


1992

UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

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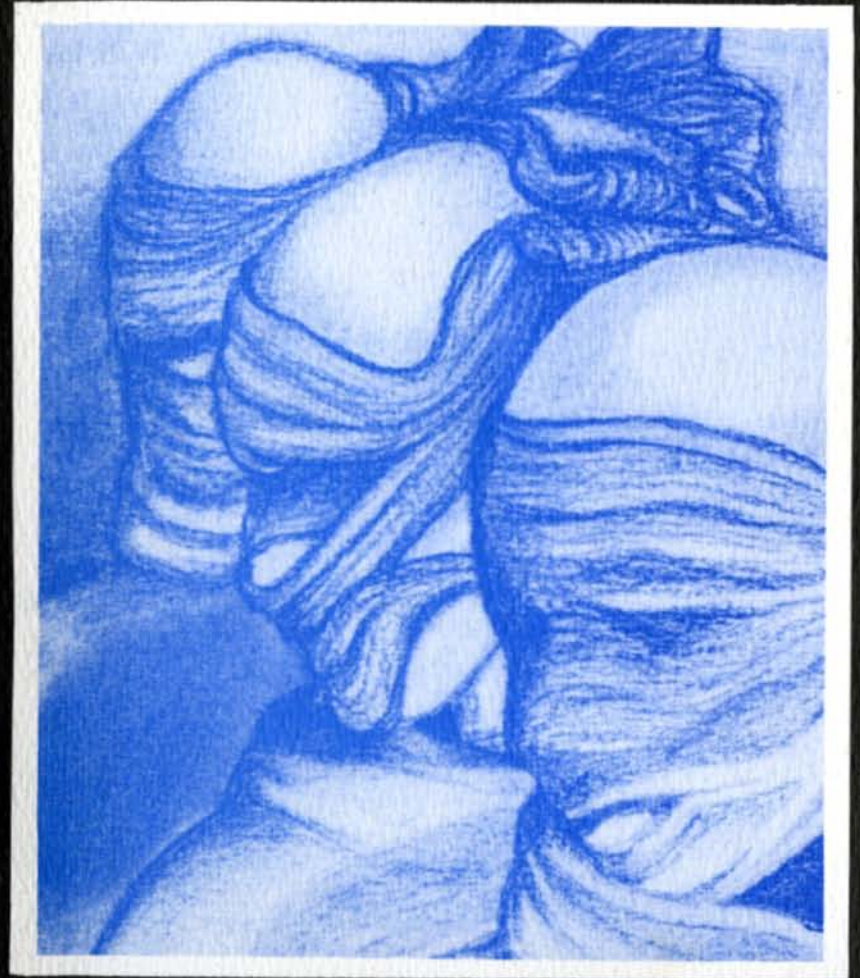
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ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University




WESTERN
KENTUCKY
UNIVERSITY

1992

68A34
ZEPHYRUS

Spring 1992

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



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

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye--
So priketh hem nature in hir corages--
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

from the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

Award Winners

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Brent Fisk

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Susan Maertz

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Christopher Bratton

Honorable Mention
Carl D. Ballard
J. Soucier
Eva Whittle

Zephyrus Art Award
Allison Drago

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Hide and Seek

In the wet haze of summer, the rain
trees heavy with water, you take me
under the porch,
net of spiderwebs tangling, damp dirt
the smell of it like
worms--moist, segmented,
as pink and translucent as lips
your hands in my hair like
static electricity;
it's not long until I'm
grass stained
resting in the cool air like
a leech, drinking
color from the bruised sky.

Premonition

(Litany for an Adopted Child)

I have been to
a palm reader.
She tells me
I have ten brothers and sisters
I have never seen.
Some nights I don't sleep
because I know they exist--
the way faith is explained
in Sunday School, the way
water will catch you
when you dive.

I imagine I've seen them,
their faces eerie and blurred
as they passed in cars,
the noise of engines, traffic
muffled by the sound
of my father's voice:

Your mother and I
wanted to choose
a daughter.
You were chosen.
We chose you.

Four Poems About My Mother

Playing bridge with matched cards
and tallies, coasters
carefully scattered with hearts
and clubs, you laugh
low in your throat like a crow.

Our kitchen ceiling, its geranium stains
from the home canned
tomatoes under high pressure
when the cooker
exploded,
remind me of
your burned hands, gauze
as thin as a moth's wing.

I carry a photo of you
with a flip,
your heavy hair frosted,
the fake Christmas tree,
your cigarette
glowing like a star.

In fifty years, who will remember
the birds we buried,
planted like bulbs
among the rose bushes?

Coffee

I have taken up
coffee, a habit
belonging to my parents
with their cups and saucers;
they measure milk and sugar
while the percolator steams.

I fill a deep mug,
brew each pot
stronger and darker
to match my eyes
and sustain me--
thin as water, as smooth as a spoon--

I will be bitter if I live a hundred years.

Barometer

I predict weather by charting
your face: eyes hard with sleet,
snow creeps into your mouth
and freezes it;
humidity is gold sand
that clings to you, rubs off
on my shoulders. I remember
the last cold season, icicles
that crashed like bells,
and the last warm one, your face
like a sunflower turned toward the light,
your hands were starfish.

Falling, the last leaves
bleed into each other like paint,
and I dread
the first days of winter,
each drop of snow
coming down like a knife
to pierce this house.

Lightning Bugs

In the field behind our house
they hang over the dark leaves.
You stand in the yard and watch,
come in smelling like air,
your brown arms, eyelids
heavy as syrup.
Late at night when you think I'm asleep
you keep track of them--
wavering haze of green light,
occasional flaring, like
matches--
you don't rest until
morning.

I get up early,
watch water settle on spiderwebs in the yard,
measure the spaces between us,
adding to the place where
your body ends and mine begins.
I am tired, drawn out like a telescope.
On power lines, birds wait.

You sleep all day.

Numbered Things

They say he was a counter.
One who counts what he sees.
Floor tiles, pennies,
expansion joints in highways,
freckles on friends'
skin, highrise buildings,
corners, cars, mile markers,
telephone poles.

He crashed nine times, watching
wires meet pole insulators,
before losing his license.
Steps to the market added up
fine, and back, the same.
But window eyes along that route
pointed him out to hills.
Geese in flight, dropped deer
antlers, pine trees, stars--some
falling, lake ripples washing
his feet, creekrock under toes,
flies, snowflakes, all
became a new arithmetic.

They say he'll die, counting
grains of sand pouring through
homemade glass, laid out
to mark his neat days.

The Kissing Tree

On a certain sycamore,
Maybe pulpwood now,
Initials upon initials
Are carved.

The Kissing Tree.
To hold a hand under it
Meant sailing the farthest
Out of rusty swings
Toward lovely third-grade girls.

Many lonely nights
A forty-year-old woman
Wakes screaming,
Sweating from a nightmare
About a boy who fell from the sky,
Lifted up on one arm
And cried that he loved her.



Man

On the moon
in the Sea of Tranquility
a modified human footprint
disguised as a footprint
slowly being blurred
by the solar winds
slowly being erased
as even the mountains
on earth are swept flat
by the wind, the simple air
that even now whistles in,
through the cracks
around the doors,
the windows.

