

*rhode island college magazine of the arts*

# SHORELINE

interview with *frank bidart*

# SHORELINE

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## feature interview

**frank bidart** lives and writes poetry in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Besides *In the Western Night*, his collected works, he has published three other books. *Shoreline* caught up with Mr. Bidart one weekend between a reading he gave at Rhode Island School of Design and a workshop he taught in connection with the Pawtucket Arts Council.

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## The Letting Go

Bright  
mid-May afternoon  
Debbie lies on her back  
The cement wall,  
full of heat,  
bakes her body  
so recently chilled by  
the swift ocean breeze  
I sit upright  
facing yards of  
seaside wall  
translucent, green bubble solution  
in my left hand  
wand  
in my right  
Waiting –  
Timely waves  
sound a loud “Sssshh!”  
and the clacking  
of beach rocks  
catches my attention  
as the waters recede  
Breaking –  
“She’ll be back in two months...”  
thinking today,  
her birthday,  
we silently wonder  
how she is  
in Switzerland,  
the haven  
she always says  
is cloudy and damp  
Her onionskin  
letters  
thin, blue envelopes  
always stamped:  
AIRMAIL  
shared and devoured  
by those  
she left behind  
I dip the wand

in the magic solution  
and then hold it  
to the breeze  
in silent  
tribute  
A cascade  
of swirling, colored  
bubbles  
salutes  
our friend  
a quarter of a world away  
Debbie holds herself,  
“He’s going to New Mexico, you know...”  
I nod in affirmation  
while my mind  
conjures  
Southwestern images  
inspired by  
Willa Cather  
I hear the hope  
and the loss  
in those words  
Yet, not knowing how  
else to comfort  
I hold  
the wand  
up  
in silent  
recognition  
of life’s journey  
change, growth –  
and as the glistening,  
delicate  
spheres  
float towards  
the light  
a grandfatherly man  
strolls by  
smiling  
and softly breathes,  
“It’s a beautiful thought...”

nadine skorohod

sep a rate

en ti ties

It's late afternoon, a Saturday,  
and we are sitting in my apartment  
drinking coffee. The phone rings.  
It's for her. I think nothing of it  
at first but then I realize that she  
doesn't live here anymore. It's the  
same kind of expression of carelessness  
that got her into this mess in the  
first place. She carries on like  
I'm not even there, flicking ashes  
on my formica while I spill some sambuca  
into my empty mug. Outside  
my living room window the neighborhood  
children are arguing. A station wagon moves  
slowly down the street. It's like a picture  
from the old family photo album. I say old  
because she destroyed it, along with other  
possessions, in what can best be described  
as something less than a clean break.  
She couldn't justify her actions to me, the  
police, our priest or anybody else for that  
matter. The therapist said that she was letting  
her inner bitch surface. I didn't feel  
like checking the wastebasket every morning  
for the rest of my life. Keep it all, just  
leave me be. My memory exists as a separate  
entity. The lawyer says that in five working days  
she'll be one too. The children are still  
arguing outside. But, on giving it a second thought,  
it seems as though they are only mimicking  
what they see in my living room window.

john mcaleer

Test

Beep.

Beep.

Vkejd.

This is.

Hummmmmmm.

This is a test of the Emergency Communications Network.  
This is only a test.  
You are simply hearing this tone  
So that you might be prepared for any  
Actual emergency that might occur.  
There is no need to panic.  
If you are panicking, please stop NOW.  
If you were in real danger,  
If a bomb were attached to the bottom of your chair,  
If your fly were down,  
If a friend of yours had grown to hate you,  
If the ceiling were about to fall in,  
If you were at risk of breaking down,  
If the building were being evacuated,  
We'd let you know about it,  
And tell you what, if anything  
You could do about it.  
Uh-huh, you betcha.  
This is a voice you can trust.

ben jones



## falling back into summer

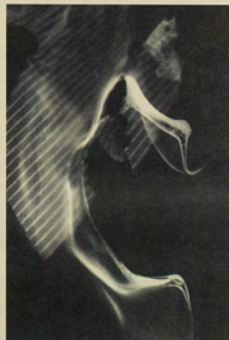
(a.k.a. Autumn is cool)

so tired of this october chill  
frost collects on dried leaves  
and windowpanes  
kids come around for their harvest  
giggles gather treats  
excitement exudes from under  
plastic masks  
and grease paint faces

by my childhood delights  
were found in summertime  
bare feet chasing over the lawn  
following the flickering path  
of fireflies  
we'd climb to tree tops  
trying to touch the stars  
hidden among night  
and the thick blanket of green  
Autumn was that grown-up  
who shook down the leaves  
that i hated to rake  
my sister would collect them up  
to stuff into her scarecrow  
mom would sift through  
the foliage to find specimens  
to iron under wax paper  
dad pulled the pumpkins off of the patch  
before it got too cold  
and  
i have never harvested  
anything  
but desire  
for summer  
to catch a firefly  
and watch it glow with  
all its might  
all night  
it often gets too cool  
in the fall to go  
chasing stars  
to put in jars

eileen james

photography by *todd lindeman*





## Over the River and Through

**a** If I heard, before it happened, was my sister saying, "And did you know that fish brains never stop growing?" Somewhere between Rhode Island and Pennsylvania I woke from quiet mundanity. We were on our way to my Gramma's house. I didn't have anything better to do. Riding in the car made me sick, and, even if I'd never had a tendency toward car sickness, who could get anything done with a bony elbow in her right side and a chatterbox sister at her left? I just sat there in awe: all the lights in the world came on. At once.

We'd been in the car breathing each other's bubblegum breath for around four hours. Matt had his elbow in my side, though Mom, who had, of course, never had the pleasure of sitting by him, ignored my complaints. My sister, Sue, was blabbing and blabbing and blabbing about school or something—I don't even know. What I do know is that I heard her say the thing about fish. That's when the car started spinning, and the whole world with it. Before I knew what happened I was flying—watching Mom and Dad nod their heads, pretending to understand; watching rays from my brother's eyes make a bridge for thoughts between his brain and the letters on the pages of his book; watching my sister shrink into a tiny, tiny twittering bird.

No one else seemed to gather the massive implications of this: their brain's never stopped growing. I thought of my old goldfish Freddy, who, actually, had never seemed too smart. I had tried to teach her to read for a good month or so when I was seven, but I kept getting all my books wrecked and Mom said she was going to take the tank out of my room if I didn't cut it out. I stopped, but not because I was convinced that I was wasting my time. Sometimes the way she swished her tail back and forth I thought for sure that she was getting excited about a good part or that she wanted me to turn the page. My heart was racing.

Mom told Dad we'd better stop in case "the kids" had to "go." None of us did, but I was dying to step out into the world I had just created and dance there endlessly.

As soon as the car stopped I was out the door. The other family members stretched in strange unison, except for Matt, who didn't budge. Sue stopped talking for a minute. I heard in the wind above the highway blasting for the music and ran out into the picnic tabled-lawn spiraling like a helicopter blade.

Mom yelled when I nearly knocked over a stroller. I ran up to her and told her that I thought my brain might be growing, especially since I'd been getting bad headaches lately. She just smiled and patted my throbbing head. I told her about how inside my head I was a fish, but that she couldn't tell because she was a human mom and they were sometimes not so smart. Pretty soon my brain would be bigger than hers, though, and then she'd know. Then she'd see. For a second, she got a weird look like she saw a bug on my face or like she didn't recognize me. The look went away, though, and she gave me a little shove in the direction of the restrooms. I understood: to her I was just a little girl. But that was okay. Thousands of blades of grass were singing to me. Yes, I hear you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Something inside was trilling.

After another four hours of Mom's folk music we arrived at Gramma and Grampa's yellow and blue house. I had figured the whole way there, singing extra loud to drown out Sue's endless monologue. Matt was thoroughly peeved. He was sulking when we pulled into the driveway. I know he didn't want to be there. I wasn't sure if I did. Mom never seemed to be too happy on these visits, and Gramma just asked lots of questions that Mom never seemed to know how to answer. I didn't know how I felt about Gramma myself. She cried a lot when we left. And laughed loudly while we were there. But she never seemed too surprised by anything. Gramma was funny anyway.

I looked over at Matt as the car pulled to a stop. Man, he looked like he was going to take a bite out of that book he was reading. He devoured books about sorcerers and dragons and

magic stuff. I couldn't understand it: the covers of those books grossed me out. But he really got into that sort of thing. (So into it, in fact, that he didn't ever bother to notice that he had his elbow jammed in my side.) He caught me staring at him and whacked my knee. I ouch and slapped him back. I knew it was a feeble comeback, but I was sure that as soon as my brain had grown I would have incredibly shocking and witty responses to his abuse.

Gramma watched us from her window for probably ten minutes—until we had unloaded everything from the car. When she finally came outside she was holding a baby, who was spitting up on her shoulder.

"Look at my new baby!" she cooed, as though she'd seen us just yesterday. I watched Mom's face to see if this was real. Of course it was.

"Oh, is this Margie's baby? What a doll!" She took the baby's raccoon hand and made funny faces at it. They talked about him for a good five minutes. Gramma never even acknowledged the fact that she hadn't seen any of us in eight months. I knew this was hurting Mom's feelings. I tried to send Gramma a telepathic message: *Please show Mom some affection. She is your daughter.*

The baby started screaming.

I'm sorry—I wasn't addressing you. I was speaking to the lady holding you, I explained to him.

I had every intention of continuing my apology, but Gramma was telling Mom that she just had to see their newly installed linoleum. She nudged us both inside while Matt, Sue, and Dad pursued an argument about the location of Sue's second suitcase. When we got to the kitchen I tried telling the baby (whose name was Gordon) that I was friendly and that he had no need to fear me. Either my warm thoughts or the bottle quieted the wiggling lump. I told him about fish and he grew a grin.

Gramma started to tell us all about this Margie person, some lady Mom had been friends with in school. Somehow or another Margie had ended up staying in Pennsylvania and living right near where she'd grown up, right near her former best friend's parents. Now she was away on a business trip and Gramma had a lot of tending to the kid.

Dad, Matt and Sue moved into the living room where Gramma offered easier company. Sue was still talking. My plan was to stick near the baby. Gramma put him in a high chair and took down some tea cups from the cupboard. I caught Mom looking around nervously.

And finally Gramma noticed me.

"So what have we been up to lately, Hannah?" she asked, pouring tea from a remarkable height. Boiling water splattered on my arm.

"Oh, nothing." I was trying not to flinch.

"You're getting big now aren't you?" she asked, pinching me for a quick estimate of body fat percentage. She sat down and searched my face for a good while. I tried to look away, but I was drawn to her hazel irises and intrigued: this was the lady my mom grew up calling

"Mom." Mom was looking pretty silly sitting across from me, picking her fingernails. Gramma began doodling on a napkin.

"Not really. I'm only an inch bigger than last time you saw me," I responded much later. She looked up and I caught a glimmer in her browner eye. I blinked.

Mom was still looking down, apparently studying her nails, so Gramma directed all of our attention to the intricate pattern of birds in her new linoleum. I only saw oceans bubbling to the surface. Too bad her kitchen was so yellow.

