

1991

UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/eng_stu_write



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Western Kentucky University, "UA68/6/1 Zephyrus" (1991). *Student Creative Writing*. Paper 40.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/eng_stu_write/40

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Creative Writing by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University



ZEPHYRUS

Spring 1991

A publication of the English Department
of Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

Editors

Lisa Day Robertson, Managing Editor
Paul Kirkpatrick, Art Editor
Sylvia Ahrens
Beth Dixon
Brent Fisk
Steve Hegge
Beth Kemper
Susan Maertz
Melanie Morris
Jeffrey Richardson
Kerry J. Smith

Faculty advisor: Joseph Boggs

Graphic Design:
The Electronic Art Lab, Department of Art

Cover design: Jeff Jensen

Faculty advisors for graphics:
Jeff Jensen
John Warren Oakes

Printing: University Print Shop
Western Kentucky University

Editors' notes: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

Zephyrus was electronically typeset in Times-Roman by John Warren Oakes on a Commodore Amiga computer using Professional Page software.

Dedicated to
Joe Bolton
1961-1990

1985 Western Graduate
Former Editor of *Zephyrus*

The Distance

Two women are hugging each other goodbye
On the sidewalk in the tree-shadow
Of a late spring afternoon. It is not
Sexual, though both are beautiful.
And though both are tall and lithe
Under their dark hair, the differences
Between them are infinite
And support one another. Behind them,
In the distance, buildings
Tangential to the sun catch fire a moment,
Then darken. A young man, hands
In his pockets, is coming toward them.
The women are crying.
They are not yet ready to part.
And it is not sexual.
Even the young man, who is surely lonely,
Slows as he approaches them,
Feeling a sudden reverence
He wouldn't have thought himself capable of.
He stops half a block away.
The women part. They part
Like drapes drawn open
To catch the last light.
One of the women gets into a car
And drives away; the other

Waves, then turns back across the grass,
Perhaps to her apartment. And the young man
Walks on into the gathering
City twilight, which will be
More beautiful and lonely for him
When he looks up. His whole self is focused
On the precise spot of the women's
Parting. When he reaches the spot,
He stands there. Just stands there,
Transformed in the vivid air of their absence.

Award Winners

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
J. L. Johnson

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Holly Hedden

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
John D. Davis

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Beth Kemper

Zephyrus Art Award
Gregory C. Neat

Table of Contents

Award Winners	5
Allison Thorpe	
Crusts of Other Loaves	8
A Musical Theory of Iris	11
Wars	12
Bizmo in the Spring	13
Steve Hegge	
Eating Snow at 22	19
J. L. Johnson	
For the Daughter of My Father's Best Friend	20
Carl D. Ballard	
Festival at Trimble County Middle School	21
Things I Used to See	22
Susan Palmer	
First Trip to Vegas, Gambling	24
Jim Bradley	
Descent from the Cross	28
Cafeteria	29
3:17 Wednesday Morning	30
Kerry J. Smith	
Sleeping with Father	31
Linda Walker Cox	
Inertia	39
David Rice	
These Things are Always Here	40
Geisha	41
Mother Todd	43
Andy Rademaker	
Bacchus Drank	44
I Tried to Tell You This was a Love Song	46
Fall	49

Susan Schorr	51
The Dance of the Nymphs	
Holly Hedden	52
Lullaby	53
When I Was with You	54
Newts	
Ramona McCain	55
China Red	56
Of Pine Cones, Pheasants, and Friends	
Susan Maertz	57
Soap	58
Algebra	59
Insomnia	
John D. Davis	61
Miller Went Home	
Eva Whittle	77
Black Oaks	
Brent Fisk	78
23	79
Message from a Bottle	80
Untitled	81
Warmth	
J. Martin Cobb	82
Close to Creation	
Lisa Day Robertson	83
The Cleaning Lady	84
Election Day	85
Driving on Hometown Highways	
Beth Kemper	87
The Gift	91
And the Sons Will Pay	
Notes on Contributors	93

Crusts of Other Loaves

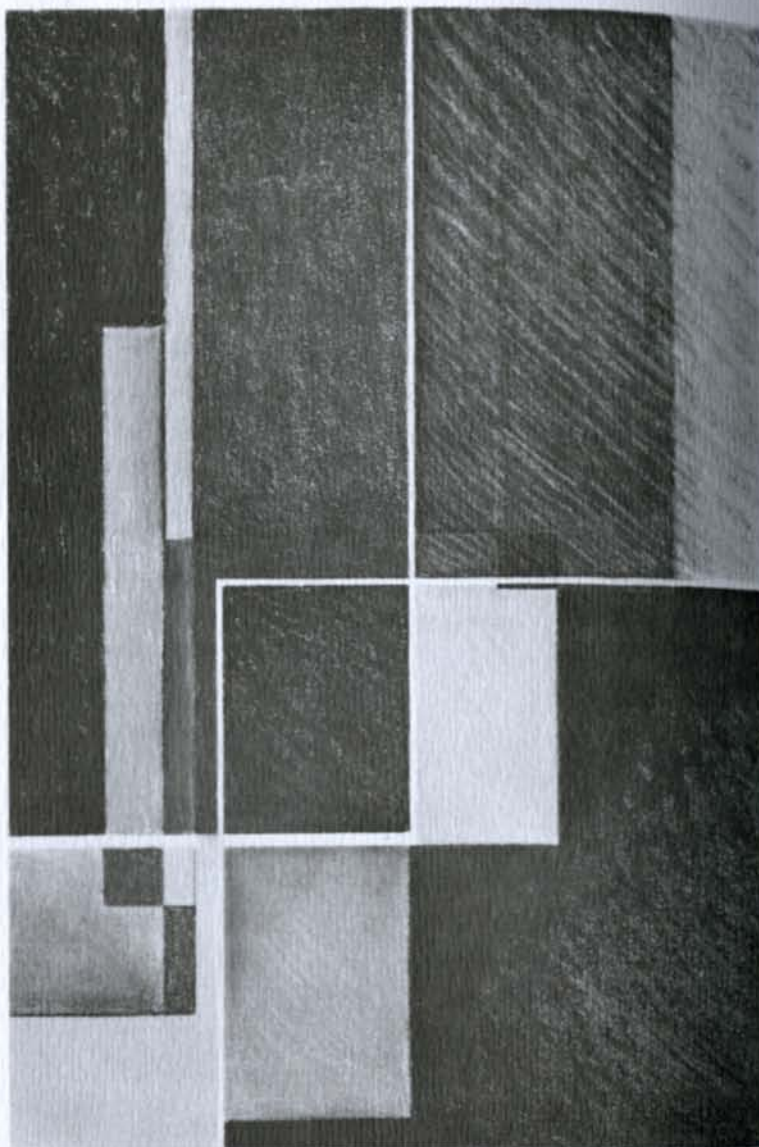
Just a small neighborly auction
down the road a piece or two.
Sure, I'd heard the rumors--
the old woman was a crazy artist,
would run you off with a shotgun
sure as look at you, turned to a bat
each night and stalked the moon.
Her place was hidden by large willows
and a suicidal curve in the road.
I had hailed glimpses driving past,
a tiny floral figure in a wide panama
puttering the contours of my vision,
clipping toenails of some monster
yellow forsythia, diverting rivers
of pink tea roses, weaving the earth
with tulip hymn and lilac lace until
I'd confuse her with the flowers
she tended. I imagined her painting
those sweet smelling swirls on
sultry eves, a light breeze trying
hard to sway the canvassed petals.

Now that exotic impression lie bare,
lifeless. A harried auctioneer wilted
in the fiery sun atop a hay wagon
hawking dustworn pillows, acres of
chipped salt and pepper shakers,
wedding furniture still alive
after all these years. I saw no
artwork, no paintings or sketches,

not even a needlepoint. What a sham!
The woman had been a pack rat,
no artist surely. Boxes of ancient
books and papers graced the yard
in stages of browning fragility,
burlap sacks of scrap cloth boomed
in attic finery, and slatted crates
containing who-knew-what seemed to
reproduce while I watched.

The caller flew from item to item
in the heat like a frenzied bird,
then 3 glass pans jumped to grasp
and shouted out to me where I stood
under a spreading oak. I saw my hand
rise for the old dishes no one wanted.
Too irregular in size--too deep and
wide, glass too thick, they clanked
without horror. The sun broadened
their stoutness, edges coated with
baked-on pasts as if to say: this
meal was so good, let's use it
as a starter for the next.
Cultures kept in caked suspension.
Possibly the old woman shared
my loathe of wifely labors.

I had prepared to come away with
a splash of barded inspiration,
a muse at bidding cost; but for \$1,
I inherited the crusts of other loaves
to carry on as my art, my craft of
kneading, the calling of words risen
and punched down, oiled and patted,
baked well; pages devoured with honey.



A Musical Theory of Iris

For Mr. Brooks

It was their year: a spring
of remembrance when the twilight
chanted of willow rocker and
my mother hummed along, butter
notes, ballads of babes past,
grown now to log men and miners,
weavers and cooks, gone now
to orchid legend. She chorded
the ocean blue octaves they
carried over hot summer hills
to homes where rhythms roamed
earth, newly tuned; symphanied
wine red bursts of barn raisings;
psalmed the royal form of harvests;
anthemed echoes from axes hefted
by grandfathers who pealed the
chill from winter's white breath.

In this, another dusky sonata
when iris rules again
(especially those tan ones
with the smoky purple edgings
that always smell of sassafras),
my voice starts up, thin, shaky
stranger that grows firmer,
stronger, as it marches the eve
of my people, kin calling.
The child stirs in my lap,
sleeps to fragrant croonings
composed of their bones.

Wars

He always came
when I was lonely,
grinning of gifts:
Tea for the Tillerman,
a crystal ball, seeds
of his revolution.

His eighth summer--
forced to help
shake out dustmops,
snip beans to be canned.
Boys wandering home
shouting his name.

He always came
though he wore
the ring of another.
There was magnetic
reserve, intellectual
passions our eyes
couldn't rise beyond.

This bud-nipped morning,
my wash flaps the grey
streaking of ridge
like bleached albatross
unable to fly. Cool winds
urge my sleep-musted thoughts
to leap, spin, dive as well,
but they waltz, still,
in dreams of wounded soldiers.

- For Steve

Bizmo in the Spring

For my father

Come spring, Harry's wife shoos him out to the front porch he has added to their doublewide trailer--him and his stained coffee cups and filthy cigarette smoke. He grumbles and complains at the banishment, but deep down it is his salvation. For Harry Bizmo is a poet. Balding, 67 years old, dull watery eyes, bottle-thick glasses, slight limp from a forklift accident in the warehouse, nevertheless, a poet.

He and Rita moved to the country five years ago. His idea, not hers; and although she has grown fairly accepting of rural life, he knows she will spook for the city the minute he drops. The first few years they gardened and canned the results like winter-sensed animals. The heat, bugs, and Rita's weight finally drove them off, their garden plot transformed now to bobwhite haven. When the cold weather sets in, he joins Rita in front of the television for long, gruesome hours of inane game shows and the tragic slayings of showgirls.

