

CAT HISTORIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Cat Histories: A Collection of Short Stories portrays young, idealistic characters that are confronted with the harsh realities of life and share a longing for a better, more optimistic past. Six of the stories are set in Mississippi in the Seventies and Eighties. The eccentricities of this culture are most relevant in *Decency*, *The Tennis Player*, and *Lips Like Bruised Berries*. Four Stories detail the relationship between Peck and Radley, from bliss through decline, amid the difficulties of mental instability and infidelity, to their virtual end.

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KATYDIDS

Our feet were so dirty and dusty in the summer we went barefoot all the time. Granmaw would give us a dime a piece or a quarter to go to the store and pick out candy. I liked the orange wax harp because I could chew different notes into it. But I could never make music on it. Lucy liked those tiny wax cola bottles with juice in them. Lucy was still little and did not know her numbers and letters. She drew an orange scribble and said it was Granmaw. It did not look like a person at all. And I told her not to draw on the walls.

Our feet were cold on Granmaw's wooden floors in winter. When I got up to go to the bathroom in the pitch black night I would creep on my toes into the small square room and reach for the light chain before I was safe from stepping on a slug. All of us had done it. Felt the cold jelly goo through the toes or on the instep. Granmaw slept with a silver pistol under her pillow. She showed it to me once but would not let me touch it. She slept with Lucy in the back room. I was in the middle room and when Momma and Daddy were there they slept in the front room. The windows were thick beveled glass that could not be seen through from inside or outside. There were curtains by my bed that had baseball hats from every team printed on them. I used to imagine that I was wearing one of them and played out scenes in mind of being in a uniform and pitching or batting against the others. On the other side of my bed there was an old door that had

been boarded up and painted over. It led to Granpaw's room. A door into the kitchen did too. Granmaw would lock the door from the kitchen to our hallway when we went to bed at night. Sometimes he pounded on that door and wailed.

I had been in Granpaw's room before. It smelled like cough syrup and vomit. Thick dust covered his chest of drawers and in the mirror above it I thought I saw an X in red drawn across it. There was a big garbage barrel in the back yard they burned the trash in. I liked to watch but Granmaw wouldn't let me stand too close. Sometimes there were red and white and blue cans more than a hundred of them.

One night when Momma was not there Granpaw busted through the door by my bed. Granmaw grabbed our hands and ran us out to the porch and locked the front door with a skeleton key. I saw through the corner of my eye when we ran an old man in suspenders and long socks on the floor in the living room pounding his fists and feet against the rug. We heard him stumble over the table and big leather chair and telephone. We heard his cries like a hurting animal. I saw my sister's eyes. Granmaw gathered us up in her long fat arms on the big oak swing. She told us to listen to the trees. On the other side of the street the leaves were singing "*Katie did*," she said and on our side they were singing "*Katie didn't*." I wondered if she had her pistol with her that night.

I remember Granpaw sitting in front of the TV watching Lawrence Welk, or out under the sweetgum tree in his lounge chair with his cane over his lap. I wondered if he was imagining things like I do or if he was reliving his life. As I got older I wondered how much regret there was.

THE TENNIS PLAYER

Suzanne stood at one of the small square tables, the white table cloth and her long blue skirt rippling in the wind. Hair blown into long tangles over the right side of her face. On the table she had a paper plate of deviled eggs and her bourbon coke. There was a smear of yolk in the corners of her mouth, and a little blood. She rolled those rebellious brown eyes over to glance at me from time to time. I was standing on the other side of the gazebo, finishing the last of my bourbon. The party was over, and everything but Suzanne's table had been taken away. She and I were all that was left of Baby King's reception for his oldest daughters wedding.

I had wanted to leave hours ago. There was a hurricane out in the Gulf about 600 miles away and we were under a tornado watch. I could feel how heavy the sky was. It would be pouring any minute. I had heard rumbles of thunder, miles to the South.

The unmarried couples and stags had already left. They had declared their need to party and scooted off toward Greenville while there was still some discernable light under these purple clouds. The wind charged as if it were coming from beneath the ground and blew the hem of her skirt up above her waist, flipped over the paper plate. She walked to me, slipped off her heels. We would have to trudge across the grass, collecting rain in our clothes. I would not walk through the King's house. Suzanne took

down a bridesmaid tonight. She would be intent on stoic silence for the rest of the night as it would be too hard to play the sulking child.

I have seen funnel clouds in the sky before. I was never afraid, but excited by them. When I was younger, we would hold storm parties, and celebrate the rain and lightning with rum and whiskey in my cousin's house with the stereo blasting and all the windows open. Couples under the amber influence would fight, a face would be slapped, and someone's girl would run out into the black air and soaking rain, crying and screaming, and someone else would run out for the fruits of rescue. A boy would declare his fifteen years of love for a girl in his eighteen year old heart with slurs in his mouth. Someone would get jumped just for fun, and it would turn angry. Suzanne was younger. She and her friends tried to mimic us, but I can't believe they ever got as crazy.

There is a bean tree in my cousin Mali's yard between the carport and the front porch steps. The pods would turn yellow at the end of the summer. I was on my bicycle, pulling off the pods, opening them up, just fidgeting. Mali's daughter, Sayra, and some of her friends from Junior high were there. Kenny King, Christine Maun, a boy from Sidon who brought vodka in a shampoo bottle, and this new girl on the front porch steps. She had long thick red hair, freckles on her thin arms. I thought she was a cute flat chested kid. They had decided that they would have a storm party on that bright Saturday afternoon.

“Sayra swears it’s gonna rain,” she said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Sayra swears. And I don’t care if it don’t rain anyway, we’re gonna have a good time. You wanna sip of this? It ain’t shampoo it’s vodka.”

“Yuk. Tastes like soap.”

“Tastes like vodka to me. I like it better with Dr Pepper, but I can drink it straight too.” She lifted the bottle and just barely wet her lips. She looked straight at me with those intentionally serious brown eyes, and her brow creased.

“Woo!”

She and Christine started fusing about who was going to make Kenny King his first real drink.

Christine Maun, my cousin Sayra, and Suzanne Wiles were inseparable all through school. On summer nights they would sit at the picnic table under the sweetgum by the tennis court and play poker for sweetgum balls. They would sneak over behind the old church to smoke cigarettes. They competed with each other for one of the King brothers, Boyd McBride, and other boys their own age. Through high school I didn’t pay much attention to them, though some of my classmates did. I thought they were too young, and just assumed that they had all dated everyone but me. Matches were made and broken in between classes at that tiny school.

