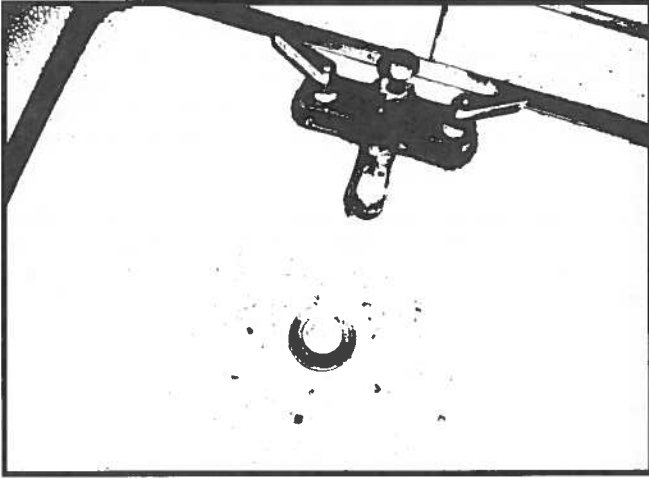


# hawai'i review



#63

# Hawaii Review



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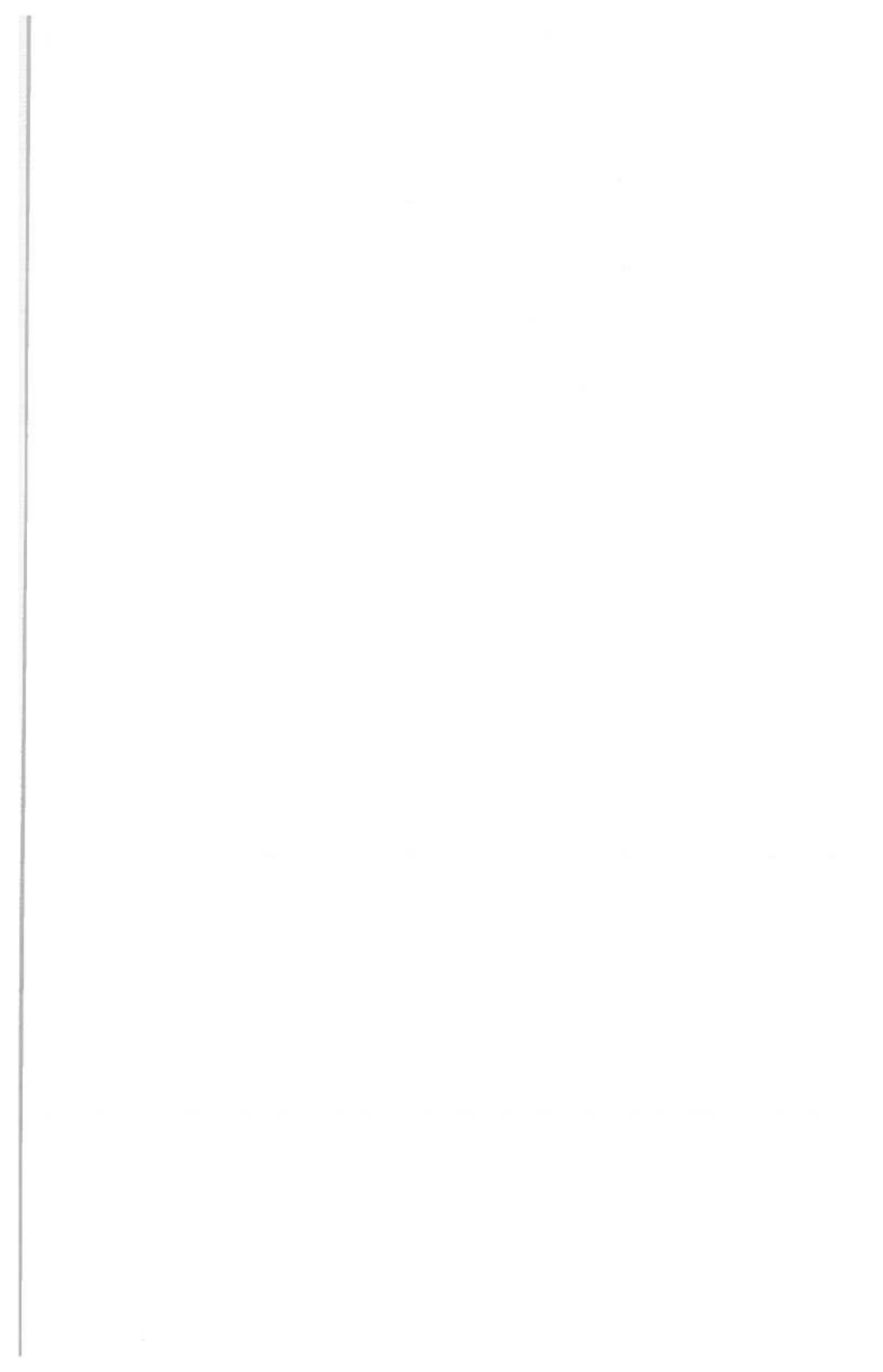
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## FEEDING THE BLUEBIRDS

Bird lore and love and sunlight  
    tinting my face  
How can I describe things  
    that contain  
Only what you make with your  
    mind?  
The path to the birdhouse,  
Through a field of ants and  
    Pebbles and grass and  
Stream-washed stone,  
The tiny door, pent up music  
Of the fledglings.  
I leave store-bought worms  
In a glass jar  
On top of the wooden box.  
Relief and unbelief and  
Swelling. Let the wind  
Take snowstorms of bluebirds up in its whirls,  
Traveling ever after,  
Traveling, traveling  
To a wide and  
    decent happiness.



## IF I WERE AFRAID TO TELL YOU

What I'm telling you now, I'd say, "Did you hear about old Rockaforte? He died." Well, back to other things, barely enough time to...time to... What *was* he doing? What was he thinking? How much longer shall we able to think of the divine and bright green turning gray? Why are all our hands shaking? Could it be the laxatives? While his soul floats around in the void (brave words that circle meaningless neurons and a void isn't even *that!*) But while his soul is floating in the void let us reassure ourselves of one thing. These words were carefully selected for the year's slow rounding out of four seasons in autumn's fires. You could tell autumn from around the trees where worms whisper about the sun's funeral, but by spring Rockaforte will be ready to cuckoo again, with the best of the beasts. He's not dead yet. His calendar of timeless insects singing rounds should be enough to keep the world from wearing away.

## GOING FOR MORE TESTS

Sleepy, but the heart  
shakes me keeps me  
no food no drink nothing  
left inside could be  
interesting if it were not  
me life is not simple  
enough the way I'm  
doing it thus these tests  
do I get a grade was  
always good at tests  
never quite know what's  
going on inside take a  
look photos for my  
album it will be good  
to go to sleep in spite  
of what goes on in the  
bright room where they  
will fill me with  
light as if I were  
a house to be walked  
through I might hear  
their voices echoing  
but will not remember  
except for the words  
they leave behind  
inside where they will  
sometimes scurry around  
like little animals in  
the walls at night  
mysterious but a good

sign that whatever is  
alive is always right  
there out of sight but  
keeping me curious  
even so. Awake with  
wondering.

## MIGHT

[1]

You and Valmiki grunt through push-ups on the landing at the back of Borough Hall in Brooklyn. One handed sometimes, but often not. You are not that strong. You ignore the pigeon shit splayed between your fingers, telling yourself it has no smell, no matter how fresh it is. You do push-ups to get ready to join the fraternity. They will strengthen your body and brace your mind. Beneath you it is quitting time and the people leaving their jobs are heading off to the gyms to make themselves strong. You think that it is important to be strong when you approach your middle age, still light years away from where you stand now at nineteen. You also know it is important to form habits early. You lie on your chest and prop your chin up with your wrists in a proper TV-watching pose to better watch the strength-concerned people. Your chest and stomach touch the ground. The cleft in your chin pains you as usual from the pressure of the balls of your wrists. The people glance at you quickly, strangely. You avoid their eyes. It's quitting time, and the drones are heading back to their hives and then to the gym, soft-satchels in hand, hard briefcases too.

You and Valmiki keep at it: Who can go longer? Valmiki collapses after one hundred and thirty-seven push-ups. You'd stopped on seventy-two. His cheekbone crushes into some dried pigeon guano. He doesn't care. Valmiki is skinny and sleep-deprived. When he has his jacket off, he has back hair that sticks out the back of his shirt, which startles you since you don't think it matches his dimples. The circles beneath his eyes are half-way to his mouth; they look cared for, like he manages them; he's spent all night studying again. How are you young men getting so old so quickly you ask yourself.

Your commuter college is just up the street. You feel the puffiness under your own eyes, thinking you and Valmiki are a

good likeness of one another. He remembers periodic elements with inknotes scratched onto his palms too. But, when he graduates, he will go to Yale law school. And you? Time scampers ahead. You look across at him. He breathes with power. There is maybe fire and disgust in his veins. You straighten yourself and sit on the top step, breathe out, watch the January air moisten like a ghost. How's that concrete taste? you ask.

Fucking concrete-like and immobile, he says.

Anything I should know before we get on line?

He laughs. Ever heard the expression keep a tight asshole? He reaches over the rim of the top step, balls some snow, looks around. You look down at the people, don't look back when you hear him say *aha!*, knowing that he's found a perfect pebble and is sticking it into the snowball, giving it a heart.

You crack your knuckles and look out toward the people done with their daily tours of duty. Valmiki will finally be one of them; his parents are strivers from some mysterious part of Trinidad from somewhere up behind God's back that you'd never heard of even though you told him you did. You stand, stretch. You can see the Brooklyn Bridge if you really wanted, at least the direction that it's in. Haze and a new steel construction site prevent you from seeing it for real. But you know it's there. You twirl the naps on your head. Some frats are known for being pretty, some for being hard. What's this fraternity known for again? you ask Valmiki, stretching your neck, trying to see the golden statue of the woman on top of Borough Hall from where you stand, knowing it's impossible.

Kicking ass, Valmiki says, hucking the heart-shaped snowball into the crowd, waiting for the splatter.

[2]

When you get home that night, your uncle is passed out in front of the Knicks highlights, exhausted from his job's time and a half

adventure. He seems all of a sudden soft, like he's slipped out his bones before bed. You pluck the glasses from his face, turn off the set. He falls awake when the sound snaps off. What? he asks. What?

You're asleep, you say, tucking him in. Let me help you.

Did the numbers call? He rolls over, lifts the crumpled, sad lotto tickets.

We'll check in the morning, you assure him.

He pulls the covers over his naked shoulders, sinks a little deeper into the mattress. You think about climbing in, fold his glasses close instead, head back to your room, him not liking you in the bed anymore.

[3]

He is not really your uncle of course. The first time you saw him was at the Savannah in Trinidad during Carnival. He seemed more powerful then, him shadowing girls younger than you. You watched him at a corn soup stand, lose out to the first, then the second, then the third girl with legs too thin, him moving as easily as rain dripping from trees. The girls were all jailbait. It was your second breakout from St. Michael's home for boys, seventeen; you were sure no one would come to get you this time: Who really wants to strengthen a complaining voice with food? There were hundreds of people all around you that night. Somewhere a steel-band rumbled, warmed up; the ground tremored. He was eating corn soup when you approached him. Everything smelled of dust.

Sorry about them girls, you nodded.

Yeah. He dug the spoon deep into the cup, emptied it over his face. Close, his skin was splotchy, blackheads and ingrown hair. On his scalp his hair was thin.

You from New York, ent? He was a freshwater Yankee, forty-three maybe. You leaned against the corn soup stand, a pose; the vendor was making too many sales to object. You didn't

know what you were doing; your hands were cold. It was late February. People were scattered everywhere like broken tinsel, forgotten tree ornaments a week after Christmas.

Down for a few weeks, he said, finally looking at you.

You nod again. Your accent, you said.

Oh. That's good, he said. You were the one who asked him if he wanted to go for a walk; he was staying nearby. You were not afraid. Up in his room his boxers were mid-thigh, his hands busy between his legs. From where you sat, across from him, there were shadows everywhere, his face especially. Tell me about the home, he said, breathing short. St. Michael's, right? Nuns? he asked. Were there priests? You did not yield your strength from his weakness. But, during the first month when you started to live with him, you fell asleep lightly, if at all.

[4]

Ask anyone, you all want to join the fraternity for ass. You sit in the crummy cafeteria of your edge-of-Brooklyn college, under a roof tight with asbestos and frying oil, wondering what hazing will be like the first night. No anal probing you hope. No outdoor nipple twisters either. This winter is a blitzkrieg.

The cafeteria bulges with kids in the game—basketball players, members of fraternities, women you want to taste. And then there are the four of you on splintery seats, sophomores, none of you men, although you are not quite outcasts. You are all skinny, you think, breakable.

You ask Valmiki if when the collective you go on line whether Timber will be your collective dean. You'd seen Timber around campus, muddy-complexioned with freckles laid out like land mines across his nose, him rejecting birds you lusted after, Anastasia too. Even in the winter he wore his wifebeaters outdoors, that was the kind of cool he was, him sprinting across the street to the Korean deli and back, a walking Adam's apple, tooth-

pick thin, his nipples printed through a thin jersey. He had been in charge of the information meeting. He laughed when you said you wanted to join the fraternity for brotherhood. What kind of a herb did you take him for? he'd asked.

It'll probably be Timber, says Valmiki. Sanford looks at you. You didn't know each other three weeks ago, you still didn't like each other now. He reminds you of a big oonks back at St. Michael's who ruffled and ripped your father-given picture of Muhammad Ali that was the only thing that you were going to take the day you broke out. Now they're both in heaven, the big oonks had said, flinging the fully formed pieces into the air in front of your eyes. You think to yourself, *this* is going to be my line brother?

If we don't get hazed, we won't be considered for real, says sleepy-head Kamal, drinking his orange soda sloppily. Kamal's a clown; you hide your disgust. Some of his soda spills onto his shirt, green with suns, ugly. This is how he acts fully awake, but still. You take a swallow of your own soda.

There isn't going to be any hazing, Valmiki says, chomping a fry. Shit's illegal.

Kamal eyes Anastasia as she joins the food line. Hey Anastasia, he shouts, Is that a keg in your dress? Cause I wanna tap that ass. She ignores the collective you, sidles up to Timber. You finish your soda, wait for the fallout.

Sanford pelts Kamal with a fry. Even if you *cross*, that shit'll flop, he spits. The tension shows: the stink of possible fraternal beatdowns hangs among all of you like unwashed clothes. For all Valmiki's solid arguments, you knew no one crossed without a dislocated disc, a broken femur; the fraternity was a skirmish.

You fools up for this? Valmiki taps his finger on the table. We're going to be on line for eight weeks at least. They'll play with our heads every night from midnight until about three. Every day



but Sunday.

Valmiki has been singing this song since the information meeting. You don't know where he gets his knowledge, but you believe him. Some information is unconscious you figure: it hangs in the air with radio waves and the truth about conspiracies, like you knowing what to do that night in the Savannah, you knowing who to choose. You look away from Valmiki, to the crowd, watch the people you want to be.

You fools didn't answer me, Valmiki says, fingers gooey with ketchup, fishing for a lost fry. You fools aren't listening. You search out Anastasia in the crowd, her ass signaling to you like a semaphore.

[5]

Between that night at the Savannah and the time that you left Trinidad, papers were signed quickly; he said that people knew him. Trinidad was all about who knew *you*, hell, he said, That's what the whole world was about. If you didn't use what you knew it led to three D's—desperation, despair, or the big dismissal; he was a technician for a telephone company and drove an Accord. You sat quietly on the seat over the plane's fuselage; he clutched the handrests. Had you ever flown? he asked. You shook your head. You'd spent the entire morning looking at your passport, your first name followed by his second, tracing lines that were raised on the cover. In the picture your face was thinner than you thought, younger too. We're heading north, he said, wiping the corners of his eyes, then adjusting his seat belt. North-west specifically. When we get there we'll see about getting you into school. He drank often and quickly, sucking the life out of middle finger long bottles; he slept while you fiddled with the headphones. Back then, you didn't have to shave, your face was as smooth as a river-washed stone. What you remember cleanly about that day is the grimacing soldier of war in the movie, his sneer as he

mowed down sweaty enemies with an iron will and a machine gun. After the movie you kept the headphones on, listened to nothing. You hid yours when the attendants collected them.

[6]

Of course there's hazing. The first night on line, they fuck you up proper. The set is held in Timber's basement in Marcy; kids are still balling on the corner under streetlights. On the sidewalk, salt is scattered after a sudden snow. You notice your breathing slowing down just before you enter Timber's house.

Inside, the ceiling is low, the room smells of suck and fuck; there's a crib in the corner. Other than Timber there are two others issuing brutality—Big Brother Apache and Big Brother Helter Skelter, thugs with everything thick about them, not just eyebrows: arms like the gun bores of tanks. You form the line quickly, all dressed the same: Kamal is shortest and ace, you are deuce, then Valmiki. Lanky Sanford is the tail.

Timber watches the collective you, bored. Eyes up, he snaps. He raises Kamal's chin with a finger, you all follow suit. You seeing anything yet? The light? The knowledge? he asks. You know who you are? What the fuck you're supposed to see? he asks. You think whether to answer, whether he is being rhetorical. Valmiki says you never know how long you're going to be on line; you never know until the end, when you become one of them. I'm your dean, Timber says, slapping Sanford hard in the face. While on line, we're going to teach you to be brothers of the only fraternity worth shit, he says, and the goons, tall as giants, laugh. They stay mostly in the shadows. Timber says hazing is illegal—and if any of you drops from the line and tells the police they'll lose the chapter or go to jail. Here he swivels, punches Kamal in the chest, knocks him to the floor with an *oomph!* So, Timber says, The first thing you have to know is, when I say one, you say loose lips sink ships. He cuffs you in the chest, then the others, keeps

time bruising sternums. I'm too pretty to go to jail, he says. For some reason, you know he likes you best.