It is spring that makes Bizmo's heart leap: one more chance, new eyes, rebirth. Important, for Bizmo is on his way to fame.

It was nothing at first--free copies of minor magazines which he hid in the basement, mixed with the old *National Geographics* like foreign secrets; token prizes of \$5 and \$10 were good for a month of extra coffees down at the poolhall. He keeps a post office box in town under the name of H. B. Zepher (a pen name he has adopted). He told Bob, the postmaster, he was renting it for a friend, and now takes care to slip in when Bob is in the back room.

Bizmo always had a love for poetry, but it was Sabrina who gave him his start. She appeared one night when Rita was knitting Christmas scarves and watching some hospital hopeful. Outside, reveling in the essence of spring, Bizmo yearned to set himself free, as a true poet should. But how? Get his hair dyed purple and spiked to form? Buy a rowing machine? Go looking for God?

Then Sabrina appeared—long, wind-flown, red hair, ivory lace gown that melted and shimmered about her like tossed glitter—coming up the path from the garden. Her shoulders were bare pale dreams. Bizmo knew enough to know she was not of this area (no one lived within miles), nor of this town, nor this world. Gracing the tree shadows like some fluid hallucination, she turned and smiled, a warm magical beacon in the dark. And gone!

Nothing.

Bizmo blinked. Had she been real? The moon reflected off his glasses? Fireflies?

No matter. He rose and walked inside for pencil and paper. Rita did not look up from her dedicated doctor spree. He flew about, quick and quiet, unwilling to lose the image. Then he was out and seated, and under star power, penned an ode to that glance.

It needed work, he could see that. The Event (for now it had become major) had happened so fast, he was unsure of quite a few things. For instance, which side of her smile crooked more? Could he see her teeth? How was her head turned? How high had she held her chin? He puzzled until Rita put out the lights. But the next night the woman was back, and his words improved in their act and order.

She came that spring and summer and well into fall. Sometimes she just swayed to midnight out in the distance. Other evenings, like a timid, tawny creature, she approached and sat on the rain-bleached wooden steps near his feet. When the leaves flamed at first chill, she danced while the full moon waned, and it kept Bizmo high all winter.

One lengthy love-laden fantasy won a poetry contest. With the check, he installed a heater in the basement. He told Rita he won a bet at the poolhall. She was just glad he wasn't smoking up her new mauve curtains, glad to be rid of his rude remarks about Binky Barton, her favorite gameshow host.

His first poem, "Sabrina's Smile," was chosen for an anthology, and Bizmo could hardly wait to tell her in spring.

But the next season, it was Lily who came. A slip of a sprite in ragged blonde curls who giggled at nothing and grinned at all. She taught him sonnets.

That year he was heralded by a few editors and critics as a rising young talent. Bizmo laughed. His neat, hand-written poems (he shuddered over typewriters, felt deadly ill contemplating word processors) hailed a childlike lust for life, they said. A passion for the simpler senses. Several young women (poets themselves) wrote him hinting letters.

The following spring Emily arrived, serious as a summer sun, and he discovered the French forms. His foot was firm in the door of several magazines. People wrote for interviews; he turned them down.

Tamisha came into his life with the compacted beauty of the Oriental eye, and he grew to mystery.

Bizmo continued to play the part. After all, who would hail him if they saw he was an aged bald stick. Probably call him a dirty old man. His subtle erotica would be labeled porn. So he stayed where he was, happy in his rutted sanctuary.

"Harry, the grass needs mowing."

"On my list for tomorrow, Dear."

"Those three tomato plants you insisted on buying are straggling."

"I shall water in the cool of the day, Sweets."

"Call Eddie about this picture tube! I don't want it to go out in the middle of 'Rich or Poor.'"

"Will do, My Love."

"And what's with all that mushy stuff? You aren't brewing moonshine down in that basement, are you?"

Mush has been a big problem most of his life. A side he dared not show to a father who abided no tears, to the boys who favored smug smiles and fast cars, to the burly men at the warehouse. What would they think? Here he was, finally able to pour out his thoughts whenever he picked up a pen. Released. Happy.

Some nights, however, he considers senility. He knows a mind can be snapped fairly easily. Maybe a part has given out and he doesn't know it. Truthfully, he has nothing to touch in these muses of his: a remembered scent, a shape, a smile. They never speak in earthly voices, but somehow their presence sparks his brain. Maybe this is a symptom.

In one of these moments of anxiety, he rushes to the basement and hunts the *National Geographics* for his free copies. Then, down on his knees, hugging the old issues like salvation, he comes to.

What is he doing? A man his age should be--what? Searching a Florida beach for shells? Holed up in some cash-sucking condo? Lying down and dying?

He has never felt more alive! Strong! Virile! Iron courses his veins. His fists clench, and he wants to grab this surge, to harness it. He sees his destiny: Poetry must be saved! It dies. Poets were once gods. They could be again! He would do it! His words could change the world! Let a sign come to him!

Kneeling in silent prayer, Bizmo hears the wind tapping at the basement door. Comely with oceans of raven hair, bold eyes, dress one with comet tracks, she steps forward.

"Quatrains?" He whispers.

Her words rain soft and merry, grace him like knighthood, "Heroic epics."

Taking a deep breath, Harry rises.



Steve Hegge

Eating Snow at 22

Buttoning my Christmas coat I descended the aged hill covered in thick white afghan behind our placid home. the new snow spinning down brisk in Morlidge's field was wet that Sunday afternoon. The brick house where Mick Trusty broke a bay window with a stray apple stood over me with hands on hips, and I laughed despite Mrs. Morlidge shooing us from the bright tomatoes we hurled at Mickey and his gang in defense of the tree camp. A couple of rotted 2x4's still clung to the sprawling oak fortress where Joey Sprat told dark stories about Old Man Ingram and showed his dad's magazines, which we gaped at and grew to anticipate every weekend.

Mickey, he's into bodybuilding and parking cars at some floating restaurant down on the Ohio, and Joey hasn't been seen nor heard from for years. Mrs. Morlidge, she's out there, somewhere, or in here, in one of the infinite snow flakes. And I, returning with mitful of mouthful of snow, I danced the uphill trail from the hidden field back to here, at 22 fluid years, chewing on cool water dripping from the sides of my smile.

For the Daughter of My Father's Best Friend

Another silent Thanksgiving
between us
and ice crinkles at the edge of the lake.

Ten years ago
Two tumbling Indian princesses
fall asleep in a sailboat cabin
 Identical tucks of the knee
 Mirrored tangles of hair
Two fathers, loud men of the lake,
balance globes of brandy
tie the tiller
and chart the Arkansas stars.
 An artist, an engineer
 Binding their arguments
With long threads of laughter
stitched upon the night.

We were knit for each other,
you and I,
from their threads
and their pattern
But time outgrows and
the lake's wind is colder now.

I'll call you next year,
speaking in a carefully constructed
language of echoes,
 hollow
 as we beat our fists
 upon a huge sailboat hull
 lying on the shores of Lake Ouichita.

Festival at Trimble County Middle School

Somewhere on the hillside
a cow is watching stars,
dreaming, if cows do,
of grass on other planets.

Headlights drag a split-rail
down U.S. 42
and leave it cold
at a bend in Trimble County.

In a shadow of the middle school,
a woman leans alone into her broom,
pulling away the memories of the evening
from under a row
of empty chairs
lined along the lunchroom wall.

A pair of small eyes
stares back from the frosted rear window
of a pickup driving away,
and the moon
follows it home.

Things I Used to See

From the corner of my eye
once, when I was too young
to make sense of it,
I saw my mother fall,
crying.

It was years later,
at my aunt's house,
when I watched the dog
spin lifeless
off the bumper of a pickup
speeding out toward open season
that it all came clear:

I think my mother, too,
had been spun,
left for dead
by a man hunting wilder game.



Susan Palmer

First Trip to Vegas, Gambling

They have great windows
In the hallway of CircusCircus
(Not in the casino--no
Windows in the casinos, please!
And no clocks. Who wants to know
What time it is? Feed the slot machine!)

You see desert-

Virgin desert-

On your way to a bar
Where you may hear
The Gospel according to your
Second Bloody Mary
Only not too much talk,
Else the Apostle Behind the Bar
Disturb you from feeding five dollar chips
Into the Five Card Stud video game
Mounted onto the million dollar padded bar.

But the windows in the hallway are
Forty feet high
The hallway is a million feet long--
You have to stop and look out
At the panoramic sweep
Of rock and sand and Rockies and sandstone.
(How the hell did people get
Ox-drawn wagons over
All those boulders? Mustamadefer
anawfullotta bad backs and dead babies.)

You stroll elegantly dressed in the
Five-hundred-dollar jeans outfit
Purchased yesterday at Saks,
Down an indoor causeway alongside
A nye of pretty Black ladies
All decked out in gold and costly apparel
Carrying Tupperware-looking bowls full of
nickels.

And out of each window you keep seeing this
Virgin desert--possibly the only virgin in town,
Except for the kids brought to CircusCircus
By their parents.
People from Mexico
Come to Vegas
The way you and I
Come to Six Flags Over Georgia
Or the Epcot
Or--hell, the mall.

God knows what the Chamber of Commerce
Pays and plays
To keep Kmartandmcdonalds off that desert virgin
To keep her hot, fluid face clean and pure
For the viewing pleasure
Of all us paying customers.

You move on
To the casinos and the dinner-and-show
And the showgirls all look like virgins.
Their legs travel a poker route from their piggies
To their navels to their tonsils, virgin legs
NOHAIR, as in MOHAIR, like Barbie,
is there a Showgirl Barbie out
Yet? Yeah? In time for Christmas?

Let's get the kid one for Christmas
So she'll know what to be
When she grows up.
Showgirl legs soft and sweet and five feet long.
Like a shaving cream commercial,
You know, the best a man can get?
Dancers' breasts bubbling up like Colorado River white water

From those cute sparkingleggyvirginleotards.

Now this is how they decide who does what in Vegas
(If you're a girl)

If you're really ugly in Vegas,
you bus tables.

If you're passible,
you wait tables

If you're a seven
you tend bar

If you're an eight
you run KENO

If you're a nine
you serve free drinks in the Casino
and you get to wear one of the sparklingvirginleggyleotards

But a TEN--
Oh, baby, a ten-
Now we are talking
Number Girl at the fights at Caesar's
Roulette Girl at the Paddlewheel
Show Girl at CircusCircus

Maybe lipsync a little backup for Jerry Lewis.
May even get her picture in one of those
Sale papers available at all the newsstands.
(Oh yes--and if you have stretch marks
And gray temples, you pay to stay--
Unless you own the place.)

Nobody looks like Madonna in Vegas,
Nobody is hard and hot,
Nobody challenges you,
Nobody ignores you and nipples up to your husband,
They're all like the WardsReedsHuxtables
In plaid shirts and leotards,
The waiters and valets make you feel pretty and young,
Everyone is so nice
So nice. . .

You give out a lot of dollars in Vegas
To the drinks girls
To the bartenders
To the kid who hauls luggage from the rented car to the room
To the kid who pumps your gas
To the one who cashes you in.

