

GARLAND



Spring 1990

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Garland

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"Is Dr. Dan here...?
We'd like to dedicate
this book to him."



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No Daughter of Mine

A Short Story By Sandy Brown

Mark, my older brother, was at the kitchen table filling out his Selective Service form. He had two more weeks to get it in before they came for him. He had neglected it not out of principle but rather out of sloth and discombobulation. He put his glasses on top of his curling hair that was fading from blondish to brown. "There go," he sailed the form across the table, "finished."

"Wimp," I said, "you know you shouldn't let the government manipulate you that way." I pulled my already brown hair back and secured it with a rubber band, picking my too long, circling bangs out and blowing them from my eyes. Mom looked up from the turkey she was gutting.

"You know, Laurie, you shouldn't use rubber bands. They'll ruin your beautiful hair." She pulled up her thinning hair and fanned her neck. "What I wouldn't give for hair like that. You kids never thank God for what you have." She went back to the turkey.

"Really, though, Mark, you can do something about it. You can conscientiously object."

"I don't care about this anyway. There's no war. I'm not going anywhere. So why should I care? Go through all that trouble for nothing." He took a sip of his iced tea, unsweetened, and put his glasses on the table. "Besides, it says nowhere on the form that you can be a conscientious objector. That's something you've got to make up and defend for yourself."

"There's always wars. Little wars. Like John Lennon getting killed recently—a little war. The Selective Service is warring against your own American freedom. Don't sign that paper? Fine, then you go to jail. Freedom?" I looked at him like I had him on that one. He picked up his *Omni* magazine and faked like he was not interested—he was reading. Mom had tunneled through the bird and had the neck and giblets in a bowl. The giblets were the color of a bruise on her arm which was as big as a saucer. She got it when a door closed on her at work, she had said. Grandmom, who wore garter hose without the garters so they sagged at her ankles, was shredding bread and throwing it into a Corningware casserole dish, making stuffing. It looked like Thanksgiving, which was three weeks away, but this spread was for my dad's Amway initiation meeting tonight, at the house. He had to give a speech. He practiced all last night, tape recording himself, playing it back, saying "toilet" whenever he screwed up.

As if stuck three minutes behind the rest of

the world, grandmom said, "John Lennon was crazy. Crazy people shoot other crazy people. That's the way it is these days." I decided to ignore this. I remembered when I was in second grade and would come home talking about the songs we sang in school, my grandmother had told me that every song was a prayer to God.

I looked into the backyard through the sliding glass door next to the stove. There were two gutted VW Bugs, Caucasian color, that were as empty as shed snakeskin. The bucket seats had been thrown in the stream, back in the woods behind the house, and the neighborhood kids had built a bridge with them so they could cross the stream. Dad needed a VW chassis for his latest project. The sun balanced on the tops of the trees. Sand and gravel made a huge circle in the lawn, like a circus ring, that was left after the pool was taken down. Dad was sawing the fiberglass body of his three-thousand dollar kit car, which would be complete with low running boards and leather-covered steering wheel, a replica of an antique something or other. It was beige, the color of malted milk, and brown, the brown which is the most basic brown, the brown you think of when you think of absolute brownness. He had been working on this, off and on, for about a year now. He said it would be finished by Christmas and, as a gift, he wanted leather driving gloves and a chauffeur cap. I couldn't help but die when I thought of him driving around in this absurd car, his knit-shirt-covered gut hanging over his polyester brown pants. And him wearing leather driving gloves and a chauffeur cap! He wiped the sweat off his face with his undershirt, put down the saw, and headed up the lawn. The fiberglass underside of the car looked like severed flesh, tendon-like strings springing from a raw meat base.

The porch shook with his weight. His Florshheim shoes were the kind with the holes that made them look like miniature collanders. He wore those shoes to work, to coach basketball, and to church. He was going to wear those shoes when he left us in June, after Mark graduated from high school. I thought that bizarre. I mean, he was gone anyways, for all intents and purposes, so why stick around for one more event? Like he was wanted. Like he was needed.

He opened the sliding glass door, leaving a cluster of fingerprints, and I turned away. I was hoping he wouldn't tell me to cut the grass. I had

asthma and reacted most violently to grass, especially cut grass since all the pollen flies around in the air. When I got the allergy tests two years ago, a nurse put fifty hooked needles in my arm, one after the other, with a short intermission when we were at number twenty-five. She numbered each shot with the pen she wore around her neck. The shot for orchard grass swelled to the size of a silver dollar. That was the worst reaction you could have—a silver dollar. Tobacco swelled to the size of a penny; mold, the size of a dime. So every time I had to cut the grass, I had an attack, so bad I had to go to the hospital. The air just wouldn't go in my lungs. Maybe this time he wouldn't tell me to cut it because of his Amway dinner. It would mess things up if I were to go to the hospital.

He put his arms around my mother, from behind, and squoze. He stunk of sour sweat, his undershirt stained piss color under the arms. She retreated, didn't repond. He wasn't going to tell me. Good. I had already been to the hospital three times.

Mom said, "Laurie, could you start setting the table?" I reminded her that I was going out with Tara. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. Mark, honey? Please?" Mark's forehead thudded on the table as he dropped and feigned a sudden sleep attack. He was always sleeping on the table anyhow, nothing new. I felt my father glare.

"Like hell you're going out."

"Just for a while, dad." Grandmom looked at me like I had just grown a penis, then she shook her head and turned back to the stuffing. "Besides, Mark said that this evening Venus could be seen right overhead of the crescent moon. It's a rare astronomical event and me and Tara want to go somewhere and watch." Mark's telescope was already on the back porch, aimed.

While it was still safe, I went to my room to change, putting on a big sweater and a pair of sweatpants. Before leaving I had to mark the allergy chart hanging on the back of my door. Today I had a little bit of wheezing and a runny nose. My pen marked out the appropriate slots, of which there were thirty symptoms available to choose from, while Tara's black VW Bug appeared slithering up my road.

Back in the kitchen, grandmom opened a little tub of oysters that suctioned then slid out into the shredded bread like a pile of the nastiest phlegm. Mom was fighting the oven rack; she banged it around like she hated it. Dad was looking at her like my going out was all her fault. He had that foreboding look that said something would certainly be discussed later. When in my room, I heard my mom say that she couldn't control me either. Like going out with a friend is a fucking felony these days. "See ya's." Nobody said anything. I turned and bounced down the steps and zoomed out the front door.

Tara was wearing an Orioles WFBR 13 flop hat, bright orange with that goofy looking bird on the

front. Her dark remote-American-Indian-descendant hair was in danger of being burned by the cigarette in her mouth that she was ignoring. And she has burned her hair before, by the way. She was playing drums on her steering wheel and singing "Imagine," which, miraculously, was on the AM station she could get, the only station she could get, AM 68 WCBM-Magic 68. She turned to look at me and we connected, understanding each other's remorse over Lennon's tragic death. I opened the door and the seat fell forward. The floorboards were rusting and the seat was going to go through any day. regaining control of the situation, I balanced myself, leaned back, and listened to Tara sing. I lit a cigarette. We sputtered off.

This evening was going to be a stoplight night, I could tell. A stoplight night is when the sky is a certain color—hazy purple, grey-green, and still blue because the sun's not all the way down. The greens of the stoplights look so beautiful against it, kind of mystical, so me and Tara named these kinds of nights for our own. We backfired up to Roy Rogers, where I used to work, forced to wear the cowboy hat and ask, "Will you be joining us in our dining room tonight?" instead of the usual, "Here or to go?" All of the managers there had the hots for all the sixteen-year-old female employees. You could tell these guys were henpecked in a serious way; they were also thrilled to be making \$12,000 per year. They had made it in the competitive world. They were managers! Anyhow, I used to get scolded by these sickoes because I didn't use my potential. Their way of saying this was "You know, Laurie, if some guy comes in here and orders small fries with his burger, and he's got some good-lookin' chick smilin' up at him, say, 'How 'bout makin' that a large fry?' You know he ain't gonna turn you down, now, right?" Standing there in my nylons, white waitress shoes and cowgirl get-up, I would try to convince them that I would try my hardest to sell suggestive. I understood their philosophy, I had told them. Needless to say, one night I was sick of working the drive-thru in the rain which soaked me everytime I opened the window, so when the buzzer buzzed, and the customer in the car heard me say, "Go the fuck to McDonald's," I got fired.

Tara went in Roy's and came back out with two large coffees and two biscuits. This was ritual. We settled in, pouring cream and Sweet 'n Low into our coffees, and then we took off our shoes, leaned back, and let our feet hang out of the windows. We sipped and ate. We spent hours at a time here in the same parking space which we called "The Twilight Zone," because this spot was the only place on the entire earth where we could get FM radio. It was eerie. And, naturally, we attached more significance to this event than was necessary. We knew that radio wave communications were used in the effort to locate extraterrestrial life. Because a telescope focused on a star is blinded by the light given off, it makes it

impossible to locate possible planets, so astronomers use radio telescopes instead of light telescopes to try to detect waves given off by a civilization that uses radio communications. The frequency used is called the Cosmic Waterhole, because it is associated with hydrogen and oxygen. The theory is that there is less static around these frequencies, because they are near water, so any other intelligent civilization would send their messages through the Waterhole if they wanted to communicate with us.

Well, Tara and I had found the Cosmic Waterhole. We were the chosen ones. We were the earthlings sought out by the extraterrestrials who were coming by to pick us up as soon as they could get us alone. In the event that they came for only one of us, we vowed to refuse to leave the earth unless the other was invited too. We were absolutely convinced that they were coming; it was only a question of when and where. And here we were. Waiting.

Tara tuned the radio to 100GRX, which was actually good in those days, before it became so popular. Jim Morrison was singing "Gloria," and I laughed, thinking about my grandmother. Jim was saying, "Wrap your arms around my legs, wrap your legs around my face..." and whatever he was praying for I'm sure my grandmother somehow wouldn't approve. Tara had her eyes closed and she was getting into the atmosphere, so I left her alone.

Across the street from our parking spot was a brick building that used to be an arcade and was now a car parts store. In an English class once, the teacher had us read an essay written by somebody famous who was complaining about the difficulties of teaching. The essayist had a student who simply could not write and express herself. He sent her to Main Street and told her to write what she thought. Nothing. So he sent her to a brick building and told her to write about that. Nothing. Then he told her to go back to that building and to start writing about the brick in the uppermost left hand corner. This whole process took a semester, but she came back that last time with pages and pages of stuff that started with the brick and ended with a type of self-revelation. I thought about that for a long time, how the tiniest, insignificant detail can open up an entirely new world. Lighting another cigarette, I choked as I punched Tara on the arm. In the middle of rush hour, hundreds of cars headed who knows where, this guy drives by on a bike, the old people kind of bike, creeping along with his back exactly straight! "Get a look at this weirdo!" We stared at him in disbelief. Everyone else in the world was scurrying about while he was going for a leisurely ride in the middle of it, his posture as pure and unaffected as an English horseman. Tara spit laughter and banged her hands against the steering wheel. We howled over it for a little while and then settled back in to watch dusk remove day. We sat there until the trees disappeared and became forms of

trees, massive arachnid-shaped holes in the sky. We convinced ourselves the trees did actually disappear and burn right through the sky, the way a branding iron burns through the skin. A few years later I found a quote by Wallace Stevens and I called Tara long distance just to read it to her. Stevens knew, we agreed. He said:

It was when the trees were leafless first in
November
And their blackness became apparent, that
one first
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design.

"Should we get going now, you think?"

Tara looked at me like a criminal. "I say we get high first." She reached into her sweatshirt pouch and brought out a sandwich bag, one-eighth of it filled with buds. She shook it around and made her voice go cartoonish. "Smoke me, Laurie, smoke me up. I'm so lonely."

"What about the Amway guests, Tara? I gotta control myself when I go back there, or," clenching my teeth and imitating my father, "'Your ass is grass and I'm the lawn mower.'" Tara and I were the first in our high school to discover pot, next to the basketball team. I think we started a trend because by the time we graduated, everybody was high, although by then we had all but given it up.

"Amway? Are you hearing yourself? Amway?"

Before no time, the Bug was bloated with sweet, toxic smoke. GRX was having news time and there was a report about the Tylenol cyanide tampering which started a craze, a nation full of copy-cat offenders, poisoning brownies and apples at the supermarket. Someone used Visine which had acid in it. Death tolls were climbing—no food was safe—consumer beware. Tara looked at her coffee as if mentally and physically forced. "What if my Sweet 'n Low was cyanide?" She looked at me with dread.

"Then we's gonna die togethah," I said, mimicking a TV evangelist. She found this hideously funny and put her head between her legs while she choked and howled. The people that had parked next to us an hour ago had finished eating a nice, nourishing meal at Roy's and started to get in their car. They stared at us. We were guilty, going in jail, I knew it. "Tara," I said, "don't look now, but the people next to us are undercover and unless we act really cool, we're gonna get busted. So get the fuck up, now!" Tara uncoiled and looked at the couple standing by the car. She had to look no further when she saw the woman with cat eye glasses taking out a compact from her purse and reapplying her lipstick. Tara was between her knees again, dying.

"We're busted." I was ready to be cuffed.

"God." She bolted upright. "What if my Sweet 'n Low really was cyanide?" We looked at each other, both in our separate terrors. One of us laughed first and then we were almost upside down kicking every part of the car that got in the way. I started thinking of the Amway dinner, how I was ever going to pull it off. I asked Tara how she would react to a house full of middle-aged Amway freaks giving speeches and demonstrating Amway cleansers in certified and approved Amway squirt bottles, in the first place, and then how she would react, STONED. She said no problem, she'd come with me, and we'd do homework. This again sounded like a great comedy line and, laughing like hopeless hyenas, we pulled out of The Twilight Zone, leaving the elderly undercover cops in the dust, bordered by the squat, decorative bushes exclusive to fast food chains.