Rebel Angel

The sun...
You'd need Superman's eye
to take a good look.
The image we form
when we close our eyes
is from some movie,
a blood orange
being sucked juiceless
by the horizon,
not at all the naked
brass bulb that creates
images and religions
and can as easily destroy
them.

The moon, forever
skirting the sun's stare
and hiding its backside,
pales in the daylight,
its beauty being
sculpted by shadows.

Sometimes, though,
on an autumn night
filled with dust and pollen,
the moon, too, will be shaded
the color of blood.
As if the consort
had dressed herself
in the monarch's clothes.

The Descent

A million tons of steel sink into the ocean, glide down with more grace than would seem possible for such an unwieldy weight. The cold dark water lets it slip, like the air does a feather. A ship never attains such a freedom of movement traveling across the surface, its navigation charted with deliberate hands.

Currents move throughout the great vessel like strong emotions--filling the cabins, moving through engineering and the bridge, swirling around the massive dining room, disturbing the ship's insides and making of anything not bound down a spiraling galaxy of furniture, clothes and utensils: items that were not so conspicuous when held to their proper places.

Soon the ship enters another world, a place where metal is no match for water with the weight of the world. The ship becomes smaller and more insignificant. Its turbines once powerful enough to electrify a town, its kitchens once feeding a small army, its engines and smoke stacks once an industry are now nothing compared to the sea. By the time it reaches the bottom, it is as dense as a stone and finds its place among a bed of stones.

An Unscheduled Stop Near Hays, Indiana

With the lights off inside the train
we could see past our own reflections
out to the flat, grassy fields that unfolded
to the horizons on either side.
Without the hum of the fans
we could hear the wind whipping
around and rocking the train as we sat dead
on the tracks trying to conserve the batteries
and waiting for them to clear away the debris
and hose off the spilt gasoline.
We could see the lights on the horizon
that were Hays, Indiana and the red and blue
lights of the ambulance as it approached
from the east, the two body shaped baskets
strapped to the top of the ambulance
as it inched its way past our windows
maneuvering through the narrow space
between our tracks and the ones next to us.
We could hear the emergency workers talking
in hushed voices, the young conductor crying
as she moved down our aisle.
We could see the dark, twisted outline
of what was once a car as we rolled past
and heard an older conductor tell another
that a father and three children
had been in the car.

We never felt the impact
as our mile of steel met
a box of metal and glass
never heard the crash or
scream as we tore through
plastic, upholstery, flesh, and bone
never saw any blood or bodies
as we pulled off to continue
our journey.
If the old conductor had not
told us, we would not know
that we had collided with a car
and killed four people
at a crossing near Hays, Indiana.

Safe Space

The road that James was driving on ended at an intersection. His car kept on going. For a moment he was airborne. All four wheels and a ton of Pontiac Bonneville off the ground. James couldn't really be sure of that though because he had blacked out and let the car drive itself off the road. Several days later, though, when he was looking at the car with his father, looking at the smash under the front bumper and the way the car was bowed just slightly in the middle so that the back doors couldn't be opened, he smiled into his hand, his mouth laughing but his eyes remaining serious so that his father would not see, and he decided, "Yes, I must have flown."

He awoke on impact, the car bumping him up and down from ceiling to seat, and he started to drive again, although now he was plowing through a rocky field on four flat tires. Without stopping, he turned the car and tried to make it back up onto the road, but the rims were just spinning on the incline. Giving up, he turned the car off and fumbled with the keys, not being able to get them out of the ignition because he couldn't think to push the little release knob. James stumbled out of the car.

The headlights pointed up into the night sky and shined through clouds of dust.

"Are you all right?"

James was standing on the road looking down at the car. It didn't look that bad to him. The engine was making its cooling down noises.

"Hey! You okay?"

James turned to see a small subcompact car that had stopped beside him. The passengerside window was rolled down a quarter of the way, but it was dark inside.

"You need a lift somewhere?"



"I guess I ran off the road somewhere," James said, looking back at the ditched Bonneville.

"We can give you a ride to a service station." A young man was standing there, leaning on the subcompact's open door.

"Yea. That'd be great. I guess I ran off the road somewhere." The young man made room for James to squeeze into the back seat.

As they drove back toward town, James became aware that the driver and the young man were making fun of him, but he was too drunk to care. As he sat in the cramped back seat with his legs folded up, he watched the road, the broken white line, rush by, and he laughed to himself as the other two laughed at him.

Sitting on the cold concrete floor, James stared down at his socked feet. He was wondering why they had taken his boots away. He had just gone along quietly afraid to ask any questions, and they had locked him up. His socks were embarrassingly dirty on the bottoms, and one had a hole to match the hole in his right boot. He looked at the inert bodies, all shoeless, that were scattered across the cell floor. The sleepy sound of obstructed breathing echoed off the walls and produced a vibration that tickled his ears.

By the time he had been dropped off at the service station by the two laughing Good Samaritans, by the time he had drunk the four large Styrofoam cups of scalding black coffee and burnt his tongue while he waited for the tow truck driver to get out of bed and to the service station, by the time he had ridden with the tow truck driver in the tow truck back to where his car was ditched, by the time they had hauled the Bonneville back up onto the road just in time for the police officer to happen by, by the time James had failed the sobriety test, not being able to touch his nose with his eyes closed or hold his left foot in the air and count backwards from one thousand, was read his rights and handcuffed, by the time he had been taken to the police station, blew a .11 on the

breathalyzer and was put into the drunk tank, his boots being taken away first, by that time he had sobered up.

A jangle of keys at the door then a sliding sound, metal against metal, broke the peaceful buzz of the sleeping cellmates. A bearded man was pushed into the cell by an extended strong right arm. A voice said, "There ya go." The door slammed shut, and James heard the lock slide back into place. The bearded man turned his stumble from the push into a shuffling walk and made his way to the back of the cell. He didn't sit down or even stop. Instead he shuffled back around and appeared to be surveying his new surroundings. Stopping beside a floored sleeper, who at the opening and closing of the cell door had rolled over onto his back and begun to snore loudly, the bearded man paused, looking down, and then gave the snorer a solid but restrained kick to the side, as methodical as if he had slapped a malfunctioning television set. The snorer grunted and turned over onto his stomach but continued to snore. Without summoning any recognizable emotion to his face, the bearded man delivered two more kicks to the snorer's side. James flinched at each kick. They had been delivered at full force. The snorer emitted a moan that echoed from wall to wall until distorted. The other sleeping cellmates all became silent for a moment. Their vibration ceased like the song of cicadas when the insects are disturbed. The snorer's moan died, and he began to mumble, his face pressed to the floor, talking to and tasting the dirty concrete.

James put his head down between his knees, his legs being folded up against his chest, and pretended to be asleep. He could hear the bearded man shuffle to the wall opposite and sit down. At first fear was stronger than the urge to look up, and James sat there straining to hear any sound the bearded man might make. The sleepers had resumed their song. The snorer, no longer snoring--somewhere between sleep and wake, consciousness and unconsciousness, numbness and pain--continued to mumble in an unintelligible but definitely pleading voice, made small by his face still being

pressed to the floor.