And after a couple of days
You get a headache.
So you get in your rented car
And you buy a couple of bottles of water,
Check the spare tire,
Drive onto the hot fluid face of
The only virgin in town.

And that will be
First Trip to Vegas, Touring.

The Descent From The Cross

Is it Pontormo's talent
or my own guilt
which forces my eye
to you?

Lavender backed,
young, helpless man
bearing the load
of a dead Christ.

I look into your eyes.
I too feel the weight
of doubtful salvation
and the certainty of my sin.

Cafeteria

Prepubescent grins
of Nike shorts
and tube socks
intermingle with
a scrap of food
fleeing from mouths
of incessant laughter
and discussion of
bubble-gum messiahs.

A nicotine cloud
of starch and silk tie
briefcase with gold watch
pinkie ring
points and stocks
dropping his eyes
onto finance report
USA TODAY.

Lovely redhead
question and answer
study session of
low mumble ideas and terms
with knowing glances
and hand holding sexual underbelly
trying hard to keep their
minds on the subject.

Forgotten sandal
of hardnail leather
lies on greasy, gray specked floor
next to billowy lumps
of mashed potatoes
and green spherical peas.

3:17 Wednesday Morning

I often wonder if
in the average lifetime
one will spend no less
than three years
mesmerized by the tone
of the emergency broadcast system.

Sleeping with Father

"I slept with my father sometimes."

Jake sat in the comfortable leather chair in the very warm office and stared out the window at the distant gray buildings. He had learned by now what the doctor thought was important about the past, so he picked something that seemed interesting.

"Okay, Jake," said Doctor Marshall. "Keep going."

Jake set his sweating glass of ice water on the coaster by the lamp. He straightened his tie and slouched into the chair. He wished he had a chair like this at home. He spoke quickly, remembering. "Often he didn't come home before bedtime and I would sleep with my mother. She would ask me if I wanted to, and I usually did. Sometimes she would fall asleep with me in my bed after reading to me. My father would come in very late, talk to himself while he stood at the toilet, and go to the guest bedroom to sleep."

Jake looked at Doctor Marshall, who was taking notes on a large legal pad. The doctor paused and looked over his quick smile and his glasses at Jake. "Go on," he urged gently.

Jake shrugged. "Okay. Looking back on it, my life was very complex for a five year old, I guess. It wouldn't be anymore, though, of course. Half the kids in America have divorced parents."

He looked at the glass of ice water and watched the beads combine in bursts and run down the side of the glass, where they collected in the coaster. "I was the only kid I knew of whose parents were getting divorced. I guess it

made me feel special somehow. The kids who knew never persecuted me or took pity on me. Their parents must have warned them about that. I was well-liked, all in all, and I think that was what probably kept me feeling happy." He shut his eyes and propped his head against the cool leather of the chair. He hadn't tried to remember this deeply in years. The smell of the leather reminded him of baseball gloves and t-ball practice. His team had been good. They had won the county championship when he was eight.

"My mother cried a lot though, even when I slept with her, and once when I asked her why she was crying, she rubbed her stomach and said she didn't feel well. I didn't ask after that. She seemed to feel bad very often."

"Mm," said Doctor Marshall.

Jake's eyes opened, but they continued to stare out the window. "When my father did come home before bedtime, I slept with him in the guest bedroom. One night he came home as my mother was putting me to bed. She had been reading *The Cat in the Hat* to me. My father stood outside the doorway to my bedroom and said, 'Hi, son.'"

"I looked at my mother. She was staring at the book. I could hear the hum and bubbling of the filter on the aquarium across the room. The aquarium's light was on, and the fish swam around quickly, neons and black mollies, darting and schooling. I had gone with my mother to buy them. Fish sometimes jump out of the aquarium, you know? Sometimes we'd find one on the floor behind the aquarium, all wrapped up in dust and hair. It'd be stiff, like plastic." He looked at Doctor Marshall. "Like the little lures guys take fishing, you know?"

"Mm-hm," said Doctor Marshall.

Jake looked back out the window. "Only we wouldn't know one was missing until the smell...I remember the fish would stare out of the aquarium from every side, except the back. I wonder why they were never interested in the red paper?"

Doctor Marshall was writing furiously on his legal pad. The top corners of the pad wiggled up and down. Jake looked down and straightened his tie. "Anyway, my father was still in the doorway. I said, 'Hi.' I couldn't see him very well. The darkness of the hall was between us. I could smell the cigarette smoke that drifted off his clothes into the bedroom, though. My mother shifted on the edge of the bed, but she didn't move her eyes from the book. I told him mom was reading *The Cat in the Hat* to me."

Jake paused, staring at the fish in his mind. "The fish were moving in and out of the plastic plants, swimming around the 'No Smoking' sign."

Jake's eyebrows jerked down toward his nose as he looked at the doctor. "Why do they make those plants such weird colors? Bright blue plants? Are there really bright blue plants in the ocean?"

Doctor Marshall smiled. "I don't know, Jake." After a short pause he said, "What did your father do then?"

Jake didn't like being manipulated, but he had paid the money, so he kept talking. "He sort of half smiled, I guess. He said, 'That's nice of her, son.' Then he turned and started down the hall. He said he was going to bed and asked me if I was coming with him."

Jake sighed and shook his head. "I looked at my mother again. She was looking at me now. I wanted to sleep with my father, because I hardly ever saw him, but I didn't have to say I wanted to, because she knew it. She smiled and kissed my forehead. She told me to do whatever I wanted to, that it wouldn't hurt her feelings." Jake sighed again. "I smiled and hugged her. As I got out of bed and started running after my father, she said, 'I love you.' I told her I loved her as I ran down the hall."

Jake rubbed his face and shut his eyes. "I always ran away from her. I never ran *to* her. I don't think I was there very much for her, and she really needed somebody. Just to

tell her they loved her, you know? Just to say, 'Here I am if you need me.' "

Jake took a drink of ice water and rubbed his cold fingers on his eyes. "Damn it," he said. "I could never talk to her."

Doctor Marshall stopped writing. "Why not?"

Jake opened his eyes and looked at the doctor. "I don't know. We just never...I...oh, hell. She wasn't much for telling me her feelings. She never told anyone. I guess maybe she thought I wasn't old enough to understand. And I probably wasn't. But I don't know if I've ever forgiven her for dying and not telling me what she was feeling all that time. I've tried, but there's something inside that just won't let go."

"It's good that you recognize there's a problem," said Doctor Marshall. He got up and poured a mug of coffee. "How do you take yours?" he asked.

Jake waved the offer away. "Thanks, but I don't drink coffee," he said. "I've never been able to stand the flavor. Stays in my mouth for days after."

"Many people don't like the taste." Doctor Marshall sat down again. "Were you finished with your father? You were going to the guest bedroom with him."

"Mm. Yeah.... When I reached the guest bedroom, my father was already in the bed, but the ceiling light was on. He told me there was some money for me in his pants pocket and to turn out the light before I came to bed. I looked in the pocket and found a couple of dollars and some change. That's a lot of money for a five year old. Especially then. Two dollars would buy a lot of stuff. I remember I said, 'Wow!' or 'Thanks, Dad!' or something. I turned out the light and got into the bed and arranged the money under my pillow." Jake fingered his right pants pocket. "My father always kept his change in his left pocket.

That seems so weird to me. I've put my change in the other pocket, just to see what it feels like, but it feels really strange, all wrong."

Jake looked at the bookcase across the room. "His arm always fell across my face during the night."

He looked at the doctor. "I think that's all there is to that memory." The doctor said nothing and continued to write on his yellow pad. "Is it okay if I walk around some?" To Jake it sounded like a desperate plea. He hadn't meant it to.

The doctor nodded. Jake got up and walked to the window.

"Your parents eventually divorced, didn't they?" asked the doctor.

Jake smiled humorlessly into the glass. "Yes." After a pause he said, "I suppose that's in my file?"

"Yes."

Jake watched the doctor's reflection take a sip of coffee in the window. "So what do you make of that, Doctor Marshall?"

The doctor said nothing for a moment. "How old were you when they divorced?"

"I was four, maybe five, when he left."

"Mm-hm. Was your mother working at the time?"

"Yeah. She was teaching at the elementary school down the road. I used to stand in the window waiting for her to get home. The babysitter always watched soap operas and never really kept up with me. I finally got in trouble with her for putting cotton balls under the trivets on the stove and turning on the flame. I thought it was neat to watch the balls just suddenly poof into cinders. Stupid. I heard the babysitter telling my mother about it, but Mom never said anything about it."

"So you got away with a lot as a child?"

"Yeah. After my father left. Like I said, Mom never

really talked to me. I mean, not about anything that mattered. No one ever told me about girls. Or sex."

"What kind of dating life did you have in high school, then?"

The office was very quiet. Jake could hear the traffic from the streets below. The secretary was typing outside the door. Jake could see the doctor in the window, writing, not looking at him. He was glad. "I never went out with anyone. Well, that's not completely true. I had a couple of girlfriends in high school, but...they...asked *me* out. Or they got someone else to ask for them. Actually, I've never asked anyone out. I can't talk to women. Any dates I ever have are set up by my friends. I don't recall ever going out on a date in college. It's...it makes me wonder what's wrong with me sometimes. I'm not gay. As far as I know. I haven't had sex in...mmmm. I mean, women look good to me, and I want to meet them and know them and...you know, sleep with them, but...oh, hell." Jake walked away from the window and sat down again in the comfortable chair. "Yeah. That's it. Hell." He drank from the glass of ice water.

Doctor Marshall smiled and looked at Jake, who did not smile back.

"Jake, is it really that bad?"

Jake stared at the doctor's ring finger. "Aren't you married, Doctor Marshall?"

"Yes."

"Were you in a fraternity?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever have trouble asking a woman out?"

"Well, I'd have to think about it, but--"

"But probably not, right?"

The doctor paused for several seconds, looking at Jake. "We were discussing your problem."

Jake leaned forward in the chair. "Yes, it is a problem. It's a problem all right. It drives me crazy! That's how

much of a problem it is! And you know what? I've thought a lot about it, and I know the answer, I know what the cause is, but I can't do anything about it!"

"What's the cause, Jake?" The doctor was leaning forward now, too.

Jake looked hard at the doctor. His eyes were wide and his hands were balled into fists. "My mother! No one telling me, explaining what...." Jake fell back into the chair and closed his eyes tightly. "But I can't blame her. She was under so much stress. So much pain, so bitter...can't imagine it. I don't even have the right to." Jake breathed in deeply and sighed. "I can't let it be her fault."

Doctor Marshall eased into his chair, his back straight, one leg carefully crossing over the other. "Jake, you have to. You can not keep dragging this around behind you. It's time to let it go."

Jake's eyes turned lazily toward Doctor Marshall. "Yes. I know. But...oh, hell. I don't know how." His eyes remained unfocused, staring at someone not in the office.

Doctor Marshall's lips were reduced to a thin line. After a moment, he spoke. "I can't tell you how, Jake. Now you know the problem. You have to figure out the way. It always works best if you think hard about it, try to figure it out, and then apply what you learn yourself. However, I want us to keep meeting at the usual time. Do you want to work this out, Jake?"

