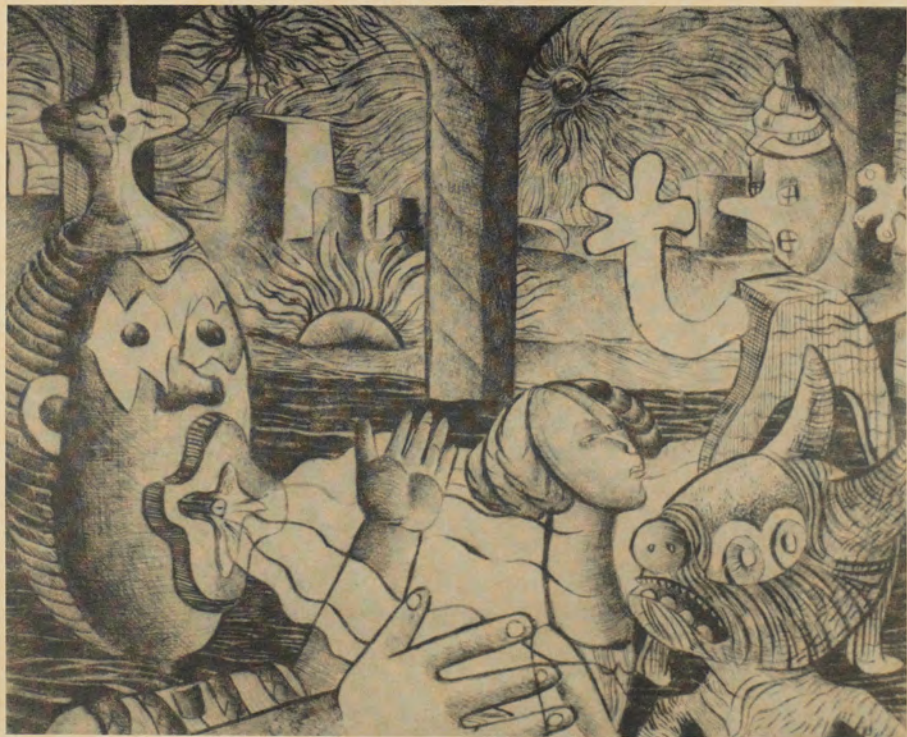


SHORELINE

THE RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE MAGAZINE OF ARTS AND LITERATURE



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3 DOLLARS

Errata:

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P. 58 *read:*

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Eddison Gayle
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Hot on the Third Floor

by Scott
Altonian

She stood to the side of the black electronic mat, pumping the front of her red t-shirt in and out. Her chest looked like the breast of a bird, heart beating wild and fast. The cool air conditioning of the jumbo supermarket hit Maggie, making her dizzy, like the waves at the beaches around Ocean City. Outside the glass doors, the suffocating late August heat lingered through the cramped streets of Providence. Her shirt and forehead were damp with sweat from the three block walk from her apartment. Errant white strands from the fringe of her cut-off blue jeans stuck like seaweed to her thighs.

"A real scorcher, eh?" said an elderly lady in a purple jumpsuit who entered through the electric swinging doors.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Day like this drives people over the edge — makes them crazy," the old lady said, staring at Maggie several seconds past politeness, then waddled off pushing a cart in front of her.

"I believe you've hit the nail on the head, as they say," Maggie mumbled to herself. She reaffirmed the barrette that held her frizzy copper-red hair out of her face, channeling the uncontrollable mass back behind her ears, then commandeered a lone cart from the corner and began pushing it down the aisle. She pushed it with one hand and continued to pump her shirt with the other. She maneuvered her way down the condiments aisle, cha-cha-ing to the sanitized Latin beat that emanated from the speakers on the ceiling. The dull fluorescent lights cast an anesthetic glow on the colorful jars.

As she was placing a jar of mustard into her cart, she caught a glimpse of Carlos, the young man behind the meat counter, down at the end of the aisle. He was cutting something with the electric slicer for the old lady in the purple jumpsuit. Every couple of seconds he looked over in Maggie's direction. He didn't move his head or his body, just his eyes. They would be fixed on the meat in the slicer, then would quickly roll up, before rolling back down to the job in front of him. Maggie turned back to the shelves of colored jars, rubbing her chin, and with all the emphasis of an exhibitionist, slowly knelt down to retrieve a jar of tannish colored horseradish. She paused in a crouched position, pretending to compare prices, then rose and dropped the jar in her cart.

Appearing satisfied with her purchase, and her act, she turned and pushed her cart towards the small glass tank full of lobsters and crabs. A tall man in blue slacks and a button down shirt stood, bent over in front of the lobster tank, his face inches away from the glass. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of a grey barracuda jacket. Maggie smiled at a toothless grin at Carlos over at the meat counter who was

handing the old lady her meat. He caught it but didn't smile back.

"See anything you like?" she said, as she parked her cart next to the man in front of the tank.

"No, no, I don't," he said, a bit startled.

He stood erect, a clear six inches taller than Maggie. His dark face was covered with stubble and more than a few pimples, and a few strands of dirty oily black hair hung over his forehead. He began furiously rubbing his eyes with two crooked forefingers, as if he were trying to erase

them or push them back into his skull. He stopped abruptly, then shoved his hands back in the pockets of his jacket. "I don't like them at all," he said.

Maggie peered through the translucent glass at the murky mass of lobsters and crabs. "I know what you mean," she said. The tank was divided in half down the middle, lobsters on the left, crabs on the right. One lobster was making his way from one end of the left compartment to the other by walking on top of the others. His impotent claws protruded in front of him, hindering his progress. The rest sat immobile in the artificial liquid atmosphere, soft small white air bubbles purring from the filter. It was a cramped mass of brown and tan shells, segmented tails, tied-off claws, and black lifeless eyes on the ends of tendrils. The eyes moved irrespective of the bodies. "A sorry sight," Maggie said, looking upwards towards the man. "I'm from Baltimore." She pronounced it Bal'mer. "I've been in this market every week for the past three months and I haven't seen one lobster or crab" — pronounced crabe — "worth spending money on. They're just too damn small and skinny. I guess you people just don't get the good stuff up here. The Maryland Blues."

The man didn't respond. He stood, his mouth half-open, staring at the glass. He gave Maggie a quick sidelong glance, scratching the bridge of his nose, then looked back at the glass, stuffing his hand back in the pocket. He sniffled several times. His eyes were dark, little spots of dried ink. "You're absolutely right," he blurted out. "I don't like it at all."

"Well, sir, you want to get yourself some good crabs, you take yourself down to Ocean City" — pronounced Ooshin — "by the beach. Just south of the Mason-Dixon. That's where they're all at. Or then I hear they've got lobsters up in Maine."

Again the man didn't respond, but Maggie didn't wait. She gave him a polite smile then pushed her cart over to the meat counter and Carlos. His arms were crossed and he was staring at the tall man, the skin between his bushy eyebrows tensed into a small notch.

"You keeping cool back there, Carlos?"

He turned to Maggie. The notch dissipated into his face and

was replaced by a lazy grin. "Oh yes, ma'am. Very cool back here, you know." He was young and had dark features: smooth spotless brown skin, bony cheeks, and small glossy ochre eyes. His thick black hair gave off a shine, like the feathers of a crow, and he wore it in the Continental look. The white smock that covered the front of him was soiled with faded pink and red and brown stains in the shapes of hand-prints.

"I was thinking, Carlos, of a reuben."

Carlos squinted over the counter at Maggie's chest. "A reuben, Miss Brighton?" he said. She bent her head down. In large white letters on the front of her shirt read the words NEVER FEAR.

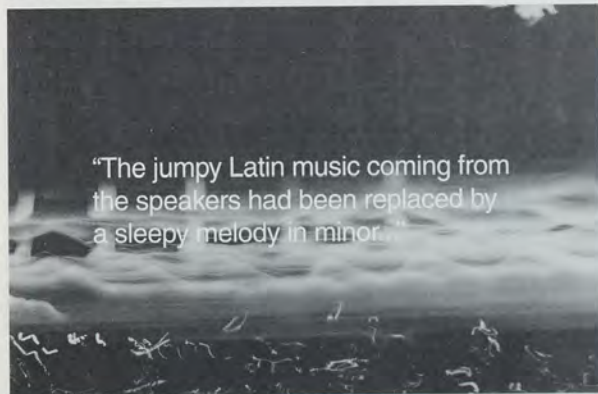
"Yes, a reuben," she said, as she turned around, tugging the bottom of her shirt so it was taut. The back of it read UNDER-DOG IS HERE!

Carlos chuckled softly, the laughter spilling from his mouth in short staccato bursts. "Ah, yes, this Underdog, he is very

glass casing and pulled out a halved, spherical shaped chunk of rare pastrami. He carried it over to the slicer with care, as if it were something soft and delicate. Maggie scratched her chest. Lightly several times as she watched him place the pastrami on the slicer. He flipped the safety handle over, on top of the meat, then flicked the switch. He worked the machine like an accordion, using his whole upper body. He had large strong hands and long fingers. The shiny spinning metal blade caressed the chunk of meat, thin slices peeling off like skin and piling up in the catch. The jumpy Latin music coming from the speakers had been replaced by a sleepy melody in minor. The sound of it mingled with the monotonous hum of the slicer. "Carlos," Maggie said, staring vacantly at his hairy forearms, "what's my first name?"

"Hello, mister," Carlos said, raising his voice above the sound of the slicer. He discontinued the slicing to lean over the counter towards the tall man in front of the tank. The man

"The jumpy Latin music coming from the speakers had been replaced by a sleepy melody in minor."



funny character. I see the cartoons on the television." Maggie turned back around, nodding. "Yes, well. Now, what you said about a reuben, Miss Brighton?"

"The sandwich, Carlos. You know, pastrami, horseradish, etc.?"

"You want some pastrami, sir?"

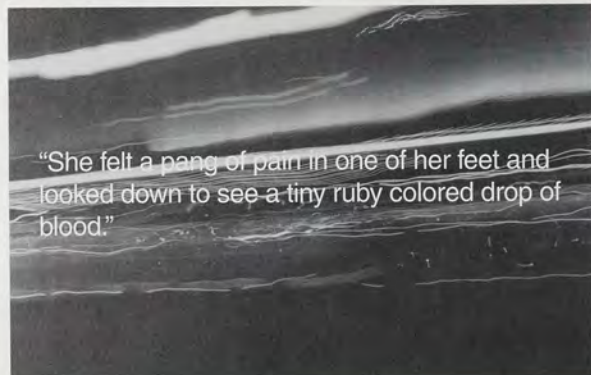
"Yes, please. Shave it thin please, Carlos. A half-a-pound."

Carlos cleared his throat several times as he reached into the

had his face up next to the glass and was tapping at it with a forefinger. "You want to buy one of those things? I'll have someone get one for you if you want to buy one." The man stood up erect and shoved his hand in his pocket. He rocked from one foot to the other, looking at Carlos.

"No, no, I don't like them," he said, waving Carlos off. Carlos muttered to himself as he went back to the slicing. When he finished, he brought a handful of pastrami over to the

counter and dropped it on the scale, "This guy," he said to Maggie, lowering his voice just above a whisper, "he been standing there twenty minutes, since before you ever come in here." He raised two bony fingers. "Two time I ask him if he need help. This is number three. Every time he say, 'No, I don't like it,' whatever that supposed to mean." He made a twirling motion with his hand going away from his head. "*Jesus y Maria*, these people, they are crazy, you know what I mean?" He began removing slices from the scale, eyeing the digital meter. "I'm sorry now, what you said, Miss Brighton?" Maggie was channeling black behind her ears a few strands of hair that had sprung forward out of the confines of the barrette. "Carlos, what's my first name?"



"She felt a pang of pain in one of her feet and looked down to see a tiny ruby colored drop of blood."

Carlos scratched his neck, continuing to remove the slices and still eyeing the digital meter. "Oh, well, let me see. I believe you tell me couple weeks ago your name is... your name... Maggie." He looked up, pointing the finger he had been scratching with at her face. "Maggie, yes?" "Correct. How old are you?" "Me? Well, I turn twenty-three, two, three months ago." "And how old do I look?" "You, I say you... about twenty-five, twenty-six, something like that, Miss Brighton." "Carlos, how come you're all the time calling me Miss Brighton if you know my first name?" "Well, I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders as he wrapped the meat in thick white paper. "Is your name. You tell

me couple months ago your name is Brighton, so I just call you Miss Brighton." He shook his head as he placed the package on the counter. "Yes, well, my name is Maggie. I haven't heard anyone say my name in a week and a half, you know. Did you know that?" Carlos stared vacantly for a few seconds before realizing she actually wanted an answer. "Oh, no, Miss Brighton." "Anyway, I didn't even need any groceries today," she said. "It was just too damn hot. I live on the third floor, you know. It's very hot. I just came down here to cool off, and maybe get the fixings for a reuben." "Yes, I see. A reuben is nice on a hot day?"

Maggie took the package from the counter and placed it in the cart next to the mustard and horseradish. She stared at the package and the jars, seeming to contemplate something. She ran her hand slowly back and forth along the metal frame of the cart. Carlos scratched his neck. "I thought maybe you might call me by my name today, Carlos," she said, the pitch of her voice rising. She looked up, catching Carlos in the middle of a nod. "Anyway, do you live around here? What floor do you live on? Do you have any idea what I've been doing all morning?" Carlos' eyebrows floated up on his face, forming a sort of bushy black triangle with the apex in the middle of his forehead. He wiped his hands on his smock and fidgeted with a large knife that lay on the counter in front of him. "Ahh, well,

Miss Maggie. I live on the second floor, just around this corner here," he said, looking up and pointing at the wall behind him. "And I tell you, it gets very hot up there too on days like this. Very hot it gets on the second floor and danced around this." "It was so hot, I took off all my clothes and danced around the apartment naked all morning," Maggie said flatly. Carlos crossed his arms on the counter and rested his chin in his hand with a look of mild confusion. A rather obese black woman with large breasts had positioned herself behind Maggie and looked around her at Carlos. He made a motion with his eyes for the woman to wait. The woman made a sound of annoyance with her tongue and the roof of her mouth, then inhaled deeply and forced the breath out her nose. "No clothes on," Maggie said. "I just put this shirt on to come down here. And these shorts." She smacked her left thigh with her palm, the small excess of cellulite trembling slightly, then pinched a bit of flesh between two fingers. Carlos inched forward on the counter and gazed at Maggie's legs. "Because I think I look pretty good in these shorts, because I don't really know anyone in this town. Three months and I don't really know anyone in this town. Just woke up this morning and..." "What you looking at, lady, for Christ's sake?" Carlos erupted. "What?" the fat lady said. Maggie turned to the black woman. "I put on some music and started bouncing off the walls in my birthday suit," she said, shaking her head. The woman stepped back and cocked her head to the side like a turkey. "I just couldn't sit still, even though I was burning up. I took a cold bath for an hour," she said, extending her thumb from a closed fist. "Then I bounced around for another hour," she said, extending a forefinger, "until I was all tired out. Then I just sat in front of that damn rattling fan"—she extended her middle finger—"staring out the window at those damn pigeons nesting in the dormers of the..." "Yes, yes, I know what you mean," Carlos said in a burst of effusion. He placed his two outstretched hands next to each other as if he were holding something. "Sometimes my mother, God bless her, sometimes she just gets—how you say it?—she gets under my skin. I have to go to my room or leave. She just starts rattling on and on and..." The sound of smashing glass, coupled with the high pitched scream of the fat woman, seized the attention of both Maggie and Carlos, who turned, just in time to see the lobster tank splinter into a thousand minute pieces of glass on the shiny tiled floor, hapless lobsters and crabs spewing out, sliding and tumbling in every direction, water sloshing all the way across to the potato chip rack, and the tall man with the Barracuda jacket running down the condiment aisle, weaving through bins of fruits and vegetables and couples of startled elderly people, slipping and sliding on the bright floor. "Jesus y Maria! What the hell you doing man?" Carlos yelled. "Stop! You stop, you crazy man!" A security guard came running around the corner from the direction of the registers and was bowled over by the man in slacks. "Get that guy! That crazy guy just knock-over-all-o-my-lobsters!" The