Amway was the one big break that would put my dad financially over the top. This time he was going to do it, he was determined. Last month it was insurance. Tara asked, reading my mind almost, "Does Amway make kit cars?" She cracked again while 100 GRX turned to static before our ears. The kit car. Last month it was a sailboat. My dad was looking for that one great hobby that was going to save him from oblivion.

"Hey," I pointed to the sky, "look, there's Venus and the crescent moon."

"Whoa," Tara marveled.

Five years later, we made it to my front door. "Hey, thanks for coming in to save me." Tara took the bandana off her wrist and tied it around mine, a symbol of blood brothers without the blood. Sneaking around the back we realized the lights were still on in the Beetle. We fell into a bush in mad hysterics. "Fuck it, man." We thought we at least quietly fell up the porch stairs. Mark was soldered to his telescope and only looked at us to complain, wordlessly, that we knocked him out of focus. "Hey," I said, "can I see Venus through there?" Mark stood back and motioned his allowance.

"If we were in the southern hemisphere," he started, "then I would be able to see the Magellanic clouds, which are clusters of stars that are all the same distance from the earth. The particular stars are called Cepheid Variables and they can be used to measure the distance of the stars from the earth. Since light changes over time, the period correlates with the brightness." He looked up at the sky as if damning it to Hell.

"Whoa," Tara said, looking up at Venus. Her American Indian profile looked then like original man, looking to the stars, attempting to encompass and comprehend his purpose on the unsettled planet.

I looked into the telescope and watched Venus reassemble into a perfect white disk the size of a fist. If it ever burned through like a brand, like the trees do,

then it would look just like the bruise on mom's arm, only now a bruise on the spiral arms of the galaxy, where it would be almost permanent and where it would appear to be more believable, more real. Poor Mark, I thought, and for some reason I felt sorry for his being stuck in the northern hemisphere, no Magellanic clouds around, no hope of finding, in his sight, the yardsticks of the universe.

"Come on, Tara, let's brave it and go in."

Mark bent back to his telescope like an oil drill to the earth; like a man to his lover. The sliding glass door was new, thank God, so it made little noise as it opened. Tara and I darted into my bedroom and started on posters for our Issues class, this month's issue being Death & Dying. The poster was supposed to have something to do with the stages of death: denial, anger, bartering, grief, depression, acceptance. Or something like that. I decided to avoid these guidelines, maybe because of the high, maybe not. In front of us I laid out the poster paper and the crayons. I had owned these crayons since second grade. Mrs. Cohen, who called me "wig lady" since my hair then was as white as a page, assigned a worksheet that required crayons—every word starting with "G" had to be colored in. I didn't have any crayons. After a couple hours crying, because I was sad, not selfish, dad took me to the drug store and bought me a Crayola 16 pack. That night I colored in the "G" pictures—a giant, I remember as one—with more care than I've ever done anything in my life then or since. Over the years, the crayons broke and wore down, but here they were, still, bits and pieces of coloring wax in a little sandwich baggie. And I had felt massive guilt for years after the day when they stopped being perfect. I felt I had betrayed my father's kindness and generosity.

Our weighted attention was on our posters: we scribbled like children. Tara was drawing a skull and crossbones and said she was going to write "Grateful Dead" around her picture. I was writing lyrics to songs that occurred to me—"The truth you might be running from is so small, but it's as big as the promise, the promise of the coming day." Atop this I drew Venus and the crescent moon, with a little stairway leading up to it. Rushes of societal laughter waved in from the living room and my dad's thick voice must have been giving its speech. Next on the poster came a picture of John Lennon, dead and naked.

During our drawings, Tara and I had managed to fill the ashtray with cigarette butts. We didn't talk much but cracked up now and again, no reason. She said out of nowhere, "I wish the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria had just sunk on their way over. Then we could hike and camp through undisrupted forest all our lives." She scratched her nose and looked up. "Let's get a pizza."

I motioned mom into the kitchen and let her know the deal. She said okay. Tara and I rumbled

down the porch and to the Bug, the battery not yet dead from the headlights. On the way to Pizza Hut, we passed a road that used to be a dead end when I was little. Mark and I used to walk to it and then go all the way to the end, collecting rocks in little bags, and then going home. We said it was Spain. We told mom that we got our rocks from Spain. We always went to Spain.

Vernon Cook was at Pizza Hut. He was expelled from school, as was the rest of the basketball team, for drugs. He had his hair short, the afro now gone entirely out of style. He was the man to see when I needed help in chemistry. I was flunking and he was a scientific genius. Since his expulsion, I was in big trouble. After we had the pizza on the table and before I knew anything, my father flashed into the Hut, enraged, biting his bottom lip and unable, at this point, to control his nostrils which flared like waterless gills. He jerked me up by my arm and led me to the door, jabbing his elbows in my back to keep me going, not even letting me turn to signal apologies to Vernon. Tara was used to it. Outside, he locked onto my ponytail and dragged me along to the car. He had a white Datsun two-door, white and blue cloth interior. He shoved me in.

The whole thing smelled like gas except for the body of the man, which smelled like Brut. I could see him now, before the Amway dinner, washing, like he always does, in the sink. Saying it saves water. Which would be fine if he were concerned with the entire planet and not just the water. He worked for a pipeline, the same pipeline that went up into Alaska and killed the animals because they couldn't cross to find more food. And because he worked for the pipeline and had the opportunity, he stole gas in five gallon Texaco cans which he kept in the trunk. When the car needed a fill-up, he would use a shortened garden hose as a siphon, sucking on the end to get the flow started. The fumes coming from the trunk suffocated me.

Now was the silent treatment. It was always this way, whether he was mad or not. I rode with my dad a lot since he took me to Junior Achiever meetings at a high school half an hour away, under the pretense that he was going to the Moose to have a few drinks and socialize. If there was not silence in the car, then there were the hideous tapes of my dad lecturing at church—he was lecturer every Sunday—that he played again and again to see how he sounded, how he could improve. Mark and I were forced to go to church and listen to him; if we refused, he would kill us. After church it was always, "How did I sound? How did I sound?" Inside my head I answered him, "Like the devil incarnate." Outside I just said "Fine."

Also on our weekly trips up to JA, before he dropped me off, dad's high school ring was hung around the turn signal; his wedding band was on his finger. When I got back in the car, however, his

wedding band would be on the turn signal and his high school ring would be on his finger. Sometimes the seat would be moved back. I tried to imagine the person who rode to wherever with my father during the two hours when I was miserable and incomparably lonely in the woodshop of that accursed high school.

Seeing the man, my father, one did not have to sprain the imagination when thinking of his sexuality. One time I heard him and mom having sex, she arguing that he must wear a rubber because there are more than a million sperm in one drop of semen. He begged to the contrary in a pathetic whisper. He kissed her, full-mouthed and wet and I shuddered in my room, thinking of the gross smell of his mouth and of his flabby weight on her: she, disgusted, barren, having been always told to hate sex. The squeaking and the entire sex act ended in one minute. Swear it. I didn't know too much about the particulars of sex then, but I knew enough that one minute was short. Ridiculously short. It followed suit, though: all his endeavors were short, premature, aborted. All of his escape attempts from the prison of his own self were so temporary you could almost see them evaporate before your eyes.

I know he wanted me. I'm not stupid. One time he lay face down on the bed with a thin towel covering his rear, and he asked me to rub his back with Ben-Gay. Lower, darling, lower. I knew what he was up to. Mother fucker.

The town vaporized in the car windows, he was driving so fast. His knuckles were the color of exaggerated death on the steering wheel. We stopped at a light and the whole town lay beyond us now the way the sudden lights of Juarez are said to appear after the long, empty journey through Texas. He couldn't wait to get me home. He was excited for violence. Sex was the reason for this somehow, I knew then, only intuitively. And although the stores and houses and cars were behind us before they were next to us, Venus followed me home in a calm, steady line, the way the moon is said to follow children.

We were home: I almost banged into the dashboard from the stop. "Get in the fucking house, bitch."

"Why don't you just hit me out here, dad? Come on. It'll make you feel big in front of all the neighbors. Come on. You're the tough one." I was scared, but somehow above it.

"Get the fuck in the house, I said." We were in the middle of the lawn. My bedroom curtain opened to a triangle and my grandmother stuck her nose into the scene. Next door at the Johnson's the television came purple and flicking through their large bedroom bay window. Mr. Will once sat in a folding chair on the lawn beneath that window and supervised as Mrs. Sue painted the house California Mauve with a stretch roller. The Johnsons had no

kids. They kept to themselves. He grabbed my hair. "No daughter of mine is EVER going to be friends with no NIGGER!" I thought about Vernon and Tara at the Pizza Hut, wondering if they decided to eat after all. Up until now I had had no idea that Vernon was yet another catalyst to my father's insanity.

As unaffectedly as possible, I opened the front door. I was in the corner, now, brutally shoved to the floor. He started to walk up the stairs, dusting his hands off as if a job was just well done. Mark was next to me on the floor, a shotgun lengthwise beside him. He had diluted some ketchup and poured a stream over his head, ear. Although this stunt was nothing new, it still disturbed me. You always wonder if it's for real this time. I stood.

"I bet that made you feel big, didn't it?" Voice clear, deliberate, condescending. The bulk that was my father turned. I was on my way up the steps. "Do it again."

"BITCH!" He was incensed, beyond us all, in the little void of his own powerless insignificance. I passed him, my back towards him now, nearing the end of the hall. Hands on me, down, crushing the laundry basket beneath me, skinning my arm on the textured wallpaper, crucifix falling off the hall wall. Stood up. Walked to bathroom. Sat on toilet and in my room, in her housedress and with little silver hinged clips in her hair to keep the teased ring-curls in shape, was my grandmother bent over the ashtray, like an altar boy over a rack of candles, counting the butts Tara and I had smoked. With false teeth in hand, her stone-knuckled, arthritic finger pointed to each one as she whispered the numbers. Normally this would annoy me to the end. Now I would had to have been dead to care any less.

He was watching me, outside the bathroom. Mom was experimenting with her new curling iron, having just switched styles from a teased beehive to a more natural, though permed, head of thin, blond, baby-like curls. Amway mint toothpaste and Amway breath atomizers were on the sink. "When are you leaving," I smirked, "I mean, why don't you just leave now?" He takes out his handkerchief. I don't feel sorry.

Memory may have distorted this instant, but while he stood there and cried, as usual, and mother kept curling her hair, awkwardly, like a baby trying to shoot a gun, all I could think of was one night when she was fed up, as usual, and was taking the gas cans for evidence of my dad's thievery—her advantage in the child custody case. Which, naturally, would never come to be: he certainly didn't want us, he merely wanted her to suffer, to stay with him. Anyway, it was snowing and I don't know how I knew it but I knew my mother had no underwear on under her skirt. Maybe she told me. She, Mark, and I saw my father,

out the window, taking the gas cans from her trunk. She flew out to stop him and, all of a sudden, they were both there in that strange snowy light, wrestling with Texaco cans between them, she losing traction beneath her loafers. And then he pushed her down in the snow. I felt her sudden chill in my own skin. Mark left for his own room. All I could think of was her uncovered crotch, and though I couldn't see it from the window, in the dark, I imagined that part of her, her privacy, was huge, slick, as if raised to the sky in an effort to erase the Big Bang, to ungive birth to the universe, to suck it all up into her like astronomers say the whole mess will someday be sucked up by a blackhole.

Now, at the sink, she began cleaning her face. I didn't blame her.

Stepping around my sobbing father, his big face in the handkerchief, his elliptical gut agitated, I went to the kitchen and picked a little off the turkey carcass. Then, turning on the flood lights and standing with my feet together and each arm spread out to clamp me to the door frame, I looked outside to the VW carcasses, the actual and final form of the kit car. I was, like them, his project, work neglected, only encountered as a distraction. He always grew angry at his projects and junked them. But, unlike them, I could never be finished, not by him, not in his fashion. The floodlights highlighted the ring that was once a pool. Sure, the pool was gone, torn down. But it was there through my childhood, it was what I knew, even in its absence, maybe even because of it, I will always see that pool.

Poor Mark, his telescope still on the porch, still focused on the planet. No UFO was going to capture me. I realized this, remembering John Lennon, killed by a fan too obsessed with him. That's the way it is, right? Do harm to that which sustains you. Nobody would call this love.

My father must have realized that no one cared for his dramatics nor for his feeling. He was not to be comforted, must have been bored with his crying, when his shoes made an indisputable thud as he snaked into the kitchen. I turned around, facing the kitchen, and repositioned my arms on either side of the door frame. Beyond him, in the foyer, was Mark, sleeping now. A fold-out crepe paper turkey was hanging from the hall lamp. This man could not hurt me. Still, compressing every ounce of me into my arms, I braced myself.

My eyes connected with his and for a second I felt pity. As if translucent, I saw through him, to his son lying by the door, in a position for which there is no punctuation. "Cut that grass," he said to me then, "it's a disgrace."



Poetry

By Mary Zajak

Walking Home in the West End

The sky is taffeta tonight,
Pulsating with the blue that is not yet black,
That still has the blueness of all blues in it,
Sheer clouds making watered patterns,
Swirling into rings around the moon.
The sky is so low,
It wraps around me.
So I wear it.

And sparkling in my full skirt of sky are
Stars that people give as gifts;
And the dome of the glass palace of the botanical gar-
dens
Resting on the lawn;
And a diamond spiked gate around the gardens,
Locking in the pipecleaner tree,
Pigeons in stained overcoats,
And squirrels who sit on my feet at lunchtime,
Begging for treats.

