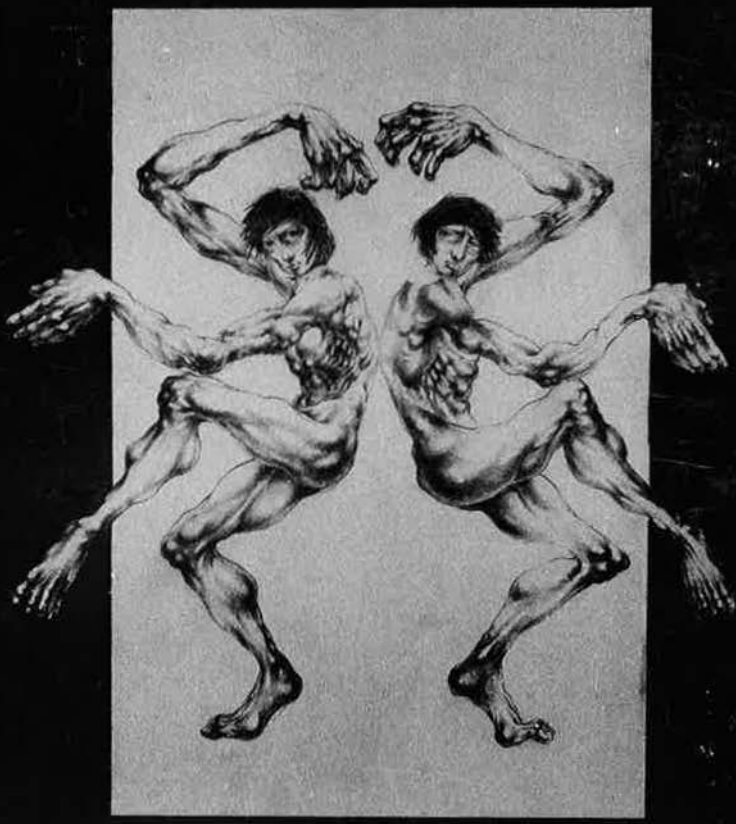
NORTHRIDGE REVIEW



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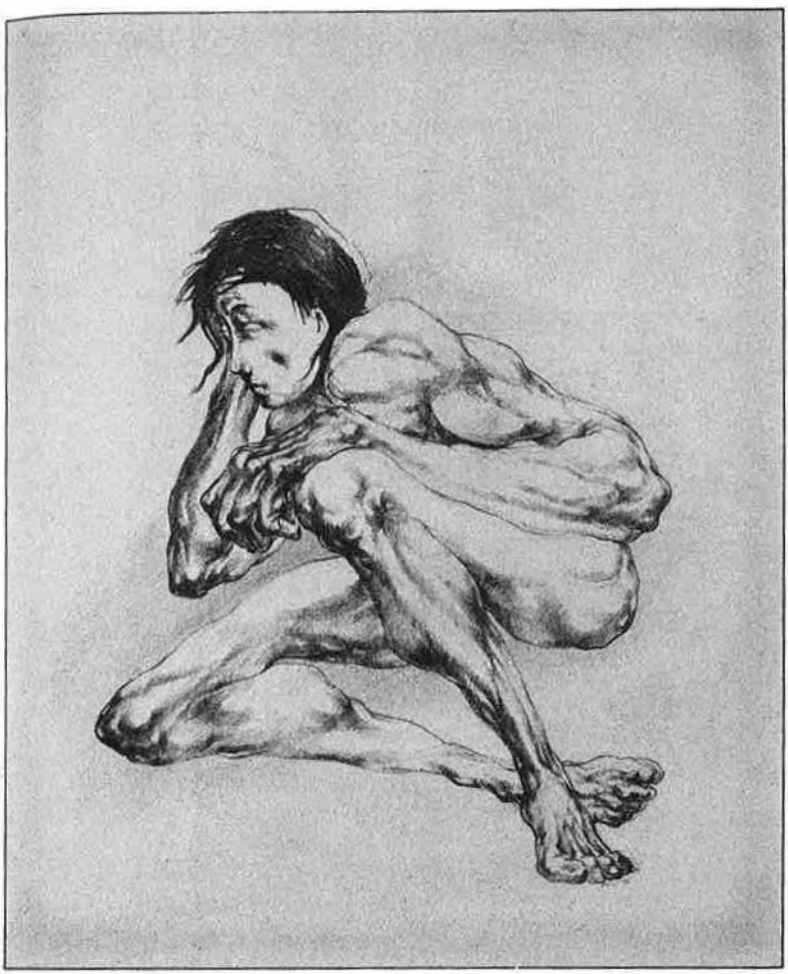
ESSAYS

Not long ago a teacher told me that her best students feel that it is no longer necessary to write anything. She said they think everything can be done with figures now, and that what can't be done with figures isn't worth doing. I think this is a natural belief for a generation that has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate mystery.

–Flannery O'Connor
from "The Teaching of Literature" in
Mystery and Manners



Rafael

In the tub we play games
with the tugboat and the wind-up hippo.
The water bounces in our close sea
sliding onto the floor
soaking the clothes thrown about.

"Mi hito, wash my back – please," I say
and he clambers over my legs
exchanging places
forgetting the soap
as he scrubs so generously,
tickling me with the loofa, laughing
"Wash daddy's back."
Then quietly, the water finally still,
with no hands, he pees on me.

◊

I First Gear

I have to drop it into 1st, kick it
into that meeting place
of clutch and gear
to climb your driveway,
and struggle through the wiggly Spaniels,
to see you
in among the pillows, tired
with straws in the 7-up.

II A Plantation Legend

You're like a coffee bean
brown
warm-looking, and
you used to be very round.
Like java you're good to hold
you warm up the insides
whir and spark with energy.
You're comforting like jo
in the wee hours, and
the cold before work.
Like cappuccino you can be intellectual, but
never snobby
like a double espresso.
You are a true bean, dear Sophie
and if I could brew in your cup
just a bit of my love
it would fly through your insides
and light up your lungs.

◊

Rachel at the Well

"Our Women squat on knotted calves,
young
the furrows over their eyes
deep with nitrate and dust,
squeezing out a few drops for their suckling,
tender warriors
as the pita bursts on the coals
of the Beirut Hilton.

They still hear the last of the shouts, an
erotic farewell of spent Uzi's and

wailing; but now the empty casings
at the waterfront, like the dried sperm
in the sands of Yemen
or Syria, are rusting
after the excess of the exodus,
and the falafel ignites in their guts
as their men dessicate under camouflage.

Hoist the jug to your heads, Oh Women
swell and
sway
as you go to the well,
where the tank commanders pass,
to draw water."

◊

Randall Thomas

Estate Italiano '76

In Urbino, men piss into the streets
At night, their vicious cats hiding
Crouch and sniff the filthy shadows
Slipping down from the laps of sleeping churches.
Sunday morning, one hundred bells are ringing
Like so many sacred trains
Swaying off to heaven, chugging holy holy holy
Away with the whispered and withered prayers of the old.
But if you are young, you are Communist,
And tomorrow the sun will be Red and rising
Up and into the streets with the sound of water rushing
Running and triumphant, to wash away the sins of their Pope.

◊

Dina Makris

Canonized Transformations

Yesterday
Was a day ahead of myself.
You could not buy the Sunday papers
On Friday, day for fish;
Burning my eyeballs
Grandmother's eyes storm at me
Guide me to feel in my nostrils
All we shared on Pagan holidays;
We were always Pagan, you and I.
Rituals
Killing snails by candlelight,
Taking sweet wine communion
Under the loving eye of
Stained glass window trapped gods.
Easter brought lilacs
White, cold-scented freedom to Pan;
We let ourselves loose against the light
You, small, deformed, yellowhaired
Smelled so clean, like a saint – virginal
All I imagined death to be
Before I grew taller than you.
I smelled the lilacs all afternoon
Picked apples, touched you,
You were gone, and I was happy.
I should look like you, but
My hair is black
My spine is straight, and
I smell of bitter lilacs;
You taught me how to sing:
"Here comes Lazarus, here come the Palm leaves,
Her comes Sunday when we eat the sea's gifts."
My hair is turning white,
Grandma,

I curl my back before I sleep, and
Her come smells like lilacs on my body.

◊

A Poem To Go And Tell Women On Mountains About Nesting

Two by two in silence
They gather to write the credo.
They live good-hearted lives
On opposite sides of the mountain
Come together at night
With every flicker of the candle —
Lit by Aprodite —
To show the paths into each-other's lives.
They circle the fire in the rain;
It's an invitation to love
Not a ritual for the Goddess.
Will you see them in the flickering light?
"You may enter all you think mysterious;
You may let your lizard tongue savor
The bits of Plato and Sappho
You pull from our secret places;
You may join us to the top
Where you set us apart from every other woman,
Where you make us be
Of earth, and water, and lilacs;
Where we bake bread on our thighs
Roll spices on our breasts
Before we feed our daughters;
Where our small hands
Become a giant fist
Make a difference.
Wipe the spices off your mouth

Offer — do not give — the bread
To the women who don't come
Two by two
To sign the credo in the night."

◊

Grandma Turns 93

On these April mornings
that only hint of spring,
with a child's anticipation, she says,
"Will you roll me to the garden?"
Removing her shawl,
"You can go now. I'll be fine."

She will sit for hours
fumble out of her slippers,
dig her toes into the ground.
Her arthritic body
opening to the sun.
Just when I think she's fallen asleep,
she cackles
as the neighborhood tom attacks a crow.

At dinner,
we cut her meat, butter her bread.
She shakes, food drops on her robe.
We don't have peas anymore.

One night,
hearing giggling girls,
I entered her room
to find her and mom
sprawled on the floor,
her unwilling body
taking them both down.

She will be 93 tomorrow,
celebrating in the garden,
blowing seeds off dandelions,
digging weeds
with her toes.

◊

Fade Out

I've seen them in the square,
on warm summer nights,
that are at once, mild and animating.
Soft blue and green tiki lights,
reflected in the bells of trumpets.

They dance barefoot on concrete.
When the tempo picks up,
girls prance around their partners.
Old men, smoking pipes,
slump in their folding chairs,
and remember.

Saxaphone takes the lead,
swaying, saying touch.
No steps, no variation,
more foreplay than dance.

I sit in my darkened upstairs room
and watch for hours.
Knowing the box step.
Knowing the cha cha.
But unable to feel
the ardor of music.

The sax trembles into delicious tones.
Music fades.
A couple, moved, unmoving
kiss, unashamed.

◊

In Absentia

Melanie
my days have been wasted
since you left
at dusk the receding tips
of daylight shrivel
in the sunset's furnace
like worthless timber
burning like rags.
they char and blister
rushing into the night
and I am left with
no receipt for them
no memory of how
I lost them
remembering only that you
were not there.
the evening skies are thieves
dark sponges
soaking up my daylight
bloating into sunsets
which never heal
but which only get redder
like a scar that persists
long after you've forgotten
how you got it.

◊

P. D. Murphy

Dawn the 6th

Darkness colors as it departs
from the kitchen, white light on yellow walls,
white elbows on a yellow table, watching
the glass-panelled door and windows of the living room.
Their shades translucent description
of each day's motion muted.
Nothing reflecting light only the shades
from black to gray to white opaque.
Am I a fool following Plato and pretending
not to know?
The doorknob solid for the turning or an image
only for consideration

◊

Mike Newell

To A Poet Accused Of Obscurity

for Benjamin Saltman

if we were to sit and talk at length i might say
you write too much of other writers here the conceit is too clever
there you are too personal where's the internal logic explain
this to me it's inaccessible but setting all that aside
i'd say

***

i've seen you reveal the surprise in darkness, snarl
feet in tree roots, surf
Santa Ana winds, reveal landslides in a pebble
shifting, bones in the shadow on a window shade

i'd say you've made me genuflect before flowers
too dark to name, filled my spine with snow,
left a frozen glove burning on my palm

and i'd wonder how safe it is
to understand these poems too well.

◊

Her Name Is

seven sons and a daughter four more born dead
  one dress for church
one pair of pants to scrub trailer floors
  and clothes in boiled well water
flash cards to drill her children in reading and math

aged and retarded cradled as her own
brightest student in her high school and college
hours daily before a stove kneading
and forming leftovers
the child who spoke only her name
clinging for hours to become the family's best mind
her potter's wheel shaping clay like so many lives
alone in a trailer with kids her husband
at sea for years mumps measles mono chicken pox
poison ivy hives
survived Mark Twain read aloud
seven kinds of homemade bread and religion
thrived best in private no one told her
how much they cared
suicide prevented by children afraid to lose life itself
don't know her never did but this
is a thank you note a son's naming

There Was A Boy Whose Hands Were A Language

There was a boy whose hands were a language
When he woke mornings he showed them to his mother
And they became two brown wings of a sparrow
Or leaves or even snow falling past his bedroom window

When it was spring his hands were new flowers
Pushing up through the earth
Like bright buttons through the eyes of a dark coat

In summer his hands were wind blowing in the grass
And golden apples burning holes in a green leafy sky

Sometimes the boy's hands brushed across the air
And his mother knew they had become a stone
Or a water spider jumping across the surface of a lake
As easy as a finger flicking a sawdust ring

Sometimes the boy's hands struggled like a wrestler
And his mother knew there was a storm approaching
Or the boy's sister had fallen off her bicycle
And once they became fists
And fell to his sides like tears
And she knew a dog had been struck by a train

◊

Poem For Stephen Foster

I too sing the old songs, Stephen
I do it with my heart against the earth

I sing about horses and rivers and women
Ah, but they are your words and so you should know

But I also sing about the sun,
how it spins around and never stops
I sing while I still have earth under me

How long has it been
since you've sung the old songs?

Sing just one more song, Stephen
The moon is your banjo-head!

◊

Laboring

I remember the rapid sucking
sound of our two-year-old bitch
panting at dawn in
the mud foggy yard on
the Patuxent

and the sight of
my stiffened mother
clasping the cold sponge, leaning
over the sweaty infant burning
in Peter Pan pajamas;
she rocked it
still and lifeless
until noon.

At noon
the bitch pawed
the screen door to
brag of her
seven wet puppies.

◊

Jodi Johnson

White Cat Hit By A Car

"Is that your cat?" they said, pointing
To a rag of white on the roadside.
I went over for a closer look,
Thinking—no, it can't be, it looks almost grey—
The dark hair moving as if by wind
Or breath: ants.