security guard struggled to his feet and ran out the electric doors. "Jesus Christ." Carlos examined the mess, slowly shaking his head back and forth, then disappeared into the back room spluttering expletives in Spanish. The elderly people at the other end of the aisle stopped dead in their tracks and did not move, as if they had just seen a Gorgon. Maggie surveyed the scene with a closed fist covering her mouth for what seemed like a long time: broken shards of glass strewn about the floor, lobsters and crabs, some on their backs struggling to right themselves, some not moving at all, one lobster that had been propelled across the aisle and into the bottom shelf of canned soups struggling to get back to the tile floor, knocking over two cans in the process, only to end up flat on his segmented back, and the water spreading out, touching the edge of her sandals, slow and silent, the only sound that of a bland instrumental version of a popular song drifting down from the ceiling. To her left, two lobsters were steadily crawling away from the carnage, seemingly unnoticed, towards the snack aisle. She felt the wetness on her exposed toes and stepped back. Carlos reappeared from the back room taking a large white bucket filled with water. He burst into more spluttering as he came around the counter and saw again the mess on the floor. The elderly people gradually began moving again. They murmured to each other with exaggerated looks of disbelief on their faces. They turned their carts around and headed for the registers. The black woman asked Carlos if she was going to be able to get her meat any time soon and Carlos snapped, "Not right now, lady. You'll have to wait." A man wearing a blue sweater, the manager, arrived from the front of the store. He walked with a quick deliberate step. His name tag said Bill. He began asking Carlos a series of questions, all of them unanswerable. "How did this happen? Why did he do it? How could you let this happen?" Carlos' voice grew tense as he answered. The sound of crunching glass could be heard as he waded tentatively through the mess, carefully picking up both the dead and the living and dropping them in the same white bucket. The made a clicking sound as they landed on top of each other. "This lady, this lady right here. She saw the whole thing," Carlos said in an aggravated tone, looking to Maggie for validation. "Tell him, this man was purely insane, no?" Maggie turned to the manager. Both him and Carlos were staring at her, poised for a response. "Lady, you saw it, you saw what happened," Carlos said. "Tell him." "He said he didn't like them," she said, as if it were common knowledge. "What?" A toothless smile curved across her face and she laughed through a closed mouth, the sound of it coming out her nose. "He said he didn't like them," she said, enunciating every word. The two men stared at her as if she were deranged, then gradually resumed their banter. Maggie turned back to watch the progress of the two escapees as the black woman joined in the argument between the two men. The lobsters had made it past the snack aisle, still side by side. Two young men arrived

on the scene with mops to help Carlos. They didn't notice the two getting away. The voices of Carlos, the manager, and the black woman faded into the back of Maggie's head, like the sound of a distant muffled radio on a crowded beach. In three strides she made up the distance the lobsters had travelled in two minutes and snatched them both from the floor. Their spider-like legs continued to move in the silent air. She felt a pang of pain in one of her feet and looked down to see a tiny ruby colored drop of blood on her big toe. The pain pulsed in time with the beating of her heart, the ruby droplet expanding.

"Oh, no, Miss," the manager intruded. He was standing in front of her. "Please let me take them from you." He rolled up his sleeves and extended his hands.

"I want them."

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly let you take them, Miss. That's not possible. It wouldn't be right." He stepped closer. Maggie stepped back, holding the lobsters close to her body.

"I want to buy them."

"But they may have pieces of glass on them. They've been on the floor. You saw what happened. I cannot, with a clear conscience, sell them to—Oh, my, you've cut your foot, ma'am. Look what you've done to your foot. I'm so sorry..."

"My foot's okay. They're fine. I'll take them."

The manager dropped his arms to his sides and let out a deep breath. He looked straight up into the lights as if for divine assistance. "At least let me clean them off first. And they're free. Everything you get today will be free, for all your troubles. This is a real mess we have here. Here, let me clean them off for you, for all your troubles. I'm very sorry about all of this, especially your foot."

When Maggie was convinced that he'd give them back, she turned the lobsters over to the manager and he slipped behind the meat counter. Carlos was now involved in a deep discussion with the fat lady. He made thrashing motions with his hands. Maggie crouched down and rubbed her toe with the bottom of her stretched shirt. The manager reappeared

momentarily carrying a small brown cardboard crate. He placed it in the cart. After much resistance on his part, she convinced him that she only wanted the crate. She didn't want the stuff in the cart anymore, even if it was free. Just the crate. As the two of them started for the registers, Carlos said something about it being hotter tomorrow. "Much hotter tomorrow, they say," he said. "Maybe you go buy an air conditioner, Miss Brighton."

After maneuvering her through the check-out line, the manager again apologized for all her troubles. "I hope this won't affect your opinion of our store. These things never happen. Please come again, ma'am."

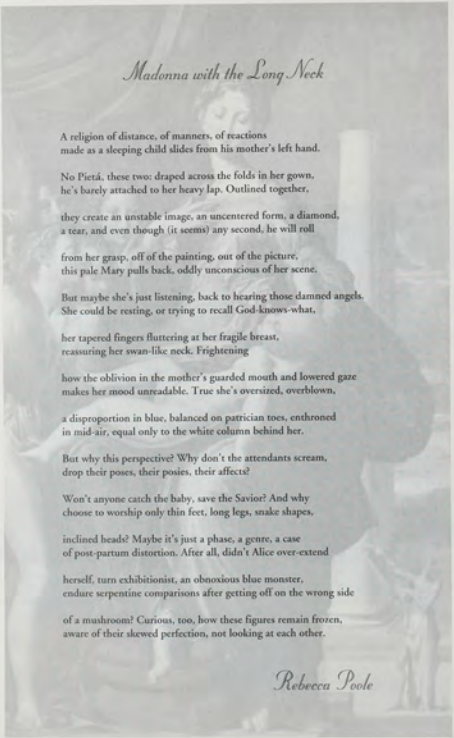
"My name is Maggie," she said, then slipped out the electric door into the bright yellow sunlight.

She squinted her eyes into thin slits. The suffocating heat engulfed her like a swarm of mosquitoes. She began to sweat. The pain in her toe pulsed with more intensity and she became dizzy from the change in temperature. The crate seemed to tremble and move in her hands as she limped through the parking lot and down the dry sidewalks like some damaged thing. When she reached her apartment her heart was beating fast and her shirt was again sticky with perspiration. The blood from her big toe had oozed on to her sandal, soiling the rest of her toes with ruby stains. The two young boys who lived on the first floor of the house and their friend from across the street were playing with a basketball in the driveway. "What's in the crate, lady?" one of the boys from the first floor asked. "What happened to your foot? Did you know you're bleeding? Lady?" She stared at them for a few seconds, her breathing labored, strands of her hair damp and matted against her forehead. She looked, for a moment, as if she were about to say something, the words forming on her lips. Then she turned, and walked up the driveway towards the entrance in the back. "You have nice legs, lady," the boy from across the street squealed. She heard the childish giggling and the bouncing of the ball, hollow and resonant. *Nice legs.*

White Girl in a Window

Sitting on the step, he scoops swirling slices of peaches from a can. She thinks of fat goldfish. The top of his head is a neat black square. A chain wrapped in red plastic connects a bike to the rail. With the spoon handle he picks pebbles from the tire treads. He yawns, then looks down the street. She looks too. He stands up. The spoon drops and clinks. Holding the can with both hands he drinks, the thick yellow syrup drips down his sweaty neck. She closes the curtain and wishes she were dead.

by Bethany Mott



Madonna with the Long Neck

A religion of distance, of manners, of reactions
made as a sleeping child slides from his mother's left hand.

No Pietà, these two: draped across the folds in her gown,
he's barely attached to her heavy lap. Outlined together,
they create an unstable image, an uncentered form, a diamond,
a tear, and even though (it seems) any second, he will roll

from her grasp, off of the painting, out of the picture,
this pale Mary pulls back, oddly unconscious of her scene.

But maybe she's just listening, back to hearing those damned angels.
She could be resting, or trying to recall God-knows-what,

her tapered fingers fluttering at her fragile breast,
reassuring her swan-like neck. Frightening

how the oblivion in the mother's guarded mouth and lowered gaze
makes her mood unreadable. True she's oversized, overblown,

a disproportion in blue, balanced on patrician toes, enthroned
in mid-air, equal only to the white column behind her.

But why this perspective? Why don't the attendants scream,
drop their poses, their posies, their affects?

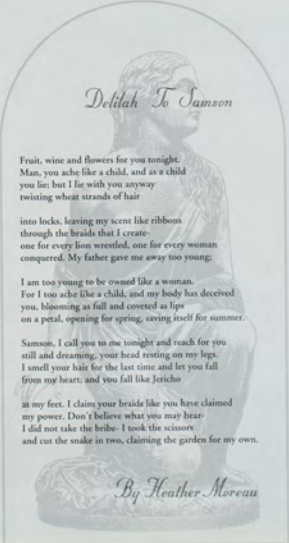
Won't anyone catch the baby, save the Savior? And why
choose to worship only this feet, long legs, snake shapes,

inclined heads? Maybe it's just a phase, a genre, a case
of post-partum distortion. After all, didn't Alice over-extend

herself, turn exhibitionist, an obnoxious blue monster,
endure serpentine comparisons after getting off on the wrong side

of a mushroom? Curious, too, how these figures remain frozen,
aware of their skewed perfection, not looking at each other.

Rebecca Poole



Delilah To Samson

Fruit, wine and flowers for you tonight.
Man, you ache like a child, and as a child
you lie; but I lie with you anyway
twisting wheat strands of hair

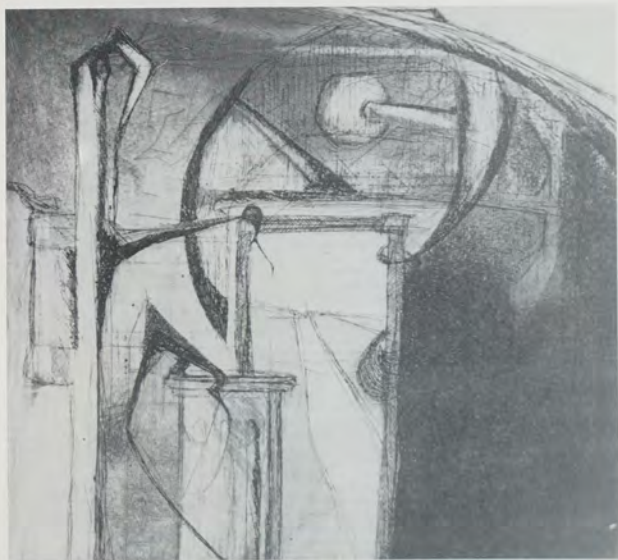
into locks, leaving my scent like ribbons
through the braids that I create—
one for every lion wrestled, one for every woman
conquered. My father gave me away too young;

I am too young to be crowned like a woman.
For I too ache like a child, and my body has deceived
you, blooming as full and coveted as lips
on a petal, opening for spring, saving itself for summer.

Samson, I call you to me tonight and reach for you
still and dreaming, your head resting on my legs.
I smell your hair for the last time and let you fall
from my heart; and you fall like Jericho

at my feet. I claim your braids like you have claimed
my power. Don't believe what you may hear—
I did not take the braid: I took the scissors
and cut the snake in two, claiming the garden for my own.

By Heather Moreau



The Darker Side of Life for Barbie

My precious Barbie
sat in her box
golden hair, pink skin,
blue eyes
and all
She did not know what
this little girl
had in store for her
And Momma said,
"You take Black Barbie
she was made "specially for you"
but I insisted on the
real thang
Momma thought it was quite innocent

So I looked at her hair
so silky and yellow
longer than mine would ever be
"Our hair's easier to care
for short," Momma said
so I cut off Barbie's hair
A shimmering crew cut graced
her rubber head
It still wasn't enough
So with the sticky brown
molasses that Momma
pours over our Sunday morning pancakes
I covered Barbie's hair
Now she would know the
struggle of never passing
a comb through her hair
Momma did not know about this

Next, her sparkling blue eyes
I easily turned brown
with a magic marker
Brown, like the color of
the muddy ground
like mine
Momma would say,
"Keep your feet planted
on the ground"
Now the ground would
forever be planted in my Barbie
If Momma only knew . . .

I then took a paintbrush
to Barbie's pale skin
stolen from Momma's
supply of oil paints
Dark Brown
Momma yelled from the kitchen,
"Get your grubby hands outta
my paints, girl!"
I was done
though

Now let Barbie see
the darker side of life
I thought as I threw
her into the
dung-heap of tattered playthings
I kept in my toybox
Then I turned my attention
to my girlfriends outside
running in the sunset
brown silhouettes
with bushy wild hair
against the temenents and high rises
They were so beautiful

Barbara Neeley

Interview by
Beth Schulman

Shoreline: Will you give our readers a summary of *Blanche on the Lam*?

Neeley: *Blanche White* is a forty year old domestic worker. She's been doing domestic work by choice essentially all her life. She's tried other jobs and found them even worse than cleaning other people's houses. She has been living most of her adult life in New York City. She is in many ways a domestic par excellence in the sense that she can do anything from laundry to soufflés. She is also the guardian of her dead sister's two children. She decides to leave New York when someone tries to entice the children into his van for the sort of purposes that people drag children into their vans.

She decides to move back home, back to North Carolina where she and the children were born. Unfortunately it is a small town and she is not able to make the kind of living she was accustomed to in New York City. She finds herself in a situation where a couple of her ladies have left town without paying her and she has creditors to pay and so she's written some checks that bounce. She gets dragged into court on a bad check charge and is given thirty days restitution. And she's also slightly claustrophobic, so when she has an opportunity to escape from the courthouse she takes it and goes to the home of a wealthy family for whom she'd already refused to work and essentially hides out in their house. While she's there a couple of murders take place. She thinks it's probably someone in the household who's committed the murders and since she is the blackest thing around she assumes that if anybody's going to get blamed it's going to be her. Unless, of course, she is able to find out who actually did it and she sets out to do that.

Shoreline: Had you read many mystery novels before starting *Blanche on the Lam*?

Neeley: I have read mysteries all of my life, beginning with Nancy Drew. I didn't set out to write mysteries and don't consider myself primarily a mystery writer. While I generally go to books to learn how to do everything, including swim, I did not read any books on the mystery genre before I wrote this book so I think it's only fair to warn you that the art of mystery writing is pretty much a mystery to me and that what I know about it I know only from having tried to craft this first book and the second book that I'm currently working on.

Shoreline: What inspired you to start this novel?

Neeley: I actually began writing *Blanche on the Lam* as a way of amusing myself. I was stuck on another novel and back in those days I was so undisciplined that when I got stuck instead of staring at the wall with my finger up my nose until something came to me, I would stop writing and go find a book to read. Unfortunately this time I couldn't find anything I wanted to read so I started thinking about what I would read if I had something to read. I had recently published a short story in which one of the major characters was a black woman who was a janitor and it made me sort of hungry for something, and this was a story about class within the black community, but it made me hungry for something on race and class from the perspective of a sort of ordinary everyday black woman. I had also recently met an extremely black woman with a lot of attitude. When I met this woman it occurred to me we needed a heroine who looked, acted just like her. Now of course being stuck on my original novel meant that I was also feeling very murderous. So I went about putting together the sort of heroine that I wanted with the kind of book that I wanted about race and class with a couple of murders.

Shoreline: Are you inspired by other novels while you are working on your own?

Neeley: While books are really my major learning tool, I never consult literature when I'm trying to develop characters because I always want them to be an outgrowth of my understanding, feelings, experience and intuition about whoever this person is supposed to be. Instead, I called on the memory of my own grandmothers, both of whom have done domestic work in their lives. I talked to women who I now know who are domestic workers or work in nursing homes or have done that. And I also dredged up a horrible, traumatic era of my own experience of being dazed as a domestic worker.

Shoreline: Have you always considered yourself to be a writer?