[7]

You learn that same night that Sanford had tried to cross the line the year before; this is his second time trying to join the fraternity. The collective you didn't know, not even Valmiki. Timber knew. Timber knows. Timber splits up the collective you and beats on Sanford alone the rest of the night—body work, his face, his chest. The rest of you get off easy—nipple twisters, push-ups, squats and their ugly relatives too: the TV and the chair.

At four AM, a reprieve: the collective you is dismissed; your first set was three hours. The wind chill is no joke; you move quickly to the subway. Your bruises burn and color quickly.

I don't know if I can stay with this shit, Kamal says, rubbing his eyes. Messing with my sleep like this. You think to laugh but don't, that Kamal could think of sleep at a time like this. Steam rises from Sanford's head like a bombsite. He is the only one not shaking in the winter air, walking with his chest pushed forward like a rooster. No one talks until you all drop into the subway. In the fluorescent light, the truth: Sanford bleeds from every hole in his head, his ears are big; one of his nostrils is ripped. His face smells of pennies.

Fuck, says Valmiki. You need to go to the hospital, he says, leaning Sanford's head back with a thumb and pointer finger, dabbing his face with his sleeve. We'll take you.

Hell, mutters Kamal, Now I'll never get no sleep.

You rub one of the bruises on your own arm. You feel nothing for Sanford.

Sanford sits next to you as you ride to Atlantic Avenue, your original separation point for different subways home. The car is empty, not even drunks. Blood stains Sanford's teeth. As the train pulls into the station, you decide. You get off at Atlantic,

don't go with them to King's County Medical. You tell them you will see them tomorrow and don't listen for dissent. Your nipples burn. When you walk through your front door at five AM, your ears are frozen and you wonder who stayed with Sanford at the hospital.

[8]

After the third night on line Sanford tells the collective you that he's dropping out. He glares especially at you. It's after the third set and you are outside Apache's house, shivering and lost in an hectic section of Brooklyn, imaginary villains everywhere in the shadows while you fiend to find your bearings, a subway train, a star to guide you. Sanford has hospital stitches all across his face. He looks like a baseball. He stutters too, and walks with a limp. He doesn't look at you after his announcement; he takes a different subway home. The big brothers hadn't eased up on him his whole time on line: on the second night he got his first black eye, on the third night, a pair.

No one gives him a pound when he leaves; there's no love for a deserter. While you ride the subway you forget him; he's an unfortunate casualty left behind. You and Valmiki study the Greek alphabet instead; Kamal snores softly; Timber will damage all of you if you didn't know alpha, omega, and everything in between by the next set.

[9]

At five thirty AM, you are on the telephone, waking Timber's ass up: for as long as you are on line, little brothers are the wake-up calls for big brothers. Good Morning, Big Brother Batman, you say, Batman being Timber's on-line name.

Timber yawns. You're supposed to start and end every sentence with 'sir,' he says, and hangs up. You wince, knowing how much pain that little slip will cost you on line that night.

Your uncle walks past you as he prepares for work, his

face all pillow crosses and deep lines. What you doing up so early? he asks. I hope you're not into no monkey business, he grunts. He has been suspicious these past few days; he knows something is up. He asks you if you checked the lottery numbers: did he win? He ends up in the bathroom, lathering his chin. He hates that you have to shave now too. He reminds you to shovel the front of the garage, the sidewalk too. You say you will. Saturday. You'd better, he says. He grunts again as his piss climbs the bowl.

[10]

After you shovel the sidewalk, you feel ancient. You go into your uncle's bedroom to see what's crack-a-lacking. He's watching TV, the nature channel, cheetahs and their game, nothing you could ever look at and enjoy. He pops his eyes open as one animal crunches into the flanks of another. You should look at this sometimes, he says. See how animals act in the wild. As if you don't know. He tells you to come onto the bed and says that one day you both will go to Africa, the motherland, see Safaris, maybe the Sphinx, before either of you gets too old. He sticks his hand under your shirt, rubs your back. You cringe as he caresses a bruise. We need to go to other places other than Trinidad, he says. We're both getting old, he says. Every year it's the same shit.

You don't know what he's talking about. You haven't been back since you left. He touches one of your sore nipples and you flinch. The cheetahs snap bones on the 55-inch TV. You still have nightmares of the both of you lugging that monster up the stairs.

[11]

That night's set is quick, the brothers have nothing planned; you, Valmiki and Kamal recite some laws and bounce, happy to have an early night for once. Kamal has his car and drops you at your house and speeds away, trying to let his parents see him home early for once, even if on a Saturday night. The ride home is gen-

erous of him; he lives in Queen's.

Your uncle is still up when you get in, belly to the breakfast table, gripping the edges like arm-rests. There are lottery slips all around him. He plays the lottery when the prize slinks past thirty million—why run the risk unless there is a big payoff? His routine: He flips the ticket slips upside down for luck on top of the television as the numbers call. Your part as his good luck charm is to sit on the bed eating chocolate chip cookie dough until the numbers pop and his luck runs out.

Since you've been on line, six days now, the pot hasn't been worth it. But this past night the money rose to thirty-five million. You usually buy the tickets—part of your job as talisman—but you haven't been around the past few nights for him to run you to the corner store to buy some. How pissed do you think he is? He looks up at you as you walk in, anger staining his face; hell, you could taste the bile in his throat. He gives you money to buy exactly three tickets at the corner store.

You walk slowly into the push-back wind, wishing you had a heavier jacket. When you are a few feet away from the store you see this girl getting out of a car so old that the bumper sticker is the newest thing on it. From her license plate you see she is a member of the sister sorority of the fraternity that you would like to be a part of. You follow her into the corner store and to the back, past the newspapers and dusty candy. The fur coat she has on looks troubled, as if the maker decided halfway through stitching that he was an animal lover.

You watch her bend halfway into the cooler closet; the plastic vertical flaps cut off her head. She's deciding between two torpedo-bottled sodas: green and nasty. When the cooler releases her, you see that her collarbone juts out, her earlobes aren't pierced. You can see across her eyes that she's done with school; the mascara is crooked. She is maybe beautiful enough to be in a

horror movie.

You lean against the junk food rack, say hello. She spends time with her back to you, reading the soda's label, as if her thin ankles can't stand extra calories, as if she doesn't need fattening. You step up close behind her, rest your chin on her shoulder, run your hand along the back of her coat which ends at her waist. You rub your hand on the back of her thigh, find the difference between her legs. There is nothing definable; the coat warms your hand is all. She stands there for a few more seconds before she decides on both bottles, casual, like she doesn't feel you digging between her legs, like you aren't there.

She leaves without looking back. Up front Bobby works the cash register, paunchy from his Pakistani diet. Three quick picks, Bobby, you say nonchalantly, pulling out the cash. When you look up you see the scimitar next to the register. It's so sharp it makes you think Sinbad lives around the fucking corner.

Listen, Bobby says, If you come back in here again and do some shit like that, I will cut off just one of your balls, he says. Just one.

You have nothing to say, your shame has shrunk you. Even if you'd spoken it would have been in a voice too high to have troubled him much. Your nuts are inside your stomach.

When you get outside she is still sitting in the car, sorting through hand bag junk, tissues marked with lipstick, maybe waiting for the heat to kick in; the muffler gasps at the back of her shit-mobile. She just looks straight ahead. Maybe she's wishing she were running the car in a garage, a garden hose connected from the muffler to the driver's window. You want to tap on her window, tell her something. But It Isn't In You. What are words after actions? She shifts into gear, disappears into another limp Brooklyn night.

[12]

Back home your uncle is at the door, asks if you've been to Trinidad and back.

Just buying the tickets, you say.

You make a show of patting your pockets, poking around. You are searching the tongues of your pants pockets when his cuff catches you near the top of your eye, a clean right cross that startles, the first time that he's exhibited physical violence. You didn't know he had it in him. When you fall, your head snaps against the corner of the fridge. You touch the back of your head, and thankfully, no blood. He floats up the stairs and you stay on your back for a moment, listening to his footsteps fade, guestimating the distance between yourself and the ceiling, yourself and the sky.

Later that night he crawls into bed with you, and although the heat from the radiator sweats you out, always on too high, his warmth feels almost good.

[13]

Valmiki picks you up Monday night and tells you that it'll just be you two tonight—Kamal is visiting his aunt, sick in Maryland.

A likely story, you say. What's wrong with her?

Her back.

You're kidding me, you say.

His family's close.

You're kidding me, you repeat.

He shrugs. That's all I know.

You leave it there. The collective you is done; the line is snapping; there are only two links left on the chain. Kamal is probably catching up on sleep—can you blame him? Only the sixth night on line and your eyes burn every second of every day. You haven't slept more than three hours in any one night since you've joined the line; this is, you know, how brainwashing works, how



POW camps are orchestrated. You and Valmiki will catch it when you line up minus one, just like they punished everyone when Sanford dropped. You are picking Timber up at someone's house. Valmiki has you read directions as he drives.

When you get to the address, Valmiki leans on the horn, and after a second, Timber pelts from a house and into the back seat. He tells Valmiki to keep his eyes on the road, tells you to keep your eyes up. You can smell that he has just been with a girl. He slaps the back of your neck. How's it going? he asks. You see anything yet, little brother?

Sir, no sir.

Timber knows that Kamal's not coming, and he tells you to forget about him, he's dropping Kamal from the line—there's only one acceptable reason for missing set, and the bullshit he gave wasn't death. Timber slaps the back of your neck. He's thirsty; are you thirsty? He makes Valmiki pull over at a corner store, sends him in for a couple of sodas. When Valmiki is gone Timber asks you if you know whose house he'd just left, and when you say no, he tells you it's Anastasia's. He asks if you think she's a dyme?, and you tell him most definitely. He smooshes the back of your head and you crash into the windscreen. You've got some pussy back in Trini, little brother? he asks. When you say no, he shifts in the back seat, and you can see the white of his eyes in the rear view mirror. You gay? he whispers.

Sir, no sir.

He leans back. Relieved. What about Valmiki? He your boy? Your ace boon coon? You tell him Valmiki's your line brother and you'd die for him. Timber nods and flicks the back of your head with a finger longer than a ball point pen. Then he flicks you again. Plenty of sluts from Trini around here, he says. He tells you Anastasia's from there, as if you didn't know. He leans back, looks out the window, asks you, how come you ain't got no pussy back

in Trini? You turn around, want to make him laugh, bust the tension up, show him you could be his brother. You tell him that you did have some ass but she *must* be fucking someone else by now. Timber laughs, slaps the back of your neck. He slaps your neck again, harder, then tells you to turn around, and reminds you to start and end sentences with 'sir.' He says he likes you—it's always good when a little brother can make a big brother laugh. When you cross, he says as Valmiki comes back into the car, You can have Anastasia. As the car pulls off, he makes you and Valmiki split a soda, has each of you drink a thimbleful from the bottle's cap; Valmiki pulls his end at traffic lights. Timber groans at the sharing: How can you drink each other's backwash? he asks, horrified.

[14]

In the car after set, you see how they fucked Valmiki up: there's a huge knot on his forehead, blood streams into his eyes, and are one of his teeth chipped? Valmiki swabs his eyes, sticks some tissue up his nose while steering. We're getting closer to the end, he says. I can feel it. We're just about to cross. When they start going crazy like they did tonight, with shorter sets, we're almost done. He laughs, sticks the tissue in further. You can't look at him. Outside, Brooklyn zips by, indifferent. You nod as you massage your chest, ignore the pain.

[15]

Valmiki drops you off at a subway station. His parents are worried about where he's spent the last few nights, and he figures if he gets home early tonight, they might ease off. He'll have to sneak into his house. You know if his parents find out, he'll be yanked off line, Valmiki looking like he's been head-butting rocks just for the high he gets when he stops.

When you get home the front door is locked, the lights out. Your life is in a garbage bag outside the garage; he didn't even

use a suitcase. Hey! you call out under his window. What about Africa? you yell. Before we get too old? The wind whips and you don't hang around. You pull a sweater from the bag and spill the rest of clothes onto the steps, keep it moving. Mercenaries, you know, travel light.

That night you do the subway shuffle, trade some clothes for a rank sandwich with the guy with no legs in the wheelchair who always shakes your hand, who says he *sees* something in you. While on line you aren't supposed to walk on grass, use elevators, drink or be with women. You aren't supposed to be seen anywhere but classes and sets, even on the subway you're to be a ghost. Time our patterns the big brothers warned you. Don't take our trains.

When you curl yourself into a corner on the gray seats, you think how fucked up it would be if one of the brothers sees you on the train tonight and fucks you up again, lifts you from your dreams with a stomp to your chest.

[16]

The next day you stay out of classes, sleep in a closet in the basement of the school near a heating duct, *fuck* if they check your classes and you aren't there. You wake up when hunger tears through your stomach like claymore explosions. Your dreams harbored goose-stepping Gestapo and floating fetuses. You run into Valmiki in the cafeteria that afternoon, his eyes crusty, his breath swinging.

Quitting, he says. He tells you he's dropping because Apache wants his car until he crosses, whenever that will be. That shit wouldn't fly, he explains, his parents would have a conniption fit. Valmiki says that buying big brothers sodas is one thing, but he can't go home without his car. His father disdains frats, and what if his grades fell and he lost his scholarship? You're thinking of this now? you say to yourself. You look away. The excuses soften

his face. You think he might cry.

You want to tell him that his cheap-ass father is full of shit, that he should have sent Valmiki to Yale undergrad and not have him have to fight up for a scholarship as he's doing, *fuck* teaching him responsibility and discipline. You don't say this, but listen as Valmiki says that he hasn't slept more than two hours in six nights; how much were you getting? You tell him it's alright. He suggests you drop too; no one has ever crossed by himself. You tell him you'll consider it. He says it isn't worth it, it's been two years since anyone has crossed; did you know that? Timber's year was the last time those fucks admitted someone, he says. He says that Timber is an asshole, how is the chapter to stay alive with no new members? You nod, and he keeps talking, touching the knot on his head that Apache blessed him with the night before. Valmiki told his parents that some rocks had jumped off the road and caught him in the face, chipped his teeth too.

[17]

When you line up by yourself that night in Timber's basement, Timber is seated on the floor eating Skittles. Helter Skelter and Apache sit on fold-out chairs in the corner. Timber asks if you're sure you want to stay on line. You could drop now, he says. We wouldn't think shit about you. He launches a Skittle, catches you in the eye. No one has ever crossed solo, he explains.

Sir, I'll stay on, sir, you say.

But there ain't no line, he says, standing. It's just you. You don't have no *support*. The last people who crossed was me and Helter. He raises his fingers, shows you a peace sign.

Loose slips sink ships, you say.

You don't get it, he says, then walks up to you and punches you in your face. Now you're the ace, *and* the tail. You're gonna get it from all sides, he says. Apache and Helter Skelter stand, extend to their full height, their frat jackets big on them.

Sir, I'll stay on, sir. Your head is tilted back; you're looking for the light. Apache laughs, comes over and slaps you on the back, tells you that he and Helter will form the line with you; they will be your brothers; they will get you through; you have been their favorite little brother from the start. Helter Skelter swears and says *he* isn't lining up again, not ever. He says his ding-a-ling is still a little bent from when he caught a kick when he was on line. He isn't living that nightmare again. He throws a roll of duct tape at you, hits you in the stomach.

Don't worry, whispers Apache. It'll be alright. He tells you to close your eyes, recite the Greek alphabet. He says it with you. While you are doing that, Timber stands on the other side of you, and says 'one' over and over. You abort the alphabet, start to say that loose slips sink ships, and catch one in the chest from Apache. Finish the alphabet, Apache whispers.

Before the pain catches, Timber smacks you in the face for putting him second, tells you to open your eyes. *I'm your dean*, he says. Do what *I* say. Helter Skelter stands behind you, asks you to name the fraternity's founders, punches you in the back before you can get out the first name. Timber leans in and twists your nipples, holds them tight in his fists, whispers in your ear. Hello, little brother, he says. Who do you think is going to believe these stories when we're done with you? He releases one nipple, punches you in your chest. He walks away, picks up a bottle, smashes it on the floor, and slaps you across an ear with his free hand. Do you really think you're going to cross this line by yourself? he asks. He puts down the bottle, punches you again.

Don't worry, says Apache as he smashes a fist into your back. Timber crashes a flat fist into your nose and mouth. Your face is warm; in your mouth you can taste your blood.

Brother, if you thought all that shit before was hazing, you've been hanging around them other pussies too long, Timber

says. We're starting the line *tonight*. He lifts your head; you focus on a spot on the ceiling. After a few more face-shots you can't hear out one ear. Why do you want to be a brother? Timber barks. Why do you want to be one of us? Do you see it? If you were a brother you'd be seeing it by now.

Sir, no sir, you say, the blood under your skin warm. I can't see it.

Timber judo chops your neck, then the back of your head. Helter Skelter and Apache rip your t-shirt off; one of them says something about heading outside. Lights pop at the back of your eyes like fireflies; there are lines and dots in your vision, the kind you get from looking first at the sun, then at the real world. They duct-tape your eyes, your face, all but your ears. How about now? Timber says, slapping you again before they drag you into the cold, shove you into the burning snow. Do you see it now? You hear him clearly through the good ear. Do you see it yet? he asks. The answer comes to you like lightning, just as you feel a kick in your crotch. Of course you see it.

## AT THE BAR

Sipping, I hear the wine contend:  
"Grapes hold their sweetness in reserve  
. . .to hold control."  
At the bar,  
We also add tips and traps.