The dead are so changed; earth-heavy, still.
I should bury the cat. But the ground is hard;
I scratch out a shallow hole—a mouth.
I wonder whose face is under my shoe.

Instead, I tip the cat into a plastic bag.
Early the next morning, on my way to work,
I throw the white bag into a trash bin.
It crashes like a rock.

All that day I am afraid of my blood,
Crawling blue under my skin. If someone
Slit the veins, it would pour out, tiny and dark,
Waving antennae.

◊

The Death Of A Horse

The acadia is heavy with blossom
As they put the old horse down—
Yellow flowers smelling of damp ground,
Sunlight hanging in grey leaves.
He shakes bees from the petals, falling,

His legs galloping through blue sky.
Even when the rest of him is still,
His nostrils fill with warm air,
Eyelids open and shut like wings.

He has cancer. Each day for two years
His throatlatch tumor fattened,
Catching the stomach tube at worming,
Then his hay. They chopped alfalfa,
Mixed in molasses. Lately each breath
Whistled; they dreamed of the lifting of ribs.

Now, the needle in his vein,
His whole body fills like a lung,
Then empties . . . His hooves
Draw furrows in the dirt
As they drag him into the truck bed.
Bees settle again on thin wings
In the earth-scented flowers,
In the flower-scented earth.

◊

Hart Schulz

Grass Mountain

for Gary Snyder

far from boiler rooms
and shipyards
from Siuslaw or Shokoku-ji
your head rigid
and necessary

I watched you once
at San Francisco State
thru a small window
in the door of a
classroom

I laughed then
like fire and dry wood

We spend our time
don't we, Gary?
we walk schoolyards
in wind
talking quickly surely
deciphering each other
applying for things
locking the office door
over small silly poems

did I tell you
once as I bathed
in a creek
I saw your face
in the hillside?

as big as world

you sent pictures
of Ishi bathing there
naked
and I smiled

felt your hand at
my heart again

We really had it
didn't we, Gary?
at Grass Mountain
throwing pebbles
in ponds
for texture
making eyes at strays
laughing at that redhead
having a joint
and whisky
over dinner

in '63 in Oregon
with Robin
you were piling
lumber like
some destiny

I threw newspapers
at dawn while
Nancy slept
watched them
slap concrete

and even those things
didn't make sense

I listened to the
Truckee river once
slept in a turn-out
there with the

ghosts of the Donners

I lived there
for the moment
while you struggled
for survival
in San Francisco

those ghosts taught
me not to separate

What comes next
for us, Gary?
do you remember
David?
"I'm going to do something
for TV," he said
"somebody has to,"
you told him
and we laughed
and held hands
like fire and dry wood.

◊

beast fable
(future memories of the swamp)

two beasts
one with a single eye
fight beyond the clearing
in the alkaloid rain

tips of spires
rise from the swamp
beast battle thick in mud
that floats on sunken rooftops
of manhattan banks

and the thousand eyed beast
can not make a single picture
in its ancient mind

twisting suction cups
vice the one eyed sapien
down into the salty mud
serpent twisting eyes spinning
moaning to overcome with sheer force

while the cyclops beast
holds its breath beneath the surface
knowing it will live forever

◊

Ida Ferdman

For the One Who Loves Lilacs

The lilac tree's fruit
is the lilac itself,
and more special
than any fruit
born in the spring
because of the various
shades of its hues:
the lavenders, pinks and
the fluffy cloud whites.
When crystal-like drops
of moist morning dew
fall on the petals
the colors will change
into pearlized pastels
that will catch sparks of light
from the moon
and the sun.

The lilac tree's filled
with delicate masses
of clusters
of flowers
that cling to its branches
like children who cling
to the clown
in the park.
Each cluster
has hundreds
of finely-formed blossoms,
that put altogether
make up a bouquet.

And the scent

that's sent forth
from the tree
in the spring,
is enticing, and
spins me around
like the weathervane spins
on the top of a barn.
The scent of the lilac's
not hard to describe:
it creeps through my senses
like a mouse through a pipe
and tickles a spot
that's between both my eyes.
The scent of the lilac's
so strong, I would swear
that I tasted it yesterday,
when I yawned
out of doors.

There's one I know
who loves the lilac
best of all
of the bountiful
botany
nurtured by earth.
For her love of the lilac
she'd wander as far
as her feet would permit her,
just to break off a bough;
then she'd bury her face
in the soft, subtle petals
and drink in the essence
as a baby drinks milk.

And her home is a vision
of celestial wonder
to observe
at the start

of the season
when other buds too
are awakening
from slumber.

Like a shrine
to the goddess
named Flora,
her home is.
And this one
who loves lilacs
also blooms bright
just at the sight
and the very first sign
of her favorite flower
at the dawning of spring.

I'm not really sure
why it is
that this one
who loves lilacs
loves lilacs the most.
It might have to do
with the way they first look,
at the first hint of light
on the very first day
of the earliest hour
of spring;
when all the world's fresh
and re-born.
And the lilac's sharp color
looms out
like a star
in the fog,
on a bay
in the night.

I think that this one

loves the lilac because
of the place
in her past
where the lilacs still grow,
in that small Polish town;
in the fields,
along roads,
and her family's front yard.
The lilacs still grow
in that time long, long
gone;
that time long before
the big war came along.
The war that had swept her
far, far away;
from her family,
her friends,
and the sweet lilac tree.

When she looks
at the lilacs
her thoughts often roam
back to her past,
to the place
where she lived
as a child
in that town;
when the world
was as simple
as a game,and as safe
as the space
between mother's
soft arms.

The lilacs of spring
are the parts
of her mind
that jump into life

when the weather's still chill,
and then curl up again
in the warmer days
of the year.
If I could grow lilacs
all year
then I would;
to keep a smile
on the face
of the one
that I know
who loves lilacs.

◊

You take a dollar bill,
and hand it to the fellow
on your right.
Surprised, he makes a
game out of it and
hands it to the fellow
at his side.

Soon, the bill has passed
through the entire theatre,
and out through the cashier
into the street.
Nobody keeps it!

A paper juggernaut,
it keeps on going,
right onto the network
news, where CBS gets it
just in time for
Andy Rooney to hand it
to his camera person.

What have you started?
You only meant to hand the
bill to your wife
(on your left)
for some popcorn.
She just laughs, but
you've begun looking for
Rod Serling behind the drapes.
What does this mean?

And finally, 3000 miles away,

the bill is handed
from Nancy to Ron, who
laughs and passes it
to a Secretary of State.
All on national news.
And the psychoanalyst on TV
gives his philosophy on the
meaning behind it all while
the serial number is flashed,
"Don't pass a bogus buck!"

And finally, a national stunt—
passing the bill from one end
of America to the other—
just for kicks.

You make your way to D.C.,
ready to grab the bill as it
leaves the hand of the last
pudgy senator, to learn
the enigma, why
this stupid piece of
long-worn, plastic-encased
paper has captured
an entire nation.

And there you are,
waiting as the bill leaves
pudgy-hand's grip
and you keep it!
An angry murmur
rises as to who would
dare to spoil the fun.

It's mine! I gave it away
first, and I'm going to keep it!
you shout to no avail as
they close in.

A lynching over a lousy dollar?
Much worse has happened,
and folk will do anything
to get on TV.

The cameras whirr,
but a noise becomes
much louder and vibrant,
a rumbling, grumbling sound
growing as the earth, somewhere
in Arlington splits asunder,
and the filthy, smelly
skeleton of Harry S.
himself bursts forth!

In a flash, he's ripped the
8-bit note out of your
trembling hand.
I'll stop this nonsense,
he yells so loud his
jawbone crumbles.
And he vanishes as
quickly as he appeared,
with the buck
he had to have.

◊

Sharon Levine

Cloud

Grandma stacks her dishes
in a cloud. The cloud,

risen off wrinkling white water,
presses onto her big cotton waist
pale flowers
that grow to the collar.

It expands in twists to stir gray
waves in her hair; tumbles
down in petals to the hem.
Nothing falls further but dew:

she lets it settle
on her bandaged ankles
so the burdened feet bulge
and she remembers

how many years she has wrapped
in clouds. She turns to face
the tall kitchen stool
from where

I can't see far enough
to catch her faded words.

◊

Jodi Johnson

Winner of the 1982-83
Sherwood Prize for Poetry

A Mother's Death

When mother was sick she sent
Morgan and Jason and me
Outside to roll down hills,
Catching hay-colored grass and purple flowers in our hair,
So that at five years cancer
Seemed something made of sky and hot yellow splinters of sun.

**

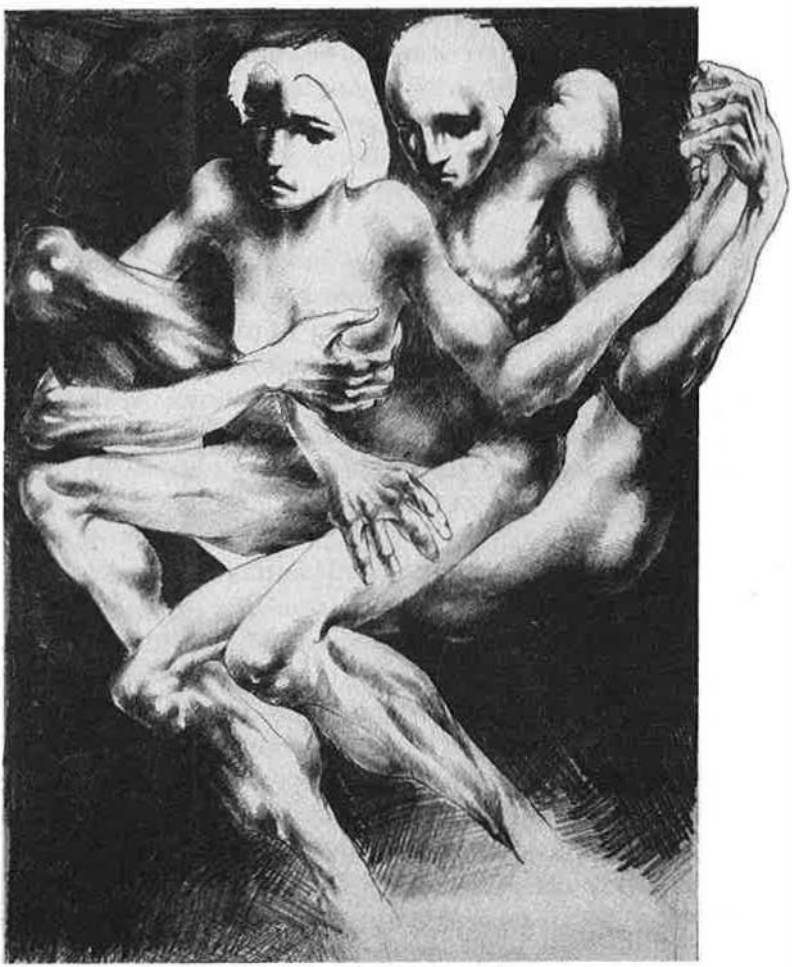
I picked sweet-peas for mother,
Purple/pink flowers in a glass by her bed.
But she didn't see—eyes closed, she sang,
Her voice dropping like petals in the room.

It was a year before I knew she was dead,
(Knowing was a dark sour taste on the roof of my heart.)
I only thought she was gone
And perhaps walking suddenly into her room one morning
I would catch her there, smelling of sweet peas, singing.

**

I think that if I could
I would reach both arms around the waist of the world
And squeeze it flat as a sky,
To make the dead sprout up.

◊



Mona Houghton

Trust

It was a hot night. John and Jackie had left about an hour earlier. They were the last guests to go. The drainboard was stacked high. The dishes were all but finished. I had learned from experience that washing up was easier with a nice high than a nasty hangover. Harder on the dishes for sure, but chips and cracks were easy to live with, and there was always Elmer's glue.

"Here's the last of 'em," Warren mumbled as he bumped his way through the swinging door. Each wine glass on the tray was in a different stage of emptiness. Warren set his booty down beside the sink.

Swoosh, swoosh . . . swoosh, swoosh swoosh. The pink bubbles rode on top of the water, swirling down its path away from me. Warren put his chin on my shoulder and watched too.

"Gone," he said.

"For good," I added.

The sink made a sucking sound, wanting more.

A hand slid under my tee shirt; fingers caressed, lightly. Bushy lips brushed the nape of my neck. I turned my head slowly and found the lids closed over Warren's oval eyes. I kissed each one quietly.

The right eye opened. It moved about, erratically. The left eye opened. It darted here and there. Suddenly Warren jumped back and looked directly at me, wildly.

He screamed, "Praise the lord. Praise the lord. I can see. He has given me sight! He has given me light!"

"Stop it, Warren," I laughed.

But Warren fell to his knees. He grabbed my foot and kissed it. "Thank you, thank you."

"You silly goose." I jumped astraddle Warren's back. He wheeled around the kitchen on all fours neighing like a mad horse. I yelled, "Whoa!" and held on for dear life.

He sang out, "Hi-ho Silver," and reared up, flailing at the air with his hoof-like fists.

Warren's whinny faded as I slid over his butt and onto the floor.

He turned on his knees and looked down. "That'll teach you to ride bare back," Warren puffed, catching his breath.

He leaned down and gave me an Eskimo kiss. I could smell him, nut-like and warm. I reached up and put my hands on the back of his neck and invited. He crumpled beside me and nestled his head carefully between my breasts, a hand on either side, making things closer.

We stayed like that for minutes. Warren's heart slowed down to a regular pat . . . pat . . . pat. I stared at the bright bare bulb glaring down from the ceiling and remembered how many times I had promised myself to buy some sort of fixture for it, knowing I never would. I liked it the way it was.

Warren raised his head, ready for more. "Let's get naked and go for a swim."

I thought for a moment. "Only if I can have some of your white lightnin'."

Warren smiled evilly, uncrumpled himself and said, "Just you wait." He disappeared down the hall and into his workroom.

The year before, Cole, our neighbor, and Warren had set up a still in the abandoned barn which sort of stood on the boundary betweeen the two properties. They had concocted a clear, fiery liquid which, in the next few months, gained quite a reputation locally. I didn't know how much was left, but Warren always seemed to have some for special occasions.

He returned, potion in hand. "Come, my little mermaid."