Neeley: I was at the University of Pittsburgh in another life. I hated it because it was a school where there were about two-and-a-half black students besides me, and

they were about twelve years old. I didn't go to the University until I was twenty seven years old. So kids would come by my room, knock on the door and say, "I wanted my friend to meet you. She's twenty seven years old!" But during those days I always had members of the professorate encourage me to write, but I think the problem was I wasn't writing then except for some extremely bad poetry that I now claim was written by someone who has the same name. I couldn't see writing fiction as a career, it was like, how do you pay your mother's mortgage as a fiction writer? So it took me a really long time to take myself seriously as a writer.

Shoreline: Where does your material come from when you create characters?

Neeley: I am a great people watcher. I sometimes ride the subway. I just write quick descriptive sketches of people who are sitting around me. And so I really think it's a combination of the two. My writer's group met, for example, and I gave them the first fifty pages of my second book and one of the women in the group said, "Now about this character who looks like Charlene." Anyone who knows me and knows Charlene will know this is Charlene, which isn't a problem except her partner, whom I also know and admire, is a total jerk in the book. I could change the character very easily by simply making her not extremely beautiful. So I think I do, I just sort of mix up people. I use folks sometimes without realizing it. After the first short story I had published in a national magazine, my mother called me up and said, "It's nice of you to put your grandfather in a story." And there it was, but it was like somebody had to point it out to me. On the other hand, I'd written this story in which the protagonist was exactly modeled on my sister, but that's never occurred to the other members of the family.

Shoreline: Do you write full-time?

Neeley: I'm writing now for the first time full-time. I'm living off of consulting money and the advance from my second book. And it's really interesting trying to come up with a writing schedule that works for me, I try to do it the same way I do work, get up at 5:30, get dressed, and start to write. What works for me is to go to bed about 9:30-10:00 and start again in the morning.

Shoreline: You say that you accidentally fell upon mystery, but what is strange about this particular genre to me is that it's a fairly stable genre with very restricting rules that can't be violated. Did that occur to you?

Neeley: It didn't occur to me at the time, I'd said, I didn't read anything on the subject. It occurred to me when I turned in my manuscript and my editor said to me, "Well, in real mysteries, the murder happens before page 75." [laughs] And, I think, for me, as a person who resists authority of all kinds, that doesn't mean shit to me quite frankly. I notice, it seems to me, that numbers of people are taking the genre in very interesting directions that don't have anything to do with those rules ... I think of it as being a book that has a murder in it as opposed to being a good mystery novel.

Shoreline: So in the next ones, are they going to be more mysteries, or are they going to be more centered on *Blanche*?

Neeley: I've been sticking, at least with the second one, with a murder mystery and I think it's because I haven't given it a lot of thought. I just started doing it. I know that this has got to stop. First of all, as a social activist, it just feels so weird to me. Sitting around, trying to figure out how to kill people when I spent my whole life trying to save people. And, I think that our interest in murder is sick. [laughs] You know?



Photograph by Marilyn Humphries

It is very strange to find myself doing this. The problem is that it is such a wonderful vehicle for doing political writing because people will get information that they never would have seen and they will keep reading because they want to know who did it. I know that right after I finish this second *Blanche* book I'm not going to write the third one right away. I am going to write something else, because I am too concerned about being labeled as a mystery writer. I'm sure mystery writers don't even consider me a mystery writer. [laughs]

Shoreline: What ever happened to the novel that you said you had started and were getting frustrated with?

Neeley: It's one that now I want to finish. I worked on it at the writers' colony last summer and I would really like to finish it. It scares me. It's a novel that I began out of a need of my own. I've always been, for whatever reason, very conscious of the sort of mythology that you lose as a sort of kidnapped slave. You know, you have no idea what sort of stories your great-great-grandmothers used to tell around the fire, or whatever. And I've always been hungry for that. And at some point I decided, the hell with it, that I'll write my own. And that's essentially what this book is about. And so I think it scares me at some level.

Shoreline: You mentioned that you have a friend that *Blanche* was based upon, but she reminds me of you. And I don't know if that's true and you're just not willing to admit it or maybe you've kind of pictured that other woman and that's how you've characterized her, but really it's projected.

Neeley: I think there is a certain, sort of both smart and smart-assed and glib and occasionally assertive to aggressive type of woman in our community of which *Blanche* is representative. So, I'm sure that in many ways she sounds like me, she sounds like my mother, she sounds like any number of women I know, but she's not modeled on me. She did not have any of my experiences, that I can think of.

Shoreline: Will she be in the next novel?

Neeley: She certainly carries my ideas. We have similar ideas. The second book is also being somewhat more difficult for me because this second book is about race and class within the black community. I'm letting myself off easy by saying race and class, that's not exactly what it's about. It's about class and colorism in the black community.

Shoreline: What do you mean by that?

Neeley: I mean that within the black community there has always been, since slavery, a sort of differential treatment between blacks with light skin and blacks with dark skin. And it isn't simply that they get treated differently by a white society, they get treated differently by black society. And, you know, this is one of those issues that we're not supposed to talk about. And so that's what this second book is about.

It's been really interesting to me because from my perspective, what I see, is that people who are light-skinned have advantages that brown-skinned people don't have in the larger society. They get jobs, they do things we can't do. But in talking to people, the thing that's been fascinating about it, is that light-skinned women complain about the fact that black people say nasty things about them, ask them how come they're so light and blah-blah-blah. They never mention the privilege they get. Whereas, you talk to dark-skinned women, they don't complain, they just tell you what happened. Some of the most horrendous stories you ever want to hear. No plea for sympathy, no self pity. I just think that that's fascinating. And that's certainly not to say that things are cut just along those lines, light skin on this side and dark skin on this side and there are no light-skinned people who are both aware of their privilege and have good politics around the issue because that is certainly not the case. And they are as representative of my second book as other people are. So no, I don't think *Blanche* has any of my issues in the second book either, because I'm not dark enough to share her experience.

Shoreline: The issue of isolation seems common to writers regardless of class and gender. Can you talk about your experience with that?

Neeley: Yeah, I have so many dilemmas around this subject. First of all, I'm really active in organizations. I do a lot of work. So I can always find something to do to

break the isolation and sometimes when writing is going well, of course I'm absolutely happy with it [the isolation]. I like being an observer in a society that's a majority white. I like a role that we're accustomed to. I like watching and noting and doing all of that. I like sitting in my study and writing. The isolation that I don't like is the isolation that I feel when I am with people.

Shoreline: I've felt a great deal of comfort in creative writing classes here, the atmosphere. Do you feel that way with your writers' group?

Neeley: Oh, absolutely. My group is getting ready to break up because we started out with six members and now we're down to four, and one of them is leaving the country for 18 months. So, we are essentially going to disband and I'm distraught. I don't think I could have gotten this book written if it hadn't been for the group. I was working a 60-hour a week job when I was writing this novel and part of what kept me going was the pressure of the writer's group, knowing that my turn was coming, that people expected to get at least 50 pages in the mail from me two weeks before the date we met, and that I was going to get called on that night. Our group is a very disciplined group. We try to meet every two weeks, we take turns having our stuff read, you send the stuff to people or deliver it to them so they have time to read it at least twice. When we meet, we go around, each person says generally what they liked and didn't like about the piece. And then we go page by page over every little thing. [laughs]

Shoreline: Have you ever taken any creative writing classes or workshops?

Neeley: I have never taken one anywhere. I've never taken a creative writing class even when I was at the University.

Shoreline: What do you think of them?

Neeley: I don't know what you get from them. Which is a major reason why, I guess, I've never taken one. Oh wait, I did enroll in one at Duke and I went to, I think, two sessions. You know, some wimpy little white boy gonna tell me how to write? I don't think so! [laughs] I've been asked to teach a creative writing class, and it's like, I can't even imagine what you do in a creative writing class. How could I possibly teach it? I need to go take one before I can teach it! But, if what it does is the thing you said, give you a place where other people care about writing, then it's worth it for as long as the other person isn't telling you how and what to write.

Shoreline: Supposedly, there's a "new field" that's opening up now, women's literature and Afro-American literature. What do you think about that?

Neeley: I guess it's important for you to get literature at whatever point you get it. On the other hand, it is absolutely insulting that literature by women and people of color is in a sense of afterthought. I suppose we ought to see it though, as an in-road into the boy's game, that maybe we are actually going to be allowed to be represented at universities.

Shoreline: Our readers are mostly writers. What advice would you offer up-and-coming writers?

Neeley: I would say ... get your butt on that chair and write. There is no greater high. There is no greater satisfaction that I have found. There is nothing like creating this thing out of whole cloth. Write what you want to write. Write the way you want to write it. Do not listen to other people's advice about how you should write it. Satisfy yourself in the writing and just do it. Don't think about writing. Don't think about how hard it is. Don't think about the fact that you only have 45 minutes left to do it, just sit down and do it. Do it all the time. Do it under whatever circumstance you have to do it under.

I have had jobs in which I did it on my job. I once took a job in California. I took a job as an office manager in a small electric company. I was the only clerical staff person. And I went to these boys and told them, showed them my resume and said, "You see what hot stuff you're getting. I can do your job four hours a day and I do that, I want you to promise me that if I finish your stuff early, I can work on my own stuff." And they did. [laughs] I have worked in other places where I was supposed to be typing a report, using the computer to type a report because I had to get it out right away, and unfortunately the secretary was out to lunch. I was working on my own short story! Cheat the world to write!!

Memories of Childhood: Mary and Family

I remember pain
and fat ladies crying
and I've held my breath
and watched

Grandpa's house
1978
sharing the room,
faded and pink
with young auntie Mary
the pick of the litter

Just fourteen years old,
but in our family
Mary was just as
much woman
as Grandma
only younger

Mary, in her old ruffled housecoat
greedy, dimpled fingers
reaching under the bed
to snatch at the hidden box
of Twinkies left for her by Grandpa
wet lips, moist tongue
double chin devouring
sponge cake and creamy filling

I've heard in the dark
the rustling sheets
and muffled cries
and secretive warnings
the big dark silhouette
young womanhood spoiled, the sin,
I've closed my eyes but still saw it all

Cheeseburgers and Tab
corncurls and Yoohoos
Mary hides herself
freely in the kitchen
she and Grandma
spend all day
baking pies
they share a pie between themselves
then pop some tin frozen
meals in the oven
Grandma's not hungry
she'll be doing the dishes

Grandma's linoleum kitchen
bright yellow curtains
the place for her
to hide
in a set of plastic curlers
all she's ever strived for
was to be suburban
buzzer's off, dinner's
done

Church crosses
badges for hypocrites
beatings in a panelled
living room
over L.V. dinners
... hail Mary full of grace ...

Varnished oak and red velvet
the smell of bourbon or whiskey
on a five o'clock shadow
at six o'clock
- come out of the kitchen
there are no dishes to
wash. Please come out and see
me and Mary
and Grandpa -

Eileen James



Urge



Napping on the couch
after a hard day of thinking,
half asleep yet conscious
of an unconscious twitching
between my legs, the pressure building
as I grind my hips down hard,
the soft couch resisting,
to facilitate that feeling,
a kind of itching between my legs,
that calls attention to itself
and requires scratching, I
look up and around to see if anyone
notices this action.

First time I got that feeling
I was seven years old and silent,
laying face down on the bench
of the red picnic table at the old house,
(it felt like stealing)
after a hard day of playing, I
stumbled upon something secret,
something singularly pleasurable
and appealing, an experience immeasurable
against that of a child's,
an unopened treasure chest,
full of unknowns and variables
(the things I did to my quilt
after that discovery).

This couch, it is comfortable
but I sit up at the sound
of the front door rattling,
rubbing my eyes alive
(the feeling between my thighs
subsides), and my mother
labors up the stair, I
fix my freshly rubbed stare
to a picture on the bureau
of a little boy with a toy,
a plastic lawn mower,
in the back yard
of an old house,
and suddenly feel quite guilty.

Scott
Altonian

Photograph by Milo Nera

too much seeing

we could see
water between trees
rising in flood and
a worm sun —
a veiny eye
shot with white blood
from too much seeing
and too little sleep —
boring its way
through the branches
and our arms ached

Deborah Zawadzki

CATWOMAN

1. PEELING

took its skin off today
it pulled off like an orange's
face
strings tied fur to
muscles so we snapped
them and peeled
they told us not to take any
thing out
so we just stared at
torn
mammary tissue
and at
the fat
the mustard slime
that was her
only privacy

2. SACRIFICE

the smell of cat preservative
sticks in the creases of
these paws
you stand here
with your scalpel and probe
looking to dissect
too bad
i can't die
for you
anymore
like the nine
times before
too bad
you can't possibly
hurt me
now

still

leave me my vital organs
for old times sake

3. NAUSEA

You did
you did
taw a
puddytat

and i noticed
you were looking
for yourself
in my eyes
hoping i wouldn't
see

I may be stiff
as a board

but i can move
your
insides
and consume
you
in my fumes
in my flame

don't stand
so close

4. ME-OW

she'd had her
mouth closed
when she died
tongue
stuck
between her
teeth

they
brought her
like a lamb
to the slaughter
man and injected
her with sleep
and blue dye

we take the cat
out of the bag
and shear her
like a sheep
bleating
her final
regrets
loud
to drown out our
silver howls



Illustration by Micheal Yeomans



Illustration by Micheal Yeomans

"It's too damn cold out there!" exclaimed my cousin's wife as she burst into my house and began peeling off her leathery black layers of clothing. I closed the door against the storm and turned to see her gloves separating from the long, brittle stalks of her fingers. Her eyes were riveted to the large wood-burning stove in the kitchen. Bare to her long johns, she rushed over to the stove and knelt down before its hulking body. She raised her hands in some sort of pagan salute and held them before the grate. As she closed her eyes, I got the feeling that she hadn't really seen me yet. It was more like she had made the five mile trek just to see my wood-burning stove. I gazed out of the window at the blank, drifting whiteness. The short window bordering the highway was cropped off halfway so that only the grey, crunchy tree tops were visible. The plow which she had followed out from town was progressing painfully down the highway, and my shovel was still plunged into a snowbank ten feet from the door, where I had lost the battle against the dense, wet wall and gone in for coffee. Her pickup had slid off of the driveway into the ditch. I didn't know whether to feel protected or trapped by all of the whiteness, but before I could decide, the evening flakes began to fall, compounding the bleakness.

"I can't believe you came out today," I said, noticing her hands again as she let them fall spent to her sides. I couldn't help examining them whenever I got the chance. I had been acquainted with her for two years, but the scars were still an oddity to me. The palms were like slices of white cheese that had been melted and crumpled and resolidified, so that the skin was shiny and fractured by strange lines of tension where it had been unevenly redistributed. It reminded me of the fracture lines on old porcelain. Each pad of each fingertip had also been burned away so that she had no prints, only glossy-looking circles. She liked to joke that she would be the perfect burglar because of the anonymity of possessing no fingerprints. Her right hand, now poised at her mouth, was pinching a cigarette tightly in the middle, bringing it back and forth to her lips for her to inhale in quick, shallow spasms. She smoked manically, taking double drags and reminding me of a praying mantis scooping out little bug innards. She seemed insecure, like she only had a few seconds to finish the smoke before someone came in and chased her away.

"Yeah, well, I was cold and lonely. Mostly cold. So I decided to brave the elements for a visit. Too bad you don't live in town."

"Too much society. Your power went out?"

"In Ous? I guess you can't escape society, even in a town of five-hundred. My heater is fine. It's just that gas heat...well, it's not like your big black smoke-puffing maria. Gas won't keep me warm. I need a fire."

"That's kind of weird," I said, tossing the words at the back of her short-cropped head. "My experience has always been the reverse. I wish I had better heating in here. The stove doesn't heat anything but the kitchen. See?" I gestured conclusively to the sleeping bag I had folded into the corner. I gazed at a few of my joints so that they would pop impressively and let her know

what a bad night's sleep I had had, but she didn't seem to notice. Or if she did, she found the stove much more interesting.