What seemed like a long time passed before James could finally muster enough courage to peek out between his knees. When he did, his lungs caught and kept his breath, and he felt a red fever run through his body. The bearded man was looking directly at him. James froze and closed his eyes, once again feigning sleep, but he jumped at the sound he knew was the bearded man getting up and moving toward him. James kept his eyes closed as the man sat down next to him. He could feel the heat from the man's body and hear him breathing.

After a period of silence, James heard the bearded man say, "What they got you in for?" James jumped and pretended to be just waking.

"If you're awake now, boy, I asked, what you done to be in here?"

"A DUI. I got a DUI."

"Good. That's a good thing getting you crazy drunks off the road. Ain't safe for a decent man who minds his own business and ain't ever broke a law in his life. Now why can't the police stick to that and leave us law abiding honest fellows to our own?"

"I..." James could smell the whiskey on the bearded man's breath.

"Now you take me. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for 'em nosey neighbors calling the police and the police coming in and sticking their noses where they don't belong, where nobody's noses belong except a man's and his wife. Should have gone and arrested the neighbors instead, just for not minding their own business. You know what I mean?"

"Yea, uh..."

"You look too young to be married. Are you married?"

"No. I..."

"You're big enough. I wouldn't mind having a big ole boy like you around the house to help out. Problem with

kids is they come too small and good for nothing. By the time they get big enough to do anything, that's when they turn on you."

The man was silent for a moment and seemed to be thinking about something in particular.

"I don't have no son. Nope, not anymore," the man said as he turned his head to look at James. "I don't mind telling you this because I can see you're like me, you don't..."

Again, there was a jangle of keys at the door and the sliding back of the lock. A policeman entered. "Jack Zachariah Sparks," he called out after reading the name from a document he held in his extended hand.

"That's me. Jack Zack," the bearded man said as he stood up.

"Come with me. You've just been promoted." The police officer escorted the bearded man out of the cell.

James watched the door close once more and heard the sound of the key locking it. He tucked his head back between his knees and waited. Despite his long stay and the soothing hum of the sleeping cellmates, James never slept that night.

James couldn't find the place where he was supposed to work off his community service hours. They had given him vague directions on the phone, no address. He was wandering around in the general area; he knew he was close, but he couldn't decide at which house he was expected. It was an ordinary residential neighborhood that bordered on being seedy. It would probably degenerate further in the years to come. Clothes and sheets hung out on lines. Dogs slept chained to their doghouses. Cars rested on blocks in backyards. James didn't want to go knocking on doors. It was too early on a Saturday morning for that.

He found a pay phone and dialed the number he had scratched on a scrap of paper. The woman's voice asked him where he was calling from. James told her as best he

could, and she said, "Look over your right shoulder. You should see a red brick house with a swing set in the backyard. That's us."

James walked across a parking lot towards the house the woman had described. A chain-link fence surrounded the backyard. He opened the gate and walked down the path that led through the yard to the back door. A large wooden shed took up most of one side of the small yard. James passed the rusting swing set and saw a small sand box with most of its sand dumped out over the sides. A few toys were scattered across the yard. Dolls lying face down in the grass. A red and yellow plastic toy lawn mower. A flat basketball. A few odds and ends that were probably just parts of toys. There was no one in sight.

At the back door James rang the door bell, then, looking up, noticed a security camera pointed down at him. There was a buzz and the sound of the door unlocking.

Hesitantly, James pushed open the heavy door and stepped into a small kitchen. Still there was no one in sight. He closed the door slowly, taking his time in hopes that someone would come in and find him rather than having to search through the house himself.

He paused to listen and thought he heard somewhere, maybe in the basement, a radio playing soft music.

A young woman appeared in the kitchen carrying an armload of clothes. She surprised James since he had been listening yet had not heard her approach. She stopped to eye him for a moment then came up to him with her hand out, balancing the clothes in her left arm.

"Hello. I'm Sharon." James shook her hand. "So you're the new slave. Well, we've got plenty of work for you. What's your name again?"

"James."

"Well, James, it's good to meet you."

It was the same voice that James had heard on the phone, but he had expected an older woman.

James's first job was to clean out the gutters around the roof. As Sharon had instructed, he found a ladder in the crowded, junky shed and dragged it out. At first he thought he could do the job from the top of the ladder but soon found himself on the roof scooping the rotted leaves and black water out of the gutters with his hands. James didn't mind the work, even after coming up with a dead rat in his palm. He enjoyed being on top of the house in the cool fall wind. As the sweat evaporated off his arms and face, he was invigorated.

Taking a break from his work, James stood up and looked across the neighborhood. At this vantage point, he could see over high fences and shrubs into backyards, and he felt a slight power. It was still early though, so there wasn't much going on. An older woman worked her flower garden, and a few children played in the mud along the side of the street. What other life the neighborhood held remained inside, out of sight. James's vigor left him, and he suddenly felt alone.

When he had traced the gutter all around the house and dredged out all the clogs, James returned to where he had left the ladder only to find it lying on the ground, probably pushed over by a gust of wind. He sat down on the edge of the roof and thought. It was a little too high to jump to the ground, and he was too embarrassed to yell for help. He was trying to come up with a third option when Sharon came out of the back door with a plastic bag full of garbage. She noticed the ladder on the ground and looked up at James.

"Having trouble?"

"Yeah. The wind blew it down."

Sharon set the bag of garbage down and righted the ladder for James.

"There you go. Were you going to stay up there all day?"

James blushed as he climbed down the ladder, and

Sharon continued on her way to the trash cans with the garbage.

After looking at all the junk that had been piled in the shed, James decided that the only way to clean the place out was first to move everything outside. The light in the shed was bad, so James couldn't make out what was in all the boxes until he had them outside. There were boxes of clothes, some neatly folded, others wadded up. Most were children's clothes--bright colors, some typical kids' clothes, others miniature versions of adults' clothes. There were also boxes of mismatched dishes, some with chipped edges, others still dirty with dried food. And there were boxes of toys, mostly simple ones, stuffed dolls, faded plastic cars, and trucks smelling as old as they looked. Several sets of mattresses and box springs were stacked up in the shed, along with odd pieces of furniture, some scratched, others missing legs. And several rusted strollers including one built to accommodate triplets. It was a collection of the first things abandoned during a hard journey.

James dragged all of this stuff out and set it in the driveway that led up to the shed. He cleaned the building out, dusted and swept, got his hands all stuck up with cobwebs.

Empty the shed looked newer, larger, and not without some possibility, and then James moved everything back in, trying to arrange it in some sort of order. In the end the shed looked as messy as before with its piles of junk crowding out the small space. James just shook his head.

As he vacuumed the living room, James occasionally glanced through the open door at Sharon as she worked in the small office. She sat at a desk filling out paper work. There was a bed in the office, so apparently it could double as an extra bedroom if needed. During the day James had seen two other women. One stayed in her room most of the day, only coming out occasionally to watch the

afternoon news or go to the bathroom. The other had a baby with her and was in the kitchen warming some formula.

James heard the door bell over the noise of the vacuum and glanced at Sharon, who was looking at the security camera monitor that was on the desk before her. She pressed a button and got up, moving through the living room toward the kitchen. A moment later she returned with a new woman who had two little boys trailing along on either side. The woman told the two boys to stay in the living room while she and Sharon went into the office. James was moving two end tables back to their original positions after having moved them to vacuum. The two boys--one about six years old, the other maybe nine--stood staring around the room. They looked at James, who continued his work.