I can still see little Suzanne's eyes, and compare them to my wife's eyes. They look the same, of course, but the expression around them has changed and their affect on me has intensified. In my mind I do not even think of them as the same being. That sassy kid became the woman who has given me more bliss and misery, more happiness and gloom, than I ever thought was possible for a man on this earth. Behind those eyes I know there are sparks of pride. I imagined they were also dampened by a smaller sense of shame.

What I loved were the summer nights at the tennis court. Even after hundreds of nights my heart still hopped at the prospect. Fifty cents in the grey metal box on the light pole bought two and a half hours of light. A quarter in the coke machine at the gas station got you a strawberry Fanta. Or peach or vanilla. In high school we were bringing six-packs, and people from Sidon and Greenwood were coming to play. There were cars parked all around the courts on some nights with their doors open and stereos on. I developed a strong serve and by the end of my sophomore summer no one who came to play could beat me.

It was just a concrete slab with a crack running through the east side, but the net was good. It stood on the lot next door to the old Methodist church that my parents were married in. That little church had been boarded up for all the years I could remember. Back in the sixties, a young bearded preacher had suggested that the congregation "Invite

our Negro brothers and sisters to worship with us.” Momma, Aunt Bay, Charlie Canner and his family did not walk out. My Grand Uncle Amos did, along with the other thirty something members of the congregation.

After the wedding of Barbara King and Randall Connor, the reception was held on Baby King’s lawn. He must have had ten acres cut out of his farmland for the mansion and the large covered patio behind it. I was not worried about anything. I had found a friend at the party. We talked and I kept one eye on Suzanne. She was at the food tables with a few of her friends, being real sweet to each one of them. The wedding party was not announced, but the way they came in was choreographed. I didn’t imagine a glare across the room, or the heightened nervous energy. Christine, the Maid of Honor, came in wearing a long yellow dress. Kenny King, her husband, wore a gray tux. They tried hard to notice everyone but Suzanne. She and I started the dancing, the wedding party and the single couples filled the floor. We got daring, even a little slutty. She had a long powerful body.

I saw her on the court one day in the summer after I graduated from State. She was taller than I remembered, with strong legs long enough to reach anything on the back court. Long arms for a powerful smooth shot, and her back worked on every stroke. She had become something extraordinary. Fierce and passionate, pounding her opponent, a boy that followed her back from Tulane.

“I swear, Hodge. He follows me around like a little puppy dog. I try not to encourage him. Be rude when you see him, or act like we’re lovers and he’ll go away.”

Her real power was not in her legs, her back, her arms. She had been well educated. In previous summers when I would come back from college to stay with Momma, I saw Suzanne rarely. She had become a tall, big breasted, beautiful girl, one of the local ‘hot babes’, never without a date. By the time she graduated from high school she had been engaged twice. Once to Kenny King, and once, even earlier, to a summer love in Panama City. That summer that I saw her on the court I no longer thought of her as a kid. I was too amazed by her beauty. She was so animated and exciting.

She started coming to all my matches in Greenville, Yazoo City, and Jackson. She was dominant in the stands. More acquainted with cheering at football games, it was hard for her to keep quiet. At times, during a tough match, I would look up and she would be gritting her teeth, making a fist, her eyes on mine. And if I was near enough to her seat so that she could shout a whisper without getting thrown out of the stands, “Beat him, Baby. He’s weak. He’s afraid of you.” She was excited by the tennis scene. She loved meeting people, gathering up friends and acquaintances like a collection. Practicing the art of how to be when seeing this one, or what to say to that one. She worried about being the prettiest girl on the court. She usually was.

Winning on the court was important to me. Suzanne needed to win in any room she walked into. I knew she was playing me. Like she played her father for a new Trans

Am before she was a sophomore. Like she played Kenny King, the boy from Tulane, her friends. She would call me up, just oozing over the phone about how she wanted my hands on her, and to be alone all night with me, only to beg me the same night to take her to a college party. She would flirt with every man in the room, but we always ended up in the darkness of my car, or in my tiny apartment. I am curious now, why at that time it was more important to me to be amused and surprised by her, rather than sure. Maybe I needed that, and the uncertainty, to stay excited. When I needed to talk about love, she played that part as truthfully as any other.

One night we were out at the little dam south of Greenwood, where people liked to park and party. We were having a good time, and I was feeling comfortable with her, and a little proud when she wound her arms around me. One of the girls there mentioned how nice it was that Kenny King and Christine were finally getting together.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Kenny had to settle like that.” Suzanne said, “I was praying he would find a good girl at Ole Miss, just praying he would.”

Driving toward home that night, I pulled over on a side road. Her breaths were short and desperate sounding. I felt tears on her face. I turned on the overhead light and saw how red the eyes, and her wet lips.

“Why am I like that, Hodge?”

And then she looked at me with stern serious eyes, “Don’t let me get away with it. You got to save me, Hodge. Don’t let me get away with anything on you, ever.”

I couldn't imagine a better lover. I could not imagine any other woman that could keep me more alive. So one year later I asked her to marry me, and talked to her father.

In Mr. Wile's den it was always too warm. It was all made out of cedar and you could hear the floor and the walls squeeze and moan.

"We used to go out drinking sometimes. Your father was a good man, Hodge. He didn't know nothing about farming. But I liked him."

"I did too."

Sitting behind his heavy desk, he produced a bottle and a glass.

"Here, have a drink, boy."

It was always warm bourbon, no ice.

"You want to marry my Zanna."

"I do."

"Or do you have to?"

"I want to."

Jonathon Wiles was a big landowner. I had heard of them years before they moved here. They were living in Sidon when his wife ran off with somebody. He

married a much younger woman, and bought her a brick mansion several miles out of town on Beaver Creek. He brought her, and Suzanne, with him.

“What are your plans?”

“I’m teaching part time. And playing.”

“Not much.”

“I’m thinking of working on a doctorate so I can teach college.”

“Uh-huh. See that deer head up there? That’s hers. She was a better hunter than my boys. But what I mean to tell you, Hodge, and you probably already know. What she wants, she gets. Can you handle it? I don’t know you can.”

“That’s not the problem you—“

“I don’t think anybody can. But you got your shot. Your Daddy was a good man. She gets a fourth of my land when I’m dead and buried with my bones.”

He poured another glass for himself.

“You played tennis at State didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Were you good?”

“Yes, I was. I still am pretty good.”

“Not much of a game really. I never followed it much, but that’s all right.”