I peeled myself up off the floor, egged on by the delights to come. White lightnin' was guaranteed, if nothing else, to give a second wind.

*** *** *** ***

Warren and I picked our way across the field of alfalfa, trying hard not to scare the fireflies. I asked him for a sip from the jar.

"For your tee shirt," he bartered.

All the wine from earlier had left me with a thirst for something substantial so, rather than argue, I slipped the shirt over my head and handed it to him. He dropped it as he held the jar to my lips and poured. Warren was accurate. I got a sip, and only a sip. I reached around my back and undid the clasp. An undergarment apparently held more value than a shirt. For it I received two portions. I found my willingness to give up clothing increased proportionately to the amount I took off.

By the time we arrived at the creek I had the white lightnin' and neither of us had a stitch on. Just like spin the bottle, I thought. The boys were always willing to take something off even when they didn't have to.

Warren took the jar, sealed it, tossed it into the swimming hole, splash, and shouted, "Last one in's gotta make the bed for a week." He jumped in. Bigger splash. I followed him. The water was hot from the spring that bubbled up above the place where we swam.

"Warren . . . oh, Warren," I said into the night.

"Over here. To the left," he teased, taking a big gulp of air as he spoke.

I listened. I could almost hear the water close over the top of his head. It made me feel uneasy, imagining Warren suspended in the black water, hiding from me. He might have disapperared. He might have dissolved. I might never have been able to find him again. I had always felt if you couldn't see people there was no telling what they might do, and up to that time in my life the instinct seemed to be a reasonable one.

He surfaced near me and put my fears to rest. I held my breath. I could tell he didn't know where I was. I sunk beneath the water and enjoyed being the missing one in our game.

The water surrounded me tenderly and I yielded. Above, Warren called my name, at first tauntingly, and when there was no answer, anxiously. I knew I should go up, but I stayed, resenting the need to breathe. I slipped back to the beginning. The first nine months must have been the best.

Finally the fright in Warren's voice reached through the water and grabbed me. I kicked up off the slippery stones,

shooting to the surface.

"I'm right here," I sputtered.

"Dammit, don't do that," Warren said, taking me in his arms.

I found his lips in the dark and kissed them. "Sorry." Another kiss. "I couldn't resist not being." The moon came out from behind a cloud, lighting up the night.

"Be careful." Warren hugged me closer. "I'd miss you."

The rustling bushes warned us of Lucy's arrival.

"Darn it," Warren said.

We untangled our bodies.

Lucy bounded up to the creek's edge, smiling and wagging.

Warren splashed some water at her. "Hi, pooch."

"Be nice to him," I said quietly. "He's had a rough time of it lately."

Warren said, "What's new?"

Cole's depression preceded him, like his dog. As he walked into the clearing I could practically feel it descend on Warren and me and wrap itself around us, wanting to bind the three of us into its gloom.

Cole was a painter when he wasn't working at the hardware store in town. He had grown up on the streets of New York and was named after Nat King Cole. He had fought in Vietnam. He was trying to get away from violence, but it was always right there, just beneath the surface, just one coat away. We were all friends, but Cole and I were good friends.

Warren had had to work in Boston for several weeks once. During the evenings Cole and I had sipped and talked a lot. That was when he had told me about the horror, about the death, and about how it all haunted him like phantom feelings in an amputated limb. That's when I had told him, too, about Warren at seventeen. For some reason it had slipped out.

"Hi-ya, Cole." I tried to resist his mood.

"Hi." He was completely submerged.

Warren was losing patience with Cole's fragile state of mind. He grabbed the white lightnin' as it bobbed by. "Here, have some of this. Maybe it'll cheer you up."

Warren held the jar up toward him, but Cole made no

effort to take it. He was looking at me. For a brief moment I could see the moon reflected in his moist, broken eyes, but a cloud put us back into darkness. We were merely shapes again.

"When you didn't answer the phone I guessed you'd be down here," he said to me. He could have guessed Warren was here with me if he had thought for a moment.

"Come on into the water. It feels good," I said.

"It sure does." Warren scooted up behind me, spoon style. He whispered into my ear, "I don't want to be blue." He put the edge of the jar to my lips and poured some of the hot liquid into my mouth. I felt it in my toes before I swallowed.

Cole looked ghost-like, weaving in front of us, his arms raised over his head, struggling with his shirt. His voice was muffled. "God dammit." Rip. The fabric gave out.

"Patience." Warren warned.

"Fuck patience," Cole muttered, flinging the ruined garment into the bushes.

Lucy thought it was time to play. She pounced on the shirt and returned it to her master's feet. Cole didn't notice. By then he was fighting his way out of his pants, a drunk in a Japanese shadow play.

Finally without clothes, Cole sat on the big boulder at the edge of the creek and dangled his toes into the water.

"What's up?" I asked.

Cole hardly needed encouragement. "Nothing works. Nothing's alive anymore."

"Well, I'm alive," Warren said. He took a big slug out of the jar to prove it.

"I feel dead inside," Cole challenged.

I said, "Maybe you should call Lisa. Maybe she's ready to come back." Lisa had moved out about six months before. Cole loved Lisa.

"Lisa doesn't care. Nobody really cares."

Warren was bored. "We care. We really care."

Cole didn't seem to notice. "I mean, does it really matter, one way or the other?"

Warren was getting angry. "Not when you get right down to it. But don't forget, Lucy needs you. She depends on you.

As a matter of fact, in her dog like way, Lucy probably loves you." Lucy snapped at the air. She knew she was being talked about.

"Quit it, Warren," I said, defending Cole.

Warren said, "Okay, Doctor." He swam away from us.

"He's drunk. Don't pay any attention to him."

Wasted breath.

Cole only heard what he wanted to hear.

"Nothing's going anywhere." After a moment Cole continued, "I sit in that house and feel my life decaying from the inside out. I can't stand it."

"You're lonely." I looked over my shoulder and found Warren's silhouette on the shore, steaming eerily against the sky.

Cole's despair drew me back. "Everyone is always lonely. Companionship just takes the edge away, that's all. It's still there, lurking, waiting to pounce." He paused, searching for further definition, waiting to describe more clearly. "Friendship is a sham. We all use each other because we're afraid of the dark."

"Well, as long as it's between consenting adults . . . " Warren joined us, momentarily. He nuzzled my ear. "Want to camp out? I'll get the sleeping bags."

I said, "Sure."

Warren headed for the house.

Cole drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. "I wish I could believe in God." His voice quavered.

"Believe in love."

A stinging, mean, "Ha," hit the air.

"You believed in love when Lisa was here."

"Love is worse than friendship. With love you grow to expect even more. With love you're even more insulated from the truth."

"No, Cole. You're all wrong. There's always . . ."

Cole didn't let me finish. He didn't let me utter some saccharin statement about love and friendship.

"No. I'm right," Cole said. "We would have been much better off if our brains had stayed small. We complicate our

lives to amuse our memories. To occupy them." He tilted his head back and looked up into the cloud covered sky. "And then the nasty little buggers turn around and torture us." Cole's head fell forward. "Oh, God," he sobbed.

I didn't know what to say. Cole had such a different perspective. He could make any optimism seem foolish and back his position with personal accounts from the dark side. He knew more about LIFE than I possible could because I had never put someone's guts back into their body and then tried to make them whole again with my tears. Who could argue against that?

"Cole?"

He didn't respond.

I got out of the water and sat on the rock next to him. Cole and I had never been alone and naked before. I wondered if Warren imagined he was challenging me in some perverse way.

I reached over and put my hand on Cole's leg. I ran the tips of my fingers along the soft, brown hair I knew was there.

"You're going to catch cold," he said.

Cole picked up my hand and wrapped his warm fingers around mine. It was the second time he had ever held my hand. The first time had been on the day we met. I had had an abortion. No one knew about it, not even Warren. I had gone to the hardware store on my way home. The faucet in the kitchen had been dripping for months. I fainted in the washer department, then threw up all over Cole, who was holding my hand when I woke up. It was his first day at work.

After he helped clean me up, I had started crying and couldn't stop. Cole patiently listened to me blubber on about my missing fetus. We drank some whiskey in the back room. He called Warren for me. Six months later he rented the farm next to ours. Warren had always been bothered by the way Cole and I had gotten to know one another.

Cole put my hand on the cool stone between our hips. He stood up and stepped down into the water. He swam slowly over to the cool side of the creek.

A few minutes later Cole was back on the rock next to me. He laid back and covered his eyes with his hands. If I listened I

could hear Lucy and Warren in the clearing not a hundred feet away. Warren was zipping our sleeping bags together. Lucy was running circles around him. Cole sighed, wearily.

"Don't be afraid to need other people, Cole. It's normal. A person isn't meant to be alone, really alone."

"But they always leave. They always die or go away."

"Not everyone."

Smoosh, smoosh. Warren primed the Coleman lantern.

Cole took a deep breath. "I want to kill myself."

"No you don't." I grabbed at straws. "Your painting's going good. You used to say that was all that was important." I tried to sound casual. "Anyway, you want to know how it turns out, don't you, just like the rest of us?"

"I already know. We all know. We're just pretending we don't," Cole said.

He sounded so serious I was afraid I was getting out of my depth as "friend". "Cole, if you really mean what you say . . . and aren't just experimenting with me, you should see a doctor or . . ."

"Don't worry. If I had the nerve to do it, I wouldn't be talking about it, right? I mean, isn't that what they say?"

"Go over to the V.A. and ask them."

Cole sat up. The words came out of his mouth matter of factly, like he was asking for a recipe. "Tell me, how did Warren ever find the courage to actually pull the trigger?"

The mantle in the Coleman lantern burst to life, too late for the question not to be asked. Warren's amazed eyes glistened across the gulf between us, Cole's words branding me, "The Defector." Ten years crashed like so much shattered glass. Warren looked away and unfolded the drop cloth, rectangle, square, rectangle, square.

I could only watch Warren and wonder why it had seemed so natural to tell Cole at the time, and so outrageous that he should know now.

Cole stood up. "Well, I better go." He knew what he had done. What I never figured out was whether it was done on purpose.

I stood up. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Don't worry about me. All talk and no

action."

Cole picked up his pants and shirt. He said "Sorry," to me and, "Goodnight," to Warren.

Warren didn't acknowledge.

I didn't know what to do. I simply stood there between them.

Cole whistled. "Come on, Lucy," he said, and started along the path toward his house. Lucy raced in front of him as soon as she was sure he was serious about going somewhere.

Warren, on all fours, smoothed the joined sleeping bags out over the drop cloth. I started toward him, feeling more naked than I had ever felt before.

He brushed out imaginary wrinkles. "Just leave me alone for a while, okay?"

I stopped.

He looked up at me. How could his confessor have forsaken him? "Okay?" He demanded, again.

I went back to the rock. I toyed with the white lightnin' and cursed it for loosening my tongue.

I had betrayed him. I had broken a vow.

Warren had tried to blow his head off when he was seventeen and would have succeeded if he hadn't used a hunting gun. Under his beard, around his right ear, there were scars where they had sewed his face back together. He hadn't told me about it until the night before our wedding. He only told me then to explain his attitude about children. He wanted me to understand, completely. He had waited until the lights were out and I was half asleep before starting the story. We talked about it all night in the dark. It was never mentioned again.

*** *** *** ***

I slipped into the sleeping bag beside Warren. His back was to me. I thought he had dozed off, but he reached over and turned off the Coleman lantern before I had a chance to.

The clouds had blown away; the moon had set. The Milky Way was stretched out across the sky—forever.

"I'm sorry, Warren."

He rolled onto his back and looked up into the night sky with me. "So am I."

Warren turned to me, but his touch was tentative, like the first time. He wanted to show me it wasn't going to come between us, but couldn't.

I counted falling stars and gave him my wishes.

*** *** *** ***

Cole dropped by the house a few days later. He seemed to be on top of the world. He borrowed the vacuum cleaner. He said his was broken. I told Warren that Cole must have called Lisa and that she must have said she would come back to him, since he was cleaning house. Warren hoped I was right.

The next day I went to Cole's house to use his typewriter. I owed my father a letter. I found Cole in his truck. He was dead. He had taped our vacuum hose to his vacuum hose. He had attached the end of his vacuum hose to the truck's exhaust pipe, and stuck the end of our vacuum hose in through the wind wing of the truck's cab. The gas gage read empty. Cole's lifeless fingers were wrapped around a pistol. Lucy was in the house, under the kitchen table, dead, with a bullet in her head. Cole hadn't left a note.

*** *** *** ***

After a while Warren and I were back to our normal routine, more or less. I missed Cole. I missed his obsessive need to corral life and define it in absolute terms. Warren didn't feel his absence as I did. At times I thought Warren was relieved that Cole wasn't around us. Perhaps Cole's constant questioning reminded him too much of his own delicate grasp.

Warren changed, slowly, afterwards. He wasn't as sure of himself, and every once in a while I would catch him looking at me apprehensively.

◊

Dina Makris

Ritsard—A Scene

We meticulously did what he called "fishing" quite often, and I had to amuse myself convincingly enough while he caught fish and threw them back in the water.

Ritsard was a sensitive man; he did not kill things. He ate his steak well done, so that he could feel better when he drove by the cow fields the next morning on his way to work.

Ritsard did not work; not in the nine to five way. He just liked to get dressed in the morning and drive to town. He would do the grocery shopping of the day and be back by 9:30 a.m. If I was at home, we'd make love, and then he'd go to his room and turn out those poignant little doodles he did for a living. After tea, he'd get dressed and drive into town again. If he had any personal errands, he'd do those; if not, he'd just drive around the business district for a while. Ritsard loved to pretend he had a nine to five job. He'd do all those things people do after work; be it drinking at a bar, or merely loosening his tie, and fighting traffic. He worked in an office once. He wanted to be a nudist then. Ritsard always wanted to be "naked." Once he drove 100 miles without a stitch on. He did not like it; but not knowing that before hand, he had not brought any clothes with him. The ride back was unpleasant. Now, Ritsard would undress when he came home. Unless he had to cook.

Ritsard never cooked. He fried things. He fried apples, breakfast cereal; one day I caught him frying store-bought doughnuts. It had something to do with powdered sugar becoming caramel. He never told me what came of it.

