be.
And I sit in my seat and gaze out the window,
feeling his presence.
as a bright pink house, and an oak tree, and a mailman
by,
listening to him roll his coins down the slot,
waiting for him to ask for his transfer and then begin his search for a seat.
I think how everyone is going to look up at him,
it's unavoidable,
as he struggles down the aisle,
hands gripping tops of seats as he goes,
urging myself not to raise my eyes as he approaches me.
I know exactly what's there, anyway;
I see him everyday,
that same pained expression--the agony.
But like all the other morning riders,
many taking time from their papers,
I'm curious once more,
and have to get a closer look.
Again it's pussy and sore looking;
quickly I search for another pink house
and suffer.
I want him off my bus.
I want to rip his face off.

Peg Maloney
Biogenesis

In the beginning, we came falling from ear doors.

Like welfare cases, breeding

Bombs on Bread

Always making sound gestures.

Geraldine Rand

LOOK UPSET UNDER

YOU

FLO, YOU

WIG, "FEAR OF RUTS

YOUR PLASTIC

Geraldine Rand
The Haunting

Dust drowned curtains
are drawn over yellowed windows,
a haze of cigarette smoke
crawls into the air like a spire:
this is a graveyard of books
that lie at crooked angles
around the room:
sculptured stones that stare
with histories of their own.
The walking dead spirits of books rise
and gather in the center of the room
to mutter like dying flames:

"We brought him our finest of brews
and quenched his thirst with words,
at our inspiration
his fingers found voices of their own;
we heard their song and were glad.
But forgetting the gifts we have given
he left us here to rot and wandered off,
drunk on the dregs of his song.
Now we will haunt him with grief.
Gathering at his desk
we will foul his machine
and quench our thirst with ink.
At our command
his words will twist away like snakes.
We were born of greater hands than his,
and coming in the corridors of sleep
will whisper in his ear:
'There are better fingers born
than the ones that dangle from your hands,
there are better voices heard
than those at your command.'"
A Sunday Night

Hanging blue jeans
over the mouth of a greasy stove
wringing suds and stains
from yellowed socks
and stringing them up
side by side
on the wire
of a bent black hanger

The house beats with heat
water drips from T-shirts
and slaps into a tray
making a puddle
where a solitary cigarette
floats

Jonathan Hazelton

Untitled

Ghostman Brown,
you've come to haunt me again.
Looming presence ever searching
to find another attic.
Ghostman Brown,
leave my eaves to the squirrels.
I can see the light through you,
Ghostman Brown,
and you ain't selling me any bibles.

Barbara Horrigan

Ti-Jean

Lowell's sacred sun of art
You Jack dharma triumphant easy rider
Generation bum wildly free
Running naked through N.Y. concrete illusions
Unknown hitch hiker cruising with Angels
Words so prophetic of cultural deluge
And that cross of eternity in your mad eyes
You Jack blowing a beat jazz trumpet
Note after bop note
St. Francis jumping with glee
Dylan singing the gutsy vocals
Cody smiles teeth glowing in miracles
Shouting ‘‘yea yea!’’ and ‘‘wow God!’’ throughout
Now we're all in the Sgt. Peppers band
You Jack rucksack heaving silhouette
Trudged up last mountain in clouds
In red checkered Lumberman's shirt slick
Paining with 11 manuscripts of genius
A new style mood flowing voice spilled
Beatific thrust shattering into living prose
But that sad swirl menacing death eye
Beat Buddha spirit forsaken
Christ genie trapped in a port bottle
As I hold your book in tears
Your spontaneous blue-flamed torch
Blazing inferno word that warmed our secret souls
So fast too fast sparks emitting tongue-shaped verb
A nova so bright as to enlighten a whole literary scripture
You Jack vagabond of American visions!

Jim Buckley
Parallel Movement

We climb stringent arches onward
Watery hands caress the cloud lovers
Kierkegaard's lost journals now wild
Accidental taxis pass in glossy dread
Eagerly traced channel hindered yen
To steal over the slick cemetery night
Now Joe Gravedigger lonesome spade
Lumps of moist earthen morals phallic worms
Heaved! Examine thy dream! Stunned illiterate!
Open virgin! Genuine rifle!
Mysterious suicide dragging strips of raw egg!
Colossal earplugs!
I was there! I was the man!
On a long newspaper-spoon fantasia downward view!
Absolute morbid joy! Subliminally unsettled-
And the shadow winking selfhood
past!

Jim Buckley
The Obese Photographer
(A work in progress)

Philip hangs an Army blanket across the bathroom window, and with a rolled rug covers the blade of light at the foot of the door. He twists a safelight into the fixture. The red bulb lacquers his hands and brow with infernal tints.

Since the fire in the attic he has used the bathroom for developing and printing. His son, Thomas, cleared a path of loose shingles up to the charred hole, and covered it with clear vinyl nailed down with wood slats. Philip would like to keep both the insurance check and this provisional skylight. He’s used to the bathroom now, though he has to store his things in a dresser in the hallway. Steam could ruin his sensitized paper or blister the pleated sleeves of his enlarger.