## CULTURE OF LIES

Someone told a secret.  
It expanded to many more.

As from small corn  
Sprouts the great tale . . .When we heard

It's a matter of something warm  
Exposed too long.



## FOREARMS, BELLY, INNER THIGHS

In the newest brochure sent out in mailings in the thousands—resort life amidst the Sonoran splendors—my hands and forearms are pictured, expertly placed on the model's bare back. The skin colors are perfect, flushed with sunlight. Her expression, partly visible beyond the rise of her shoulder, registers bliss. Have the Massage of Your Life! the caption says.

In real life, it's even better.

Parched from even a brief exposure to the desert heat, you enter a cavern of stone hollowed into boulderside. Panoramic windows display landscaped green and bare cliffs; cottontails graze; subterranean waters trickle. I offer some, ice-cold, in a small, white paper cup.

Most clients tell the receptionist that they don't care if I'm a man or woman. Secure in my professionalism, they aren't nervous about disrobing. The moment of wariness when we meet is instinct, an involuntary tensing of facial muscles. The rabbit pauses, twitching its nose; then, sensing the luxurious privacy of the wild, proceeds.

I observe invisibly, and without judgement.

I'm lucky. Not everyone has a profession for which they're ideally equipped. What as a child was a painful sensitivity matured into a sense of touch as exquisite as a gourmand's palate or mosquito's tympanum. Combined with a deep clinical interest and intellectual detachment, I have the raw materials of a master. If I'd been born one hundred years earlier, before roentgenograms, I'd have been a brilliant diagnostician.

But gifts lie dormant until recognized. So, I'm doubly lucky

that I met Susan when I did—in the midst of that false start in my life, medical school—and that my hands affected her as they did.

It was finals. She'd developed heart palpitations while cramming for economics and was brought to my room by her best friend down the hall. At the time, I was barely through first-year anatomy, but I hadn't the resolve not to examine her. I had my father's medical bag in my closet. I pulled out the oto/ophthalmoscope, the old-fashioned rubber reflex hammer, and the Littman cardiology stethoscope folded over, as he'd left it the day he died, and as I'd carefully refolded it since. [I'd taken them out periodically to handle and admire.] With all these, and some superficial qualities—impressive height, dark seriousness despite a fair complexion, a soothing voice—I pulled it off. The palpitations went away. It was again luck that she didn't afterwards keel over from an exotic but highly treatable heart condition.

So, on frigid on-call nights, I had the comfort of knowing that, if I managed to elude the medical staff (who wanted me assisting every blood-soaked detail of their nocturnal proddings), sometimes by promising freshly Xeroxed articles from the library, sometimes by backing out the door at moments of high drama, I could speed off to her, napping or studying in the hospital lounge, and we'd steal a vacant bed where she'd warm my body against hers, or relieve me of the morbid agitation I'd pick up on the wards.

When a year or two later I explained that my gifts would never lend themselves to the depravity of the operating room, that I couldn't stomach the barbarism of medical intervention, and that I didn't like the city, she showed no disappointment. Nothing would disturb her serene climb through B school, internships, and corporate heights. She reminded me that what first attracted her was my hands, my touch, anyway. It'd be tragic to

waste that on the anesthetized or the comatose. Others could prolong life and ease suffering. Wasn't Pleasure a gift as well? And one not to be squandered?

She is, not surprisingly, now in demand for the inspirational seminars she orchestrates on leadership and management.

Our home is on vacation property. The air is health-sustaining. Our garden is indigenous flora and fauna, no more artfully arranged than nature would make it. Our walls are the shade of the reddish earth. The lack of winter gives us a sense of being immortal.

We've lived here now eleven years. We've been together sixteen.

Susan's body is a wonder. She hasn't aged; she's strengthened. There's a fanaticism in the progression—a mathematical logic that underlies it: the workouts at five am, the long runs culminating in sprints, under a sky wisped and mild, signifying the infinite. She returns not sweaty but finely dusted with salt, her skin a delicate parchment over solid bone and muscle.

While, she showers and dresses, I glide in and out of the bathroom to appreciate the way she puts herself together—moisturizers, mousse, foundation, undergarments, workclothes, a subtle perfume. I reach around her for my toothbrush, for my shaving kit. We collide, lightly.

"Someday, we'll have a bigger bathroom," she says.

My commute to work is the extent of my athleticism: a short bike-ride past beargrass, prickly pear, skirting the cholla of the jumping spines. The spa is a temple, simple, spacious, and harmonious, and I'm the priest who loves his workplace without

being distracted by the clutter of New Age principles.

I mean no disrespect to my colleagues—devotees of Feng shui, Chi-Gong, Ayurvedics, poles, magnets, crystals, Native American animism. No job, no life is an easy one; having guiding lights and filters helps. But I'm a scientist, and you're an organism. I don't ponder your soul. Typically, you're a woman; not uncommonly, you're a man; youthful, aged; dimpled, hard. At the spa, I can be consistently attentive and soothing and medical without that hard gulp that I used to take before an encounter with disability or desperation.

Unlike Susan, who never compares, my mother finds me a disappointment after my father, a man of intellect and rigor, of altruism, and humanity. He was courageously and tragically dead by the time I was two of a disease of the kidney. I don't remember him. My mother, placid today, I knew as a force, raging. I tried too much to get her attention. In memory, I stiffen like a windsock, incongruously sideways, held by my neck. At other times, there's calm; I have tremendous power. By virtue of lying still with her. The child is motionless, terrified of breaking the spell.

There are recurrent dreams. 1)I'm in a bright box. The inner surfaces are covered with the pale skin of my mother's ventral surfaces: breast, belly, axilla, forearms, inner thighs. 2)I'm a perfect cylinder in a perfect case. Silvery metal. One of the hardest of elements. Not human.

The most beautiful thing about the desert is the storms. Once you go native here, you read the sky. Anxious scrutiny or happy anticipation—it's the same. You become insanely peaceful and wise with reading. The steeliness in the depths of that light blue, the rush of bats across the field of your night-vision, the fish-

scale pattern in the clouds at dawn; science, superstition, necromancy combine—you predict a storm. And when they come, they're always expected. Always, the first blast of wind in conjunction with the thunderbolt knocks sky and ground together. Torrents of water run, mad fingers gouging root and soil. When it's over, the landscape is reconfigured: sand swirls, gullies, dry as a bone; a saguero may have split and charred.

But I never counted on things looking the same.

We hadn't married with children in mind. We were well over thirty when the desire for them sneaked up on us.

"I feel old," Susan said out of the blue one day.

She was rarely plaintive.

"You're n—" I started to say, but she'd already decided not to hear.

When she said it again, a month later, I was ready.

"Why?" I asked.

We began with surprising ardor, not trying, but merely careless about protection. Then there was the first cogent love-making, nervous and full of intent. She turned away from me, after, rather than clinging, as though to make room.

After the disappointment, mingled with relief, I waited upon her every cue: sex tonight or conserve sperm, hopeful signs or failure.

When did she become dissatisfied with compliance? When was it decided that I had to show Initiative, the partner to Eagerness?

I complied. I tested urine in tiny vials, smeared secretions on slides, charted temperatures.

I was a participant.

Eventually, we consulted doctors, driving to Phoenix twice a week for months. I gave specimens. I accompanied her to pro-

cedures in which more precise mechanisms than my own delivered my sperm. Sitting in a waiting room, I thought of murdering her doctor, *our* doctor. I wore a fixed smile of submission.

And Susan, instead of melting into me needfully, began to tense at my comforting touch, as though sensing something. And I'd remove my hand with utter casualness, and slink inwardly away.

We're mismatched. Her body hard and graceful, her love of clothes; my drooping at the gut, my khaki shorts and tees. I remember when our lovemaking for weeks consisted of me licking at her nipples or pinching, and, my penis hard or not, coming or not coming, sandwiched in the soft skin of her clenched thighs. She'd lie with her fingers teasing my anus, so nervy from desire and anticipation that an extra hard pinch or flicking double lick could send her into orgasm repeated at intervals throughout the course of the night.

Now we fuck with uniformity, as if submitting to a lack of desire.

I'm sullen. It's inconceivable that she doesn't know why. Instead she accommodates readily to my mood, injecting a note of cheeriness into everything we do.

I tell her that I'm sullen and why.

"That was Then," she says, indicating that I've indelicately evoked a shameful past.

Words come between us less and less. Certain formalities remain, like "Would you like me to cook dinner tonight?" or "How about a salad?" while "How was your day, dear?" has gone by the wayside. Occasionally, prompted by something in the news or overheard, one of us might say, "You know they've started that new method in New York," or "Did you hear about the center that just opened in Phoenix?" Sounding to ourselves like the

technophiles we never were, and then silent in reply.

It's hard to hope when there's been no explanation for what's occurred. We've fallen into that category of frustrating mystery. Our bodies are normal. With nothing to blame we blame something irrational in ourselves, in our marriage. We don't make explicit what it is. We can't allow that we feel this.

Neither of us has become particularly depressed. And Susan has begun to travel more. She is really very in demand at this point.

My work remains the same. No more hours, no less; no shift in clientele. Nothing new on the horizon.

One day like every other day, my first client is a man, roughly my age. We exchange pleasantries but after he's settled on the table there isn't a peep out of him. He has a relaxed body: one that's peaked, and followed a sedentary path. The skin's neglected, reddish-brown from sun. Where he's not tan, we're the same shade of midwestern white. He wears a wedding ring.

I use the first dozen or so strokes as always to prep the field and survey the lines of tension. The muscles have knotted in the usual chains.

As the oil warms beneath my palms, I plumb the deeper layers of tissue with pressure, working from surface to depth in increments calibrated to the answering contraction of muscle: here just a wave-like change in tone, there a longer, deeper reflex contraction indicating intensity. The last of the knots gives way as the music on the tape switches from jazz to classical.

I begin to work in patterns. The body has lost its particularity, and become of a vibrant and responsive consistency. My patterns are guided by images that come to me, typically, peeling an onion, making julienne strips of zucchini, or washing lingerie. Sometimes I remember the fingerpaint in my kindergarten class-

room. Today I see myself dribbling a soccer ball across a manicured, English-looking lawn. The music is so familiar I don't really hear it. There's tremendous ease of motion.

I tell him we're going to turn over now; I'm going to lift the sheet so he can reposition.

I lift it. He turns and lies flat on his back, exhaling deeply. I settle it back over him. He's become erect. The tenting of the sheet magnifies the effect. I put my hands on his pectorals and give them my weight; there's resistance, which gives way. I weight his sternum, hearing the cracks of the tiny bony articulations there.

For years I've been immune to the occasional reflex sexual reactions of clients. Today, I'm not. I'm not interested, but I've seen the erection, and though I no longer look, it's in my mind. My throat is tight. That's all.

I move to the triangular muscle groupings in his neck, disturbed. The disturbance rests next to the image of the erection, obvious, but unseen. I have the urge to brush my teeth.

I touch his forehead. "Jake, how do you feel?" I ask.

"Great!" he answers.

"Take your time and relax," I say. "I'll be outside."

He emerges robed. He asks politely for my card. I offer water, then withdraw. He leaves a tip of twenty per cent.

I return home over the off-road trail, pushing hard over gravel and sand. New construction mars the landscape.

Susan's there sipping iced tea at her laptop in the kitchen. I look at her. She's small and young-looking in gym shorts and boyish tee-shirt.

I pour myself iced tea, and sit across from her. Our legs are symmetrically opposed, propped on extra chairs, the prickly



sisal of the seats irritating our calves.

"New client?"

"Lengthening last year's for the aluminum people," she answers, typing smoothly. I compare the number of words said to the number typed, and feel shorted.

I cook dinner. As I slice tomato and cucumber, Jake's erection hovers like Macbeth's dagger. I need a psychiatrist.

When I come to bed, Susan's there.

"Why're you in the dark?" I ask.

I sense the change in atmosphere before I realize that she's crying. Her shoulders shake. I hold her until she calms enough to say, "It's so sad. So sad. The baby could have slept right here between us." We lie together, but as I drift off I have a moment of panic: it's as though I'm not holding her, but holding on to her. Then it passes, and I'm entombed for the night.

In the morning, she's her usual energetic self. Her face is puffy, though. I feel reproached.

At the spa, I wish that I could regain my immunity. Meanwhile, my formerly well-behaved clients have mysteriously misplaced theirs. I'd swear there's no deviation in my technique, but suddenly I'm the unwitting purveyor of exotic foreplay.

Day after day, I'm bombarded by their arousal. I must be confused about erogenous zones. The CEO's respirations increase when I probe the tender points around the caudal end of his left erector spinae. Were early anatomists punning, while mischievously withholding arcane knowledge?

I come to expect the tenting of the sheet.

And my *female* clients: on any woman, young or old, mar-

ried or not, breasts large or small, no matter how primly I straighten the sheet's crease from armpit to armpit, it disarranges; she stretches her neck innocently; there's draping; I'm given glimpses of breasts. Head-on looks. I neatened the sheet again. Cover the areola is my code. It's the compulsive behavior of the fascistically repressed.

As I smooth the sore calves of the lesbian actress who winters here only when gig-less, on the bit of sheet tucked between her cheeks, I register the slow, translucent spread of her arousal.

Despite such concrete evidence, I tell myself that I'm making this up. I take my mental temperature daily. I mock my giddy sense of helpless power. I'm reassured by the routines of morning and evening: Susan returning from her run, coffee together before she leaves, the making of the salad, decisions about shallots, about vinegar.

There are moments of deeper dissonance. There *is* the fourteen year-old girl, brought in by her mother, identical manes of chestnut hair. They exchange conspiratorial pampered smiles as the mother kisses her and leaves. My ministrations, the gentle glidings along the supplest of landmarks, are worshipful in their respectability. The muscles are those of a gymnast on holiday. She's cocooned in pleasure. Yet at some point, her eyes flutter open. They remain on me for the duration. I ignore her scrutiny, never thrown.

I'm operating without a textbook. I *should* write one, a re-mapping of the body's sensory neural connections. But I'm stupid. Mrs. Jones moans with throaty delight when I tease the lumbar nerve roots that spread sensation to buttock and leg, and to the little patch of skin between anus and vagina, while *Mr.* Jones sig-

nals for return only when I move away from a well-worked upper thigh. I'm caught up in an unseen pattern.

In those clients who take a series, I see progression over the days. The habitual knots melt almost before I handle them, while the gluteal and lower back muscles are held voluntarily in anticipation of my touch and then released—with a sigh of surrender—to my attention. I surrender in turn, playful, absorbed; and then it becomes a concert of waves upon waves—their breathing, my breathing, forearms gliding, oil over water, querying muscle, answering hands. A Joe Feld is the first to ejaculate upon the table, Fiona Carnegie the first to emit the escalating “ohs” as she writhes beneath my Swedish figure-eight.

“You’ve been working late,” Susan observes.

I attend warily, as though hearing distant sirens. “Busy for this time of year.”

“Such a nerd,” she says.

And yet, for the first time in my career, I’m incapable of tracking time. Distractible, disorganized, I run over sessions, keep clients sighing, cursing, and then soothe and gratify beyond expectation.

Inevitably, it seems unmanly to remain unaffected. It’s, at the very least, *tactless* to meet the abandon of a Fiona Carnegie without even a bulge to indicate biological interest.

I’m discreetly aroused. And if the head or shaft of my penis, through layers of cloth, should brush a thigh or be revealed in insinuating fullness to half-lidded eyes in the semi-darkness, so be it.

It all comes to an end with Mrs. Ted Swensen. For five years she’s been a constant, appearing always the same week of

January for her husband's company's annual golf retreat. This year, seeing her name on the schedule, I imagine her smile of well-tempered delight, and I think, will even *she* be subject to this?

She is. Within minutes of the first stroke, I see piloerection in all the beautiful golden hairs of her arms and legs; her breathing is drawn and shallow. At turnover time, there's awkward ballooning of the sheet, which settles crookedly over nipples straining with desire. Her vessels are so dilated that she glows. Her breath disturbs the candle flames on the shelf.

With utter poise she takes my hand in mid-stroke and places it upon her pubis.

"Here," she says.

She releases it.

I don't move it.

She half-sits; the sheet falls away. She grasps me firmly around my head and pulls me towards her.

She whispers in my ear, "Don't be afraid. I want you there, on the outside." Then she lies back, her eyes closed and legs spread.

I drop my pants. Mounting the table, knees hampered by khakis and briefs, I comply. The confusion of parted lips and hair at the entrance of her organ paint me with a silken nectar. I rub.

"Now," she says in a low voice, "just the tip, and stop. Don't worry."

I hover, teasing the tip. I'm an initiate. The coupling of dogs or horses greatly imperils the inexperienced penis of the initiate. Should panic ensue, the creature may bolt, leaving vital parts behind.

"Give me another half of an inch," she says, "please."

I move minutely forward and stop, awaiting further instruction. I'm suspended, motionless, hard as though my life depended on it. "Half an inch more," she says.

I'm measured in increments of quarter inches, my muscles locked, halting any forward motion that is not at her bidding. "Relax," she says, which I can only interpret as a purely mental phenomenon. Yet relax I do and, as I do, her vagina is in subtle motion, hugging, releasing, rippling, tightening. I'm a pilot in crisis, having lost the distinction between sky and sea, spiraling, control stick searching for life and reason.

"More, Dan," she says, her voice a beacon.

At last I'm tightly inside, body shielding hers. She wraps her arms around me.

"I'm fertile today," she tells me, affectionate.

"Don't worry," she says again, quickly. "Let's come."

I'm a perverse Cinderella and she's my Fairy Weirdmother from another planet.

We come. It's possible I've fainted. At some point, she detaches herself from me and leaves the room.

My wife appears in my consciousness and remains there.