"I wish I could touch it," she sighed wistfully. I tripped over to the percolator and plugged it into the wall to listen to it gush.

"How has it been for you this week?" It was the first time I had actually been in her presence since the incident had occurred. I mouthed my phrases awkwardly. She seemed to be unconscious of any lack of her own propriety.

"Not too bad," she said.

"Good."

"Not too good, either. I still haven't let Jay's cat inside the house. I warned him that if he left the cat would suffer. He's such a bastard."

"Why don't you bring it out here?"

"Because I can't touch the damned thing to get it into the car.

It just sits outside my bedroom window at night and meows to be let in. Sometimes it jumps up onto the window-sill and thumps against the windowpane. I'm afraid it's going to break the glass.

"It's a twenty-pound cat, you know."

"Uh huh."

"We never had him fixed."

"So let him in."

"No!"

"Why not?!" I was amazed at how quickly this woman could make my temper itch:

"Because it reminds me of Jay. They've got the same grey eyes, black hair. They both walk heavy on the floor, hitting all the same creaky spots. And they're both cold as ice." I wondered how a cat could be cold as ice, opposition building a wall beneath my skin as I thought it over.

"I don't think that's possible, Jessie. A cat can't be cold."

"You haven't felt it with my hands." She sighed heavily, admiring her own damaged paws, and pulled away from the stove at last. All the talk about the cat had driven her out of her trance.

"I thought you said it wouldn't let you touch it," I reminded her, as she sloughed down at the counter and held her hands up around the

percolator. The rounded metal distorted her flesh even more than the fire had done. There was something about her blissful state that made me wish, for a flickering moment, that her skin was touching my own. Horrified, I tried to focus instead on her empty green eyes and the freckles that were scattered across her bloodless face.

"It doesn't anymore. Not since Jay and I fought that night. We were in the bedroom with the cat. The cat was between us on the bed. Jay called me a frigid bitch and I felt my hand slam across his cheek. It vibrated my whole arm like a two-by-four and made a noise like the crack of a baseball bat. I was too busy noticing the cat's reaction to even think about what I'd done to Jay. That animal was in my lap like a black tornado, just spinning in a frenzied ball and scaring me to death. Then, before I was able to defend myself, I jumped down to the floor and shot out of the room. My lap was a mess of shredded jeans and blood. The cat did a pretty good job of ending the fight, though. While I was in

the bathroom pouring peroxide over the claw marks, Jay was in the bedroom packing his bags. I was still hurting about what he had called me, so I didn't even feel the liquid bubbling inside of my skin."

"And then he left," I concluded anxiously. Every time she came to this part before, she had been in the throes of some fabricated emotion, and I was glad to have her shedding just a little more light on the picture, dying for a way to crack open her head and lay it all out for myself.

"Yeah. He only took one bag."

She still seemed the most intrigued by the fact that he left his television set at home. "He didn't take his papers or his pictures or his gun or anything. He didn't even wear his coat. I think he was honestly afraid of staying. I watched him pass through the house one final time and then he picked up the cat and went on his way. 'Don't expect me to take care of that fucking beast,' I told him, but he gazed at me and shook his head like I was pathetic to him. And then I spit across the room at him, knowing full well I was only a short range spitter. I didn't even come close to hitting him. I'm still embarrassed about it. I've never spit on anyone before, but God, I'd had it with him. He'd been killing me for months. In bed. It always had to do with bed. He just couldn't take me as I was."

I was amazed at the seedy melodrama she was feeding me, and fully aware that it had to do with a great deal more than matters of the bedroom, but I listened quietly, trying to get an angle on her. "Why do men have to be so greedy? I can't help it if he didn't do it for me. It's not my fault I need a volcano, you know?" she asked me coyly, as if expecting an answer. She gave me a quick, characteristic wink before she continued. Her long, sandy lashes were lethargic arms, fanning the air before her eyes. "I stayed with him anyway. I loved him in spite of his lukewarm touch. Shit, he was my old man. I just didn't like the sex. I didn't like him touching me all the time. I got the shivers."

I offered her the most awkward of condolences. It made me impatient when she came to the part about sex. I think it was because I was seeing her

from Jay's perspective. There was something about her that reminded me of a dummy in a wax museum, something sick and unlit, as though she had been cooled in the perfect mold. Except for her hands. It occurred to me then that I had never touched them, or allowed them to touch me, that even at that moment I was scooting farther down the cabinet from her. She didn't even seem to care. She just eyed me curiously, the blush that had risen to her face fading away, leaving her pasty again. I wondered, with her hands so close to the percolator, why she didn't begin to melt. Why hadn't she become deformed in Jay's arms? I felt a longing to console him with my own compensating limbs.

"You're not disgusted by my talking about him this way, are you?" Something in her voice indicated to me that she would give me just exactly pleased by an affirmative response.

"No, no?" I quickly lied. "No. I was just thinking about the poor little kitty, out in the blizzard. I wonder if maybe you should

let him in the house tonight."

"I'm not going home tonight. I want to stay here, if it's ok."

"Well..." I gave a superficial glance out the window to assess her predicament. "Alright."

"And about the cat, try to see it from my point of view. I'm thinking about saving my own skin, you know? That cat wants to get at me."

"Uh huh."

"To get at my throat." With these last words her hand rose to play with the base of her collar bone in a gesture that might have waxed seductive. After several moments of silence I opened my mouth again.

"Oh, Jessie, by the way..." I was a little ashamed at how quickly my next question formed itself.

"Yes?"

"Well, I wanted to ask you one question. It may be important to you in the future, in case Jay comes back to you."

"What?" she asked flatly.

"Well, what you two were in bed..." I saw her jaw clench tightly at the hinges on the sides of her head.

"What?" The words emerged as delicately as they could from between seamless teeth.

"Well, I know it's important to a man that, well, he mentioned something to me once about you..."

Her eyes were wide now, and dark, her hands clamped shut into fists. Her knees bobbed rapidly. The last thing I'd wanted to do was expose myself to her emotions. I was thoroughly afraid she might be able to detect my intense concern about their sex life. "Did you ever laugh at him...in bed?"

Suddenly her face loosened up again and she grinned naughtily, scanning my face intently.

"So, is that what you guys did all those times he snuck over here by himself? Talk about our bedroom problems?"

I felt naked the instant that she threw "all those times" back in my face, and humiliated by the way she shook it off like it was something so petty.

"Well," she drawled, "was kind of funny

sometimes. I mean, he was so serious when he got into it, you know? There was this whole formula that he went through, starting with his hand here..." She placed a withered palm over her left breast, pushing it up so that the flesh made a full moon at the top. It curved blatantly beneath her underwire, and then moving here and there, always the same way, until, well, you know. Until it was over. I think he'd read some book somewhere that gave a list of the woman's hot spots or something. It was so random the way he went at my body. The ear one second, then my foot the next. Would you believe he actually stopped once to massage my foot? He said the foot was the seat of sensuality. It was like he kept coming to detour signs or be wanted to be sure to cover all the bases. I just wanted him to get it over with. The whole time he always had this painful, hopeful look on his face, and I would try to keep covered in the blankets. I was cold more than anything."

"And you laughed?" I asked, crushed. I was appalled that she



could speak of him in such a dispassionate way. His foot-massages had always moved me to great sensual heights.

"Well, it was funny sometimes. And I was bored."

"But did you laugh viciously?" Jessie tried to look appalled by the question. I hadn't meant to come off so judgmental, but I couldn't help it. It didn't take me long in my familiarity with her to pick up on her subsurface features, the generally dark void of her personality. It had revealed itself to me by this during their courtship, her apathetic acquisition of Jay. What was oddest to me was that she never really seemed to try to construct a credible front to deceive me, who she knew to be so closely bonded to him. The purposelessness of her possession came to my full realization at the wedding, as they stood at the altar and she allowed him to take her limp hand in his for formality's sake while her vixen howled through the hollow cathedral in flat slaps against the walls that robbed the words of their solemnity. It was at that moment that I knew we were all making a big mistake. I was able for the first time to fully detect the jagged gleam in her

eyes as she turned her back to us and tossed a menacing bouquet over her shoulder directly into my arms. It was a deliberate mockery, since I had received well into the most obscure part of the anxious bevy, and as I held the tightly-wrapped stems, the flowers began to resemble hot dillips of blood.

At the reception she had danced in a frenzy with every man but Jay. She even tried to sweep me away with her once, during a particularly frenzied moment, but I declined and she giggled decadently into the crowd again. Jay and I watched, embarrassed, and each time she switched partners, she would be whisked past us with a shrug of her shoulders and a gay exclamation.

"I'm just trying to keep warm," in spite of the fact that she was wearing her bright red ski jacket over her knee-length gown. Somewhere in the cellar men were slaving away over a dead furnace. The dance hall was a bit nippy, but the conglomeration of people had generated a stuffy warmth of shared body heat and liquor. Jay gave up on trying to get his new bride's attention and we walked outside into the winter air to escape the scene and commiserate. Leaning gloomily against his dented old Mustang, I apologized for ever having introduced them.

"I guess I don't have to pretend with you, cousin," he said, lighting up a cigarette and nodding to a couple of passing relatives who were on their way out.

"What is it, Jay?" I put my arm through his. "Go ahead and tell me. We've been telling each other everything since we had our first kiss in Grandma's wheat field." He fidgeted enough to cause me to lighten my grip.

"Well, she's a bit of a whore."

"Jessie?"

"Yeah. She can be really..."

"Cold."

"Very distant sometimes."

I seemed in unexpressed satisfaction, never bothering to ask why he'd gone ahead and married her. She had seemed so

normal, acceptable, and uncommonly sensual when I'd met her at the gynecologist's office in Sterling. She had a way of flipping through the tattered magazines in the reception area that was restless, cagey. She wore the same suede boots above the calf, and concealed mostly by jeans, but cutting high above the calf, and when a bit of her air wafted my way, I noticed that she wore the same perfume, too. Chantilly. I had offered her up to Jay as a spiritual sacrifice, hoping to gain points for my soul. But even I had been able to detect her weak spots soon afterwards.

Nevertheless, the union had been inevitable, the solution to all our problems. I watched queasily as Jay plundered on with the relationship, determined to make it work, convinced that it was the right thing to do. And when he left her, I didn't ask why either. I just let him in for coffee one night to hear him say Jessie was too much of a reptile to live with. After offering me a ride to California, he asked if I might keep his destination a secret from Jessie. His eyes were desperate as he looked at me, his cup of coffee splashing over his hands. His vulnerability was pitiful, and I was forced to give him up to the night, to do what he felt he must do.

"I just need to warm up for a while. There's ice in my bones. I pray to God she doesn't kill the cat while I'm gone. I couldn't get him into the truck."

"She won't," I told him hopelessly. "Maybe she'll just have time to get all the meanness out of her."

"I don't think so," he said. "She's got a hunger in her that I'll never figure out. She always says she's cold. She shivers all the time. It's almost self-destructive, the way she goes after what she wants. She's like a heat-seeking missile. I don't think she'll ever grow out of it. She was born a cold and hungry baby. That's why her hands are ruined. She says when she was a baby, as soon as she learned to walk, she broke through the barrier her parents had set up around the wood-burning stove they kept in the living room. She called it her first love affair. She just wanted to touch it, to feel the heat. And she burned off her palms and her fingerprints. And then she did it again when she was five, with an iron."

Jessie was pouring sugar into a steaming cup of coffee. She clutched the black mug tightly, her knuckles turning white. Her lips were a pale blue, with red lipstick lining the edges, and there was a thin white band around the mouth.

"You really don't have much circulation, do you?" I asked, annoyed by the ferocious act she made of gulping the coffee.

"This'll revive me, I'm sure." She didn't look very revivable to me, but before I could think of something appropriate to say, I absently mumbled that she should have been born a candle, with an extensive wick, so that she might have been slowly, lifelessly consumed by fire. She paused in her gulping for a few minutes while I dreaded her reaction.

"Well," she sighed, and got up to gaze hatefully out of the window. "I've often wished I'd been born something else, I never thought of a candle, though. You've got a real imagination. I just think fire is so quick and so happy. Not like the rest of

it." She gestured broadly with a crooked hand to the snow outside and our surroundings in my decrepit home. She looked distastefully at the cheap glass decanter of brandy I had on the counter. "I could never stand to have crystal in my home. Jeer. I just got done putting up curtains so I wouldn't have to look at the icicles hanging from the roof. The clearness of glass makes me edgy."

"But what about the stuff inside the decanter?" I mocked a playful, hospitable tone and uncorked the bottle. Quickly, I poured some of the liquid into her coffee, despite her best efforts to stop me. Then I poured a large glass for myself. "This'll help you to sleep through the evening. Then you can get up early in the morning and the snow will be reflecting the sun's rays and all the ice will be hot and drippy again."

"Have you heard from Jay?" I could tell it was a totally fresh thought in her head. I felt like we were casually tossing a crisis around in the air like dinner conversation. I didn't want to let her he'd been waylaid in Nevada by a hotel room that was particularly accommodating to men with bleeding hearts, so I just said, "No."

"Say, did I ever tell you red is not my true hair color?"

"No," I answered, a little unsettled to find myself surprised by this new information.

"Well I wouldn't have brought it up except that Jay was always talking about your beautiful honey-spoon hair. God, it was obnoxious. He couldn't look at my head without mentioning something about your hairs. Like the way your hair floated above your head in the morning, or the way your eyes precisely matched the color of the aurora borealis that time it shined over Colorado. I'm a brunette by nature. But most men love to play with red hair." Then, apparently as an afterthought: "Girls too, I guess. Do you see what I'm trying to say?"

"That you're interested in new men."

"Partly. You know me well."

"I have always assumed that you would find another one when you were broke, emotionally that is." I spitefully offered her a new cigarette. She waved my arm away. Her eyes penetrated deep into my own, the way they always did when she spoke to me. They were captivating spheres, willing to attach themselves to anything alive in the vicinity. But they gave no indication of life themselves.

"Actually, I once tried to give up smoking. A long time ago. I was doing two packs a day when my lung collapsed. I thought I was having a heart attack. It was before I met you and Jay. I was so out of shape. My mom drove me to the emergency room, where they promptly cut a hole in my chest and shoved a pipe down through my rib-cage to reinflate the lung. I tell you, those emergency crew guys are real professionals. It didn't really feel urgent until they stood over me on the operating table. I've never been so chilled as when they put the ice on my skin and numbed my chest. I thought I was going to die. I guess I asked hysterically for a hot potato from the cafeteria. It wasn't until later when I lay on my bed waiting for a hospital room to open up that I decided to quit smoking. But more importantly, I had to find

someone to spend time with, some other life. It wasn't just the numbness in my chest that was making me so cold and scared." Jessie scooted around in her seat. She held her hand up, unconsciously smoking an imaginary cigarette.

"I guess you had quit, though, huh?" I joyfully prompted. "Oh, believe you me, I cried! It's worse than amputation. It's worse than losing a man. I started smoking when I was ten. I grew up in a house full of smoke."

"Me too," I said. "Jay and I shared our first cigar in the barn on Thanksgiving day when we were twelve. We never stuck with it, though."

"Yes, that. Jay hates smoking. I've begged him to take it up so many times."

"Jesus Christ, Jessie, Jay's asthmatic."

"So does that mean he couldn't light up just once in a little while? Now that he's gone, I light them and leave them burning in the ashtray. You know, like incense. What a poor twerp he was." I tried to picture Jessie's house now, cigarettes and

candles burning freely in every room, stuck in cheap ashtrays and leaving small sooty circles on the ceiling. She was grinning at me, her sharp upper teeth coming dangerously close to splitting a gash in her lower lip. I wondered why she had worn her dark red lipstick and drawn the thin black lines around her eyes.

She couldn't have anticipated an encounter with a gullible man. But she looked frightfully ready to suck blood.

"What I figured out, after I gave up smoking that one time, was that it was the smoke I was addicted to, not the nicotine. MMmmmm." She inhaled deeply some of the smoke that had enveloped her from my cigarette. A one inch ash tumbled down the front of my shirt and I quickly put the thing out. Her head veered back and forth as she gulped down the last of the fading grey cloud. "I guess that's why I'm still smoking," she resigned.