Tonight, he had only fried the shrimp and the zucchini, and while pouring the wine, he decided not to make loukoumathes for dessert. I'll never forgive my mother for teaching him how to prepare that dessert. For days I could not take the smell of burned oil out of my hair. Instead, he fried some peapods and served with with applesauce. He got

"naked" after he cooked them. I decided to join him, as I did not have any work for the next day. He flung a peapod in my bowl and passed the applesauce. "Maybe if you'd let me lick the applesauce off your back . . ." he said jumping up and down like a five-year-old, ". . . maybe we could both transform into—quote unquote—suburbans." He mimed what he considered a proper way to mime a suburban. He went on: "The milk lady across the street," Ritsard loved to chat over coffee with the neighborhood housewives, "she said you have to do that sort of thing for variety. She got pregnant that way." He paused for a moment and then went on: "Do you want to get pregnant?"

I made a seesaw with a peapod and two blobs of applesauce without looking up. "Do you, Ritsard?"

"One of my doodles is studying to be a shrink. I think I'll make her pregnant," Ritsard said recovering from my offer.

"Now, Ritsard, can we do something about that new fishing thing you bought?"

"You mean like sex something?" Ritsard liked to pretend he did not understand.

"You're getting boring, Ritsard." I mimed a yawn. "How about we let the T.V. out of the cupboard?"

Ritsard drew his long legs up to his stomach, and cradled his knees. "Boring, ha? How about some hot chocolate?" and in the same breath: "I could strip . . . oops, no clothes! We'll fix that!" He picked up two peapods and held them up as pasties. His strong slender legs teasingly moved him about the living room. He looked like a gazelle. Being fond of dramatic exits, he climbed the stairs dancing to a ludicrous version of "A Pretty Girl." He wiggled his back at me and disappeared into his room. The light went on, and I heard him sharpening pencils. He stopped, turned off the light, but did not come out.

"Good peapods, Ritsard!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"Thanks!" he yelled back. Silence.

"You know I'm dying up here." Ritsard was so meticulous!

Sucking on the last peapod, I got up and pulled the T.V. out of its exile.

◊

Debbie Korbel

Martin

"Where do you like to sit?"

"How about the back," said Mercedes, "that way we won't have any moron kicking the backs of our chairs."

"Okay," said Marin.

The theatre house lights were dimming along with the voice of the crowd.

'For once,' Martin thought, 'a blind date that has potential.' Martin turned to look at his date. Mercedes wasn't fat, she seemed intelligent enough, and as a matter of fact, other than her ridiculous name, she seemed okay.

Mercedes glanced coyly his way and gave him a smile. She then turned and began to scream at the top of her lungs, "I want to feel your hot throbbing manhood between . . .,"

Martin clapped his hand over her mouth with lightning speed. She scratched his arm and squirmed from his grasp.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" she asked.

"What am I doing?"

"Are you one of those guys that has to pull a 'macho' trip to reassure himself of his virility?"

At this point most of the people in the theatre had turned to see where all the commotion was coming from.

"Please," Martin pleaded, "keep your voice down, everybody is staring at us. I'm sorry, I won't touch you again, I promise." He figured he had just better humor her.

Finally, the house lights went down, and the audience seemed content to give their attention to the show that they had paid to see.

"Mercedes, I hope you won't think I'm prying," he crossed his legs protecting his crotch, as there was obviously no predicting this woman, "but what made you scream like that?"

"Well, I don't believe in an afterlife. I think that this is the only existence and since we only get one time around, we

should make the most of it."

Martin nodded as though this were clearing things up considerably.

"I always had a desire to shout out something obscene in a crowded place, so I did."

"I see," Martin said, although he didn't say what he saw, which was that this girl was nothing short of foaming rabid. Mercedes turned to watch the picture.

Martin also turned towards the screen, although he thought this little drama was going to be hard to top.

'Why the hell am I sitting here?' he thought.

"Excuse me, Mercedes, I'm going to get something to eat, would you like anything?"

"No thanks, . . . well, actually I'd like some peanut butter cups, thanks."

'I bet you would,' he thought, and he pictured her making the most of them.

He walked out into the lobby which was lit up like a Nazi interrogation room. He scanned the candy counter's selection. There were Krackle bars and giant packages of Junior Mints and boxes of Cracker Jacks built for two, but no peanut butter cups.

Martin waited for the girl behind the counter to get off the phone. She was more than chubby, he thought, it looked as though someone had shoved an accordion into a sock. 'She really wore that orange and yellow uniform, yes indeedy.'

The girl finally fulfilled her obligation and cracked her gum in his direction.

"Do you have any peanut butter cups?"

"No."

"Need somthin?" she asked the two boys standing behind him.

Martin stood there staring into the display case. "Chocolate Almonds, Snocaps, Hersheys Kisses, Hot Tamales, Yo Ho's frozen bananas. That was it, he felt sure she would approve of the substitute. "One frozen banana please."

"One fifty."

He paid 'chubbs' and returned to his seat, only to find that Mercedes was gone. Something told him that this was his big

chance. He laid the banana down in the chair where Mercedes had been sitting, and started back out into the lobby. He walked past the candy counter and towards the front door, and after passing the threshold broke out into a trot. Somehow, he hoped the banana would compensate for his absence.

He unlocked the door of his Celica and plopped inside. He rolled down the window and stared across the parking lot. There was a group of teenagers huddled against the back of a building, they were laughing. Martin put his head down on the steering wheel and began to sob.

"Christ, I'm thirty-seven."

"Hey buddy, are you alright? Do you want me to call you a doctor or something?"

"What . . .?" He looked up to see a guy in an Adidas jogging outfit, the kind the non-athletes wear to look athletic. "No, no, I'm fine, really. Terrific. As a matter of fact, I was just crying tears of joy. Take a look at these, have you ever seen tears of joy up close?"

The guy in the jogging suit started to back away from the car.

"I'm so happy it's killing me."

Fear swept across the 'Adidas' mans face and he turned and started to jog away.

'Probably the first time that suit has broken wind,' Martin thought.

Martin took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure. He turned on the ignition and aimed his car home. Bed sounded pretty good, even though it would be just him and his right hand again. He really didn't like to sleep alone. It didn't bother him when he was younger, but after being married for eleven years, he really missed that other heartbeat. His wife had left him for their gardner, but not until after the guy, Sun Jin Jin Jun Jo, had relandscaped their front and back yard. 'Eight thousand dollars worth of azaleas.' His wife had insisted that it was a good deal, she said that it was worth it because Sun Jin Jin Jun Jo used his own special brand of fertilizer. 'Well, at least she was telling the truth about that.'

He awoke the next morning to the insistent ringing of the telephone. His arm groped for the receiver.

"Helloo."

"Hello, Martin. Are you awake? I can't believe what you did last night! If you think . . .,"

He cracked open one eye, nine-twenty. "Oh shit, Judie, let me call you back."

"Call you back my ass, Martin. What the hell did you think you were doing last night? Why did you embarass me like this? Couldn't you behave like an adult? No one said you had to marry the girl, but to leave her stranded, and as if that weren't bad enough, you put a melted ice cream on her chair."

"It wasn't an ice cream, it was a frozen banana. I wasn't thinking."

"Obviously."

"Judie, let me explain."

"Mercedes won't even talk to me. She's furious, and I can't say I blame her. You know, I really don't want to tell you this Martin, but I'm your friend and I feel it's my duty."

Martin could feel it coming.

"You're no prize Martin. You're in no position to be so damn critical. Mercedes is a very bright girl, she has a degree in . . ."

"Wait, don't tell me, animal husbandry."

"What? No, in psychology."

"That was my second guess."

"Listen," Judie said, "you're the one who asked me to get you a date."

"I guess I sould have specified that she be born on this planet."

"Very funny, Martin. I'm rolling on the floor from your great wit, of the nit variety."

"Judie, somebody's knocking on my door."

"You owe me an apology Martin, I . . ."

"Judie, I have to go, . . ."

"Martin, don't give me that bullshit. I've seen you do this when you want to get your mother off the phone."

"Really Judie, there is someone at my door. Hold on for a minute." Martin got up, banged a couple of ashtrays together, and started to have a conversation with his reading lamp, "Hi Harry, How's it going? Just a second, I'll be right back, I'm on

the phone." He picked up the receiver and said, "Judie, I have to go, I'll call you later."

"Martin, I'm not falling for the ashtray routine . . . If you hang up on me, I'm going to be really pissed!"

"I'm not hanging up on you." He began to annunciate each word carefully, "Goodbye Judie, I'll call you later." He hung up the phone and said "pissed" the way a magician would say "poof" after making a tiger disappear.

He headed towards the kitchen for some coffee. The instant coffee jar was empty. 'Shit.' He boiled some water and poured it directly into the jar. A light yellow-brown liquid formed. He sat down at the kitchen table, which was about the only piece of furniture his wife had left him, and drank his "coffee essence." He would have to go to the market today. He forced himself to get dressed and drove to the Ralphs on the far side of town. He didn't want to chance running into any of his neighbors and their pitiful glances.

Once inside the market, Martin pulled a cart from the rack. 'Ah,' he thought, 'all the wheels work. Things are looking up.' He always started at the produce section. 'Head,' he thought, 'need some lettuce.' He picked up a head and threw it in his cart. He strolled past the parsnips, potatoes, broccoli, and turned left down the paper goods aisle, and alas, his first impasse. He could never figure out why people's I.Q. seemed to drop below subnormal when they went shopping. 'Perhaps it was the flourescent lighting.'

There was a giant woman in a giant mu mu, disguised as a living monument to the flower of Hawaii, the hibiscus. She and her cart, which was loaded to the hilt, blocked the aisle in front of him, while she decided which toilet paper to buy. 'One can never be too hasty in such matters.'

There were two more shoppers closing in from behind. One of the ladies who was manning a cart behing him, had left her baby chew on a bread stick, which it had proceeded to smear all over it's face.

'Very attractive,' Martin thought.

Rush hour at the Whipple house finally subsided, and Martin continued around to the next aisle. His eyes screamed to a halt. She was in a skimpy tank top, no bra. (Martin

immediately regrettted not having seen her in the frozen foods aisle.) 'And those legs!' She had on a pair of cut-offs, and just the slightest bit of her that shouldn't show, did.

'Oh God,' he thought, 'please let her want the one on the bottom shelf.'

It was as if He had heard the prayer. Martin nearly died and went to heaven when this 'madonna' bent over in those 'beaver pleasers' and pulled a bottle of Four Seasons off the bottom shelf.

'That hair, that hair is incredible. A blonde ocean.' It was undoubtedly the most beautiful blonde hair he had ever seen. She brushed it out of her eyes with such indifference. Martin would have done anything just to touch it.

She turned somewhat suddenly, as people sometimes do when they get a feeling someone is staring at them, and caught Martin digging his fingers into the head of lettuce. She looked at him and smiled. Martin saw God.

He forced his lips to move. "You are the most perfect creature I have ever seen. A poet's inspiration, a painter's dream, . . . I'm scum, but would you consider having a cup of coffee with me? My treat."

She laughed and pushed her cart forward away from Martin.

"I'm serious, I'll treat."

She turned around and said, "I don't even know you, you could be some kind of maniac or who knows what."

"What do you need to know? Look in my shopping cart. You can tell a lot about a person by what they buy. Lettuce, toilet paper, Lavoris . . . what kind of a maniac cares if he has bad breath?"

She laughed again.

"So really, would you consider it?"

"Okay, I'll consider it."

"Okay, I'll meet you by the checkstand, and whatever your decision is, I'll abide by it."

"Fair enough."

Martin abandoned his cart and waited at the checkstand area. He didn't know what he would do if she said no. He did his best to convince himself that she might say yes. He saw

her emerge from the meat counter, 'the best set of loins Ralphs has ever seen.' She was averting her eyes, she was going to say no, he could feel it coming.

"Maybe another time, okay?"

"Sure, no problem." His insides caved in.

He walked out of the market a beaten man in every sense of the word. No woman. No groceries. No life. He sat down on the planter in front of the market and watched the parade.

She walked to her car and opened the rear hatch of her Gremlin. Martin stared at her rear hatch. Before he knew what he was doing, he was beside her again.

"I just thought I'd give you a chance to reconsider."

She turned around, obviously somewhat surprised to see him again. "I thought you said you'd abide by my decision."

"I've had a bad decade, and you could really cheer me up if you'd at least give me your phone number."

She looked as though she were considering it.

"Look!" he said, "I've been separated from my wife for seven months and I'm really just looking for some company. Really. What do you think? I never attack anybody on the first date, it's just not my style."

She laughed again. Martin knew he was gaining ground.

"Tell you what," she said, "I don't like giving out my phone number, why don't you give me yours?"

Martin saw the pitfalls in this arrangement, but he figured he had to compromise. "Seven six six, eight three two two."

What's your name?"

"Martin. And what's yours?"

"Monique."

'This was getting too perfect, just too perfect,' he thought.

For the next three weeks, Martin never picked up the phone before it rang three times. Finally she called.

"Hello Martin? This is Monique. Remember me?"

"Monique who?"

She laughed. "I thought maybe you'd like to meet for some coffee somewhere."

"Sure, you name it." He was very excited.

"How about the corner of Third and Sylmar? I know a little place there. About seven o'clock?"

"Fine. See you then."

Martin held the receiver in his hand and stared at it in disbelief. He would have about two hours to give himself the most important tune-up of his life. He showered and shaved and spent ten minutes deciding which shaving lotion would be the most effective in subduing this magnificent creature. He stood in front of the mirror clenching his fists and holding in his slightly paunchy stomach, all to the tune of 'Nobody Does It Better.'

Finally, it was time. He took one last look at himself before leaving and decided he looked hike the biggest putz he had ever seen.

He arrived at the appointed place, Third and Sylmar, but saw neither Monique nor any coffee shop. Did he misunderstand her? Did she say this corner? Tonight? Was this some sort of cruel joke? Was she laughing at him from someplace nearby with some of her friends?

She wore a white skirt, made out of a light cotton, and a sheer magenta blouse. Martin could see the outline of something lacy underneath. There was a slight breeze, and 'That hair, that hair.'

"Hi, how's it going?"

"Fantastic! Where are we going?"

"This way."

He followed her as though he were being led on an invisible leash. They walked around the corner and up a flight of stairs. They stopped when they reached Apt. #3.

"I thought we'd have coffee in, if you don't mind."

"No, not at all." This part of the fantasy didn't come until much later in his imagination.

She opened the door and Martin followed her inside. He said "Nice place," before he even looked around.