And she spoke again, turning to my mother, "Wow! I sure haven't seen you in a long time! Do you have a hug for Mom?"

It was like she'd just realized we were there.

That night I met my mom in the doorway to the bathroom. Her eyes were red and she—and everybody—was going to bed early. I realized then that she always looked over me or on

me, but never at me, like Gramma had. I hugged her and ran into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I squeezed my brain tight and sent off, *Even she loves you. She simply lacks the means of expressing her emotions.* Where did the words come from anyway? I didn't talk like that.

The baby woke in the other room and started whimpering. Gordon's little crib was in the room with me and my sister. I walked over to his cage and wondered if maybe he was one, too. Sue was already asleep—thank God—all that talking had worn her out. So I just sat down next to Gordon's crib in the dark.

Well, are you? I don't need an answer now. If you are not ready to divulge the information, I will wait until you are.

The baby's baby-blue eyes searched the darkness, finally locating the light beneath the door. Maybe nobody ever did really look at anyone else. I lay down on the floor in my cotton baby doll and thought about the linoleum and the trip. I watched people walking by, peering in on me from above.

"No, I'm quite alive, thank you," I whispered to them.

"I don't wanna go...no, make me some...no, I don't wanna," Sue was talking in her sleep.

"Well, you have to, so there," I told her, talking like Mom.

I moved to Sue's bed and stood over her sleeping face, watching her eyes move beneath her lids. This was "Susan," my sister, whoever that was. She would never look at me. I even tried opening an eye with no luck.

At 11:02 I walked out into the living room where Gramma was up watching the news. Gramma was reading the newspaper.

"Whatcha doing, honey?" she asked, her gray curls bouncing when she looked up.

"I can't sleep," I told her, and plopped down in a chair across the room from her.

"Come over here and tell me what you're doing in school now."

I didn't feel like it. I moved closer and tried lying.

"All we do is finger paint."

"That was always my favorite part," Gramma told me. *Nothing* could phase them.

"Yeah, but they make us paint war scenes with blood and guts," I lied again.

"Yes, I remember that too," obviously she didn't remember a thing.

The newsmen on T.V. was talking about beaching whales. Gramma explained that she didn't buy tuna because of the whales that got caught in the nets. She said there were enough of them dying that industry didn't need to add to their troubles.

"I sure do miss my tuna sandwiches!" Gramma sighed, "Your grandmother and her ethics. She'll drive an old fella nuts," Gramma hid behind his newspaper, chuckling. I looked at Gramma.

"You understand, don't you, Hannah?" she squeezed my arm, smiling. "So what should we do tomorrow? Think your mom and dad will be rested enough to go on some excursions? I was thinking it might be nice for us to drive out to the farm..."

"Oh, won't they just love that, Nora! The place is in shambles!"

Gramma ignored him. I asked her what farm she was talking about.

"The one I grew up on. The six of us, and Grandma, lived in a big farm house. My father was no farmer, but we always called it 'the farm' because there was so much country. It was a beautiful place. Pond in the back, trees all around. Some old friends own it now. You'd like it, I think."

I wanted to know about the pond.

"Don't get her started on the pond. You'll be sorry!" Gramma warned, as he ran to get ice cream for the three of us.

"Oh, the pond!" she laughed and pulled me closer. "My brother George used to catch fish and cook them for the two of us. There were some good fish in that pond, I used to watch them for hours..." She shut the television off. Gramma handed me a bowl of chocolate.

"You know, Hannah, one day about a month before she died, my grandmother took me out to the pond..."

"Nora, leave the poor kid alone. She doesn't want to hear about your crazy grandmother!" He sat down and picked up the sports section.

She continued, "We watched the sun on the water for a while. And then she told me that was where God lived, in the ripples. She said if I ever needed something, anything, to just walk out to the pond day or night and spit my fear of never getting it onto the brightest ripple..."

Gramma nuzzled from the corner. Gramma sent him a mean look.

"Anyway, I remember looking at her small body in her dingy dress and her worn-out old shoes and thinking how strange it was for her to be telling me to spit. And then I thought, 'Well, now, how could that possibly do anything? I wish it was that easy!' She stood very still and then, just as I was about to turn back to the house, she gripped my shoulder and, looking me right in the eye, she said, 'Now, there's a good one. Just go ahead—just spit it right out.'"

I told her I wasn't going to go spitting in any pond. I pulled away from her, and ran to the other side of the house and into the trees. I sat down in a place way into the woods and cried. I was about the same age as you, I think."

Gramma had her arm around my neck now. She smiled at me.

"She tells all the grandkids that story, Hannah...heh, heh! Well, but she changed her ending there a little, for you, I guess...What sort of trashy novels you been reading lately, Nora?" He was still smiling at her when he reached over and slapped her playfully with the newspaper he'd just folded up. He must have known something I didn't, but now he was going to bed.

"Your Gramma's loony," he whispered in my ear before he gave me a loud kiss. I wanted him to stay, so I wouldn't have to be alone with Gramma and her stories, but I knew there was no escaping at this point. She had this grip. He kissed Gramma and winked at us both before he disappeared up the stairs.

I know she kept talking to me, but after I finished my ice cream I must have fallen asleep. I can't remember anything else she said. I woke later in my bed to the sound of someone calling my name. My head hurt and a breeze was blowing through the window screen.

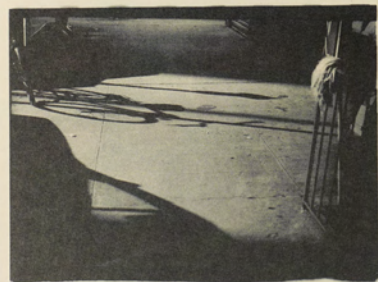
Gordon was awake and gurgling. There was poetry and singing coming from inside and out, everywhere. The grass and crickets hushed to listen. Susan turned over in her sleep and sighed.

*There were some good fish in that pond,* she'd said. I wondered how you got to be a "good" fish. I was thinking about Mom and her red eyes. Her distant look. It was the same in Sue's eyes. I tried sending out a message but could only think *I'm ready now*, though I'd no idea what for. I heard a whisper, "Hannah? Hannah? Are you awake?" I didn't know that I had ever been awake before. Matt appeared in the doorway.

"I can never sleep in this house—all its noises. I keep hearing...things." He sat down on my bed and flipped on the light. He searched my face for a few seconds before he opened his book and began reading.

My skull shivered. There was no sense putting it off any longer. I surfaced to gulp the cool, dry air, realizing I would never be alone again.

deborah zawadzki



photography by *billy r. ray*

Night:

Summer

on Bank St.

Dig the rhythm  
of the city summer  
the flash  
flutter  
Celestial beat

of stars with the  
blink  
splash  
of streetlights

and the smooth groove of cars  
with the crowd  
sliding  
swaying  
dancing in the heat

Friends gathered on bar stools  
as night smiled through the cigarette  
smoke and our whiskey grins  
We could do nothing but rejoice  
had no choice

eileen james



## Pretty Good Lies

hey, you're an English major, am I right? I thought so. You're always going way too deep into things, going on about what x means or what y symbolizes. It's no way to live. Me, I'm into accounting. Just give me numbers, baby. Let the calculator do all the thinking.

What do I want? Well, I wanted to tell you about something that happened to me a couple of weeks ago, just before exams. It was strange, and to tell you the truth I can't quite figure it out. You know something, between you and me? I think it's supposed to mark a significant moment in my life, like a turning point or something. An epiphany? Is that what it's called? Well, you ought to know. Nothing traumatic, I haven't gone insane or anything, and that's what's confusing me. Just a lot of weird stuff that I'm not sure how to deal with. I can't get the events to balance correctly in my head. I figured you could tell me what it all means and why I feel the way I do. To be honest, I don't trust psychologists, so I figured an English major would be the next best thing. Yes, I'm serious. And everything I'm going to tell you is true, even though it may sound odd or made up. There's no sense in me lying, so you have to believe what I tell you. I bet you don't even care if I'm telling the truth or not, now that I think about it. You probably just want to hear a good story, to hell with symbolism. Come on, admit it...

I'm in the A&P near my apartment (and near my old house for that matter) picking up essential items. I room with two other guys and I agree to do all the food shopping provided they clip the coupons out of the newspaper and wherever else they find any. Clipping coupons is a white trash pastime and I don't like to associate myself with those kinds of activities, though I don't mind saving a dollar here and there. Fortunately, I went to high school with one of the check-out girls and I always go to her station with the coupons. Nothing you do in front of Heather is embarrassing. Anyway, I'm in the frozen foods section, picking up a couple of pints of Ben & Jerry's and some Swanson frozen dinners. I'm a big fan of Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough and my roommates go in for Salisbury Steak. It's another of the compromises we live under.

I bet you still live at home, right? In the dorms? Even worse. I spent a year in those ratholes, had a Psych major for a roommate. Let me tell you, they really f---ed up on that one. I kept asking me these lunatic questions, like which shoe did I put on first in the morning, and was it the same one I took off first at night. Who really gives a shit? One morning he wakes me to tell me he's doing an experiment. He asks me to write down the number of times during the day that I become conscious of my own breathing. He wakes me up to tell me this! Well, as you can imagine, I was conscious of my breathing all goddamned day. I couldn't think of anything else. This went on for weeks, well after I told him what had happened and he had given me a knowing smile, as if he knew all along that this little experiment would screw up my life indefinitely.

Then one day it stopped, as if my brain reminded itself that breathing was involuntary. Even so, I needed to get the hell out of there. He was just too strange. So I took an apartment with a couple of history majors. They're quiet, they don't bother me much. I divided up the space on the refrigerator shelves equally, and so far they've stuck to it. About other things, like I said, I can compromise.

Alright, I'm in the frozen foods section, and coming down the aisle towards me is Blake, a fluorescent beeper clipped to his maroon apron. Blake is also in the business curriculum, and we were in the same marketing class last semester. He helped think up slogans for my ad presentations. I kept drawing blanks. Everyone likes Blake—when he's around. When he's not around, nobody likes Blake.

"What's up Chester," he says. Blake calls everyone Chester, which is one of the reasons no one likes him. Blake also went to high school with me, before he followed me to college. I say followed because he has this habit of popping up wherever I happen to be. Clubs, movies, restaurants. Last summer coming home from California who do I meet at JFK Airport on the connecting flight home? Blake had gone to Cancun. The fact that he works at the A&P in my neighborhood, despite the fact that he lives on the other side of the city, seems like one more way to haunt me.

"Hey, Blake. How's it going?" I say, avoiding eye contact, instead sticking my head into the freezer and pulling out the Ben & Jerry's. When I emerge, Blake is leaning on my cart. His eyes are all bloodshot and when they see the ice cream, Blake responds, "Hey, Cookie Dough!"

Then he stands upright again and reaches into his back pocket. He pulls out, of all things, a spoon. I barely have time to wonder why he would carry a spoon around in his back pocket when he pulls out yet another spoon and hands it to me. Then he takes one of the pints from me and pops the lid.