The enamel is chipped in a spot on the lip of the sink to show a blue metal that bleeds when water washes over it. Standing before the sink Philip is poised and glazed; his senses retracted like a snake’s tongue. His breath is thin and tight, as if his chest had sprouted the circuitous plumbing of a french horn. He is startled by his stillness. He had been holding a green rubber hose and looking down at it; he is confused by the way it materialized in his palms. He fits its cushioned rubber funnel over the sink faucet and recalls he had been thinking of whether it was last summer, or the one before, that his wife started wearing bedroom slippers to the supermarket. He wonders why this thought should immobilize him. He takes three stainless steel trays from the formica table against the wall. When Philip kneels at the edge of the bathtub his obesity becomes acute.

Philip’s car is over ten years old and, in the fashion of its year, is vast and arteriosclerotic, with six ash trays molded flush with the doors and dash, and triangular window leafs with their own small chrome cranks. Philip has the two yet operative windows rolled down to rinse out the fumes of rancid vinyl. His equipment is in the trunk where it might be cooler. Philip is thinking of the bride’s face and the maids’ faces. He’s thinking how everyone will shine and wilt in this humidity. He wonders if he might as well stop at the Valley Mall for a compact of translucent Comsilk.

Yet another couple has chosen the Rhoda Arms for their reception. Philip lopes after the bridal party, cameras around his neck like amulets. Everything is scarlet in this hall, a color that compliments neither skin tones nor pastels. The church had been much better. Whitewashed to a ringing brilliance. Against those walls the people were like fruit tumbled on a linen cloth. The light had slanted through the stained windows just so, to gild the edges of the bride’s gown and ice her veil to a warm breath frosting around her cheeks. At home Philip will fit a silk stocking over a wire hoop and insert this in the shaft of light that falls on his sensitized paper, rotating the hoop, diffusing until her image becomes ethereal.

The five musicians are swaying in their black jumpsuits. Their faces are long. Their unctuous music coats the silvery din of the hall.

Philip steps up to the edge of the dance floor, he lowers his head, his hand dials the camera’s fat lense, he sees the brass molding separating the scarlet carpet and parquet. He looks up and there are two men walking towards him along the border of the dance floor, their suits of the finest slate-blue fabric, their hair metallicly tinted. They pass Philip’s shoulder and he hears one say, “...the nerves turn to macaroni.”

Philip wants to get out of there before children are found crouched under tables drunk, before young men grab snowy slivers of cake and dangle them above their open mouths as they dance, the cake breaking like icicles, tumbling off their chins and smearing beneath the dancers’ shoes, before he turns a corner on the mezzanine and sees the bride at the end of a hallway, limping in her stiff gown and thoughtfully picking rice out of her bra. He wants to leave, and he does.

In front of the Spruce Diner there is a plaster doe. A lawn ornament. Her front hooves are bolted to the blacktop just behind the molded white slabs that delineate the parking area. Her forelegs have been chipped down to their armature of ribbed metal rods by the bumpers of hasty drivers.

Philip takes a seat at the counter. Over the door of the kitchen the certificate from the health department is secured to the wall with green plastic tape, the same tape that patches the tears in the booth seats and counter stools.
Jean, Philip’s favorite waitress, sets a cup of coffee before him. “Could I have date-nut bread with cream cheese and a jelly doughnut?”

“Yes, if you have it.”

Jean wiskes over to the pastry case. She’s young and fastens her long black hair so that it hangs like a tassel. Philip tips the dispenser and sugar falls, as out of the neck of a bottomless hourglass, disappearing in his coffee. He leans over and grabs a newspaper from the pile near the cash register. On page three there is an article—“Infant Murdered by Tennessee Housewife.” Philip frowns. He refuses to read articles like that. “That’s news of no import,” he says to himself, “and it shouldn’t be in the newspaper.” He reads a full page report, “How Our Atomic Arsenal Stacks Up To Theirs.” He chews his date-nut bread as he reads. There is a world map, six inches square, with the locations of warheads and submarines indicated with symbols like shark’s teeth. Philip refers to the legend—shaded symbols mean higher megatons—but he keeps losing track. He bites into the jelly doughnut and turns to the family section. There’s an interview with the owner of a petting zoo. He sets up his menagerie in the promenades of shopping malls. He reads how the monkeys grow particular, they won’t eat the skins of fruit, spitting out blueberries even. Philip thinks of the black hands of monkeys, their purple fingernails. The air conditioning is chilling the beads of sweat on his skin. He looks around for Jean, he wants to pay his bill. Jean comes over.

“Your friend,” he says, “does she want to sign a contract for her wedding?”

“Oh, you know she said she’s going to have Decker & Sons. I told her you were cheaper, but…” Jean shrugs.