"I want to watch TV," the youngest one said to James.

"Go ahead," he replied.

The boy wandered over to the television and turned the set on. His older brother followed him. They both sat down a mere foot away from the screen. The older boy began turning the channels, not staying on one program more than five seconds. James looked into the office. Sharon was sitting close to the new woman asking her questions. The woman sat straight and stiff. Her face was hard.

There was a noise, and James looked over just in time to see a lamp tumble off the television set. The six year old had tried to raise himself off the floor by grabbing onto the cloth that covered the television. The lamp had been sitting on top. The bulb broke on the floor. Sharon and the mother came running in. The little boy had not been hurt. He just stood to the side, staring at the two women and James as if expecting to be punished by someone. James set the lamp back onto the television and was about to pick up the broken glass when Sharon said, "James, could you take the boys outside for a while? Just keep an eye on them. Don't let them get into any trouble or go outside the fence."

"Okay."

As James led the boys outside, he noticed that their mother was crying. He heard Sharon say, "Don't worry. Things get broke around here all the time. It was just the bulb."

Outside James sat in one of the swings moving slightly back and forth with his legs dragging the ground while the two boys played in the sand box. He was glad to be outside in the fresh air again. The house had smelled all closed up with the odors of a household concentrated. He hoped they wouldn't keep him much longer. He was tired, and it was getting dark. The sun silhouetted the houses across the street. The neighborhood was still quiet. It seemed to James that whatever had happened today had happened in this house and this yard.

When James looked over at the two boys, he saw them throwing sand at each other. Then the older one shoved his brother to the ground.

"Hey!" James got up and rushed over to the two. The older boy went around James to the swing set. The younger one was sitting on the ground crying. James knelt down but didn't know what to say. Suddenly the boy jumped up and made a dash for the gate. James was up and managed to grab him before he could get out. He picked the boy up, and the six year old put his arms around him and buried his face into his shoulder. James took the boy back, and the two sat down next to the sand box in the sand that had spilled over its edges. The muscles in James's arms and legs and back were sore from all the work he had done that day. He was exhausted. All he could do was sigh and hold onto the boy as he cried into his shoulder. The other boy sat motionless in one of the swings and stared at them. By now the sun had gone down and it was dark.

Sharon had situated the mother and her two boys in a room. She and James stood facing each other at the back door.

"I guess you need to be getting home."

"Yeah. Well, I guess I'll see you later," James said

as he turned to leave.

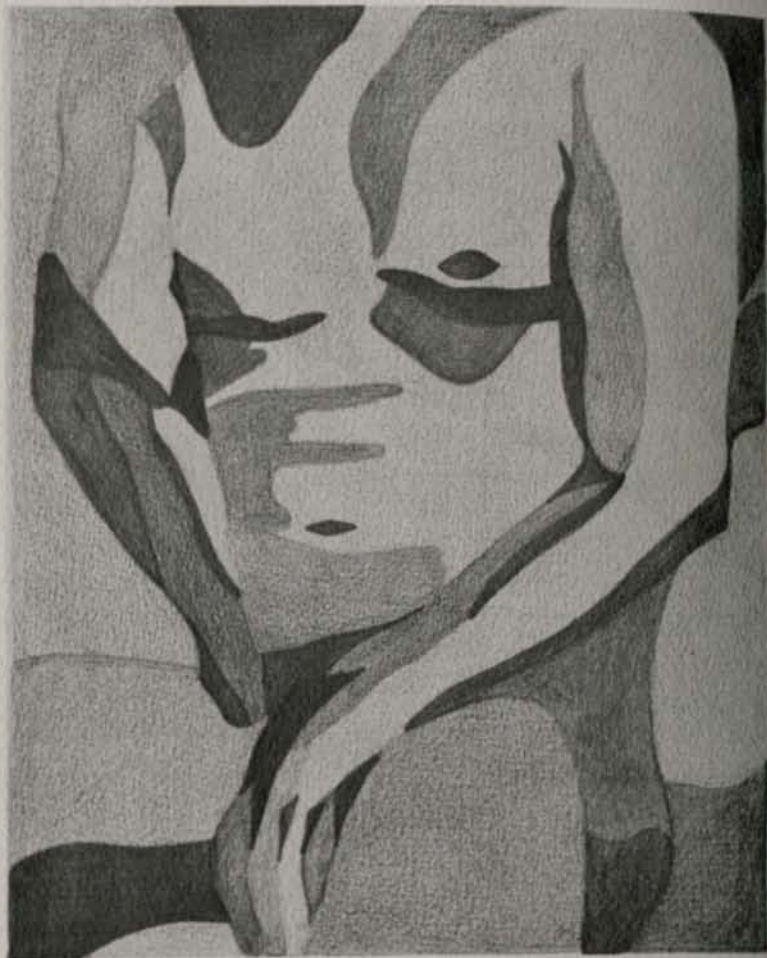
"Hey, James. Thanks for putting out an effort. A lot of guys who come here to work do as little as possible."

"That's okay. It wasn't that bad." He paused for a moment then turned and left. He heard her say "goodbye" behind his back and repeated "bye" without stopping or turning around.

When he got home, his mother fixed him a sandwich, but he was already stretched out on his bed, still fully dressed, asleep.

At the party he went to the next Friday night, James kept telling his friends, "After I got that DUI, I knew I couldn't keep drinking and driving. So I've given it up for good. You'll never see me behind the wheel of a car again." After the twelfth cup of beer from the keg, he lost count. He danced a lot that night with a group of his friends until the floor shook. It was not something he usually did. At 4:30 in the morning after most everyone had gone home, James walked out the back door. He pissed in the alley behind the house. He vomited in a yard down the street. And he found himself at the door of a friend's apartment. It had been left unlocked for him. James swayed in, trying not to wake his sleeping friend. He found the small couch comfortable and had no trouble falling asleep. He dreamt of a clear plastic, audio cassette tape case filled with cloudy water. Inside was a silver fish that took up most of the case and a tiny gold fish. The silver fish was dead. The gold fish swam around its inert body.

James was sick most of the next day.

**Between Friends**

1.

The way you left
was like a ride on a tire swing.
You pushed too hard.
I fell out.

2.

Your extra-long Northwest vowels,
pride in your teenager face, nearing thirty,
fascination with things German, even chocolate cake--
these are things I never thought I'd miss.

3.

When I want you back in my life,
I'll put on sturdy gloves
as if I'm re-potting a cactus
overgrown from its soil.

Some needles will still draw blood.

Architect

We had practically drawn up its blueprints
during late summer talks
in the evening, holding hands.

Soon the house was all we could speak of.
You cemented your problems behind the white walls
where my paintings were to hang,
and the hardwood shelves for your books.

What a master carpenter you were
adding on new rooms to store the things you couldn't tell me
until its foundation broke
leaving me among the pieces.

Summer, the Accusation

A slow pull
on a melting string...
those three months
thinning to pinpoints
then to nothing, not even
a shimmering ghost on the road
behind me.
Soon it will be too hot
for me to accurately recall
when we last saw each other.
Sweat swells and slides
down a curve of bone,
running into my open mouth.
I taste salt and sleep.