"Thanks. Sit down, I'll get us some coffee, unless you'd rather have something else?"

"No, no. Coffee, coffee, fine fine."

He watched as she went into what he assumed must be the kitchen. It was a small apartment, and every inch was filled with papers and books and plants and records. Not at all the way he had pictured her to live. 'Well,' he thought, 'they

could always hire someone to clean.'

She returned with a tray of coffee and some sort of pastries.

"Well," she said, "here we are."

"Yes, we are, aren't we."

"Have a danish, please," she said as she held the tray out in front of him.

"Thanks."

"Were you surprised that I called?"

"The truth? No, I know I'm irrestible,"

"That's true," she said, and looked him square in the eyes.

Martin melted. He swallowed a large hunk of cheese danish without chewing it enough and began to cough it up. She laughed.

They talked and as the evening went on Martin became more and more comfortable with this woman. He even noticed her chipped tooth. They talked and covered the typical subjects people cover when they are first getting to know each other. The conversation slowed and then finally stopped, but the silence was not uncomfortable.

It seemed perfectly natural for he and "Iques," as he had already given her a nickname, to be kissing. This progressed and an hour later Martin felt as though he had experienced his own personal renaissance.

"You were terrific, really."

"You're not too shabby yourself."

"I'm starving, do you want to get something to eat?" he asked.

"I can't. I have to get up early tomorrow."

Martin was a little disappointed, but accepted this.

"Well, I guess that's my cue to say goodnight . . ."

"Yes, it is."

"Hey, why don't you give me your phone number?"

"No, I'd really rather not."

"Very funny, come on."

She wasn't smiling. "Look, we had a nice time, can't we just leave it at that?"

"Nice time. Is that what we had? You can have a nice time visiting grandma."

"Please don't be like this."

Martin was silent.

"Don't be like this. Don't you see how stupid it is? You'd rather have no cake than a small piece? Why can't you accept a good experience as just that?"

"You're right," he said, "we both got what we wanted, we both got fucked."

"I think you had better go now."

Martin stared at her breasts, wishing he could touch them. He walked towards the front door and paused with his hand resting on the knob, hoping to be retained. He turned to say something, but she had already gone into the other room.

He walked down the staircase, and for some damn reason he started to whistle.

◊

Scott Memmer

The Spring

> Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
> They have to take you in.
>
> —Robert Frost

Joshua Kirk pulled his workgloves off and held them in his hands; not much else needed to be done. Already the stalks had been cut, gathered and bound—the bundles tied, the fields plowed to a deep, rich brown, the beans frozen, the berries canned. Then the three of them, he and his two sons, had mended the fences, going carefully along the perimeters of the fields, straightening posts and stringing wire, digging postholes and generally setting the land to rights—until they stood together in a hollow and watched a caterpillar spin her silk amid the twigs of a broken milkweed. Such were the rites of Autumn.

Josh watched the thinness of morning hint across the sky to the east. "Here, Boss-boss-boss!" he called as he opened the gate and let the cattle out of the pen. Then he climbed, grunting, onto the top of the fence, removed his coat, cap and glasses, and set them, along with his gloves, on the post to his right. He placed his hands on the upper-most rail and snuck the heels of his boots through the lower slats of the fence. "Go on, yuh old bovine," he muttered to one of the cows. "Go git yuhself fat."

He let his eyes wander to the farmhouse, then back again to his seat by the barn. He steadied himself on the rail and looked again at the house.

At this time of year, for what little good it would do him, regret was almost like a game to him. He counted over and over in his mind, in regulated disappointment, the fourteen eggs he'd found cracked and spoiled in the chicken coop the day before, considered the paucity of the year's soybean crop,

the scant weight of a new calf, then weighed the possibility of rain. The land, tilled, drear and naked as it was, would be particularly susceptible to erosion, he felt. Maybe they shouldn't have cleared it so early; maybe they should've waited a few weeks. But the dog days of August had been so hot and dry, so windless and aromatic, that the corn had grown faster than he'd ever seen it—so fast you could hear it creak and moan at night, recovering. So they'd cut it early and let it sit at that.

"Go git on!" he called to the cattle. He grabbed his cap and glasses, leaving his jacket and workgloves there on the post behind him, and slid his spectacles onto the bridge of his nose. He brushed his hair back with his left hand, pulled his cap forward with his right, and tugged the bill across his brow, then watched the headlights of a pickup pass along the road.

Sixty years.

He rubbed his chin and traced the lights of the pickup until they vanished behind some willows.

Was he really sixty years old?

Somewhere in the dark a freight passed. Josh walked across the barnyard, crossing at the edge of the lawn, and saw his wife and sons sitting at the kitchen table. Suddenly the horn of the freight sounded long and low, filling the air with a sonorous, plaintive cry; then, as quickly as it had come, it faded and was gone. "Git on, Boss—git on!" Josh cried, this time striking the rump of a nearby bull. The bull snorted and sprang into a trot, and Josh returned to the barn as the last of the kine plodded from the pen; he shut the gate and bolted it securely behind them.

On the far side of the field dawn poked its nose like a mole amid the clumps of hoarfrost weeds. Josh gazed over the trees and located in the distance the shadows of the steelmill smokestacks. It wasn't as if he minded steelmills, he told himself, he just wished thery weren't so close to his farm. But they were, and there wasn't much else he could say about it.

He leaned against the gate and ran his fingers over the corrugated aluminum.

Gazing down the cattlepath, past the silos and the empty propane tanks and the rusted harrows, he thought of the

spring. He could almost see himself kneeling in the leaves before the pool, could almost taste the water, the way it ran down his chin, how cool it felt on his lips. It'd been a long time since he drank there, and suddenly he was very thirsty. The water would be sparking and pellucid, flowing up through ferns and clay and granite, and when he leant over to drink the blood would rush to his face and his toes would curl in his boots. The water would startle him, for it stung with an unaccustomed abruptness (it was quite cold), and the excess would dribble down his chin and onto the front of his shirt.

Opening his eyes, Josh found himself standing on the ground beside the pen. Gradually the sun had drawn away the curtain of night so that now the land, though still ill-defined and disproportionate, had begun to realize itself through the initial etchings of dawn. The stars had dissipated somewhat, while the moon, sinking, had grown more and more yellow.

Josh scuffed the toe of his boot through some straw and glanced at the farmhouse.

"Oh, hell, ther's scarce a sliver 'a light in the sky," he said; "they'll be in there a quarter of an hour if a minute . . ."

He stepped across the yard, past the fenceposts and the gate, and in the half-light found the trail. The cowbells sounded in the shadows as he followed their tolling. First light teased the horizon, while squirrels and chipmunks, their feet moving swifter than their hearts, scurried ahead to hide themselves amid fallen leaves or behind rocks. Josh felt his feet compress the ground; he watched the last stars flare out briefly, then dissolve. Over to his left a stream murmured in its unquiet bed. He stepped through a pile of leaves, crackling them, snapping a branch beneath his foot, and looking down to see the dew gathering on the tips of his boots, noted that with the motion of his walking the moisture would bead and fall away. Before him, wavering dimly, the shadows of the cattle trudged outward in a line. He passed one or two of them, whacking their rumps as he went by.

Off to the east daylight further began to invade the dark. The trees set themselves against the sky like crowds of great, bent tooth-picks. Josh noted the latticework of oak, sycamore

and bramble, the fine line of earth and sky, the furrowed and stilled cornfields, the rows of barbed wire fences, the few distant, flickering porchlamps. The factory smoke would rise from the stacks in a matter of minutes, there where if you were lucky the wind would blow it back to the city, there where it was all smoke anyway.

The path widened to a road after a time and ran beside a row of elms until it came to an aluminum gate marked, NO TRESPASSING! Josh unlocked the lock here, slipped the rope over the top of the post (he had to secure his land to keep the millworkers from hunting on it), shoved the gate with his body, slid in and walked it back into position. He fastened the gate with the rope and kicked it once for good measure.

"If I ever catch one of those bastards on my land again," he muttered, "I'll kill 'um and use 'um for fertilizer."

He crossed the field, his feet tracing minutely the stiff furrows, the uneven roll of the land, where there was no path now and where pebbles, branches, rocks and cowflop contested for his balance. He thrust his boots through the mulch and saw the darker forest ahead. "If those bastards ever piss in my spring, I'll string 'um up by their balls!" he said, entering the forest, feeling the warmth of the maples and their dryness beneath, walking several hundred yards until he was well into the depth of the trees, then stopping. For no apparent reason he thought of his childhood then. He remembered the trees he'd climbed as a boy—the branches and the sky and the aphids that crawled all over his arms and legs; he remembered the white farmhouse where he lived with his parents, the algeaic horse trough behind the barn, the frogs in the horse trough in summer; he thought of his old dog Felix. Here beneath the trees the earth smelled musty and damp, here it was not cold. Josh turned about and looked where he had come. It seemed far, so very far . . . he judged it to be about sixty years. He noted the fences which separated the fields into fallow and fecund. Someday he would be on the other side of the fence. It came upon him then—a sudden, cogent realization—that the light of the last stars always seemed to find the sorrow of the earth, its salty toil, it fields and barren wastes.

Morning was breaking. Josh felt his chest rise and fall, rise and fall, and heard his expirations unsettle the air with a hush. Slowly he knelt himself on the ground, bending himself at the waist, and buried his face in the leaves. "Don't take it from me," he whispered into the soil. He dug his fingernails deeply into the leaves, pressing his forehead into the humus beneath. "Don't take it from me," he repeated. He arose silently on his knees then, rubbing the leaves over his eyelids, down his face and across his throat, and felt the moisture seep into his skin. He stood, brushed himself off, and walked deeper into the forest.

He found the stream and followed it until he came to a hill. Here, on the other side of this hill, next to a small rectangular plot about the size of two men lying side by side on the ground, was the spring.

Josh followed the stream around and, arriving at the spot, removed his cap and glasses, setting them on a log nearby, stepped out of the streambed and up the incline, and knelt himself before the pool. He inched forward on his knees until he overlooked the water. Looking down, the first thing he saw was his own face. How strange his eyes looked! were those really his eyes? No matter, he looked past them and studied the pebbles at the bottom of the pool, the black earth beneath the pebbles, and the decaying bodies of the leaves along the floor and sides of the pool. Three or four discarded crayfish shells hovered uncertainly in the water on the other side of the spring, and above and behind Josh, just coming into full light now and reflecting off the surface of the pool in a sudden display of blue and gold, was the morning sky. The light came new upon the land, shocking the air with a crystalline, a prismatic, presence.

Here where it was good. Here where it was not cold.

Josh drank long and hard, cupping his hands together before him and taking the water down his throat in hungry gulps. The excess dribbled down his chin and into the pool.

"If one of those bastards ever sets foot on my land—" he started to say, but something inside him in a shape remotely human held up its hand (didn't he know this face?) and spoke to him in a firm voice, saying "Silence!" It was his own voice—

and he was silent.

The sunlight then—like a hobo in search of a trashheap bottle—thumbed through the branches above, and plumes of breath-smoke (his own) mounted further into the sky. The earth smelled new and raw and crisp and fragrant—the fragrance of autumnal surrender—and something solid in his heart urged him homeward. "Pa!" he heard his eldest son shout into the gully; "Pa!"

He would sit in his chair tonight and tell his wife how good the water had tasted. She always listened, always said, "Yas, yas . . ."

Josh stepped down the embankment, retrieved his cap and glasses, followed the stream for a quarter-mile or so, then broke for the open field. He marched out defiantly beneath the bare trees, kicking his heels high, his knees too, and walked swiftly, purposefully across the meadow to the gate. He kicked the gate once, hollared, "Yah, Boss!"—then, feeling young and perhaps even a little reckless, scaled the gate like a child and jumped down the other side.

He called to his sons at the end of the road. "Hey you!" he shouted. They looked up momentarily, then went back to their work.

He stopped once to check a fencepost, another time to remove a log from the road, a third to slip his hands into his rear pockets, lean back and watch the sun rise—to look out for a moment over the steelmill smokestacks and then turn away from them forever.

For a while longer he would have his farm, then he would go off somewhere and die. But not even death could take it away from him. Josh saw his wife standing on the backporch step and felt a clump of soil crumble beneath his foot. Even from here he could see that she was waving him in for breakfast.

◊

Laurel Dewey

A Second Chance

He rested the heavy barreled rifle on his shoulder and centered his target in the frame of the gunsight. His eye roamed for an instant through the sight and down the sleek extension. Each muscle was tense and every movement deliberate as he slowly cocked the rifle. Click, click, click cracked into the silence. A bead of sweat formed on his hairline and made its way down the side of his face. He placed his hand on the trigger and began the ritual count to ten before releasing the deadly sting. One, two, three, four... his eyes shone in anticipation. Five, six, seven . . . he held his breath. Eight, nine.

"Mason Wainright! What in the world are you trying to do?!?"

"Damn you!" he said, throwing down the rifle.

"You were aiming that thing right at your Uncle Peter's tiffany lamp!"

"I was just practicin'!"

"And what if you jerk by mistake and hit the trigger? Well, I'll *tell* you what! It'd be 'tiffany' all over your Uncle Pleter's living room! Then you'd be in a sorry state, I can guarantee you that!"

"And what would you do, Mama? Huh?"

"Why... I'd... I'd be very embarrassed. Yes, I would be... *extremely* embarrassed!"

Mason turned away with a half smirk creased into his pumpkin cheeks and began to survey the surface of his rifle. His concentration was entirely devoted to his "piece," as he called it, except for the occasional brusque pushing of his unkempt hair away from his eyes. His round features were exaggerated unnecessarily by the khaki safari outfit he sported. It had been a gift from his mother on his eleventh birthday two months ago, and he wore it continually, calling it his "hunter's apparel."

"Is your Uncle Peter up yet?" said his mother's voice, its wistfulness skimming the air.

"Who cares?" said Mason, tightening a loose screw in the barrel.

"That's not a very nice way to talk about your dear Uncle Peter. After all, if it weren't for him, we wouldn't have been able to spend these glorious weeks on his ranch—which, don't forget, will be yours someday when Uncle Peter is gone."

"I *expect* it to be!" said Mason, glaring into his mother's eyes that were as clear as glass. "I have the only right to it!"