“Some people think my style is outdated.”

“Weddings are supposed to be old-fashioned.” Jean tears his bill from the pad, grabs the round glass coffee pot from the burner, and starts down the counter.

On Main Street between a hairdresser and the karate school is Decker & Sons Photographers. Philip walks by in the evenings, sometimes. He stops before the tiers of photographs in the display window. Gilt picture frames, some with open work, like the stiff lace of cheap lingerie. There are portraits of young girls in acrylic sweaters with luxuriant hair and stringent smiles. There are babies seated on imitation fur or princely velvet pillows. Cirrus clouds in the backdrops. Philip might whisper, “They stop at nothing.” or maybe, “Take away their artificial lighting and they’re lost.”

The coffee pot empty, Jean resets the brewmaster and turns to Philip laying his palm on the counter. “Philip, did I tell you about the man spying from a car? A couple days ago when I went to my mother’s house to do laundry she told me kids from the neighborhood had come to the door to tell her that a man was watching our house from a car and asking them questions about my family. When I heard that, I went out there and asked him what he was doing. He said, ‘Don’t worry I’m not an investigator.’” Jean’s grey, kittenish eyes scan the booths for needy customers. “Anyway, when I phoned the police station they already knew all about him. They said he was watching the house around the corner from ours where his ex-wife was staying, and asking questions about my family to lead people off the track.”

“That’s crazy. He wasn’t doing a very good job, covering up I mean.”

“I guess not.” Jean grabs some menus and paper mats and darts off. Philip stands up and rumages in his pockets for silver.

Philip is watching, in a feline trance, from the small bathroom window. He should be setting up, but he’s watching Kira, his daughter, pacing on the cracked sidewalk below. Kira is fifteen and beautiful. A wide-jawed face with features shaped with sweeps and turns like calligraphic letters. A beach towel and satchel are in a heap on the seeded lawn. Kira disappears under the porch roof. The steps are split and loose and Philip can hear them teeter. She leaps from the steps back onto the walk. She is absorbed in kinesthesia, and turns on the balls of her white Puma sneakers, blazes of black on the sides like the face stripes of gazelles. She is waiting for her boyfriend; her boyfriends change by the month. Sometimes they have bronze freckles over their sharp noses, high-arched eyebrows beneath curly fawn-colored bangs. Sometimes their satiny straight hair in angled in styles so severe it seems carrots could be shred on the sides of their heads. They come in rattling station wagons or buffed, black, heavily chromed cars. High school rings flashing below their knuckles like large blue warts.

Kira went to ten out of the fourteen nights of the county fair. She’d come home with handmade earrings or slips of yellow paper with a print out of her computerized handwriting analysis. Philip saw her at the fair once, just off the midway near the dairy goats. Her head thrown back, she was biting the rim of a paper cup, laughing. Philip could see her midriff below her halter incurve as she laughed. He slipped away.

Philip hears the twang of the rusted spring as the screen door is pushed open. “You want to bring anything for lunch?” His wife’s voice is honed and stretched, its inflections the rise and fall of a whine.

“No.”

“A couple sandwiches?”

“No.” Kira whips around, “there’s food to eat at the lake.”

Philip’s wife is terribly patient and he wonders if her patience is a token of her weariness.

Carla Randolph
Outside it was raining. Christopher sat alone in his own gray corner of the room, looking out the window at the dark sky, and the tall blue buildings that seemed to change shapes in the drifting fog.

"Listen," he said, without turning his head from the window. "I'm not trying to prove anything to anybody. I left New York to go to California, and I left California because I didn't want to go to Viet Nam. So here I am in Montreal." He wiped the dusty mist from the inside of the window with his sleeve and leaned a little closer to the rain. "It's as simple as that," he said, looking over at me. "Doesn't that sound simple?"

Across the room a stereo played the ending of a Cat Stevens album. We sat through most of the last song. Then I watched Christopher stand up and walk over to change the album. He looked different now. His blonde hair looked almost brown in the shadowy corner of the room and his dark blue-jeans and blue flannel shirt made it seem as though he could fade off into the gray darkness if he wanted to.

"What do you want to hear?" he said, turning on a light above the stereo.

"I don't care," I answered... and then after thinking for a minute "how about some Simon and Garfunkel? You got anything by them?"

"Probably," he said, looking through a pile of albums. "It's just a matter of finding them." The pile of albums almost covered a long narrow table that sat near one of the huge stereo speakers. The albums and the stereo just about filled that whole side of the room. A soft, tan couch faced the stereo and two chairs that matched the couch sat in between the windows next to the "stereo" wall, while the fourth wall had a brick fireplace built into it. I sat on the couch with my feet stretched out on the carpeting watching Christopher shuffle through the albums.