Return to Sender

I'm the sort
whose fingers itch
to open mail that doesn't belong
to me, so when
an empty October evening
sifted down with the leaves
I pushed one of your windows
open to a lazy yawn,
and stood in a room
that shimmered with the phrasing of your presence.
Sharpened by guilt,
I slipped into the crease of your home
and opened a life,
reading
the curve of your head on a pillow
the smell of your soap in a crumple of terrycloth
the width and breadth and angle of your body
in its daily space.
These were things past,
letters from a few hours previous,
and from a place unknown
to my own small geography.

Halloween

The sheet crackles
like newspaper
as we set our ponderous need upon it.
Slicing into taut flesh,
we scoop out greedy handfuls
of each other.
I use my fingernails
to scrape you hollow,
you sink a knife
and cut a gasping mouth.
Naked, we glow
with a terrible heat,
an empty light.

Winter, an Invitation

Watching stars melt
on the warmth of a fingertip,
I know it is our season--
flints striking sparks
from each other
under a slate-colored sky.
The compressed clarity
of winter air
carries your voice to me
and miles, miles beyond.
In summer, you pull
your hand from my hair
to wipe sweat from your
lip, and
the thick richness of heat
hangs like veiling
on our bodies.
Summer deceives our
mystery,
but winter's white
calls all colors into one,
you and I into us.

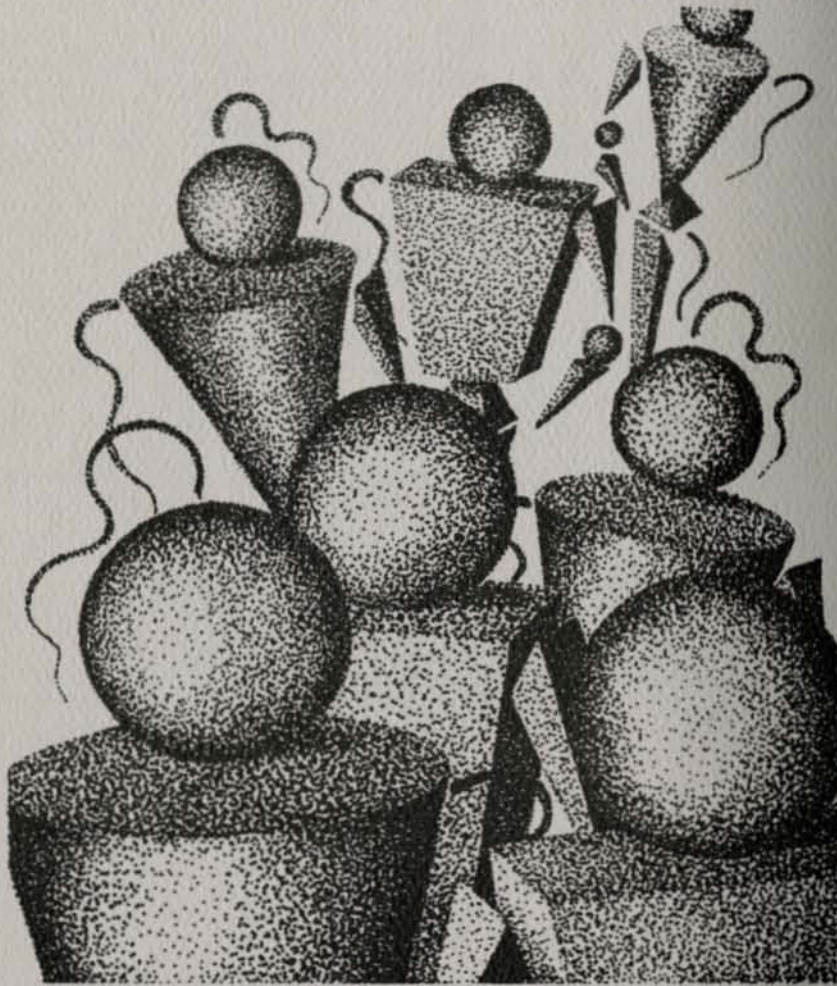
Climbing Mt. Java

Sour aftertaste
Damp forehead
Aching eyelids
Pre-midnight
Hum of the fridge
Sigh of the roommate
Characteristic...tic...tic
Tic of the wall clock
Barely audible grind of crickets outside
Inside of sudden neck movements
Slow winding down of muscles
In your head
Shoulders
Heart
Last resort not to
Sleep aid
Swig of instant
Instant cold instant
Disappointment.

Growing Things

Dana stood poised like a dancer on her porch, gazing out at the blaze of color that was her garden. It had started out as a normal yard, but her enthusiasm, like the plants themselves, had grown and blossomed, until the yard became a beautiful tangle. Dana watched the plants, new white hyacinth and coltsfoot mingling with delicate purple violets and bell-like lily of the valley, and the red-blue-green jewel tones of the hummingbirds and hovering butterflies like a benevolent goddess. Chuckling at her own imagery, she glanced down at her standard gardening outfit; worn jeans, extra-large men's sweatshirt to cover the soft rolls of her flesh, the mountains and valleys of her body. "Goddess of over-abundance, perhaps," she thought. She picked up her little spade and the brown tray of impatiens. Putting the thought firmly in its place, Dana strolled across the remaining bit of lawn, the cold dew tickling her bare toes. There was a little patch of earth just by the locust tree that was crying out for some kind of growth. Dana intended to fill it. The lacy green fronds that were just beginning to uncurl from the branches would give the impatiens just enough shade. Fragile and small, they tended to wither in the sun.

Dana knelt and sank her hands into the soil, crumbling it and smelling the rich, dark scent. She could wear it like perfume. She grasped her spade and started to dig. She supposed she was happy. She had a good mind and a good job to go with it. She had earned--herself!--the money for her little cottage. Nestled by a lake with four or five other homes, it was far from the urban hustle of the city or the sterility of the suburbs. "But it does have its



drawbacks," Dana thought, as she heard the familiar pounding footsteps on the gravel outside her fence. Cory jogged into view and seeing Dana, made a beeline. Cory, with the lean hard body that had never carried an ounce of superfluous flesh, was her next door neighbor. Cory bounced in place in front of Dana and delivered her usual greeting, "Hey, kiddo! Up for a jog?"

Mindful of the ritual, Dana smiled her usual smile and replied her usual reply, "No, not today. Thanks, though."

"You really should come with me, you know. Exercise would do you good! I couldn't live without my morning jog!"

Dana smiled again and made the closing remark, "Just isn't my thing, I'm afraid." Cory shrugged and grinned and sprinted off.

Dana watched her go. It wasn't Cory's fault that she was the embodiment of every gung-ho gym teacher Dana ever had. It wasn't Cory's fault that beside her Dana felt like a slug, shapeless and ugly. Cory's intentions were good. "Ha, ha!" Dana chuckled darkly to herself. "The road to hell, my friend!"