I started playing the higher rounds. In Memphis, Louisville, Charlotte, Jacksonville. Zanna made most of the trips with me. She would set up a little house in the hotel rooms, with photographs and banners on the walls. She brought her own monogrammed pillowcases and her own comforters. She invited players and their wives or girlfriends over. I never got past the quarter finals in the largest tournaments. The younger players, 15 or 16 or 17, that had grown up playing clay and grass all their lives, the type I used to beat easily, were quick and powerful enough to recover from the mistakes I led them into. My mind was still strong and determined, but I started to struggle physically.

Bobby Perry was a player that I had had an equal record against in college. We often were paired in the lower rounds, and I usually beat him in three of four sets. He looked old and slow, like he didn’t belong, and I felt sorry for him. Occasionally we would work out together. He talked about quitting. He was one year younger than I.

She did not come with me to Richmond. She said she wanted to go to Christine’s wedding. I was feeling great on the courts and won the lower rounds easily. In the quarter finals I was playing a blonde kid from Florida. He could not have been 17, and he was powerful but I knew how to play him. I kept breaking his serve and that shook his confidence. I was up on him two sets to none. During my first service in the third set we played a long volley, both of us working the back court, hitting hard low

shots. He lobbed one low over the center of the court. It was one I should have let go but I reached and my legs did a split on the clay. I heard something pop loose in my knee. I could hardly stand, but finished the match, losing 3 to 2. Even before I went in to surgery in Memphis, a week later, I knew I would never play in serious competition again.

While I was laid up, she labored over the apartment. Painted flowers on the tiles in the kitchen, re-tiled the bath, hung paintings and ceramic pieces on the walls. She lugged color and music into every room. I loved her little collection of bracelets and earrings on the nightstand by the bed, and her cinnamon smell.

We had our skirmishes, and she was a fighter. She would shriek and punch and kick. Sometimes it took every ounce of my will to keep from hitting her back. One night we were out drinking with some friends, and I was paying a lot of attention to Dusty MaCane's little vivacious girlfriend. We were chasing shots of whiskey with cans of beer, and laughing. We tried to dance but were so drunk, she fell all over me. Suzanne sat quietly stewing, her arms folded across her chest. When we got home she threw plates at me, then glasses, then she took out after me with a full wine bottle. It became funny, both of us laughing but I had to run out the backdoor, and didn't come back till I thought she was sleeping. But I found her laying face down on the couch crying.

Her pride hurt us both in some ways. She was unhappy with my position, a landowner's daughter married to a failed athlete teaching high school. I think that was behind a lot of our arguments, and every argument, regardless of its origin, became a

competition to win or lose. But she filled up my life, and I loved her, so we were married and a year later she had our child.

Tonight, at the party, she was focused on Kenny and Christine King.

“Look at her grinding away at him. I’d like to take that bitch down, Hodge.”

There was a streak of ranch dressing on her bottom lip. Her eyes were large and loose with liquor.

“That would be weird, Baby.”

“I was born weird. That’s why you love me, right?”

I didn’t hear the glass bust, sending shards of clear points into the air, causing several people in front of me to back away. Over their heads, I saw my angel’s long hands full of Christine King’s black hair, bending her down to the floor. There was scratching and screaming. And slapping at each other with shouts and curses. I pushed someone out of the way and grabbed her by the waist. I pulled her up and we drew backward through the crowd.

The wedding party left almost immediately. Everyone was gone within the hour. Suzanne fixed a place for herself, at that table, with a plate and a drink, signaling her insistence to stay put. She spoke to no one. I know in that mind there was a tiny spark of glee, but she kept from catching eyes with anyone and looked down when I caught hers.

The shouts I had heard clearly from Suzanne were, “Kenny still loves me. Ask him about the Holiday Inn in Leland, Bitch! Ask him about that.”

I decided to pick up Edward. Mrs. Dyer would have kept him overnight but I knew he was mine and I wanted him with me. Suzanne held Edward in her lap and I thought about how it used to feel to watch her play with him, and read to him, and keep her body near ours as a home.

After putting him to bed she came to me. Her eyes were beautiful, sweet, and defiant. I put my hand around her neck and squeezed. She froze. I wanted to kill her. I held her until she started shaking. I let go. She fell to her knees. I walked into Edward’s room and picked him up in my arms.

“Hodge. Hodge don’t leave me. What will I do. What will I do.”

I walked out.

DECENCY

When he pulled into Atchicola it was still dark. He had been up for hours. Henry always woke before daybreak. He would leave his wife asleep, shave and dress, and in a white shirt and black tie, meet his oldest son downstairs in the kitchen. They would fry some eggs and bacon, boil some grits, eat in silence, or speak in whispers so as not to wake the others, and take off to work in separate directions by sunrise. That morning Henry had gotten up earlier than usual and ate by himself. He took his briefcase, stuffed with invoices, an old worn Bible, and a large potato sack that he had set aside the night before, and stepped out of the house, careful to close the door quietly.

He drove slowly through the little town, but when he hit the gravel road that led further out into the country he gunned the old Lincoln. He believed that you had to drive fast on gravel to get anywhere, and that you had to stay in the middle of the road, even around blind curves, or you would skip off into the ditch. He slowed to cross the wooden bridge over Beaver Creek, by then the large orange sun was low on the horizon. The road forked, and he took the smaller, dustier branch that curved around a large field of soy bean on the right. A thicket of forest bordering Pinchback Lake on the left. He pulled into a dirt drive beside a blue house, opened the car door, it was already hot. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe the dust off his glasses, picked up the sack and stepped out of the car.

It was a shock to him to see how much smaller the house was than he remembered. Paint was chipping, and the roof looked like it was about to cave in. The screen around the porch was torn out and the screen door was loose on its hinges. He stepped across the porch, creaking under his feet, and knocked on the front door of the house.

“Miss Ella?”

He knocked louder. “Miss Ella! You in there?”

“Deaf as a post,” he whispered to himself.

He opened the door into a dark musty room. There was an old upright piano against the right wall, and an old woman lying on her back in a small white bed. Her feet near an inner door that led to the back of the house. She was fully dressed, wire spectacles folded on her chest, and a cane by her right side.

“Miss Ella? You alright?”

Henry stood over her for a few minutes. She looked to him to be about 80 pounds, and he knew she had to be at least 80 years old. His mind instantly compared her to old photographs, still stored in his memory, taken when she was younger, heavier.

“Miss Ella.” He touched her shoulder.

“Oh.”

“It’s Henry Lusk.”

She was sitting up, unfolding her spectacles, "Who?"

"Henry Lusk," he spoke louder. "And what are you doin' in bed, it must be six o'clock. You're worse than Martha."

She chuckled. "Oh, I've been up. I was just taking a little nap. Mr. Henry, my, my."