"I can't find any Simon," Christopher said, setting down some albums. "How about Kiss? Kiss is good enough ain't it?" He was already putting the album on when he asked me. He turned on the turntable and walked back to his chair by the window.
"Well c'mon, shoot," he said, sitting back down in his chair. "You said you wanted an interview, so c'mon, hit me with some questions."

"O.K." I said looking over at him. He leaned forward in his chair, waiting for me to say something. "O.K. ... how old were you when you left Los Angeles?"

"Aw. c'mon," he said, sitting back in his chair. "You know I was eighteen. That's why I left." He paused for a minute and folded his arms across his chest. "Why don't you ask me some good questions... like how I like the Canadian chicks up here or what kind of wine I like. Yeah, ask me what kind of wine I like. I'm really getting to be quite a connoisseur. I'm really into wine."

"Why don't you ask me some good questions... like how I like the Canadian chicks up here or what kind of wine I like. Yeah, ask me what kind of wine I like. I'm really getting to be quite a connoisseur. I'm really into wine."

"O.K." I said, pretending I was writing. "Mr. Christopher, could you tell us what kind of wine you prefer."

"Strawberry Hill, sir," he said. "That's good stuff, that Strawberry Hill. It's got good aroma." He reached over to turn up the stereo while I wrote down that "Christopher the draft dodger" likes Strawberry Hill Wine, and that he thinks Kiss is a good substitute for Simon and Garfunkel.

"Ask me about my job now," he said. "I love talking about my job." He spent the next fifteen minutes telling me about Williamson Paper Products, and how great their notebooks and book-bindings were, and what a good company it was to work for, and how great it was to have a job where you meet people.

"I'm district sales manager now," he said. "That's my new title. They even gave me a company car. It's not much--just a Nova with a six cylinder in it--but it's free. I mean, who would complain when it's free?"

When he finally finished talking about his job, he jumped up from his chair, hit the reject button on the turntable, and started walking toward the kitchen.

"There," he said, "if you're done with this interview, c'mon out in the kitchen and I'll buy you a beer." I followed him out into the kitchen, not ready to let the interview end.

"I don't think I'm quite finished yet," I said. "I don't think I've gotten quite what I was after yet." He opened a bottle of Miller and handed it to me.

"I wanted to know more about how you felt about Viet Nam; how you felt when you left, and how you feel now." I sat my beer down on the table and pulled up a chair. "Mostly," I said, "I wanted to hear your story."

"My story, huh," he said. He pulled a chair back from the table and sat down. "I don't think I have too much to tell." He look at the window over the sink. It was still raining. "You seem to see things differently than I do," he said, still looking at the window across the room. "You seem to think you'll find something interesting or exciting about me ... maybe something mysterious. I don't think there is anything like that."

For a while after that neither of us spoke. He was right. I was hoping to find something exciting or mysterious, and so far all I had seen was an ordinary man in an ordinary apartment with an ordinary job.

"O.K.," he said, finally breaking the silence. "O.K. I'll tell you my story. But I don't think it's much." He took a swig of beer and sat his bottle down on the table.

"In September of '69," he began, "I left N.Y. for California. You know I lived in Albany, don't you? Well anyway, I had an uncle who lived in Los Angeles. He offered me a job in a store, so I went out. In December, about a week after my eighteenth birthday, I came up here. Not alone though. Me and four other guys came up. We came up in a '59 Ford. I didn't think the old clunker would get us out of town--and they wanted to take it to Canada."

He told me about the trip up to Montreal. They were "scared" crossing the border, but other than that it was like a "fishing trip" or a "camping trip," and none of them had seemed to take it too seriously.

When I asked him how he had felt about leaving home like that, he said, "I guess I left home when I left New York, not when I left California. When I left California, I just left my uncle and the store. It wasn't home. And it wasn't hard."

"You didn't find it hard leaving your country?" I asked. He looked right at me. "I'm in my country right now," he said. Then he was quiet for a minute. He stared at the beer bottle in his hands as if he was studying the label. "It was my decision," he said, still studying the label. "I'm here because I wanted to. Anybody who stayed behind, stayed because they wanted to. I've already told you my reasons for making that decision..."

"What about regrets?" I asked. "Have you ever wished you had done things differently?"

"No," he said quickly, shaking his head. "I think I'm the luckiest guy in the world, being where I am today. I'm not complaining about the way things turned out." He liked talking about Canada just as he liked talking about his job. "There's nothing I really want to change," he said.

"You never feel bitter?" I asked. He thought for a minute, putting his elbows up on the table and folding his hands together.

"Maybe at first," he said. "Maybe I wished I had been born a little later. But not now. I'm happy." He stood up and walked over to the refrigerator.

"You want another beer?" he asked.

"No thanks," I said. "But I do have one more question for you."

"Well, let's hear it," he said.

"Do you ever feel like going home?"

He sat back down at the table with his beer. "Look around," he said, "I am home."

Bob Miller
Across from the Clam Bar and down two flights of stairs, careful not to slip on the ice and, behold: *the place to be.* Rooms of people wearing boas, safety pins, matted hair vests; there's soul in these cats at a party.