Padding back to the shed, Dana found her watering can and took it to the spigot. The ground was rich and moist, but an extra watering would be good for the new plants. She had tried jogging at one point, she reflected as she gave the impatiens a drink. Her chest, rather larger and more rebellious than Cory's, had bounced up and down painfully, her knees and ankles hurt and stiffened, and she had developed shin splints rather quickly. Jogging had gone the way of aerobics and Jazzercise and Callanetics. Dana preferred walks, long, private, rambling walks around the lake and through the forest preserve. When she walked she could be alone and herself, free of the side-long amused glances of slender, pretty exercise enthusiasts, free from

earnest people with good intentions.

Dana sat on her back steps and idly pulled weeds from the flagstones as she looked about her, familiar peace settling back around her. A breeze danced to her and with it came a honey-rich scent, heavy and heady like wine. "The peonies," Dana thought, and smiled. The peonies were blooming. She had not intended to have them in her garden; they took up so much space. But they were her father's favorites, and he had given her some transplants from his own garden. They were a favorite of the nectar-lovers, the hummingbirds, and even the ants. Chin on hands, Dana looked at the plant. It was a shrub, really, for it had grown and spread. Its bright fuchsia made a blaze of warmth against the other cool, pale colors in the yard. It reminded her of her father, who was a big, laughing man. She reached out to stroke a silky-soft petal, bent to bury her face in its perfume. The men at the office would slap her on the back and include her in the bonding-ritual conversation and look past her to the slim, tanned typists. Dana wondered, as she pinched off a blossom and tucked it behind her ear, if any of them would know what a peony was. She smiled and let the thought melt away.

The gate, ivy covered, stood open. The gravel path led down to the water. Dana drifted to the path and watched the lake as it glowed like a sapphire. The wind made little ripples across the water that caught the light and sparkled. Dana walked in the grass beside the path, mindful of her bare feet. There was a little dock at the path end, where the neighbors sometimes tied up their canoe. It was empty now, empty and waiting.

The water looked cool and blue this morning. It was probably cold. She had a swimsuit in the house, a green one, rather matronly. It was uncomfortable. Dana smiled again and let the thought spin away. She peeled off her sweatshirt and dropped it to the dock. She dropped her

jeans. The houses across the shore were like watching eyes. She looked at them and dropped her bra, her underpants. Poised like a dancer, Dana stood on the edge of the dock. "It'll be freezing," she thought, and dove.

She slid through the water, sleek and buoyant. She surfaced and smiled at the sky. The water wasn't cold at all, but warm, sun-warm. She glided along with easy, powerful strokes, and the water caressed her body like a lover.

Half Remembering

I remember half a farm,
one shady side with the forsythia bushes,
the cistern sunk in concrete,
steel mesh screening debris.
I remember the yellow paint,
the low front porch,
the creaking floor.
I remember windows,
watching snow filter down,
watching wasps ping against eaves.
I remember my grandfather's cough.
I've forgotten his voice,
but his stories are still there.
The long road moving against the river,
the whirlpools he pointed out
while cigarette smoke stung my eyes.
I'm afraid of forgetting the halves
of the things I do remember.
His face slowly yellowing
in a photo album, the yellow paint,
the dusty gravel drive,
and the stray dogs he wouldn't let us feed.

Cemetery Road

The coal mine moved south,
embracing the small white stones.
The gravel road
came right up to the burial site,
then veered away into the night.
We parked next to the body of a Maytag washer,
then walked into the stand of pines.
In the distance, cranes moved earth.
Caution lights blinked endlessly at the crossroads--
earthmovers could crush a Buick flat.
The stars were cold, the light from the
city to the south faded into black.
We felt as empty as the bottles we left
next to the toppled stones.
The cold car waited.
When the driver turned off the lights for effect,
someone snapped, "Start the car, Steven."
The thirty miles back to town was a lousy ride.

After 2 1/2 Years We Talk About Apologies

At a table by a window
we looked into each other
as people looked in at us.
We told each other obvious things,
pulling them out of the smoky air
above us.
We folded our language in napkins,
hid it under plates and silverware.
What we were saying was as obvious
as the neon signs outside.

In Need of a Haircut

Both parents believe so,
they said it to me
my last visit home,
noticing because they
do not see me each day.

They no longer mark my
growth on the door frame
quarter inch by quarter inch.
Relatives at Christmas, Thanksgiving
do not say, "My, how you've grown."
Now, something more vague.

My father is shrinking, my mother, too.
I need a haircut--
It's that growth they see,
that growth they understand.
Nails, whiskers, hair.

At the barbershop it falls into my lap,
gets swept from the floor.
I look into the mirror,
the shrinking barber, my father's age,
bows his head.

Reunion

The blue white glow frames her face,
a face like an aged potato
left in the root cellar,
just before the sprouts jut out to
aim for new soil.

Eyelids hanging low
and deep set in a pool of dirty white,
her hazel eyes seem melted.

Shoulders bent,
weighed down by heavy navy
and the rubied sunflower at her neckline.

Potato skin emerges again,
as her arms lay folded across the swollen abdomen,

And further down,
ankles crossed over each other,
flesh hidden from itself.

Then comes her voice,
breaking buoyant sounds,
bobbing in and out,
like minnows edging the surface.

She mentions her "hard hearing"
but there is only the rise and fall of her hand.

All around is movement
and clamor and laughter,

Yet she is smothering,
rolling up in pillows and blankets,
going to sleep in a circus of solitude.

Night Nursing

Silent in the dark,
only our breathing,
shallow and slow.

Her nightly journey begins,
disorderly, fumbling,
restless from the sharp seat slats
and curveless back.

She hunts in the dark,
a nomad setting out on new ground,
so skilled.

She relaxes in the course,
and the stretch ahead
is wide and full.

Imagine her face, in the dark,
where it begins and ends,
just stroke her head.

My wings unfold to the rhythm.

Weight Loss

Teresa,
all 102 pounds,
sucked in her
gut
because she said
she was fat.
We haven't
seen her
since.

Crayon Connoisseur

Jimmy
eats crayons
because he says
he likes
the taste.

Mrs. Gardner
tells him
to stop it.

She's never
tasted
cornflower blue.

Left Home

For Sean, in the Air Force

My refrigerator frames the picture
of the two of you cooking
in high school. You and my son
in chef hats, bonding with egg
whites, chuckling at some private joke.

When you left, he quit cooking. He can't
write to you, or maybe won't. It is right
that you address your letters to
the family of. He knows you've been too close
to war. I remember that the souffle fell,
I answer for us all.

Sky Poem

I read it like
an old sailor, watching
for red in evening,
a ringed moon.
Moving on whim
across days and nights,
the sky lets in
light by degrees.

A neighbor comes across
two fields and the woods
back of us to walk in the rain.
We wave from the dryness
of our rooms and something
is said about "sense enough."
I crack open a door to consult
with the sky and reach for rain.

The Bluebird House

Even in our disagreement we encouraged
bluebirds this year with boxes all
their own. Still, they may not last, they're
only large enough to intimidate sparrows,
and the robins mean to stay. I move
gently, in time with the wind, in order
to watch while a rain crow predicts
I'll have to move inside soon.
It may be easier to leave
than stay and fight it out.

Upstairs, Age Twelve

Knotty pine surrounded what
was mine like a fort. Only one
window looked out at the A of the roof
next door, allowing the corners
of the sky to stare wide-eyed
through white curtains. It was there
I recorded the weather and the name
of a boy on four thin lines
of a five-year diary. A distant
train whistle sang me to sleep
when I was too old for a mother.