But now I walk on the outside,
In the dark.
I walk in the night that begins at four p.m.,
Peeking through the windows of the Grosevnor Hotel,
Dodging the buses on Great Western Road,
Watching for the sign that says I'm halfway there:
Kirklee Road 1/2 mile
Maryhill 3 miles
Glasgow Airport 10 miles

Wishing to be home,
The wind sweeps the sky from around me,
And the stars spill out
Onto the ground.
I gather them into my pocket,
And walk home.

The Fishmonger

Fish guts and bloodied grouse
are gray pearled skin
oozing a flood of liquid ruby,
splattering their reflection on my face.
Fish eyes stare unblinking at me,
glassy balls,
like paperweights with black bubbles,
or marbles with tiny paper fans inside.
Not the x's found in comics.
Crusty shells of onyx,
silver scales packed into metal compartments.
Peering in through crystal panes
I wonder how this place,
this shop of whitewashed walls,
and clean red hands,
and diamond chips of ice,
can hold so much terrible death.
And I hope that when I die
I will be displayed in all my finery,
like an apple in Reuben's still life,
or a salmon at McWhirter's.

Poetry

By Robert LoCascio

Onward Through Scottish Lakes

Gospel of St. Idego Thomas

Dear Father,
Why do you let me live?
I bring nothing, torment, sad song,
No sun so bright, sky glistened blue
rainbow seven, hearty anew;
You send no bolt, message, nor Dove sign, I
fear you not;
My life, His wounds blackened, burned, spoil,
Rot.

Dear Mother
of blue, start life of pale hanging
thought;
Take my sins faded by upon burning Sun;
Set Holy indeed, I not think feel nor need;
Let me break free of shackles,
Blood gushed from the wrist of Sin;
There's no simple Apple, Serpent's Soul
of thy ribbed flesh. As Adam blamed Eve,
I too can accept my life's eternal banishment.

Dear Son,
You, my mind, I copy free,
Let not O'Father begotten Sacred Lot;
Slaughter His followers, unholy indeed!
Smile return, At last fresh not free,
Wash tears thy soul, breast, raven, Jackal, all
desire;
Bleed Oh painful brotherhood,
No need for grace, piece lock
my soul, forever great stress, Embrace!

Dear Me,
Not worthy of list forgone,
Let life simple, I give Him my blood;
You cast no shadow, Spring
O'Mightiest Hood.

The trees they also wisk by,
Our lives transient apart from our inner soul,
We try at a grasp, the movement within none,
"Settle my son," writes the father, your
time
it too shall come.

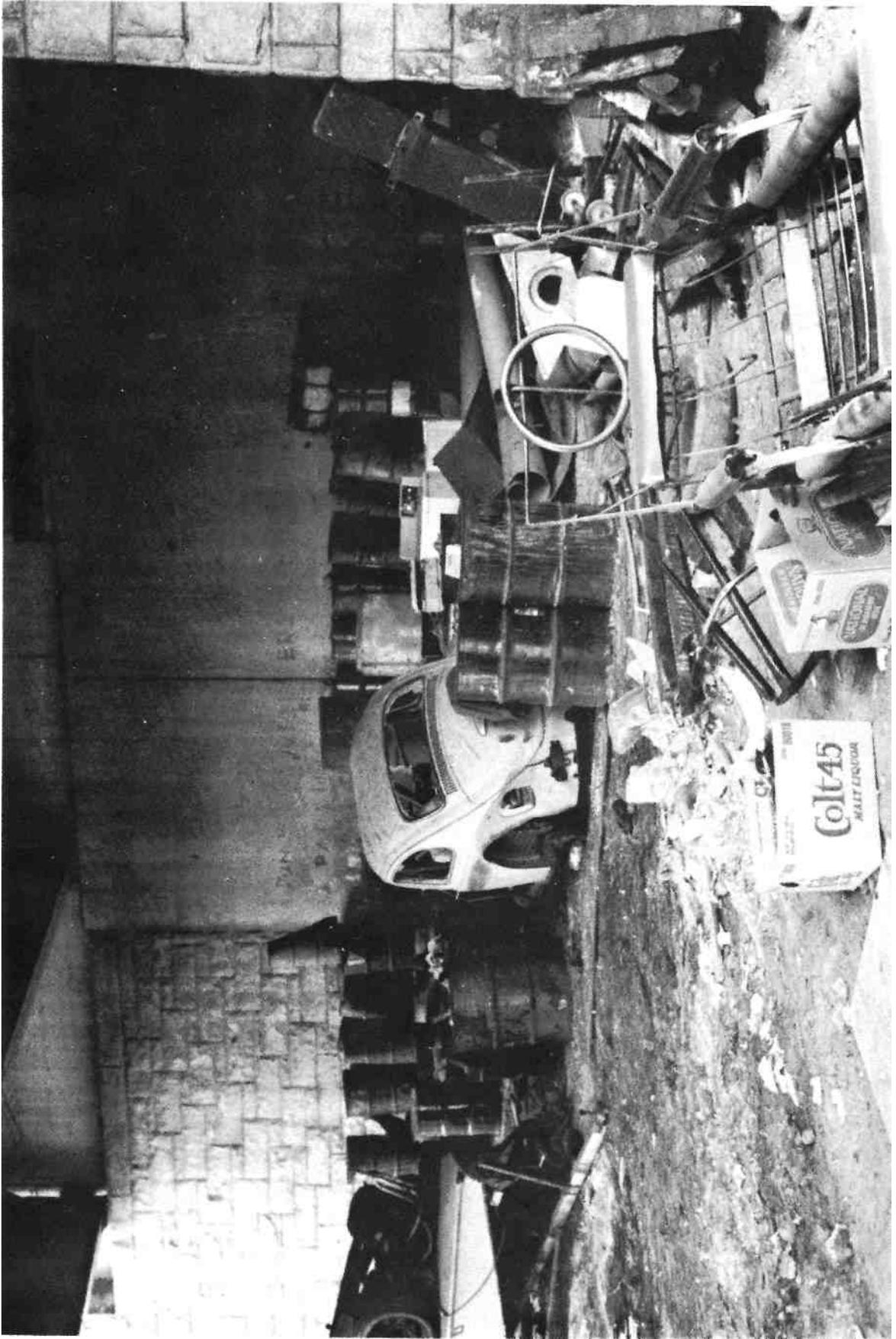
The days when we stand then crawl,
begin but never want to end;
As we pass through a middle, formed
are our dreams—At Last! time does exist.

As our coldness runs through clear veins, cold
lies our
love and dreams, we pray for the sheltered womb.
Movement, I've grasped the downcasted drops;
Hold them, at last the clapping puddle
freezes (a cold stagnation), End.

Eternal dreams begin with our mother's tears
that become the past and future home;
Time stands as saviour apart from thy Father's soul
With a whisk we begin and end, one movement, one
whole.

INRI

The time's will past to see the white flesh
part thy rotted sorrows with a netted cross;
See not swing as your lights faded mesh,
You have fallen grace from the red burst sun to emerald seas,
Queen watch up to your son for he is rising,
Take the blackened bone of a timid sky off your naked soul,
See sweet the blue shallow inanimated lips surprising
life from the drifting wood of the words clothed whole,
He stands now at the right of nature's Grand Creator,
Part not the clandestine, lonely, sacred statues fear,
Bring into our red pulse the first tide as doves soar
from your perforated hand—throw not the fire endless spear,
As You began the night-day, breath-ice, molded of one knit,
the Immortal Brave said, "I never regretted it."



Waiting for the Train

A Short Story By Ed Ashton

After I shut off my alarm I drift back to sleep and dream that it snowed during the day. In my dream I get out of bed and walk to the window, snap up the blind and see the entire back lot white and glittering in the glare of the arc lamps. The trees across the way are bent and bare and a dog runs along the verge of the woods, barking and leaping, trying to keep his belly out of the snow. What really strikes me, though, is a car parked in the far corner of the lot. It's completely covered and I find myself wondering if there might be someone inside, trapped and freezing. Even in my dream I know no one gets stranded in a parking lot behind an apartment building, but I can't stop thinking about what it would be like to be inside the car, cold and still and velvet-black. When I wake it's nearly 9:30 and I'm shaking despite the heavy wool blanket pulled tight around me.

After I've pulled on my pants I lift the blind to see if it really has snowed. My boss is from Georgia and he lets me come in as late as I want if there's snow on the roads. When I look out, though, all I see is the security lights reflecting off the dull chrome of a half-dozen rusting Buicks and Fords parked close to the building and a car I don't recognize at the far end of the lot. It's a jet-black late model Camaro and it's sitting right under the Resident Parking Only sign. The sign says violators will be towed, but what really happens is that Gonzalez in 204 slashes their tires. Gonzalez sells coke. He says it's bad for business if his customers can't find a space.

I'm waiting for the water to warm in the bathroom sink when the telephone rings. At first I don't want to answer, but then I think it might be Mr. Carson calling to tell me not to come in tonight. I guess I know it's really not, but I don't get many calls and I'd hate myself if I let it go and then found out later that it was him. I pick up the phone on the fourth ring. The water in the bathroom is still running.

The voice on the other end of the line is thin, gratingly polite and androgynous. It's definitely not Carson.

"Hello," it says. "Is this Raymond Talbott?"

"Yes," I say. "Do I know you?"

"Mr. Talbott, I'm calling about the state of your soul. Do you attend church regularly?"

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm late for work." There's a water spot on my pants leg. I rest the receiver against my shoulder and wipe at the wetness with a seat

cushion.

"What does it profit a man to gain the world?" asks the voice. "What does it profit him if he loses his immortal soul?"

As I'm trying to think of some polite way to hang up I suddenly remember sitting in the back pew of Grace Lutheran Church on Christmas Eve and hearing Pastor Mortensen ask that same question. I didn't know the answer then either.

"I'm sorry," I say after a long, awkward pause. "I have to go. Good-bye."

The voice says something then about the wages of sin, but I'm no longer listening. I brush again at the spot on my leg and drop the receiver into its cradle.

Out in the parking lot the Camaro is resting on its rims. As I'm walking to my car I try to imagine the owner coming back from Jerry's or the Cabaret and finding his tires slashed, cursing and telling his date what he'll do if he ever finds out who did it. I know the feeling. Once when I was in high school my father loaned me his MG as a birthday present to take my girlfriend to a basketball game. We were playing East Marion and at halftime I got into a shoving match at the concession stand with Joey Halloran, a big farm boy from Buckhannon with a thin black beard and pitted, tobacco stained teeth. He pushed into line ahead of me when I was only two bodies from the counter.

I told him to move back, but he just laughed and turned away. Gwen was standing beside me. I turned to her and shrugged, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. I glanced down at the floor, then up at the back of Joey's head. He was saying what a bunch of pussies Fairmont boys were in a voice just loud enough for me to hear. I took a deep breath, called him a sheep-screwing hillbilly and shoved him out of line.

Joey probably would have killed me on the spot except that a security guard was standing in the stairwell watching us, whistling through his teeth and tapping his nightstick softly against the palm of his left hand. Joey looked at the guard and back at me, bared his teeth like an animal and told me to get the hell back to my own side of the gym. Then he said he'd see me in the parking lot, but my back was already turned and I was telling Gwen a joke about a travelling salesman and a stupid farmer. I think the

farmer was supposed to be from Iowa, but in my joke he was from Buckhannon.

I thought that was all there was to it, but after the game Joey was waiting for me, leaning against my dad's car, pushing the side-view mirror back and forth with his left hand and digging in his ear with his right. I told him to get away from the car, but he didn't even look at me. I went up to him then with a vague idea that I should push him or try to knock him down, but as soon as I was within arm's reach he caught up the front of my shirt and hit me full in the face, hard enough to break the skin on his knuckles. My head snapped back and I fell across the hood of the car and to the pavement. My father told me later that I left a smear of blood from the bottom of the windshield all the way to the wheel well.

I think Gwen screamed then, but the pound and surge of the blood in my ears was deafening and I'm not really sure. The only clear memory I have between the blow and the emergency room is of Joey looking down at me, spitting tobacco juice onto the pavement beside my head and putting his rawhide boot through my father's side window.

When I pull out of the parking lot my rust-brown Volkswagon is the only car on the road. This is one of the things I like about going to work at night. I never have to screw around with rush hour traffic. I leave my apartment at five of ten and by quarter after I'm sliding into the "employees only" space behind the Hillcrest Avenue 7-11.

After I've parked and locked the door I lean for a few seconds against the torn vinyl top and breathe the night air. The sky is clear and starry and I'm thinking about the night John Riggio and I picked up two Lost Creek girls in the Meadowdale Mall. He had the bleached-blonde in the back seat of his mother's Buick while her short angry friend sat with me on the south bank of the Harrison County Reservoir and talked about going to Venezuela, where she said she had relatives. That night was a lot like this one except that there was snow on the ground. Also I guess it must have been colder because when it had been a while and we tried to make snowballs to throw at the car they broke up in the air like silent starbursts.

I hope it snows now, but I don't think it will. It's been a dry winter. There was a farmer on the Cable News last night who said that if his fields don't get snow or rain or something soon the March winds are going to take his topsoil and ruin his winter wheat. I think he was from Kansas. He was big and stupid looking and spat tobacco juice into the dry soil at his feet as he spoke. I thought of Joey Halloran when I saw him and I remember hoping for just a moment that every inch of Joey's topsoil ends up at the bottom of the Monongahela.

An electronic bell dings as I walk into the 7-11. When I first came to work here they had a real doorbell dangling from a chain right under the welcome sign,

but now they have this artificial thing that sounds like the beep on an answering machine. Garret McDaniel is sitting on the counter. He glares at me as I walk in the door and points to the clock. I'm almost twenty minutes late. Garret's the day manager. He and I are the only ones in the store.