How did we come to this? And when? are among my first ineffectual thoughts. Now I know how much we've given up. How little we're resigned to. Now I'm on the other side.

And, nothing has changed.

The way the dog slips his collar, but stays. He sniffs freedom, but he's a creature of habit and forbearance.

My practice returns to its former state. Though I can't say I'm immune, I am busy, and tired.

In the off season, I grow sluggish. I put on a few pounds. Susan suggests I get massage therapy teaching certification, to vary my routine, and I think she's right.

A year rolls around, and Ted Swensen attends his compa-

ny's retreat alone.

"Too young..." I hear him tell someone pridefully. "Not sleeping..."

An unbearable year.

Finally I get the first glimpse of my son. I see him from the window of my cave, framed in the magnificent vista of mountains and golf green. Walking, already trying to run, he lumbers after cottontails. They lope casually out of reach.

Tiring of this, he turns to his mother, but as she moves to sweep him up, he changes his mind and heads towards his father, and buries himself face first at the level of his knees. His father lifts him easily into the air, and the gesture pierces me.

Mrs. Swensen sees me at the window and waves. I wave back.

I move to the door, and pause. My heart pounds.

I don't retreat. I exit the spa into sunlight. I walk towards the family. They're not far away.

I break into a run.

In my mind, Susan is there. She has placed her briefcase on the ground. She stands on the green, arms folded, wide-legged in high heels. We look at each other. She unfolds her arms as I pass.

I run faster. As I approach the evidence of my potency, the proof of my power, a strange thing happens: my size diminishes as my velocity increases.

My arms and legs pump. I accelerate over a grassy rise. I'm on them now. The father crouches as if preparing to field a

ball. I'm small; I'm determined. I hit him with all my force. He pretends to be overwhelmed. We roll in the sod and dirt, laughing. I can smell him.

Susan watches. She laughs with joy.

## MAKING FRIENDS AT THE PROVIDENCE CENTER

"I cut my wrists," she said,  
holding them out for me to see.

Actually she had scraped her wrists,  
with a nail file,  
the only thing available:

raw and pink, the skin in tiny shreds  
like mice had chewed them in her sleep.

"Did you tell the nurse?"

"No."

"You have to tell somebody."

"I'm telling you."

I knelt down and took her hands.  
A light traveled from her eyes to meet me  
and died somewhere in the air between us.

"They're gonna take my kids away.  
He's gonna get my kids."

"It's just till you get better.  
It's not permanent."



"Everything's permanent."

Still motionless on the edge of the bed  
she retreated to a deeper immobility,  
well behind the glassy border of her eyes.

"Are you glad it didn't work," she asked,  
"when you tried to kill yourself?"

I heard a voice behind me say,  
"It's time to go now, Todd. The doctor is on his way."

"They know," she said,  
hands slipping out of mine  
like fish returning to the sea.

I stood  
and stared at the nurse for a while before leaving.  
Her eyes were oil spots dripped in snow.

"Your friend will be fine," she said,  
stepping aside.

## THE CHEVALIER OF LESSER THOUGHT

He knew mind  
was connected somehow  
to the chemistry of the brain—

all those firings and misfirings  
depressed him, nameless as they were  
and aimed over the sky,

random attack tiny  
in the fan of stars.

Worse still  
was how thought came in a voice,  
his voice, final ruin of silence

gibbering in the native tongue, elegy  
for the stillness that escaped him,  
at all times,

like the lost animal freedom  
he could barely conceive.

## BLUE FOXES

Only spring, but the grass Allen and Daphne laid their blanket in stood tall and green. The sun shone with unseasonable warmth and the ground was dry, as they had been a week without rain, and the first insects flew and crawled over the field without disturbing anything.

They could not hear the birds, though, for the sawing. First the sawing and then the grinding, coming from the next field over where three men fed branches into a wood chipper now, blond chips spewing forth from the other end. And in between branches there was the motor.

Allen had just poured two more glasses of wine when he saw the blue foxes. They must have come from the woods, from the dark line of trees that bordered the field, but he hadn't heard them come. To him, they had simply appeared, bouncing up and down in the high grass.

"Look," he said.

Daphne squinted, not into the sun, but because she was slightly nearsighted.

The foxes, two kits, leaped and ran, their bodies appearing momentarily above the grass then subsiding again, just their blue tails poking out, the color of peacock plumes, iridescent.

"Oh, my God," Daphne said. "What are those?"

"Blue foxes."

Daphne was Eric's fiancée, and Eric was a friend of Allen's. Allen had brought her to the field to have sex with her for the first time, but that wasn't possible now with the men across the way sawing and grinding. At least he didn't suppose so. He thought of taking her to another field, but this was the field he knew. And he wouldn't bring himself to suggest another place. Not that he needed to mask his intentions—Daphne wanted to have sex with

him, too. She'd said as much, or hinted it. Neither of them was past the age of welcoming youthful indiscretions, though they were beginning to see them as such. No, not a question of the flesh being willing, it was the practical matter of saying so. Saying "Let's go somewhere else" was the same as saying "Let's go somewhere else so that we can have sex," and though this was what they both wanted, it was not something either would say. So they sat on the blanket and drank wine and watched the blue foxes.

"Only their tails are blue," Daphne said.

He watched the blue tails in the grass, peeping up like periscopes.

"I wonder where their mother is," he said.

"They should call them blue-tailed foxes," Daphne said. "Why don't they call them blue-tailed foxes?"

One of the foxes bounded up, arching its back, bright blue tail shivering toward the sky, and the front paw of the other fox flashed above the grass. "I don't know," he said. "They're a rare breed, blue foxes. Not something you see every day."

The blue foxes romped through the grass, so close at times that Allen could see their grinning black lips, their red tongues hanging. Their blue tails glowed in the sun.

"They aren't afraid of us," Daphne said.

It was true. They flowed across the field like wind through the grass, unheeding, the way animals behaved in dreams.

Daphne lay on her side. She touched Allen's hand, and he curled her fingers into his, and her fingers were warm and delicate, the way fingers are in dreams.

The blue foxes darted across the field then, the grass moving like waves around them, their blue tails streaming away. Allen felt a pang at their leaving.

"What are we doing here?" Daphne said.

He was watching the foxes run, listening to the grinding wood chipper in the adjacent field. Each in turn, the blue foxes vaulted over the bottom rail of the wooden fence.

"What does this mean?" Daphne said. Her thumb rubbed his thumb. The pressure of her hand matched his pressure.

"Ho!" A shout went up across the field. The men had seen the blue foxes. Allen could see the blue foxes too, the blue tails, the grass swaying with their movement. He squeezed Daphne's hand, looked at her.

But his gaze moved back across the field. There were shouts. One of the men fed the wood chipper, and after a half second's delay Allen heard the grinding, and he saw that the barrel of the chipper tilted up, spewing chips into the air like cannon fire, in the direction of the blue foxes.

"Hey!" he called out, stood up on the blanket. "Hey!"

He saw the men turn toward him. One of them laughed, said something, fed a branch into the chipper, and the chips shot up and rained down where the blue foxes ran. The blue tails shot through the grass erratically.

"Hey!" Allen shouted.

He walked through the grass across the field, reached the fence, stepped over it. The men came toward him. They wore checkered shirts. The blue foxes had disappeared.

The men stood in front of him. "Hay is for horses," one said.

Allen looked for the blue foxes. They were nowhere in sight, had been chased away. He thought of their tails again, how they had flashed like blue armor in the sun.

"Those were blue foxes," he said.

"No shit," one man said.

"You shouldn't do that. They're a rare breed."

Then they placed their hands on him, dragging him away

from the fence. Their hands were like pliers. They gripped down like steel, made his mouth taste metal.

He looked back and saw Daphne running toward the fence, her hands holding the hem of her skirt, her breasts falling and rising as she ran, her hair in her face with the wind. He thought he saw her squinting. Then a fist struck him.

"Prick," someone said. "Dickhead."

Then he felt pounding, knocking, his body loosening to pressure.

He wanted to say that he did not care about the blue foxes. That the men could do whatever they wanted to the blue foxes. That he actually had no feeling for them at all, didn't care about any rare breed. Already the moment when he had stood, shouted "Hey!" from the blanket, seemed ages ago, a decision made in another lifetime. What he cared about was himself, lying there with Daphne watching the blue foxes run across the field.

Pounding in his head, his arms, his backbone, but he would not fall or lose consciousness.

"Blue foxes," they said, laughed.

"Sorry, boys," he wanted to say. "I don't care about blue foxes, either." But he wouldn't say it. He could hear Daphne's screams.

He wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't fight. He would walk as straight and quiet as he could. He wouldn't plead, though he wanted to say, "What are we doing? What does this mean?"

The sun shone warm and the grass rose above his ankles as he stumbled now, knowing how he wanted his legs to work but not able to make them, not saying anything, and there stood Daphne at the fence, coming no closer, quiet now too, one foot braced behind the other, as if she might decide to run away. The blows were finished, now only the insistent hands. He could see the picture clear. There was Daphne, pretty in the sun. The fence

was split-rail, old, warped, faded. Far away, elevated slightly above his current position, was the bright checker of the blanket, the wine bottles like chess pieces. He could almost see the blue foxes run, he and Daphne watching them. He could almost see the blue foxes in the woods before they had come to the field, drawn in quick steps toward the warmth and the spring sunshine, leaving behind the long months of winter. He could see the moment when Daphne had first looked at him that way, how he had looked back at her just the same, how he had thought right then of the field as the place to take her. He could see the first time he had come to the field, on a picnic with his parents and brothers and sisters. He could remember the first time his father told him about blue foxes. He could remember right back in time to the very beginning, the picture was so clear. He could see where all things started and moved. Yet the moving continued, his stumbling feet continued, and the picture shifted slowly, like a clock face from the vantage of the sweeping hand. He was right not to speak, there was nothing to explain—not to the men, who were nothing but force, movement, and not to Daphne, hesitating so prettily at the fence, who would after all be forgotten. Decisions were made, motives were supplied, long before the blue foxes, before the white butterfly he saw bobbing at the blue sky now, before the trees and long grass, before the hot sun, even, and there were not any words for it. Decisions—he had made some too. He stumbled to the wood chipper in the grip of these men's hands.

## FENCES FALLING IN A SUDDEN STORM

Now the party's on the street:  
Touch football,  
Shirtless and skin,  
When the rain nets the Nerf.  
But the game goes on,  
Louder now that cheers come,  
Droplets applauding in the street,  
Collecting in the storm drains  
Giving me the football-American-street-football  
Score over the football-soccer-football game  
Flickering blue and gray across my living room.  
Louder still because I try to ignore  
The hos and hahs and the  
Girls screaming about their shirts  
Soaking sheer, their sheer underwear soaking through,  
The players picking them up and  
Catching a quick feel under the storm  
And a glimpse behind the weight of water on V-necks.

Flickering and fading for just a second,  
Behind my red-eyed pint,  
I think about lead tipped erasers,  
Dynamite magic markers,  
To wipe them out  
Shut up their laughter,  
The foolery,  
The grunts,  
The groans,  
The snorting chortle  
The shouting



Chest pounding  
Slippery  
Salvation  
Shoes soaked and oozing,  
Pockets twisted,  
Underwear wedged somewhere,  
The bodies shoulder to shoulder.  
Some shivering,  
But most are screaming out  
The simple glorious joys of having  
Their arms above their sopping heads,  
Trying to catch the downpour  
Being at one with the uproar,  
And at peace because they're not laughing alone.

## THE GREAT NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE FIRE JUBILEE

Not a thunder crack but a rolling boil  
Of engines and instructions.  
To my bloodshot surprise  
The cars moved away while the  
Sheet metal shadows, wobbling forward  
Toward a three-story banner the shade of afterbirth,  
Of arson with intent.  
Spotted retinas following a Colt,  
Burning the clutch and third down the street.  
Hip-high I tailed my father who  
Looked down his shoulder  
Down the coiled garden hose at me.  
"A cold one," he said  
Dirt in uniform arcs across his cheek  
Neck and  
Forearm.  
Fetch.

"Hold it down, hold it down",  
The paint curled away from the wood.  
Our garage molted and boiled,  
Spray from garden hoses swarmed the  
Fireflies above the pyre.  
Whites of eyes and pink lips on soot  
Flickered as the silver can flipped skyward.  
Aluminum sweat and daydream venom,  
Vapors just barely made liquid,

Never touched his lips but  
Smashed into his tonsils.

Shillings split and slid, sparking.  
Hand to a fist,  
The can full of knuckles,  
Popping, cracking, and hissing, spraying.  
"One more."  
Silver sweat  
Modified spit  
Amber tributary rejoining the delta,  
"Another,"  
Condensation dulls the edge of ice and the barbs of carbonation,  
Lipless descent, soot and sweat, eyes watering, boiling,  
Kept from searing as the houses across the street were:  
Dry and infectious:  
Another.

## PCTRE

Know what's strange about that snapshot you keep  
Above your hibachi kitchen, out on the lanai,  
Where the dinner journal scorches the white concrete wall –  
The photograph that lost the smell of the photo lab  
(Where Wendy one-houred them for free before she put in her two weeks)  
When Bryce lit and pissed-out a road flare under the hibachi  
While he swayed in front of his doppelganger,  
The two of them squinting at each other, both in Johnnie Walker headlocks?

It's not that your childhood friends are moving into air-conditioned and Docker,  
Pantsuit and pantyhose offices, or even that you don't ever remember the moment  
That the shutter snapped or the way you smiled that time or the time before that.  
What's weird is the way those eyelids – you see when they're shut and black –  
And the nose – which you have to cross your eyes to look at – escape detection.  
Ornaments on the center of sense that seem so odd on your face,  
So odd in their alien motions, expressions, and that horrible voice of yours  
Telling Wendy to lean in while Bryce was slightly awake and not slumped over,  
Telling me to "hurry up and take the goddamn picture,"  
Because you have yet to hang a single mirror in your apartment.

## THE ARTIFICIAL REEF

A middle-aged muscular man, tanned umber,  
he worked as a scuba diver, he said,  
when there was work to be had.  
I met him at my hotel in Key Largo.  
Talking tourism, terrorism, Iraq,  
we rapped away the hours,  
until swiveling toward me, he  
changed the conversation to himself.

He spoke about the artificial reef  
his company was planning, how they would move  
an old Navy ship to offshore sanctuary,  
punch holes and scuttle her with explosives. In time  
she would grow fingers  
of elkhorn coral and harbor  
bigger fish and more kinds  
than the Civil War wrecks.

He listed the fish that would come:  
dark chub along with yellow-tailed snappers,  
black-striped sergeant majors, gold-flecked moray eels,  
stingrays, squid and sea turtles too.

Eventually, my companion plunged into plans.  
He shared with chagrin that he worked part-time  
for Wal-Mart. But when the artificial reef  
was ready, he would buy a stable, maneuverable boat  
with a full glass viewing gallery.  
Danger be damned,  
he would offer diving too,

but for trained divers only . . .

*I envisioned a paperweight ship alive  
with silver snowflakes ridging the railings  
and coating the decks. Starfish, sponges  
and soft corals joined a hundred kinds of fish.  
A 13-foot manatee grazed on turtle grass.*

When the bartender said he was closing,  
I rose, our revels now ended, wished  
my new friend well and departed,  
to round my day with sleep.

---

Today, months later, the newspaper reports:  
A Navy ship intended for an artificial reef  
six miles from Key Largo slid away  
as holes were to be punched and ended upside  
down with her bow  
above water. Workers disembarked safely.  
Boats are instructed to keep  
500 yards off the site.

## THE MAGICALLY MISSING ROCK

The New England Society of Antiquities newsletter says a farmer rolled a rock into the entrance to a cave rife with ancient artifacts near my home in Albany.

Shades of Mystery Hill\* — Does a circle of rocks align to the North and the sun at the solstices? Does the word *Bael* cut into a rock?

On the next warm weekend, I drive south with Anna, a friend from work. We dissect the mysteries of archeology and the mysteries of industry, speculating on who made Mystery Hill in 2000 BC and who might be let go in an expected layoff.

Near the X spot, a plateau with a faded farmhouse, overgrown with weeds and shrubs, we find a stone quarry with thin wedges jammed in cracks outlining three-foot squares. We wonder how the tribe moved rocks so big. Maybe by breathing in unison? Nearby is the mouth of the cave shut by the fastidious farmer. I imagine a circle of skeletons, remnants of a tribe dancing in the rocks, killed in an instant by who knows what. A two-foot circle of small rocks around a big flat rock perplexes. I take photos.

Around the corner lies another puzzle.  
There we hike through massive pines,  
with little undergrowth, dead-ending on the edge  
of the plateau, to overlook distant farmlands.  
Leaving Anna to meditate,  
I follow a steep path down among the pines  
ending at a warm, eerily quiet clearing  
by a wall seemingly composed of rocks  
from the quarry across the road.  
Finding no opening through the moss  
and hodge-podge of foliage,  
I assume the wall is the back of a great hall  
in a cave, perhaps the one across the road.  
For a few breathless moments, I am alone,  
a trespasser in a foreign temple teeming  
with whispering spirits. Suddenly chilled,  
I turn back.