"I guess so."

"To breathe smoke. I love smoking."

"Yeah."

"I love it. And wood stoves. Yours in particular."

"Well," I said, moving closer to the stove. I felt protective of the large metal cavern. I felt like fencing it off from her. Or frying an egg on the top. Anything to have my back to the vaporous woman. I opened the fridge, which was vacant of eggs. But there was bologna in the meat drawer. So I threw a few too many slices on the stove top and watched them rise up into greasy cups.

"Would you like some Frankenberries with your bologna, Jessie?"

"You know, I really don't eat fried bologna. Unless you blacken it a little and make it crispy."

"I don't know if you can blacken bologna, can you? I mean, without turning it into something else."

"Sure you can. It's just meat. Burn it."

"Well it doesn't really seem like meat." I grumbled. "I



always think of it as... a foreign substance. It's meant to be cold and wet."

"Like flattened out puppy noses, that's what I think."

When I realized Jessie had moved up behind me and felt her chin on my shoulder, a wave shook my body. The sharpness of her jaw was like a spike driving into my flesh. I was nailed to the floor.

"You're a little chilly."

"Bad circulation. I need a shower." For once I wished for appalling body odor.

"I was thinking of you the other day, Andie. It was a sudden urge. Maybe it's the weather."

"Snow makes me lonely, too," I agreed, trying to distance myself. I felt like shaking her off of my body. She was giving me fever chills. I pressed the bologna caps flat. Her breath was steamy and oily, like the air that had popped out from under the meat.

"But it was a different kind of urge. It was the same kind of urge I get when I pass through the smoking section of a restaurant."

"Oh, gee. It couldn't be that bad! We haven't seen each other for weeks."

"Precisely. Sometimes I feel like jerking their heads back and sucking the smoke right out of their throats."

"Maybe you miss Jay, and you're associating me with him." I was barely able to contain the absurdity of the remark.

"Jay never would bring me with him when he came to see you."

"He didn't come as often as you think," I said with a twinge of melancholy.

"It pried me off, because I really like to see you."

I took the bologna from the stove and held it on the spatula, waiting for her to allow me to move.

"Do you have any marshmallows?" We could scorch some in the fire! She jumped frantically off of my shoulder and looked to me with the highest expression of excitement.

"Oh God, that would be the best!"

"No, but there are marshmallows in the Frankenberries!" Her body looked ready to break.

"Oh," she said, clearly deflated. "Well, I guess that's exciting enough. But remind me next time to bring some."

"You have some nutty cravings," I said, attempting a giggle and hoping that there would be no 'next time.' But already I could map out in my mind the inevitable days of seclusion with her to come.

"Don't you just love the texture of a charcoaled marshmallow? It's like peeling black burned skin off of shiny white guts. Sweet little murder. The only thing I've ever craved more than marshmallows at this very moment was some charred wood in the remains of a campfire Jay and I made this spring. It got so bad I had to sneak out of the tent in the morning and take a bite."

I put all of the burned bologna on a plate for Jessie and poured her a large bowl of pink cereal. I was resigned to starve in her presence.

"But anyway, didn't it bother you that Jay never brought me with him when he came to visit? Didn't it offend you?"

"No, of course not." I didn't bother to elaborate on all of the game-playing Jay and I had done. I was barely able to admit it to myself. We had always been strongly attached. Not dependent, but mutually attached. After having seen him sliding around in his underwear on my hard wood floor wearing my bras for knee caps, it was hard to believe either of us cared what anyone in the dinky town of Otis thought of us.

"Please eat," I begged, watching the floating bits of cereal in her bowl come apart and turn to mush. I had done a good job blocking Jay out of my mind once the blizzard had set in. My life hardly seemed to exist with the globe obliterated in one white smoke. Except for Jessie. I hadn't anticipated nursing his freezer-burned wife with cold cereal and heat. I tried to imagine his long thin arms around her, pulling her sharp, twiggy body in close for warmth, only to be gouged in the soft spots by her sharp angles.

"Why did you let him go?" I asked again, almost to myself. This time her eyes rolled up to scan me sharply, suspiciously. It was a slightly sensual expression on her face, but it was also menacing. Her tongue flicked across her teeth, caressed her upper lip. I stared intently, waiting for it to dart out again. I wanted to see if it was forked.

"What difference does it make?" she asked me.

"I burned everything he owned in the kitchen sink: the books, records, clothes, even his first teddy bear. Can you believe he kept his first teddy bear? I ripped off the legs and gouged out the eyes and tossed it in on top of the grey sweater you gave him last year for Christmas. They burned much too quickly. Why do you ask so many questions about Jay?"

"He's my cousin." I tried to make it sound generic.

"Yes, but was he ever anything more than that?" For a moment her eyes turned black, or maybe it was a reflection of the bologna she hadn't touched. I felt hot and tingly all over, the way I had when I'd been caught by the police spray-painting the back of the gradeschool. I felt like there were hours of grueling explanation and torture ahead of me. A night with no supper and a full sleep of phlegm and salty tears. She must have caught the guilt in my blush because her hands, both leathery talons, gripped my arms as though she would shake me to the floor. She stood up promptly and set her weight against me. In all my imagined confrontations with her, I had never felt so weak and sordid.

"Are you in love with your cousin, Andie?" I was gaping at her treacherous play, my mouth gone dry and dusty. My tongue flapped against the sides of my mouth like a broken wing as I tried to rationalize, but all that came out was a weak, "Fuck off," after which, she gleefully released her grip and bent forward to kiss my mouth.

"Well, sweetie, believe me, I sympathize. He's a man. They have a way about them that's sort of irresistible. Especially Jay.

with all his chivalry and sensitivity and willingness to please."

"I can't believe I ever introduced you to him. I can't believe I'm the one who put it all together." My boot was tapping wildly, creating an embarrassing echo between us. I tried to achieve a macho stance.

"You know what's right and what's wrong," she said conclusively.

"What?"

"That's why you set us up. Making love to your cousin isn't right, not by a stretch!"

"What do you know about making love?" I hissed. Orange flame leaped behind the iron grate of the stove. For once I knew how it must have felt to want to be eaten by fire. Then she was close behind me again. Her arms twisted forcefully to encircle my waist. I could feel the ease of her ribs and her slowly beating heart against my own pulsing, twitching frame.

"Tell me something about love, Andie. You seem to know so much."

"I know you're incapable of it. The feel of your skin shows me what a corpse you are. Without a flame, *rigor mortis* takes your body over. But you choke us out. You steal our oxygen and cover us like dust and suffocate us. You did it to Jay and you would do it to me if I let you. But I won't."

"Talk about love, Andie. It doesn't have to be about Jay. It can be about me."

"How could it possibly be about you?" I asked, even as I began to stroke her arm.

"You love me, I think."

"No. The only thing I ever loved was a flock of baby chicks we ordered through the mail when I was twelve." I lied desperately. I had loved many things before and after the chicks.

"You and Jay?"

"Jay and I."

"You loved chicks." Her voice was charmed, melodic, and lulling. The flames inside the stove were like a hypnotic meditation. "Little puffy, fluffy, yellow, round, soft, chirpy chicks."

"I loved all twenty-one of them plus the prize rooster."

"Named Jay?" she cooed. "How did this love affair end?"

"We freed them."

"And ate them?" she giggled.

"No. It froze early that year and their heat lamp went out in the barn early one morning. When I went to check on them, they were almost dead, huddled together like popicles. I ran in to wake up Jay and we put them on a cookie tray and stuck them in the oven to warm them up. But we forgot about them. The heat was on too high. We were watching cartoons and we didn't even think to check on them until we smelled them burning."

"Oh God!" she cackled.

"Oh hell," I said, close to sobbing. "I hope you go to hell, Jessie. Real soon."

"They say it's warm there," she purred. "But don't you see? It could never have worked between you and Jay. It would always have been burning chicks. You needed a change."

"I need some more chicks!" I screamed wildly, flinging her off of me and grabbing the poker that was propped against the cabinet.

"Holy shit!" she exclaimed, startled, like a vampire confronted with a cross. It was the first time I had ever seen her true self surface so suddenly. I wielded the poker in the air above my shoulder, ready to plunge it down her throat.

"Ok, ok," she whispered as she backed away to the opposite side of the room. "Maybe you're not ready yet." Within seconds, I watched her change from a frightened beast back into the demi woman who had come into my house to warm up. She ran long, warped fingers through her cherry-red hair and even found it within herself to withdraw lipstick from her sleeve and apply a bright new tint. For fifteen minutes we stood there. I was frozen, waiting for her to bear her psychological fangs again, but she stood pleasantly, her hands folded in front of her.

Her transcendent skin was more like china again than the flesh of a dead bird. "Yes, I need a little time," I agreed, lowering the heavy iron rod a little. She shifted her weight delicately, then poked her chin bravely up into the air. A fresh laugh rolled from her velvety tongue. "Of course, a few cooking lessons might not hurt."

At that moment the phone rang, crumbling our standoff. I answered it, the poker hanging heavy, sweat dripping down the handle. It was Jay, with the last of his wish-you-were-here phone calls that I would be receiving for a while. I was glad when he told me he had finally escaped Nevada. He told me he had shed the most of her there in that red plush room with the gaudy gold fixtures. He was pretty sure he had left her on the sink with an empty can of deodorant. He was moving from hell to Purgatory now, California was scooping him up with gentle arms, and he could only hope that I was making the same kind of progress.

"Can I come with you, Jay?" I whispered, fully aware that she could hear and relish every word. I was a child again, terrified by nightmares and begging my dad to let me get in bed with him, and at the same time trying not to wake up mom. "I miss you," I trembled, knowing how badly it was true. His absence was real again, and crippling.

"I know," he sighed. "But don't you see, it's not just Otis and his people, sweetie. It's me. I can't do it anymore. I can't be the guy." There were a few minutes of silence. "I don't know what to do next. Andie, or how I got started playing that crazy game with you and Jessie, but I've got to be decent. Maybe she can teach you something. And I do pray that you'll be at the end of the line when I get there someday. And that you don't break down in Death Valley."

"Whew!" And with that, we were off to find ourselves. With Jessie, I played along for hours, refusing to close my eyes as darkness approached, or to let the fire go out. We were coiled in opposite corners of the room, and I dreaded each word that flew from her mouth and landed in mine like taffy to be digested. I knew that by morning she would have me wanting to molest her, that my turn had come. Beneath the weight of her gaze, I clawed myself into consciousness and listened for falling snow.

MAKING LOVE TO YOUR COUSIN ISN'T RIGHT, NOT BY A STRETCH



Cornered

I.

When it rained, I grew
impatient with worms drowning
on sidewalks, in schoolyards.
By recess, their squished corpses
would beach, laid out on the blacktop
like anemic licorice whips.

Still, they were the best bait
for catching a third-grade girl, her attention
always claimed by the boys who tortured her
down hills, around trees, under slides,
worms dangling from their slimed hands
like ponytails. They'd count coups, and scores
of victims wriggled away, shrieking for a teacher.

II.

Naturally, I turned to moths:
gold and black spattered bodies
rattling wings at my window
until I killed
the light and floated outside,
nightgowned, unnoticed. Even
the moon could not match
my whiteness, soon candle-lit, as I
plied those insomniacs with the glass
respite of a peanut butter jar
and vows of eternal devotion. Always,
I'd find one dumb enough to be
attracted to a halo.
Some cornered pest,
a seizure, shadowy and fitful,
and big as the fist that finally grasped
his feathered convulsions, then left him
clearly bottled. Well, I wanted to watch
him jerk while contained,
gasp like some poisoned fairy,
dizzy as ashes
escaping.
But I never could believe
his need until the morning,
when it was too late
to do anything but cry
and clap his dust from my hands:
fling his torn form to the sun.



Rebecca
Poole

Photograph by Milo Nera

All in a Row

i have forgotten what your teeth feel like.
it must be like biting into an apple while it is biting you.
it must be like maple syrup on snow.
i have realized what i had long forgotten
like smoke catching in the back of my chapped throat.
i refuse to cough, to let it sting.
i swallow wax, smooth and healthy.
i am intrigued by the biological:
by wondering how chocolate ice cream got on the telephone,
by slathering peanut butter between my fingers.
sometimes i have to bite the steering wheel suddenly,
feel the soft vinyl of your arm.
our legs twist around each other
and bend at the knees like bean plants fallen off the pole.
our feet brush against the eggplant,
the zucchini.

i have forgotten what your teeth feel like.
it must be like punching down risen bread dough,
or biting into the flesh of your own hand.
we are a double helix, railroad tracks uprooted.
we twist, we garden.
we are intrigued with between,
it forces us to come to terms with
the duality of a three dimensional universe,
the opposition of table tennis. it forces us
to stay in one place,
the object of all the pulling.
a weed, a maypole.

i have forgotten what your teeth feel like.
let me slide them out of your gums.
i will collect them
in a matchbox in the freezer
like hailstones.
i will size them next to my own jealous teeth:
see how yellow, see how chipped.
i will be your dentist,
and fill your cavities with my own enamel.
i am intrigued by tension:
the teeth can never be clean enough,
the eyes sit too close together,
the kiss is too dry.
i will never remember your teeth.
you will sit in the sun and tell me about them
as i churn weeds into the pile of eggshells and coffee grounds,
carefully composting every word.

Kathryn
Duhamel

Big Sugar Creek, Powell, Missouri, August 1992

1.

I had to walk away
from you and your
unnecessary
remarks about my use of the word
"kumquat"
so
i followed
the creek upstream
in love
with the wave
and the gravel bottom
tripping my flip-flops
i walked
a swaying camera
hanging on my neck
and caught
two heart-
shaped butterflies
conferring over stones
the builders rejected
warming their dark-heart
wings before they
flew

2.

muffled voices
followed
i turned and turned
but didn't see you all
standing there
apologizing
ready to love me like
i needed you
to
instead
the waters just laughed
about my legs
about my fantasy
that in the heat
this dark heart's wings
might lift me away

i walked
in love
with the fight
in love
with the flight

3.

i walked
until
an island made
the water fork.

i stopped divided
scared
divided
you were all a mile
in the opposite direction
what if
what if
i got lost back
here upstream where
the rocks
were hot
and the stream
rushed past them
giggling
knowing

i turned around
knowing
i was more afraid
of being
found

4.

but i started back
water from behind
shoved past me then waited
for me to catch up
at logs and rocks
complaining
a water snake
motionless
on a rock
waited
my pulse fluttered
then settled
down
stream
i stepped past
it
quietly

5.

i walked back
to the spot where i'd begun
into the still between
the boulder and the trees
to the pool lit and filled
with bits of sun
filtered through branches
filtered through water
filtered through stones
and to Danielle
("God is my judge")
who'd been waiting
for me
she pushed me under
under again and again
shouting
Open your eyes!
(for the underwater shot)
dunking me laughing
(i kept floating)
Sink!
until finally
she snapped it

water went up my nose
and i breathed

i imagined we'd
found the jordan
- here in missouri -
where so many first
kissed
the sun on a sunken stone
and rose

i had
to walk back to all of you
to tell you
i love you
and i'm

in love
with this

more

Deborah Zawadzki



Photograph by Milo Nera

Why I No Longer Cook
Chinese Chicken Wings

*They would sit patiently in the soy sauce for hours
until their shining moment on tin foil
where they would glisten and steam in anticipation,
in the white and red kitchen.
Oriental fog filled the room.
It was sunny and large and hanging green plants
made yellow patterns on the tile.
And I, so young, felt suffocated,
and thought of jumping out the window,
But instead carefully flipped over the chicken
with oven mitts and fork
while my mind ran in circles like the cat on top of the
refrigerator.
The chicken was good, and the garlic, and you
and with the cat in my arms I remember
cooking chicken in the sunny kitchen.*

Elyse Press

Waiting,
After Li Ch'ing-Chao

*This cold rain tells me a season is lost,
The trees have stopped their dancing,
Their leaves are still and waiting.
I sit by the chill of the window
And watch shadows sift
Like thoughts over ground,
The face of dawn
Creeping from over a far-off hill.*

*I will wait for you with my eyes to the east
And carve your face out of morning's first beam.*

*A change of season brings on similar deaths.
I cannot stop the rain from striking a turned leaf.*

Heather Moreau

Clams

A purple burlap bag filled with clams;
like fat gray rocks
or so many small moons.
I reach into the fridge for a closed shell.
I haven't held a clam in years.
Pressing the cold to my cheek
I think of rolled-up sleeves,
the suck of black mud—
some morning in my past.
Then I taste dripping butter,
the white belly dipped,
and remember the black neck
like a shriveled umbilical cord.