"I love this stuff," he says, taking in a mouthful. He hands me back the pint. What can I do? I dig in.

After a swallow, Blake says, "Guess what, Chester? I'm going back in business."

"I didn't realize you were out of business," I tell him.

"No, not that. The other business."

Blake used to be a bookie up at the college. One of them, anyway. The one that didn't get arrested. Blake's brother-in-law is a state trooper, and he "accidentally" tipped Blake off about the impending raids. Blake was able to close up shop in time to salvage the \$20,000 he had made during the run. Some assholes are blessed, so they remain assholes all their lives.

Then there's the other business that he didn't quit, the one I was reminded of when his beeper went off.

"Ah, shit," Blake sees the number. His beeper is fluorescent pink. One of the things I love about American industry, that makes me want to be a part of it, is that we can market items specifically for criminals, as you'll never see a doctor or lawyer wearing that sort of thing. Not just any kind of criminal either. The kind of guy who wants the world to know he's a criminal.

Blake shakes his head, runs his hand through his hair. I take up another mouthful of ice cream, refusing to give in to curiosity.

Then he wipes his spoon on his apron, sticks it back in his pocket and says, "Gotta go make a phone call, Chester. You know how it is. See you around." He leaves me with a half-eaten pint of Ben & Jerry's and his spoon, which I shove into the container and place back in the freezer, taking out a fresh pint.

What was Blake doing carrying around two spoons? You're asking me? I'm the one that wants to know. I remember in high school he'd always have a comb sticking out of his back pocket, or a switchblade on the days he felt he needed one. But spoons, that was new to me.

Listen, forget it. Don't worry about the spoons. They don't have anything to do with the rest of the story. At least I don't think so.

I go into Heather's line, my coupons cupped inside my palm, visible to none. I had just been with her a few nights ago and I usually don't like to talk to her again until at least a couple weeks after, when I'm ready for it again. But it's either that or go through someone else's line with the coupons, and I'd rather deal with her.

I've known Heather for five years, the same amount of time she's been working at the A&P. She was already well on her way to becoming the kind of girl she is today, although I'd never noticed her in high school, not until she started working in the market. Only then did I realize she was a neighbor, within walking distance, even from where I live now. I love the way she thrusts her hips violently forward in order to close the register drawer. It's a habit she's never lost, even during the time she was pregnant.

It's funny about Heather. Before she became pregnant, people used to think she was too skinny, and I used to tell them she was as thin as you could be without being considered skinny. Then she had the baby, and everyone thinks she's fat. I think she's chunky, but just a few pounds short of where you would call her fat. She's always on the edge of something.

She checks out a few items without a word. It's obvious she's pissed at me for whatever reason. Just a matter of time before I have to leave about it.

"If you were going to skip out on me, you could have at least locked the door on your way out." She's right, but I always leave the door wide open. I figure she's got a bigger beef.

"My mother came down to my apartment five in the morning"—she's lived on the ground



floor of their tenement by herself since she was thirteen—"and there I am, naked on the living room floor, that bottle of shit vodka you brought over on the coffee table, and I have to hear how Claudia's been up all night coughing and crying, running a fever, and that we should take her to the emergency room."

She grabs the coupons out of my hand. I grab a *Time* off the rack and flip through it while she goes on.

"So I sit up, I can't even open my eyes, my head hurts so much, God knows where my clothes are, can't remember who Claudia is. The only thing that's real to me is my mother going on and on and on..."

"It's not my fault," I tell her, perusing an article. Some new discovery related to Darwin. I'm into Darwin. "If you were more responsible, if you took better care of Claudia in the first place, you wouldn't have to hear of any of that." To tell you the truth I could care less, but it's real easy to take the moral high ground around Heather. She's defenseless in the realm of morality.

She exhales and grunts, "Fifty-eight nineteen." She glares at me. "After coupons," she adds. I look around to see if anyone is paying attention, which, fortunately, they're not. I hand her the cash, then she makes change and fires her hips at the drawer with such energy that I ask her when she's getting off work.

"Right now," she tells me, which, horny as I had now become, is not what I have in mind. "Good, I needed a ride home," she throws in. There's no getting out of it at this point. She shuts off her aisle number (three) and sheds her apron. I throw the *Time* on top of the bags in the carriage without paying for it.

We're on our way out the door—the carriage had hit the rubber pad and the doors had swung open, we were that close—when Blake comes out of nowhere to stop us.

"Hey, Gary, I need a favor." I should have known when he called me by my real name that it was going to be a hassle.

John Uptide? Who the hell is John Uptide? The story. "A&P?" Oh, yeah. I remember that from when they forced me to take that Western Lit class. The checkout boy dumps his job for some barefoot snobby girl. Didn't he get screwed in the end? I don't mean that literally, I just meant that he doesn't get the girl.

What's the big deal, here? You and your stupid details. We could have just as easily been at Almacos or Stop & Shop. Just calm down and listen to me. I'm beginning to think you're missing the point.

What Blake needed, he explained, was for someone to make a delivery for him, since he'd already used his allotted fifteen minute break and was working until closing. His partner, according to Blake, was in New York and, get this, I was the only one he could trust to do it for him. It entailed driving crosscountry to his house, picking it up, and bringing it to the address he wrote on the back of my receipt.

I give him a million excuses why I can't do it. Sick mother, dying uncle. Pretty good lies, I'm thinking. Then he reminds me of the \$170 I owe him from last year's NCAA tournament prior to his shutting down (I had bet against Duke, those pansies, three consecutive games). I resist some more, tell him that when he went out of business all debts were cancelled. Then he turns over my receipt and he sees the deductions. Blake smiles, hands me the receipt, and says, "Chester, I never thought you were the kind of guy that would clip coupons." Then he walks away, leaving me his keys and a total stranger's address.

Heather insists on coming along. Since the neighborhood is so shitty, I figure why go alone. Besides, I get lost easy, and Heather seems to know how to get around.

At the intersection before Blake's house we get behind this station wagon. I'm staring at a bumper sticker on the back window that reads "Powerless" when all of a sudden the wagon rips out in a patch of dirt and runs the red light. I try to move up to the white line and this black labrador shoots out onto the road. I stop short and—remember, we're in the inner city here—the dog just looks at me, or the front of the car anyway, and lays down.

You read about these kinds of things in the city police log, but you never figure being involved. That's the only explanation I have for getting out of the car to move the dog. As soon as I get around to the front of the car, Heather beeps the horn in my ear and it wakes me out of my stupidity, just in time to get back in the driver's seat and lock the door before this crazy immigrant-looking guy with a knife beats me to it. He shouts something at me in fluent non-English when I take off. I'm thinking it must have been his dog, or was until I ran the mutt over peeling out of there.

So Heather essentially saved my life, and her own. Her previous hostilities found a new vent. She ragged on me for getting out of the car like some kind of tourist. I suppose I deserved it, but who needs to hear that stuff from her?

"You're such a fool! Didn't you see 'Bonfire of the Vanities'?" she yells.

"No, but I read *Bonfire of the Vanities*." True enough, although I'll admit it's the only book I've read since my eighth grade summer reading list.

"You mean they made a book out of the movie?" Heather asks. Questions like that really make me wonder about her sometimes.

"Isn't it a wonderful world," I begin to say. Talking with Heather is like talking to cement, so you can think aloud around her when you feel like it. It's another of the reasons I like her so much. "Isn't it a wonderful world where criminals train dogs to play dead in the road so they can conduct more efficient carjackings?"

Heather jumps up and points down the road. "There's Blake's house." I slow up and park in front of it.

Blake's house is surprisingly nice considering the shit surrounding it. Heather and I let ourselves in. Blake assured us that his dad would not be home and even if he was, he wouldn't care. I finger for a light switch while Heather marches on in the dark. When the room goes bright I spot her down the hall already turning into what I figure is Blake's bedroom.

I follow her path and enter the room. Upon recollection that was the exact moment when I became disoriented.

It was all mirrors. I used to sell furniture part-time and I'd seen this kind of stuff before, but never so much at once. The drawers on the chest were mirrored. The bureau, too. The doors on the armoire were mirrored. The headboard as well as even the nightstands were mirrored. Not only the drawers but the tops of them, too. It was a square room, and all these mirrors were facing each other, reflecting nothing.

And right in the middle of all this, on the end of the bed in the exact center of the room—and never mind questions about why such a thing would be on Blake's bed—lay a copy of *Backlash* by someone named Susan Faludi.

"He said it was in a shoebox, but there's a hundred shoeboxes in here," Heather was in the closet, searching for the product. I looked around some more, but I don't know what I was looking for. I don't know how to look for explanations. There were too many variables, not enough raw data. All these formulas spun around in my head. None of them plugged in.

I kept as much distance from the bed—and the book—as I could. No good reason. I breathed a sigh of relief when I noticed a marketing textbook on the floor by the closet. I figured things would settle down.

"Here it is." Heather emerged from the closet with a fistful of cellophane, stepping on the textbook on her way towards me.

Then she did the strangest thing. I guess you would say it was totally out of character for Heather, but she reached over to the bed and picked up the copy of *Backlash*.

She took it with us.

On the way to our next destination Heather pinched out of the bag and rolled herself a joint. I rarely touch the stuff, don't really know what good it does. But given the situation, not to mention the price, she was able to talk me into it.

We were headed to the good part of the city. The best and worst areas are practically connected, with hardly a buffer. No train tracks or anything. The other side of town, where Heather

and I come from, is all middle class and mediocre. All the bratty kids from high school came from this, the good part. Although you could never tell them apart from the scum in Blake's neighborhood.

By the time we found the right house we had finished the joint. You always hear how pot enhances your imagination. But if you're like me, there's nothing to enhance. What it did do was make me focus on all the weirdness that had taken place that day, and braced me for what was yet to come.

Heather rings the doorbell which I doubt anyone can hear since there's this music coming from the cellar, shaking the porch we're standing on. But I guess Blake did phone ahead because there's someone at the door within seconds.

"Hey, you must be Blake's pals, come on in." Right in front of me is this drop dead gorgeous girl. Eyes, tits, blonde, you know what I'm talking about. But she's wearing this suit jacket with giant shoulder pads. I hadn't seen such a thing since my mother quit her bank job six years ago.

"Come down and play," she says, motioning me and Heather to follow her. That's when I notice she's also wearing Reeboks.

We descend into the cellar and the sight is beyond belief. There's about thirty or forty people sprawled around this huge room. All the guys have their hair slicked back and are wearing bright suspenders. All the girls look like the one who answered the door. Way over at the other end of the room are these phony paper mache bathroom stalls where people were snorting real cocaine.

Everyone is dancing to the unreasonably loud stereo system. I recognize the song, and this surprises me. "I Want Candy." Remember Bow Wow Wow? Back when we first got MTV? I liked everything I saw.

The hostess shouts toward me and Heather. "It's an eighties revival party."

"Blake didn't tell us it was a party," Heather screams back. Her face looks cute, the picture of bewilderment.

"Did you bring the marijuana?" the hostess asks. "We still have to satisfy the hippy set, you know."