As I walk around behind the counter Garret hops down and fixes his thinning blonde hair in the mirror over the sunglasses display, curls back his lips and runs a finger across his front teeth. I wonder if I've made him late for a date. As he takes off his vest and pulls on an overcoat I imagine him tearing out of the parking lot, changing into a tux on the beltway and gliding into the driveway of some Forest Hills debutante. I have him taking her to the Old Mill Club, but by the time they get there she metamorphosed into Garret's sister Irma, who has a hairy mole on her neck and weighs at least a hundred and ninety pounds. Garret sees me snickering, throws me a poisonous look and starts for the door.

I suddenly feel bad because I come in late a lot and as far as I know Garret's never even mentioned it to Carson. As he dings open the door I tell Garret that I'll be in at 9:30 tomorrow, but he just grunts and walks out without a backwards glance. When I worked the day shift I saw Garret fire a clerk with a grunt just like that. With Garret a grunt is worth a thousand words.

I put off getting into my cap and vest until the first car pulls into the lot, a huge Ford van with only one working headlight. As long as I'm not wearing the vest I don't really feel like I'm working, but as soon as I put it on I know I'm stuck here until dawn. I'm checking my reflection in the front window, making sure the hat is on straight, when the door dings.

When I turn around a woman in a ratty brown parka is standing on the black rubber doormat brushing at her arms and front and shivering. I look out the window. The moon is bright and clear just above the horizon. After a few seconds the woman straightens and looks around, then turns and wanders slowly down the first aisle.

I hope she's not here to steal something. I caught a shoplifter once last year. He was just a kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen. He came into the store with a 7-11 bag in his jacket and tried to walk out with a six pack of Schlitz. That works sometimes in big supermarkets, but in a convenience store there just aren't enough customers for the clerks to forget who's bought something and who hasn't. He was almost to the door when I hopped over the counter and told him to drop the beer.

If he'd done that I would have let him go, but he took one look back at me and tried to run. I caught him at the door by the collar of his jacket. It was fur-lined leather and I remember wondering as I wrestled him to the floor why someone with the money for a two hundred dollar jacket would try to steal from a 7-11. It wasn't until the cop was there and taking my

statement that I realized he just wasn't old enough to buy beer.

The woman in the parka finally settles on a bottle of soda and a box of Ding Dongs. She brings the stuff up to the counter and hands me three ones. The skin on her hand is grey and a thin scar runs from the corner of her left eye into the hairline below her ear. As I'm counting back her change I find myself wondering what she looks forward to. I try to imagine her going home to a family, putting children to bed and setting an alarm before she goes to sleep. I try to give her a job, a lover, even a dog, but in the end somehow I can't picture her doing anything but going home, eating her Ding Dongs and waiting to die.

When the van pulls out of the parking lot I pull a stool up to the counter and take a yellow legal pad from the shelf by the cash register. This pad is the reason I can feel sorry for Garret. He's the day manager of a 7-11. I'm a short story writer who happens to work in a 7-11 at night. It's a big difference, even if I never sell anything.

The story I'm working on now is about my last night in West Virginia before going away to college. I bet Greg Bush and Billy Meyers fifty dollars that night that John would jump off a railroad trestle into the Monongahela river. I won the bet, but somewhere between the bridge and the water I think I lost my best friend.

We were sitting in the middle of the Goose Run trestle, seventy feet from either bank and ninety above the deep, sluggish Monongahela. John was dropping pebbles one by one and counting the seconds, trying to separate the splash from the constant basso growl of the river. Bush and Meyers were sitting close together on the east bank with half a case of Budweiser and a bag of chips. We had the rest of the beer with us but John wasn't drinking. If he actually jumped, he said, he didn't want to make it down alive and then drown because he was too drunk to swim out of the current. It was a warm, clear night, the kind when Mrs. Ferguson might call my parents and invite them to come sit with her and enjoy the evening. The moon was a bright silver high overhead and the breeze carried the cloying scent of blooming honeysuckle from the west bank.

I know John thought that if it got too close to midnight and he was still sitting there I was going to try to make him jump. I wasn't, though. I was just killing time, waiting for the train.

"I just wish I could see the water," John said, and dropped another pebble. He counted ten under his breath before realizing that he'd missed the splash.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's still there." Actually I could see a scattering of pale white about midway between us and the west bank that I thought might be the moon playing off the ripples. It didn't look so far. I was starting to think I might jump myself when John cleared his throat and spit between the ties,

then muttered something about killing himself over fifty dollars.

I looked up. John was lying back with his head on the rail, just like that suicide did in the Grafton switchyard. It gave me the creeps and I told him so. He sat up, but he looked at me then like I was his worst enemy instead of his best friend and said he thought I was there to make sure he did kill himself.

"Come on John," I said. "It's just like going off a high dive. You'll be in the water before you even know you've jumped."

He told me to go to hell then, but I didn't say anything back to him because I knew he was just making noise. I opened a beer, took a long pull and set the can on the rough wooden tie between my thighs. My watch read quarter of twelve. I was eighteen years old then and I had one of those radioactive glow-in-the-dark watches, the kind with radium on the hands and numbers. My father bought it for me right before the government took them off the market.

I kept it until I read a magazine article about how the women who painted the numbers were all dying with horrible tumors on their lips and tongues from licking their brushes. There was a picture with the article of an old woman with a growth on her bottom lip the size of a golf ball. She looked sad and angry and gruesome all at once and I can still remember the way my stomach clenched and churned when I looked at that picture and then down at the watch on my wrist.

"It's almost time, isn't it?"

I nodded, took another mouthful of beer, and heaved the half-full can far out over the water. I didn't like beer. When I was fourteen John and I split a six pack of my father's Iron City behind the Fifth Street Gym. He was fine afterwards, but I threw up against the whitewashed brick wall for an hour and a half. Even now the taste of beer sometimes makes me think of the smell of bile and the cool press of the bricks against my cheek.

John was on his feet and leaning over the edge with his hands on his knees when we heard the first long whistle. We were both still as statues for just a moment, long enough for us to pick out the faint shudder of the locomotive above the deeper growl of the river. I felt the hackles rise on the back of my neck and part of me wanted desperately to run. I looked over at Meyers and Bush. They were laughing and as I watched, Meyers crushed a beer can against his head and heaved it into the underbush. John was still leaning out over the river. His eyes flickered from the water to the east bank and back and his breath came in quick, shallow gasps. For the first time then I wondered if he really might not be able to do it. I wondered if I would be able to push him, and if he would hate me for it afterwards. The sound of the engine was clear by then and the whistle cut the night into perfect halves.

It sounds strange, but during those last few

seconds I didn't think about the train or the jump. I thought about my first kiss, standing on the east bank under the trestle. The girl's name was Joanne. She was thin and blonde and her mouth tasted like cherries. She kissed me once on the lips and once on the throat, then slapped my cheek and danced away laughing when I tried to kiss her back.

When I looked up John disappeared, just like that. No Geronimo, no last words, just one step into darkness and he was gone. And I found myself counting seconds, waiting for the splash. Before it came, though, the train rumbled out of Deer Lick Hollow and onto the trestle. The whistle screamed and the huge front light barreled towards me like the avenging eye of God. I never understood before why a possum will stop in the middle of the road and wait to be run down at night, but for an instant then I looked into that light and was paralyzed, torn between terror and seduction.

I might have died there on the tracks except that just then I heard, or thought I heard, the tiny shock of John's body hitting the water. Without thinking, without feeling, I stepped into the night and started counting.

The bell on the door pulls me back to myself. I've covered four pages of the pad with my wide, looping handwriting. As I look up an old man in a filthy wool cap and torn black overcoat shuffles past the counter and down the freezer aisle. He makes a show of checking prices on frozen dinners and cartons of ice cream. When he thinks I'm not looking he wanders into the game room at the back of the store. I go back to check on him a few minutes later. He's curled up in the space between the Centipede machine and the side wall, hugging his knees like a child and rocking slowly from side to side.

Mr. Carson warned me when I started the night shift that when the weather turned the bums would start loitering around the store at night. He told me wait ten minutes and throw them out.

"They're like rats," he said. "You let one hole up in here and pretty soon you've got a whole goddamn colony."

The man behind the Centipede machine looks up at me, then leans his head against his kness and hugs himself tighter, as if he could make himself smaller and smaller and finally disappear. I lean forward with my hands on my knees and tell him he has to leave. He pretends not to hear me. I say it again. I reach out to touch his shoulder, but he shrinks away from my hand and when he looks up there are tears beading in the corners of his eyes. I straighten and look down at him. He leans forward again and pretends to sleep. It's a cold night. Mr. Carson won't stop by.

Mr. Carson never actually works in the store, but he likes to make sure every few weeks that things

are being done his way. When I was working the day shift once he sent his sixteen year old grandson in to try to buy beer. The kid had a Pennsylvania license that said he was twenty-two, but the picture didn't look much like him and the vital statistics listed him at least two inches taller than he really was. I grinned, handed him the ID and told him to come back in a couple of years. He shrugged and walked out with the six pack still on the counter.

I went to put the beer back in the freezer then, but before I was out from behind the counter Mr. Carson stormed through the front door yelling something about confiscating the identification and how he would have my ass if he lost his certification. His gut pressed against the front of his magenta sweater and his bald pate was livid. He probably could have gotten worked up enough to fire me except that two or three minutes into his speech he tried to say "these" and a long string of saliva snaked out of his mouth and down his chin. He turned his back on me to wipe it away, then stalked out of the store without another word. When I finally picked up the cans to put them away they were sweating and they left six smeared water rings on the counter.

Back behind the counter I flip to the first page of the legal pad and read over what I've written. I wanted to write about losing my best friend. I had an idea when I started tonight that it happened somewhere in those few seconds between the trestle and the river, but when I come to the end it isn't there. I need to go back farther...

And then it comes to me: Kerry's party. Prom night. The closest John and I ever came to a real fight.

We stopped just after sunset at the park on View Avenue. It wasn't much of a park, actually — just a set of swings and a teeter-totter on a strip of flat land a hundred feet long and maybe half as wide. But even so it was a pretty spot. It was almost the highest point in the city and from the top of the rise behind the swingset you could see for miles. When I was little I thought I could see the whole world from up there.

"Do you remember this place?" John asked as we stepped off the curb into the thick, uncut grass. I nodded, but he'd already turned away and was walking slowly towards the swings, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his faded Levis. I followed a few steps, then knelt down beside the flat slab of exposed rock that had always been home plate. It was too dark to see the letters, but when I ran my thumb across the spot they were there, almost as deep as I remembered: R. T. L/SG.F..

"I'll come back for you," I told her when I put them there. It was a line from a movie, but at the time I thought I meant it. Gwen laughed, knelt down, ran her fingertips across my cheek and asked how could I be so sure she'd be waiting for me. And that was it, of course. That was exactly it.

"I can't believe you're still mad at me, Ray."

I looked up. John was sitting sideways on the only unbroken swing, leaning against the chain and swaying gently from side to side. The darkness made his face a vague white oval and his hand on the chain seemed wrapped in spider silk.

"I still can't believe you did what you did."

He dropped his eyes, turned away and pretended to take an interest in something up the hill. I stood and began to wander towards the outfield. Every stone, every stump had its own memory. Here was the spot where Keith and Gary Barron finally stood up to Gilbert Thomas and beat him bloody while the rest of us stood watching, too afraid of him even to cheer. There by the teeter-totter was where Mike Moore fell trying to catch a kickball and broke his collarbone. And there on the hillside, just hidden by the bushes, was where Gwen first let me peel away the pink and coral of her sundress until there was nothing left between us but perfect white.

"So how far did she let you go?"

There was a long, awkward silence. When John spoke his voice was thick with injured dignity.

"I don't remember. I think I was too drunk to really do anything."

I wanted to say then that I wouldn't have gone into the back room with his girlfriend no matter how drunk I was, but I was afraid my voice would break. John stood, stepped out of the swing and started towards me. I crossed the second base line and wandered into the high grass of the outfield. A stiff breeze was playing in the upper branches of the trees, tugging at the new leaves, daring them to let go. For just an instant then I wanted to be one of them, to whip over the crest of the hill and float all the way down to the Monongahela.

I reached the edge of the woods at the far end of the park just as the moon edged over the horizon. From the treeline the land fell away for a half mile, dropping three hundred feet or more before hitting route 250. Halfway down was a clearing that some backward junkman had once used as a scrapyard. When we were sixteen or seventeen we sometimes went down there with a case of beer or a fifth of grain and took turns rolling tires at the cars passing below. Before that, though, the hillside was the perfect place for hide-and-seek and a hundred other twilight games.

"Do you remember 'Manhunt'?" he asked quietly, almost at my shoulder.

"Of course." I said without turning. "We used to take turns hiding in the trunk of that beat up Dodge in the scrapyard. We were the only ones with keys."

"They never caught on, did they?"

"Never."

He bent down to pick up a stone at his feet, turned it over in his hand and heaved it over the trees and far down the hillside.

"Remember that time I told Mrs. Janecki that

I threw your baseball through her window?"

I turned to look at him.

"But she blamed it on you."

I looked away and watched a set of taillights disappear down 250.

"We were something, weren't we?"

The door dings. Two boys, sixteen or seventeen, step onto the rubber welcome mat and look around. I recognize the taller one. His name is Charlie and he comes in here a lot on weekend nights to play video games. His friend is short and stocky, with long brown hair and a thick glaze of acne on each cheek. They whisper to each other and compare wallets. The shorter boy hands Charlie two ones. Charlie pockets the bills, pulls a five from his wallet and brings it to me at the counter for change. I check the register. I only have two rolls of quarters. I take his five and hand him back eight quarters and three ones.

"Can I have all quarters please?" he says, and pushes the ones across the counter. I shake my head and push them back. Charlie looks down at the bills, then up at me with a flush of sudden anger. He hesitates, then snatches his change and stalks back to the gameroom. His friend turns half away and calls me a dick. I grin and give him the finger in the shoplifting mirror, then shake my head and go back to my notepad.