Settled with a drink against a near wall, stands Balboa. Bush beard and hair tied back, crimson like his Fire Chief's hat, 243 by number and cocked forward as if hiding the third eye. A wooden cross devoid of Christ, showing its cross-piece just above his waist. Rust stains where the figure's lower limbs left their imprint, buried deep within his trousers. He holds a congenial smile, first directed at all surrounding then at the swampy bottom of his cup.

*Grog to prop the soul,* he tells the people around him, and asks, *is it fair to bitch its end when near and far the world winds down around us?*

A black maned girl with a freckled nose crosses the room to mingle, and smile, and talk, with a hushed, puppy face. Her eyes roam over everyone, pause, drink the gaze of a shining face, drift on. Smile, rest.

Engaged briefly, she gives no notice to the listing Coolie who offers a fresh drink. His pigtail hangs like an oily rope over the spotless glass, taunting an invisible lifeboat on the golden sea with mock salvation.

He says her name softly, *Veronica,* as he rests the drink calmly by her side.
and departs. She reaches blindly, touching it with poise, her eyes laughing. Her hair so shimmery in the colored light; like the iridescent rainbow that reflects from an oil puddle.

Through a ragged corridor of people I watch as the Coolie begins to beat wildly on a xylophone of sorts against a far wall, his sticks padded with lunacy. His scream, deftly between beats, interrupting the simple flow around Veronica; only she, smiling and nodding, refuses to utter a sigh.

Tap, plink, twing, bam, blam, bam...plink, slap, bam, tap, plink, twing...you all think I'm simple, don't you?...SIMPLE...INSECT...TAP! PLING!...come on, take me outside and throw snowballs at me!...BLAM! SLAP!...take me out and bury me in the snow...BANG!...I dare you...TWANG! PLINK!...COME ON....

Balboa walks by handing chunks of cheese to kindred spirits. Moving close with an offered morsel, he tells me that our Coolie needs refreshment, but in the absence of Oriental fare, he can only offer Swiss.

As he enters the Coolie's line of sight the clatter ceases, leaving an unexpected void filled with the sudden stares of people as if in a daydream. So dead is the air, the Coolie's hoarse panting flows like a mud slide along the carpet and up my legs, filling my soul with a sludge of misgiving.

Balboa stands still and smiling, Buddha-like as he gazes toward the silent pair; man and instrument heaving with motionless frenzy until a new seizure finds its way into action and words.

FIFTY CENTS IF I CAN STROKE YOUR HAIR! the Coolie screams, SEVENTY-FIVE IF I CAN STROKE YOUR BEARD!

Balboa turns his head and winks benevolently at us, then goes to the Coolie's side, lost from view as bodies shift, closing the corridor. Attention reverts to conversation, beer, a fat girl dancing alone. At my side now, Veronica again fills the room.

"Sometimes I think they should put John in a rubber room," she observes.

"The Coolie?" But of course the Coolie, how can I be so lackluster.

She nods. Coolie John, quite, I muse.

"Indeed," I say.

"You like my cross? I'm not sure I believe in it, but it makes me feel good. Like a great work of art." Veronica smiles shyly at first, then with a sort of vague provocation as an eyebrow rises ever higher.

"Actually, I hadn't noticed it till just now. It complements your shirt," I begin, raising an eyebrow of my own. "It's not terribly obvious on that background, you know?"

Actually it is quite handsome. Rather like her hair, onyx, a texture that suggests great depths. If the light was stronger I think I could see shapes moving just below the surface. A tropical lagoon at dusk with screaming night birds and faint croaks from the flora.

"It's oh so much more subtle than him," as she points to Balboa, who stands by a smiling Jock who has a baby doll pinned to his sweater. They chat animatedly with no sign of Coolie John. Balboa's cross now and then a sword in the Jock's hand, creasing, jabbing the floor.

"Is there a quieter place to talk, do you think? I can't think straight here any more." Her eyes glitter in appeal, twinkling with throaty interest.

"My place?" Her eyes drink it in. but I think no faster than the polished cross, like a target now, tilted against her right breast.

"Is it far?"

"I've got a car," I say.

"Sure."

Backflash: two nights ago.

I am in the Clam Bar for a nightcap, first eyeing the house across the street, anticipating the party. Then cornered against the bar by a shabby dictaphone named Jason who insists on bringing to mind all the wonderful, beautiful things that can happen at an Anti Nuke rally.

...then at the end, just before everybody leaves, we get into a big circle and join hands, the lights dim and we sing, say can I bum another smoke?, 'We Shall Overcome."

"Jesus." Pent up boredom spins me away from the ridiculous conclusion to face the figure standing at my other side, and before I fully see him, his form, his face, he asks if I'm seriously now, planning on the "March In Rows."