"The front door was wide open. Somebody coulda' come in here and robbed you blind."

"Nobody bothers me."

"They'd better not. I'd have to take out my pistol," he said. "It's hot as hell fire in here. Don't your air conditioner work?"

"I think so. I run it in the afternoons."

He walked over and pushed each button on the old unit until it shuddered and rumbled on. He pulled a shade up and the light exposed a wide band of dust in the air.

"What are you doing way out here, Henry?"

"I came to check on you. An' I think I'm gonna have to take a whip out on your chilren and your grands too. Don't they take care of you. The house looks like it's about to fall down."

"They come out sometimes. Lucille gets me my meals everyday."

“Can she cook? You look like a light breeze could blow you right off.”

“She does right good. You shouldn’t be out here worryin’ over me, Henry.”

“Where would I be, Miss Ella.” Henry sat on an old brown couch. “You worried over me when I was little.”

“You boys weren’t too much trouble. An’ your mother was just fine. I still miss her. She was fine.”

Henry noticed a certain bliss in those eyes and smile, and her face looked fuller, healthier. He looked down, “Well. She was.”

“I still pray after y’all everyday.”

His bravado sank, just a little.

“How’s your brother Donald?”

“Oh,” Henry spoke gentler, and slower, “If he’s not drunk, he’s hungover. You know how that goes.”

“Then I’ll pray after him twice as much.”

“Well,” Henry stood up, “I came to do a job, Miss Ella. I ran into Jimmie Coates the other day an’ he said you were about run over with cats, so I said, ‘You ought to be ashamed if you don’t get out there and run’em out.’ But I knew he wouldn’t.”

“There’s a lot of ‘em. I stay out of the back of the house. I’m just afraid they’ll run under my feet and throw me down. But you shouldn’t be doing that, I’ll get one of Lucille’s boys.”

“It won’t be hard. I’m ready right now”

“I do appreciate it. I will be glad to have them out a here.”

As he went through the door to the back rooms, the difference in temperature was immediate and harsh. The kitchen door was shut. The bathroom was empty. He opened the door to the back bedroom and saw two fully developed kittens sparring by the back door. He opened the door and they moved away from it. He cornered one and reached for it and it arched its back and hissed like a full grown cat. He jerked back his hand, reaffirmed his determination, grabbed it, received a painful scratch across his thumb, and dropped it in the sack. Looking down, he saw the other was playing with his shoelaces. He picked it up with thumb and finger behind the head and it curled. He dropped it in. Under the large bed there was a mother bathing two of its kittens, when he interfered she darted through the back door. He grabbed two more small ones, and chased another till it ran out. But under the daybed there was a calico nursing five or six newbirths.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, sweating powerfully, glasses slipping off his thin nose. He threw them on the bed, loosened his tie. He got down on the floor and when he reached in was hotly attacked. Wishing for a broom or a stick, he looked around the room but there was nothing. The sack on the floor behind him was

meandering and mewing. He sat down and stuck one long leg under the bed and raked at the litter. The calico ran out, its back arched and hissing, ready to attack. He stood up and kicked it. It ran out the door. He scooped up the little blind ones easily.

On the way back he stopped on the bridge and dropped the sack in the creek. It floated for a few seconds, the small bodies squirming and rolling, and then sank. There were thin red streaks of blood running down Henry's right hand. The sun was higher. He stood looking at the line of trees, and the way the sunlight lied heavy in the hollows of the branches that it touched. And he thought of the leopard. He had seen it as a child. A giant leopard in the trees in his backyard. When the wind would get strong the leopard would shift, move, into another tree. No one believed him. And then it was gone when he got older. A shift of the branches in wind and sunlight.

When he got to the store the sales ladies were waiting outside the door. A couple of them had left. In twenty years he had never opened late.

“Wasn't Brien here to let y'all in?”

“Brian doesn't work Fridays.”

“I bet he's still in bed curled up with his new wife. That boy will never become a merchant.”

Henry opened the door. "Mr. Cohen will have my head," he said.

He sat in the office upstairs, matching invoices to the checks Mr. Cohen had signed. Martha called and said that the counselor had come to see Amanda Leigh again.

"I tried listening at the door," she whispered, "but I couldn't hear much. He wants her to see someone."

"Someone what?"

"A doctor. I don't know, a therapist, I think."

Henry couldn't say anything.

"What do you think?"

"I'll ask Doctor Seeles. Did she eat anything?"

"Hardly. Carrot sticks and a peach. I can't get her to eat any meat, she won't touch it."

"I'll be there around nine." He hung up the phone and rubbed his eyes. He stood up and looked over the floor downstairs, and saw that it was crazy. The piano factory had paid that day. All the ladies had customers.

All the ladies but Elmira and Miss Zula were black. All the customers too, and he couldn't help thinking at times that they all had a secret. It was a secret joke on him. Even Miss Ella, and Jimmy Coates. They knew something that he was not in on. He

worked up what energy he had left and spent the evening making sales. He couldn't close up and get out until nine-thirty.

When he got home Martha was upstairs in bed as usual. There was a plate on the stove wrapped in tinfoil for him. He went to Amanda Leigh's door and knocked. He waited patiently before knocking lightly a second time. And when he heard her rush over, unlock the door, and then rush back to her chair by the window his breath quickened, and the tiredness of the day left him, for it had to. He pushed the door open gently. And he sat down in the armchair just outside of her room. It had been placed there ever since she stopped going anywhere, and stopped letting anyone come in.

The room looked neat. There were no records or books scattered on the floor. He missed the loud music he used to complain about. There was one small plate on the white bedspread. A peach pit, like a small wooden cranium, and a couple of carrot sticks. The curtains and the walls were white, like the plate. She was in a white gown, staring out the window. He had to think about what she might respond to. She had refused to answer questions and might slam the door shut if he started out that way. He took one shoe off. She turned around with an angry face and pinched her nose. He put the shoe back on.

"I saw Miss Ella today. She's in bad shape. The house is just about to fall down around her."

He wondered what she saw in the glass, and whether she was listening.

“All she’s done for those kids and grandkids. They’ve left her alone. I’m gonna lay it on Jimmie Coates with a stick, it just about makes me that mad.”

His smile looked helpless.

“Why I must’ve run two dozen cats out from under her bed.”

She whispered something. He could feel his heart beat. And he started to speak fast.

“Well close to twenty, anyway. Mostly kittens, the momma cats were--”

“Kittens?”

“They were wild. One tore my hand slap up. Look a’ that.”

“You threw kittens out of their home?”

“Out of Miss Ella’s home. They’ll be fine. Cats take care of themselves.”