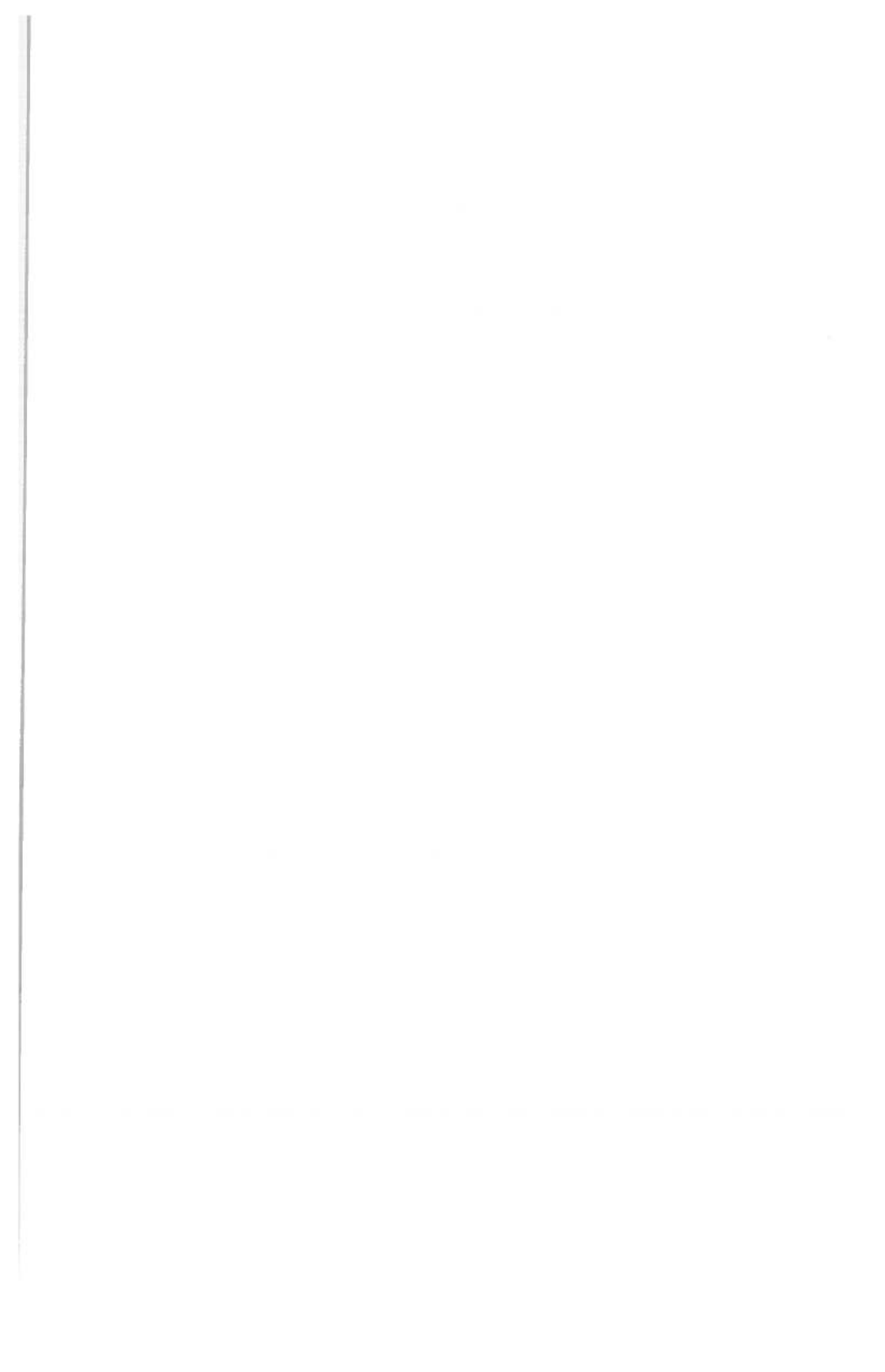
We head for home, first noting the number  
on a *For Sale* sign, to ask the price  
of this ancient site.

Before I have the film developed, the cutback  
comes. My job is among those chopped.  
So is Anna's. By the time I see the photo  
of the circle of small rocks, the skeletons  
have danced, circling the rocks thrice,  
weaving their magic. The center rock has vanished  
like our jobs, leaving only a transparent spot.

---

\* Archeological site located in southern New Hampshire.





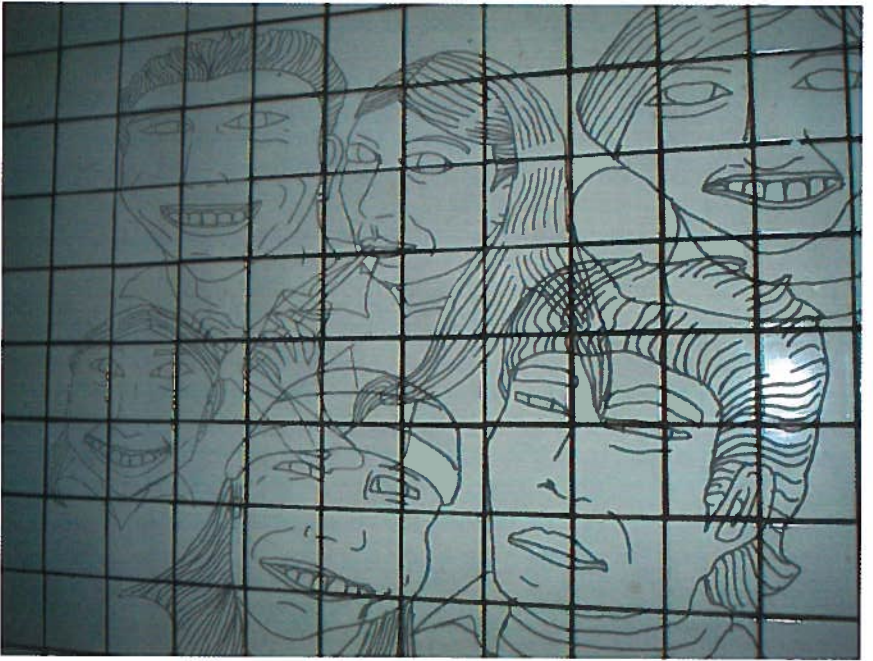
















## AGORAPHOBIA

Like an edgy marsh egret one leg crossed  
still as a stick except a million-year-old fear  
of public places starts in a pool of stomach  
molecules I can't stop from multiplying  
until trillions propel me out of my first-row  
outdoor chamber music concert seat  
ungainly scrambling through cattails  
and reeds onto the stage knocking over  
winds and violins ruining everything.  
What will they think of me flailing to  
get airborne only to start falling  
a millisecond before I hear guns  
drumming me shrieking into water  
my neck yanked up limp before  
a twitchy musical brain cell reminds  
my heart to beat and fly and that I haven't  
actually done this again for the thousandth time?

## LISTEN

Take your claw hammer and pull a long rusty nail  
from a dry fence post: you hear a raven  
caw in your ear about your unnecessary existence.

Record that sound and play it back  
twice as fast: a red winged blackbird  
is perched on a mustard plant  
serenading grasshoppers and honey bees.

## CLEANSING

I know wot I know  
from observation  
not cuz he toll me straightforward.

I know  
he no even believe in  
da kine Chinatown herb doctor  
like all da regular ORIENTAL people,  
da kine wea get da old guy  
who takes out all kine weird stuff  
from those little drawers  
like Bat's Wing, Snake Skin Powder,  
and Dragon's doo doo or wotevahs,  
cuz twenty years ago  
he tried 'em once wen he caught cold  
and nevah work so dat wuz da last time  
he went ova dea.

And  
I know  
he no believe  
like all da regular people,  
in da kine prescription medications,  
da kine you get from da real doctor,  
cuz he nevah goes for his check-ups  
unless he get someting  
he deems for be serious  
like da time he had one mild heart attack.

Recently I kinda suprise  
wen I see

all kine pill bottles  
from da Health Food Store  
popping up at his house.  
And ees strange dat he feels  
compelled for explain.  
He tells me  
"Das all cutting edge stuff-  
you gotta be mo' modern  
than modern medicine.  
Jason Winter's Tea for overall vitality.  
Anavit for strengthen da immunity system.  
And Brain Drain for enchance  
da mind."

He even trying out dat colonic deals  
wea you gotta shove dat ting  
up your DA KINE.

Dis one I find out wen I happen  
for walk into da bachroom  
while he wuz doing his  
cleansing.

I turn around fass kine  
cuz bad enough you imagine yourself  
doing someting li'dat,  
but worse wen you actually see someone else  
doing it.

Das wen all of a sudden  
I get one flashback  
to one image  
from long time ago.  
And I dunno wea da memory came from,

wuz like dea  
always insai my head,  
but packed away  
in one little mental storage box  
dat my brain forgot wuz dea.

Wuz couple weeks aftah  
my Ma passed away  
and every night I couldn't sleep.  
One night I had for wake up  
for go make shi-shi.  
I walked down da hall  
and I heard one noise  
coming from bachroom.  
Da door wuzn't shut all da way  
and through da crack,  
I could see da light from  
da moon shining down on da toilet.  
He  
wuz jus sitting dea  
crying  
in da dark.

I remembah I wanted for  
go in da bachroom  
and ask him  
hakum he wuz crying.  
I wanted for say  
someting  
like no cry Dad.  
I love you.  
You know,  
someting for make him  
feel little bit bettah.

But I nevah.

Instead  
I went back  
to my room  
hid underneath  
my blanket  
and started crying too.

I hear one flushing.  
Das wen he comes out carrying  
one red hot-water bottle in one hand  
and one long tube in da oddah.  
Wen he passes me in da hall  
he no say anyting  
and I no say nahting back.

For some reason my eyes get teary,  
but I suck it up.

Before he walks back  
to his bedroom  
I ask him  
if anyting stay  
wrong.

He stops, turns around.

And he tells me.

## RETURNING, PATH OF THE CIRCLE

roads paths invisible seamlessly  
follow. so life  
begins  
and begins again

from the unopened box  
bullets and glass, pauses in the music, misplaced words,  
pauses in the music just long enough to hear it  
as it passes. a breath. the chained dog barks. rain.  
again.

the wooden walls of my childhood  
with creases like paper  
said nothing

of the slow inhalation  
of the embryo that flexes and swells

of the light shines stars dissolving in kerosene.

from the unopened box  
the words to a simple prayer that had forgotten me years ago  
(I once memorized  
the security of words, a recitation to dark wood  
and dark  
I memorized  
the security of words).

the architecture of the bird the hollow bones, body hung  
between

arms that have learned to be carried  
the path ends  
and begins again.

the day's sky and clouds like the skin of a scaled fish, the night  
is open on one side and clear fluid pours out like tea.

the body of the sea  
is wrapped in nets  
and is rotting.  
and the waves away from me  
in the direction I should be going.

in the end  
the earth.

the impermanence of stone.  
the impermanence of wood.  
the bird flies away.

in the end when all the floors have been swept  
when all the floors of lifetime have been swept  
and swept again  
and the gravestones shine with rain



## IN THE TREES

it is already past morning  
and the nightbugs  
are quiet in their nightcocoons  
the leaves have closed their tiny doors  
the wind turns to face the land.

behind they spread sleep thin  
over the footpaths of broken light  
their cells scattered  
random as rain.

in the trees  
the sun behind leaves  
it is always darker

in the trees  
where the treeroots probe and moisten  
it is listening  
the earth,  
it is two hands  
and two arms

## CHILD'S PLAY...A MEMORIAL

Scorched clouds disguise  
inches, yards and miles  
clutched by generations of youths  
on foot, horseback, and hummers,  
descending  
on motionless torsos,  
bodies huddled in fear and pain,  
horror singed  
into faces.

A world away  
children's voices ring out  
victory,  
or roll over dead  
under clouds of snowy egrets  
floating in azure expanse  
over fields of blood red poppies.

## NORTH OF DANIA BEACH PIER

Blessed is the One who prompts the old wooden pier to glow golden on this late afternoon, heartens the fishermen to throw their lines into the sea to lure the red snapper or the black mullet, occasions the distant surfers to sit patiently on their boards in little convoys, talking quietly among themselves with the assurance of perfect secrecy reserved

usually for penitents in a confessional, or skimmers to challenge the incoming waves along the shore, performing magnificent somersaults to the delight of their girlfriends who watch from their towels on the sand, directs the Splendor of the Seas to sound its volcanic yawp and venture out from the safety of Port Everglades

on to Key West and Cozumel, encourages the Boeing 747 to lumber in from Paris or Madrid, or its humbler cousin the Beechcraft 1900 to hurry home from one of the thousand islands of the Bahamas.

They are all aglow and beautiful in the setting sun—the weathered pier and the pelicans dive-bombing into the water and the golden somersaulters and the sandpipers fidgeting back and forth—

aglow just as I must be to the occasional beachcomber who walks behind me, his elongated shadow blackening the sand—sudden and frightening.

## DOUBLE PRINTS

The girl from the lab called today to say  
she thought at last she'd found my photos,  
she said there was a picture of a lake with some trees,  
one of a church, several of a woman,  
another of cars going down a street.

I should have thought she would have said  
that the maples and oaks of the Bois de Boulogne  
blazed in the autumnal sun and couples rowed  
pale green weathered boats to a distant island,  
that several hearty souls had climbed the  
four hundred steps of the north tower of Notre  
Dame and joined the brooding gargoyles to  
view the whole of Paris spread below, that the  
woman wore a toggle jacket and a ribbed turtleneck  
sweater that matched her blue eyes, and that  
one of the cars going down the Rue Suchet  
was a yellow taxi headed for Charles de Gaulle  
with a single passenger barely visible within,

But yes, I said, those sound like mine.

## BRAILLE DRAWING OF A RAT

Not the word RAT  
But an image

On a sheet of rice paper  
Raised dimples  
Lift an outline from snout to tail-tip

Should I compare my soul  
To this rat on the pavement  
A smear of bright red lipstick blood  
Leaking from its drool flat mouth

Thin yarn skull hair  
Rain slicked back black like olive oil  
Eyes clamp-closed Retina flat  
One paw tight about the other  
Waiting to be dipped in altar wine

## DOUBLE SELF PORTRAIT

West Omaha December Rum-soaked  
The air On the manicured front lawn

A man in pajamas lifts  
The green Sunday World Herald  
From his oak plank front porch

To stare at me Asleep  
Crisp in front  
Blue jeans & bomber jacket  
Curled like a cat in a pile of leaves

I remember nothing Only staring  
Down At the side profile of my skull  
In a pool of vomit on the leafy ground  
& the frontal image of my bloody face  
On a warm damp towel he handed me

## GYPSIES

Jobin and Ernie were locals with no place to go, and like their friends, cruised West Beach to make out or look for company. That was a date—driving to the end of the seawall, down sandy pasture roads to the dunes with a sleeping bag, a joint or a bottle of cheap wine. They'd make love and lay together, his hair matted and sticking to her shoulder, ragged and just long enough to begin to curl with sweat and mist. They would look up at the stars through the light fog. Sometimes they would speak of the future even though Ernie couldn't think of one. Jobin wanted him to, wanted to believe in love when she knew better, thought she knew what was coming.

Early night, already August, the fading yellow light blended dark blue with the tar-stained dunes, the ceaseless wind abrading cocina shells, creosote pilings, discarded plastic and beer cans, covering them with patient sand. Emptiness accepted everything. Shapes shifted when the winds changed and sand hid it all, the beach a magic graveyard at dusk, glinting with broken bottles and white, cleanly washed bones. Ernie drove his mother's car down Nine Mile Road and parked it unseen behind a hill of scissor grass. He carried the sleeping bag like a body draped over one shoulder and held out his hand to Jobin. Jobin waved the flashlight ahead of them. Together they hiked to the hidden spot they had used the week before it rained.

"Shit! Turn off that light!" A voice surprised them within feet of the worn trough they believed they claimed for their own. An older couple were living like moles in the hollowed-out dune. They had propped up the outside of the dune with washed up two-by-fours like seasoned miners. The contents of two backpacks lay half-opened in the protection of the trough. In the returning dim they saw a man, wiry and sunburned dark as a matchstick, with a

wild black beard and hair to his shoulders. He was holding a hunting knife at rest next to his bare feet, crouching beside the opening. "What do you want?"

"Sorry, man. We don't want any trouble. We come here once and a while, that's all. My girlfriend and me." Ernie held her hand. Jobin nodded, silent.

"Trouble?" A woman's head emerged from the outside of the hollow. She looked them over. "Shit. It's just kids." She crawled out on her knees, then stood by the opened dune, her arms crossed.

"That's all right, we'll go," Jobin said. "Sorry to disturb you."

The bearded man saw the half gallon of Ripple. "No, you guys can stay. C'mon, be sociable. Let's visit awhile. C'mon babe, it's been a long week, let's entertain. C'mon, sit down." He extended his hand to the flattened sand around them. "I was just going to make a fire and check the net. You can eat with us if we get a good catch. Sometimes I get so many I have to throw them back. I'm called Shiloh. This is my old lady, Willie."

The woman shook their hands. "Cool. Sorry about your reception. We have to be prepared, that's all," she said. "We set up camp a couple days ago. You could have been the Heat." Willie had Asian eyes with an indirect glance which drank in every detail of what she saw, and straight black hair down to her waist. Jobin felt the woman's eyes assess her without comment while she addressed them both, putting her hand on the man's waist for show. "We don't want them to send my old man back. He's off parole."

"What're you busted for?" asked Ernie from under his new moustache.

Shiloh unwrapped a square of tinfoil with a crumb of hash inside. His hands were tattooed with crude blue stars, and he grinned. "This shit. You kids got a pipe?"



They shook their heads. Shiloh fashioned a pipe out of the scrap of foil. The kids passed the bottle around, and Jobin asked how they made money to travel. "You don't need money to live," Willie said. "You just live. We pick up what we need. Sometimes we come into a little stuff to deal, but mostly we get by. I'm collecting this shit now." She reached into the dugout and pulled out a cardboard box full of driftwood and shells, and passed them over so they could see. "I'm making wind chimes. Mobiles. Punch a hole in them, shellac the shells, string them up with line. Tourists'll pay ten bucks each. When I get enough made, I put out the bait — put on my bikini, and walk down by the hotels. Ten bucks, maybe twenty if he's a sucker, and I get rid of them before anybody asks to see a permit. If I get stopped, I don't-speaka-de-English. Get what I mean? I've worked this three coasts and two countries."