"Ah hell, let's not get started on that. For results they should have called it 'March for Dimes' and been happy if they got that. Ah, you know anything about Booker T. Washington and the theory of the Talented Tenth?"

"What? Isn't he from Tuskegee?" He looks genuinely puzzled. "An inventor?"

"Well," I say, "did you know that the pig was his favorite animal?" He looks even more puzzled, but in a sly way, like I'm putting him on. I introduce myself.

"Caleb Flower," he replies. "Do you know Ricky who's usually in here, you look an awful lot like him."
I look over my shoulder, a reflex really, and see only the smiling face of humanity’s last hope, Jason’s oily nature at its best, calling to my conscience: Repent. He walks off finally to deliver more words of encouragement to those souls at the other end of the bar.

“Ah no, does he wear glasses?” Turning to face Caleb Flower full, I prop myself with an elbow on the bar.

“No glasses,” Caleb replies. “So what’s this Booker T. stuff, pigs? Come on.”

“Well, I’m a student of history, fun facts of history for the most part; and hell you gotta talk about something. So, when Booker T. Washington was a little boy—” Caleb cuts me off with a flourish, smiling apologetically.

“Well I’m into Psychology, for the most part, so let’s talk about that if it has to be something. You’ll like this.”

“Funny, I would have pegged you for a poet,” say I, with wandering gaze firmly attached to Caleb’s figure, now slouching with beer in hand, stillled before his lips.

“Ha. Well, be that as it may, Psychology teaches us to change behaviour with either reward or with punishment,” Caleb says all in a sigh. “Especially if it’s undesirable behavior, swift and intense punishment. That’s why with laboratory rats—”

“Or with burning blacks.”

“Well, that may work as an example to the others, but hardly gives the subject with undesirable behavior a chance to reform. Now with rats, or kids, anything really, to change behavior it’s best to punish with as short a time lapse as possible or they won’t adequately respond. Like if you whack the dog when you get home from work for dumping on the rug hours before. It won’t understand, and probably ‘ll resent you.”

I begin to wonder suddenly, if in the tiniest way, I should even care.

Looking back over my shoulder I notice the dated savior trying to drum up recruits for the March, back by the Space Invaders game, or under the T.V. where some construction worker types are looking at him like he’s nuts. Still for the price of a cigarette, I see a lucky few treated to expositions on the future of humanity’s last hope, Jason’s oily nature at its best, calling to my conscience: Repent. He walks off finally to deliver more words of encouragement to those souls at the other end of the bar.

“Don’t you feel guilty?” I ask, thinking some mock interest may cheer him up. “I mean about lab animals. They don’t push the right button and...”

“And we send a jolt through their cage? Hell no. They’re just animals, expendable tools, we bred ‘em by the thousands.”

“When they wear out you replace them?”

“Sure,” he says. “And what’s more, it’s more advantageous not to let them wear out; nip ’em in the bud as it were, before they ever have the chance to grow old and useless on their own.”

“Wild,” I say as we both stare at Jason’s gesturing appeals for help; “it’s for the future,” he yells suddenly.

Caleb turns silently back to his beer, caught up in the glory of bubbles moving slowly from the sides of the glass to the surface.

I stare after Jason. Buffeted around from one end of the bar to the other; careening away from impact with opinions stronger than his own. Rolling back and forth between people who stand like pillar and post to his words. At times rocking after a jolt that leaves the chimes and tinsel of a pinball game etched in place of the regularity of bar life.

“Do you know that guy?” I ask Caleb with exasperation.

“Hell,” Caleb snorts, then looks up. “He’s the second person I met when I started school here. A weasely little slime bag who’ll never do a day’s work in his life as long as he can find a cause to suck up to.” Caleb fairly heaves his discontent as we both watch Jason’s ricocheting progress back towards us.

“Christ, ignore him,” Caleb says as he turns back to face the row after row of brightly colored liquids that line the wall behind the bar’s polished expanse. Jason steps up beside him, and Caleb glances at me; a glance like the shower purpose that cushions his head like a halo—he lays his burden in front of us.

Caleb is winding down in spite of himself, I can see. A vacant stare at the pay phone while he talks, as if willing it to ring. As if my demeanor, not quite on par with his own, has laid Caleb low.

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Jason is drunk. His words make no sense, but true to his creed—the higher purpose that cushions his head like a halo—he lays his burden in front of Caleb.

“Fuck off,” says Caleb, who seems in part resigned to the coming spectacle in spite of the throbbing vein at his temple.

“Don’t you give just a little shit?” Jason asks beseechingly, concentrating entirely on the trembling flush that fills Caleb’s face. “Don’t you care at all?”

“Go on Caleb,” I say, “tell him about Psychology. Lab animals and all; their little pink eyes staring up in bewilderment.” I hand an unrequested cigarette to Jason and fumble for a match. Forgetting me, Jason pokes the air in place of the regularity of bar life.