The phone rings, the clam
still sits in my palm.
I ask my aunt,
"Is it alive?"
This bluish curve of beach,
this future ashtray.
"Of course," she says.
Already I have water
heating on the stove.
"So I'll be killing it?"
"Yes, and if it doesn't open up
don't eat it. That means it was dead."
Was dead.
She means now, in my hand.

We hang up. I turn the faucet on
and scrub the clam like a potato.
Now I see it's really just a smile itself;
like the teeth mold at the dentist's
that always scared me.
Except this is toothless and friendly.

I consider death
as I clang through a cupboard of pans
for the steamer. I consider
the soft belly between my teeth,
the crunchy crystals of sand
and the rubbery neck (that I can eat now
because I'm older). I consider
the clam on the counter
rocking slightly from the clatter.
When the water starts to bubble
I pick it up, still cold,
and hold it mouth to mouth.
I almost expect it to talk.
Just the grin.

Will it hurt, is really what I wonder.
How can you hurt a rock?
I think.
This is just like a rock.
It is.
Then I remember second grade,
walking home from school in the rain,
rescuing the stones and rocks from the cold;
how each shape was a face to me.
I pulled my stool to the bathroom sink
and made a tub of warm water.
Tiny plunks, then washing away mud and grit,
uncovering smooth gray. I lifted each rock
dripping and dried it with a fuzzy cloth,
like a doll, like a baby,
like this was all that would ever matter to me.

I lower the heat and add salt.
Later that night I dream
rain and an ocean
of purple rocks. Even later
a pan of silver water
and the clam; mouth open
in a frozen yawn.

Bethany Mott

"As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others" (Fanon 109). Consequently, according to Franz Fanon, a black liberationist philosopher, it is impossible for Blacks to be Black in a racially mixed society. They are only able to exist in relation to whites. In this context, black people have few black heroes, so they adopt white ones. White culture has the power to determine what is and is not of value. By devaluing blackness, the black desire to be white, to be accepted, is understandable. Several characters in *The Bluest Eye* exemplify Fanon's theory. In the novel, Toni Morrison illustrates Fanon's idea through various characters and examines blackness in a world where white ideology is predominant.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon says: "And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me" (110). Fanon's experience of meeting a white man and having to look him in the eye is very much like Pecola's experience in *The Bluest Eye*. Upon meeting Mr. Yacobowski, a white shopkeeper, Pecola "looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition - the glazed separateness" (Morrison 42). Pecola has seen this absent glazed look before and decides it is her blackness that makes her invisible to others. She not only accepts a white ideology, but internalizes it until there is nothing left of her own identity but the desire for something she can't possibly attain, blue eyes.

The dejection of not being seen causes Pecola to not be able to see herself. If it is true that we perceive ourselves by how we are perceived by others, Pecola does not exist. The hatred she feels by not being acknowledged she blames on her blackness, and therefore she begins to despise her blackness more and more. Thus comes her burning desire to be white. We are told, "Every night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 40).

Fanon
and
Morrison
**BLACK
L I F E
WHITE
IDEOLOGY**
by
Beth
Schulman

Fanon says, "there is identification - that is, the young negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude" (Fanon 147). When Maureen Peale, a popular light-skinned mulatto girl befriends Pecola, Pecola shows no emotion. The damage has already begun from not being seen for so long. When Maureen accuses her of seeing her father naked, instead of viciously defending herself, she "tucked her head in - a funny, sad, helpless movement" (Morrison 60), as if to say there is no way to win against a girl who is accepted. Pecola stands defeated before her fight begins. Fanon also says, "... I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust the black in me, that is, the whole of my being" (191). Morrison gives us several examples of characters who distrust their blackness, among them is the character Pauline Breedlove. This is most obvious when Pecola visits Mrs. Breedlove at the Fisher home.

When a pie is spilled, Mrs. Breedlove comforts the little Fisher child instead of her own. And when the child asks, "Who were they, Polly?" (Morrison 87), Mrs. Breedlove does not respond. By doing this, she separates herself from her roots, her blackness, by not even acknowledging Pecola as her child. Instead she acts as though the white Fisher child is her own. Mrs. Breedlove shows more respect for the white family, by placing them on a pedestal, than she does for her own. "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man - they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep", we are told (Morrison 101). Pauline Breedlove leads a double life. She is unable to leave her husband and children and fully enter the life of a white. However, she is also unable to leave the white family, which is also her security, a place where she believes she is respected and where people listen to her.

Another instance in which Pauline hides from her blackness is when she goes to the movies. She adores Jean Harlow and goes as far as attempting to cut her black hair in the style of the white movie star. By actually attempting to physically look like a white woman, Pauline denies her blackness and attempts to replace it. This masking, however, is not possible.



Where Pauline fails at reaching her ideal whiteness, Geraldine nearly succeeds. To Geraldine, blackness means low class and filth. "In Europe," Fanon says, "the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul" (190-1). Geraldine acts in accordance with this attitude when Pecola is lured into the house by Junior. When he abuses her, as well as the cat, not only is Geraldine more concerned about the cat's welfare but she blames

Pecola for the tragedy. "Get out," Geraldine says, "you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (Morrison 75).

Geraldine not only tries to rid blackness from her life in the form of other black people, but tries to rid the dirt she equates with blacks, physically. Geraldine attempts what is called "denigrification." She attempts to "whiten herself" (Fanon 111). She tells her son, "Colored people [are] neat and quiet; niggers [are] dirty and loud" (Morrison 71). So, she

scrubs herself and her son, to rid that "dirty blackness" from them.

Junior, Geraldine's son, is also an example of a black character who identifies with whites, with terrifying results. Fanon says,

There is identification - that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts the white man's attitude. He invents the hero, who is white, with all his own aggression - at that age closely linked to sacrificial dedication, a sacrificial dedication permeated with sadism (147)

Junior certainly illustrates sadism when he lures Pecola into his home. He "snatches the cat by one of its hind legs and began to swing it around his head in a circle" (Morrison 74). He seems to be projecting all of the anger of his mother, as well as his own anger toward the idea of blacks being inferior, on Pecola, through his torture.

Toni Morrison does offer an example of a black character who does not accept the white ideology. Claudia questions and logically rejects the notion. Claudia is the one character who does not perceive herself as others see her. She is certain of her identity, of where she comes from and where she is going. She fights for what she believes in and does not enslave herself. She is the freest of all the characters in *The Bluest Eye*. She is proud of being black, though not of being poor, and although she is jealous of white people for being treated better, she does not want to be white. In fact, quite the contrary, she hates whites for being placed on an undeserving pedestal.

She says, upon receiving a white baby doll for Christmas, "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me" (Morrison 20). Thus, not only is Claudia resistant to the myth of little girliness. "What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?" (Morrison 20), she is also resistant because the dolls are always white. Unfortunately, she says, "the truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to [dismember] little white girls" (Morrison 22). Thus, instead of Claudia accepting the myth of whiteness as superior, she questions it and upon finding no major difference, she

despises whites for receiving better treatment.

Maureen Peal is just the type of little girl Claudia hates. Because Maureen is light-skinned and rich, she is treated like a white child. Claudia is curious about Maureen and would like to befriend her, if for nothing else, to examine her. Claudia does not get a chance to befriend her, but when Maureen offers to buy Pecola ice cream and not Claudia or Freida, Claudia is appalled. Just as Maureen asks very personal questions of Pecola, ones she herself would never have been rude enough to ask, she is personally offended. This leaves her more confused and angry. She wonders, if white (or light-skinned) girls are rude and low-class in their manners, why they deserve to be treated better.

Claudia tells us that her attitude changed when she grew older. She says, for example, "I learned much later to worship her [Shirley Temple], just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (Morrison 22). Thus, Claudia is able to conceal her hatred and jealousy and accept whites in order to get along as easily as possible in society; she "adjusts."

Both Fanon and Morrison offer hope and liberation through struggle, and both authors wrote to re-illustrate the problems caused by a white ideology, and to point out the fallacies that accompany it. Characters like Pauline, Geraldine, Junior and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* illustrate the struggle. However, Claudia is the one character who offers hope in a seemingly despondent world. Unfortunately, we do not know enough about her later life to tell if she keeps her strong self-image. We do know that her "adjustment without improvement" toward Shirley Temple is a sign of conformity, but a self-knowing one. By showing the masks that blacks wear in an attempt to be accepted by whites, Fanon and Morrison succeed in un-masking the horrible truth about white societal attitudes and the consequences.

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"Watching TV" by gregory pare

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FIXED MINDS BLANK
SEE THE STARVING CHILDREN IN AFRICA THAT YOU CAN
HELP FOR ONLY THE SMALL PRICE OF A CUP OF COFFEE
SEE THE BLOOD ON THE STONE DRIP BECAUSE THE BAD
GUY'S HEAD LANDS THERE WHEN RAMBO BLOWS HIM UP
GIJOE IS READY HE HAS HIS UZZI
SUPER- X SOAKER
IS IN E STORES
NOWGET S V EZZEEE... ME ONE
SOICAN I O R BOOM 'NAMIS
GI JOE L BOOM... BLOODY
BACKAS ASTHEN S E BANG NTGIRL
WASPOU H N BANG... NDDEAD
IN JOH O C NSTOWN
SEETHE O E LIE BADGUY
INIRAO T UZ DOWN... HEDIES
WE WIN ZI NOVEMY
PEGUP3 S SEXSEX YOU'RE SPACES
YOBART G G E E DEAD FLUSHD
CHERRY U XS BOMBSS
DOWN A R N TOILET
ITHINK D S SEX ILLTRY
CLINTONPROMISED TOCHANGE AMERICA
THE SUPERBOWL WAS ON SO THE PRESIDENT WAITED
NOBODY HEARD HIM ANYWAY BECAUSE KICKBOXER WAS ON
NOW GOD SENT A MEMO: PLEASE SEND CONTRIBUTIONS
REMEMBEROURCHILDRENREMEMBEROURCHILDRENREMEMBEROU
THESIMPSONS MURPHYBROWN
MARRIED WITHKID
RAMBO ROCKY

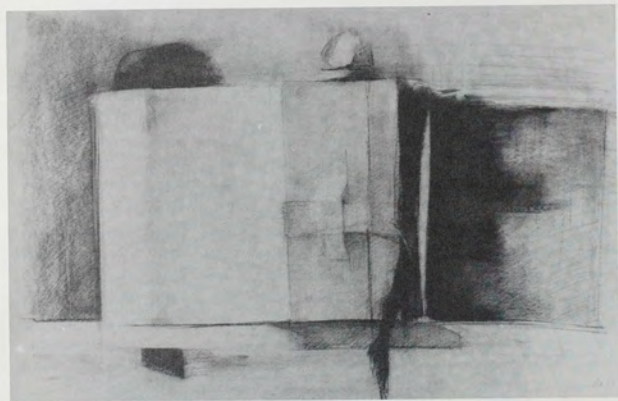


Illustration by Sandra McDonald

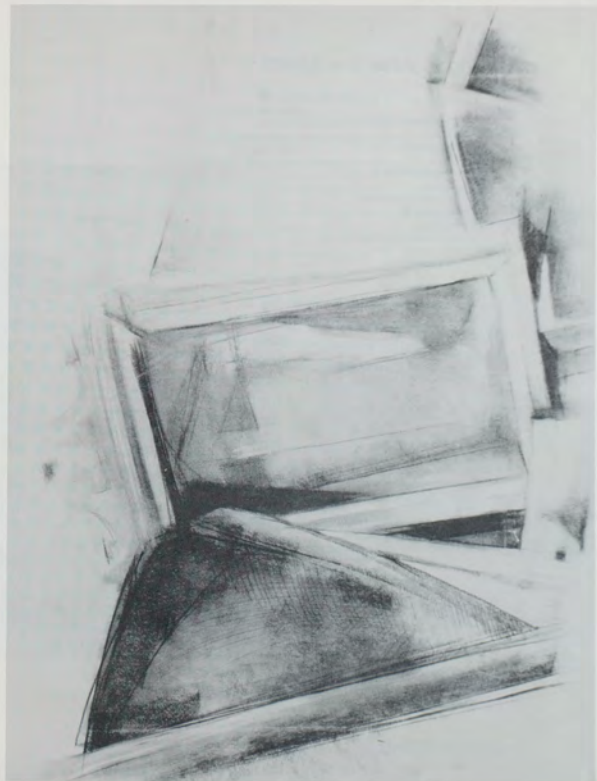


Illustration by Sandra McDonald

Kissing K. After the Aborti n

It was born out of Chaos
and was bound to die
in Order,
as our lips moved closer,
my hands by my side,
my face the sun
and yours the moon
in that moment before
eclipse,
when movement cannot be detected
and reason goes out the window,
we came together
in the center,
a whisper of sweat
implored me to act,
and I wondered
who came up with the concept
of pressing lips?
exchanging blows?
and was it really a concept at all?
or just an uncontrollable

urge,

like sneezing,
something older than the both of us?

And with my hands on your shoulders
we ate each other's faces.
I slipped down your throat,
a child
on a playground slide,
arms outstretched, unaware
of the Earth rushing up to meet him,
eyes sky wide,

embryo surprise.

And the world kept its mouth shut
as your tongue dipped and swirled,
your eyes half-shut and glossy,
face like a baby
in a crib
intent upon a mobile of elephants
and serpents
twirling out of reach.



My hands on your hips,
the only sound
was your eyelashes blinking,
and there was not ever the thought of ending
this liquid ballet.
And with my hands on your chest,
I thought I spied a sway in your legs,
a drawbridge slowly opening,
and still there were no fears to allay.
But with my hands on your belly,
I thought I heard you thinking.
True, it was no longer swelling,
yet I was not ashamed,
we were still in love,
didn't that much remain unchanged?

Then my hands on your belt buckle,
and you turned,
I turned,
I thought we might never turn again,
for in the reticence
of that muted moment,

you spoke,

your voice like the flaming sword,
gutting the silence
and screaming *abort*
with visions in your head
of our Cain, our Abel,
of all the possibilities born
out of forty-five minutes
of iniquity,
but you always forgot
that this sorrow was divided
equally,
Just like you to only use words
to speak to me.

You were right,
it never mattered what was said,
this sweat's what led us here
in the first place,
but in the world of Order,
in this third floor
apartment in Providence, Rhode Island,
late October,
that baby will always be dead.

Scott Altonian



From a Photograph of a Man with AIDS

This man is encased in a frame
somewhere between the black and
the white, set into pose, looking out
as I look in.
He sits alone on a hospital bed
facing the window with his back
to the camera. His body is bound
deep within the frames: the window
the photo the frames that shape my mind
seeing him. He is curled forward,
his heart driven back into his chest,
the rest of his body encircling it
like a band of arms reaching out
of his backbone. Everything depends
on the endurance of this bone. It is large
and extends like a wooden beam
up to the back of his head
disappearing in the hairline.
His back is bare and pale and wide.
This man is caught in a frame
that makes it easy
for the half-interested to look
and to walk away. It is painted to be presentable
but underneath it is rotting as wood turns soft
and lifeless.
To the man that lives in this photograph:
I have cut your figure out
and learned to hold it in my hands
free of borders,
warm breath releasing
into the open air.