"That you do!" said Uncle Peter's deep baritone. Uncle Peter strode down the wooden stairs from his bedroom. There was no need for him to be filled in about the conversation. He knew with Mason it was one of three things: guns, food, or his "rights."

Uncle Peter's lean figure stopped at the bottom of the stairs as he rested his hand across the banister. His fingers were slim like a pianist's. He hadn't combed his sandy hair or shaved that morning. He was dressed in his "ranch uniform" complete with red Talbott flannel shirt and olive green slacks with matching jacket.

Sinking his hand deep into his jacket pocket, Uncle Peter pulled out a thin cigarette, then moved toward the unlit fireplace and pursed his lips. "Someone should have started the log this morning." He brought out a long fireplace match and, with a quick flick across the fireside brick, struck it to flame, lit his cigarette with the match, then placed the flame into the bed of brush where the log rested.

Mason's mother smiled as the glow from the fire danced across her face.

Mason turned away and continued the inspection of his rifle.

"Peter," said the Mother, "I've got a sack of garbage out there from last night's dinner that's calling to be taken to the dump."

"Don't say another word," said Uncle Peter. "I'm on my way!"

Mason's mother let a sigh escape her lips as she crossed

back into the kitchen. Uncle Peter moved to the coat rack and donned his World War II fighter jacket. Outside, the air was cutting cold. Mason found interest in the roaring flames that licked the sides of the hearth with a raging vengeance. He collected a ball of saliva in his mouth and fervently spat a direct aim toward the largest flame.

"You'll need more spit that that to put it out," said Uncle Peter zipping up his jacket.

"I don't want to put it out!" said Mason, turning to his Uncle with a glare. "I want it to burn, higher and higher. I want to watch it crack the log in half and disintergrate it to flecks of black. I want the flames to leap out into the room until the whole room is engulfed with fire!"

Uncle Peter stood silently for a moment, raising his jacket collar to his neck. "Well," he said, "At least you'll have something to do today."

Mason's fierce stare softened for a second but returned as Uncle Peter opened the front door and started to leave. "You passing the meadow on the way to the dump?"

"I might be," said his Uncle.

"You can drop me there," Mason said, snatching his gun and jacket. "I'm gonna pick me off some squirrels!"

The drive to the dump was a half mile's distance down the road past the last creek. The meadow lay stretched between the ranch house and the dump. They sat in silence during their drive until Uncle Peter passed the meadow without stopping.

"Hey, stop!" yelled Mason. "You passed it up!"

"There's another clearing just as good by the dump," said Uncle Peter, shifting the aged gears in his '52 jeep.

Mason sat befuddled. He wanted to speak out defiantly but chose not to. Uncle Peter was a man of few words but what words he did speak were important and not be be argued with by boys such as Mason Wainright—even if he was a nephew.

Uncle Peter turned to Mason and eyed his gun. He turned his attention back to the road. "When did you get that gun?"

"I forget."

"You forget?"

"Christmas."

"Which one?"

Mason turned angrily toward his Uncle and remained silent.

"Which one?" his Uncle repeated.

Mason turned his eyes back to the road. He spoke slowly and quietly with a voice filled with anger. "The one before he died."

"I thought so!" said his uncle, turning the jeep toward the dump. The dump road was etched with deep furrows, long and jagged, that sent the jeep up and down and side to side. His uncle seemed to ride with the bumps as a horseman rides a galloping horse. Mason, however, held tightly to the side of the jeep. "Ever heard the old saying, 'You never get a second chance to make a good first impression'?"

"Never!" said Mason, holding on tighter.

"It's a good saying to keep in mind. Do it right the first time, or don't do it at all!" said his Uncle. He pulled to a jolting halt.

Mason's back slapped the back of the seat. He sat, collecting his wits as if he'd just finished a high speed roller coaster ride. Uncle Peter had taken the huge sack of garbage and dumped it in a large crevasse built for that purpose.

Slowly, Mason slipped out of the jeep, clutching his rifle tightly. He sauntered around the jeep and waded through the thick, dry brush. The ground was cold and cracked. The snow would soon fall and each crack would be filled to overflowing with the soft white powder.

Uncle Peter was dumping the last remnants of the debris into the deep hole when Mason spotted a grey and white flecked rabbit darting across the low brush that lay several yards in front of him.

From all the squirrel hunting he'd done, he knew to lie low and walk softly. He'd shot a fair share of tree squirrels in his eleven years. Sometimes he didn't kill them right off and had to pump a few more slugs into them to finish them. The bodies got pretty torn apart but that was alright. He'd never had the chance to shoot a rabbit, and his imagination relished the thought. If only he could mesmerize the creature as he'd

seen done on television—that way he'd be able to get right up to it and nail it clean through the head.

The light touch of a hand dropped on his shoulder and he jumped a bit. It was Uncle Peter who now had spotted the innocent prey. The rabbit had stopped to munch on a patch of green grass.

"You gonna go for him, Mason?"

"Damn right, I am!" he said, opening the chamber and making sure the gun was loaded. "*Damn*! I didn't load any bullets. Oh God . . ."

Uncle Peter's hand slowly came forward, holding a box of bullets. Mason looked at him. Then he grabbed the box and began to empty the shiny pellets into his palm.

"You only get one," said Uncle Peter.

"You got *plenty* here!" said Mason.

"You only get one."

"I might not plug him with one!"

"You better."

"But what if I . . ?"

"He's moving," said Uncle Peter as he watched the rabbit hop forward a bit. "If you want him, you better do it now."

Mason turned to face the rabbit and in his mind measured the distance between them. Regaining his command of the situation, he emptied all the bullets back into the box, except one. He clicked the chamber open and let the lone slug slide in. He clicked the arm shut, then raised the gun toward the white and grey target.

Uncle Peter stepped back.

Mason framed the prey into his gunsight, tilting the long barrel downward a bit. He cocked the rifle slowly, letting the click blend with the rustling of the wind. He began his slow count. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . .

Suddenly the rabbit darted forward and Mason pressed the trigger.

He lowered the gun and stared for a moment.

Uncle Peter stepped forward and eyed the rabbit. It didn't move.

Mason smiled wildly. "I got it clean! What a shot!" he said. He looked at Uncle Peter who kept his eye fixed on the rabbit.

His Uncle's face was without expression. "Well, aren't you gonna contratulate me?" said Mason.

"Not until you kill it," said Uncle Peter.

"But it's—" Mason started to say "dead" when he saw the rabbit rising on one side.

"*Damn*!" he said. "I was sure I nailed it!" He looked at his Uncle. "Well, come on! Give me another bullet!"

Mason opened the chamber of his gun and motioned to his uncle to hand him another bullet.

"I told you you only get one shot," said his uncle.

"Well then, how do you expect me to kill it?"

"You'll have to break its neck." His uncle turned to walk back toward the jeep.

"Are you crazy?" Mason was wide-eyed as he followed close behind.

"Hurry up! Your mother will have breakfast waiting for us and I don't want to be late."

"Give me another bullet, dammit! I'm not breaking its neck!" Mason crossed to where his uncle was brushing dry leaves from the back of the jeep. "Give me another bullet!"

Uncle Peter turned toward the boy looking up at him. They stared at each other for a long minute.

Mason swallowed hard and gritted his teeth. "Give me another bullet!"

His uncle turned away.

Mason groped in his uncle's jacket pocket for the box of twenty-twos.

Uncle Peter grabbed Mason's hand to pull it out of his pocket. They struggled for a moment.

"Give them to me!" Mason said over and over as his eyes became wild with anger. "Give them to—"

Uncle Peter cuffed him across the face.

Mason released his hand and stood in shock. No one had ever dared touch him in anger. Not his mother—not even his... he looked at his uncle as if to beg once more for just *one* more bullet. Uncle Peter's face remained unchanged.

Mason pressed his lips together tightly and turned to the rabbit. He walked slowly toward the animal, hoping his uncle would make a move or a sound that would end this torture.

Uncle Peter did not move.

Mason held his breath, then let it out as he reached the dying rabbit. The creature was panting, its eyes wide and fixed on a blade of grass. A small red spot behind the rabbit's right ear marked where the bullet had hit. The fur surrounding the spot was damp with blood. Mason turned away, letting out short breaths repeatedly. He tilted his head backward so the tears would dissolve back into his eyes. He could hear Uncle Peter arranging his equipment in the back of the jeep and felt better to know he didn't have an audience. Mason returned his glance to the rabbit whose panting had subsided considerably. "Maybe he'll die on his own," Mason hoped.

Kneeling down, Mason lowered his finger to the rabbit's ear and gently stroked it. The rabbit's glass-clear eyes tilted toward Mason who found himself mesmerized with their gaze. Those gentle eyes. Mason shivered.

Now, the rabbit's eyes tilted toward the blade of grass once again as if to say, "Do it and do it fast."

Mason took the rabbit's head between his thick palms. The warmth was fading fast from the rabbit's body. "Do it and do it fast," he told himself. He closed his eyes tightly, as if anticipating a blow and whispered, "I didn't mean it. I never did."

With that, he jerked the head backward. One muffled pop and the rabbit lay at rest. Mason opened his eyes and withdrew his trembling hands. He lay his palms on a moist patch of grass, hoping the sick feeling would soak into the ground with the rabbit's blood. He wiped his face with his sleeve and stood up, exhausted and dazed.

The glands in his mouth filled with saliva. He feared he would vomit and swallowed hard to force it back. Mason turned to his Uncle who was now sitting in the jeep, rolling his finger across a cigarette butt. He moved to his uncle's side, paused, then spoke quietly, for fear of breaking into sobs.

"I did it," he said.

"That's good," his uncle said.

Mason looked Uncle Peter in the eye, the sadness washing through him. "I didn't like it."

"That's even better," said Uncle Peter.

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Angelo Lombardo

The Maker of Men

Joey Tell hated wearing the body suit. The thick rubber pressed and chaffed his skin and the big bubble helmet made his shoulders ache, but his discomfort receeded under the waves of joyfull anticipation he felt flooding through himself.

He loved the wildness, the brute force of Oberon. He felt insignificant, like a trespassing insect, as his rubber suited form made its way through the towering flaming tongues of red and orange spirals of coral that crowded upwards from the marshy soil. Black, oily sheets of rain fell ceaselessly through the coral shafts, like sticky black juice driving down unrelenting and permeating the little man and the darkness itself.

He made his way slowly back to the station, a ribbon of light stabbing out from the lamp afixed to his helmet, illuminating a spearpoint of worn path framed in black rain through the darkness. As he walked, the steel-laced sack suspended from his hip, laden inside and swollen with weight, swung back and forth like a steel pendulum. He thought of the specimen squirming inside the sack and grew excited. He felt that every specimen he brought back to the station was like a piece in a living puzzle, and that each piece began to fill in and gradually form a picture of the Diggers and of life on Oberon. He felt he was on the brink of finding the key to the Diggers and of proving to the others what he had already convinced himself to be the truth. The ringing tattoo of rain exploding against his helmet washed away his thoughts as he struggled over a giant red trunk of fallen coral that lay crumbled like an immense column of ancient ruins. In the washed out horizon, the murky blue lights of the station glowed faintly in the wet darkness.

Joey Tell stepped onto the grid of the elevator platform beneath the station. The platform silently ascended into the bottom of the station. Bathed in the red light of the decon-

tamination chamber, he held the silver sack in his gloved hand and pressed the button below the communicator.

"I've got one," Joey said. Air hissed behind a wall and a steel panel slid open in front of him. He pulled a box from the compartment and placed it on the floor. Opening the lid, he gently settled the quivering sack into the box and latched the lid.

A brilliant violet light filled the chamber, disinfecting Joey's suit and the specimen box of any possible contamination. A green light above the chamber door blinked on and the heavy door unsealed and swung outward, opening. 'I am cleansed and purified,' he mused as he walked into the station.

David watched him from the decontamination control panel as Joey gently layed the box on the floor and removed the clumsy bubble helmet. The face without the helmet visor was young and boyish; the high cheek bones and small chin had not the slightest hint of hair. His big brown eyes were guileless, they were innocent of secrets or deeper meanings. His coarse brown hair was cropped short and carelessly.

"First one in twenty days," Joey said. He stripped the rubber suit off, pulling it down in one piece. It lay at his feet like a crumpled shadow.

"You get the Digger like the last one?" Davis asked, placing the helmet on a storage rack. He was a small man with watery eyes that looked up to Joey from under the milky prisms of thick glasses.

"Yeah this one practically jumped into my lamp-beam. My light always freezes them. They seem paralyzed by my helmet lense until I shove them in the sack, and then they get active again."

"Joey," Davis said gently, taking his elbow, "You know you have only thirty six hours until project deadline."

"I know. I just can't file a Clear Report yet–not until the last hour. I can't explain it. I have a feeling about them, I can feel that the Diggers are intelligent. When you look into their sad gray eyes..." Joey Tell's voice trailed off and he turned his face away from Davis. Davis watched him as his figure receeded down the long dim corridor. As Joey Tell walked,

pressure plates in the floor beneath his feet activated the overhead lights as he passed under each section, so that the arc of flourescent lights followed over him like a halo.

Joey Tell carried the specimen box past the "hothouse" port and sealed the hatch-way behind him. The hothouse was a 1,000 square meter glass enclosed room attached to the rear of the biolab. The glass tank was a self-contained duplicate world of Oberon; a piece of the wild planet captured and controlled in a microcosm, like a lump of clay under a magnifying glass.

Opening the air-lock, he walked into the equalizing chamber. He pulled on a baggy plastic body suit moored from its oxygen tube above him; the suit would protect him from the rain and the extreme cold maintained in the terrarium to recreate the natural habitat of the Diggers. When the temperature in the chamber had equalized with that of the tank, the inner air lock hissed open. He walked slowly and clumsily in the suit through the hatchway, the oxygen tube uncoiling behind him and pulled floating through the light gravity.

He felt again as if he were outside the station walking through the wildness of Oberon; thick black rain fell all around him from a network of spray pipes above him, and everywhere were the immense, mossy ferns, shrubs, and the magnificent rainbow hued glistening stalks of the coral spires. The coral trees and plants were so thick that he had to follow the same muddy trails in and out of the tank.

He came to the clearing in the center of the tank. A gigantic canopy of tangled red and yellow coral branches towered above him and screened most of the rain from the clearing. He set the cage in the center of the clearing and opened the lid. He unfastened the sack inside and stepped back. He walked to the edge of the jungle and stood still. He heard a muffled scuttling sound beneath the leafy overlay; he knew they were here.