“Good Christ, did you have to say that?” Caleb turns fiercely to me, then

A Familiar Woman
when you time's up than go to Hell when you're eighty with all that blood on
your hands." Jason pauses for breath and lights his cigarette, now wrinkled and
in places stained dark from the sweat of his hands. "People like you don't
bother to think about things they're doing till it's too late. Animals are the
freest form of life we have, since we've corrupted ourselves."

"Garden of Eden; yeah I know, I used to be Catholic too," Caleb mutters,
rolling his eyes like an adolescent girl.

"Christian man, Christian. If we all used to be something, it's Christian."

It's becoming obvious that Jason is revving up for more, much more; sudden
passion driving out the drunkeness.

Caleb in turn is winding himself tight; tight like a test pilot before a super
secret flight. If he fails he knows he won't ever come back.

The momentary silence that separates these two, convincing in its sincerity,
still is no match for that which I've nurtured while they've reacquainted them­selves. And there's no mystery there either; they care, I don't. But how is it that
they can even bring themselves to care? I muse. What a queer affliction.

Humming a little jingle I once heard about nuking the whales, I smile and
let my drifting eyes rest on only those things that need to make sense. And in
fact they do make sense, just wonderfully: shouts of merriment, clinking
glasses. The bartender smiles at me, I hum and smile back.

I look up at the pockmarked T.V. screen, humming merrily just like me. A
man dressed as some sort of vegetable---a turnip, I think---is creeping slowly
upon an old man asleep on a park bench. He is alone in the creamy light of the
lamp overhead, twitching his limbs like an old dog reliving his past glories,
lying solidly before the fireplace.

There's enough sense for all concerned, I think.

Flash forward: the night is again the present. Veronica and I slide on velvety
sidewalks down to a quiet nightcap, just a block away and well worth the effort.

"They seem to know you here. Come a lot?" As she speaks, Veronica's index
finger twists strands of her hair round and round.

"I try to make this my last stop whenever I'm out. It's nice, don't you think?
Nice and calm after all those other places; great way to get your equilibrium
back before going home."

She eyes me oddly, almost to the point of looking right through. Discor­ncering gaze, but still it's easy to return. To rely more on atmosphere unspoken
than sore throat; nights of smoke and talk do take their toll.

Veronica's uplifted eyes suddenly cloud over with a blush like smoking
embers; dying in neglect and exhaustion but still with a yen to smother life. It
holds for a moment like a pall, drawing me down towards a deep, black
bullseye within the chambers of her heart.

Then gone. Again I'm talking, she laughs. But of course, I've been talking
all along. Enchanted without ever realizing it, and now just a hint remains in
the smoke and the shadow.

The dark cream of dawn floats like drifting snow on the road ahead; the headlights of oncoming cars, orbs too
early to offer warmth. Passing scenery, sparse turmoil against the flat glow of
sand and mist, making only the car itself as if alive, surrounded by a periphery
of insignificance.

"Are you sure we took the right road? Why didn't you say you lived so far,
we could have gone to my apartment."

"I've barely got enough gas to get back," I insist.

"Jesus, it's 4:40," as I pull myself free from the car and study these new
surroundings. Ahead is a trim cottage with window boxes, shutters and a T.V.
aerial. The shades are all drawn, but a faint light flees from a crack around the
door as we approach.

"That's okay, I'm used to late hours," she replies indifferently. "Step this
way."

We enter what must very nearly be the inside of a cave. The light comes from
a single kerosene lamp, sitting on a fat telephone book in the middle of the
floor. The walls are adobe. Hung in small dusters, in not quite obvious
patterns, tiny black and white pictures are arranged.

She stands with her back to me, just beyond the lamp, so that her image
seems to grow out of the light and like an ivy, up the wall.

The pounding of excitement is finally silent in my ears as I cross
to her side

and scrutinize the scenes arranged in a simple oval, with curving lines radiating
out to form a circle in motion, rolling across the rough clay. In the dim light I
can only make out the stilled movements of children at play; by a pool, on
swings, under trees. Smiling, I turn to her, now closer than I've yet been.

"Cute kids, any of them you?"

"I don't photograph well."

Turning puzzled to the wall, my eyes more fully adjusted, I pick out some
particulars that had escaped me. Three little girls swinging like crazy monkeys from a clothes line; the head of a small boy stuck fast through an iron railing; the back of a brush-cut head, hair dry and scorched like the Serengeti Plain.

"I just like pictures of little kids," she whispers.

"I see. Quite."

She moans my name, rising in pitch then dropping to a whisper. Writhing under my weight like a snake, undulating ruse in homage to those stuck forever against her living room wall; undulating spongy after image. My mouth tastes like I've been eating cock.

"Deliver us from this temptation, who art high in heaven," she intones from beneath me, "deliver us from evil...."

Amen. I want to answer amen! and be done with it, but she moans convulsions, tears the sheet to bleeding ripples; pulls the lamp off to shards blind on the floor.