We stood in silence as the moon rose over Miller's Ridge. It was fat and dim on the horizon and when we turned away it gave our hands and faces a faint orange tint. As we passed the swings John said something about football, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking about lying with Gwen on a wool blanket in the bushes behind the teeter-totter, stroking her cheeks with my thumb and sliding my foot slowly up her calf. The night had just a touch of autumn then and when I lifted her sweater she shivered and wrapped her legs around mine. Later, just as we were getting there, she said she loved me.

And as John stepped back up onto the curb I couldn't help but wonder: when she laid with him that night in a nest of down jackets and pink chiffon, when she writhed and moaned and pulled him close, did she ever call out my name?

I've just finished reading over my last few paragraphs when a long, piercing scream from the gameroom pulls me over the counter. I slap open the light wooden arcade door and see Charlie peering around the corner of the Centipede machine while his friend leans into the space between the casing and the wall. The smaller boy's fist rises and falls steadily and the old man's voice fills the room like a physical presence.

Charlie's head snaps around as I come into

the room. In the dimness of the gameroom his eyes reflect the light from the doorway like a cat's. Charlie tries to say something, but the man behind the machine is bellowing now like a wounded steer and Charlie's friend is shouting obscenities with each blow. I start toward them. Charlie steps out to meet me. He's nearly my height, but I outweigh him by thirty pounds and when I shove him aside he crashes into the wall and sags to the floor.

In another stride I reach the smaller boy and drag him away from the machine. He spins and takes a long roundhouse swing that catches me in the ribs, just under my left arm. The air chuffs out of me and tiny white spots pinwheel in front of my eyes. As he's drawing back to hit me again I reach in and wrap my forearm around his throat, pull him off balance and throw him to the floor. I drop one knee hard onto his chest, hold his face steady in my left hand and hit him once, twice, three times, until my hand is slick with blood and I lose my grip. I want to hit him again, but I catch his eye for just an instant then and remember looking up from the pavement at Joey Halloran and tasting my own blood.

Charlie grabs my vest and I allow myself to be pulled up and away. His friend's nose and mouth are bloodied, but I didn't hit hard enough to break anything. He pulls himself to his feet and stands just out of arm's reach with his fists clenched and eyes leaking tears for two heartbeats, then turns and runs out into the store. I hear the crash of a falling display and the electronic ding as he pulls open the door. Charlie looks at me and says something I don't quite catch, shakes his head and walks away.

When I'm sure Charlie is gone I turn on the overhead light in the gameroom and look behind the Centipede machine. The old man is wrapped in his limbs like a spider in poison. His cap is on the floor beside him and his bald scalp is a patchwork of red and purple. There's a little blood on his sleeve where it's pressed against his face and he sobs quietly with each breath.

I kneel in front of him and touch his shoulder. He hugs his knees and shrinks back to the corner. I want to ask him if he did anything to deserve the beating he's taken, but I don't think he could even tell me his name.

I'm on my feet and about to leave when I notice that the Centipede screen is dark. I take a step back and see that the cord has been pulled from the wall and the man behind the machine is sitting on it. And then I realize what Charlie said: Mike had a high score.

As I'm leaving the gameroom I turn off the lights. Before I start fixing the Doritos display I get the Gameroom Closed sign and hang it on the door.

It's nearly 3 AM by the time I get back behind the counter. The moon is high and bright outside and the buildings across the way look washed out and

sickly. For some reason it makes me think about the time John and I spent the night alone in his parent's river house. We tried to stay up all night, but I fell asleep in front of the television in the middle of the late movie and dreamed about being chased by giant ants, being caught and carried back to the hill as a gift to the queen.

When I woke it was two in the morning. The television was playing the national anthem and the full moon was shining through the living room window, silhouetting an enormous old garden spider who'd built his web between two beams on the porch. I got up, turned off the TV and walked to the window. The spider divided the moon into eight pale orange slices. Usually I hate spiders, but I remember thinking that this one looked like a safety net between me and the sky.

Then, as I watched, a black shape flashed across the moon and the spider was gone.

My head snaps up as the door dings. It's Charlie's friend. His nose is crusted with dried blood and his eyes are bright pink. He takes two stiff steps forward and stops. His eyes flicker around the store and his breathing is fast and shallow. He looks like John right before the jump.

I press the silent alarm, hop across the counter and tell him to get out of the store. He doesn't speak, doesn't smile, doesn't even look at me. I'm stepping forward and raising my fists when he reaches into his jacket, pulls out a battered .22 pistol and levels it at my head.

I've always heard that when you think you're close to death your entire life flashes before you, but it doesn't happen to me. All that comes to me as I throw myself back over the counter is that night on the trestle, staring into the light and watching the train come on. He fires three quick shots. The reports blend together into a single thunder bolt as the hot dog warmer explodes and I crash to the tiles at the base of the slurpee machine. The silence after the shots is marred only by the chiming of falling glass, then quick footsteps and the ding of the electronic bell.

When the door snicks shut I roll onto my back and touch my face, my chest, my belly. No holes. Nothing wrong at all except for a warm, creeping tickle on my thigh. I reach down. My crotch is soaked. I start to laugh, but when I raise my hand to my face it's smeared with blood.

I don't feel any pain, but when I reach down again I find a jagged, wet tear in the seat of my pants. The red alarm light is blinking over my head and I'm wondering how long it will take for the police to get here and how long it takes to bleed to death from being shot in the ass. My head is swimming, but my stomach is tight and churning and it feels like falling. I try to concentrate on what's happening, but my mind wanders and when I hear the sirens I'm not thinking about police or ambulances or the blood that's slowly

soaking through my faded Levis. I'm thinking about the shock of the water after ninety feet of screaming wind, about sinking ankle-deep into the riverbed and clawing my way back to the surface and about how when my head broke water and I took that first wet gasp I felt like Lazarus stepping out of the tomb. □



Poetry

By Moira Sweeney

Untitled

Under faded slats
of Dock II planks

sister searched
for lost scissors

dragging the
wire-bent crabnet

in the clouding
foaming
swirling
sandy-cream
living
beautiful
watery
realm.

Untitled

I have laughed
in your face
when you fell in the river,
the time you sputtered
as you swung
from the mooring line,
waves crashing,
splattering you with
brown algae and kelp.
Forgive me,
you were so grimy,
so pathetic,
and you
laughed
too.

Untitled

the gold curtained tapestry
defends her position
like the princely mountain of old
guarding the precious Liralen.

her Roman nose
dignifies her face
and Cuban tresses
enshroud her violet eyes.

the delicate bare shoulder
yearns to shrug
out of leaden manteau
but resigns itself,
mitigated by pale cygnet tendrils.

the lightly curved lips
invite a closer look;
intensely, they anticipate.

who is she enticing? why does she arch her brows?

imagine the man
in the doorway,
snaring
that fatal glance.



Poetry

By Karen Fish

What Is Beyond Us

(For Tim)

Above the meadow of pain, the pins of Queen Anne's lace,
black-eyed Susans and tall silver grass, the moon lifts large, white
a lake.

The midwife instructs me to remember something pleasant.
She is raising her voice, calling my name.
I don't remember anything.

My grandfather and I played a game called, "hand over hand."
First, he placed his large hand palm down on the tablecloth,
my hand went on top, our hands alternating till we had a little hill
of hands. The hand on the bottom was pulled out and slapped
on the top of the stack—and so it went.
We played till our hands were a blur, till dinner.
Tickle, tickle on your knee, if you laugh you don't love me.

I don't believe this. I don't believe this.
That's what I tell you, my voice a dark wing moving over us.
I am on a sailboat, standing on the bow, looking ahead,
spotting for rocks, shallow water, a ridge of sand. We drift
past the jetty of rock, past the marina, the stranded skipjack
of boyscouts who wave and laugh with embarrassment.
I'm in a dinghy alone, on my knees, paddling to shore,
toward birch and scrub pine.
Near the beach the lilies' closed white fists float on the surface
of the water. Two herons pedal and lift into the sky.
The air is pink, the water violet-green.
The midwife tells me to think of pain as constructive.
This pain is the best kept secret in the world.
My father died late at night, young and alone in some hospital
after drinking and drinking. Your father came from Ireland
in the late twenties and even when he had the chance,
didn't return. We suppose he wanted to go back too badly
and like the man who loves a woman too much, he pushes her away.
I'm not remembering any of this because I'm on an opposite shore,
under a hectic moon, the birches just doors of moonlight.
I'm in a darkness I won't remember.

This is the best kept secret in the world;
we've dropped anchor, the low clouds are, in this almost darkness
the color of pearls. There are acres of reeds, a few startled birds,
trees. And when they hand you the child,
our daughter, you look at me with a face I've never seen before.
I've heard—sometimes, it's what we've never seen before
that we recognize.

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Woods Hole: Cape Cod

This landscape is not metaphor.
I want the actual thing. It is a particular sky.
Sky as door and there is the sun,
usually a sloppy, bright, garland wreath stuck
to that particular black nail.
The nail the only solid thing from heaven that I've seen.
See, the rash of rain peppering the surface of the bay.
Maude Gifford's husband in his shallow oyster boat
scissoring his way between the grass islands on stilts.

This is the view taken away.
Let's say the land is sold.
Let's say the elderly are moved to town,
placed somewhere to be cared for—away
from the stoves with the burners they forget to extinguish,
from stairs—the hours, the days holding their frail bones
in place.
The land as inheritance, stolen and badly managed.
It was my dead father's sonnet—

This is what you will receive
This is what you will receive

receive

And the moonlight searches out the bedroom
where my grandfather's father was born, first cried.
The stars just heads of light between the spread limbs
of old trees.
The ground I speak of—my afterlife, the day dream
my father wanted to pass to me
like a white envelope, better than cash.

The trees are stuck to the rumor of hills,
clouds tethered to the distant shadow of ocean.
The fishing boats come and go, strung with lights.
Portuguese families crowd the breakfast bar before dawn.
The sun is always the soothsayer, the rocks circling
the lighthouse suspect as ever.
Nothing changes good and evil, certainly not time.

There is the moan of engines, the heavy barges
dredging our notion of the bay—making it deeper.
Geese fly over the house, a hook
again and again, catching only the season.

And it is twilight when I am most sympathetic
thinking of the farmers without their farms, without
the long walk to the mailbox,
their sun plunging into the barn roof, night
after night.

It is always twilight when I imagine
the demolition of the present tense,
the blue shadow of the homestead coupled to
the lawn no longer mine,
the water view, the moon a twirling,
bright weathervane on the roof of the house.
Twilight, when I miss the black hollyhock,
blue larkspur.

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When the Soul Leaves the Body

When the soul leaves the body does it surface like a swimmer
who needs a breath badly, coming to the lid of sky exhausted,
eye-level with the wavering net of pattern, light and shadow...

When the soul leaves the body does it jump like a person
from a spun car through black smoke before the vehicle explodes
and stops...

Is it just another place, another white room flooded
with the clarity of light, the edge of vision...

Must we give up our tricks then—

the slick man his rhythmic voice, the woman who can only
use her eyes, their maneuvers—
do we drop them like a grocery bag that gives out at the bottom
and walk on?

Do we go ahead,
to where we were before, where contradictions become complete
like the tree merging with its reflection
to the dark intoxication which is not the self.

will I hear my own voice—softly through the dark,

"just tell me what you want me to do."

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For Men: About Women

A Short Story By Trish Robertson

Judith Anderson was certain that she was handling the worst thing that could ever happen to a mother quite well. Better than her mother would have handled it at the very least. She flipped the apple pancakes in the skillet and looked over the bar that divided the kitchen from a cramped, brown and white dining room. Her daughter sat there in the morning sunlight that splashed over the wobbly table, gazing at her hands as if they belonged to someone else. Her hair was matted from her shower and her eyes were calmly tragic. Judith put the pancakes on a plate and moved around the bar to the table. Steam rose into the beams of sunlight and the smell of cinnamon soaked the room.

Judith had always thought that people should learn from their mistakes, not suffer for them. She envisioned her mother lecturing about crime and punishment with a wooden spoon in her hand, flicking batter around the kitchen as she became more enthusiastic. "There is right," her spoon would tick toward the right, "and there is wrong." Her spoon would tick back like a metronome. "You've got to know the difference. And if you don't, God does." The spoon would punctuate her words with spasmodic shakes, and the batter would start to fly. Judith sighed. Her mother would never have done what she was about to do for her daughter Arlene.

At the moment, Arlene was not eating the pancakes. Judith knew it must be hard on Arlene, but she was young, intelligent, pretty and had a bright future ahead of her now that she was away from that father of hers, and Judith mentioned this to Arlene often to encourage her. Who knows what he would have done in a situation like this. Probably call her a whore and kick her out of the house for good. Judith often wondered if Arlene had any clue how lucky they were to be away from that man. The lawyers certainly thought so. She had tried to discuss it with Arlene, but never got very far.

"Do you have your things together, darling?"

Arlene turned her face from the window abruptly. "All you have to do is drive me there. I don't want you to stay."

"Let's just go, shall we? Leave your pancakes and we'll just go. The sooner the better. Yes?" No need to make things worse than they were. Judith reasoned. The poor girl was learning a lesson that was hard, but she would remember it forever and when

she became a success, on her own without the help of that man, she would remember her mother as the person who helped her see the world as it was; who helped her out of trouble; who didn't fill her mind with nonsense about sin when she least needed it. Judith still cringed thinking the backward notions her ex-husband had tried to force into the girl's mind. When Judith met Sylvan, she hadn't a clue that he would be an insufferable conservative after they were married. Sylvan was a spelunker in college and so was she. The first time Judith met him was in Hunter's Cave in Missouri, known as Hunter's because the cave entrance was located on private property owned by a farmer with a gun.