Heather Moreau

From one of the lesser hills of Providence

The ri h roo rah of the billions of barkers
and the strange and happy twitterings of little birds
just don't belong
as much as the screeching of the jay
and the groan of grey pigeons under the awnings.
Frictional breathing of rubber on asphalt passes
like a modern recording from ear
to

ear.
The morse code honking of waiting or irritated drivers
comes in that broken window with the bap, bap, bap of the
basketball kids.

Something else down the street stirs
in what no doubt was once a bustling place
of pride, production, and crowded streets,
now suckling off the bosom of decay.

Could that be a misplaced madonna-
That mad maiden twisting her sagebrush hair,
staring out at the universe
uttering little chicken laughs?

Brian Sheenan

Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf

by Rebecca Poole

(Vita Sackville-West was a writer of novels, poetry, essays, and travelogues. In December 1922, she met author Virginia Woolf at a dinner party. In 1927, Sackville-West travelled from London to Tehran in order to join her husband, Harold, the British ambassador to what was then Persia.)

This train shakes me.
I've stabbed the window with a corkscrew,
and the chill air staggers through,
giving me a stiff neck. I am a barn owl,
a little grey ass to think I'd write
winter in Russia looks vibrant.
This morning the steppes suffocate me
more whitely than any London February.
Can you diagnose this affliction? Do you guess?
You are not here to smooth my hair
or make me tea, or pull me out of a mood.
My mannered companions turn their heads
and count my forced breaths, expecting
me to complain, but I won't
give them the satisfaction. Harold would
behave coldly, lecture that I act more
like an adult, a grown mother.
Why can't I? Am I missing
some transparent explanation? I'm afraid
Leigh's spoiled Scotland
for the East. Last night
I stood frozen, cast in plaster
while he stomped the Highland fling
on top of my trunk. Quite the shepherd,
Leigh, in that rancid goatskin jacket.
His horn-rimmed glasses and plaid knickers
finally betrayed him to a Cossack mob.
They pressed in close and embraced us,
begging for whiskey.
We'd stowed nothing but caviar.
But all those hands...

I was nearly raped yesterday.
No one here understands
a simple flirtation.
But Leigh saved me, so I suppose
he can make himself
useful after all.
Miss Jebb hangs upside down
from the luggage rack,
waiting for Leigh to propose.

Miss Elgwood drinks
mineral water. I miss
my darling Virginia. I want
her comfort, her clarity. I need
to wrap myself in the crash
of her words, in the rhythm
of her words, those thousands of words
as lustrous as an ocean,
as almond-shaped eyes,
unveiled.

When I was a girl,
I'd hollow a cave
under my bed covers and hide
in the warm blackness, imagining myself
an unawakened princess. I believed
the forest outside was guarding the palace
with all that ice and wind forcing branches
and boughs to their monstrous, crystallized knees:
like a mausoleum of prised chandeliers
until the sun finally slew winter
and kissed me, heaving
the sodden world into a fresh heap
at my bare feet. Forgive
any stupidity, but I cannot reach the center
of what I mean to say. I remain stranded
at some obscure intersection between
"Bad Novelist" and "Good Poet,"
your honesty, my husband and children
all circling, waiting for me to collapse,
waiting to vie for my bones.
Don't ask that I detail this mess,
insert yellowed emotion, wax
some optimistic old photo...

The boys sometimes surface
at Harold's side,
and my writing is something
which none of them can snatch from my mouth
or paw into an unrecognizable griminess.
And why should I share
that which belongs to me,
to me, objects always dearer,
more natural than people.
You know love
frightens me, so understand
description breeds distance.
Perhaps this is why I clasp
my emotions, my impressions, my words
to my breast and push them in the space
between two ribs. Nestled safely there,
they fill every emptiness and feed
off my core like tiny white worms,
like family.

Lucille Clifton's poetry cannot be read in silence. It rolls off the tongue with few stops, in a rhythm distilled from kitchen tables and church pulpits, from front stoops and washboards. It is quintessentially female and black and quinquennially American. When Clifton speaks of the talking, the storytelling that goes on between her daughters and herself, storytelling of all, "not just Black, America," she says, "It is our strength, this talking and listening, because we have traditionally shared . . . the inward feeling and meaning of things." It is this "inward feeling and meaning of things" which connects her to Whitman, whose influence she acknowledges. One can see their similarity in many facets of their work and their attitudes. Whitman's great imperative was that one live with "perfect personal candor." This honesty shines through Clifton's work. She stands, as Whitman did, in the dead center of her poems, allowing no wisp of air between what she is declaring and her listener. She talks up close, not in your face, but right at your side, and she does this in a verse as free as her hips, hips which she assures us, "have never been enslaved."

Just as her hips have never been enslaved, so her verse could never have been confined to a set form. When Whitman wanted to celebrate himself and his native land he had to find a new kind of verse. It could not be a sonnet, a sestina or a villanelle, artificial frames on which to hang language, an external structure. What he discovered was that if one listened well and built carefully, one could create a free verse whose structure is a skeleton which, like Clifton's hips, is born and develops as the integral part of the poem itself: it is strong and needs no corset. In the 1920's Mies van der Rohe coined the phrase 'form follows function' for his Bauhaus school of architecture. It was the same with Whitman - he wanted to write America, so he took the rhythms around him and built his song. When he wanted to sing himself, and he did the same, with a fine ear for the truth and that truth gave him image and rhythm together.

Clifton also sings her self and that self is remarkably strong. That strength also shines through in poems to her world, a world in which she feels totally comfortable with telling people what is wrong and how to right it - one almost feels the voice of God in "Come home from the movies":

Singing Life Alive: Sound and Celebration in Free Verse by Lisa Beade

Come home from the movies,
Black girls and boys,
the picture be over and the screen
be cold as our neighborhood.
Come home from the show,
don't be the show.
Take off some flowers and plant them,
pick up some papers and read them,
stop making babies and raise them.
Come home from the movies
Black girls and boys,
show our fathers how to walk like men,
they already know how to dance.

It is the strength and sureness of Clifton's voice which make her work so interesting, because they illustrate so well the building of sound, meaning, rhythm and structure. When we look at this poem the thirteen lines seem to break into six parts, with lines 1 & 2 serving as a refrain: "Come home from the movies/Black girls and boys." Lines 3 & 4 follow the imperative of the refrain with a reason: "the picture be over and the screen be cold as our neighborhood." The off-rhyme 'be over' - 'be cold' connects the two rhythmically. In line 5 we have a rephrasing of line 1: "Come home from the show," but it is a set-up, as we shall see. In line 6 there is a different use of the word 'be' and it is here that the poem actually shifts, with the repetition of the word 'show' the beginning of a series of biting oppositional imperatives which, in lines 7, 8 & 9 carry not only the powerful reasoning voice behind the images, but the rhythm and sound of the poem.

It is the voice of judgment looking down and saying: "Take off some flowers and plant them/pick up some papers and read them/stop making babies and raise them." So much is in these three lines! There are the imperatives at the beginning of each line, followed in the first two with the repeated word 'some,' and then the two-syllable nouns: flowers, papers, babies. Following the nouns is an unwritten, but understood, caesura before the 'and' which creates a wave-like crashing of positive exhortations at the end of the phrases, all ending in 'them.' This is a masterful use of parallel for structure and rhythm. Lines 10 & 11 are the refrain repeated, giving us breathing room for lines 12 & 13, where the noun 'show' of line 6 becomes the verb 'show' of line 12, and the rhyme for 'know' in line 13, followed by the brutal infinitives: 'to walk' and 'to dance' to the end of each line.

She is sparing her audience nothing. All she has to offer is her poems and her truth. These images are almost indecent in their naked truth. Although the 'know' in the last line is not marked, it cannot be read other than fully stressed. As sad and hurtful as it is because of the way she has told the truth, one may hear the cluck of tongues, but one must also see the sparkle in her eye.

It is this quality of real love and tolerance for the human condition that makes Clifton's voice so unique. Whether she is enticing a lover, killing roaches, chopping greens for supper or refusing to grow old with her graying hair, her voice digs deep into the elemental with a keen intelligence, a wary wisdom, a fierce dignity and a joyous celebration of life.

Julia Wright

Interview by
Beth Schulman



Shoreline: Does writing about your father present special problems? For example, are some memories too painful or vivid to remember?

Wright: I think when you write about a person who's been very close to you, you are raising very special problems. You're raising problems of your own identity, of how close you are to the other person. You're exposing yourself to both a lot of joy when you discover you're very close to him and to a lot of pain when you realize there are limitations of closeness.

I think a daughter writing about her father is a specific problem that, perhaps, isn't present when a daughter writes about her mother. A daughter has always had a very ambivalent, and often fraught relationship with her father and putting that on paper takes a certain amount of courage. I have found. There are areas I didn't want to deal with, but I think trying to deal with those areas helps. So the father-daughter relationship is a very special one and needs to be treated in a specific way.

My special problem of dealing with Richard Wright as a father is that he died at the end of my childhood, so I only have a childhood to account for him. For instance, if he died when I was about forty years old, I would have so much more to say. So what I have to do is go back to my childhood and remember what the child thought and, of course, try to be mature about those thoughts. It's a little complicated. In fact, somebody at Princeton said: "You've walked through so many selves," and

I thought, "My goodness, this person understands, I have walked through many selves." I don't know how many more I'm going to walk through but I hope it'll settle down.

He was famous, therefore, there were many reasons he didn't belong to me only, so that was a special problem. When you're writing about a father who was famous and you're his daughter, you're actually claiming only part of him because the rest belongs to the others.

And then another aspect of it that does present problems is, since the early seventies there have been a number of biographies, and brilliant ones at that, so the danger would have been "everything's been said" and "what do I have to say that's so new and brilliant and marvelous?" and besides I'm not an academic, I'm not an expert in the sense the other people were except for the first person, who knew him. Her name was Constance Webb and she was a friend, but the others were all academics and I felt that their expertise, perhaps, might have exhausted my subject, but I think that was, also, not true.

Shoreline: What do you want your biography to do that the other biographies of Richard Wright have not done?

Wright: I think that maybe what I can do, and that's the difference between my expertise and academic expertise is that I have the expertise of a daughter at close range, so that I could, perhaps, portray the private man. I'm not saying the inner man because that's too ambitious. Who knows what went on inside his head? Especially since he was a genius, I believe. But I could, perhaps, give more glimpses into what his private life was like without trespassing because there is a danger, even for me, to trespass. There's a fine line, and I have to keep being aware of that. I don't want to be responsible; you know, when you are the daughter of a man who died the way he did, and who is very important, you tend to think "Well, did I do this right? Was I close enough? Was I supportive enough? Could I not have seen? Could I not have guessed?" And you go into these endless rings of wondering whether you've done enough and I think that's good up to a point and negative afterwards. I think the past is past and I could not have been other than a child. I couldn't be Joan of Arc. I don't think he would have wanted me to.

I think also, perhaps, a specificity of my biography could be to portray, for once, a positive relationship between a black woman and a black man at a time when black male/black female relationships are being portrayed as very fraught and often too painful. So I'm not saying my relationship was perfect and golden and marvelous and everything, but I think that on balance, I could chart this relationship in a positive way. I could make the reader feel how much I benefited from being close to him. It could be a beginning because I think that black daughters try to make sense of their relationships with their fathers, even very negative relationships, like being beat up and whatever else. I think then it would be easier to make sense of whatever difficulties they have in their relationships with their black lovers and black husbands. I think our relationships with our fathers is one of the roots of our future difficulties or successes in our love life or affective life with our black

Photography by Gordon Rowley

partners. So if we could do this homework with our fathers, it starts with our fathers, it starts with our mothers, maybe we could find a way out of this jungle of contradictory, violent feelings between black males and black females. It can be a beginning. I'm just taking an approach.

Shoreline: Did you take what's been going on in society as a consideration when you approached this?

Wright: No. In fact it was unconscious. I just realized afterwards that it could be an answer, but it was just a very natural thing because I needed to do it. But sometimes what a person needs to do can help another person. But it wasn't self-conscious.

And what else could it be specific about, this biography? I thought that perhaps a well situated or located in his life to demystify a lot of the mythology, since I was behind closed doors in a sense. And to demystify some of the gossip, especially around his exile, because that period is not well known as the period in which he was in the States. Of course, give a sense of his living presence, anybody who knew him could try to do that, but having been close to him I think that was one of my responsibilities as a biographer. To elucidate the circumstances around his death, since I was the only member of the family in Paris when he died. My mother wasn't there. So that gives me a sort of peculiar and particular responsibility which I'm aware of. Finally, because of my age. I'm fifty and was born in 1942, and this is the end of the century. I think I also have a good perspective to spans, the historical periods to which he belonged.

Shoreline: You mentioned the four previous biographies. I'm wondering if you have a favorite and how you feel about them all, and if you want to disclose what is your least favorite.

Wright: Basically I didn't feel I could compete with them I felt perhaps I could... I know it's an academic tradition when you begin a biography to review what the other biographies have said and often that becomes a negative critique of what biographers have had to offer. I would have tended to do that a year or two years ago, but now I feel like saying the good points, and the first biography was by Constance Webb.

Amongst the biographers she was the only person who knew him, because all of those who came afterwards, except myself, were academics of another generation who didn't know him, who studied him academically. Constance Webb was the white American wife of Seal R. James, the Trinidadian critic and Trotskyite. I think her biography is interesting because she knew him, and therefore a certain presence emanates from her book; that is the good point. However, her book is very flawed.

Now lets take another biography I like on balance and that's the one by Addison Gale. The reason why I think there's a very good dimension to Gale's book, although his book also is flawed, and that is he was able to show how much my father was harassed and pressurized by various categories of secret police agencies, and I think we needed that because nobody had done it, and so that was a good angle, and if it was a rather limiting one because his life and work can't boil down to that

only, it was important.

And then I think the standard biography by Michelle Falk, the French professor, is important because it has a precise chronology, which even I use, and a respect for detail and, although on the other hand it is flawed, as far as I'm concerned, because Michelle doesn't always understand politics, and my father was a political animal, and so Michelle being almost politically, can't understand some of my father's political passions sometimes.

Margaret Walker, have you heard of her controversial unauthorized biography? I don't want to say much about Margaret Walker, possibly because I don't have many very positive things to say, and I don't like to talk about things only negatively. But basically, amongst all the biographers, Constance Webb and all the others who came after, I would have hoped and wanted and wished for a black woman biographer to seek out his black children.

Shoreline: Constance Webb didn't seek you out?

Wright: No she didn't, but being white, and having known my father, I can almost forgive her, because she knew me when I was little and she could draw on her memories of me in her book without, perhaps, really having to come to me. But here was a black woman at a time when black women are united, I feel very close to some of the black feminist tenets, and would've just imagined that here is the first black woman biographer, talking about a Richard Wright who hated black women and obviously, I mean, I don't know, if I had been her, the first thing that would've come to mind is, "Okay, what does your daughter think of it," because how does a famous black author who hates black women relate to his black daughter. But she didn't. So, she carried a lot of fantasies in her book, which I could've dispelled if she had. I was willing to meet her, by the way.

Shoreline: Did he hate black women?

Wright: No, he loved them so violently and so much, but he also went through a childhood of having been put down by them, because the patriarchy in his family was not only strong in character but strong in religion and forced religion on him, which he rebelled against. So that he had an experience of both the ferocity of black women and the love of them, and to put the ferocity of a black woman together with an intense love of them, to put them together in the same feeling is going to create a lot of emotional mischief, so I think it's complicated.

You know, I'd like to say one thing, if you could write something in this interview which I haven't put through before, is I don't think we should be afraid of complexity. I think we should tackle it. I know it's easier to say this is black and white and this is good and bad, and this is beautiful or ugly, but I think the realities of things, if we could be a little more not afraid of tackling complex things which are neither, or sometimes this way or sometimes that way, that's the way life is, greyness, if we could explore the greyness of things, which is what happened when my father married my mother and produced me. These are the areas I'm sensitive to because things are very complex and many sided.

Shoreline: Is there one specific thing you want readers to know about Richard Wright?