Jake's eyes focused and turned toward the window. He stared at the buildings outside the window for a long time. He felt hard and cold, wrapped in dust.

Several minutes later, after hearing Doctor Marshall spout encouragement, Jake walked out of the office and shut the door behind him. The secretary was typing, but she stopped when she saw him. He approached her desk, looking at her hair. It was brown and very shiny under the fluorescent

office lights. He thought it would look agonizingly beautiful under softer, more intimate conditions.

She smiled brightly, dropping her eyes to examine a calendar on her desk. Her lips were a soft pink. He did not think she was wearing lipstick. "Okay, Mister Evans. Let's see...next Thursday morning at 10:30, right?" She had her finger on a numbered box. Her nails were short and clean and unpolished. She looked very, very good to him. He could feel all the usual anxiety; the tightness of his throat threatened to mute him. Her sweater, warm-looking, was within his reach.

Jake smiled weakly and said, a little too brightly, "Right." She handed him a card with the date and time of the appointment, and he almost dropped it. Her smooth, pale hands were lovely and confident.

He looked at the secretary for a little longer than was necessary. "Is there anything else, Mister Evans?" she asked, perfect brown eyebrows raised, professionally expectant.

"Uh...no. No. Thank you." Her ingenuous nearness and his impotence flooded him with anxiety. He smiled weakly again and walked away from her desk toward the door. He got his coat from the rack on the wall and hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. Then he was outside the office, quickly pulling the door shut behind him. He stood alone in the hallway with his eyes shut and his back against the wall by the door.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said.

Linda Walker Cox

Inertia

I take out the trash
after dark

Voiceless shadows
dance on shades
like black butterflies
skating on snow glass

Sometimes I wonder
about lives
in other houses
are they happy
or hiding behind blinds

waiting
for the night to travel

like luggage
with unknown destinations

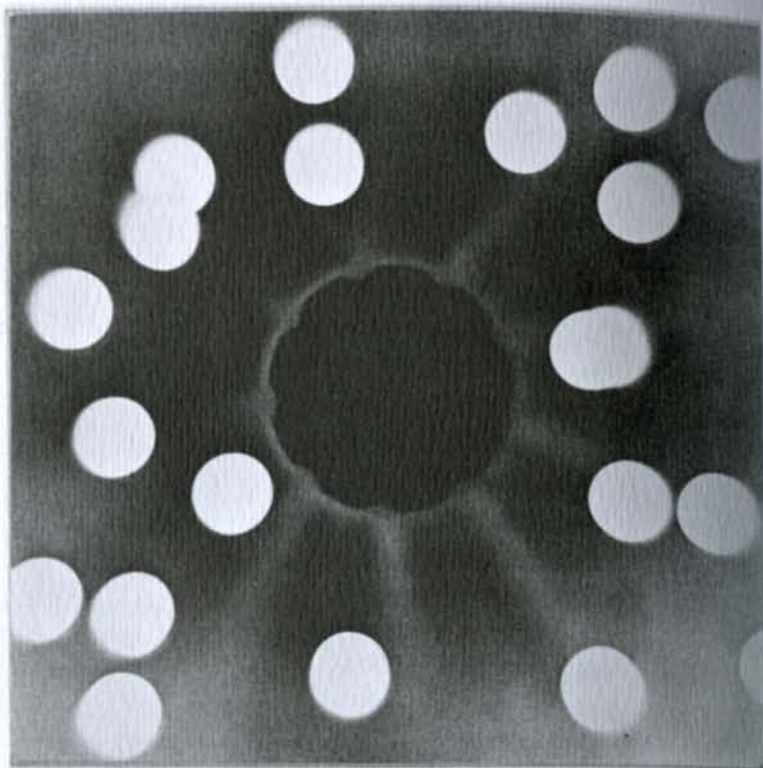
These Things Are Always Here

With the white sun behind you,
 I couldn't make out your eyes.
 They were pushed back
 and shadowed dark.
 We kicked the gravel together;
 you, half wishing I would go away
 and I, half wishing you would tell me to.
 When I think about it now,
 I might have turned away too soon.
 But it was hard
 just staring at the sidewalk
 so I started walking.
 It was long and slow,
 and the pavement burned
 with dignity,
 with pride,
 with all of the lost things.

Now in some further August afternoon
 I sit in the chopped light
 of a cracked blind
 sorting through the pile.
 Polaroids, assorted junk,
 and a scarf for Christmas.
 When I put my hands into this past,
 it seems my fingers bleed
 much more than anything else.
 It was a damn load of work
 getting through it all.
 But now, the sun is pushing itself
 down across the street.
 Night is taking over.
 I'm running out of light.
 It's high time I did something with these things.
 They don't seem to be finding places for themselves.
 I haul it all back into the bag
 and toss the whole thing into the corner.

Geisha

Feet pressed hard
 on flat thongs
 spreading ashes
 to the good earth.
 A small face strapped firmly
 to your bent back.
 I can't see porcelain
 in your stretched, brown face.
 Nor a thousand proud emperors
 across your mountain fields.
 Just the bare wind
 whipping at your skirt
 and your hacking sickle
 at the tall stalks
 miles from any holy man.

**Mother Todd**

Today, the sun is high
and the first tulips of spring
are opening
and Mother Todd sits
in the white porch swing,
just as she did as a girl.
The grass is newly thick.
She'll find a boy
to keep it in check
when school lets out.
The small maple tree
only a few years old
and the solid white birdbath
bought just last summer
keep the old yard
from looking too plain.
Two mockingbirds screech
in a nearby bough,
scaring the squirrels
to the telephone wires
and Mother Todd sits
in her white porch swing.

Bacchus Drank

Bacchus was
a lush,
a drunken old man
with feeble fancy for grapes
pulverized and fermented dark red
bordering on purple,
he rode on a donkey from
festival to festival
smiling and belching
drinking and eating
with that damn laurel around
his head the whole time...
oh how the lady centaurs
loved him, they hand-fed
him grapes on a blanket
beneath a huge shade tree, everyone
smiling after his throne destroyed in
a drunken stupor,
how angry Zeus became
as he bade the dark clouds
encroach upon the festival
and Hephaestus smite him a
lightning
bolt that he might smite
old Bacchus,

he would have succeeded had
he not fallen fast asleep
on a cloud,
the meanwhile
Bacchus lay drunk kissing
his one-horned donkey
on the lips mistaken for a lady
centaur,
what a happy fellow
what a saint
what a lush that Bacchus
what a useless
homeless
well-loved old man...and his children
lie in alleyways
coughing up pieces
of yesterday
when the wine
ran so free

I Tried to Tell You This Was A Love Song

I tried to tell you this was a love song,
oh, but you just wouldn't listen
YOU, with your modern inconvenience
and everyday feminine logic,
taking me to the movies,
 drive-in back seat
 dining out low on cash,
 and you were there,
 laughing in the rain, cold
 as shadows of all night's enshrouding darkness
 blanketed velvet-smooth over
 our heads
numbed with dull morning incoherence,
it's still late at night to me,
but you closed the top of the convertible,
pulling me into your arms awaiting,
legs entrapping. . .
your stare engulfing me with all determined
malevolence of deepest

Anger

I tried to tell you this was a love song,
oh, but you just wouldn't listen,
you, with your anti-moralistic outlook,
desensitized heart pleading for more. . .
pain to torture your wanton soul,
fire to burn hot your inner desires. . .
 One night your ideal of passion,
 too lonely for a step into the future
 too crowded for a moment beyond now. . .
 sitting on a beach holding marshmallows
 cinnamon-puffy, dropped mine in the sand,
 oh well, I suppose you'll just--
 YOU ATE IT! laughing
 in the rain, cold
 as shadows of all creatures lurking
 eclipse our view of life
 true, honestly I don't know,
numbed with dull morning incoherence,
it's still late at night to me,
You recline in the sand as grains ever-longing
cling to your sea-salt sprinkled body
wet with delight, tingling with taste
chronic addiction,
pulling me into your arms awaiting,
legs sand-scratchy entwining,
your stare engulfing me with all determined
malevolence of deepest

Anguish

Yes, I tried to tell you this was a love song,
but still you wouldn't listen,
you, with body so moonglow serene,
wine-rich delicacy, voice rough-sultry

 You take me to all corners,
 in bounds out of bounds,
 bouncing, rolling, falling,
 ripped into pieces indistinguishable,
 holding me near your breast milky-warm
 through nights cold-dreary,
 tearing my heart as blood pours bitter
 dam-broken over your words
 so insincere,
 waking me with kisses
 fire-raging gentle as sun erupts from
 parched earth to awaken our thoughts
 dreamy, staring into the distance

 beyond the tower of yesterday,
 the walls of tomorrow. . .

 You burn forbidden sorrow as tears
 sift gritty from your fire-shot eyesockets. . .

oh, but I tried to tell you this was
a love song

Fall

when she was
young she would
collect all the fallen
yellow leaves and pretend
they were gold,
hoarding them beneath
the tree they grew on
(see, money does grow on trees)
the children would rush
the pile of sparkling
treasure, bagging as much
as tiny hands could hold,
running as a small
fortune fell from them...
after a while she became the robber
and someone else
was protector.
Often it was a
blueprint of a house
upon which she would add
stem-walled room after room
keeping the floors clean

with special care...expand
 expand
 expand
 the house would be
 a mansion with a
 pool...expand
 expand
 expand
 rake them
 and pile them
 and run jump fly
 through the air brown
 hair violent in the tumble
 rising splotched with gold-green
 and orange as static held leaf and
 twig pasted stiff--shake brush and run
 back to start over again
 expand
 expand
 grow older
 and remember when
 raking leaves was
 more than...

now she looks out the window
 and smiles wide,

 says
 she wonders what it would
 be like to sit against a tree
 when all the leaves fell
 (at the same time on her)...

behind her,
 through the open door,
 I see the old man across
 the street who rakes leaves
 from sun-up-to-down, he's
 begun talking to himself loud
 recently...

The Dance of the Nymphs

Shocked by the expected rain
 they each ran into hiding
 and closed like hyacinths.
 And while they waited the generations--
 they lost the perfume of the apricots,
 and almost forgot the steps.

But now--the clouds reflect soft green,
 so does the light wafting through the boughs--
 the nymphs arrive and the trees ease away
 making a lawn.

They stumble at first, shy and stiff
 from the caves' isolation,
 because lifetimes had passed
 before they could return.

But the perfume of the apricots
 reminds them of the steps, familiar again--
 and they laugh.

And for awhile, they glide in their green ballroom
 until an apricot falls
 and makes them stumble.

Frantically, they ignore the emptying tree
 as the cold ground becomes quilted
 from the dropping fruit.

Yet, they are stunned by the rain
 then they run into hiding
 and close like hyacinths.

Lullaby

Watch the rain
racing in cold rivulets
down the windows.
Feel the drowsy slicing
of the tires through the water
on the road below.
Let the rhythm of
windshield wipers
hypnotize,
as the rain,
and rhythm,
and road
gather in a weight
on your eyelids.