Heather nods and the hostess leads us to one of the phony bathroom stalls. There are no doors on them, with commodes instead of toilets. A couple of guys in suspenders join us. The only way I can tell them apart is that one of them is holding a copy of Lee Iacocca's autobiography, on which the hostess dumped some of the pot to be broken up.

"Hey, you're in my economics class, aren't you?" the boy without the book says, sipping a Michelob.

"Oh, yeah. I didn't recognize you," I laugh. He's just the sort of person who would be doing this sort of thing. He pulls a small packet out of his shirt pocket.

"Make room on Lee for me," he says, dumping a small dusting of cocaine on top of Iacocca's face. "Let's give our new friends a test drive." I figure it's inappropriate to refuse.

Have you ever tried that stuff? Know anything about it? Just what you read in stories and books? You mean people in books do this kind of thing? Even the books you read for courses? What a strange thought. Drugs in literature.

I'll admit that it was the first time I'd tried it, so he sort of had to talk me through the procedure. We each snorted some through a rolled up dollar bill while Heather watched. The poor girl, she was still wondering what was going on. I had no idea she was still carrying Backlash. Steve Winwood came on the stereo and everyone boomed until it was replaced by Blondie, which brought down the house, everyone shouting "Call Me" after Debbie Harry. By the time we were through, Iacocca's face was clean.

The hostess gave Blake's money to Heather. Then she kissed Heather on either cheek and did the same to me. I never saw her again. One of the suspender twins—the one with the Iacocca autobiography—went to get more Michelob. My classmate pulled out what was left of the packet.

"Would you like to do a line?" he asked Heather.

"Sure, what the hell," she said.

"Hold out your book."

She did and I instinctively took a step back. I'm not good at reading situations but for once I did something right.

"What the fuck is that doing here?" I heard over the music.

Before Heather had a chance to react my classmate had snatched Backlash from her hands, spilling the little bit of cocaine that had escaped from the packet.

The next few minutes were confusing, considering I was as drugged as I had ever been in my life. What I do remember is a bunch of guys in suspenders carrying Heather up the stairs, one of them yelling about New Age feminist propaganda, whatever that is. I went to a window, and at ground level I saw Heather tumbling out onto the front lawn, then the book following, hitting her on the ass. I stood puzzled for a moment until someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was my classmate.

"Hey," he told me, "you can't have your woman bringing shit like that down here."

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I felt he was right. I nodded in agreement, and we went over to the bar to have a Michelob.

What do you mean, what about Heather? What does she have to do with this? I was right. I knew you were only listening to me for the story. You're supposed to be helping me, remember?

What happened next? Well, I must admit I had a good time. After the party? I don't see where this is relevant. Okay, okay. I'll tell you.

I had forgotten all about Heather by the time I left the party, but I realized that I still had Blake's keys. I was completely wired from the cocaine and my thoughts were a bit frenzied. I flipped on the radio as I drove and "Shock The Monkey" was on. I broke into a cold sweat, although I couldn't help but turn up the volume. I wasn't myself. This I was sure of.

I nearly missed Blake's house because all the lights on the street were out. I went to the door, figuring I'd just drop the keys in the mailbox and bail out of there. But as I stood on the top step a car from the next block backfired, setting off a chorus of barking dogs. I came out of my skin and took cover in Blake's house.

There was silence, with the exception of the dogs, who sounded muffled once I closed the door. I thoughtlessly began to turn on lights. I walked quickly down the hall and Blake's bedroom door was open. He and Heather were in there.

Now this is no big deal, as such. It's a perfectly believable scenario. What shook me up was that he was reading to her. He was reading her passages of Backlash. It was beyond me. Way beyond me.

"Hey, Chester," Blake said, as if we were at the supermarket or something. Heather just gave me a steely look, like she had something on me. I was incapable of reaction.

"I got your keys here." I dropped them on one of the nightstands.

As I turned to leave Heather said, "You got a lot to learn, Gary."

"What?" I wanted to hear what she had to say. Instead, I got Blake.

"Chester, you must learn to respect the needs of a modern woman," Blake said, and with that they started in on each other, not waiting for me to leave. Backlash fell from the bed and landed on Heather's underwear. I had bore witness to something, and as I left the house and entered the outside world, I felt overwhelmed by it.

Are you happy now? That's the whole story. No, wait, there's one more thing, the real caper. I had forgotten the groceries in the trunk of my car. The Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough melted all over my Time. It was what you would call ironic, right?

They made an ass out of me. That's the way I see it. I'm just not sure how they did it. Am I missing something? Is there anything significant to be learned from the whole experience? Come on, analyze. I kept you entertained. Now explain it to me, tell me what the hell is going on here.

**Shoreline:** At the reading today your brief biography said that you were teaching at Brandeis. I wasn't aware that you were teaching.

**Bidart:** I teach actually at Wellesley now.

**Shoreline:** And what are you teaching?

**Bidart:** I teach workshops and literature courses. I like to do both.

**Shoreline:** How do you feel about workshops? We spend a lot of time working with the same students. It seems like the same fifteen ideas get talked about all semester without any new ideas coming out of it.

**Bidart:** What you are bringing up are the problems with workshops. Like anything, workshops can be good or they can be bad. Or a mixture. I think that the hardest thing as a writer is to get a feeling for just what the words on the page are doing. What you can learn from a workshop is how this thing you've made is understood by other people. How it's heard by other people. It's not that they are all right. But it's what Proust says somewhere. Proust says that we don't need the work of art, the work of art needs us. It's perfectly true that that is going to become like an x-ray of our own ways of reading, of our own predilections, of our own feelings. But you can still see what the words are doing. And the more you know those people, in fact, the more you are going to understand what in them is being evoked by those words and you will still learn a great deal about the thing that you made, by seeing it out there. I also think it's true that to be a writer is this amazing combination to risk everything, to be very vulnerable, and yet to make something that has a kind of public existence outside yourself. And that extremely, often, painful process of letting people that sometimes you don't even like or respect handle something that you have made. That is a good and necessary process. It's part of being a writer. Being a writer is to be somebody who can both risk everything in terms of vulnerability and yet make a public object that then becomes something that other people touch, handle, talk about, think they know something about and the problems with effective workshops—you have readers that seem to you imperfect. Well that's only an image of what it is to be a writer and what the world is. You're always going to have imperfect readers. But you can learn so much from them. You can see they become a kind of mirror—it's the only mirror you're really ever going to have.

**Shoreline:** But if you know these people then you know the kind of things that they are going to pick out.

**Bidart:** Well, in a way, yes. And very often, something that a writer thinks is very clear isn't clear. Or a connection that is maybe central to the poem that is made in the author's mind but isn't made so that 95% of the readers can get it. As a teacher, I don't bring into a workshop a poem—I decide when poems are done and which poems are done—I wouldn't bring in a poem that didn't have to me something at its center worth making a poem out of. I often think the poem is not fulfilled and what I try to do as a teacher—as someone who talks about the poem—is to help that poem fulfill that action that is at the center, that spine. Now, often I think a writer can see more clearly perhaps what that central action is through a discussion in a workshop or where it goes wrong, where it doesn't fulfill itself. But particularly with undergraduates I wouldn't say, "Look, this poem isn't worth writing." I might say in a conference when it's just the two of us, "Look, I don't see what you're doing here. I don't see that this has any life. I don't see what is animating it." But I wouldn't subject the person to that in front of fifteen other people. I put a lot of emphasis on revision. I think often poems don't embody or fulfill that animating action—animating impulse or spine. And sometimes one can see that much more clearly when it's through a discussion with a lot of people. So, I think workshops can breed timidity, they can breed a kind of conventionality because certain things are very recognizable and in a way defensible moves in a poem and you have to resist that. And you have to resist making a



photography by *billy r. ray*



poem that is armored against every kind of possible objection. That's the downside of workshops. But I think that if the right person is leading the discussion you can not enforce such a conventional set of values and expectations about the poem. I don't believe that you should try to produce what used to be called or maybe is still being called the "workshop poem." That poem that's so well made that everybody says, "Wow." And yet it's a little empty. Maybe it doesn't have something at its center that is important or that really moves people, but is elegantly put together and has a lot of showy images and clever moves. That's not something I'm pushing for. But, I feel I learned a lot by going to workshops. By listening to poems being discussed, thought about line by line, in detail. So I feel that there should be a way for other people to learn like that.

**Shoreline:** This leads me to think of how what you write no longer belongs to you after it's printed.

**Bidart:** That's right. It no longer belongs to you and it is not you in the way that it might have been you then. You are also changed in the act of making it. Which is one of the purposes of making it.

**Shoreline:** What about education? It seems so important in writing.

**Bidart:** It does transform the way you see the world.

**Shoreline:** You seem to get inspiration from literary sources. In the *Western Night* reflects this I think.

**Bidart:** Oh, absolutely. The beginning of a piece by Borges says we fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed. One way things happen that you make something is by taking a pre-existing form or a pre-existing subject matter and filling it. But in the process of filling it you don't come out with something that is just Keats or Shakespeare. It's different, it's changed. You fill it, you embody it. You make it something that is your own. You have changed that thing. Ideally you are also changed in the act of making it. It's a journey—something is at risk for you. You are changed. It's not as if it comes out of nothing. It never comes out of nothing. I think what happens is often people are not aware of what it comes out of. They're at the mercy of their idea of what a poem is so that they don't know there are other ways to make a poem. Or that there are other kinds of structures or other ways of imagining a shape or a form. There may be some way in which they really have to transform the source or the form they are given but they don't know how to do it because they think it's the only possible way to do it. I think what you have to do is understand that one of the things education gives you is that it exposes you to many, many ways of making things. So you're not trapped in a very narrow set of expectations, of forms, of ways to make things. You're always building on something. Ideally, you build on it so that you're not a slave to it. You are not at its mercy. You don't ever build on nothing. Language isn't built on nothing. Language is built out of all the sentences and words you ever heard, but by having gone through you there will be an accent. Mallarmé says that each person is a rhythmic knot. That rhythmic knot that you are, that consciousness that you are, will transform the language, the thing you are given. But you are always starting from something, and it's not just words, it's also forms, it's shapes, it's patterns of feeling.

**Shoreline:** If ideally you are changed during the process of writing, does this mean the reader will automatically be changed also?

**Bidart:** If it's going to be an important psychic event for anyone else to read your poem, it's an important psychic event and act for you to make the poem. Frost quotes Horace in saying, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." The point isn't to get the reader to cry, the point is

something has to be at stake for the writer. If something is at stake, the writer—to however small a degree—will be changed in the act of embodying and discovering and exploring that thing that is at stake for them.

**Shoreline:** We talk about that in workshops—how finding an emotional truth will convince the reader. But that doesn't mean you want to go around writing an autobiography either.