Judith hadn't really seen Sylvan at first because the carbide lamp on her hard hat was out and she was sitting, breathing heavily, in a damp alcove deep in the cave where darkness pushed hard against her open eyes. She could hear the rest of the caving team a little way off, and expected they would notice her absence in a minute or two. She squatted on her knees to keep the mud and water from soaking too far into her pants as the musty, slightly acidic smell of spent carbide burned her nostrils. Before her team noticed she was gone, though, another spelunking troupe that had been following them for some time shambled noisily into her alcove—Sylvan among them. Sylvan, tall and straight, had offered to fix her lamp, and she had handed it to him mutely and waited, watching his hands move and marvelling at the length of his slim fingers. The rest, Judith thought bitterly, was history.

But, she had come a long way, she liked to tell herself. She also liked to think about how far women had come. Not at all like that dumb cigarette ad; rather, through the efforts of individual, strong women. It was one of her favorite topics of conversation. "You know," she would say, "women have really come a long way." Then she would give examples, starting with the right to vote, but ending with the solemn reminder that there is a lot more to do. This always made her think of Arlene and the future. It baffled her that someone as bright as her daughter could make a mistake as stupid as the one they were correcting today, but more than anything, she hated to hear the girl cry. Last night she had heard Arlene choking little sobs into the pillow. Judith had never cried when she was Arlene's age. It seemed like such

a waste of energy, an admission of defeat.

Judith's old Pontiac gleamed dully as it wove down the highway. She was an aggressive driver, and as she passed Camaros and Subarus some of the other drivers glared over angrily. "They're calling me a bitch right now, mmm?" Arlene didn't answer. Thin, web-like clouds were beginning to burn off in pink morning sun, and along the sides of the highway cornfields blurred into green and gold streaks. It was going to be a long ride to the city, and Judith thought it was as good a time as any to talk about what Arlene should be learning from all this. "Think about your life, Arlene. All the wonderful things you will do with yourself. College is only a few years away for you. It is a wonderful time to be a woman."

Arlene was swallowing quickly as if she had eaten something nasty. Judith remembered being that age, living in her mother's large white house. Her mother used to step onto the back porch every morning with a teacup steaming in hand and praise God. She praised God for her family, her garden, her strawberry preserves, her good health, and the fine china that they never used in the dining room cabinet. Her voice would float out over the okra patch in the backyard and sometimes the neighbors would hear and call good morning across the hedges. Then she would raise both arms and tilt back her head so that Judith, standing behind her, could see her dark little bun of hair as she called, "Good morning! God bless you!"

Judith's mother had loved to talk about sin. It was almost a hobby with her. She would wait until breakfast was on the table and everyone had had their orange juice, then she would start. "Those McOwen girls," she would say, "are headed straight to hell." Judith could never get her mother to elaborate on the particular sins of the McOwen girls, but she was sure at the time that whatever they were, the McOwens were in big trouble. Judith felt now that she had escaped her mother through a combination of education and sheer force of will. While she was in college, that institution which her mother opposed, she had sworn that any child of hers would see the world untainted by notions of sin, a world beautiful and full of choices, a world where everything wasn't planned out ahead of time, and you could become anything you wanted and take the credit. A world like that was full of tough lessons, she reminded herself often. She had married Sylvan in college without telling anyone first, and when her mother found out, Judith received a letter informing her that she was going straight to hell. If she were her mother, Judith thought, she would look at this business with Arlene today as some kind of failure. But that was not how Judith saw it at all. It was an opportunity to impress upon Arlene the importance of decisions, the importance of right choices.

Her mother had been right about the Hell part in a certain sense. After she and Sylvan were married they moved east to Pennsylvania (Sylvan's idea) and Judith got pregnant with Arlene. In several ways, that was Hell, Judith decided. The minute Sylvan had discovered she was pregnant, he became obsessive. He combed the house for anything unsuitable for children, throwing out books (including most of her college texts), a set of steak knives, and all of their spelunking equipment. She awoke one morning to the sound of him opening the door and when she went to the window she saw him standing at the end of their driveway with light flakes of snow floating around him and sticking in his hair. One foot was placed on top of a bundle, the other planted firmly to steady him as he tugged twine around the bundle to tighten it. Judith flung open the door just as the trash collectors were tossing the bundle into the truck. Sylvan wouldn't tell her what had been in the bundle, but when he left for work, Judith tiptoed through their house like a burglar, trying to discover what was missing—her typewriter, journals, and back copies of *Beacon*, a small womens' issues magazine that had folded shortly after she'd left college. She'd decided then, after being married just over two years, that even though Sylvan was the sexiest man she had ever met, she would leave him...someday. He got drafted then and things quit seeming so bad for a while.

The picketer was a small, squat woman with a plain face. She was wearing a flimsy sandwich board and puffing slightly as she paced in the now hot sun. The front of the board said THE SOUL OF THE BABY IS LOST IN PURGATORY. Judith started across the parking lot toward the picketer and Arlene snatched at her elbow. "Please, mother. Don't." Judith turned and said loudly, "This person is trying to rob women of a right they deserve and fought hard for."

Arlene's face went white. "Oh God, mother. Please."

The picketer ignored them. She looked rather wilted, Judith thought, and not very bright. Judith wondered when was the last time this creature had an original thought. She was reminded of a wind-up toy at the moment it begins to run down, and she felt a little foolish for her outburst. Arlene was halfway up the steps to the clinic when Judith turned to follow. The clinic was a large, freshly-painted white house with a porch. A carved wooden sign hanging over the porch steps read HILLCREST WOMEN'S CENTER. Inside, a pleasant receptionist took Arlene's name. Judith smiled and the receptionist smiled back as she handed Arlene a sheaf of papers to fill out.

"Mother," Arlene whispered, "you can go now."

Judith had hoped to avoid a confrontation in public but there seemed to be no help for it. She

glanced around the spacious waiting room. An adult couple sat talking softly on a sofa. A black woman sat by herself in a chair by the bay window. Two red-eyed women were holding hands and looking at their knees. One of them was shaking slightly. "Darling, you are the youngest one here. Maybe I should stay?" The black woman looked up. Behind her the curtain billowed gently.

"No." Arlene's voice was desperate. The receptionist peered at them. Judith considered the simplest way to handle this. Arlene obviously needed her, but was too proud to admit it. She looked ready to cry. Judith turned and walked to an empty chair next to the black woman and sat down. Arlene hesitated and walked to the other side of the waiting room and seated herself by the couple. She avoided looking at Judith.

The couple on the sofa were still talking. The woman wore a green dress and the man had on jeans. Arlene had told Judith that her boyfriend Allen did not want to come here with them and that was fine with Judith. She always did feel that Arlene was a little too good for him and this proved it. He was a scrawny 16 year old with a nasty sense of humor. After Judith found out about their mistake, she had written him a letter telling him how lucky he was to be going out with a lovely, intelligent girl like Arlene, and that he should learn a thing or two about responsibility if he wanted to be successful in this world. A week later, she received an envelope with one hundred and fifty dollars cash in it paper-clipped to a note that said "Hush Money".

Judith knew that her mother would have turned a boy like Allen right over to his family minister and told him to pray for the boy's soul, hopeless as it was. But Judith considered herself above such a simplistic view of things. She did wonder, though, now and then, if her mother still prayed for her soul—divorce was, after all, a sin and probably a worse one than marrying Sylvan in the first place.

Arlene's head was bent over the forms so far that her hair hid her face. The two women had quit holding hands and were chatting softly. Judith turned toward the black woman and said, "You know, we've really come a long way, haven't we?"

Arlene's head snapped up and her hair settled with a swish around her shoulders. The black woman's eyes took a moment to focus on Judith. She paused. The radio station crackled. "I came from Lancaster," she said, then looked away. Judith rolled her eyes and was about to try again when she saw that Arlene was gazing directly at her. Judith smiled and Arlene scowled, then looked away.

Judith turned her attention to a smoked-glass coffee table in the center of the room. It was covered with brightly-colored pamphlets bearing titles like "What You Should Know About Contraception," "Know Your Options," and "For Men: About Women."

She picked up "For Men: About Women" and chuckled to herself. Here was one her ex-husband should read. He'd come back from Vietnam hating a lot of things—women among them. Judith imagined what she would say in a pamphlet for men: about women. Maybe something along the lines of "Don't fuck with us anymore—we're not all stupid." She hadn't been, anyway. When Sylvan got back, she waited four years and then hired a lawyer. Judith liked to count patience among her better qualities. She set down the pamphlet which said inside, "Your girlfriend may be waiting for you to bring up the subject of contraception."

A nurse walked in and called the black woman. Arlene got up, walked over to the receptionist's desk and handed her the forms. When she turned back, Judith motioned for her to sit down next to her. The cushion still indented slightly. Arlene pretended not to notice as she looked past Judith and out the window. She froze for a moment, swayed as if about to faint, then sank into the chair. Judith reached over and took her hand. She hated to see her daughter suffer this way. "Arlene. Relax." She tried to say it soothingly. "It will be over in less than an hour. When we leave, you can get on with the rest of your life." Judith felt certain then that her decision to stay had been a good one. A different nurse with heavy makeup came in and called Arlene's name. Arlene let Judith help her stand.

"Just follow me," the nurse said. She looked at Judith. "You can come, too, if you want. It's just the counseling interview stuff."

Judith didn't want to come. She hated shrinks, so she smiled encouragingly and motioned for Arlene to go ahead without her. All it would be was a bunch of questions and she could hear them already: "Do you have any moral reservations about this procedure? Are you currently engaging in sexual activity?" Psychologists reminded Judith of her marriage counseling which she'd arranged for appearance's sake. Questions, questions. Sometimes, Judith liked to imagine what she would say to a shrink if she had the chance to do it over.

"Are you having any recurring dreams?" he would ask.

"Yes." She would tell him. I keep dreaming that I come into your office and you ask me if I have had any recurring dreams, and I tell you 'Yes, I have this dream where you ask me if I'm having any recurring dreams, and it goes on and on like that all night long."

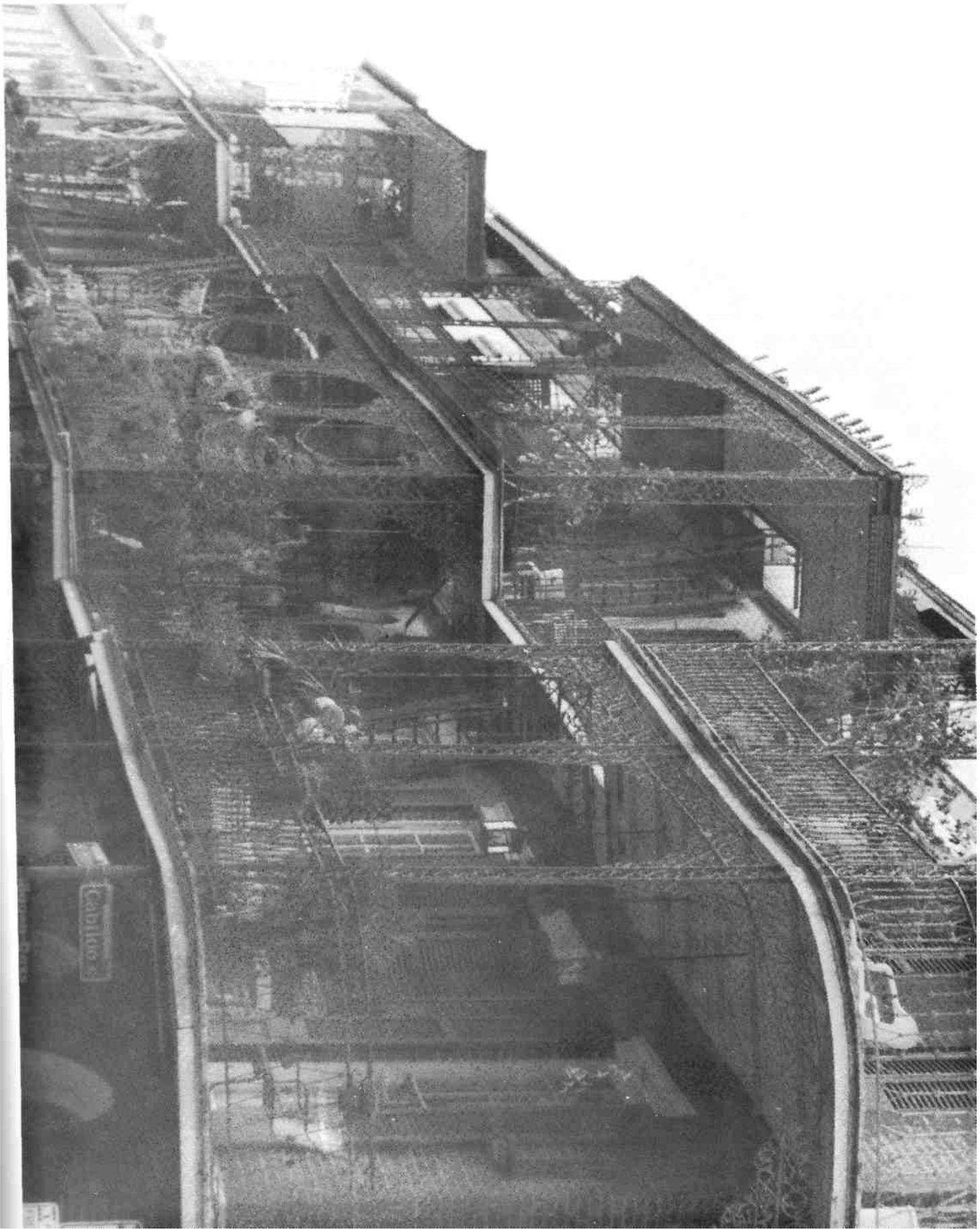
Her ex-husband had been awful in counseling. He simply wouldn't talk for the entire hour and, as soon as they left, he would tell her that her mother had been right all along.