When I Was With You

When I was with you, I told you things. I told you
I hate mirrors and empty tears and ugly tile floors. That I
love showers, and clean sheets, and squirrels with twitchy
tails. I told you when my dog died, and when my bedroom
window broke.

I didn't tell you I have dreams in which your face
disappears and I can no longer write. That I love the smell
of your hair, soft and thick, meant to run between the fingers
and brush against the cheek and hide warm tears. I didn't
tell you that I can still feel your hand touching my face
when you thought I was asleep. I didn't tell you I forgot
to breathe when you caught my eye and didn't look away.

I never told you anything you didn't want to know.

I didn't tell you that I cry in the shower where no one
can hear me, and all the drops become my tears, and I can
feel myself dissolve in them. That I found my dog dying
broken in the street, and how she tried to bite me when I
touched her. I didn't tell you I broke the window with my
fist when you started looking away from me.

Newts

The largest hesitates wisely before venturing onto my proffered finger then strikes out, stopping for nothing, threatening to plunge over the edge and smash his small, spade-shaped head on the naked wood floor.

The littlest is delicate as his colors, pale pea-green with ten tiny orange dots rimmed with black. He has picked his way on shaky legs across my fingers, wobbling like a colt and blindly waving his front legs like windmills off the ends.

Godzilla, the conqueror, will cling to the glass, inches above the waterline, the bottom half of his fragile body showing beneath the rim around the tank's top, red and black lie a signal flag. He sits, staring with tiny bulging eyes at my face, a blinking question mark. His leathery-looking skin is soft through the middle like the belly of a lap dog. If I offer my nose, he pads with tiny moist paws up and across my forehead.

He is fascinated by out.

He doesn't understand the air and ground which would shrivel his long, supple tail and crack the skin around his golden-and-black eyes.

China Red

She was popular, Carla,
my classmate who looked like a
china doll and walked
on her hands--every recess,
unless the weather was bad.

I used to watch her, fascinated,
one moment skipping along on
perfect, tiny feet; and the next,
gliding over the ground on her hands,
the switch so smooth
I almost couldn't see it.
Afterwards, she'd always catch
my eye, try to return my smile--
then she'd shrug her indifferent
shoulders and walk away.

We met again, yesterday, after
twenty-five years. The corners
of her mouth turned upward when she saw me.
I returned her smile, then she walked away
in indifference, the strands of her
matted hair dragging in the mud
and the gore of her bleeding hands.

Of Pine Cones, Pheasants, & Friends

It fits in the sign-language C of my hand,
but speaks in a tongue all its own.
Its first word is hollow where it rests on my thumb,
the rest follow in lines up the curve

like hairbrush bristles in loose, slanted rows.
Strumming its petals from bottom to top,
the thrumming of a comb's tinsel teeth,
a clinky piano in keys muffled and flat,

or tinfoil over-used. Pulpy plumage sprouts
through its woody shell, a thorny teardrop
at each feather's end, paused in unison,
never to fall, but to entice a raindrop.

Its scent is dry and bitter, like the taste
of papery wood that comes caught in the folds
of pecans you thought you'd cleaned better,
like the years in the Alamo, only fresher.

From the top it looks like a drab zinnia,
from the side, like a forgotten Christmas tree
in a crooked stand, or a sleeping pheasant,
head tucked under its wing--like me, when we met.

The pine cone sleeps until rain and time soften
its spikey shield, give it courage
to challenge the dirt with fragile roots, to uncover
its head, unbend its neck, reach straight

and high for the trickle of life pouring down
between the crevice of trees where it fell.
You are like the pine cone, you live past your passing
in the tree that took root in me.

Soap

The sun is smeared across the kitchen table
and you are carving soap,
coaxing a turtle
from a square white shell.

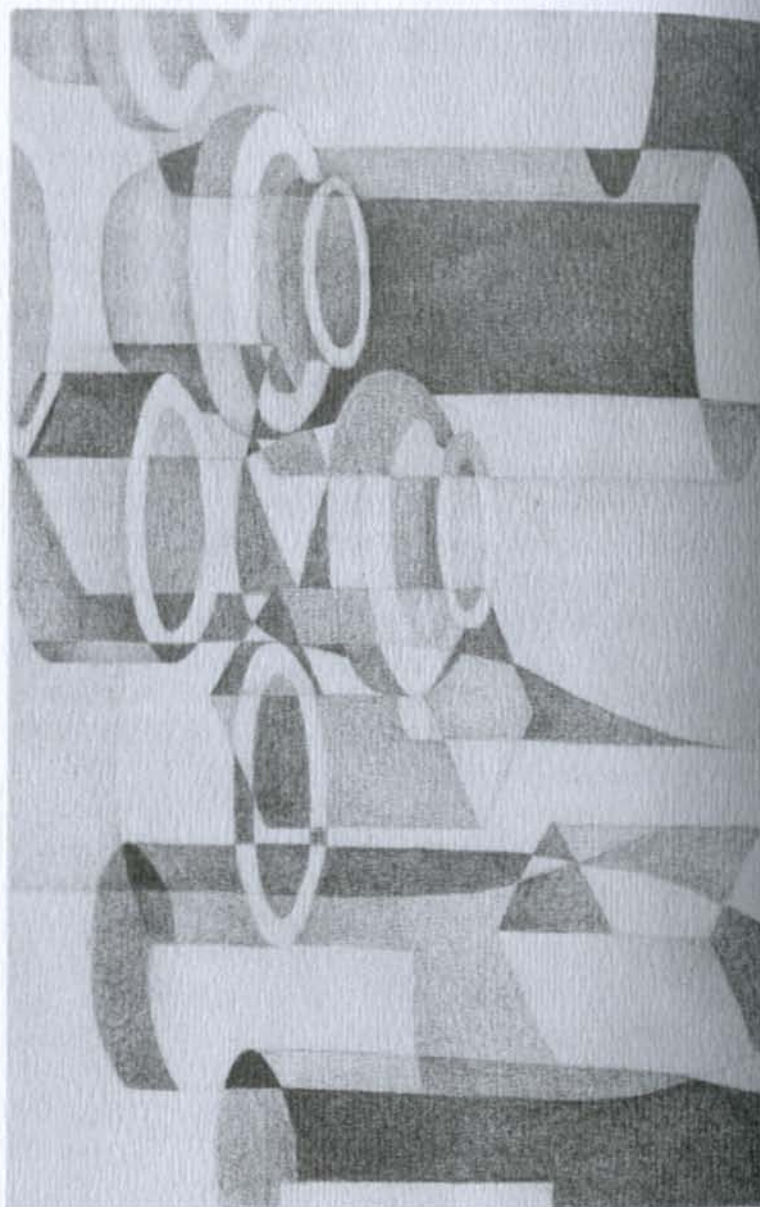
I am forever
washing dishes,
your elephants and rabbits
dissolving in my hands.

Algebra

Staring out the window into the wavy heat
I multiply the edges of
birds flying south
by the tops of trees,
imagining your hair
gritty with chlorine,
the arches of your feet curved and perfect.
While the rest of the class calculates
sales tax
you defy gravity,
and I want to measure
the arc of your back,
the precise geometry of your legs,
determine your exact speed
entering the water.

Insomnia

Late at night when the moon
keeps me awake for hours
I can hear them across the hall--
the thick, dripping sounds of their kisses,
the smooth music of his skin
against her skin; they are
two sticks rubbing themselves together,
and the smell of his hands in her hair,
her lips on his face
is smoke that circles above them,
seeps under my door
and stains the dark wood floor
black.



Miller Went Home

About a year had passed since the war had ended, and I had not been home for almost two years by the time I boarded the troop train headed back east. I saw San Francisco only as a large crowd of buildings I had only time to glance at somewhere in between the troop ship and the train. Two weeks out to the islands, a month lost in Okinawa, and two weeks sloshing back across the Pacific and the Army was finally done with me, the Japanese having long surrendered. For me, "the enemy" were only bodies I saw in photos I bought from a guy who'd been in the Philippines, ones that showed huge mounds of dirty grey skulls.

Why I bought the photos I couldn't figure when I got back to San Francisco. There was no good reason, except maybe boredom, since the "real" action was all over by the time I'd made it overseas. I reasoned to myself that I'd give the photos to my boys when they were a little older, but I could well imagine what my wife would've said about that.

During the layover, I told my buddy, Art Stasium, about my dilemma:

"I'd never hear the end of it, and God only knows what'd happen if the boys found 'em before...you know, before they'd understand."

"Give 'em to me then," he said with a grin. "I imagine my Dolly'd get a real kick out of those."

At the Townsend St. Station we were herded into twenty-four man groups and given our car assignments. Art traded a guy for a place in my car, so we could share cigarettes, something that we figured might become a major concern once we left the station. A lot of the guys

thought they couldn't get through the trip with the official limit of only one carton each, so a lot of bartering would be going on.

Of course, some guys always got around the regulations, and then there were guys like me, who brought on a carton mainly to trade off for magazines or newspapers. We boarded, found our seats, and then Art took off for the head; when he came back he had his wallet out and was counting his script.

"The action's already starting, Bill...there's a crap game going on in the next car up."

"I need a nap," I yawned. "I'm not real eager to lose my money this early."

"Welp, I'm sure there'll be plenty of action goin' on later if you want. Be back in a awhile." He lit a cigarette and put on his "poker face," which was a hard, cold glare I'd first seen on the troop ship as he'd leaned over the railing and tried to keep his supper down.

It was mid-afternoon, and the train hadn't even left the station. There was too much activity going on in the converted Pullman for me to sleep, and it didn't slow down when the train started moving. Besides the noise and all the bustle going on, my seat was anything but comfortable. I had a smoke and watched out the window as the tall buildings turned to smaller ones, then into houses, each one clean and neat, and then into open desert. I was finally dozing off when Art slumped back in his seat in a cloud of grey smoke.

"Watch out for the one named Carney," he groaned. "There are sharks aboard."

Dinner formation was definitely regular Army; at 12 noon, burly Sergeant Frazier came stomping through the car, hollering: "DINNER! FALL IN! MARCH FORWARD! DINNER! FALL IN! MARCH FORWARD!"

Since the mess car was in the middle of the train, one

section would file through the mess and into the opposite section, then back through the mess to pick up the chow and head back to their assigned car. Those who sat in the cars on either side of the mess car, thinking they'd be the first to eat, were surprised to find, when the lines actually formed, that they would actually be last. These men, then, were always the most surly you encountered on the trip.

On his return, Sgt. Frazier bumped past us officiously, without a word to anyone other than a terse "Fall in!" if a man blocked his path. One of these unlucky men was Alvin Miller, a guy I'd met in the train station, an acquaintance of Art's. When Frazier came up behind Miller and barked his command, Miller jumped and almost fell over into his seat. As Miller recovered, Sgt. Frazier passed on without seeming to notice.

Art cursed. "That Frazier's an officious little bastard," he said in low voice. "Poor Miller's all jittery 'cause he's thinking about jumping off when we get to Pine Bluff."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed as the line started to shuffle forward. "That's stupid--if he doesn't get processed in Chicago he's gone without official leave--an automatic court martial!"