The Selling

She claims I didn't want her.
It's true enough, I suppose.
I had a good life--my own
room, toys, parents.
Then she materialized.

I spent my time that summer
in the backyard, hiding
behind the scratchy bushes
of currants, stuffing
myself on the tart berries.
Even my grandparents couldn't
fill the void I owned.

It was easy climbing the fence,
a torn hem not worth the mention.
I was the quiet angel:
they only discovered my absence
when neighbors began calling,
reporting on my progression,
my failure to market all that
baby softness effectively.

I believe I gave her a fair
buildup--said she slept a lot,
didn't eat much, never cared
what she wore or how she looked.
I asked only pennies.
Would have taken an apple.

It was not until later,
and with her every fine
telling, that I realized
my wonderful luck in
attracting no takers.

On A Sunday Morning

Coffee, Coltrane, and rice
held off the gloom of departure
inspiring an even moment
on a worn Persian rug trimmed
meditative blue.
You offered me slides of your sculptures
"Here is where it all came together."
I held transparencies
up to fluid morning light--
light passing through your work,
through me.
Looking on I felt the strength
of your thick, nurturing hands
spinning goat hair,
filling, creating spaces with water,
realizing the weight and tension
of black granite
nestled in yellowing linen.

Congregation

I saw the flames dervish wildly above the church
and the people were drawn.
Church members
pilgrimaged from nearby offices
to witness a lifetime of sacrifice and community
take the form of a fleeting primitive energy.
Others joined the vigil:
willowy adolescent boys with secretive grins
and Greeks from the nearby campus came
in the spirit of carnival.
The rest just watched, unaffected--
passive, yet somehow responsible.
I felt the inertia of traffic,
the cars around me captive, static
while black, consuming incense billowed upward,
a miniscule offering to some opaque
omnipotence.

In the small hours
after my reading
is almost done,
and the heat
of the day
is gone from me,
I feel a whisper.
"Be still," it says.
A cricket creaks
outside my window
like the rusty chain
of a swing
just barely moved.
"Know."
A star sparks,
a million miles away.
I see it
from my trailer window
in Beechmont, Kentucky.
"I am God."
My heart beats
and I agree.
What else could I do?

Lifting The Fog

We wound out Doug's car
all the way back
from Barren River Reservoir.
His lights
just barely
cut through
the early morning
mist
that hung
over the fields
like a crazy dream
hangs above your mind
just after you wake.
On the straight patches of road
I watched you sleep.
I knew you.

Backrub

Your hair
was a silk sheet
pulled down my back,
sweeping me to sleep,
leaving strands
I would find
and smile at
for weeks.
Your hands left
warm places
that went clean through
to my spine.

Papaw

I shot at the tree
whenever he would aim for me
and hold up the barrel of the gun
when my arms were too short.
And every day I'd get a quarter
for a popsicle at Lane's.
We'd pile in the back of the rusted white truck.
He sang his favorite gospel tunes as he drove--
he got saved in the Kyrook quarry
and baptized in a creek.
The Liar's Bench was barely big enough
for him and his friends,
but he'd make room for me on his knee
so my stories could be heard.
And he'd sneak me another coin
to buy more BBs.

First Hunt

My breath
makes smoke
in front of me
in November wind
as I remember
to take small,
even
breaths
like Dad instructed.

Behind me
he stands
rigid,
and I mimic
his stance
trying to blend
into the branches
high above
the brush below.

The crunch
of weight
on fallen leaves,
Dad's pressing fingers
through four layers
of bunting,
the presence
of the rifle
against my coat
and Dad's
anxious gaze
felt on my back
fight my fear
to ring out
a shot
in the silence.

Simple

Little man in baggy overalls
waves a stubby hand at me
on my way home, reminds me of
stuck-on
toys in rear windows
that swing, jerk happily.

Every day going home I notice
at the sound of my car, or any,
he rises from his stoop
where he's watering potted weeds,
or stills the chain-link swing
to greet me with a pink grin.

On my walk, I slow
and see his kitchen table
in the yard, chair-pushed-under,
where he sits to arrange,
rearrange, collectible rocks,
spaced evenly in his mind's categories.

Home, I think
about his rooms, maybe three,
probably decorated with road-finds,
and his sluggish journeys
up the road and back
never past the curve, ever.

Seventh Summer

In my seventh sweltering August,
Grandma led me to the creek
to wade between the gurgling currents
and relieve my parched-tongue feet.
I lapped up icy water between my toes
and listened to her tales
of the crawdaddies beneath the rocks
and picnics and cane pole fishing.
I followed her voice downstream
slipping along the mossy slate floor,
and we wished together
that she were seven again.

For a Dead Friend

Your eyelid hung
At an awkward angle,
Like a loose shutter
Draped across a
Battered sill.
They fixed it with
Mortician's glue
That crusted like
Frozen tears
On the tips
Of your black
Lashes.
They put your good side
Out-
Hiding your dents in
Makeup thick as
Bodyman's putty,
Leaving your scars
To the shadows
Of the wall.

At your side,
Your mother
Held your bloodless
Hand
As if it were
A hatchling
Fallen from
The nest.

Molting

for Martha

The silk cocoon
of your pajamas
dangles from the back of
a chair in our bedroom,
your shape still there.
The pants bend at the knee
from walking, the hollow shirt
clings to what was
the flat of your stomach,
the dents of your breasts.

Watching you earlier as you
slipped from the silk
it occurred to me:
we shed our skin,
even,
for the ones we love.

On the Divinity of Stars

Because he can fly
no higher, a powdered
moth sacrifices himself
against my porchlight,
the only star he knows.

At night we steer by
what light we can find.
Like those wise men years ago:
staring out from the desert darkness
towards a bright star in the East,
they turned from their fields,
left their land dying,
their herds to be eaten,
their families to starve.

Finding some importance
in a new star,
they set off
flying toward that light,
their old wings beating hard
against nothing but faith.

Why There Is Light

It began in the circle of the first
fire, a chance bolt
of lightning
stirring the night into vision.

Early man bent from the caves
to see it, and
finding something to talk
about, he
created language.
The simple sounds of emotions
at first,
surprise, fear--
and then anything to drown out
the noise of the chattering stars.

On the Edge

We grasp things
by the edges
that define them:
the line
where a body meets
another body, for
example, or
where it meets
the absence of body.

Without the lines,
what is inside
or out
would be the same.
And as children
we are taught to
respect lines,
to make things
their proper color.

Growing up, we learn
true art; we touch
edges--push, pull--
our two bodies
so close
we define each other.

Familiar Fields

I'm laughing. But not the way everyone who
stumbles across an irony or absurdity laughs. I'm laughing
the way the guy at the hospital who has just been informed
his wife died in labor (taking the baby with her) laughs.
One moment it's nirvana, the next nonosecond, Pleasanton
Cemetery off Route 6, bearing flowers, tears of hilarity
streaming down your face and mixing with the October
rains.

It's not that I don't love her. She knows that. I've
spent years wasting my marginal talents as a poet trying to
tell her. The thing is, I keep getting stuck between my
Thomasesque metaphors and my Stevensonian phrasing.
Too opaque. Or maybe it's translucent. She sees it, but to
her it's something else.