He knew he had tripped. And he knew he shouldn’t plead but his heart was kicking under his ribs.

“Won’t you please have a late dinner with me? We’ve got country fried steak and mashed potatoes, or I’ll get Momma up and make her fix whatever you want.”

Her face was like porcelain or marble. Turned still toward the window, never looking his way.

“Do you think it will snow this winter?”

“We might get some.”

“I hate the snow. All those little animals.”

“They’ll be grown by then, Amanda. Won’t you please have supper with me?”

“They will freeze to death.”

She walked over, and he tried to catch her eyes. She closed the door and he heard the lock click.

Henry sat at the kitchen table by himself in front of a plate of leftovers he had heated up. Pushed a piece of steak with his fork, scooped it up with some potato. He chewed open-mouthed, his whole bony face working on each bite. He buttered a cold roll. That vague ache of an empty belly began to fill and warm.

He had told Amanda Leigh, through her door, “I’ll get Momma to fix us some eggs, and if she don’t do it, why I’ll heat up a skillet and slap her bottom with it.”

But he realized as he said it what a silly joke that must be to his children. When they were younger, Martha was his ally. She used to love doing things for him. When he would get worried over bills or work, she tried to make him feel good about it. She made him feel like he was a good man. Now she does only what she has to for him.

Amanda Leigh had said, “No,” in the tiniest voice, and “I wouldn’t eat the fetus of any animal.”

The image of Miss Ella came into his mind. At that moment while he had stood over her, he had been afraid for her and for himself. She had looked like a bank of dark ripened plums on a white sheet. And he remembered his wife, twenty-five years ago, running into the house, a bead of sweat running from her flushed temple, her dress folded in her arms and heavy with plums which she threw out on the kitchen table, and they rolled falling about the kitchen floor. He had kissed her neck and made her laugh, when she was young and thin so long ago, and yet the memory was so plain to him, he could hear the plums drop and roll on the linoleum floor.

ONE PART TEQUILA, ONE PART DEVIL

They were playing a game. With red and green plastic pieces, little silver figurines, dice, phony money in pastel colors, and colorful cards with names like Pennsylvania Avenue and Park Place. The board was spread out on the dark crude wooden table between them.

“Your turn.”

The boy called Radley sat on the couch, hunched over the table. He picked up the dice. The girl was called Peck. She sat on the floor with her legs crossed, and her hair was the color of light through the windows in the afternoon. It was cropped close against her face and neck. Radley dropped the dice. He picked up the tiny silver piece that was shaped like a dog and moved it seven spaces on the board.

“And you owe me thirty-five dollars,” Peck said.

“That’s easy enough.” He handed her three of the phony bills.

It had been raining for days, and the nights were hot and damp. The place was dim, and there was a constant dripping sound outside the door. One lamp burned on an end table by the couch, creating shadows behind her and contrasting the image of him, white T-shirt, long black hair.

“Now I’m building,” she said, and she reached in the box for several red plastic pieces that looked like little houses.

I’ve seen many colors in her eyes but now they were gray and wide and she was happy. She laughed in short huffs, like an old man, though I’ve heard her singing smooth and high on some evenings. She rolled the dice and moved her silver car halfway across the board.

“Ninety dollars,” he said.

“That’s nothing. It’s your turn again. And I wanna trade.”

“For what? You have everything.”

“I’ll give the bank Park Place for the last Railroad,” Peck said.

“You can’t trade with the bank.”

“You can’t block my trade.”

“I don’t think it’s fair.”

“You’ve made trades. I’m doing it anyway.” She put one card in the box and took another out, setting it down with the other cards beside her.

Under their voices was low music playing, sending tiny electric sparks through the air, twisting around and over the table. On a 12 inch black and white, Dick Van Dyke

silently stumbled over an ottoman. A blond cat jumped off the couch and ran into one of the dark rooms in the back.

All of her colorful squares on the board had little red houses on them. She handed over many of the pastel bills and kept only a small pile of white and yellow ones.

“You can only land on one, two, three, five places without paying.”

He moved his piece to a square with a question mark, and he picked up an orange card. He rolled again and moved the little dog to one of the red squares.

“You can’t pay.”

“I’ll give you Pennsylvania for the bill.”

“Ha. I’ve got nearly everything now,” Peck said. “It’s just a matter of time now.”

Radley rolled and moved his silver dog to Chance, Go, Community Chest, Free Parking, eluding her every time. She was getting stung for 20 or 45 or 75 dollars on every move, and had to take two of her plastic red houses away. He laughed everytime he threw the dice. I was crouched down on the floor next to her and I felt the heat beneath her skin. She picked up a yellow card, tore it in half and in quarters, threw the pieces into the air. She rose, and I rose with her. Our minds were a tangled mass of needles. She opened the door and walked outside, down the wooden steps under the light and sat down hard in a

mud puddle. Her head down, her hands slapping the water over her belly, her thighs. All of her circuits were black. Her mind belonged to none of us.

Minutes later he walked out, and came to offer his hand. She let him lift her just a little before swinging hard. A loud smack of bone and flesh together, his glasses knocked askew and he dropped her back into the puddle. I watched him walk back up the steps under the one bare light bulb. Shadows seeping into the damp ground around the steps. He walked back inside, holding his jaw in both hands.

They lived in this long rectangular box house. They had a bedroom, a den, a small kitchen, smaller bathroom, and at the back a brown room with a bed and many boxes of old letters and photographs. I've never learned to read, but I had fingered through all of the photographs. Seen her as a little pouting girl, holding the hands of her Mommy and Dad, and seen through their sad eyes. Seen her older, with shining blonde hair and high breasts, posing with a wide smile and folded hands. And seen her much as she is now, at a picnic table placing a gentle hand on the boy's face as he looks down. And another picture, the most recent one I think, in which she is wearing a blue print dress, with a line of green forest behind her. Her tongue folded under between her teeth, furious, she is taking a swing at the camera.

I liked to touch her things in the bathroom, the hose hung over the shower rail, the plaster things nailed to the wall. One is a little plaster cup where she put her rings

before getting in the shower. Another is a tiny painting of a barn on an empty dirt road. A green plastic basket on the counter held their dental and shaving things.

The door banged open to the hard afternoon sun and a darkened shape. She dropped her purse, pulled off her skirt and stumbled into the bedroom. She ripped the cover and sheets off, along with her blouse and bra and flopped on her back. She was so pink, but for her eyes and mouth. A pillow and a mattress gathering the moisture from her body.

The door banged open again and Radley walked in holding in one fist a patch of weeds with tiny blooms on them.