He shrugged. "Well, the war's over, you know?"

I shook my head. "Not for us...not 'til we get our papers."

We passed into the next car, and Art pointed out an obese, sweaty man with no hair. His uniform was stained and seemed a size too small; he seemed to breathe smoke even though I never actually saw him puff on a cigarette. "That's Carney," Art whispered after we'd passed him. "So why should Alvin wait, I mean, what's the point? Why go all the way to Chicago when we're passing right through his home town?"

"That's just dumb," I said. "The Army will track him down and drag his tail back to Chicago anyway, except then

it'll be to send him to Leavenworth. Besides, what if he picked up typhoid or malaria from over there and starts spreading it around back here?"

"Goddamn," Art said loudly. "Are you a walking Army regulation manual?" We walked on in silence, through the kitchen car with its mouth-watering smells and noiseless, white-garbed cooks. As we passed into the forward section of the train, Art lit up a cigarette and offered it to me.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I told him the same thing. I don't know whether he'll really do it or not--with the speed this train's going, if he jumped off he'd probably get killed. You know, I think he hasn't actually decided whether he'll do it or not."

The whole time we filed through the cars I'd been watching Miller, but for most of the time he was nothing more than another khaki uniform with a head of dark hair, just tall enough to make out from a slight slouch in his posture. When we all turned around in the return direction of the mess, I only caught a glimpse, for just a moment, of his face. Even though his features were calm, Miller's eyes darted about, glancing here and there, watching everything and everybody.

Back in our car, Miller and another man, Tackett, sat and ate with us. Tackett, an overly handsome guy with a deep brown tan, had worked for Armed Forces Radio in Hawaii, and had nothing so much to talk about but his many affairs with officers' wives, all of whom, he said, were "begging for it."

"I guess the big guys are too busy with other things," Art laughed.

"Aw, they've got their sugar on the side," Tackett drawled. "They're just more discreet about it. One of the wives even offered to set me up with my own radio station in Miami, if I'd leave my wife."

"You're married?"

Tackett held up a sparkling gold band on his ring finger. "My ball and chain." Art and Miller chuckled.

A younger kid passed by us and gestured at Tackett. "Hey, Tac, up for craps?"

Tackett smiled. "Oh, you bet." He stood up and pocketed the pack of cigarettes Art had handed him a little earlier. "Hey fellas, you want in? These guys are straight, I know 'em."

"I'll come and watch," Art said.

I declined, and Miller shook his head as they left. I offered Miller a cigarette, but he shook his head, turning to the window. I ate in silence, flipping through an old *Look* magazine, trying to think of something to say to him.

When I finished eating, I sat my kit down on Art's seat and traded off the magazine for a morning newspaper that was already tattered from making the rounds. After about twenty minutes, I folded up the paper and offered it to Miller.

"No, thanks," he said in a calm voice.

Hearing him speak prompted me to more action to get him to say more. "So, I hear you're from Pine Bluff?" I asked.

Miller turned to me with a wary look and nodded.

"You married?"

This seemed to relax him a bit. "Yes, sir, for over a year."

"Five years for me; I've got two boys, four and two. The youngest said his first words the day we left Okinawa." I picked up my mess kit and gestured to the forward door. "Need to wash up?"

Miller's mess kit had been sitting on his lap, the food barely touched, and from his reaction it seemed he'd forgotten it was there. "Sure...I'm done," he said.

As we walked back to the mess car I asked him if he had any children, and he shook his head.

"We had some problems," he said as we fell into the line. "Me getting sent off didn't really help matters much."

When he said this, his voice was straight and sober, and in it I picked up a familiar sadness. It reminded me of the afternoon I came home from work, Millie at the kitchen table, staring blankly at the brown envelope. When I saw how red her eyes were, and how dry, I knew what it was.

Miller and I took our turn at the deep metal tub, rinsing our kits with the water that ran continuously from huge tanks on either side.

"Well, you'll get home soon," I said uselessly. "Things like this work themselves out, I've found."

I believe Miller sensed I was not just talking to kill time. He smiled at me, dried his kit and started out of the car. I followed him. Miller was trying to get away from me, but we got caught in a bottleneck between two cars that turned out to be a group of men furtively sharing a bottle of whiskey.

As he started to pull away again after passing the group, I took him lightly by the arm. "There's no reason you should make things worse for you and your wife...not while you're so close...."

Miller shook my hand off, but not with real hostility. "I appreciate your concern," he said quietly. "But I hope you'll keep this to yourself."

We silently faced each other for a moment, and then I nodded. "Okay, whatever you want."

"I just...I need some time," he said as we stepped back into our car. Several of the sleeping berths were now taken, but Miller found one at the end of the aisle, and he nodded at me as he got up into it. As I sat down opposite his berth, he turned his back to me and didn't move again for hours.

The night was long and tedious, and I still couldn't fall asleep, even though the only sounds to be heard were snores and the rick-rick-rick of the moving train. In the

dark we passed through all the tiny desert towns, slowing to a crawl through Tucson, stopping for a load of ice in Lordsburg, and pulling over in Deming to allow a freight train to pass in the other direction. At about two a.m., Art returned, again in a sour mood. "Still awake?" he asked in a low voice.

"Can't get comfortable."

"Not like those hammocks, eh?" On the troop ship, when there was no more room in the bunks to squeeze in, you were allowed to string up a hammock, which was actually much more comfortable, and not half as dirty as the bunks.

"Wish we had those here--Army'd never go for that swabby stuff, though." I chuckled. "How'd the game go?"

"Tac's guys were a bunch of rats. I got out pretty quick, but then I got into a game of poker with some younger guys--low stakes."

The lights in the car were dim but not out, and I thought Art had gone to sleep when he suddenly spoke up again. "What do you think about Alvin?"

I turned to the window. "I think he still hasn't figured out what he'll do. With a little time to think, I imagine he'll decide to stay on."

Art said nothing for a time. "Tackett seems to think he'll jump...maybe even before we reach Pine Bluff."

"That guy's a jackass."

"I agree," he said. "But he knows how to figure these things...he's a con man for sure, but he's got a clear eye for the handicap."

I couldn't tell if this was a compliment or something worse, and with Art there was no certainty. I knew he was a decent guy, even a moral one down deep, but there was a part of him that enjoyed the things on the fringe of acceptance, like my Philippines photos and the bloody Japanese head-scarves he'd bought in a bar in Okinawa.

"So what do you think?" I asked him.

He scratched his regulation haircut and sighed. "I don't know for sure. I heard that we're maybe about half a day or so from the Arkansas border." With that, Art fell silent, and before long his breathing became heavy and regular. I turned to watch the scenery fly past, and tried to imagine leaping out from my uncomfortable seat into the deep, black ravines and gulleys.

Over breakfast, Tackett anxiously approached Art about going in on the "Miller jump pot."

"The deal's like this," he said quickly. "Some of the fellas are working up bets on whether he'll go or not, which is silly." Tackett lit up a cigarette with a blur of his hands and continued. "I know he'll jump, I'm sure of it...so the real money to be made is in where he's gonna do it, the difference being will he jump twenty miles before Pine Bluff, or ten miles? Or will he wait 'til we get right into the city before he goes?"

"Or maybe if he waits 'til we've passed the city by, like, say, five miles?" Art said sarcastically.

"Yeah, that's on there, sure," Tackett said as he tossed away the cigarette. "So you want in? Everybody's in on it, Art...there's a bundle going down on this."

Art pulled out his script, but Tackett waved it off, explaining that this wager was "strictly cash money." With a grunt, Art dug out a \$5 bill and called "five miles outside" of the Pine Bluff city limits. Smiling, Tackett scribbled this down on a dog-eared piece of paper.

"That's a good choice, Art, you've pretty much got that spot to yourself." With that, Tackett turned his boyish face to me. "You want in, sport? Still got some good spots here--easy money!"

"Just leave me out, okay?"

Tackett dismissed me without a word, winked at Art and turned away, going off to net more fish. I was frustrated

with Art, angry that he'd descend to such juvenile activities where a man's life was concerned. When I said this to him, he shrugged.

"You can't stop a man who wants to make his own decisions."

"Even if he'll ruin his life, or even die, because he doesn't want to wait for a discharge? That's nuts!"

"Do you want to try and stop him?" Art groaned. "Go ahead! I don't really give a damn at this point...but I'll tell you, I thought the whole reason we went to the war in the first place was so we could keep our freedom of choice--so if Miller wants to get home early and he's willing to risk his life to do it, then by God, I say let him!"

We finished our breakfast in silence.

Miller, even quieter and more distant than the previous day, ate his breakfast in what seemed like total oblivion to the hustle and bustle surrounding him.

Does he know about the bet? I wondered. How can he not know? Tackett was making the rounds, and I heard discussions all around us.

"We'll pass Abilene in fifteen minutes, then it's Fort Worth," said a younger voice behind me.

"I put ten down for Dallas," came a reply.

"Dallas is too far away," said another. "He'd have to hoof it, and that's over two-hundred miles!"

"Why would he have to walk?" the young voice asked. "All he has to do is hop another train or take a bus."

"Two-hundred miles ain't nothin'," someone said with finality.

I folded up my mess kit and turned to Art. "Listen to that--can you hear what they're all talking about?"

With his grim poker-face, Art angrily chewed each bite. He swallowed with a loud gulp and stood, fumbling with his mess kit.

"I wish you'd quit this self-righteous bullshit," he growled, pushing past me.

His anger shocked me, as I'd never seen Art angry at anyone, not even on the troopship when he almost got into a fistfight with a sailor who poked fun at his sea-sickness. I wondered why the thought of Miller jumping his discharge angered me so much, more so than just from a sense that he shouldn't be breakkng the rules. For some reason I was taking the whole thing as a personal affront, as if his jump was affecting me in some special way.

Watching Miller from the far end of the car, I tried to picture him jumping off the train and into the dark woods I thought would surround us as we travelled through Arkansas. This was not a hard thing to do, and in one of the many jumps I imagined him making, I thought of myself leaping off on the outskirts of Louisville. I saw myself pushing off from the train, falling down a ravine and rolling around in the dirt, standing shakily, maybe hobbling with a broken leg, trying to find a cab...then, finally, a short drive to the spare, little brown house in Germantown....

The jostle of the train as it began to slow brought me back to the reality of the day, but thoughts of my boys, and especially Millie, alone in the house, making dinner as the sun began to set lingered in my mind. Down the aisle, Miller stood and walked out with his mess kit, as a hundred eyes snapped awake to watch him go. Whispers became loud voices, discussions were held openly, theories compared, the whole car abuzz.

On the other side of the window, Abilene, Texas, rushed up to greet us, with its buildings, cars, and people. I watched the people as long as I could, one here, one there, seeming not to move at all as the train passed them by. For them, home was--at most--a short drive away...

When Art finally returned, we walked to the rear door and had a smoke, and he was full of stories. A fight had broken out in the head, he told me, and a more-than-slightly-besotted corporal had been unceremoniously dunked head-first into a toilet.