**Bidart:** I think Eliot talks a lot about impersonality. But in fact his poems are intensely personal. I don't mean that they are all exactly autobiographical in detail, but I think there is a huge amount psychically at stake. In fact, late in his life he was really quite explicit about this. He talks about how *The Wasteland* is all wound up with, again, what was psychically at stake for him in his marriage. There are even lines in *The Wasteland* that were written by his wife, said by his wife. The psychic state that comes out of it was his own. I think that is equally true of *Four Quartets*. I think *Four Quartets* is at least in important aspects a confessional poem. It certainly has an amazing, even directness about its relation to Eliot's own life. In a way that *The Wasteland* is not so directly openly about his own life. It is. Certainly I think that that is true of Pound's work too. I think it becomes very explicit with the *Pisan Cantos*. I'm not talking about autobiography. I'm talking about what is socially going on in the psyche. For example, I have never been anorexic, I'm not female, but a huge amount is at stake for me in "Ellen West" and the fact that I'm not anorexic and female doesn't mean that I'm not absolutely as implicated in that material as I think anyone else is.

**Shoreline:** You read a piece of prose today. Can you tell us a little about that?

**Bidart:** That piece is a response to a piece by Borges called "Borges and I." Borges talks about himself as the "I" in the Borges and Borges is the writer. And then there is this "I" that is not the writer. My piece talks about "Frank" in the way that there is a desire not to be a distance between the essential "Frank" and the "Frank" who makes poems. But the "Frank" that makes poems makes poems that then later are not the perfect image of "Frank." "Frank" has gone on and continued and I hope changed and I hope in fact been changed by the process of the writing. And later looks back at the writing and can only actually go on and write more things if he feels the distance between that thing and himself. Because there's still something to be done. Some something that is not wholly the truth in that earlier embodiment of "Frank." What I'm trying to do is escape from a sense that there is something fundamentally inauthentic or inessential in the embodiment in the made thing. The whole premise of the Borges is that there is this disjunction between the historic, rather vain, theatrical self who makes and this other more private self. I'm hoping to, in a way, escape that disjunction.

**Shoreline:** At the reading you talked about the world of your imagination.

**Bidart:** Yes, the world in which I read my poems aloud is night and somehow this light is not a very good light for me to read my poems in. This is entirely idiosyncratic. I'm not suggesting that for someone else this should be true. In some ways I think my poems are like little pools of light surrounded by this vast darkness and they create their own arena and it's not the arena that you can see by that light, by daylight. It's an arena where everything can be seen because it has a necessity about it, it's part of a pattern, it's part of a shape and for me the hard thing about daylight, that light—daylight—throws a relatively even light on a great deal of stuff and it shows the surface and all the time my poems are trying to get beneath the surface. In a way I sort of crave an arena where everything means something. I try to create for the period of the poem—it may be a strange or shocking order, but there's a kind of order—a kind of necessity about everything.



**Shoreline:** You prefaced part of the reading this morning by saying that you were going to read some love poems. But "In the Ruins" doesn't seem like a love poem. Can you explain what you mean by love poems exactly?

**Bidart:** It's a poem about love in the sense that it's a poem about feeling an injunction that involves one's project as a poet. And if what you love is your fate, that's part of one's fate. It reflects something in you that you love that this should be your project. But I agree that the term is more stretched in relation to that poem than the others. But, after all, if you do try to return the dead to life, somewhere that's an act of love.

**Shoreline:** How did you get started? Did you always want to be a poet?

**Bidart:** No. I always knew I wanted to be an artist. I didn't know what kind of artist. I don't think that one should think that poetry is over here and fiction is over here and movies are over here. I mean I think that all those people are makers, and I seem to be able to make things in poems on the page. If I could make movies, and if what I had to make seemed to have to be a movie, I would do that. I don't give any priority to one way of making to another. Anyway, I grew up wanting to be a filmmaker or a director. I always wanted to write poems but I didn't think my poems were very good and I never felt that that was the thing that I could make, and then when I went to graduate school, I—first of all I never actually made a film, I shot a little bit of footage—but there was some way, in fact, that working through images and having to work collaboratively is alien to me. My imagination of the films I wanted to make was very different from the act of making films. I think I'm not a collaborator. It was really in graduate school that what I had to write about, and the way that I could make a work of art that embodies it, seemed to require writing poems.

**Shoreline:** That is an interesting point of view because sometimes in literature classes,

you get professors who seem to have a real disdain for pop culture.

**Bidart:** Some of the most profound experiences I've ever had, have had to do with film. I remember the first time I saw *Red Desert* or *Adventure* and the kind of joy that came out of Judy Garland in a film. The point is that the arts don't all do the same thing. They're all different, and can embody things in different ways. There are reasons that poems get made instead of films. There is a way that words are connected to the paper that is part of our inner life. To ourselves we are partly a voice and that voice uses words, and this you could embody in a poem. Maybe you couldn't in a film. A film has to work through images. There is a way in which words are both physical and they are abstract. You can embody that joining of physicality and abstraction in words in a work of art in a way that is very hard to in film. Each medium can do certain things. But it's not like I think that now in the twentieth century that we can make films that poems somehow don't matter.

**Shoreline:** When you see your work on the page do you think, "This is my voice?"

**Bidart:** Getting it right on the page is very hard for me. I go through hundreds of versions on the page. The idea is not to get it on the page to look the way I read it aloud, but rather to replicate the voice in my head. But there is that interior thing that both of them are embodiments of. But, if I can get it to the point that feels right on the page, that always seems to me the truest embodiment. It's more right on the page than any performance I can give it aloud. Ideally the poem should be better than any reading that I can give it. But it's very hard to make the words on the page read the way I hear the words in my head. That's what I struggle hard to do. And that's why I go through all sorts of revisions—to try to see just what the words on the page are doing. Not add a voice just because it is the voice in my head. But try to make my eye try to have the experience that I've given by the voice in my head.

**Shoreline:** What do you think about performance poetry?

**Bidart:** I've certainly heard poems read aloud that where very powerful but that then failed to make a structure that embodied that movement, because they were not as powerful on the page. If a person can make something in any medium that is compelling, well then that's wonderful. It doesn't have to be something else. I haven't seen a huge amount but that's partly because I'm so overwhelmed with the things I have to do—but it's not that I think it's not worth paying attention to. I have just gotten such pleasure and joy and been so moved by so called pop culture. One has to respect that. One has to honor that. If I could write a song that was good, I would do it. If I could write a lyric that was wonderful, I would do it. I certainly would not abstain from doing it.

**Shoreline:** I noticed that you smiled when we mentioned "Herbert White" earlier.

**Bidart:** It's a poem that I think can so easily be read the wrong way. I've heard people who think that it's a celebration of the things that Herbert White does, and it's not. And, for me the poem would be utterly impossible, if there were not the things in the poem having to do with ideas. It seems to me that in the world I come from, he embodies crucial things. He's someone who wants very much for his world to have meaning, but he doesn't know how to get that meaning. The closest thing he can get to meaning is to perform often destructive acts, in relation to other people and, ultimately, to himself. It's a destructive act that fulfills some pattern. But he doesn't understand what the pattern is. But he does, at least, get the sensation of order and meaning. But that's so terrifying, because in the process, he hurts other people. He kills other people. He's like a proto-metaphysician or something. He's somebody who wants the world to yield order and pattern and meaning. And has to make it all himself. He's really someone without 20,000 books in his head. He's without many, many, models and ideas and conversations and dialogues about who we are and what we are and what our feelings are grounded in and how our feelings are connected with each other. He doesn't have any of that. He has to do it all himself, and he does a very bad job of it. He's the chaos out of which everything else is trying to rise.

**Shoreline:** Do you write everyday?

**Bidart:** No, not at all. I write when I see something that must be written, I write when I see some form or order or pattern. When I see something, and I can imagine some form or container for it. And I get very caught up doing it. But then I don't write for long periods of time.

**Shoreline:** What kind of advice would you give us, just starting out?

**Bidart:** Rationally, I can tell you "write everyday," or "find a time to write," but that's not how I lead my life. When I get involved in a poem I let it completely take over my life. I stop doing almost everything else and I stay up all night for days. I'll be very ruthless about the matter. But, then for large periods, I'm not writing. I think you must always try to make things in your head. I think every human being has some crucial thing in our psyches that we're working at, some issue, something at stake for us, something at risk for us. And we're working at it all the day. Often, we don't know what it is. We're half-conscious of it. We have to get in touch with what that is and try to find a way to imagine the container for it, the thing that can crystallize it. I don't think there are any rules. Everybody's psyche is different.

deb delasanta  
eileen james

## Cycling Home

*It was 7:37 by the time  
I noticed my little sister  
was a woman. The sun  
was a giant  
orange spraying  
light behind her head and  
she was blue: her eyes, too, were  
wet blue — and red — from crying.  
yet she squeezed me, and my dry brown  
eyes shed a single drop each.*

*The thing is I hate sounding like I  
know. I hate thinking, in fact.  
Moreover, my insides are  
s-p-l-i-t-t-i-n-g.  
I'm so full of crap*

*and light.*

*People Please Understand:  
my brain is rotten, yet  
(herein lies the central paradox)  
I am happy,  
and, understandably,  
confused.*

*I have tried using "love" in  
comprehensible sentences  
and failed with applaudable consistency.  
God has encouraged me to try again.  
"You try!" I think, rolling my  
dry eyes in their tight sockets,  
but I forget —  
He already has. So, despite everything,  
I do.*

*(Sue wants to know why  
I'm so obsessed with  
this subject.)*

*People Please Understand: All I ever  
really wanted was a pair of lips  
I could call my own.  
Ironically,  
I lost my first pair in a soda  
can, like mom always warned  
happened to the careless,  
the foolish — the greedy.*

*It was 7:50 when  
I realized I'd been sitting,  
comfortably, in her shadow  
all that time.*

*My sister maintained her lead  
all the way home,  
as we rode our bikes  
over the darkening asphalt,  
peddling in synch.*

deborah zawadzki



photography by *billy r. ray*

## THE AVENUE

Big doe eyes  
under thick eyebrows like wings taking flight.  
Full lips pursed, parted and painted,  
anxious, with shimmering creases.  
Skin the color of cocoa, russet, coffee and honey.  
Black, brown, amber, red hair,  
swirled in bone-straight beehives,  
cut short, angled, with waves,  
bound in long, dangling braids.

Sisters searching the Avenue  
Sisters searching the Avenue

Flirting in ruffled blouses, or chillin' in oversized T's,  
sportin' bell-bottoms and baggy jeans,  
modeling suede parkas and jean jackets,  
you stomp the runway of the sidewalk  
in platforms and Doc Martens.

Sisters searching the Avenue looking fierce!

Talking big talk,  
while stooping over car doors.  
Taking your time crossing the street  
to meet some friends.  
Snubbing anyone different.  
Competing with anyone the same.  
Struggling with everyone in the city.

Sisters searching the Avenue taking control!

Young,  
Now,  
Strong curves holding frames tight.  
Plump, ripe, waiting to be picked.

Sisters searching the Avenue, looking...

Brother comes along,  
Gently teasing your soft bottom lip  
with his rough, scratchy fingers,  
paving the way for his tongue,  
hot, wet and sure.  
Promise squirms inside your throat.

Sisters searching the Avenue,  
Sisters searching the Avenue,

SISTERS SEARCHING THE AVENUE!