“I promise to lose from now on,” he said. He stripped and crawled into bed and covered her in his arms.

“Oh, don’t. It’s so hot.”

She took the weeds and said thank you in a thick voice, and dropped them on the floor. She spoke with her eyes closed.

“I went off last night.”

“Yes.”

“God, my eyes feel like saddlebags. Was it horrible? Was I saying things?”

“Yes.”

“I feel like a traffic accident. My brain hurts. Kiss it?”

“Okay.” He moved his hands over her breasts.

“Baby, I just want to sleep. You just keep me safe.”

“Awright.”

He rolled over on his back, brushed the back of his hand lightly against her cheek and hair.

“Love me anyway? Though I’m a monster?”

When they were gone, time was enlarged. An hour could be a year. A day was decades maybe. I was stretched out on the bed between the two cats who were stretched out and sleeping in the patches of sunlight that came through this window. She was late. She was years late maybe. And the things they talked about, the cars and traffic and teachers and children, anything could happen. And things in the house had changed. There were fat full boxes taped up tight and stacked up in the front room. There were no books on the shelves, and the boxes in the brown room were taped up too. She might never come back. I hated her Mama. Hated her drunk Daddy. They made me sicker than the boy with his push-plug love. She was probably dead too. In a car with teachers surrounded by children in traffic.

I heard the door open. I saw her standing there framed by the sunlight. In blue jeans and sandals, and her startled breasts nearly pushing through a thin purple shirt.

She dropped her purse, knelt down and rolled her blue eyes along the floor until she saw a pad of mud under one of the end tables.

“Welcome. Welcome? Catfood. Catfood,” she called.

The calico came running out and she grabbed it.

“I’m sorry to pull that on you girl, but” she pushed its nose into the pile, “this is your mess.” She ripped open the door with her left hand, and threw the cat overhand as far as she could and it was running like the speed of sound before it landed three feet from the trailer next door.

“Spiker.” The long blond, still on the bed, lifted his head. “You too.” She picked up the heavier cat, pushed his nose into the mess and dropped him out the door. She scooped up the mess in a paper towel and ran, gagging, into the bathroom and flushed it. She returned with a can of shaving cream and sprayed it on the roundish stain.

When Radley came in he dropped his bookbag, his shirt and shoes, his jeans, and drug her into the bedroom. Their wet bodies struggled together in union and opposition at the same time. I stood over the bed and watched. I tried to place myself nearest her heart to feel its regular beat quicken and strengthen. Her face and neck were

red as if the blood had come closest to the skin. I wanted to dive beneath the blood but I could not touch. Her pulse was furious, and seemed to explode within her until they stopped moving and it slowed and thickened. The boy rolled over and they lay there for some time just breathing.

“Ty’s coming over tonight for an early graduation party,” he said.

“Don’t you have an exam tomorrow?”

“I’ll pass it.”

“You won’t even make it to class.”

“Don’t measure me by your standards. I’ll make it. I’m not trying to be a genius. And I’m not gonna freak out if I don’t get all A’s.”

“Alright. Alright.”

“I’m not you.”

“Okay.” Peck got up and went to the bathroom and turned the shower on. Radley picked up his jeans and pulled a cigarette box out of the front pocket.

“Is he bringing Carol?”

“What?”

“Is he bringing Carol,” she said.

“No. He’s too weird for her I think she finally realized.”

“I don’t think he’s weird.”

Radley lit a cigarette and set it, burning, on the edge of the table. “He thinks he’s Plato or something.” Pulling on his jeans, “He stares at strangers and asks them deep questions about their inner lives. He disturbs people.”

He pulled a long heavy golden bottle out of his bookbag.

“I don’t mind him,” said Peck.

Ty was a boy with long straight brown and blonde hair that hung over his clear serious eyes. He was constantly flipping it back with his fingers. He roamed around all of the rooms, inspecting the place.

“You packed up all your books.”

“Yep.”

“Twelve boxes.” She licked her hand behind the thumb, poured salt on it, licked it again, drank down some gold from a short glass, and shoved a wedge of lime against her teeth. She made a guttural ‘Ahh’ sound.

“We’re going to that duplex on North Jackson where Doug and Stephen lived,” Radley said. He licked his hand and poured salt on it.

“They split up.”

“Yeah. Get the radio, Baby.” She went to the bedroom where she retrieved a hand held radio with a long silver antenna.

“Was it Doug’s parents? I know they had a problem.”

“They fell out of love,” she said.

Ty sat down on a stack of boxes and accepted a glass. When he drank it down his long lips curled and his eyes closed for a second, he reached for a wedge of lime as if he was in panic.

Peck was turning the dial on the radio, picking up static and thin twisted edges of music and muddled voices.

“It’s messy when people split up,” said Ty. “But it’s cool, I mean, it’s interesting. When the intensity and the nerves are bare and people are more alive like that and you can really see them, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t think—“

“How’s Carol?”

“—anybody knows what really goes on between two people. Not even they themselves.”

I stood over Ty, examining the thin straight strands of his hair. A tiny bug was in the air. It landed on his shoulder and started slowly crawling down the front of his shirt.

Peck said, "How's Carol?"

"I'm over that." Ty waved his hand lazily. "It was just a school year thing."

"How is she?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Were you intense and most alive?"

"No." He exhaled a lazy stream of smoke. "Oh, I get it. I guess it was."

The boy kept filling the three short glasses with light gold liquid, and they all kept up the ritual with the salt and lime as they drank. Peck found a station that she liked, and started singing with it, "*Baby love, my baby love, I need you oh how I...*"

The boys were talking about things I didn't care much about. Whether God understood English, or whether he or it was a disinterested nebulous spirit.

"There is a ball inside of you and that is what you truly are," Radley was saying, "This wooden, uncolored ball, and your experience paints it blue or red or with stripes."

"Well, sort of."

"Like croquet," Peck said, and she smiled.

All of them were sweating and their eyes were getting heavy and red bright as flags. She had her shirt unbuttoned down to the top of her breasts, her chest and neck

nearly crimson, sweet. She was swaying slowly. Holding the shot glass in her hands till they took it from her. Her eyes were unfocussed. I hovered close to her.

Ty said he was going to stay with his Jesus-freak mother.

“Hey. Take it easy on the Jesus-freaks,” Radley said.

“Oh, that’s right, You’re saved.” He held up two fingers of each hand.

“I love these songs,” Peck said. “They remind me of when I was a kid.” She was sitting on the floor with the radio in her lap. “They were beautiful times,” she was speaking in a slow songlike voice with slurs in her mouth.

Ty looked down at her. “How are your parental units?”