"Where are you guys from?"

"South Florida, north Seattle, So Cal, all around. Lived north at Big Sur awhile." She turned to her companion. "Pull in the net before it gets dark and you get too fucked-up." He nodded and left over the dune. Willie gathered paper and driftwood into the ring of blackened stones in the center of the compound. Behind the stones, to shield the fire from the ocean wind was the buried bowl of a scavenged 50-gallon drum. "I met my old man in San Luis Obispo. Dee's Diner where I'd waitress. He'd come there. About a thousand cups of coffee later, he asked me to go on the road with him. That was three years ago. He ain't much to look at, but he's good protection." Willie pointed over the rise with the firestick. "Hey, if you guys really want to do us a favor, how about going out to look for wood? It's going to cool down real soon. Bring back some big pieces for later."

The lovers walked west in the beach's dying light, turning over splintered boards and spars that had washed up from the

line of tide. "August already," she said. "What's going to happen to us?"

"Don't go, baby. I don't know why you want to go to college anyway. Stay with me. Promise. We'll get by. We can go off together, just like them. See some places."

"For God's sake, I want to get out of this fucking place. I want to go. I want my own life."

Ernie cleared mucus from his throat and spat into the water's edge. "What kind of life is that? Want me to ask you to get married? Because I didn't think you believed in that shit. I'm not stupid, you know. Not as stupid as my stepfather thinks. Nobody can hold me back. Your parents don't think I'm good enough. They're putting pressure on you."

"I don't want it to be like my parents. Somebody's wife. Answering where I'm going, knocked up, fighting about somebody else's money. I want out of here. Come with me. We can be together. You can take a night class."

"Fat friggin' chance. A year from now you won't remember my name. You're going to think you're too good for me. Jobie, I can't live with that man my mother married, and he can't wait to kick me out. No way I'm going back to school. What have I got to wait for here, answer me that?"

She cried into his neck, roped with veins and scars. "I love you. You're the only one I ever did it with. I can't do this with anybody else." They would make love when his mother was at work. She would lie with him and learn to smoke afterwards in his bedroom across the street from the school while the marching band practiced, out of tune. He'd take his mother's car and drive with her to the swamp where people dumped mattresses and washing machines, and they could fuck where they wouldn't be disturbed. They wouldn't have to see anything when the windows fogged up.

He put his arm around her. "I got to get out of that house. I'm not Mama's baby. I'm a grown man with another man on my ass, righteous son of a bitch. My daddy may have been a skunk, but he was a human being. This one is going after me. Sooner or later I'm going to have to fight him. You know what he calls me at home? 'That Lazy Bastard Son.' And she puts up with it. Go to college. I'm shipping out of here as soon as I can. Joining the Merchant Marine. Or we can take off together, before the end of summer."

"Go where?"

"I don't know. We'll think of something." But she saw his look drift to nowhere in particular.

"Is that what you want?"

"I gotta leave. If you don't go away with me."

"Go away with what for God's sake?" She hugged him, pressed her hips into his, and felt his tears on her neck. Is this how you leave the body of love? Or stay, making do with love and nothing until nothing tears you apart? Her parents told her she had her whole life in front of her, not to throw her life away. Then they'd tell Jobin she was going for her *Mrs.* degree. They wanted a job for her that made more money, a professional marriage, and grandparenthood. Jobin was expected to work some kind of magic to make this come true. Mom and Dad spoke as if her life would be easy. They had planned it out because they no longer had dreams of their own. They'd robbed themselves for years at the factory, the dictation desk. It was up to Jobin now, they said. She'd be a virgin, wear white, and marry, what Mom wanted.

She did not know herself, but she couldn't be what they wanted. She couldn't be for Ernie. He couldn't help her. Love wouldn't protect her. But what could a woman be for herself? What was a woman on her own?

They walked back, leaning together like branches snapped

at the bottom of a young wood too many drunken hunters had marched through. Each carried a sandy armful of spars and boards for the fire Willie had made in the pit of the metal drum. The flames flashed higher when the fire tasted a patch of tar. Headless whitefish lay on a grate wrested from a shopping cart, beginning to weep and bubble seawater from their spines.

"We're thinking Alaska next," said Willie. "Summertime things open up. There's good money there."

"What can you sell in Alaska?" Jobin asked.

Shiloh reached over and squeezed Willie's ass. She laughed and Shiloh nodded to the boy. "That's my old lady. She's keepin' us in patooties, don't you, girl?"

"You don't have to sell it, just dance for it. No touching, see? Good money too. And I can tell fortunes, read cards. Come on, Shiloh, make the toast!"

"To gypsies!" The jug made a round. "Drink to gypsies."

"Alaska, huh?" Ernie drew knobby legs up to his chest. "Never even thought about it. Never saw anything but this stinking town. Went squirrel hunting in the piney woods north of here with my dad once or twice. Shiloh, when you split, do you think I could go with you?"

"Well, I don't know, Little Brother Ernie. See, my old lady and I are a team. She takes care of industry, and I handle the details. Not that you aren't cool to come with us, but we're solo together, if you get what I mean."

"He's not half bad," said Willie, looking the boy over, scraping off the filets into crumpled pie pans.

Shiloh frowned. He snapped his fingers to Willie. "Let's eat. The wine, the wine, woman." She passed it over. "So, Brother Ernie, you're the one with the Boy Scout flashlight. People told us there were good mushrooms in the paddies back here. That true?"

"Sure, but you have to go out one or two days after it rains. You can get a dozen on a good day if you know where to look."

"You know what kind we're looking for?"

Ernie grinned. "Sure do. I been out here looking lots of times."

"Rained just a little this morning. Why don't we take that flashlight of yours after supper and go hunting for vegetables? Got to have vegetables with your meal, right?"

"Fish tastes good," said Jobin, picking up the hot meat with her fingers. "The fresher the better."

"Like they say, If you can't fuck it or eat it, may as well kill it," said Shiloh, rubbing his beard on a faded red cloth. "That's philosophy, ain't it, babe? So, Ernie, grab your torch. Let's go over the fence, and see what's waiting for us." The bearded man tied the cloth around his head and picked up a canvas sack. "Gypsies? Fuckin' psychedelic pioneers. Livin' off the bounty of the earth, and it's harvest time. You chicks be cool. We'll be back after we try our luck. Willie, get me the knife." Willie wiped fish oil off the bowie knife and handed it over. "You all be cool."

The wavering beam disappeared behind the dune. The women heard the men wade and stumble through low bushes, shouting "Fuck!" and laughing as they found the barbed wire fence that ringed the grazing pasture. Their retreating voices were blown away by the wind and the flat hit of surf rushed in to take the place of human voices. "So," said Willie. "You a townie?"

"All my life."

"That's not very long. Sixteen?"

"Seventeen. I'm leaving. For college."

"Might have tried that," said Willie, rolling a thin joint. "But I learn things the hard way. Real life: make your own rules. Use what you got to pick up what you need. That's what it's about, kid, but no school is going to tell you that." She inhaled and passed it

to Jobin. Silence and waves.

"Your name's really Willie?"

"Wilhelmina. Could have been called worse."

"Is Shiloh his real name?"

"Who knows?" The woman exhaled and kept her gaze just past the girl's face. "I think he told it to me once. So. 'She's Leaving Home.' Like the Beatles. First time for everything. What's Mama and Daddy like?"

"They like to tell me all that they've done for me, then argue about how much money it takes. I guess they would say that they're happy, but they fight over bills. They say they're working for the children. Me and my sister." Jobin avoided Willie's eyes. "How about you? Do you always do what Shiloh tells you to do?"

"You got a lot to learn, honey. Shiloh's pulled my ass out of the fire a dozen times — hell, I tell him what to do to keep his head screwed on. But he's got a built-in shit detector. He can smell trouble coming a mile down the road. Someday you'll find out. You need a man for protection." Her dark eyes lit up in the firelight. "But you're smart. Figure you'll marry your meal ticket. Be sure he has the bread up front, though. Either that or you end up freelance like me." Willie pulled a thick woven Mexican shirt over her head. "Gettin' colder. So far your town don't look like much."

"Churches, cheeseburgers, fishing piers, bars, bait shacks. School. Motels. Refinery across the bay. Nothing to do."

"We can dig that. I had enough excitement for the last couple of months when my old man got popped. Yeah, I'd say doing nothing suits us fine about now."

Jobin moved toward the fire, covered her feet with warmer sand. "So you tell fortunes? Will you tell mine? Like a real gypsy?"

Willie laughed and wedged another board into the barrel.

The flame began to smoke, then caught anew. "I just told you. Same as any woman's. You think you want to be on your own but you got no idea. Getting away from mommy and daddy's house. You want someone to say they love you. If that's what you want, then you end up back playing house, but now you're the mommy or the daddy. Choosing one means losing the other, and one don't mean shit without the other. Trade-offs, that's your fortune. That and falling for the gypsy fortune crap."

The sound of laughter and stumbling feet grew closer. Ernie flashed the light ahead of them. "Jackpot, Willie! We got a shitload." Shiloh kneeled on the sand in the light. "Count 'em. We can dry these fuckers and eat 'em for days." He spread them out, their red tops glowing near the fire. "Maybe sell a few. What do you think, baby?"

Jobin watched Ernie's eyes gleam, pleased with what he'd found. He was beautiful with his uncared-for teeth in a wide grin, his long bones and brown curls creeping to his light denim collar. She could look at him and be happy. Shiloh was putting his arm around him and reaching for the bottle with the other, while Willie was culling out the best third to save to sell. Dull roar of the surf surrounded them, the front of their bodies a visible orange by campfire.

Suddenly the air hummed with an engine gunning, tires spitting sand. Yelling shitkicker hoots, the motor revving, spinning out, doing donuts. Shiloh grew rigid, crouching, and spread his fingers out on the sand like an animal. His eyes shined red from coals. "Fuck, company! Quiet, everybody. Willie, get the fire." Willie glided to the trench and returned with a slab of sheet metal, fit it soundlessly over the drum. Smoke billowed and filled the space between the dunes, and all four stuck out their heads toward the sea for air and watched a pickup lurch down the pitch black. "This shit means trouble," the old hippie said.

"How'd you know?" Jobin really didn't.

"Christ, what a baby," he said to Ernie over Jobin's head. "Listen. Shitkicker music. You think any redneck is gonna pull into a freak party just to say 'howdy'?"

The truck turned another circle, then pointed its brights at the dunes. Willie came up behind her. "Look kid, you don't understand. He means we're holding and we've been up for vagrancy raps before. We're strangers. And you guys look — normal. You're townies, you know this place." She turned to Ernie. "You're going to have to go out and meet them and send them off, or else they'll come back nosing around and start something." Gravel laughter and a howl came from the blinding headlights. "Go on." Willie waved her hands. "Both of you. Go!" Ernie and Jobin walked out from the dune and toward the truck.

"Yo! Hoo-wee! Y'all come!" Two cowboys cut the engine, keeping the lights on the young couple. Jobin raised her arm to shield her eyes. "Hey! Ya'll got a party up there? We looking for a little action."

"Nah," said Ernie. "Just me and my girl."

The man in the flannel shirt clicked his tongue. "We heard some hollering and laughin' out here. Sounded like a party."

"Me and my girl, we laugh a lot like that."

"You got a nice one too," said the other. He had a burr cut and wore a muscle-tee even in the midnight wind. "What's your name, honey?"

The driver punched his traveling partner in the shoulder. "Now what good is her name going to do you?"

"No harm asking a pretty girl her name, is it? How 'bout it? What size bra you wear, honey?"

"Cut it out, Carl, you back in society now."

"Well, she can either tell me one or the other. Which is it, doll?"



"Betty Lou. My name's Betty Lou, and this is my boyfriend, Tommy." Jobin poked Ernie in the ribs to make sure he got the idea. "We came out because we didn't want any surprises, the two of us."

"She's a bold one, sure enough. You got a bold one, Tommy." Carl pulled out a brown paper bag from the passenger seat. "Go ahead, you two. Have a drink of Turkey."

"My name's Jimmy. And this is my baby brother, Carl." Jimmy walked to the back of the truck and put down the tailgate. Carl followed the kids to make sure they joined him, and Jimmy took his position on the flatbed facing the gulf, patting the space beside him. "Make yourselves comfortable." Jobin and Ernie leaned beside the back of the truck. "Suit yourself then," he said. "Come talk with us a mite if you don't mind."

"We don't mind." Ernie sat on the tailgate with one hand on Jobin, one leg touching the ground. Jobin leaned toward them but kept the side of the truck in front of her. The tide was louder, coming in.

"You kids from around here?"

"Crystal Beach."

"That's nice, son. Mighty pretty here. Me and my brother used to come down here all the time to drink, go fishing. Grew up in Freeport. Don't live here, though. Live in Brenham now. A man can hunt and go for trout too. I don't like going into town no more, though. It's getting too big for me."

"Things don't change much down here," said Ernie.

"Everything changes, looks like," said Carl. He peered into the mist rising from the sea. "Looks so familiar. That's why it confuses me so. It's same like I remember, but it's different."

"We drove down here from Huntsville this afternoon," said Jimmy. "Little brother wanted to see the ocean again, like old times." He gave Carl a poke on the shoulder. "We got some cele-

brating to do, ain't that right?"

"Oowee!" Carl bellowed into the crash of the waves. "Feels good just to shout. Do anything I want. But I ain't used to it. I walked into that liquor store, picked out this bottle, handed the man cash and walked on out. Just to go to the store is a funny feeling. This morning I had to pick out a shirt to wear. Had to stop and think about it." He took a long drink.

"What's he talking about?" she asked.

"Carl's been locked up four years," said Jimmy, taking back the bottle. "Four years. We just got him out six-thirty this morning."

"I never knew what time it was in the pen. I knew it was five-thirty because my stomach growled every five-thirty, regular like clockwork. Four years of chow-time, punctual, and you always knew where it was coming from. Now I'm hungry all the time. Hungry all the time and I don't know for what."

"Wine, women and song, little brother!"

"Ooo-wee!" Then Carl quieted, put his hand on Ernie's shoulder. "Tell me something, young Tommy. You got a pretty girl there. This girlfriend good to you? Takes care of what you need? Not good to nobody else like she is to you?"

A look of confusion crossed Ernie's face. "Sure. I guess I know what you mean."

"You gotta be real sure, son. Women think they can do what a man can. Makes things complicated."

"She's all my girl, all right."

Jobin knew not to speak.

"Well, I hope she is, young man." Carl stretched one leg over the wheel well. "Lots can happen if she's not good to you. You kids married?"

"Thinking about it," Ernie said.

"Don't get me wrong, but a piece of paper don't mean a

thing. Just as long as she's good to you. Knows what she's in for." Carl got down from the truck and turned from them to piss in the waterline.

"Four years, shooting his wife," said Jimmy with a yawn. "Me, I spent four years in Vietnam. I must have shot twenty Gook women and got a medal for near every one. My little brother shoots one slut and gets four years hard luck. No sense to it."

"That's all water under the bridge now," said Carl, jacking up his pants from the hip. "Course, if I had it to do all over again, I would have paid some other bastard to do it, not done it honest like I did and admitted it."

"Live and learn," said Jimmy.

"Bitch deserved it," said Carl. He drained the last of the bottle. "Hey, we got to go back into town before that store closes, get some more of this stuff. Use up the rest of the money they gave me."

"You all be good, now. Maybe we'll come on back here." Jimmy lifted the chain out of the way and slammed the gate, the noise like a random shot above the slosh of waves. "After, we can play some pool at the Seamans' Hall. I got my vet's ID."

"I got real good at pool. Nothing to do in prison but work out and play pool anyhow. Let those balls break and fall, hey buddy?" Carl stopped at the passenger door and slapped Ernie on the shoulder. "Hey, Tommy, you ought to go get you a haircut. You're starting to look like some hippie faggot." He nodded at Jobin and addressed the boy again. "You take care of that little girl of yours. Make sure she treats you right or else."

Jimmy started the engine and the pickup lurched in a circle back toward the lights of town. Carl waved, a white hand out the window.

Jobin and Ernie walked in silence to the dune. Jobin's heels sank into the sand and it shifted her weight against her.

Ernie held out his hand, but she walked apart at an angle away from him. She looked at her feet and thought of Carl, how his voice trailed off, talking about simple choices, the softness of his wondering. The simple justice he gave to his wife, self-satisfaction he kept for himself. Four years hard time or four years in the Army where they make men. And invisible women—gooks, sluts—around them. When she looked up, Ernie was still holding out a hand. She took it. Both of their hands were cold to the touch. "I was scared shitless," she said.

"Me too." He paused. "But they weren't so bad, were they?"

When they got to the trench, they warmed their hands over the orange coals. "Thanks, man," said Shiloh, "I knew it would mean bad news if they came back here. You were gone so long, Willie freaked. She said she didn't know if you could handle it. I said, 'Be cool, the kid's all right.'"

Ernie moved closer to the fire. Willie didn't talk but sat hunched over, head out into the opening of their dune facing the water. Jobin listened for an engine returning. They saw nothing under the new moon. "You guys might want to split," Jobin told them. "If they can find their way back, they might come looking."

"Nah," Willie said. "We'll put out the fire, they'll be too pissed to tell one lump of sand from the other."

Shiloh scooped up sand with a bleach bottle cut away into a bucket. He buried the hissing coals with sand. "Get the stuff, woman."

Willie reached for the canvas mushroom sack, the open backpack, pie plates and axe. The hunting knife would stay close to the opening of the burrow. "We talked it over while you were gone," said Willie, combing the area for supplies that may have scattered. Ernie handed her his light. "Too many shitkickers here. Shiloh thinks we ought to head for Mexico tomorrow."