When will you learn  
that the brother don't love you?!

mary-jane shorts

## deep and wide

the floods  
the thoughts  
the rain  
the creed  
the sky  
the sky!  
the parting

the clearing

the way—away—and  
the ground

drinking  
drinking  
drinking

deborah zawadzki

"the Fourth of July"

11/24/93

I mourn bitterly  
in silence—  
The rocks,  
dry wine,  
scratchy, wool blanket  
and the breathing person  
next to me.  
Engage in meaningless banter  
while the hard bed  
grows harder  
and the vibrant stars  
twinkle more vibrant.  
So neatly arranged—  
clean un-complications  
but mere denial  
of Our  
impossible dream.  
Toss back another  
dixie cup of Zinfandel—  
Now tipsy enough  
kiss and pretend,  
Now drunk,  
kiss and believe.  
Companions wander  
against backdrop  
of dark ocean and cliffs,  
A full moon  
draws deeper desolation,  
Fascinating fecundity,  
furious infatuation.  
My body pulses hotly  
with wine,  
I jump and join  
a home set firework—  
Glide gracefully with stars  
for a breathtaking instant,  
Fizzles  
smoky and forgotten.  
Hypnotizing moon beams  
dance with gentle swells—  
A glimmering band  
of angels  
kiss and befriend  
murky death.  
What was it  
my horoscope predicted  
for tonite's glitz?  
I wonder  
alone.

j. scarlett clark

Friendship  
on a  
Trampoline

One full thrust and reaction begins  
Hands clench, knees bend  
Preparation for impact  
with the thin, black skin  
that springs our souls into the indigo sky  
Peering into your jovial eyes

me up,  
you down  
up  
down  
up  
down

searching for constancy  
in the continual thrill  
of soaring and sinking  
like laughter and tears  
laughter and fears  
Beckoning, "Higher! Higher!"  
songs of joy escape us in damp mist  
until one's rhythm is lost in a scream  
panic—limbs flail  
(the edge is so close)  
Two arms reach out  
Two arms catch  
a moment's pause—steady  
and we are still, Supporting  
in a cold, dark, silent world  
But that one full thrust  
initiates movement and warmth,  
eyes of mirth shining light,  
and shared revelry  
(cycles of teetering on the brink)  
we are only on thresholds  
of Open doors

nadine skorohod



looking for a clean place to sit at the bus station

i am always in the middle of going somewhere,  
perfecting my own brand of poverty.  
i longed to get inside my religion,  
so i slid between the walls of this church and  
emerged breathless and shaking on my knees.

but then i got a job in retail.

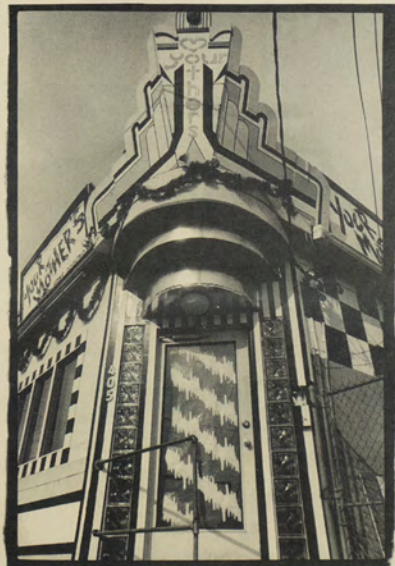
i am always in the middle of going somewhere  
like a mute John the Baptist.  
last week some pagans asked me if i was  
born again.  
i could only point dumbly at the signpost  
still wet with fresh paint,  
and say, smiling, "have a nice day."

i am in the middle of going somewhere,  
mercifully stuck in a pocket of delay.  
i am not grateful, but curious, i have tried  
to create my own rules until pride  
overwhelms my spirit: a forest rises  
from this squirrel's hoard.  
no, i am not thankful for this.  
i know  
that my time has not yet come.

i am in the middle of going somewhere.  
i was young.  
i watched the elderly rock back and forth in church,  
like the penitent trees hanging over this highway,  
and i notice these hands on the steering wheel  
are not mine. sometimes it is so dark  
the rearview mirror gets so black that  
i am afraid to see anything.

kathryn duhamel

photography by *jin kye*



## Lunch with Zelda

You step down off the table  
And settle back into your seat  
Just in time to pop open  
The new bottle of champagne  
Which arrives compliments  
Of the men at the bar  
Who were so taken  
By your performance.

You fill our flutes  
And I tell you that  
I, too, believe  
In the philosophies  
Of popular songs.

Then you look  
At me  
Through me  
Beyond me  
(Oh, to only see what you see!)  
And you ask me:  
"If I were alive today  
Who would I be?"

I say that it's the question  
I intended to ask you.

But the manner in which  
You sip your champagne  
Tells me that you are not  
As desperate for the answer  
As I am, I

Who drink away  
The rest of your bottle,  
Wanting nothing more  
Than for you (or someone  
So much like you)  
To climb back onto the table  
And inspire me.

joe longo

## Millicent

I hate Iowa. We moved there when I was five and I hated it then too. We have a small farm and, like everyone else, we grow corn and raise a few cows and pigs. My older sister Sally loves our farm. Loves all the muck and hard work and hay. I think it sucks. There's nothing but corn and cows for miles around. Sally and my mother talk about buying a few more acres so Sally will have it when she gets married. She doesn't even have a boyfriend.

I'm only twelve but I know a lot for my age. My best friend Claire showed me how to wear make-up and do my hair. Her mother taught us how to walk down the halls at school so as to be noticed. Claire even showed me how to make my boobs look bigger with a couple of bunched up tissues. Her mother bought her a padded bra so she doesn't have to use the tissue technique anymore. When we get ourselves all put together and dressed up right, we can pass for least fourteen, sometimes fifteen with a good size bunch of tissues.

My father is the only one that still calls me Millicent. Everyone else just calls me Milly. I dream about changing my name to something glamorous. Something like Isabella. A name that will be remembered long after I've glided out the door. People would turn to each other and say in a whisper, "There goes that beautiful girl Isabella. Can you believe she used to live in Iowa?"

Sally just turned seventeen. My parents taught her how to drive and she asked for a tractor for her birthday. They got it for her. A huge, bright yellow monster of a tractor. I gave her a barrette with little diamond-like jewels glued to it. I know she didn't like it. She was too busy admiring the seat of her new tractor to even notice that the stones were green like her eyes. She'll never wear it. If she did, I know she'd look real pretty. My mother says Sally is real pretty on the inside. I say with a little lipstick and some hairspray that she'd be able to show it on the outside too. After all, boys aren't going to bother looking at her insides.

I didn't get any of the things I had asked for for my birthday. I wanted a pair of pumps and got tennis sneakers instead. I asked for a cassette tape player and got a portable am-fm radio. Country music during the day and nothing but the latest, up to minute country reports during the evening. Claire gave me a string of pearls that her aunt gave to her and her mother bought me the thick new spring issue of *Vogue*. Matthew Peterson, he goes to school with me and Claire, gave me a bouquet of wild flowers. I like Matthew.

Last year when Claire was sick with the chicken pox, Matthew and I skipped school. We went down to the creek near his grandparent's house and went swimming and ate our lunches in the loft of their barn.

"Ya know what I think?" Matthew asked me.

"What?"

"I think today's one of them perfect day kind of things."

I bit into my tuna sandwich. "Yeah. Today's the best," I said.

"We should skip more."

"What about Claire?" I asked. "We can't just forget about her."

Matthew looked at me and then took a swig from his bottle of Coke. "I know. I like Claire just like you do but sometimes it's nice when it's just me and you."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "You know what else I think?"

"What?"

"I think that you're the prettiest girl in all of Louis Armstrong Junior High."

I thought he had to be kidding around with me. Nobody had ever said anything like that ever before. "Prettier than Cindy Kelly?"

He nodded. "Way prettier," he said with a smile. "And a whole lot nicer."

"You mean it?"

Matthew smiled wider. "Every word of it," he said as he handed me his Coke.

I took a sip and realized that Matthew was telling the truth. He would never lie to me. Besides Claire, he was the next person I could trust with just about anything. He pushed himself closer to me and kind of inched his fingers into the hay toward mine. I wasn't nervous really. He looked me in the eyes for a few seconds and then kissed me, really softly on my lips. It felt like he was whispering, only really really closely. And real slow too. Like in those black and white movies they show on Sunday afternoons. I could feel my stomach flop over like it had on the Spider ride at the fair last year. It was weird. I wanted to make sure I remembered it all so I could write it down in my diary when I got home later.

My parents don't know that I let Matthew kiss me. If they knew they would probably send me to a nunnery somewhere in the remotest corn fields of Iowa. It would be a living hell. But my parents really like Matthew, so that's good. He comes over and helps my dad sometimes with the corn or the fencing or the animals. My dad says he's the son he never had. Sally hates it when he talks like that. I don't think she likes Matthew very much. Maybe it's because she thinks he's my boyfriend. Or maybe it's because whenever he's around my dad gets out his baseball glove and helps Matthew with his pitching. At any rate, I know my sister is jealous.

On Friday, Matthew came over to help and stayed for dinner. Afterward, we women did the dishes and they pitched a few balls. When my dad came in with a sore shoulder, Matthew and I headed for the loft. Most times we stay up there until nightfall. We talk and look for shooting stars and sometimes he kisses me.

"Do you think we'll ever leave Iowa?" he said.

I flopped over onto my stomach and shrugged. "Beats me," I said. "All I know is that I hate it here enough to never want to come back when I get older."

"Me too."

"What do you hate about it?" I asked him.

"I don't know. It doesn't have any excitement."

"Yeah. There isn't any glamour. Corn and cows, but no glamour. New York," I told him, "now that's a place that I'd like to see."

"Why New York?"

"I think it would be nice."

"And they got ocean," Matthew added.

"Yeah, that must be so cool."

"My aunt and uncle brought me back some seashells from their trip to New England. They went to Maine and New York and to New Jersey. They said that it was really nice there," Matthew said.

"That's where I want to go then. It's decided."

"If we had a million bucks then we could go," he sighed.

"You'll come with me won't you?" I asked. "I'd have to go see the ocean and it wouldn't be very much fun if I didn't have you there with me."

"Of course I'd go," he said, taking a hold of my hand and kissing it. "We'd go to the ocean and put our feet in it."

"How about a Broadway play? Would you want to do that, too?"

"Sure," Matthew said.

"I'd have to let Claire come out and visit us. She wants to go shopping at Macy's and then go out for lunch at one of those fancy little raw fish places."

"That's gross."

"I think it would be cool," I said. "No parents, no school, no Cindy Kelly and especially no Sally."

"Hey, hey, did you see that?"

I climbed to my knees and followed Matthew to the window of the loft.

"What was it?"

"A shooting star," he said pointing to where it had been. "Want to share the wish?"

"No, you saw it, you have it. I'll get the next one."