"He couldn't even identify who did it," Art laughed. "He was so drunk all he can remember was that they wore uniforms--you know, who doesn't on here?"

On another run-through, Tackett tried to get Art to raise his wager.

"The odds are looking real swell," he said as he flashed us the cash he'd collected.

"No, thanks," Art said as he took a long drag on his cigarette. "I'll stay with what I've got." Tackett ran off again as Art leaned over to me. "Tac's running the numbers for that shark in the next car--Carney. He's got guys running all over this train, back and forth. I even heard," he whispered, "that the NCOs are in on it."

I shook my head and then turned around at an abrupt silence that fell over the car. I found myself staring down the aisle at Sgt. Frazier, who was making his way to Miller's seat. When he stood beside Miller, Frazier finally noticed the unnatural quiet his arrival caused. With a hostile superior's look, he glanced around him.

"Go on, go back to your business," he barked. "Nothing here to interest you! Go on!"

Some murmurs rose up as Frazier gestured to the forward door, and Miller stood to follow him as he marched out of the car. When the door shut behind them the car erupted in voices--an officer was going to blow the whole bet, and a non-commissioned officer at that! Some men stood and watched through the window of the forward door as others ran to the rear compartments to spread the unhappy news.

"I don't think Miller has a chance now," I said to Art as we returned to our seats. Strangely, I didn't feel at all pleased by this.

Within a few minutes, Tackett came charging through the car, his tanned face gone pale. He spoke to no one and stared straight ahead as he made his way past the other

men, who began shouting at him about their money. Stalled at the crush of bodies piled up at the forward doors, Tackett was forced to speak on threat of physical violence.

"Just let me get through and I'll come back and let you know what's happened," he said in a nervous voice.

"What about our money?" said someone angrily. There were answering cries of "Yeah," and "We want it back!" Tackett bravely shook his head. "I don't know what's going on--let me check on things and I'll be back!" A group of frowning men allowed Tackett to push through and out the door, leaving angry murmurs behind him.

We crossed the Oklahoma-Arkansas border just after supper. There was a tension in the air that made eating next to impossible, and a lot of chipped beef and mashed potatoes went uneaten. Cigarette supplies were being fast depleted--I sold the remainder of my carton for \$20 cash, having saved two packs for myself for the rest of the trip.

An hour after supper, I myself had already smoked three-quarters of a pack, and Art had smoked all he had. We sat playing rook with a couple of guys who normally sat in the car to the rear of ours, who came in thinking they'd get in on the news quicker in our car than in theirs.

Miller had been in line for supper, with the forward section, and had apparently been reassigned to the car behind the NCOs. Little else was known for certain, except that Frazier had taken Miller into the NCO car for several minutes and then abruptly assigned him to a new car. Unlike Miller, no one had seen Tackett in hours, and general agreement was that he was lying low for a while.

"I expect we'll be seeing Tac again pretty soon," Art said after the rook players left, dejected by the lack of news. "Once the guys realize that a threat from an NCO doesn't really make it any less likely he'll jump."

I nodded, glancing at the window. Sure enough, there were the tall, dark trees I had imagined.

"I wonder," I said.

Suddenly, a kid came bursting through the forward door and ran to the rear, shouting, "The bet's still on! The bet's still on! Hold on to your positions!"

There seemed to be one huge sigh of relief, and then a return of the nervousness. The bet was still on, but ground zero--Miller's hometown--was fast approaching.

Two miles outside of Pine Bluff, Tackett returned, his shirt wrinkled and sweat-stained, his hands claw-like and twitching. I almost felt sorry for him, until he spoke.

"Art, I need to borrow thirty bucks."

Everyone was cranky and tense, and raised voices occasionally turned into brief and meaningless fist fights.

"Art," Tackett intoned. "I really need the money."

I could only imagine what was going on in the mind of the man across from me--he seemed to be suffering from a walking fever, his eyes glassy, face pale, cheeks hollow. It was a face I'd seen only once before, on the troop ship...the face of a young soldier who'd been in the Philippines, who'd had the unlucky job of burying burnt pieces of exploded Japanese soldiers found inside their blasted encampments. Tackett, like that kid, was very close to his own personal edge.

"Please, I have to get the money NOW--before we reach the town."

"Still taking bets?" Art asked. "How?"

Tackett could not reply. "Please, Art." He watched with apprehension as the trees outside flew past.

"I've only got a twenty," Art replied, handing him two bills.

"You don't have ten more?" he said as he grabbed the money. "How about five more? I've got to have at least twenty-five."

I dug in my wallet and pulled out a crumpled bill, part of the cash I made from selling my cigarettes. "Here," I

said, handing it to him.

Though Tackett took the money in a flash, he seemed confused by my action. He frowned at me, and then fled with a quick "I'll pay you guys back soon."

I stared at Art, who rolled his eyes. "He's gone nuts," I said. "If he loses all that money I'll bet he'll jump this train."

He whistled. "I think a couple of these guys may just crack before this is over...they all got through the war and now look at 'em!"

There was a slight lurch as the train slowed. "We're coming in to Pine Bluff!" a high voice shrieked.

Everyone, myself and Art included, bolted to the windows. In the distance, around a long and winding curve, were the dim lights of the town, and the brightest of the lights, Art pointed out, were those of the train station. Luckily for us, it was facing our side of the train.

"A front-row seat," Art said calmly.

The air was tight and hot, and when the windows of the car went up, the atmosphere didn't change. Art and I leaned out, like kids, and so did everyone else. All heads, all eyes, moved relentlessly from town to train...to the one car where no one leaned out the windows.

The St. Louis/Southwest train station rushed toward us as we began to pass the houses, the buildings, the streets.... Parked cars were visible, as were restaurant signs, and a movie house-- all dark. Pine Bluff was a ghost town at this hour, empty of its people. The rushing air mussed our hair, but I felt as if Art and I were kids playing in the biggest toy train set in the world, late at night with our parents asleep.

This town was no better or worse than any other town we had passed, and it seemed no different from mine, or Art's, or Tackett's, or anybody else's for that matter.

I just barely heard Art exclaim "Sweet Jesus!" as we pulled into the station, a steel and wood affair that looked

like something out of a western picture. For a moment, I couldn't understand what Art had said, until I saw her. There, on the platform alone, was a woman...a blonde, tall and motionless.

In an instant, it seemed as if the train exploded with noise. The engine and the tracks cackled and screeched in my ears, and I heard an unbelievable flood of human voices pouring out seemingly from every window on that train. I couldn't understand any of the words, since it was everyone, Art and me included, hollering out at the top of our lungs. I can scarcely imagine what the woman thought as car after car flew by her full of wild, screaming banshees.

Even now, I think that Mrs. Miller, as we called her, was the most radiant, perfect female that had ever lived. I believed that when I saw her, when my heart turned over and beat madly, when I realized who she had to be. She had long, blonde hair pulled back into a bun, a dark grey overcoat, and black pumps. That was all that I could tell of her clothes as we passed her, waving, wailing, down through the station. We turned, breathless, to Miller's car, expectant...pushing.

I felt as if I couldn't breathe, as we all paused, perfect in our silence, for just a moment...and in the darkness, we watched the windows of Miller's car go up, and then there was another deafening cheer. A tiny form in a light brown uniform leaped from the train, clutching its green duffel bag, falling into a grassy ravine just past the water tower.

The compartment shook with the cry of "HOORAY!"

Then there was a jolt as the train picked up speed, and we could just make out Miller, standing, and her, a dot in the distance. We rounded another curve, and they disappeared from our view.

The question, for many, then became exactly where Alvin Miller jumped from the train. After a long hour of

tabulation among a group of engineers and accountants, all under the pay of a man called Carney, the point-of-departure was figured to be approximately fifteen feet past the Pine Bluff train station. With this figure established, only two men came within the twenty-foot leeway rule that was established for the pool.

Large sums of money changed hands, but only one man went home rich.

Black Oaks

All my black oaks are dying.
They put on sackcloth and ashes, and the wind
hears in their brown leaves
the rattle.

Black oaks die slowly. The leaves and I
sense regret in the sun,
comfort in a fetal curl.

I wonder, are they unwilling to face
one more colorless winter
where rabbits strip bark from fall saplings
as high as they can stand, and field mice
gnaw into houses to give birth?

3x7...3x7...3x7

over and over
on a big blackboard
in my brain.

The moisture from my palms
makes the chalk dust
cling to my fingers.

I clench my fists.

I clench my jaw.

The sun beats down on
the back of my head
and I close my eyes to show
how hard I'm thinking.

3x7...3x7...3x7

"I know," I whisper
and write it hesitantly on
the looming blackboard.

The sun explodes as
everyone laughs.

I feel the heat of their
hot breath as the shameful sun
swallows us up.

Message from a Bottle

While playing spin the bottle,
my spin landed clumsily on
the plump girl's space.
Everyone giggled and
when someone whispered 'fat girl,'
she raised her head up proudly
trying not to cry.

I had never seen such bravery,
so I kissed her. Twice.

Some giggled.

Others didn't.

Untitled

Big empty buildings speak volumes.
Windows lit like vacant eyes--
at night you can't see out,
but everyone sees in.
Buildings make a noise deep within,
a hushed rumbling sound.
Other than that, silence.
The hush of holy places and hospitals.
Still, except your heart,
footsteps on the walk outside,
the tolling of the clock on quarter-hours,
and the prying wind.

Warmth

Early morning mist
on the still lake.
I dream of being an
old man with bushy
eyebrows, a warm
sweater on my back,
and hands not yet
numb and stiff,
curled and
slow with age.

Close to Creation

In the winter
after dark
the stars puff,
like dandelions in early fall
after all the yellow
is gone.

The Cleaning Lady

Stretching
to reach a spot she missed
on the window,
the cleaning lady
hums the chorus of a song
she heard in church last Sunday.

She reaches higher,
creasing her blue smock
that tells everyone
she is Joyce.

A single varicose vein
twists its way up her leg,
mocking a spiral strand
from her dust mop.

From far away
that mop in her cart
could be a giant quill pen
leaning from its blotter.

Election Day

Grandpa said
Democrats have poop in their pockets.

I stand in a curtained booth
seventeen years later.
I look at the names next to the fat elephant
and the sterile donkey.
When I pulled the lever to close the curtain,
six serious faces stood behind me.
I tell myself to vote
for the person, not the party.

Then I feel Grandpa's smooth, cold hand in mine
and we're standing in his garage.
The dirt floor is hard and cool under my bare feet.
Yellowing faces of politicians stare at me
from posters hanging on the walls.
Words around the face of a smiling bald man say
I LIKE IKE but I don't like him.
He gives me the creeps.
Another man on a poster holds his hands up
in the shape of V. I guess it means peace.
I don't like him either.

I remember the people in line behind me
and stare at the names beside the proud animals again.

Grandpa, I think all of them have poop in their pockets.

Driving on Hometown Highways (while thinking autobiographically)

Highways of old habits
are close to unfamiliar,
yet they seem to remember me
in a different Ford.

A roadside cemetery
catches my headlights
as tombstones wink and tease,
and the car's tires fast-dance
with a curve I don't remember.
I want to stop and read the names.