We roll, fingernails and incisors snapping like castanets on flesh, bone and hair. We part with an oath, like only cheap adhesive can, shuddering now alone in the dark.

Then in the sudden flair of butane on cigarette, the glare deep and rosy, my face is reflected on her crucifix, hanging yet in vertigo between swollen breasts. And I wish to hell something were nailed down tight to its surface, fulfilling prophecy and putting an end to pointless thought. Just where did Mr. Christ go? Is he lost, could it be?

Yes, That Pyrenean strong-man

Jocko Felinni, ringmaster of the bung hole; near and far acclaimed the "suave delight."

Or is it my dream of running away to the circus again? Seven and a half years old with wings of steel, yellow with age.

In the slanting afternoon sun I notice that there is a single hair growing out of each of her nipples. Like antennas they bob and sway as she breaths, flailing the air like tiny lobster eyes.

Her lips are swollen away from a horrible slice across the front of her face, wheezing in constant ebb. Its agony an unsettling drone in the still air.

With sudden interest I wrap a wary hair once around my index finger and give a sharp jerk. She opens her eyes abruptly, dumbly sifting through sleep for a response to my intrusion. I watch as a drop of blood forms with repulsive swiftness, then shifting my stare begin tickling her nose with the still gripped thread.

She thrashes her head from side to side as I say I'm leaving, then gripping my head from behind, she pulls my lips to the offended breast, holding me tight as I suck away the juice she offers. Letting it slide into the empty abyss of my gut, I feel the dull rumblings of hunger as her gift is noticed, then attacked.

I shake awake, shake the dream free as my sight focuses on the poster filled wall in front of my bed, now strangely frightening. I trot to the john and try to piss through an erection. Before I'm done and it's quite a forgotten lob, I've wet the floor, the seat, the wall. Muted disgust returns to me from the illuminated clock: four-o-eight, and not even the sound of traffic for diversion.

"Where fore art thou, sleep of my youth?" I sing hopefully to myself, but roaches sit in the far corners listening keenly to my convictions, learning the ways of humanity.

It’s their game through and through; listen, watch, creep toward me as I sleep. Each and every one a tiny, self contained Sphinx. chock full of an inner purpose that goes way beyond me.

"What do you think, roaches," I ask the corners, the baseboards, "a little FM? Music to calm ourselves with?” I lean towards my stereo, fumbling with the power switch and then with the knobs and dials, happy faces aglow with vitality.

Through the silence beyond the dark windows a police siren wails its contempt for the sleeping city; from the stereo a voice cries, red alert Captain Kirk, red alert. Then abrupt music with choppy words I can't understand, as foreign to me as Hebrew spoken desperately from a dark alley.

"Where are you Captain Kirk? Alert, red alert."

The roaches snicker in the shadows and I light a cigarette. "Where are you Captain Kirk," I say finally, tapping off the first accumulation of ash. Then with my stare flat out on the ceiling, I conjure back the vexation of her sweet, smiling face. Oh woman, what a sour piece of ass you are, high here in my ether, out of harm's way.

I know without having to look that I should get back into bed and try for a couple more hours of sleep before work. I’m beat and I know it, but the temptation to stay staring after the image is powerful indeed. I need the sleep, but I need to wash my mouth more; replace my blood. Purge.

But why not stay, the roaches tell no tales, no new ones at any rate.

Frederick Neadle
Solstice

I
The memory fails like an old notebook page ripped in half,
But I see the nebulous image of Mays rounding third
And the man shouting, 'The only man who could've caught
That ball just hit it.' Horowitz plays Rachmaninoff,
The people won't sit down: they laud him because
His hands are mortal. I smoke Camels and watch the
News. There is nothing we can do about the world:
No one loves a didactic. Ovid had the social answers:
As the service station man fades out into a stale beer.
My friends drink wine and I grow a beard which
Signifies a passage, intangible yet something to sleep with.

II
The eyes drop.
We are under the marquee which drools with rain:
Love's obsequies will do us no good. A jazz band
Plays in a corner bar. It is our last dance:
We touch and freeze like sculptures.

III
Black hair falls on olive shoulders under the summer
Dress. The eyes close into one another.
Outside, a frozen film laminates the walk with September rain.

S. J. Murabito

At Night

You are alone and watching T.V.
The actress portrays a teenage girl,
Yet she looks thirty: voluptuous,
Or of Spanish descent.

In the other room: a magazine,
One-hundred-ten albums you've heard before.
The smoke filters, rises, out of your mouth:
Forgotten dreams, a chimney stack.

If you're a lover, it's because you're
Alone. Inside the tube, a man weeps:
His clean-shaven neck chafed by his tight tie -
He is actually a Fed,

But he's on the take, posing as some
Boxer who's supposed to dive in the third.
He hurtles through space on disco floors,
You shut him off before

He gets out of control, not because
He's pitiful and can't fight any more,
But because his wife is on another
Channel with his best friend.

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