“Ty.”

“You know that, Ty,” she said.

“Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“Mama and I used to dance to these old songs. She was my best friend.”

She shook her head, took in a sharp deep breath. “You’re going to make me cry now.” She wiped the corners of her eyes with two fingers.

“She left you, right?”

“She died.”

“And your father was a drunk.”

“He was a good man.”

“We don’t have to talk about this, Ty.”

“I just want to know. Didn’t he burn down the house or something.”

“Shut-up, Ty,” Radley said.

“I was too little to be with him.”

Radley looked at Ty. “Why do you bring that stuff up, man?”

“I just like to know things. I didn’t know it was a big deal.”

“It’s not. It’s just history,” she said.

“Not everyone wants to share everything with you all the time. You know, every time you come over I wind up getting pissed.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

“No. Don’t go anywhere.”

She stood up and I stood up beside her.

“Radley? Something’s after me I think.”

“What. What’s after you, Baby.”

“I don’t know.” She shook her shoulders like she was trying to shake something off her skin. She looked around the room, her eyes passing through me.

“What do you want,” she yelled. “Leave me alone.”

Her face was tight, and she started screaming and crying at the same time. I was so excited. She ran into the bathroom and the boy and I followed her.

The water was running in the sink. Her eyes were in the mirror and for a second I thought she saw me behind her.

“You should be taking care of me.” She was coughing through her words

“I’m just little you.”

Radley had his hands on her head and was forcing her to bend down to the toilet, “Here,” he said, “Now, get rid of it.”

She coughed, “Daddy.” And started throwing up a pink and white mess.

He let her gently collapse, sitting on the floor, “You are supposed to take care of me.”

She was nodding her head, “That’s right. I’m little and you’re supposed to take care of me.” She grabbed the boy’s leg. “Get it away from me,” she screamed.

For one instant she saw me. My heart burst.

“Get away.”

Ty looked in behind the boy’s shoulders.

“You should go.”

“Is she okay?”

“She will be. Go home.”

“Did I do something? I didn’t mean to do”

“Go home, Ty.”

Her face had gone from pink to white. Radley started wiping her face with a damp rag.

“I’m just little.”

“You’re okay. You’re okay now.”

He picked her up.

“Where’s my Mama.”

“She’s in heaven, Baby.”

He picked her up and carried her to bed. She was struggling and crying, and her mind was far away. I was sure she could not see anything that was there. But I loved her most in those times when she was bare living energy. She thrilled me.

The next morning the boy left. She was in their room, sitting on the floor, covered by a broad skirt that was cream colored and decorated with garden plants. I could see only her bare feet poking out from under the skirt. She sat still, looking at the book on her lap. Two bright red earrings and two bright blue eyes. She closed her eyes and her lips were moving but I could hear no words from her mouth. I became afraid and could not walk into that room.

I don't know how or why I am. There is nothing that they call past or future, and when they talk about time I feel lost inside. I've known nothing but this place and her. I had imagined swimming in her blood, teeming with little fishes nibbling on my sides. Floating in the liquid and diving under. A minnow in her veins. Sometimes I would get excited and think that the wall that divided us would break down and let me inside. But I was never able to touch.

I sat there in the dust on the rug. I had been hoping only he would leave, but her things in the bathroom were gone. All their books and clothes, everything had been taken away. I have been so afraid that my living would leave me, and she wouldn't come back. She had to come back for the cats. The long yellow male stretches to inspect an empty box. He jumps inside it and curls around a square corner, his tail flicking with a misinterpreted sense of excitement.

LIPS LIKE BRUISED BERRIES

Peck could feel the heat in her face, as if someone had been boiling water in her skull. “They didn’t do anything,” she said in a whisper. She exhaled the words with the gray hairs of smoke trailing out of her mouth through the car door window into the blue air. “He didn’t even get up. No one did.”

They sat in the car, her face turned away from his. Radley’s eyes were loose with liquor, and his mouth hung open. Looking at her yellow hair, the pink color of her cheek. He knew that stubborn jaw. They had been having such a good time. The barbecue at Jimmy Cole’s house, and the little party around the kitchen table in the late hours that ended abruptly. Now, in the car, he was pleasantly drunk and disappointed.

“You make me sick,” she said. “I don’t even want to look at you.”

“Why are you mad at me?”

“You didn’t do anything. Nobody did. You just sat there.”

“What was I going to do?”

“I wanted you to hit him,” she said. “But you didn’t even stand up. I wanted to beat him up and I would have if your cousin hadn’t held me back. You should’ve backed me up.”

“The man is built like a linebacker. Anyway, I couldn’t have gotten over there that quick. You jumped up like a bullet.”

“You should have been with me. You’re all a bunch of pussies.”

They had been having a good time. Peck could feel it behind her eyes and in her mouth, laughing and talking into the chaos of the room. Voices collided and shifted in their patterns over the table littered with empty Budweiser cans and spilling ashtrays.

Shots of amber were passed around. Peck was at the table between Jimmy Cole and Radley. Brennan, a broad bellied man with sand for hair was telling old stories about Earl McArthur. She thought he looked younger than his fifty something years. He had a way of jerking his head toward someone when he was talking to them. Sitting next to Brennan was Scott Boa, a teacher at the high school. He looked like an old hippy, which he was. He wore his gray hair in a pony tail and had chains on his glasses.

Brennan could talk all night.

“One night a bunch of us decided to go up to Oxford. So we were in this bar getting drunk and singing and dancing crazy. We closed the place down. We were in Earl’s van and he was driving so of course we got pulled over. It was all I could do to keep him from going to jail. I told the Patrolman, ‘Hey look, his mother just died and he’s mourning his way.’ The cop said it was okay as long as someone else drove. So Maureen drove. Well Earl decided to ride on top of the van. He started singing “*Up On the Roof.*”

Scott started singing, and then everyone at the table joined in, "*When this old world starts bringing you down and you need a place to go.*" Everyone shouted, "*UP ON THE ROOF.*"

"Earl was singing as loud as he could and waving his arms. He fell off the van. I mean, he just rolled down the front windshield and landed on his back in front of the van. And he was lying in the road still singing at the top of his voice. Have you ever tried to pick up a dead bull? He got up and damned us all, said 'Damn all you fuckers, I'm walkin' home.' All the way from Oxford. Maureen put up with following him for about a half a mile. When we passed him he was still singing and pumping his arms."

Earl sat next to Scott and grinned like a dumb animal. Peck thought he looked like an enormous toad in a baseball cap. Maureen stood behind her husband for a moment and framed his face with her hands, "Ain't he just the cutest thang?" She batted her eyes in an exaggerated way and slid into her seat.