The waiting room emptied slowly. Judith smiled politely at the man who was now sitting on the sofa alone reading "For Men: About Women." The

only other person was the red-eyed woman who had been holding her friend's hand earlier. Her face was buried in Good Housekeeping, a magazine Judith positively loathed.

Judith looked up abruptly when Arlene walked in. The change in her daughter was noticeable immediately. Arlene's eyes were clear and her complexion flushed. Judith pushed herself up out of her chair. "Darling?...How are you?" Arlene stared straight ahead and walked toward the door. "Darling?" The waiting room was empty and very still. Arlene walked right out the door, under the HILLCREST WOMAN'S CENTER sign which swayed

slightly in the breeze, and into the parking lot. The only car in the lot was Judith's blue Pontiac. Judith's throat tightened. It looked comfortably small, like the alcove in Hunter's cave had been, and Judith had the impulse to run after Arlene, give her the keys, and let her squeeze into it. That moment in the cave lingered in her mind: the voices of her companions moving further away, scraping against stalagmites, leaving her in a darkness that hurt her eyes with its finality; the seconds of silence, waiting, with cold limestone-soaked water seeping through her pants; that instant when everything was nothing—right before Sylvan reached out his hands to take her carbide lamp. □



Poetry

By Sandy Brown

Old Eye

Days arise out of
a lack of water,
a deliberate breeze, a calisthenic, a languor
that is certain.

A moon like a cat's claw,
tiny, translucent, low and glowing,
pink and meticulously curved.
A scythe taking the grass
in an immanent precision.

Pregnant with every child born,
I turn
cards from a deck.
The king is black,
the queen as white as an unshaven scalp.
Together we form an alliance
in favor of miscalculated numbers
and opposed to nothing, in reality.
A triumvirate
in an assembled awe of beasts.

Whatever it is
has turned to evening twice,
thus desecrating superstition.
Herein wanders the skeleton
moon and its adjectival curse.
Anger turns into words, a letter.
There are two sides.

In a Swarm, Hearing

And then he said to me:
My life is small.
Something should have happened.

No. I am supposing
it takes more to memorialize
that which in an opera
might cue a dramatic gasp, communal sigh;
a purer vision.
The soprano voice bleeds on. This
does not go unnoticed.

I am supposing that the pursuit
of today's unopening sky,
this moment's unapproachable covenant,
is forfeited for a disparate
and more engaging occupation.

Something vaguely detectable
in the collapsing efforts behind real fear,
like the false fire
in the engine of a real train,
the suggestion of a vowel
in its volcanic throat
as it grinds awake. Wheels:
hands, arms, weighting on the track.

Purpose Takes Refuge

All day giving rise to nothing
but the sound of snow underfoot.
Purpose takes refuge in height.
The height of a building,
ice peeling off the shingles.
The height of a body,
ice making sense in the veins.
The height of a season;
beneath an aligning illusion
we are skyless.

Traffic Isolation

1.
I saw a rabbit in the alley,
the usual kind of rabbit,
his hind legs destroyed
by a car, pasted to the street,
his upper half twirling wildly
with rabbit paranoia,
his anxious and terrified body
like an antenna
or a weathervane, ceaseless,
and the eyes like billiard stones,
unbelievable things.

2.
Telephone lines from the rowhouses
cruciform with the main lines,
forming a faceless conduit,
a netting keeping the sky out
and everything else in.
A flock of birds materializes
so quick on the horizon
it seems to hover an instant
before taking the rest of the sky
underwing.
This is symbolic of the new legislature
of birds, armies
of them exploding into limitless
space kept out,
as if the children of thunder itself,
simultaneously born and compelled
to tear the sky in two.

3.
Along the New Jersey Turnpike
faceless road signs
space out
like tens of abandoned easels,
as if artists turn
and run from
natural and sudden disaster.



World's Fair

A Short Story By John J. Handscomb

Evelyn, our new landlady, called the night before the move to say that we had a little problem. The apartment on the fifteenth floor she had shown us, or rather had danced through, waving her arms and twirling, wasn't available after all (Mrs. Tubin had died and the move was off). A two bedroom, though, was available on the fourteenth floor and Evelyn offered it to us for the first year at the one-bedroom price. Shelia was standing next to me in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, and her head to one side. Around her neck was the necklace of carved wooden animals that I hated, but her kindergarten class loved. The front two paws of a tiger and green glass eye were leaping from the opening in her blouse. "She's trying to screw us," Sheila said, but that was before I mentioned the free bedroom that we really didn't need. My father used to say that people would stand in line for bags of cow dung if they thought it was free.

The house in Far Point was one of those crumbling Victorians that had more charm than nails holding it together. The neighborhood was fair, but improving; "rising on the bell curve" we were told. For six years we caulked and tacked and glued and tried to think of new names for the extra bedrooms that were never filled. The fall that we came to Boston we planted two lines of apple trees in the center of the lawn with grand delusions of walls of shade and buckets of apples. "Bulbs in the fall, trees in the spring!" our neighbors yelled at us from both sides. Maybe it was the season, or maybe it was the type of tree, but whatever it was, after six years all we had was six gnarled trees that grew sideways and not up and looked like overgrown versions of those miniature Japanese bushes.

Sheila managed to find a job right after our arrival in Far Point. It was in the inner city, which meant a good hour commute in the morning in addition to the hells of teaching in a city school. But we had learned to expect the driving when we realized that the only home we could afford in Boston wasn't in Boston. The money was better in the city system, and Sheila said that at that age no kid was that bad—yet. The job I had taken at Clark was on the opposite side of the city in the suburbs which meant driving straight through the heart of the city for an hour to teach three chemistry classes. When those freeway murders began in L.A., I told Sheila that I would drop her off at school in the morning, which added another half-hour to the

commute. After six years of fighting to get in and out of the city, we decided to let it absorb us.

Clarence says from the kitchen table that when the continents were one giant piece of land it was called "Pangrea." Clarence lives down the hall with his mother, Mrs. Gershin—not Elizabeth. I feel like I'm twelve when I call her that, and Sheila gets the willies whenever she's near. We like Clarence, though. He's in the third grade at the new parochial school where Sheila's teaching now and twice a week he spends the evenings with us while Mrs. Gershin does her required night-shifts at the hospital down the street. I told Sheila she was nuts to babysit a child after spending the day with a room full of them. Sheila smiled and said that sometimes she can only relate to children. Clarence has become our son by convenience, and in some weird way, he satisfies some social obligation that Sheila and I haven't fulfilled.

"Pangea," Sheila corrects him, "Pan-ge-a."

Clarence looks up from his book, "Pangea," he repeats and smiles.

From the living room all I can see is the black framed glasses that have set-up shop on his nose. The lenses are thick, but the large, round frames are what make him look like a nerd. The bowl cut doesn't help either; Clarence's mother should have a better sense of her son.

I set down the atomic problems I assigned my students for some quality geeze time. "Geeze" is a word Sheila made-up after an attempt at grocery shopping on a Friday evening. I think it derives from "old geezer" and refers to when people are momentarily out of touch with reality. The people in the parking lot "were in geeze gear" as they tried to get into spaces. The old people moving at two miles-an-hour through the aisles were "really geezin'." And the check-out girl was in "geeze mode" when she tried to unjam the receipt paper. When it's just starting to get dark outside is a good time to geeze.

Evelyn was wrong about the apartment. We like the extra bedroom; it's become a sort of library/junk storage room for us. In one corner is a bookshelf without shelves that will eventually house all the books and knick-knacks stacked on the floor. Sheila nags me in a nice way about refinishing the shelves and promises that as soon as they're done she'll start nagging about having another room to clean. The problem with the apartment is the view. The fifteenth

floor had the view we wanted, not breathtaking, but a remote view of the Boston skyline above the trees and mid-rises. For some reason it all disappears on the fourteenth floor. The sky scrappers blend with the trees like man-made impostors. The shades over the windows are broken in that they can only raise themselves to certain heights. From the couch, some reveal the sky and the air traffic into Logan while others offer the trees and lines of crooked rowhouses. Only a few are able to fully respool themselves. They are all different shades of white. It's only in the evening, though, when the lights are off and the T.V. is on, that I seem to notice.

My father had a thing for television. He'd watch it late at night when we were all asleep and he should have been in bed with my mother. When the first projection models came out in the seventies, he had denied his business sense and bought one, plunking it down with my help in the middle of the den. The room was very long, but narrow. The wide base of the projector took up half the width of the room and was deemed by mother as "that thing your father bought." Our cat, Windsor, with his feeble mind, never got used to its presence and was always bumping his head into it.

I had been in my bedroom, preping for the entrance exams for graduate school. It was summer and I was home from school at our place in the hills of Vermont. My mother had taken my younger sister to the beach, leaving my father and me to fend for ourselves. We enjoyed the challenge, convincing each other that we could cook, clean-up, and cooperate better when the women weren't around. He had called to me from the den, asking if I would come down. I went through a momentary lapse for fear that he knew I had borrowed his Mercedes while he was at the Cape, but I found him on the couch with his feet on the coffee table watching the PBS channel.

Look at this, Jimmy, he had said. It was a documentary about the 1939 World's Fair in New York. My father was six, he said, when his parents had taken him and my Aunt Emily to see what the future offered. The T.V. offered suprisingly clear images from the fair, scenes of families milling along a stone plaza, smiling at the future as they waited in line to view it. Projected as they were by the television they seemed too large, creating too many moving shadows as we watched them in the dark. They were bigger than we were.

The rubber stops on the bottom of the kitchen chairs grumble over the linoleum, which means that it must be around six and that Mrs. Gershin will be here soon to pick up her son. Clarence flies into the living room and jumps onto the sofa next to me. He slaps his hand onto my leg with a "Hey!" Sheila follows behind Clarence with his books, turning on the lights

as she goes. Looking at Clarence, I scream "Pangea!" while grabbing his sides and tickling his stomach. He starts to squeal as he laughs, "Pangea! Pangea! Pangea!.."

In the beginning, or so we are told, there was Pangea; a single land mass without separation that held all the continents that we know today in a single body. For thousands of years this world existed, seemingly at peace. But unseen, beneath Pangea, great forces were at work. Energy and pressure as old as the Earth itself were pushing upwards unrestrained. In time, over thousands of years, great cracks formed and the land mass split in pieces: the formation of the Titanic Plates. This will be Clarence's lesson for tonight. It's Wednesday which is one of the nights Mrs. Gershin works late at St. Clare's. It's hard to imagine her taking care of the sick. Sheila says that she's about thirty but by the lines in her forehead that create her scowl, you'd guess she was at least fifty. Even her name-tag says "Mrs. Gershin"—not Elizabeth—on it. I wonder what her patients call her. She picks him up around six, takes him down the hall and feeds him in an hour, then brings him back to our place where he stays until eleven. He usually spends the last hour or so asleep on our bed as if an adult party has gone on too long.

"Did you know," says Clarence looking up at me, "that every year the oceans get two inches bigger?" He raises two fingers at me for effect. Clarence is knowledge-hungry like a cable news junkie. His lesson in geography ended a week ago but he won't let the topic go. Sheila saw him in the school library kneeling on a chair, pouring through an encyclopedia.

We are in the very-old, very-slow, very-scary elevator of our apartment building. "We" is myself, Clarence, and Mrs. Gershin. We ran into each other at the convenience store in the lobby of our building; I was buying rice for dinner, Mrs. Gershin was buying boil-in-a-bag creamed chip beef.

"And did you know that every year the land masses get two inches smaller, which means that somewhere, land is being destroyed?" I'm squatting to be at Clarence's height and pushing the bag of rice together at the sides to demonstrate.

"Wow," he whispers, and then slams his fist into his hand. "Bam!" he screams.

"Clarence," Mrs. Gershin speaks. "That will be enough." She turns and smiles at me, exposing straight rows of teeth that are each slightly crooked. I remember my mother yelling at me for something stupid and the phone ringing. She could let out a "Hellooo?" as sweetly as if she had been picking wild flowers when the phone rang.

Mrs. Gershin still has her nurse's uniform on, complete with starched-white cap. Her hair pulls out of it in auburn lines and curls upward at the side of her

face. Her nose does the same upward curl only it's more severe looking. Even though I've told her to call me Jim, she still refers to me as Mr. Taylor. I figure that if she didn't get the message the first time then it's not worth repeating.

Sheila's waiting for me in the kitchen wearing the apron with the lobster pot on the front. She's pulled her fly-away perm behind her head by a clip in anticipation of the heat that pours out of the kitchen when we cook. Everytime she gets a perm she hates it but she still goes back to the same girl.

"Wanna know what I found out today?" She's on her knees pulling the wok from a lower cabinet.

"What's that?" Sheila usually has something good if she plays it out like this.

"Clarence's father? Guess where he is?"

"Where? Boston?" Maybe he was going back with Mrs. Gershin.

"Uh-uh. He's dead." Sheila rises to her feet.

"I always thought they were divorced, didn't you?"

"Where'd you hear this?" I say.

"School nurse told me. We were talking about Clarence at lunch because he had been in her office for a headache the other day and it just came up in conversation." Sheila pours oil into the wok and swirls it around in front of her face.

"How did Clarence's dead father come up in conversation?"

"Oh, you know how it goes," she says and smiles.

For dinner Sheila makes stir-fry and I do what I can by making the rice. We sit on the balcony and eat green peppers and clumpy rice and talk about work—the educational system in particular, the upcoming weekend, and whether or not Sheila should have a baby.

"I'm still young—we have a few years." Sheila gets up to clear the dishes from the table.