"What happened to Alaska?" asked Ernie.

"Nothing happened to Alaska. It's still there, know what I'm saying? We're just not going yet." Willie squatted with the flashlight glowing at her feet and continued to pack, pushing the bags toward the entrance. "We can sell these shell things on the way out of town. Hide a little stash we can pick up when we cross the border again on the way back to Vancouver. Shiloh and I are gonna pick up some Mexican folk art shit, little pots, crosses, and crystals to sell up there. The more miles north from Mexico, the better price on that stuff we can get."

Shiloh finished smothering the fire, shifting the metal sheet on top of what remained of the coals. "Baby, bring out your box." Willie left off packing to return to the hollow of dune behind the camp. She appeared holding the box of chimes out to Shiloh like an offering; he took them from her without a word. He reached into it and found a mobile, and handed it to Ernie. "This is thanks from both of us."

Ernie nodded. He held the chimes up by its driftwood bar. Jobin could see worms tunnels through the softened wood, worms had eaten and etched delicate nets that wove like nerves in tangled directions over its surface. The shells, useless as protection, twisted and pitted the older they became, hung in misshapen pitted slivers of moon, in whelks broken along the line of their axis, in cross-sections of chambers that grew smaller and tighter. A hollow gull's bone dangled next to a tiny crab claw. Predator and a last meal side by side, the same fate. A serrated sliver of a spiked angel's wing twisted on the line like a ivory dagger. A gift of skeletons hanging from a thread in shell flesh shades of yellow, pink and black, the edges grey, boundaries hard to see in the coals' dying light.

"The mutants are my favorites," said Willie. "But they don't sell, so I end up giving them away. Tourists buy the perfect ones,

but these got some history to them. They've been around. They're more interesting that way."

"We have to go," said Jobin. "My parents — they'll be waiting up for me."

The fog had rolled in. The couple walked unsteady as they had come, back to his mother's car. Jobin carried the flashlight unlit since their eyes had accustomed to the dark. Away from the wind, the comfort of the car's interior felt new, peculiar. "Look." Ernie held the mobile out, fingering the shells for her to inspect, to appreciate. "Aren't they cool?"

"It's all trash. A bunch of junk." The bend of the wood reminded her of wings that could no longer fly, and a web of worm tunnels connected every part. The complexity — the pieces that swung free, yet bound to one another made an awful, random music. Delicate shell and bone, twisted to their limit, plucked, broken, rejected, then salvaged, the discarding their reclamation, in survival, an ugliness made a beauty. What remained of the living after the living was through. Jobin had her whole life in front of her, but the gift of the chimes made her sick and angry. They frightened her. "You keep them," she said, "they look like shit."

from *IN THE TIME BEFORE LIGHT*

"Up there, do you see it?" he asked. "In the gap between those two tallest mountains. They are Lanihuli on the left and the taller one on the right is called Kōnāhuanui. There he carried out one of his greatest battles."

"Konahuanui."

"To be precise with the language, you must draw out the 'o' and the first 'a', so that your voice holds those two letters longer. Ko-nah-huanui."

"What is up there?"

"A footpath that goes over a high pass, hundreds of feet high, beyond which is the northeast side of this islands. I was in other battles, four of them in fact, but all this was a long time ago."

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"We lived in a valley which was over a ridge from another valley, the two valleys joining just a thousand paces or so from the water. These valleys formed a V pointing at the path to the water. This path led to what we called Kānalua, or the place of the uncertain, or dubious winds. It was a remote part of the island, sparsely populated because of the harsh weather. Part of the year our stream ran dry, and our land lay parched under hot sun and forceful winds. The winds present in areas have names, I should interject, and ours was always varied, strong one day, weak another, wind here at the stream, no wind thirty paces away at the path. I should say also that we rarely, if ever, saw our highest born—they remained in more hospitable areas, separate from us, their priests and warriors with them, and very likely cared little about those of us living in these far reaches. We could not approach their sacred area, and they did not sully themselves by coming to

ours, except in cases where offerings were collected by their priests, at specific times during the year. I will forego the details of this, because it does not add to my account of the battle.

"Our valley was populated by people who came in large part from other places. Normally concentrations of people are related directly, in effect large families, but we were not. The valley next to ours, however, was populated by a group of people who were related, and they were greater in number, their living conditions, soil, access to water and so on, better than ours. They had an elder, or village chief one might say, who had more direct access to the high born than we could ever dream of.

"The family in the other valley experienced a shift in power. The standing attitude of 'permission' we had enjoyed in connection with the right to our land and water shifted because of this. Their chief died, and his oldest son, a strong and arrogant man of some twenty-five years, started his reign by claiming both valleys as his own, under his rule. Hence, a form of tax—fish, foods, feathers and the like, normally shared with generosity amongst the families in our valley, would henceforth be collected by his 'warriors'. This information was received by the elders of our valley with guffaws and dismissive waves of the hands. Nonsense, they said. Another claim: should the new chief desire another wife, he would choose as he desired among our women. Again, the announcement was received with snorts and groans of jocular puzzlement. I should say that behavior of this sort would normally be disapproved of by the king, or by district leaders, because this arrogant *ākēkē*, or puffer fish as we called those whom you might call 'blowhards', was acting as if he were *ali'i*, which he was not. A puffer fish inflates itself into a ball in water, I should say. But in this case I believe those who might have intervened on our behalf either thought this claim was just or did not care, because no intervention was forthcoming. We were left to fight it out



amongst ourselves.

"Our 'elder' by acclimation, or volunteer chief, immediately prepared for a battle. To call it 'war' might amplify it beyond what it actually was, considering our numbers. In all, we had perhaps fifty men whom we could call 'warriors.' In all likelihood, a confrontation would take place where the two valleys met, at the footpath to the ocean, one I had as a boy walked hundreds of times as I learned the skills of fishing, learned from Kū'ulakai The Red One of the Sea the ability to see under the water.

"The battle, should there be one, would take place at the opening to the footpath, from which one could see the entrance to the two valleys, during this time of the year dark, lush openings into terraced foothills and a stream for each valley becoming one and, running alongside the footpath, each side of which were rocky hillsides, grass encircled boulders of our porous volcanic rock, and in flat areas, the lo'i, or kalo patches of our people. Kalo is a root vegetable that resembles your potato. Amid these patches were the thatched dwellings of the people, although I should mention that each family had a number of structures on each property. The reason for this is a matter not relevant to my story. But these groupings were arranged on each side of the stream, so that the dwellings of the people of the other valley were quite close, up the banks somewhat because of the tendency of this stream to flood from time to time.

"I was but fourteen years of age, my father perhaps forty. I had two sisters and a brother, all older than myself. Young men are trained from an early age in the fighting skills, and gradually come to favor a particular weapon. Mine, that is, the one I chose, was the ihe lau make, a hardwood spear of about a man's height, with large barbs around the point end. I had two, one to throw and one to hold in combat. I was most envious of my brother, a strong boy and destined to be a koa, or warrior, perhaps for the ali'i. He

had a leiomano, which is a short, thick, and spatulate club, not an arm's length, embedded on the edge sides with lines of shark's teeth, which as you know, are sharp, with fine serrations. His, shall we say, especial expertise was the use of this club, which he held in his right hand, a loop of strong cord woven out of my sisters' hair around his wrist, so that he might not lose it in battle. My father had a pololū, a finely wrought spear of perhaps five paces long, perhaps fourteen feet. This spear one did not throw—rather the warrior thrust with it, and made it difficult to grab from the other end by a coating of coconut oil.

"In addition to these weapons our men had pahoa, hardwood daggers fashioned in various shapes, but sharp enough to cut a man's throat. Warriors carried clubs of various sizes, including war-axes called ko'i pahoa, all of which had wrist-cords of braided hair or coconut fiber. Finally, cord was used to make ka'ane, or a strangling loop, and another implement called pikoi, or a long cord with a rock woven in one end, used to snag and trip the enemy around the ankles. Cord was used also for rock throwing slings, with which a warrior could loft a fist-sized rock some two hundred paces or more.

"Those are the basic implements of our warriors. But as I said, each boy-child was trained in the use of his weapon. I chose ihe because I also used mine for fishing. My father disapproved of my using the ihe to fish, but reasoned that because his spear was used to hang gourds, he had little basis for his objection.

"As I said, I envied my brother for the leiomano. Alone, in places where I could dream, or let my imagination free to speculate on my future, I would whisper to myself, and one word I whispered was 'leiomano.' It means no more than 'shark's lei,' and refers both to the club I described and to a small weapon held in the fist with a single shark's tooth in it. The very lyrical quality of its sound captivated me, although I will admit that the word's mys-

tery and the very beauty of its sound was established in my mind by the object it referred to, a dark, heavy club, not round but elliptical, the two lines of white shark's teeth at the narrow edges, the tightly braided wrist-cord shiny with skin oil. I would hold my spear, trying to achieve a feeling of acceptance of it despite my envy of the *leiomano*, and whisper 'ihe kauila, ihe kauila,' really nonsense, noise-making, and over time the hard wood it was made of, *kauila*, became smoother, and took on the dull reflection of the polish of my own skin oil. Over time the little crevices around the heavy barbs became blackened by this oil, and the oil of the fish I killed with it.

"My father trained us in fighting positions, crouched with left leg forward, the upward thrust, or the proper throwing stances. He taught me the throwing techniques, using carved branches from other trees to represent the *ihe*. I was a frail child, sickly and weak in my early years, but this is a matter I will ignore here. My father nevertheless encouraged me to try to be strong, and to compete with my brother. We practiced wrestling and other forms of physical competition, and my brother was, how shall I put this? A great athlete, legendary for his strength in the *Makahiki* games.

"The young chief made no move for many days, as if allowing us to prepare. And we did prepare. My father learned that their men had gathered to discuss various strategies, and the elders were questioned on the nature of their dreams and visions, on their readings of signs in the clouds, winds, the night sky.

"It seemed, then, that the claim made by the rude young chief were no more than the breaking of wind, or as is said of one who talks without action, the puffing of an *ākēkē*.

"The situation began to achieve a sort of definition, then, because of a series of small incidents at the joining of the two

streams. One of the chief's warriors demanded the catch of a fisherman from our side of the stream. The fisherman, of course, gave up his fish, but this angered the elders of our valley, who sent warriors to the joining of the streams to take fish from the fishermen on the other side. One incident involved my sisters, who had very long hair. High-born women tended to keep their hair very short. Maka'āinana women sometimes grew it long because it makes excellent cord. In any case my mother and my sisters were down the stream, having come from the ocean where they had done a monthly purification rite not relevant here. Up on a bluff was a warrior who called to them. The warrior, dressed in his malo, or loincloth, grabbed his genitals and shook them, calling to them that he wanted my sisters' hair and would get it by taking them as wives, at which my sisters erupted with saucy, derisive laughter, humiliating him. Then they continued on their way, walking quite fast to reach the safety of the valley opening before the warrior could react to the insult to his manhood.

"It was learned that the warrior insulted was the younger brother of the new chief, who, upon hearing of the insult, was pushed a little bit over the line toward action, and this is how the battle started, or at the least one of the precipitating events. But understand, these were young men, and stealing fish and other acts of aggression of that sort were merely irritations. Being laughed at by comely, fulsome girls like my sisters was no doubt an outrage, a spear to the heart of their exalted illusions about themselves, and it required redress.

"My mother was angry at them, because she believed that the offering of hair and perhaps, in my older sister's case, favors pertaining to bodily pleasure to that fool on the bluff, might have helped avoid what seemed inevitable. My sisters sneered at the very idea of letting that pompous idiot have either their hair or their bodies. The ridiculous display of grabbing and shaking his

manhood at them had negated even the remotest possibility of his having access to the hair on their heads or anywhere else.

"My father took the story as a bad omen. He spoke in rueful whispers to his acquaintances, gazed down toward the opening of the valley with his face crossed with an expression of fatalistic repose, and frequently stopped by the water and fruit gourds in our men's house to softly run his hand along the dully glinting shaft of his pololū. Our elders sent two men to appeal to our district leader, but we learned that he was not in his house, but across the mountains at court.

"For myself, I began staring at the ihe, holding it, then practicing, without much vigor or conviction, the moves of a warrior, feeling at the same time the melancholy desire to preserve the use I had thus far put it to—fishing. Was I to throw this now at a man? And would I get it back? Clearly not, for it was crafted for a single throw, or if not that, to be thrust and lodged in an enemy's body. The very idea of it made my hands shake and constricted my throat.

"My brother came down the valley from the area he was living in, with friends and close to women he was fond of. He carried with him a bundle of long sticks, and gathered around him the men of the stream basin, my father and myself included. He appeared to me magnificent, as if I could hardly believe he was my brother, that older boy I once wrestled with, who taught me many things, and I remembered spending entire days throwing our play-spears, and practicing our thrusting motions to the sounds of our ferocious yells, all of this done much to my father's approval and nodding satisfaction. He was proud particularly of my brother, who was taller than I, and stronger than any man we knew. It may be irrelevant here, but he was rumored also to have fathered a child by a woman from another valley, in fact a high-born woman, who, it was said, made herself miserable wanting him.

"My brother stood in the center of a circle of curious men, all of whom wanted to know where, or if there would be a battle. Thus my brother addressed them, and in effect I translate here, leaving out certain refinements of address that a properly rendered account would include: 'We are to meet two days from now a hundred paces down from where the two streams become one. Our elders have had favorable visions, and see a victory for us. The battle takes place when the rising sun brightens the water of the stream, a trick our enemy is using, because the sun will come up over their ridge and be in our eyes.' At this the men nodded, and spoke softly to one-another. 'But we have decided to allow them that bit of cowardice—we have tricks of our own.' He then looked down at the long sticks at his feet. 'Take these sticks and fashion ihe of them, color out their paleness with dirt, each ihe thrower making two.' The men regarded the sticks on the ground with confused skepticism, for they were of different woods, mostly soft and light. I reached down to pick one up—it was not the wood of war instruments. 'Yes,' he said. 'You can break it easily over your knee.' My brother then grinned at the men, and finally laughed loudly, showing his teeth.

"'Tell us,' one man said, 'what we are to do with these.'

"'You are to fashion ihe, as I said.'

"'And would you have us use 'ōhia'ai as rocks, mai'a as knives?'

"But my brother did no more than laugh once again. 'Do as I bid, and of course bring your ihe and polol?', he said, and then he left. The men, my father included, were left staring at the pile of sticks. 'It is not even good for firewood,' one whispered. Others watched my brother making his way up the path, their faces showing confusion and growing anger. But my father intervened and said, 'He said that we have a trick of our own. We must do as we are ordered.' And so they each picked up two of the sticks and

went away to do as they were told. I took my sticks to one of the boulders and began scraping them rapidly against the rough, porous stone, and indeed the wood was so insignificant that the task was easy.

"My mother loved all her children, I believe me particularly because my growing up and remaining alive, then finally becoming healthy, seemed a miracle, and the coming battle seemed a terrible waste of that miracle. She wept at times, my sisters consoled her, and when they looked at me, they seemed to be looking at someone they would not see again. My father never doubted the importance of the as yet unknown use of our poor imitations of ihe, and answered all queries from my mother with 'Be still,' or, 'No.'"

"I thought, when I was alone, that I was in the last day of my life. My two useless spears now darkened by the red dirt of our valley floor were now ready, dismal imitations of the ihe of a warrior. I looked up the ridge from where I stood, toward a place where I had a secret cave, realizing that I would never see it again. It seemed to me that I had lived a very long time, and when I walked from one place to another, I felt old, in fact hobbled feebly, my back bent and my knees shaking, as if I had actually aged far past the age of my father, or perhaps regressed into the physical weakness of my childhood. My hands felt weak, and my heart thumped so that I could see in the foreshortened view of my own chest the movement, as if the movement of the skin of a drum pounded in a slow, mournful cadence. The fact that I had quickly become a large boy for my age, something that had seemed to me a gift and had allowed me a certain arrogance among other, smaller and thinner boys my age, seemed now to be a curse, for those boys were not preparing for battle. I would die and my bones would be passed among the enemy to make fishhooks.

"My father must have seen the fear in me because he

drew me into the men's house and told me to think bravely, to trust in the visions and dreams of our elders, and to look to my brother as an example of the attitude and bearing I should adopt in the coming battle. He told me that he was proud that I had emerged from my sickly childhood to become strong just in time for me to honor myself and the family in battle. He told me to trust also in the flimsy spears, for my brother was in addition to being strong and quick a brilliant warrior, one whose ideas, whose imagination, was also the envy of others. How else could it be that a common boy would rise to the lofty reputation he now held?

"I straightened myself up and promised to be brave, and walked to the bank of the stream and stared across, not the place where the battle would take place but upstream of it where our land was. There I looked across and imagined their warriors, and I held an imaginary ihe in my fists and practiced the advance, one step, then stamping my foot and whispering the ferocious cry that I hoped would come from my mouth the following morning.

"Long before dawn on the day of the battle, I was awake, irritated at the beating of my heart and fatigued, because of lack of sleep. By that morning I had negotiated with myself an acceptance of my own death. I was saddened about being robbed of a future, and felt bitter that I had only one experience by this time with a woman, and the memory of it swelled my ule, and made the sadness more severe, a sense of sweeping melancholy wetting my eyes and swelling my throat.

"I thought of using my hand to relieve myself and steal one last burst of pleasure from the doom I faced, but upon a very quiet, tentative beginning, I heard my father approach. He handed me a finely woven malo, made by my mother and sisters. I put it on, tightly securing my manhood in the pouch, the waist cord tied high above my hips. Thus girded, I sat with my father and ate fish and poi and then went outside where other men were gathering



in groups of two and three. My father told me to wait for my sisters and mother, who were at that moment wrapping food in ti lives and putting water in carrying gourds. They would wait near the site of the battle to feed us and give us water should the battle go on for a long time.