The Digger slowly climbed out of the cage; its wizened gray eyes looked up into his face. Joey felt a hot flame of compassion fire inside him. The Digger took a step toward him. Suddenly, half a dozen Diggers scrambled from the

undergrowth and stood erect upon the clearing.

The presence of the Diggers filled him with a rapturous awe and wonder. Oberon and the Diggers had restored in him a sense of meaning and hope in his life. For the first time in the years that had followed his crisis of faith and the renouncement of his vows in the Jesuit Seminary, he felt a newly kindled flame of faith arise in him, a spiritual torch passed to him by the Diggers.

The Diggers gathered around the new individual, touching and smelling him, and then, crowding together into a knot, they disappeared into the dark undergrowth. Black rain began to fill in the small impressions of their footprints.

He picked up the cage and started back through the rain. Behind the bubble mask, bitter tears ran down his face. "God help me," he thought, "I must judge them but who will judge me?"

Joey Tell took his seat at the dinner table. He didn't want to waste the precious time left but he knew he had to eat to keep working. He punched the soup button on the machine at the center of the table. Davis sat at the opposite end of the table and bowed his face towards his plate. He wanted to gulp down the soup and leave, but it was too hot so he began to sip from his spoon.

"Joey," Davis faltered, looking up from his plate. "If I can help in any way —"

"Thanks Davis, but there's nothing you can do. I've tried everything. Something new has to happen fast or there's no hope." Joey slammed his fist on the table. "I know Oberon should not be cleared for Lytron Chemical – we are the trespassers here, Oberon belongs to the Diggers. Christ, I've got twenty hours, and then I'll have to file a Clear Report." He pushed his soup away and rose to his feet. "I should pray for a miracle," he said and walked out of the room.

'Once I would have prayed for a miracle,' he thought bitterly, 'Once I believed in a God.' He thought of his dim early youth in the Jesuit seminary on Earth; of his young, passionate love for God and Jesus Christ the Savior and Redeemer, but he had seen too much and his faith had

sickened; he had seen man spreading to other worlds, the distant space colonies coming at last, and the long awaited dream of contact with beings who toiled under the heat of alien suns was finally realized, and then, the fall; man had perverted contact to confrontation and the murders, the conquests, the wars and holocausts followed, while the church, righteous, noble, and apart, turned its holy face away from the blood and would not see the evil and was silent; and Joey Tell's faith had died.

He was exhausted but he went back to the biolab. He coded his notes into the telex machines. He reprogrammed his last field notes into the computer information banks and typed in all his field data to cross-reference with any known intelligence classifications. Again and again, the same maddening brick wall; the red letters formed on the monitor screen in front of him: INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO CONFIRM EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE ARTICLE R701.

He punched the screen in anger. He needed the computer to define the Diggers as within the coda of intelligent life or the Diggers and Oberon would be cleared; cleared for extermination.

He turned off the monitor. He rubbed his eyes. He was tired, he needed to sleep. He looked at his watch, sixteen hundred hours; another six hours had slipped by, he had only fourteen hours to prove and file the article petition or he would be forced to issue the Clear Report to Lytron. He thought of what Lytron would do once Oberon was legally opened. First they would bring the weather stabilizers to stop the rain and cold, and then the pumps to suck the land dry, and then the laser workers to cut down the ageless, towering corals, and then the strip-mining would begin, the refineries and great machines, and the Diggers, what chance would they have? He felt sick and ashamed and he wanted – he needed now to go back, while there was still time, and to be with the Diggers again.

The airlock to the decompression chamber hissed closed. He pulled the body suit down and over him and checked the oxygen hose. When the two atmospheres equalized, the

hatch to the Digger tank swung open. He started on the pathway. He could still see his old footprints, bubbling over with the black rain, stamped on the muddy trail that twisted through the green carpet of jungle and around the glistening pastel posts of coral.

After a quarter of an hour, the clearing loomed into view. He walked slowly, quietly up to the edge of the clearing. He hid himself behind the bladed fronds that fanned outwards from an immense, squat fern. He pulled the frond branch from his visored face and looked down into the clearing.

He saw three Diggers grouped around a small pile of shrub leaves and fern branches and pieces of coral. The coral sticks were thin and varied in short lengths. The ends of the coral shafts looked like they had been chipped off the bursting crowns of the coral spires. The Diggers were taking the leaves and fronds and shredding them into long ribbons with their hands and teeth. They piled the shreds of leaves with the pieces of coral. Another Digger came out of the overgowth on the opposite side of him. The Digger slowly dragged a piece of coral into the clearing and deposited it on the pile of coral.

"My God, they're building a nest!" Joey Tell clenched his teeth inside the helmet. He was excited and had to remind himself not to run in the big body suit. He walked back down the pathway toward the airlock.

'If they breed in the tank then I can save them,' he thought. 'If I can find more Diggers to populate the tank I can find another world for them . . . maybe an Earth preserve . . . they might survive. Fourteen hours to save a race.'

In the decompression chamber, he pulled off the body suit. The airlock closed behind him and he made his way toward the main hatchway; he was going out again into Oberon.

He searched the four kilometer radius of the trails that fanned outward from the station like muddy spokes. The helmet light stabbed through the darkness and rain scanned over the muddy pathways, and penetrated into the green veldt and fell upon the pale coral shafts around him, but he could not find another Digger.

His oxygen level was on reserve and he had to go back. He had searched in vain for almost six hours and how he knew he must return with nothing. As he walked back to the station, the lightness of his swinging specimen sack on his belt depressed him. The complete absence of the Diggers oppressed him. For the first time, he felt that they were hiding from him; he could no longer sense their presence. The shining coral pillars towered above him like silent sentinels that seemed to mock him. He saw nothing and returned to the station.

Davis was packing up the survey instruments and making some last minute equipment checks. The mother ship Intrepid would be docking with the station in eight hours. After three months on the night world of Oberon, the two men were finally about to be lifted from the darkness and returned to the green fields of Earth.

Joey Tell tried the computer again. He hunched over the keyboard and studied the green monitor screen. Time after time he punched in new variations on the intelligence data system, and each time the red letters floated up into the screen, like a haunting sentence of death playing over and over again before his condemned face: INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO CONFIRM EXTRA — he turned the screen off and laid his face upon the cool metal of the keyboard.

He had failed. Time had run out for him and for the Diggers. He tried to console himself with the thought of the seven specimens in the tank, but he knew that species repopulation with such a low number was practically impossible.

He felt numb, as if his mind was detached and far away from the actions of his body, as he mechanically pulled the master card from the computer file and pushed it into the teletype recorder. He slowly pressed the keys of the typing board with one shaking hand as he stood paralyzed in front of the machine. He watched the monitor and saw the words he was typing flash onto the screen:

LYTRON CHEMICAL REPORT: STATION OBERON:
STATUS: CLEAR

The last words on the screen began to blur as burning hot tears filled his eyes. He signed the report and sealed it by pressing his thumbprint against a black electronic lens near the keyboard; the order was now irrevocable. The flame of faith that the Diggers had fired within him was now cold and extinguished, and his vanquished faith was like a black cinder that burned a cold hole through his soul.

He wanted to say goodbye to the Diggers.

He felt as if he were watching himself move sleepily through a dreamworld as he made his way along the path through the overgrowth of the tank. The rain fell in sweeping torrents from the overhead pipes and pelted his helmet monotonously. He passed under the black muddy shadows of the looming coral spires, dragging each heavy step toward the clearing. His eyes hungrily devoured the sights that surrounded him; the lush, primordial plants and moss-canopied trees, the great feathery ferns and the glorious pillars of coral; all the strange yet unspeakably beautiful creations that were doomed, that he would never see again. He stared down at the pathway and thought of the Diggers. He did not know why they had to die and he had to live, and the weight of their wasted lives bore down upon him, pressed down upon his guilt and his culpability and oppressed his soul.

He reached the clearing. A strange and new shadow fell upon the damp earth under the interlocking crown of the coral pillars. He looked upward. He fell to his knees and pitched forward into the mud and he pummelled the ground with his fists. His screams reverberated impotently inside his helmet but he could not stop screaming.

The mothership Intrepid had docked with the station twenty minutes ago. Chief science officer Joseph Tell could not be found. A search party was recruited from the crew of the Intrepid and dispatched throughout the station. Davis reached Joey Tell's stateroom and he pressed the airlock button; a red light flashed above the door; it was locked from the inside. Davis pounded on the smooth metal door.

"Joey open up! The Intrepid is here! Open Up, Goddamn it!"

Silence.

Davis walked to the observation deck and kicked in the main control panel cover. He pulled out the two power coils to the main hatchway. The lights in the corridor behind him went out. Davis rummaged through a floor locker and found an arc-lamp. He pulled the fuse from the steel lid of the lamp and there was a spark and then a brilliant flame errupted inside the lens. A low humming noise boomed from the lamp as a bright yellow band of light shot from the lamp and splashed in a wide arc of illumination around him.

Davis walked down the darkened corridor towards Joey Tell's stateroom; the circle of yellow light flickered around him. The stateroom doors on either side of him had been opened wide by the loss of power. Davis reached the stateroom and walked across the threshold.

Joey Tell's body swung back and forth in the flickering yellow light; a nylon rope was buried in the folds of his throat and tied around the steel rails of the ceiling. His face was black and his lips pulled upward over his teeth in frozen agony and his red, wild staring eyes seemed to look up toward the starry cosmos accusingly.

The four crew members of the Intrepid walked single file on the trail through the jungle of the tank. They looked like faceless automatons in their black visored helmets and pressure suits. The overhead pipes had been shut off and now the black rain slowly oozed from the nozzles, scattering dark droplets upon the men. The green shrubs and ferns had already begun to burn brown and wither, and the coral pillars were drying, their rainbow colors beginning to bleach white.

The four men reached the outer ring of the undergrowth and circled around the perimeter of the clearing. In the center of the ground before them, there stood a statue of a man. The statue was carved in rough-hewn coral blocks. The shape of the trunk-like limbs and the oversized sphere for the head suggested the symmetry of a space suit. Long ribbons of interwoven grass blades and leaves were tied around the hands and shoulders of the effigy and anchored tightly to slivers of coral driven into the ground. There were seven small black corpses huddled together in a crescent half buried

in the dry mud, their dull gray eyes fixed upon the empty stone face towering above them.

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Harvey Canter

Woolrich into *Noir*: A Study in Filmic Possibilities

> Nelson pushed through the revolving door (of the automat) at twenty to one in the morning, his squadmate, Sarecky, in the compartment behind him. They stepped clear and looked around. The place looked funny. Almost all the little white tables had helpings of food on them, but no one was at them eating. There was a big black crowd ganged up over in one corner, thick as bees and sending up a buzz. One or two were standing up on chairs, trying to see over the heads of the ones in front, rubbering like a flock of cranes.
>
> The crowd burst apart, and a cop came through. "Now stand back. Get away from this table, all of you," he was saying. "There's nothing to see. The man's dead—that's all."

These are the two opening paragraphs of "Murder at the Automat." a story by Cornell Woolrich, one of the premier "pulp" writers of the Depression and war years. This brief passage captures the quintessence of the Woolrichian world view, and contains the seeds of his most predominant and consistent themes. It is also a scene so well conceived that it cries out for translation into film, specifically into a *film noir*. The object of this study will be to give an overview of the themes present in a specific set of short stories by Cornell Woolrich and to show the affinity between these themes and themes common to *film noir* in general. I will also try to demonstrate the acute visual perception of Woolrich, that his narrative gracefully lends itself to filmic interpretation in the style that is distinctly *film noir*.

The picture presented in the opening of "Murder at the Automat" is typical of narrative patterns in Woolrich. His is a world of darkness, where morality is buried in the shadows of

a depraved, pernicious urban environment. Woolrich pulls us face first into an oblique tableau of a world where things are askew, awry, disjointed, crooked and wrong. "Almost all the little white tables had helpings of food on them, but no one was eating." A man lies dead over there, slumped over a table "a white streak on his chin, and a half-eaten sandwich under his face." He has been unexpectedly poisoned, his life abrogated by a doctored bologna sandwich. Every night for six months he had been coming to this automat and had purchased the same sixty-cent sandwich, and now this. "There's death in little habits," says Nelson later on. The crowd pushes around the table of death, but they don't care about the man any more than the cop does, the cop who dismisses the sudden tragedy with the indifference of a man snubbing out a cigarette-butt with the heel of his shoe. The man's death has meaning only for Nelson who, bound by duty, must find the killer.

To classify formally the themes present in the Woolrich stories examined in this study ("After Dinner Story", "The Night Reveals", "Marihuana", "Rear Window." "Murder Story", and "Murder at the Automat"), we might say that the predominant characteristic is the disintegration of normative values and expectations. Instead of a reliable, stable and moral world, we are presented with a universe governed by coincidence, unpredictability and a blurred sense of good and evil. Woolrich takes a fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature; even his "heroes" are unpure. Though the bedridden Hal Jeffries uncovers a murder in "Rear Window", we can still honestly say that he is a nosey neighbor, a certified Peeping Tom. Even Nelson in "Murder at the Automat" can only arrive at the truth by himself poisoning the murderer. At best, the protagonists in a Woolrich story are characterized by their ability to function in the world with a lesser amount of viciousness than most people. There is a sort of justice in the actions of Jeffries and Nelson, but it is not the clean cut of justice that we would like to see; it is justice pared with a dull blade. The police in a Woolrich story are depicted as brutal and corrupt, or just plain stupid. By making the "good guys" so loathsome, Woolrich merely increases the sense of moral

ambiguity.

Fate takes a heavy hand in any Woolrich scenario. "After Dinner Story" is a perfect example in which seven men are arbitrarily involved in an elevator accident that kills two of them. One of the two, however, was murdered after the crash by one of the other unlucky riders; the police, for lack of any other evidence, figure the death to be a suicide caused by stress. Fate will continue to act on the group until the murdered man's father exacts his revenge a year later. The point is that if any of them had not gotten on that particular elevator, he could have been free of Fate and its after effects. As one man whines on the elevator, "I wish I hadn't come back after that damn phone call. It was a wrong number, and I could've ridden down the trip before this." MacKenzie, the protagonist of the story, immediately has the answer. "You guys talk like a bunch of ten year olds! It's happened; what's the good of wishing about it?" Woolrich then comments, "(MacKenzie) wouldn't have described himself as a brave man, he was just a realist." Characters in Woolrich either accept or struggle with Fate, but all are powerless to affect it.