"Yea—and there's always Clarence," I say.

"What more could we ask for?"

"Bookcases with shelves," Sheila says and smiles as she closes the screen door behind her.

That night I dream about the Iranian hostages, probably because I had read one of those "what they're doing today" articles in *Time*. It wasn't a creative dream but more of a historical account of what happened according to me. Waking up, I remembered something my mother had said when I was in high school. We were watching the news together—and now even that seems strange—right when the hostages were taken. They had just decided to set the women inside the embassy free with the exception of two who they thought were spies. Most of the women who had been taken weren't really members of the State Department, they were people's wives and things like that. We watched them arrive in Germany, crying and appealing to the authorities from podiums on the

tarmac for those who had been left behind.

A small woman from New York is at the mike wearing a red cellophane rain hood and tan overcoat. Her eyes are small and she is so short that when her name flashes on the screen we lose her for a moment. Her husband, she muffles, is not well. His heart, she says, is weak...and now she doesn't know what will happen to him. All she has left, she says, is God.

I remember wanting to leave the room. I didn't like watching T.V. with my parents then, too much on it was embarrassing for me. The news, for the most part, was something safe. Getting up, though, was hard—like a slap.

I remember my mother saying that if she were one of those women she wouldn't leave—in fact she'd refuse to be separated from her husband. What choice would she have? I imagined the newspapers referring to her as the woman who chose captivity. Lying in bed and thinking about my father and mother, I can't believe she said that.

The summer before our move, Sheila left the inner city school citing "conflicting personal interests." In reality my wife had found a smaller parochial school in our new neighborhood called St. Peter's. The pay was considerably less but Sheila liked the environment and what she saw of the kids. They were bright, she said, in their blue and white uniforms. From the teacher's lunchroom, Sheila could watch them at recess—a sea of children. Seagulls are normally attracted to the parking lot, mistaking them for bodies of water. Sheila attributed the heavy gull population to the children.

St. Peter's is a little over a mile from our building. It's an easy walk for Sheila but I like to swing by and get her when I can on my way back from Clark. And as we told Mrs. Gershin, if we're going to be there anyway, we might as well save Clarence the walk or the eighty-five cents bus fare if the weather's bad.

The school consists of eight classrooms, a library, and two or three extra rooms for the nurse and principal's office. A single hallway with cracked marble tiles connects the rooms. Typically parochial, the school has no art, no music, no physical, or special or advanced education. The children eat in a basement room underneath the church.

On Thursday I pick-up Sheila and Clarence at four. Usually they're working together in her classroom, but today Sheila's alone at her desk perma-stamping red smiley-faces onto math tests. The numberline Sheila stenciled over the summer runs the length of the chalkboard behind her. On her desk is a bell like the kind you ring for service and a bottle of holy water that Sheila uses to bless the children on special days. Sheila says (when she brings out the water) the kids go wild flailing their arms, trying to get a drop. Her hair is frazzled high around her head like maybe she had a really bad day, but Sheila says it

was a good day and that it's probably just the humidity.

"Where's Clarence?" I ask. The kids have placed the chairs upside down on top of their desks so the janitor can sweep the floor. On the large bulletin board along the coatroom wall Sheila's doing personal safety; warnings about drugs and fire and people who offer children rides.

"I don't know—he didn't show today—maybe he decided not to wait." Sheila slides her chair back from the desk and pulls her glasses off her face.

"I'll go have a look on the playground—you almost ready?"

"Yeah," she says, pushing her glasses back on, "I'll be done by the time you get back."

The playground is actually the parking lot for the church with white and yellow lines drawn on the asphalt for dodge and kickball. The lot is empty now, except for the pastor's Celica that sits in a special reserved space. If s possible that Clarence is in the bushes by the janitor's shed but not probable.

The basement/cafeteria smells like stale beer from the bingo games and men's club meeting. The children sit segregated by sex at long metal tables with grey chairs. There is a kitchen, but the school can't afford to supplement a lunch program although it does arrange milk delivery from a local dairy. We once found Clarence in the kitchen counting milk in the walk-in refrigerator. He was amazed by the amount of milk, speculating about the number of cows it took to make it. Where did cows come from? Where did milk come from? How'd they get it from the cows? "Science questions," Sheila had said looking at me. "Elementary Ed questions," I countered, "your field."

Clarence is in the library. At a city parochial school like this, two walls of books and four tables with orange plastic chairs constitutes a library. I wouldn't have thought to look for him here but Sheila had mentioned seeing him flipping through encyclopedias. He's on the floor reading a magazine with those dark framed glasses. He's pulled off his clip-on tie and shoved it halfway into his pants pocket, but left his shirt buttoned.

"Hey buddy," I join him on the floor and squeeze his stomach, "Whatcha reading?"

"Atlas," he says without looking up.

The book is open to "The Restless Earth." At the bottom of the spread is an inside look at faults and how they affect the different layers of earth. Each layer has a different vibrant color and at the fault the colors are disturbed from their order by the upward pushing land. There are pictures of houses sliding down hills and a section with charts and pie graphs.

"Do you understand why this happens?" I ask. "Could you read it?"

"Yeah," he says. There's a picture of the world on the page with a purple line that indicates

earthquake zones. Clarence points to Boston.

"There's no earthquakes here," he says.

"You're right," I say, "it says so right there."

Clarence lifts his hand and places a finger gently against a chart—"Most Devastating Earthquakes," specifically the one at the top of the list, a place called Shaanzi in China. Eight hundred thousand people died in 1956 from a quake, it read, and the landslides that followed.

"Clarence," I say, "this doesn't happen everyday, you know. And it won't happen here."

"Yeah," Clarence says, "I know."

Pulling the book from his hand I slide it across the floor and pull Clarence up by his waist.

"C'mon, let's go get Sheila," I say.

Saturday comes and with it the temptation to sleep late and then sit in front of the T.V. with the remote in my hand and Sheila in my lap. Today, though, Sheila's mental alarm clock goes off at seven. Flipping the shades up, she tugs the sheets off the bed as I claim not to deserve such treatment. Sheila smiles and says I'll thank her later; we're going to see the land.

When I met Sheila she was working at a grade school in New Hampshire near Concord. We met at the community college, in the small lunch room in one of the academic buildings where I was teaching and she was taking a course on Greek and Roman art. It became a psuedo-date, seeing Sheila twice a week at night for coffee in the lunch room. At first I thought Sheila was a dizbang and I remember being surprised by the neatness of her apartment, her knowledge of the highways, and the order of her checkbook. In time I realized that I was mistaking gentleness for a lack of intelligence. Six months later I had given-up my apartment and a year after that we were married and honeymooning at the Christmas Tree Inn in Vermont.

The land was our wedding present to each other; four acres in the southwestern corner of New Hampshire. At the time it was an undeveloped plot of forest among others, but the area has developed since to include a few homes between the trees. Sheila and I geeze about the house we will someday build there although we know that in a few years the temptation to sell to a developer will be too great.

An hour into the drive we stop for breakfast at Baugher's like we usually do. From there, it's another half-hour into New Hampshire before we reach the gravel access road that will take us to the property. Fall has come and gone already and I feel like we've missed it altogether. The leaves are gone and the trees stand with their arms to the sky, ready to catch the snow that November brings.

As she gets out of the car, Sheila says she's going to check on the woodpecker's nest. I take the machete out of the back seat and start taking swings at the wild grass and bramble. By the time Sheila comes

back, I've cleared a space for us under the trees and laid a wool, plaid blanket on the ground.

"Find anything?" I call to Sheila. She's wearing a sweater and jeans tucked into ankle boots. On her ski vest is a cornucopia pin one of the kids at school gave to her.

"No sign of either of them." Sheila covers her eyes from the glare and scans the sky for the birds.

"Maybe they gave up the nest," I offer, sinking to my knees on the blanket.

"Maybe."

The land overlooks a valley of pine and evergreen trees with an occasional cabin or small house. For a while Sheila and I sit and stare at the valley.

"Hey," Sheila says as she slaps my knee, "you're geezin'."

We laugh. I grab Sheila around the waist and kiss her.

"I think we should talk about leaving Boston." Sheila pushes the hair away from her face and looks at me.

"We just got there," I say. "You're not happy?"

"No—I am, it's just not where I want to be, you know?"

I tilt my head to the side and give a look that tells Sheila to say more.

"Well, it's just not where I think I should be." Sheila tugs at the grass with her hand, ripping it out in clumps. "When I think about my life, I don't see myself living in a city; I see myself here."

"Where do you want to go?" I ask.

"I don't know. I've been thinking about my aunt's place in Maine. Remember when we went last summer? It could be nice up there. Really, we could go anywhere, you know? I mean, we're teachers, right? There are schools everywhere." Sheila stops, slightly out of breath.

"We'll call your aunt when we get back, o.k.?" I slide behind Sheila and wrap my arms around her shoulders.

"O.k." she says, letting her head fall back against me.

It's nearly four when I pull the Toyota into the side lot of the apartment building. On the way back we stopped to do some grocery shopping at an organic produce store. Next to the parking lot is a park (that runs along side the building) with slides and swings and an occasional picnic table. The park was one of the reasons we had chosen our apartment. The sky had clouded up on the ride back and now rain was threatening. Sam, the groundskeeper who doesn't hear too well, is out with the lawnmower, trying to get a last cut in before ground freezes. He waves blindly at us as we get out of the car.

In a distant corner of the park I see what looks

like Clarence, running wildly between the trees. Every few steps he stops and bends down to receive something.

"Is that Clarence? What's he doing?" I look at Sheila. She's squinting to see.

"I think so. I think that's his jacket. What is he doing?"

We call to him, but our voices are lessened by the roar of the lawnmower. We watch Sam push the mower in a crooked line toward the far end of the park where Clarence is.

"He's going to get killed," I say as I open the door for Sheila. "Let's get this stuff inside and I'll go get him."

It's only after we're through one of the double doors that I see Mrs. Gershin standing at the other, watching Clarence through the glass.

"That won't be necessary," she says to me. The bags are slipping out of my hand and I struggle to get a better grip.

"What's he doing out there?"

"Dandelions, he wants to get the dandelions," she says, replacing a strand of hair that has fallen from behind her ear. "Actually, he's trying to save anything that's not grass; dandelion, wild violet, he's not particular."

I say nothing, and try to keep the bags from falling.

"He doesn't want Sam to get them with the mower; he's trying to save them."

At the world's fair, the crowds move through a dead white plaza that has been decorated with red and brown stone stars. Overhead, General Motors has built bridges for their automobiles to roam along, giving the crowds something to look at as they wait with smiles on their faces. Inside the auditoriums, the people are offered visions of the future: visions of kitchens and push-button living rooms and cars that float above the ground. They are offered stories of a peaceful world where technology has put an end to desire. Above all, the people are told of the nearness of the future. It is not to be seen as some distant event, but as a coming reality. The people smile at these visions and then head to the outdoor cafes for a lunch of polish sausage and pretzels. At night, they pull the sweaters they have been carrying over the heads of their children. They stop for ashtrays and pennants as souvenirs before heading to the parking lot where they try to remember where they left the car.

I pull the upper half of my body back on the balcony at Sheila's insistence that I was about to fall. There's no sign of Clarence now, although I suspect he's still outside somewhere.

"You know, I swear that she's done something to Clarence; not done something like hurt him or anything physical like that, but done something."

Sheila's voice is distant like she's calling me from a cheap phone as she travels from one side of the apartment to the other, putting some to the groceries in the kitchen and some of the dry goods in the dining room pantry.

When I was Clarence's age, Sister Paul Marie sat us down in religion class one day and said she was going to explain autumn to us. Thin and tough and normally very serious, she sat on the edge of her desk that day. Autumn, she said, was when all of God's creatures faced their own limitations. The trees and flowers disappeared into the ground or into themselves, while the birds and animals sought warmer weather either underground or in some remote South American country. Nature, she told us, becoming very serious, knew when to call it quits, and we would have to learn the same. After all, she said, we really weren't that different.

Out of the clouds a plane descends to the west

of the city, headed for Logan. I stretch my eyesight, and from the markings I guess it to be a TWA. I wonder who is on board and think about what it's like to be on a plane as it descends. I see Sheila and myself on board, sitting in the orange velour chairs, with our heads turned, smiling at what we see. To Sheila's right is Clarence, dressed in a navy suit that Sheila picked out for him. His small body easily wiggles within the constraints of the seatbelt that's pulled around his body. Next to Clarence is a baby in a car safety seat strapped securely to the chair; our son and Clarence's brother. Clarence has squirmed his way out of the belt and has placed a hand on the baby's stomach. He begins to teach the child, promising a host of future topics in math and science when the child is older and can understand. For now, Clarence says, he will tell a story, a story about the whole world, a story about Pangea. □





Poetry

By Christine Canale

Daniel

I walk along Hegamans Lane
Named after that farmer you once knew
All around there is the odor of wilting dandelions.
The lilacs,
The buttercups
That I used to hold so slyly under your chin.
I told you that you liked butter
You said I was a child and it was only a game
I tried my best to tickle you, Uncle
Invisible
And you play my game.

I remember you as you were then
Long limbed and lofty
A pack of Camels in the checkered workshirt
Worn. Smelling of earth, sweat and turpentine
I listened to your winded war stories
Well tailored for the ears of a youngster
Myriad adventures in India, Africa, the North Pole
The days when Bolivar, your husky pup, was your best friend
And the natives called you Old Snowshoe.

You taught me how to read a compass and sharpen a nail
Play twenty-one, backgammon, and checkers
"Hit me," "Set me," "Jump me."
You told me I was your favorite girl
And we made a pledge to never forget each other
The secret wink.

After the holidays, I remember waking in my dark room
To the clink of adult conversation
I screamed for you
But you were already there
Holding me tight as I swallowed the warm milk.