Wright: He ran counter to the cliché stereotype about absentee black fathers, and that in spite of his literary and political commitments, he was a very creative father. In fact, I'm wondering today whether his absences made him even more loving when he was there and even more creative with us, because he had to be away most of the time on tours and lectures and inside his books, whether that didn't help him to be all the more perceptive when he was there. So I'd like to say that...

Shoreline: I have heard that your father once wrote you a letter and warned you about the "dangers of the ivory tower." What do you think he meant by that?

Wright: Well, first of all, he was a creative writer and he made himself. He didn't make college because there was a lack of opportunity, obviously, for black kids of his age, and there still is. But being a creative writer and having molded his own knowledge, his own learning, and his own creativity, he wanted to be sure to let me know that there was academic learning on the one hand, and creativity on the other, and they didn't always meet. In fact, sometimes one can kill the other; in other instances one can fertilize the other. So I think that's what he was telling me, but as usual, messages are multidimensional.

He was also telling me that there was a danger universities would cut me off from the Biggers and that as long as there was a contradiction between universities and the Biggers and that universities could not take in the Biggers, I should be aware of this, and never cut myself off from the Biggers, because it was important and still is in American society.

Finally, he wanted me just to keep in touch with that world he was born into, for reasons that I couldn't fathom when I read that letter in 1960, but which become clear today because, obviously I'm writing the book, and that means recreating the world he lived in.

Shoreline: I'm wondering, just to go back for a second, to Bigger. Do you think that in a way, that was what your father did by going to France?

Wright: Cutting himself off?

Shoreline: And cutting you off?

Wright: Cutting me off? No, and it's a good thing you're mentioning that, because I think that people are under that impression. But what people rarely realize, is that if he had stayed he would have gone under. He left, I said he saved mother and myself, he saved us a second time by leaving, but he saved himself and there are times in life when you've got to save yourself, and you know, oh yes, you see you're taking me somewhere I haven't been before, because there's a beautiful story by Edgar Allan Poe, called "The Fall of the House of Usher," and I haven't re-read that story in years, but what I have kept from that story, the essence of that story in my mind is that when a house is falling on top of you, you get out. Obviously in Poe's case the characters had to stay in so the story could be written, but there's a time when you have to choose between going under and there being no story or getting out so

you're able to tell the story. I think that was the meaning of his exile, but you see, people don't want to really realize under what pressure he was, because he had to read the truth in *Native Son* and he had to tell the truth in *Black Boy*, and this was something that simply was not done then in those days, it was a crime to do that, he was breaking the taboos. And he felt things were coming in on him, the hate mail and other things, and his getting out was to be able to continue to create, so he had no choice. I really believe that's the truth.

Shoreline: Has Richard Wright cast a shadow on your own writing?

Wright: Well let me just say, that is, I always, from the age of four or five, wanted to be a writer. When people asked me what I wanted to be I'd say, "A writer like daddy, of course," and kids always do that, they say, "I want to be a fireman like daddy, of course," or "I want to be a dancer like mommy, of course." And it's never changed, it's just taken me through various guises of writing: journalism or poetry, or today biography, but I've always been happiest writing, perhaps, because I feel in touch with my father that way, closer to my father than that way, but it started when I was a very little girl. I think it's also a question of which parent you identify with.

Shoreline: Has writing the book taught you things about your father you didn't know yourself?

Wright: I'll never be the same again. I'm now able to settle all debt, I've been indebted to my father a long time, I think I'm going to be able to settle that. The book will be something I'll leave to my children, because, how am I going to hand down what I have experienced with my father to my children, which can't necessarily be verbalized? Because everyday you're doing dishes and washing clothes and taking the kids to school and you're doing workday things, and it's not easy to sit down and say, "This is how the world was," and start lecturing a child. You don't lecture your own children. So how was I going to pass it on? I feel that maybe the book, which they will be ready or not for when it comes out, will do that. They might not want to read it immediately, I didn't read my father's books immediately. I waited until I was ready and he let me wait until I was ready, but one day they'll say, "Mom, we wanna know," and they'll have the book. I might not be around, but they'll have the book. So it's a way of breaching the gap between the generations since their grandfather didn't live long enough for them to know him.

The outcome of the book is I realize I don't have all the answers. I might have thought I had when I started writing the book. All I can contribute are a series of questions which are relevant and perhaps others will answer them, because things will come to light, documents and things like that. Also, I have more of him in me than I dreamed; and I don't think in the final analysis I can tell you what his genius was about, it's a mystery to me. The writing of this book has taught me a certain amount of humility. I cannot explain why he had been, and I think that's what his genius is about, that little something which is unattainable in a man or a woman which makes him or her great.

"I have something to tell you Katie," says my father, walking toward me like a Weeble, those plastic toys I had when I was little, shaped like eggs and painted like people. I remember the song on TV, "Weebles wobble but they don't fall down." And they didn't. They had some kind of magnet or weight on the bottom. My father, he just has his two feet, tied neat and snug in a pair of old deck shoes.

"Yeah Dad?" I'm untangling the brush that just got stuck in a bunch of my wet hair. This tiny airport is right near a beach. We don't have towels, but he thought a good swim in the cold ocean might help. So we walked there. Of course, he wasn't really able to swim and I was afraid the whole time he would drown. Now we're back at the airport, changed into our wrinkled clothes, trying to dry up.

He sits next to me on the step. His hair is already slicked back in place, "Jesus, that's hot," he says, when his skin touches the cement.

"Feels nice," I say, stretching out my legs.

"Listen Kate," he says, covering my knee with his hand to prepare me for a blow, or just to steady himself. His nails are getting too long. He looks at the ground, closes his eyes and shakes his head. Then he looks straight at me, eyes wide, like he's just been startled awake. "Your mother and I are getting a divorce," he says.

"I know Dad, you told me last night." I also know because my mother told me three months ago. She just told him last week.

He squeezes my knee, not listening. "She just doesn't love me anymore, I guess. After fifteen years. Does that make sense?"

I don't answer.

"Well, does it?" he asks, looking at me like I'm her.

"No Dad, it doesn't." I pick out the pebbles that are pressed into my palm from leaning on the cement.

"Give your old dad a hug," he tells me. I lean over, but before I can hug him he hugs me, like always, squeezing too tight. We sit together a while longer on the back stairs of the airport building. He smokes his pipe. I rearrange the stuff in my pink pocketbook. My new cherry Chapstick is melted. I walk to the trash and throw it out.

"Well, what do you think?" I ask him when I come back. The gray parking lot stretches in front of us, empty, except for our little maroon car. My father stands up, takes out a handkerchief, and wipes his forehead. He looks out at the parking lot, too, as if it will give him an answer.

"I still don't feel that great," he says. That means he's still drunk. Which means he won't drive, because he wouldn't want to kill us both. We're stuck.

Suddenly he smiles, like a little boy. "Let's get a taxi and stay at a motel. This is a cute little town. It'll be fun, like an adventure. One more day together, just the two of us. What do

you say pumpkin?"

"Shit Dad, I have school tomorrow. Are you sure you can't drive?"

"Don't swear at your father," he says. "Go find a phone book." So we call a taxi and wait.

"Hey cabbie," my father says in his look-Katie-I-know-the-lingo voice, "what's your name?"

"Randy," says the driver, looking past my father at a nod. He nods his head hello. I nod back then knock my knee up against the bag of wet bathing suits that hangs from my wrist. It twirls around and around, twisting the handle and pinching my skin. Then it loosens and spins back flat. Randy watches this, waiting for us to get in. My father curls his hand around my sunburned shoulder and steers me in front of him, closer to the cab.

"Say hello to Randy," he tells me.

"I did."

Then to Randy, "My daughter. I love her but she drives me crazy. Thirteen going on twenty." He says this to everyone we meet, then he laughs to himself like he just thought up the line. I don't know what he means. I'm not allowed to date or even wear make-up yet.

Randy smiles again to be polite. His teeth are white-white and straight, like a line of peppermint Chiclets.

I'm close enough to notice the color of his eyes. There's a stray fleck of green floating in the bottom white of his left eye. The green is grayish, the same color as his ins. It looks like a dab of paint that missed.

Randy starts to open his door to get our bags. "No, no trouble," My father puts his hands next to a traffic cop. "I'll just put the things next to me on the seat."

Katie, you go around and sit up front with Randy. I always end up sitting with strangers when I'm with my father. That's how I remember places. He'll say,

"Remember that time we went to the Ice Capades?" I'll say, "Was that when I sat next to the lady with the purple mittens and matching hat?" Anyway, you can't argue with him. He thinks he's doing me a favor, giving me the best view, the best seat. On the plane ride here from the island he asked the pilot his name and said, "Joe, you don't mind if my daughter sits up front with you, do you? She can help you fly the plane." He thinks he's funny.

I hand my father the bag with our swimming stuff, embarrassed suddenly by the bright pink of my bathing suit showing through. I walk around the back of the cab and think I see Randy's eyes watching in the rear view mirror. He leans over on the seat and pushes the door open with a hand as big as my father's, but thinner.

"Wait a minute." He looks at my legs then touches the vinyl seat. "It's baking. I'll spread a towel." The towel he pulls down from the seat is splattered with oil. He looks

around for something else.

"It's all right," I say, lifting my foot to step in.

"No, just wait," he says, tugging off his t-shirt. He shakes it out like he's making a bed and spreads it on the cracked red seat. "There."

"Thanks." I climb in and try not to look at his bare chest, the way I try not to look at people when they kiss in public. Inside, the cab smells like sharpened pencils and sweat, but it's light and sweet like your own sweat can be. My father fits himself on the seat next to the bags then slams the door shut.

"Where to?" Randy asks.

"Just get the car going for a breeze. It's so damn hot." He opens the airport's Yellow Pages on his lap and breathes out a long sigh as the cab crunches out of the pebbled parking lot. My father is big on scenic routes, which in this state just means trees and more curves in the road. Randy seems to read my father's mind. He drives like we're a family out for a Sunday ride, never turning onto a major street.

All four windows are down. My hair dries fast, whipping yellow strands across my face. My father's blows in flaps of gray. Out of the corner of my eye I watch Randy's black curls moving in the wind like waves.

On Randy's upper arm is a tattoo the size of a dime. It's letters I think, or maybe his girlfriend's name. Every time he takes a left turn I sneak a look, trying to read his skin. He catches on.

"You looking at this? It's my fraternity's initials."

My father leans forward in his seat for a look. "I was in a fraternity. I could tell you some wild stories. But not in front of my little girl here." He laughs and touches the back of my neck. I laugh too because I've heard them all already.

"Where do you go to college, son?"

he asks Randy. I still smell whiskey on him, but he sounds like he's starting to sober up.

"Well, I don't anymore. I might go back. I don't know," Randy answers, talking into the wind. He rubs his fingers over the letters on his arm, like he can erase them this way.

My father leans back in the seat. I want him to ask him something else. I want Randy to keep talking. I like the sound of his voice. It reminds me of the guy on the radio station at home, "Your all night DJ. Jeff Jenkins." When I can't sleep, I watch the red radio light glow in the dark. I flip the knob all the way over until I hear that voice: wise, friendly and tired in a cozy sort of way.

"Stop at that store over there. We need a few things," my father tells Randy. There's a package store next to a small grocery and an old gas pump out front. "Stay here honey." He points at me like you would a dog. He walks around the front of the cab, holding onto the hood for balance. He goes in the liquor store first.

"So," Randy says, turning his face to me, his arm still stretched out to the wheel. "You live on the island?"

"No, but my dad grew up there."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, and now he owns a restaurant."

"Close it up this weekend?"

"Yep."

He ungrips his hand from the wheel and flips down the visor for a cigarette. "You smoke?" he asks, holding the pack out to me.

"I tried once."

"Better not to." His hand cups around the lighted cigarette like he's protecting it from the wind, but the air is thick and still. I read the signs on the store window. He smokes and rips off the white strings hanging from his jean shorts. My father leaves one store and walks into the other waving at us like he's surprised we're still there.

"So," Randy starts again, this time turning his whole body toward me. I notice his feet are bare and dusty. "What do you do?"

"What do you mean? It's summer. I don't do anything."

"That must be nice."

"I guess."

He flicks his cigarette out the window then looks at the floor near my feet. A yellow paperback lays open like a fat butterfly. Across the front in black block letters *The Grapes of Wrath* is printed.

"Do you like to read?" he asks. "Sure, my father buys me books all the time. Not that thick though."

He laughs. Then he looks straight at me, serious, at my eyes and then at my neck. "Is that a room?"

I lift the chain from my neck and trace it until I feel the chain. I fuck in my chin and look down to examine it even though I know exactly what it is.

"Half moon," I tell him. "My best friend has the other half. She lives in Iowa now."

"Can I see?" he asks.

I hold the chain as far away from me as I can, the chain pulling the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. He slides closer on the seat and takes the moon from my hand. His skin smells like soap and fresh cut grass. He holds the silver crescent between his first finger and thumb, and reads the inscription almost in a whisper.

"To Katie, B/F/F, Love Emma." His breath is a mix of smoke and cinnamon gum. "B/F/F? What's that?"

"Best friends forever."

"That's really sweet," he says, placing it gently back on my chest. It feels cold on my skin, like the coins my brother used to lay on my eyelids when we played dead. Randy slides back behind the wheel.

"Hey kids." My father walks toward the car like a Weeble again from balancing two bags, full of whiskey and snacks. He

Red Radio Light

by Bethany Mott

drops the bags on the back seat and pulls out his pipe and pouch of tobacco. The open door creaks from his weight as he leans on the car to bang the pipe against the sole of his shoe. Then he fills and packs it tight with new tobacco, hickory. When he sucks at the bit I can hear the left over spit inside. He sits with his legs out the door, smoking, and flips through the phone book. "The Moby Dick Motel. 52 Water St. You know where that is?"

"Yes sir," Randy says with a grin. He swings his arm across the back of the seat near my shoulder, turns his head, and eases the cab out onto the street. For the rest of the ride he keeps his arm there.

No one talks now that we have a destination, like if we don't all concentrate we won't get there. The car picks up speed and fills with gasoline fumes, salty air, and whipping noises from the back seat. The plastic skin of the bathing suit bag twists and snaps in the wind. The brown paper bags make a deeper sound, a crackling and sometimes a whump. I don't mind so much missing the first day of school tomorrow or missing my mother, my little brother, and our dog. The sun is hot on my legs. I let my arm hang out the window, my hand curling, catching, fighting the breeze.

We pass at least six antique shops, each one looks like the last: brown shack, roof caving in, hand-carved sign out front, piles of wooden things crowding the dusty window and out in the dirt lot a rocking chair, a peeling bureau, and a spokeless wheel. Down the road I think I see a huge blue boat in someone's side yard, then I think it's a boulder or maybe a pool or just a piece of sky. The closer we get the less distinct the shape becomes. Randy takes a left turn and practically steers right into it. I notice an eye.

"Guess that's ol' Moby Dick," my father says, pointing to the blue mass.

"Hey, I thought Moby Dick was white," I say.

Randy says, "Yeah, he was, 'The great white whale.' This just shows up better, you know, so people will stop here."

"Right," I say as I get out to take in the whale: red smile painted on, up close blue paint chipping to gray. It sits heavy like a mountain on the yellow grass. The tail curves and comes up from the ground like a frozen wave. I imagine ways to climb up on the whale's back but I keep slipping from the shape, from the smoothness, like trying to get on a raft in the deep end of a pool.

Randy is helping my father lug the bags out of the cab. I walk to their side and notice the strap on my sandal is broken. My father will be mad, he just bought them for me. I wonder if I remembered my flip-flops.

"You're a good guy," my father says, patting Randy and patting his bare shoulder. I look at his whole body now. His skin seems familiar. He's taller than my father and softer somehow. My father asks Randy if he has a card. "We'll be needing a ride back to the car tomorrow."

"Be glad to," Randy says, reaching into his pocket. "If I'm on."

"Say good-bye," my father says to me. He watches us both like we're children practicing a manners lesson.

"Bye," I say.

Randy smiles. I notice the fleck again in the white of his eye. It seems greener now, a different color than the iris. It just floats there, watching in a separate way, seeing something in me I don't know yet.