People's lives in these stories are reduced to a series of daily habits that seal their fate. Hal Jeffries is able to diagnose a murder strictly by observing behavioral patterns in his rear window neighbors; in "Murder Story" a man dies because of his own vanity and hypochondria; and in "Murder at the Automat" Avram dies because of his stinginess. For Nelson, finding the murderer will be merely a process of finding the man to fit the habits described by the witnesses.

> The public at large thinks detective work is something miraculous, like pulling rabbits out of a silk hat. They don't realize that no adult is a free agent—that they're tied hand and foot by tiny, harmless little habits, and held helpless. This man has a habit of taking a snack to eat at midnight in a public place. He has a habit of picking his teeth after he's through of lingering on at the table, or looking back over his shoulder aimlessly from time to time. Combine that with a stocky build, a dark complexion and you have

him! What more d'ya want, a spotlight trained on him?

By crystallizing life into habits, Woolrich levels out humanity in the face of Fate. He seems to be saying that we all victimize ourselves, that we are all individually responsible for where we are at any given moment. It is only left for Fate to decide if, at that moment, it will choose to flatten us with a careless backhand blow. Paranoia in a Woolrich story often materializes into just another machination of Fate, paranoia grown out of fear, fear grown out of helplessness, helplessness to change anything about ourselves that can alter our destiny.

Just because we are reading the penny-a-word stories of a notorious "pulp writer", one of Edmund Wilson's "Boys in the Back Room", it does not change the fact that Woolrich is expounding a fundamental and profound brand of Existentialism. In these stories, life ends suddenly, without warning, without apparent meaning—and no one cares. When Avram's wife is told of his miserly husband's death at the automat, her first question is can she turn on the lights now that he is gone. Life is cheap in Woolrich's world, and its purpose is often moot.

In "The Night Reveals" and "Murder at the Automat" Woolrich's protagonists take the high road of Existentialism and decide to take positive action in the face of a seemingly meaningless existence. It is a lonely road, one strewn with obstacles and dead ends; often its travellers are abused by those who no longer care to try and affect their own passage. The good man in a Woolrich story takes responsibility for arriving at justice and truth, even though he must often employ shady means to achieve these objectives. Moral absolutes disappear. Truth, at best, becomes a mirror covered with a thin layer of steam—but at least the good man tries to assimilate the image of truth. Truth and justice walk a very fine line between injustice and no justice.

Nelson wasn't the kind of a dick that would rather have had a wrong guy than no guy at all, like some of them. He wanted the right guy, or none at all.

Woolrich has a way of wreaking havoc with our day to day security. Time and again, for character after character, an everyday, mundane existence is turned into an upside-down, nightmare world of crime, entered seemingly without effort and often on the basis of a momentary misconception. As William Tucker says of himself at the outset of "Murder Story," "I wasn't one of those people things happen to, that you read about in the papers. I was part of the scene." But Tucker nonetheless becomes a murderer out of his own petty vengefulness—once he is presented with the right opportunity. MacKenzie of "After Dinner Story" is a water filter salesman, but this does not prevent him from becoming involved as a witness to a murder, and a possible victim of a begrieved father's perverse sense of justice. For all his efforts, Hal Jeffries is nearly murdered himself.

Misconceptions serve to doom several of Woolrich's characters. Harry Jordan, the humble fire inspector, takes it on heresay that his son has perished in a fire set by his pyromaniac wife. Jordan is literally beside himself at the scene of the fire.

> Somebody was hollering "My kid! my kid!" right next to him until he thought he'd go nuts. Then, when he turned to look, it was himself.

In this moment of what Francis Nivens calls "feverish emotionalism" Jordan returns to his apartment and shoots his wife, only to have his son walk in—alive—from the next room.

A stoned King Turner in "Marihuana" believes that he has stabbed a friend. He flees, seizing a revolver along the way. In his mad attempt to escape, Turner kills a cop and his estranged wife. Turner dies after a shootout, falling from a window ledge onto the street below. At the end we discover that he had never stabbed his friend at all—that it was a sight gag pulled off to make fun of his drugged condition.

The tone of Woolrich's writing lends strength to his thematic concerns. He is cool and detached, but can never resist the opportunity to inject sardonic, black humor into the action. His caricatures of newsboys and counter-people

provide comic relief and a much needed buffer from the break-neck pacing and nail-biting tension that are the hallmark of his writings. In theme and temperament Woolrich is a perfect match for the consciousness that later would typify *film noir*. The situations and conditions present in his work are a natural mates for a film style that constantly seeks to deal with characters who are almost always helpless in their own dealings with a dark and polluted world.

The visual *mise en scène* in a Woolrich story reinforces his somber notion of humanity. Woolrich has a natural feel for a dark world and the play of light—literally and figuratively—within that world. His acute cinematic sense is evident in "After Dinner Story" when workmen cut the accident victims out of the dark elevator with a blowtorch.

> A spark materialized eerily through the ceiling. Then another, then a semicircular gush of them. A curtain of fire descended halfway into their midst illuminating their faces wanly for a minute . . . the sparks kept coming down like waterfalls . . .

The stories usually move at a fast pace through a varied maze of city scenes and dingy, claustrophobic rooms. The city streets are usually deserted, as in "The Night Reveals" where Harry Jordan tracks his pyromaniac wife down empty, tenebrous sidewalks and into darkened doorways. "The blackness of its yawning entryway seemed to suck her in . . . it was like trying to peer through black velvet." A man must tread cautiously through these dimly lit urban alleyways and corridors that serve as landscape in a Woolrich episode. The city at night is a jungle of unknown quantities, and death waits in shadows of danger.

Woolrich also has a penchant for describing specific spots within a cityscape, such as newsstands, candystores and this description of a Hopper-esque diner in "Marihuana":

> . . . (it was) a long narrow lunchroom with a dozing vagrant or two nodding in the one-armed chairs, and no employee any nearer than the counter far at the back.

Characters in Woolrich must also move through cryptic hallways and stifling stairways and rooms. In another section of "Marihuana," King Turner has been taken by a group of "friends" to a "weed ranch" (not as picturesque as it sounds; it is a cheap building in the seamy part of town) to smoke reefers and forget his problems. Woolrich's narrative speaks for itself.

> There were stairs ahead, lit–or rather hinted at–by a single bead of gaslight, the size of a yellow pea, hovering over a jet sticking out of the wall . . . They tiptoed up (the stairs) Indian file. They had to go that way, the rickety case was too narrow to take two of them abreast . . . (then) they were standing at the end of a long "railway" hall that seemed to go on indefinitely into the distance. A solitary light bulb overhead was made even dimmer with a jacket of crepe paper . . .

It takes only a short step of the imagination to see the filmic possibilities inherent in such vivid description. Woolrich's concentration on tepid light fixtures automatically implies the strong shadows that are part and parcel of any *film noir* presentation.

Stairs are a favorite *film noir* motif and appear with varying degrees of importance in each of these stories, but they appear nonetheless. Stairs suggest inevitability, repetition and claustrophobia, and offer endless filmic possibilities that need only directorial imagination in camera and light placement to create further suggestion and mood. In a film, claustrophobia can be suggested by tight camera shots, but Woolrich must rely on building it into his surroundings. The elevator entrapment in "After Dinner Story," the confinement of Hal Jeffries in "Rear Window," and the refuge of King Turner in a darkened phone booth in "Marihuana" all seem to suggest that caged-in feeling that so often plagues characters in the world of *film noir*. Again, good camera work in these situations can only serve to enhance the masterful work of Woolrich.

We have amassed quite a case for the fluid translation of

Woolrich's writings into the *film noir* style on a thematic and visual level. Other Woolrich themes, such as the race against time and the erosion of love and trust (detailed by Nivens in his introduction to *Nightwebs*) are a large part of the body of Woolrichian and *film noir* concerns, but were simply not a major factor in these selected stories. The writings of Woolrich were indeed ripe territory for the *noir* school, as the several films made from his writings can testify.

Woolrich has a way of making a man's life and the "choices" that influence it about as significant as a single grain of sand on a vast expanse of beach. Think about that the next time you sit down to eat a bologna sandwich.

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Scott Memmer

The Necessity of Communication

When I was a boy, people were always going around the house talking. I don't know why there were talking—what they said seemed to be of no particular importance—but my memories of boyhood seem filled with the swelling of human voices, with the constant flow of words. Here's my sister talking to her Raggedy Ann, here's my mother talking to the cat ("Did you see the way Sally's ears perked up when I said cheese? Oh, you just love cheese, don't you, Sally?"), here's my brother imploring his broken bicycle to fix itself, here's my father's nightly lecture ("You children have entirely too much time on your hands; you children will not watch more than two hours of television."). That boyhood was spent in midwestern suburbia, in a neighborhood as guiltless and unbesmirched as the snow which fell upon it in winter; but even in that far-removed place, people were trying to make connections, establish rapport, investigate consciousness. In the middle of this neighborhood was a stream (we called it a "crick") which ran under bridges, behind houses, dissecting lawns and hedgerows, and in the winter, this stream, scarcely more than ten feet wide, would freeze over, and we would skate on it. What I recall more than anything about that time, was the way human voices would echo through the woods, the way a whisper could carry as far as a softball hit off the end of a bat in summer. These people were not uttering truisms; they were not discussing "Art" or "Culture" or "The Theatre" (theirs were common thoughts, spoken in a common tongue), and yet the memory of their voices sounding out against the fading, violet, February sky is something I have never forgotten. It wasn't just their voices, but the inflections; it wasn't so much what they said, as how they said it. These were people (implicitly, I felt) who cared—and about something other than ice-skating. They needed to speak, that was it! Memory plays tricks on us all (everything seems so

important when you're young!), but I think I'm correct in saying that there was a vehemence of conviction in that wintertime air, a bite from something other than Jack Frost. These were the people of my small world—these were the people I knew—and they, as I, needed to speak.

So, too, does the artist need to speak. He must live to communicte, must be articulation enacted, spirit breathed into movement and form; it's his duty. If he is the lone voice speaking, still he must speak, for artists, whether we know it or not, are our better halves; they are that part of us which remains awake while the rest of us are sleeping, and oftentimes they are the only ones listening to the slow, still, sad music of humanity. Above the roar of the machine and the noiseless thought of the computer, there must be a voice which is reasonable and clear. "The cultivation of poetry," Shelley has written, "is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature." There must be a voice. It must be heard. It may be the end of the world, and there may be one bird left singing in the last tree in our last remaining meadow . . . still, the voice must be heard. It may be shrill, strident and bothersome—it may be something we don't want to hear at that particular moment—but it will come from the center of us all, and it will therefore be most true. It is not a new thought that the universe is void without humanity; I say more: humanity is void without its artists.

If that last tree falls, and that last bird stops singing, who, should we be deprived of our artists, would come back to tell us how the tree sounded, crashing through all that underbrush, unsettling the earth with a dull thud?

You see, what I'm speaking about here has nothing to do with the "accomplishments" or man, but with the "work" of man. There's a difference. The difference is that, in the former, we have an object—a street or a bridge or an airport—which has mass and volume and dimension, and which can, if we wish, be measured (it is a "thing" located in time), whereas the latter has to do with things which cannot be measured—

processes rather than products—which are ongoing as opposed to finite, and which are, by definition, amorphous and undefined. A work of art, although it possesses "thing-ness," is not a thing, for it aspires to more than particularity; it aspires to infinity. The final end of any work of art is to shed new light on human consciousness, to, in Shelley's words, "strip the veil of familiarity from the world" and cleanse our organs of perception.

So we are all skaters on undulating streams of consciousness, and we hear the sounds of other skaters in the woods.

And art receives much by asking little.

And the artist is a friend not only to himself, but to all of humanity.

But the human race, too confused and disturbed most of the time to know what it wants, is going in the wrong direction. Someone has to be out there in the trenches, putting flowers in the gunbarrels, sabotaging the ammo dump, scattering the horses—and the artist is the man for the job. He is by his very nature a recalcitrant, already despised by half or more of the population, so it matters little to him whether he gains a few friends or loses them. He is the upsettor, the bolshevik, the bohemian. And his concern is chiefly human, not with the war but with the man within the war, with what that war does to him, how he changes, how his world changes. His interest is with the sensate, with the inner states of things as opposed to the outer—with "man-ness" as opposed to "thing-ness":

"I walk through the long school room questioning . . ."

"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same . . ."

"Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep."

Always the human, always the human. We measure the things that are new to us against a backdrop of the things we already know, and what we know best is our own humanity. And continually it has been our artists, our writers, who have

come back time and again to tell us what it was like out there in the world, how the human mind worked, how it felt to be human at such and such a time, how it feels to be human now. All the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, we are, as a species, pretty much as we were; we have changed little. What has changed has been our environment, and with that indelible upthrust of industrialization which occurred some hundred-odd years ago man has had to twist himself into some fairly ridiculous poses. But what impresses most in the end is man's incredible resiliency, the way he handles it all. Should he be allowed to continue—should he be allowed to survive—he will not, as Faulkner has said, merely survive, he will prevail.

So we are all skaters on this stream . . . somewhere. Voices come through the trees . . . they rise and fall . . . the snow sparkles and shimmers . . . what does it all mean? It means ostensibly nothing, unless we have the ability to shape it into an utterance of our own voice, unless we can look out at this universe which may mean absolutely nothing, and, knowing that it means nothing, proceed without caution, for it is the only world we have. We must learn that to be human is to be flawed, and that in our folly also lies our greatness; for though we were not made perfect, we were at least made capable of a boundless compassion, and it is our compassion afterall which distinguishes us from the other species. Until the time when we come to that last bird on that last tree in our last God-forsaken meadow, it should be remembered that we all have the capacity for song, and that frequently it is in the hearing of another voice—distant, hollow, alone and constrained—that we find our own true way of singing.

"A work of art," the poet Rilke has written, "is good if it has sprung from necessity." It is this necessity, ultimately, which defines us. Man creates, not because he wants or likes to; not because he thinks it will draw favor from his neighbor; not because he believes in any larger sense that he will cheat fate someday and therefore become immortal; not because he desires wealth or comfort or joy or leisure, but because he needs to.

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