"At length they emerged out of the darkness, my mother and sisters carrying bowls. My mother wept. Despite the darkness I could see in my sisters' bearing the fear and the awe at what was happening. I could smell it, feel the heat of fear from their bodies. My father instructed them to cover us with coconut oil, and put none on our feet and none midway down our forearms to our hands. He told me not to touch myself after the oil was on, because it would make the ihe slick in my hands. This oil would make me, he said, as difficult to grab as an uhu, which is a fish that is particularly slippery. But my hands must remain dry as the bottoms of my feet must remain dry. The oil, he said, would become even slicker when the heat of my body increased, as he said it surely would.

"It was then that we heard the sounds of gourds being slapped, in a steady, slow rhythm. Whose they were we at first could not determine, until we more clearly heard the sounds coming from the other valley. The warriors and elders were approaching. The faint but increasingly audible sound of some self-appointed kahuna calling a war-chant joined in the thumping of the gourds.

"By now the early light had come, making visible the glistening bodies of the men. As if to announce what was about to happen, the wind began to blow in its unpredictable way, first out of the valley, then from the ocean, the smell of sea-foam mixed now with the smell of coconut oil.

"In an effort to condense somewhat the elaborate processes leading up to the positioning of our men, I will move

ahead somewhat to the time when we could see clouds over the ocean, almost blinding in their beautiful, radiant whiteness. We were still in the half-light of the shadow created by the ridge to our east. It seemed to me that the sky over the water, hung as it was with those clouds, possessed a brightness the intensity of which I had never seen, and I thought that perhaps they were showing themselves to me in this majesty because it was the last day of my life.

"Our elders arrived, men my father knew, followed by the younger men, my brother among them. As they made their way into position on the bank of the stream, back some twenty paces from it facing the path from which would emerge the other army, the young men moved into our ranks, the leiomano bearers with those who carried the same weapon, the carriers of tripping and strangling cords gathered in another area.

"We were still in the muted light of the ridge-shadowed morning, and the sight of these men made me begin to shake again, I thought so visibly that I would suffer the humiliation of being allowed to go to my mother, up there somewhere behind a boulder in the tall grass, watching, along with other women who had come down the valley behind their men.

"I suppose it was a small bit of good fortune that the shapes of the men of the next valley appeared emerging from the darkness where the path to that valley disappeared into the foliage, because I took the moment while all watched the emerging men to slip behind a boulder, place my spears in the grass, and empty my bowels, holding the cord of the malo aside, my body trembling miserably. I then wiped myself with a handful of grass, and returned to stand with the men, feeling a deep shame at the sensation of slight defilement by my own excrement, the odor of it wafting up my chest like heavy smoke. My stomach felt empty and in a way like a vacuum, an air-space, and that sensation

caused in me a strange feeling of a sudden confidence, in truth a sense of careless power, as if killing one of those men, or more, had surmounted self preservation in importance. The feeling faded quickly when I saw the opposing army—it seemed that their number exceeded ours, as did the size and physical definition of their warriors. The fact of their apparent superiority in both number and size brought the fright back, and then I felt myself being bitten by ants, in the very spot I had wiped with the handful of grass. Their bites were worse deep in the cleft of my buttocks, and I felt all my skin contract and shudder at the feeling of them biting, quickly tried running my fingers in there to get rid of them, and as a consequence got coconut oil on my fingers, and reasoning that because my fingers were already slick, I worked at digging them out, and pinching them until I felt no more than a sensation of itching that would have to be tolerated.

“My brother then appeared before the gathering of men. He looked up the ridge, his handsome face composed and thoughtful. ‘Soon now,’ he said. ‘Gather the ihe warriors here.’ Men turned to call other men into a circle around my brother, who raised the leiomano before him and gestured with it as he spoke. ‘You have practiced throwing,’ he said. He looked at me, and placed his hand on my head. ‘My brother can split a coconut at thirty paces.’ I had never split a coconut. I had, instead, fought with it in being unable to get the spear-point out of the heavy husk. He lifted his hand from my head and said, ‘You are to place your real ihe at the water’s edge, and move back four paces. From this position you are, upon my command, to loft your fake spears, one after the other, and as quickly as you can, up, so that their flight describes a high arc, so that these spears will rain down upon them from the sky. Just as you loft your second fake ihe, run to your ihe at the water’s edge, pick one up and throw straight at their bodies in a low arc, and prepare to advance holding the

other.' The men looked at one another, the logic of this strategy still a mystery to them. 'Listen,' my brother said, 'the spears lofted first will rise in sunlight, but drop in darkness and will appear to vanish for an instant—this will surprise them so that, this one time, they will be caught gazing upward, and will not think to deflect the genuine ihe as they come at them. Remember, this must be done only upon my command, and the real ihe thrown as fast as you can.'

"We all looked across the stream at the warriors gathering. We then went and placed our ihe at the stream's edge, all of them lined up in the tufts of grass. We looked up, now having to shield our eyes somewhat because soon the sun would appear over the ridge. Indeed, behind us it had already bathed the hills in light.

"This, as I said, was the place of the uncertain winds, and now it wafted gently at us from the sea, the smell of foam and seaweed gracing it, so that I again experienced a horrible dread, probably because this was the smell that earlier had drawn me to the water to fish. My brother must have seen something in my bearing, the shaking hands, the expression of fright and anguish on my face, because he stepped away from the bank of the stream and came to me, then drew me back behind the men. He said, 'Open your mouth,' which I did, and he spat directly in it so that the tangy saliva hit my tongue. 'E mana i ke akua,' he said, which means 'let it be mana from the gods.' I swallowed his spit. 'You will be brave,' he said. Then he went back to the stream, and I swallowed again, tasting the remains of that spit gratefully, for he had given me some of his own mana, which I felt radiating into my body.

"Three elders from the other side approached bearing spears and began to thrust them above their heads and come out with explosive yells, at which two of ours did the same. One

from our side threw a stone that clattered uselessly on the rocks rising above the running water. Then young men from their side came to the water's edge and advanced partway across, one swinging his leiomano, two more threatening to throw their ihe. The sun's first blinding point of light rose from the ridge. The shadow of the ridge was now but a few paces behind us, the shadows of the men farther from the stream already stretched out on the ground. And then, too quickly it seemed, the blinding yellow-white ball sat on the ridge, warming our faces and upper bodies, and I felt a line of sweat tickling my side, and wiped it, making my hand slick. Without taking my eyes off the warriors on the other side, I stooped down and rubbed my hand in the dirt, scraping the oil off. There was no wind where we stood, yet on the far bank the leaves of the trees waved, and then we beheld the magnificent cape of an ali'i waving, undulating with color. Men looked at one another. Some made as if to prostrate themselves on the ground. What was he doing there? My brother saw him too, and said, 'No. Do not acknowledge his presence. It is a bit of fun for him, this battle.' He looked once again at the figure, high on the bank away from the little army. Others were with him there, perhaps kahuna, or priests. They had been told of this, then, and had come as spectators. 'Then we shall give them something to talk about when they go back to court,' my brother said.

"Then, at the time the sun advanced before us toward the water, we realized something else that perhaps even my brother had not anticipated. The dancing water went a blinding silver, the light playing off it in a manner that sent brilliant, nearly blinding flashes of reflected light into our eyes, and in the midst of our reacting to this, turning our faces slightly away and reducing our vision to bright, horizontal slits with those dizzying explosions of light still coming off the water, a rain of stones came down upon us, followed by a ferocious yell of exultation from the other side,

and two men fell, others grabbed their leg or shoulder or head. A man near me sat dazed, two lines of bright blood running down over his cheek. He produced a roar of rage, picked up a handful of dirt, jammed it on the wound, and then rose and reached for his fake ihe. He raised it, his face contorted with anger, and I heard my brother's voice: 'No!' at which the man paused. More rocks came at us, and this time we were more prepared, watching as they flew and dodging them, then hearing them bounce off the rocks and dirt behind us.

"Now their warriors advanced toward the water, preparing to throw spears. The warriors of the cord weapons and pololū interspersed while others with clubs waited behind, and began to spread along the stream's bank.

"Voices behind us, the elders perhaps, yelled for us to be ready to advance, and then my brother's glistening form was before us, him standing at the water's edge, his leiomano in his right hand. He raised it, then shouted, 'Ready!' over his shoulder, and we drew back our fake ihe. The warriors on the other side began to yell out a series of explosive shouts, all in unison, as they moved into the water, their ihe throwers just behind them. A man near me growled, 'Throw, throw—what are we waiting for?' But my brother held the leiomano up, carefully watching for rocks or spears. The chanted yells grew louder, and it was clear that the warriors were just at the threshold of attack, when the leiomano fell and we launched our fake ihe, up toward the sun, which in that moment blinded us, then picked up our second fake ihe and launched those too, as if we were trying to spear the sun itself. Other men were already ahead of me, rushing forward for their hardwood ihe as, in keeping with my brother's prediction, all the men on the other side looked up as the bright, sun-illuminated ihe reached their highest point and then fell, vanishing for a moment in the changed light, at which the men crouched, dodged side-

ways, parried the spears with their own, and when I threw my hardwood ihe, trying to make my eyes clearly see a target, I saw the other spears already crossing the stream in their low, fast arcs, the one that got there first as mine had just left my hand hitting a warrior in the shoulder, at which he turned away holding the shaft, and then other men screamed in pain as other ihe reached their marks, a stomach, a leg, a strange glimpse I had of one going through a man's hand as he raised it to ward the spear off. I lost sight of mine in flight. I do not know how many seconds passed, because it was as if each of us wanted to see exactly where our own spears had gone, and then were held in an awed captivation by what we saw: men unharmed advancing, other men, perhaps eight of them, addressing with shock and confusion the shafts they beheld vanishing into their trunks, or thighs, or, as I said, a hand.

"But a ferocious yell from he of the leiomano brought us back, and we each picked up our second ihe and walked into the water crouched, holding them low for the upward thrust. The slippery shoulder of a man slid over my arm, and next to me my hip was banged by the forward part of a long pololū, perhaps my father's, I don't know, and ahead I saw the leiomano appear above the slick shoulder of an ihe bearer and then vanish downward to a cry of pain. I had fallen back somewhat, feared burying my ihe in one of our own men, but continued to advance, trying to hold my balance on the slippery stones in the stream.

"A strange thing happened—we had moved under the sunlight, at which everything I saw became rich and dense in color, in its very lucidity, my own hands gripping the shaft of the ihe, the folds of skin, the brown wood and the tensed cords of my wrists and below, the running water sweeping over my feet with patches of red that elongated and vanished like red smoke thinning out in the wind. With that came the smell of blood and viscera, and

the sounds of things had become a din, a nightmare cacophony of yells and reports of wood clacking on wood, thuds, the thrashing of water as feet struggled for purchase on the stones. When I pushed myself forward, the slippery back of one of our warriors would drive me back. Then we surged to the side, and I tripped and quickly righted myself on something elevated, but soft, and I looked down just as I put my weight on the stomach of a man whose throat had been cut, at which the sound of a wet, liquid flatulence bubbled from the wide gash in his neck. I fell back, felt a pololū shaft bang the side of my head, then slide along the hollow next to my neck.

"In this loud, jostling struggle, I had not yet seen the enemy's face. I saw for an instant, when there was a division between wet shoulders, the yellow, feathered cape of that ali'i, and then just paces away, clubs rise and fall, and directly before me the straining legs of our warriors, but encircled as I was, I had nothing at which to thrust my spear.

"Then, in what seemed to me magical speed, the point and shaft of a pololū shot from the lower back of the man in front of me and raced past my side, then pivoted in the man so sharply that it knocked me sideways. As magically as it had appeared, it raced back, the shaft and then the point vanishing into the man, at which it came out once again, a few inches from where it had first appeared. The man fell sideways, the long shaft again against my right side. I could not hold my balance, and went to my knees in the water, bracing my fall with the ihe still gripped in my hands so that I bruised my knuckles on the rocks in the streambed. When I righted myself, pushing against the shaft, it raced away once again, sliding along my side, its point cutting, or scraping my skin. The man speared fell back on me, and I fought to hold myself up, pushing him aside with my ihe, at which there appeared a space, centered by the shaft of the pololū, and I crouched and



saw the man bearing it lunging forward, almost as if to try to step on me, looking behind me as if for an instant I had become invisible, the other end of his spear too far ahead of him to use on me, and I rose up and thrust, my ihe running diagonally through the man's low belly, my hands feeling first the subtle vibration of the skin popping at its entry and then a rhythmic series of vibrations as the barbs passed the entry point, then a strange resistance as the spear sunk past its barbs to where the point rammed into bone. The man released his spear and grabbed the shaft of mine and fell back, his hands slipping, and I felt the ihe pulling me toward him and feared losing it. I planted my feet and lunged back, jerking the spear, at which the hole where it had vanished swelled up in a surging pout, followed by a burst of pink and grayish entrails which bloomed on his side, the sharp viscera odor mixed with the smell of excrement. I fell down, staring at the slick, veinous mass, the far side of which held what appeared to me as a large, dripping sweet potato.

"I tried to let go of the spear and found that my hands no longer functioned, as if with a will of their own they had decided to maintain the hard grip on the shaft. The man fell back, pulling the spear, more entrails leaving him. Just beyond that man a warrior was bringing his club down on the face of another, and in three powerful strikes caved the face into itself. I tried to open my hands, and then, recognizing that they had become fused thus because of the tense grip I had maintained, I went face down in the water, twisted the spear so that the now elongated mass of entrails turned in the water, and one by one began peeling my fingers off the shaft with my teeth. When my right hand was free, I used the numb fingers to peel the fingers of my left hand off, and engaged as I was at that task, did not at first see the two sturdy legs planted before me.

"He brought the war-axe down just as I rolled away, and

the force of the blow on a rock shattered the blade, bits of it stinging my leg and side, and broke the shaft of the axe in half. I ran downstream, away from him, and unlike the situation earlier, where there was no room, where slick shoulders and spear shafts slid along my body, now there seemed to be altogether too much space, the bodies in the stream near my feet, some away, and when I turned, I saw a warrior twisting a piece of broken spear in a cord which encircled and was buried in the neck of a sitting man who clawed uselessly at it, the image strangely sedate, as if one were leaning over to whisper in the ear of the other.

"A wooden knife bounced along under the water to me, and I picked it out of the water, and stupidly studied the refinement of its fashioning. The handle was imbedded with a core of basalt rock, making it heavy. It was a good knife. Then, as if the inclination to do so had been denied me because of the close quarters of the struggle, I looked outward. There were dozens of dead in the stream, dead it appeared for long enough that their blood no longer colored the water. The man with my spear connected to him by that mass of entrails was there. On the far side of the bank stood the ali'i, still in his red and yellow feather cloak, leaning on a spear and looking out over the streambed.

"I did not understand why he was doing that until I turned. On the banks of the stream on our side, perhaps thirty men on their feet were engaged in killing thirty men on the ground, while beyond them, warriors ran up the brushy hillside after our warriors, some of whom stopped to throw stones at them. I saw figures farther up on the bluffs, women and children, running. I stumbled downstream. It was as if I had become invisible, because no one seemed to note my presence, not even the relaxed, observant ali'i. Only fifteen paces away, a man bearing a spear prodded it up into the ribcage of a prone man apparently

having no success finding his heart, for the man on the ground growled and kicked, his hands on the shaft. Beyond those two was a warrior hammering another warrior's head in, swinging his club as if trying, somewhat wearily, to crack a coconut, and with each blow a pink mist exploded away from the prone man's head.

"I did not see my brother or my father. I stood there in the water, the knife in my hand, benumbed with indecision. They were dead, I realized. Nearly all of us were dead, the largest concentration of bodies creating a small dam upstream of me. If I ran, I would be seen, or perhaps suddenly become worthy of killing. If captured, I might be devoured by some god-image at that ali'i's place of worship.

"I ran. Instinct told me to run toward the ocean, where, if I must die, I preferred drowning in that place I had always felt so spiritually at one with. To run directly downstream, however, would be unwise, because I surmised that in the rout of our warriors and in their eventual run for safety, many would have gone downstream, where they might appropriate canoes. So I ran diagonally, up the bluffs, around boulders, sprinting along familiar footpaths past lo'i, or kalo patches I knew, and once I reached the top of the bluff which afforded me a wide view of the ocean, I was astonished to discover that I was alone, the yells, clattering of stones, screams of agony, all far away and peculiarly remote, as if part of some odd dream, the sounds hollow and flat, the occasional echo of a yell coming from our valley, and below me, at the stream, the bodies of our warriors which would be pulled up the banks and left to rot, and just below the largest collection of bodies, the man I had speared, the pale line of entrails from the wound in his stomach ending at my ihe, which from that distance was tiny, a dark, insignificant twig.

"I turned, feeling airy and without substance, the knife still in my hand. There, as before, the clouds over the water remained as huge and brilliant as they had early that morning."

## BOWLING PINS

Two junkies,  
Walking along Route Thirteen

A contractor, driving a brand spankin' new  
Custom van,

Nipped them. The  
Alpha junkie put on an act, threatened

To sue. So the contractor  
Hired them

## BEYOND WORDS

Alec Guinness built  
A bridge, so he could  
Blow it up, but

Lee—his parents'  
Matches—launched w/  
His gang—including a

Scapegoat, small  
And dumb—along the  
Fetal highway, watching

The climbing black smoke

Their old fort:  
A charred  
Scalp. Then it disappeared

Lee missed the  
Popcorn-flowers, the  
White stones, in the

Cool ground

## CONTRIBUTORS:

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