When I finally did see another shooting star, I made my wish for bigger boobs as soon as possible. I remembered this wish only a few days ago. I was getting dressed in the bedroom I share with Sally one day. She came walking in just as I was putting a giant handful of tissues into place. She stood there and laughed at me. Said I should try my father's wool socks instead. What was worse was when she told my mother. Later that same day, right in the middle of Franklin's Pharmacy, my mother started telling me that she and Sally were once small like me and that they would grow in time. I knew they would. I just wanted them a little sooner was all. I was so humiliated. Cindy Kelly was standing in the cough and cold aisle and had heard the whole thing.

I faked a fever that night and alarmed my mother into letting me stay home from school. The thought of seeing Cindy Kelly and her perfectly well shaped bosom was enough to make me throw up. After a few trips to the toilet, I knew my case was air tight. But it wouldn't last forever. The next day I was going to have to face Cindy Kelly.

I dressed carefully that morning. My dad's freshly laundered wool socks awaiting their maiden voyage. With my shirt tucked into my skirt I strode over to check out the development. What I saw looking back at me was not a girl of twelve but a woman of fourteen. I was ready for anything.

By the time the first bell rang, I thought I was going to pass out. It had been a joke. The whole wool socks thing was one big laugh on me. There I was hovering over my desk in Miss Miles' English class trying to jab my pencil at the well rounded B cup. My chest itched like it had been covered with poison ivy. I squirmed, shimmied and shook like an animal in a frenzy. Looking over my shoulder I could see Cindy Kelly enjoying the show.

I had to break free. During study hall I managed to slip out to the girls' bathroom. Every stall was occupied. I had only five minutes to get back to my seat before Mrs. Killingly sent someone out looking. Desperation propelled me to the paper towel dispenser. The industrial strength brown paper glared and laughed back at me as I ripped off a few feet of it. Out came the socks and in went the paper towel. Two big handfuls, rounded into balls as best as I could. I was doomed.

I pressed my books up against my chest and knew within seconds that even this would not do the trick. Claire must've noticed too. On the way to lunch a few hours later she asked me what was wrong.

"Wool socks," I whispered.

Her eyes came popping out of her face and a laugh emerged from her mouth.

"You actually tried it?"

I nodded. "Stupid, huh?"

"See Cindy anywhere?"

"Only in English class this morning," I sighed. "She knows, Claire. My life is over."

We walked the rest of the way in silence. The paper towels were jabbing me through the heart with every step we took. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep up with the charade.

"Claire, I've got to stop," I said, shifting my books around as the crinkling sounded from beneath my shirt. "My boobs are killing."

"What've you got in there now?"

"Paper towels," I mumbled, veering off toward the bathroom.

"You should've just stayed with the tissues."

This was impossible for Claire to understand. She had the proper padding. I didn't.

I ducked into an open stall and began the process of bunching up some toilet paper.

Why don't you just ask your mom to buy you one like mine?" Claire asked.

"She would never. My mom's so uncool about those kinds of things."

"Maybe my mom could get you one."

"You think she could?" I asked.

"I could ask her."

I emerged fully toilet papered and plenty more comfortable. "That would be the best."

The toilet beside mine flushed and my worst nightmare strode out. Cindy Kelly stood before the full length mirror and smoothed down her shirt into her jeans. Claire and I went to the sinks and began washing our hands. I wanted to die. I knew she was showing off her set.

"Maybe we could work on that later tonight," Claire said softly.

"Yeah."

"Work on what?" Cindy asked. "Making a more realistic set?"

I started to laugh. "More realistic set of what?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, Millicent," Cindy purred, taking out her cherry lipgloss and rolling it over her lips. "Breasts. The things you don't have yet."

Claire gripped the side of the sink and looked at me in the mirror over it.

"Cindy, why don't you just shut up."

"Right," Cindy nodded. She wasn't going to just walk away from this. I knew she hated me the first day we met in second grade. There wasn't any way she was going to let this opportunity go.

"Hey, at least we shave our legs and all. I don't know about you Milly, but I'd rather be flat and bare than look like a monkey," Claire said suddenly.

Cindy's face became expressionless, as did mine. She didn't shave her legs? This fact had never been revealed to me before. I never knew Claire knew this about Cindy.

"Shaving isn't healthy," Cindy yelled back. "My mother says it will give you cancer."

"Really? Try telling that to all the women of the world," Claire said. "And by the way, you think you're so hot wearing panty hose and tights and all. Well, news flash. Even a pair of jeans couldn't hide that much hair. And I'm not the only one that knows it either. I heard Jason Clifford talking about how gross hairy legs were on a girl to the entire basketball team. And you know who's name came up? Yours."

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I didn't think Claire had it in her. Cindy Kelly must've thought the same thing. There she was crying her eyes out in front of us.

"Come on, Milly," Claire said, taking me by the arm to drag me away. "We wouldn't want to catch any of her ticks."

I never thought my own sister was capable of doing something like the wool socks thing to me. After the episode in the bathroom, I knew things with Cindy Kelly were going to be okay. Claire wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. But, still, it would never have happened had Sally not come barging in on me when I was changing that day. I decided to just avoid Sally for a little while. She really was a pain. My mom says that it's PMS or something like that. She says that I'll be acting like that before long too. I told her I would never let myself get to that point. She just laughed at me.

"So, you ever going to fill me in on why you aren't talking to me?" Sally asked once I had shut my light off to go to bed.

"Not really."

"How about just giving me a clue then."

"Wool socks," I said slowly and turned over onto my stomach.

"You actually did it?"

"Yes."

Sally started to laugh. "Milly, I knew you were stupid but this one takes the cake."

"Leave me alone," I mumbled, pulling my sheet up over my head.

I could hear her bed creak as she sat up. "I'm sorry, Milly, really. I never thought you'd actually go through with it."

"Well, I did. I thought maybe you knew of a better way and were trying to help me. Like letting me in on your secret."

"Nope. I didn't have to stuff anything when I was your age," she said.

I sat up and turned on my light. "You think I'll ever have bigger boobs, Sally?"

"Sure," she said. "Just be patient."

"I know."

"You poor thing," Sally laughed. "You must've been itchy all day."

"I was but they really looked good," I laughed despite myself. "I could actually fill a B cup."

"Impressive."

"Yeah," I sighed. "Hey, Sally, remember that barrette I got you for your birthday? Are you ever going to wear it?"

"Sure I will."

"Because I made it so it would match your eyes. Nobody can see your eyes the way you wear your hair. If you pulled it back into the barrette people could see your eyes. You could show them off."

"Where'd you learn that?" Sally asked.

"Claire's mom taught us," I said. "I could do it for you in the morning if you'd like."

"We'll see."

"Okay."

"Milly?" Sally asked. "I really am sorry about your boobs."

"I know you are."

I saw another shooting star just the other night and wished for not only the boob thing but for a way out of Iowa. I still want that as well. Claire, me and Matthew talk about it every now and then. We dream about Macy's and oceans and seashells and boobs. That one's my dream. We figure maybe we can try going to college out there. Just the three of us. Maybe Sally will come out and visit us once and awhile. She's been wearing my barrette lately the way I showed her. My dad told her just this afternoon that he's never realized just how green her eyes were before. And Sally's been teaching me how to drive the tractor. When I sit up there I like to pretend that I'm in my new BMW convertible and I'm driving down the highway. Of course my boobs are a lot bigger then too.

maureen tremblay





photography by *jin kye*

## A Few More Miles

We called it California and planned a trip that way  
for months,  
deciding to leave just a few days before the end  
of March, expecting to stay  
through summer, having worked twice as hard that fall:  
sold two  
bureaus and a slightly slanted bed frame made out of  
a sturdy material  
gone green, but saved from its usual place  
in the garage  
and its eventual weather beating, thinking we'd actually  
make it  
by February that year, but I stayed back East  
with my brother  
until the snow melted and I could catch a train on time  
to meet up with him  
in Denver's springtime, intent only on hot springs  
and hiking;  
I remembered then the first time I met with a mountain,  
walking backwards until  
I backed right up against it, the face tracing its features  
on my damp tank top.  
And he remembered it too, explaining that this time we  
should start with a list:  
we would only wear cut-offs and t-shirts, never shaving  
and I wouldn't  
wear a bra; he decided not to cut his hair until it covered  
half his back,  
if we made it that far. I remembered him laughing  
at the train station,  
convincing me again that two thousand miles by train  
wouldn't seem that way,  
but the worst of it was over, so I couldn't mention Houston  
(the eight hours  
of delay and derail scare with additional postponements)  
when he told me  
it was only a few more miles from there to California,  
not mentioning  
the friend that sat in the back seat where my bags  
should have been;  
but we were alone by Salt Lake and followed the direction  
of the lazy  
fly fisherman who sold us maps (I insisted that we didn't  
need a map)  
and traced neatly a continuing route on interstate eighty,  
forgetting Nevada completely,  
like the room I left with my mother to fall off into  
the Atlantic Ocean,  
I didn't care, the door was locked and it wouldn't disturb  
the rest of the house,  
the key kept somehow around my neck, cold against my chest,  
while I sat  
nearly glacial in the beach sand of northern California,  
its coolness  
and hardness something I didn't think even the sun could warm.

kristin cola

**W**ill doesn't like high school and neither do I. I don't know anyone who likes reading the Romantics and failing algebra. I think that school's only for those kids who are going to grow up to wear white shirts and carry leather briefcases that match their shoes. Not Will and me, we don't wear white, and we don't match. We skip school after fourth period, so we don't have to read Blake or figure out what *x* and *y* equal. Instead, we walk down to Thayer Street. We get a couple of slices of pepperoni at Ronzio's to eat on our way across the street to In Your Ear.

"Damn, would you look how expensive this is? Christ!" I hear him say over the Alice in Chains song played throughout the small store. Will holds up some CD between his grease stained fingers. It's some unknown underground band that you never hear of unless you come across their CD somewhere. The cover is a collage of black and white photos of half-naked women, probably the only reason I picked it out. In the upper corner a white sticker reads \$18.99, and I shrug my shoulders. It isn't a CD I want, not even for the cover. He goes back to flipping through the S's. I don't see him put the CD back, but no alarms go off when we leave either.

"What do you wanna do?" he asks me when we're back standing on Thayer Street. It's cold and snow is expected, but the clouds continue to pass by the sun without stopping.

"I don't know." I watch people pass by feeling invisible except to Will.

"Where do you wanna go?" I ask him, thinking no one else can hear me either. He looks around as though he doesn't know where the question is coming from and begins crossing the street. "I don't know. Let's just hang out at my house, no one's home right now."

"Yeah." I follow him across the street. We don't have anything better to do anyway. We never have anything better to do, but we always want something better. When we're in school, we think it's better to be on Thayer Street. When we're on Thayer Street, we think there has to be somewhere better, but there never is.

We cross Charles Street heading towards Douglas Avenue. We're cutting through the Marriott parking lot when I see the Mercedes coupe left running in the handicap parking space. It's shining black, like it's just been polished, and the engine's running softly and powerfully.

"That's what we need," I half-laugh and nod my head in the direction of the car.

"So we can get the hell out of here."

Will slows his pace to stare at the car he apparently missed seeing. "So why don't we take it," he says, scanning the parking lot.