My eighth grade English teacher once told me
everyone understands poetry because they live it every day.
She died last year in a nursing home. I went to see her
there, and I told her my name five times, but she just sat
there with dribblets of gelatin on her chin, staring at the
shadows of the room and finally she looks at me and says,
"You were an average student. "I didn't know how to
respond so I just stood there in silence with the sunset
casting the room in a hellishly bronze glow, and then she
fell asleep and I left. She died the next week.

I remember another sunset, one summer day when I
was twelve. I had just recorded the last out and my team
(the Wranglers) were Little League champions and my dad
was laughing (like a distraught husband) and that sunset
seemed like a bonfire because everything that wasn't on
that field was just ashes and I almost cried. Not the way a

child who has lost his pet or a wife who greets her husband home from war cries. No, more the way Billy Daniels cried when Ron Hagen beat the shit out of him, and every would-be homecoming queen and quarterback was standing around outside the skating rink on a Friday night in ninth grade. Billy didn't cry at first. He was tough. I mean, he could open pop bottles with his teeth and light five cigarettes on a single match. It's just that these were puppy tricks. You know how your dog will chase a rubber ball seemingly for no reason except so you and your friends can laugh? Billy wanted a little rubber ball to go sailing over his head (or disappear behind your back) so he could chase it with all the fury of a four-month-old labrador. Ron Hagen felt threatened by a little rubber ball, so he threw it away and all of us just stood there, some laughing (for this was absurd), a few crying (like fervent patriots), all glassy-eyed like some captive, inane audience.

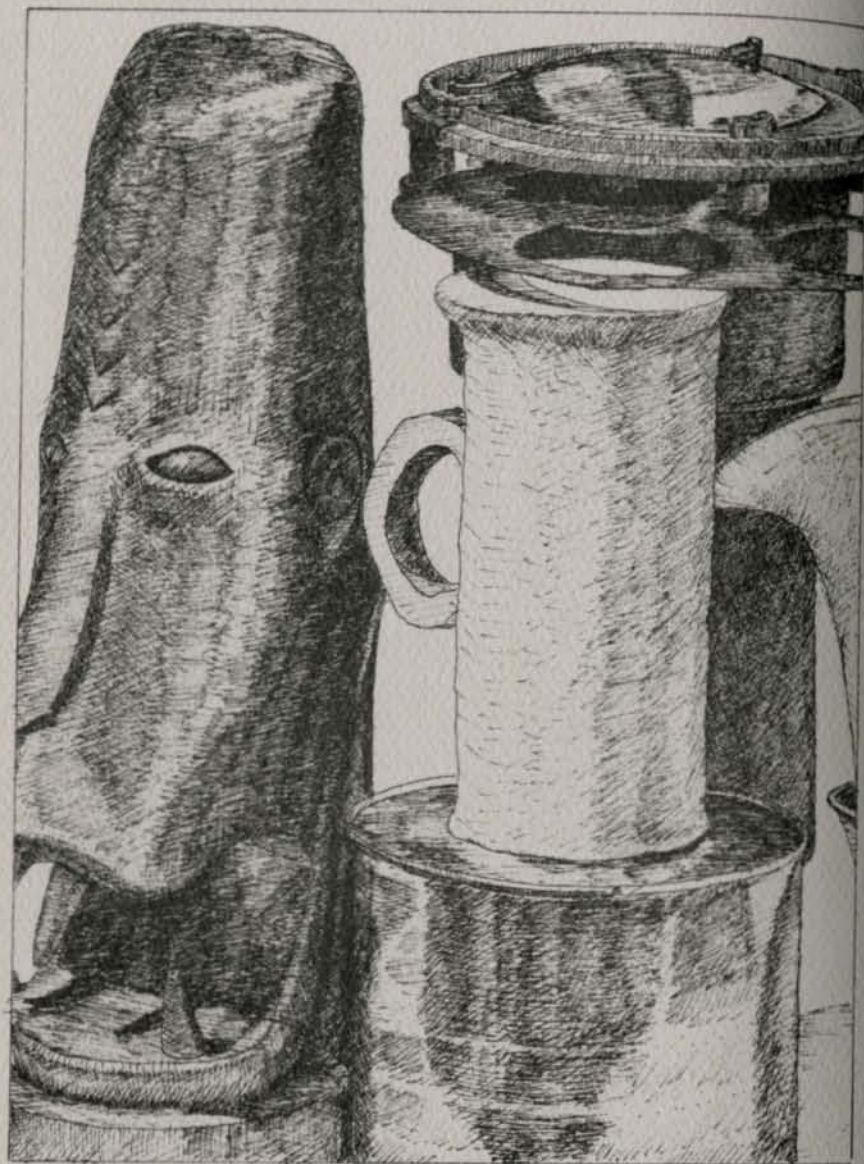
I love the way October feels. I rake leaves all morning and stare with childlike reverence at the languid, tangerine horizon. When I get to the big oak on the far side of the yard, I always think of those boyhood days of May--baseball in the yard, hitting one over the big oak's branches (stretching just like the desperate hands of fans) and the ball goes bouncing softly through the unkempt field. It stuns me to suddenly realize that life once hinged on Topps' Reggie Jackson #109 and if one could reach space commander on Gorf and, if so, how many times. On one quarter? No, man, the card where Reggie's batting right-handed. Now you don't use money, you use tokens. My dad once told me that means something you can throw away.

Her eyes are green like centerfield. Not so much with jealousy as with contempt. She looks vaguely famous, like so many young Hollywood actresses who torture with mysterious reticence. She once told me she was raped at the

carnival when she was twelve. He grabbed her behind the skeeball tent and threw her on the ground. He had a moustache. His arms were covered with tattoos and his hands were rough and he kept singing "Light My Fire" over and over. I asked her why she didn't scream for help, but she turned away and when she looked back at me I was in centerfield and all I could think of was my dad yelling "Keep your eye on the ball" as it goes sailing over my head.

One day in February we ditched school and stayed at her house. We made love on her mom's waterbed and afterwards she burst into tears and then I cried a little, and we held each other while the radio spewed serendipity across the room like glitter. We just lay there in silence, and when "Melt With You" came on we both got dressed, and I left and on my way out I met her brother. She called me later that night and said she had been thinking about me. She asked if she was my first and I lied and said no. We talked about movies and the spring formal and Shakespeare, and when she laughed, I thought about orchids. I glanced at the clock and saw it was nearly three and just before I hung up she whispered, "I love you."

Now as I stand in the yard and stare out across the piles of leaves gently shifting in the wind like dunes, I'm thinking. But not like one thinks on a college entrance exam or a prostitute thinks of her next trick. I'm thinking like a hideously grotesque person thinks of the next scream, the next nervous look, the next mumble followed by a slicing snicker. I'm pondering batting averages and the sado-masochistic possibilities inherent in the U.S. mail. I'm thinking of not cleaning my room, smoking in the bathroom, losing my report card, and the hole in my wall behind the stereo. But mostly I'm thinking of springtime when trees at the lake sing like sirens and the trails go on forever and I disappear in green, like a dog chasing a ball through familiar fields.



Notes on Contributors

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