The Gift

Elsie parted the Red Sea with her spoon, imagined Charlton Heston teetering on the edge of her oatmeal bowl, motioning his people safely through, looking back as the bumpy slime devoured the Romans, then raising his hands and saying, "Eat your cereal!"

"What? Mama, did you say something?"

"I said to stop playing with your cereal. You're not a little girl now. Not anymore."

Elsie slowly looked up from her bowl into her father's eyes, then blushed and again studied her coagulating oatmeal. "Please, Mama. Don't."

"Eh, Elsie—I—hope you're feeling all right today—I mean— I hope you'll feel like helping your mama. What with the tomatoes coming in and all, she'll need you. Won't you, Jo?"

"Of course I will."

"I feel fine."

Spoons clanked against bowls. Glasses tapped the table. A light breeze danced across the curtains, played with Elsie's auburn ponytail. Her father thrashed and struggled for air in the thickening silence. "It's going to be hot today." He sank.

Elsie saw the silence fill the gulf between her parents and herself and the table grew, became the tremendous table that separated Charles Foster Kane from his wife in *Citizen Kane*. "Yes, Ed, it'll be hot."

"Well, honey, I guess I better get a start. What with the truck acting up, it'll take me all day to drive the cattle to Taylorsville anyway. Tell you what. On my way home, I'll pick up some movies. How does that sound to you girls?"

"That would be nice, Ed."

"Yeah, Daddy." Movies were the only books Elsie could share with her parents, the only escape they understood. "And if

you don't mind, Daddy, there's a poetry collection I'd like you to get." She held out an envelope with the name carefully written. Her father took it grudgingly.

"Got no money to be putting on that right now, little lady."

Ed brushed his lips across his wife's cheek, patted his daughter on the head, and walked through the storm door with a bang.

But he left the silence, the stifling silence that was its own entity, that hung about them and waited to pounce at their weakest moment, that lurked in the corner of the kitchen and watched, waited. Jo always tiptoed around it. She feared it; yet, she fed it.

"Your dad tried, you know, to say something to you about--what's changed with you. Just didn't know what he should say."

"I know, Mama."

"And there's nothing wrong with not knowing what to say. Your daddy's a good man, you know."

"I know, Mama."

Jo slouched in her chair and sighed.

"We're going to be messing with those tomatoes all day."

"Yeah. I know, Mama."

Elsie saw the lion in the kitchen, saw it when her parents never could. Sometimes she thought they liked stepping around it. But not Elsie. She confronted it all the time, went out of her way to step on its tail. She was Isek Dineson, and Robert Redford was nearby. Quietly, painfully quietly, they stared into the lion's topaz eyes, waiting for a movement. The lion charged. Robert's gun backfired. Elsie raised her gun. Boom! She smiled. Now they would talk about something other than tomatoes.

"Goodness, it's a hot day to be picking tomatoes."

But maybe gunshots can't kill some lions.

"Yes, Mama."

"We had better get started."

Sweat dripped off the tip of Elsie's nose, making a tiny spot in the powdery dirt. She licked the salty water from her upper lip and glided her forearm across her face. Droplets trickling down her body made paths in the dust covering her.

Mama had been right--many of the tomatoes were almost overripe. Elsie liked the feel of them--smooth, firm, and warm with the earth and the sun. Mama said there was nothing like a sense of completeness--ripe and ready. Mama had used words something like that when she had explained it.

But Elsie didn't feel any more "ready" than she had before. She felt--different--but not in a way she liked. The pain didn't trouble her as much as the other thing. She felt the way she had when she thought about taking the pretty butterfly bookmark at Patterson's Drugstore--an almost nauseous conscience ache. Sometimes she wanted things she shouldn't.

"Elsie!" The voice came from inside the house.

"Yes, Mama!"

"Bring in the tomatoes when you fill that bucket!"

"Yess'um!"

A couple more and the bucket was brimming with scarlet. Elsie smiled. Scarlet. She pulled one last tomato and held it to the sky, her chin defiantly uptumed. "God as my witness," she exclaimed. "I'll never pick tomatoes again!" With a laugh, she lifted the bucket.

Core, peel, cut. Core, peel, cut. To be or not to be. Core, peel, cut. Core, peel, cut. To can or not to can. Core, peel, cut. Core, peel, cut. Nature's first green is gold. Core peel, cut. Core, peel, cut. Her hardest hue to hold--Somehow poetry made the monotony almost beautiful.

Elsie thought that must be how workers in factories survive years of core, peel, cut--by finding the melody in monotony. Repetition has a certain beauty. It is, she reasoned, the stuff of life--the easy pace of breathing, the quicky pitter-pat of the

heartbeat, the frenzied rhythm of . . . desire. Elsie felt her cheeks warm and then thought how silly she was to allow private thoughts to embarrass her. The outer world may be fenced in, but the plains of the mind should be free to be explored passionately and intimately. She wanted to inhale the clean air of literature, to stare into the open skies of music, to caress the lush grasses of art, to--

"Your dad's home. He's back early."

Elsie heard the familiar crackle of gravel under work boots, the click-slam of the storm door. "Hi, honey. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, Daddy."

"Well, I've got a surprise to make you feel even better. Let me see, what could it be?" He produced a sack from Taylorsville Books.

Elsie stared at it in disbelief. He had bought her collection. It had been a sacrifice. Money was tight, she knew, and her father thought such books to be a waste; still, he had bought it. Elsie saw it as a peace offering in a battle her father didn't even know they were fighting.

"Well, are you going to take it or not?"

Elsie took it almost greedily. The book was thin--a paperback. On its cover, a woman--her heaving bosom virtually exposed by her flowing red evening gown, her brown hair tousled by gentle ocean breezes, her bowed, scarlet mouth half-opened, her deep azure eyes half-shut--languished in the crook of the strong arm of a man. He was dark--apparently an Islander--and he wore no shirt. His muscles bulged as they supported her. Across the top of the book in flowing letters was the title--*Bermuda Passion*.

"I lost the name of that other book you gave me, but this looked interesting."

Elsie watched in horror as the table between her and her father widened, and the lion in the corner smiled.

And the Sons Will Pay

The rusty chains still hang in several of the trees--the tremendous, time-knotted oaks and maples--and they chingle in the breezes that rush up from the valley. Occasionally a horseshoe will emerge in a furrow of rich, red earth or is exposed by the harsh rain of a July storm. They are the iron vestiges of what Spring Valley was, of what Mr. Steele, with tobacco juice seeping from his toothless mouth and trickling down the crevices of time, proclaimed to be the golden age of Logan County.

Mr. Steele was an intruder on the gentle plains of my youth, the harbinger of the realities I would soon enough find beyond Spring Valley's natural seclusion. Children deserve an oasis.

"This was a mule farm in them days. Old Man Markum owned the place." The tobacco juice found a new gully, finally dissipating in a profusion of gray stubble. "I knowed him when I was a boy. That man knowed how to run a farm."

With a twelve-year-old's father idolatry, I answered, "My dad runs our farm."

Mr. Steele made a guttural sound and hurled a brown wad to the ground. Wiping his mouth on his shirt sleeve, he laughed. "Your dad don't run a farm--he works on one. Now Markum knowed how to make a place work for him, and he weren't afraid of whipping nobody that got out of line." He spoke these words with a sickening power, a force rising from the dark depths. The winds rushing up from the valley mercifully pushed his words from me,

and they joined the death-line of hate that pulsates through men's hearts.

"He beat a man to death on this here tree."

Click, scratch. Click, scratch.

The tree limbs fingered my bedroom window, and occasionally a smattering of raindrops trickled down the pane, down the side of the house, to the ground, the spring, the Red, the Cumberland, the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Gulf. A flash of lightning found its way between the swaying limbs to dance across my pink floor, and I closed my eyes and braced my body for the vibrating drumroll of thunder--

Click, scratch, click, scratch--the pop of the whip, a howl, a moan, nails digging into bark, scratching, bracing, bloody, splintered fingers, sickening anticipation.

Click, scratch. Click, scratch.

Screams echoing the horror of utter subjection--not the slavery to mortgages or habit or responsibility, but true bondage--resounded within the walls of my imagination and challenged the fortress of my understanding.

He beat a man to death on this here tree.

I knew such things had happened. I had, after all, leaned upon that very oak and spent afternoons with Harper Lee and Margaret Mitchell, had heard my parents talk of separate restrooms and segregated schools, had even seen the white-sheeted men who gathered around the courthouse in Springfield on some Saturdays and passed out leaflets. . . . But not beneath my tree. Never here . . .

When it storms, and the rains pound the earth, the rivers run red, filling with the deep, rich, precious clay, pushing it away, somewhere downstream. I suppose it was never really ours at all.

Notes on Contributors

Carl D. Ballard is a Louisville junior, majoring in English with a writing option and minoring in literature and journalism education. His work will be appearing in *Phase and Cycle*.

Jim Bradley is a junior from Flatwoods, Kentucky, majoring in fine arts with emphasis in painting and minoring in art history.

J. Martin Cobb majors in English and minors in writing and religious studies. A member of Sigma Tau Delta, he is a senior from Beechmont, Kentucky.

Linda Walker Cox is a graduate student in English. This is her third appearance in *Zephyrus*. She is from Scottsville, Kentucky.

John D. Davis is a senior from Louisville, Kentucky. He majors in English and minors in broadcasting.

Brent Fisk is a junior majoring in English with a writing minor. A junior from Newburgh, Indiana, he is a past contributor to *Zephyrus*.

Holly Hedden, a junior from Versailles, Kentucky, majors in English and minors in anthropology. She is a past contributor to *Zephyrus*.

Steve Hegge, a senior from Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, majors in English.

Beth Kemper, a graduate student in English, is from Russellville, Kentucky. She has published in *The State*.

J. L. Johnson is a junior from Lexington, Kentucky. She is an English and journalism major.

Susan Maertz is an Owensboro senior. She is a past contributor to *Zephyrus* and has published in *Gypsy* and *The Long Islander*.

Ramona McCain now lives in Bowling Green. She has published in *The Old Hickory Review* and *The Tower*.

Susan Palmer is a graduate student from Hampton, Virginia.

Andy Rademaker, a senior from Louisville, Kentucky, majors in English with a writing option and minors in music and philosophy. He is a past contributor to *Zephyrus*.

David Rice is a senior majoring in philosophy with a writing minor. He is from Franklin, Tennessee.

Lisa Day Robertson is a senior originally from Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, majoring in English. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta.

Susan Schorr, a Louisville senior, majors in French and minors in English.

Kerry J. Smith, a graduate student in English, is from Owensboro, Kentucky. His work will be appearing in *New Voices* and *Potato Eyes*.

Allison Thorpe is a sophomore majoring in English. A past contributor to *Zephyrus*, she has also published in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Potato Eyes*, *Wind*, *Pegasus*, *Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *Grab-a-Nickel*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Poetry South*, *Jefferson Review*, and others. She is also the author of an upcoming book of poetry called *Thoughts While Swinging a Wild Child in a Green Mesh Hammock*.

Eva Whittle, a graduate student in English, is from Bowling Green.