"Yeah, right." I keep walking, hoping he'd follow.

"Come on, no one's looking." He's already heading towards the car.

"What're you doing?" I stop walking long enough to see him walk up to the driver side door. He leans on the car looking through the window and lets his hand slide down to find the handle. He lifts it slowly probably not expecting it to open; but when it does, a wave of classical music comes crashing to his feet like a dam breaking. He stands before the open door and turns to me with a burning red face and bright eyes.

"Well," he pauses, "you coming?" His chest heaves almost violently as if breathing is painful to him.

I don't answer him but feel a thin film of sweat forming on my forehead and upper lip. I look into the hotel lobby. A man in a dark business suit carrying a briefcase that matches his shoes stands before the desk leaning on one hand and tapping a credit card against the counter. The collar of his white oxford shirt sticks up above the collar of his suit jacket. The man behind the counter is on the phone scribbling something down on a notepad. I turn back to Will still beside the car waiting for an answer. He slips into the driver's seat and watches me through the rearview mirror with the car door open.

I lick my dry lips with a tongue that feels even drier. I don't know what it was that I heard first, the man behind the counter hanging up the phone or Will

unlocking the passenger side door, but I run without direction like a scared rabbit. I don't want to be seen standing in that parking lot with Will in the car.

Will's already backing out of the space when I open the door and slide in on the bucket seat. The smell of leather and the sound of classical music assails me. So much warm air is being blown into my face I have to push the vents away.

Will takes the first Interstate 95 exit so we're heading north without speaking to each other. He drives with two hands wrapped so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles are white and his veins bulge. His eyes are as bright as headlights, and he focuses them on the gray stretch of highway ahead of us. I watch behind us for any police cars.

"See anything?" he asks between deep breaths.

"No, no one's following us," I say, swallowing hard. Christ, I need a drink. I cover my face and feel the car accelerate. When I finally look at him, his eyes are no longer focused ahead of us but darting back and forth from the highway to the rearview mirror.

"We just need to get to Massachusetts that's all," he says as though reassuring himself.

"Where do we go from there?" I ask always keeping my eyes on the highway before us just in case some cop is out.

"I don't know." We still have four exits ahead of us before we reach Massachusetts. Will releases one hand from the steering wheel and starts hitting the preset buttons on the radio.

"What is this shit?" he says to almost every button he presses. "You find something," he snaps, "I'm driving." He checks the rearview mirror again.

I lean toward the radio to find some decent station. I tune to some country music station and I hear Will say, "Fuck it." He throws the CD, minus its plastic wrapping, into my lap. I slide it into the CD player and press the play button. When the music comes up loud, fast and chaotic, I think, *not even for the cover*.

From the corner of my eye I see him pull out a pack of Winstons from his jacket pocket. He sticks one in his mouth without offering me one. He fumbles for the ashtray, finally finds it without looking and pulls it out. The lighter's in there, and he pushes it in. He probably stole that pack of Winstons from his mom, because he's been stealing them from her since seventh grade.

He picked up his first cigarette out of the ashtray, half-used, with a ring of bright lipstick. He pinched it between his thumb and the tip of his index finger studying each end as though he weren't sure which one to put in his mouth. A few black ashes drifted back to the ashtray, and Will stuck the cigarette between his thin lips covering the lipstick stain. It bobbed up and down in his mouth as he tried to catch it with the yellow-blue flame from one of his mom's novelty lighters. When he finally lit it, he greedily inhaled and choked. He pulled it out of his mouth, still coughing with his eyes watering.

"Here you try," he coughed the words out while passing the cigarette to me. He held it as he did between my thumb and index finger thinking that was the way to hold a cigarette. I studied it much the same way he did until the sight of it filled my eyes and the smoke filled my nostrils.

"Go on, Chris, what're you waiting for?" He laughed a little but then balled his right hand into a fist to pound those last few coughs out.

I closed my eyes, found my lips and pushed the cigarette in without inhaling. I couldn't do it, so I pulled it out and crushed it in the ashtray.

"Hey, that was still good!" he protested.

We're into Massachusetts so I think we'll be getting off the highway soon.

"No way. We gotta get the hell away from Rhode Island," he says.

"So where are we going then?"

"Christ! Would you stop asking me that. I told you already, I don't know yet," he says impatiently. I stop looking ahead of me and start looking out the side windows watching the exits coming towards me. Three, four, five.

When we pass Interstate 495, he asks me almost apologetically, "Where do you wanna go?"

I didn't expect the question, so I just answer, "You're driving," without looking at him.

"So you don't wanna go any place?" he snaps.

"I don't know where to go," I say defensively. There's nothing along the highway but dying pine trees and birches stripped of their leaves, some stripped of their bark. We continue on without talking. Time seems to stretch on as long and gray as Interstate 95. I know we can't drive forever, but I'm afraid that the longer we drive and the further we go, the more trouble it'll cause us.

"You wanna go to Boston?" I ask him. "Maybe we could go to Tower Records or something. You know, just leave the car there and take the train home or something."

"No," he flatly replies.

"What do you wanna do with the car?" But he doesn't answer.

"Then where do you wanna go?" I ask, annoyed that he didn't answer me.

"I just wanna get away." He half-raises his shoulders then lets them drop back down like dead weight.

"We have," I whisper, not sure if I want him to hear me or not. He lights another cigarette, and I settle back in my seat and fold my arms across my chest. I turn my face into my shoulder and breathe in the smoke and leather. My eyelids fall to half-mast keeping everything out of my sight except the lines of the highway running alongside of us.

In the sideview mirror I recognize the radar of an unmarked police car flying up behind us. We're cruising at 70 mph in the left lane. The cop pulls up so close I can feel him watching us. "Oh shit! Will. There's a cop behind us!" I cry. My mouth goes dry again, and I can't swallow. "What the hell are we gonna do?" I look to Will to save us. There's a flash of blue but no sound. I want Will to get us out of this car. I wish for the first time that we'd never gotten in it.

"Just shut up!" he screams at me. He eases up on the gas pedal and I feel the car decelerate. I hear the directional, and the car switches lanes almost automatically. The cop pulls up beside us without looking then passes us. I start breathing again. The cop never looks back at us.

"We gotta get rid of this car," I say looking at Will.

Somewhere west of Boston, he pulls the car off into a Mobil station. He gets out to pump, and I get out to stretch my legs.

"Where are you going?" He sounds angry.

"Nowhere. I was just stretching my legs, but I think I'm thirsty." I take a couple of steps toward the mini-mart.

"No way!" he cries and leaves the pump to come around the front of the car. He steps in front of me and pushes me against the hood of the car looking down at me. I feel the heat of the engine burning my back. His eyes have lost their brightness and have begun to cloud over. His face burns like my back, and his arms are kept at his side as though restrained. They seem to tremble without his knowing it.

"You're not going anywhere and leaving me with this car! This was your fucking idea, and you're not leaving me!" His lips don't move as he speaks the words, and he doesn't have to tell me to get back in the car. I roll to my right always keeping my eyes on him for any sudden moves. I slide along the side of the car on my back groping for the door handle. When I'm back in the passenger seat with my door still open, he returns to the pump.

Where the hell am I going to go? I think, I don't even know where the hell we are. I slam my door and shake the car.

When he's finished, he opens the driver side door and stares at me as he pulls

the keys with their Hertz key chain from the ignition. I watch him go into the store to pay, and I'm angry with myself for not pushing him back. But then I guess I never pushed back no matter what he did to me.

He dropped a Snickers and a Hershey bar in my hand. "Put these in your pocket."

"What?" I hadn't even decided what I wanted yet.

"Before she looks. Come on." He was taking the candy bars out of my hand and putting them into my pockets. The woman behind the cash register was too busy stacking cigarette boxes to notice us standing down the candy aisle. Her radio was tuned to some call-in talk show that drowned out even the street traffic outside.

"Follow me." He led me to the end of the aisle to the cold drinks. He picked out a can of Coke and turned to me. "I've only got enough for me," He shrugged opening the can. "Wait for me outside." He smiled knowingly.

I walked past the cashier who was tuning the radio for better reception. I was afraid to look her way. I would have walked out with my back to her, if walking sideways weren't so suspicious looking.

"Will that be all?" Her words followed me out the door.

He doesn't ask me if I want to drive. He just gets in the driver's seat and jams the key into the ignition. He takes us back out onto 95. It's worse than driving cross-country on a family vacation, passing every exit asking, "Are we there yet?"

"No, Chris, another hour," my dad said. "Why don't you and Will play that game, you know, with the license plates."

I shook my head and looked at Will. The summer sun was coming through the open window, and he was burning up under it. "Dad, I think Will's sick."

He looked up in the rearview mirror and saw Will, head back against the seat and eyes closed to keep the sun out. "He's fine, probably just sleeping. Look, Chris, there's an Ohio plate."

I ignored my dad and looked at Will not really believing he was asleep. I pinched his elbow, and he jerked back to life.

"Hey!" He looked around disoriented. "Goddamn, aren't we there yet?"

"Watch what you say in this car, young man," my dad said in the rearview mirror. I was embarrassed that my father would speak to Will that way, so I rolled my eyes at Will whose head was already back against the seat again.

The signs overhead read New Hampshire and Maine. I don't know where he's taking me, but soon the exit signs will be reading one, two, three again. It's December, and the afternoon sun is fading into a horizon of highway and trees. Will's teardrop shaped face is like a rock. He is undisturbed.

"So, are we there yet?" I ask sarcastically, but I don't want to look at him for his reaction. He doesn't answer me. I don't think he's listening to me but to something else. I try to hear it, too. I block out all sound, even the engine. Will turned the radio off almost an hour ago. I ignore the cars around us and hear it faintly at first. It's the sound of the wheels running on asphalt. They hum monotonously, but it's a hypnotic hum, almost electric. It is familiar, and yet I've never heard it before.

It's the only sound I can hear, and I lose myself in those wheels. Thousands of revolutions per minute. They spin on eternally going anywhere, everywhere and nowhere at once. They spin so fast they probably look as though they're standing still. It isn't until millions of revolutions later that I realize he has driven me into the dark where unsteady rhythms of light come at us from all sides, all red, red, red and blaring white.



illustration by *todd lindeman*

## Queen of Divine Providence

On hangover morning  
crisp cool sunlight  
was breathing through  
thin faded curtains.  
My blanket kept me  
cozy in the chill  
as I stood looking out  
windows at Providence.  
Recalled the night before  
when walking blue neon streets  
at nighttime was the right time.  
The boom of the music  
shook the pavement  
and our hips.  
So I was laughing  
while we were swaying  
and the music playing.  
Didn't matter that  
I was barely making the rent  
and still went chasing fun  
downtown.  
This old city wore its grime  
like a king would.  
I saw it out of my windows  
even in this daylight.  
My blanket became my robe  
for I was still  
Queen of Providence  
this morning.  
This city could tell  
some tales of history  
(and a few of me).  
The fog in my brain  
I use as a crown  
for night life.

eileen james





**Shoreline**

*We print on recycled paper*