Peck felt drawn to the only other woman in the room, who she saw as older, and more beautiful than herself. She was glad to have an ally. Maureen had large almond eyes, plump red lips and thick beautiful blond hair. She looked intently at Peck and smiled.

"The first time we did it was in my Mustang after football practice. In his shoulder pads and everything. It hurt. Highly uncomfortable."

Jimmy said, "Momma would say 'the Devil's dancin' now.'"

“Devil’s dancin’ all over this table.”

“Let’s not talk about him,” said Peck.

“I’m with you, honey.”

Jimmy Cole had a slim waist and a big upper body with long muscular arms. Peck thought he was handsome, but there was something crazy in his eyes and she felt uncomfortable when he grinned at her. He didn’t laugh genuinely, she thought, and interjected statements into Brennan’s stories. She caught snatches of them. Earl had a fight with a pit crew, and they drove over him. He got thrown out of every football game he played in.

Scott laughed. “When you tackle somebody, Earl, you’re not supposed to beat them up.”

“Well they made me mad.”

Brennan was telling Radley, “You aren’t going to find what you’re looking for at those places. Not like an old man playing blues.”

“I got this stuff at Lance’s. There’s nothing but pairs of white eyes and a lotta teeth when you walk in there,” Jimmy Cole said. “But smoke is smoke and they never bother me.”

“Yeah, and they play hip hop,” said Scott. “It’s kinda sad.”

“I’ve bought stuff at Lance’s before,” said Brennan.

“You?”

“Yeah. I went up there with Earl once. We were up at the bar and Earl started talkin’ bout niggers. ‘We should never have set them free,’ he says. ‘They need a white man to tell’em what to do.’ Goddamn I thought we were gonna get killed. I had to leave him there.”

“I went to public school,” said Peck. “Most of my friends were black.”

“I’ll tell you where you can get killed,” said Scott. “Some of those white boy honky tonks up in the hills. You walk in and see nobody has a full set of teeth.”

He laughed. “You don’t look anybody in the eye and you better be polite.”

“They never bother me,” said Jimmy.

“Because you’re a redneck. Bad as they are.”

“Are we outta whiskey?”

“Just about. Hey, where is that boy we sent to Greenwood?”

“I was just wondering that, myself. I gave him ten dollars,” Radley said.

“So did I.”

“Earl gave twenty,” said Maureen.

“I guess we won’t see him again.”

Earl pulled a joint out of his pocket and threw it across the table to Radley.

“I never went to school with no niggers. Wouldn’t have it.”

“You didn’t finish tenth grade, Hon, or you would’ve had to.”

“My best friend in high school was Tan Man. He was the smartest kid I knew,”
said Peck.

“My football player. On the field it looked like he was playing with little kids. And he was so nervous around me in those days he would stutter.” Maureen smiled. “Are you okay Peck?”

Peck saw everyone at the table in a golden light. Maureen was smiling at her. She felt like she was floating and her eyes were nearly closed. And then Earl McArthur did what he did and she was alive like a fire. Her mind went white, and when she became aware again she was standing over the largest mammal in the room, kicking and swinging at him with Jimmy Cole holding both of her arms. She turned and ran out the screen door after Maureen.

Radley took a deep drag on his cigarette, slowly blowing the smoke out of his car door window. There was a party in a small house in the middle of the fields one night in summer. He was there with Jimmy and there were many people he didn’t know. Earl

McArthur and Brennan came in late, after seeing Earl's new daughter. They had gone to the Ole Miss game while his wife was in labor.

"When I saw that baby girl lift up her leg, I thought, Goddamn, I'm gonna have a problem for the rest of my life," Earl said, "When she starts bringing boys home, I'm gonna be their Goddamn nightmare."

He looked around the room like he could bite someone's leg in two, and held up a glass full of tequila that Radley reached for and drank down at once. He remembered waking up hours later, ten feet from the house, between two rows of cotton, and learned that Jimmy had gone frantic and was looking for him on the highway from Greenwood to Tchula. Odd, that he could still remember how the gray clods of earth felt against his face.

But that was two years ago, and tonight, around the table at Jimmy's, Earl had reached his huge arm around and slapped his wife. Hard. It jerked her head back. She put her hand on her face, and she was beautiful, and ran out the screen door like a piece of cloth at nightfall. Radley had always been startled by Maureen's beauty. Her long blonde hair and lips like bruised berries. And he thought that maybe she just didn't have any choices in this small town. And maybe men in a small town get lucky.

They had been laughing. Before anyone could react, Peck had lunged out of her chair, and smacked Earl in the lips. Jimmy grabbed her arms. He said, "Whoa now." Earl sat dumbly, grinning at her. He watched her run out the door.

Peck had run around the back of the house, she wanted to tell Maureen to come home with her. He is a bastard. She ran to the next yard, but never saw anything but the blue sky over fields. She was disoriented and could not find her way back to the car but went around the back of the house and to the street. There was a small brick house, with white cement capped on the brick wall that ran on both sides of the drive. Like cake icing.

“Peck? You okay?”

“No.” She spun around and grabbed Radley’s neck. “Take me home. Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

Radley settled into the driver’s seat and smoked and waited for the sunrise before starting the drive home.

“None of you did anything. You’re all a bunch of pussies.”

She pulled a cigarette out of her purse and tapped it mercilessly against the case.

“I stood up. I wanted to fight him.”

“Well he wasn’t going to hit you.”

“Why not. He just punched his wife.”

“You’re not his wife.”

“I’ll never respect you again,” she said. She looked like she could spit him out of her mouth. “And that’s not even the point,” she said, her voice shaking. “I stood up. You should have been with me.”

“I was at the other end of the table.”

“You didn’t support me Radley.”

She was exhaling out the window. He was looking at the dashboard.

“I felt so sorry for her,” she said.

“Me too.”

“If you ever hit me I’d kill you.”

“You might kill me anyway.”

“That’s true,” she said.

Daylight was coming, turning the deep blue air to violet.

“And I’ll be thinking about it.”

“What?”

“Killing you.”

“I’ll look foreword to it.” Radley cranked the car.

He thought nothing ever goes the way you want it. Nothing ever does. It was not his fault. It was other people's business in a way. And she won't stay this angry long. He thought about last night. Sleeping at his grandmother's house they were in separate beds. He had sneaked into her room, and the bed was high and the sheets were fresh and even cool. And she was everything he wanted.

CAT HISTORY

There was a tree bigger than Moses in the back. Its southern bough towered over the house, branches and leaves crawling towards me, then going up in a straight line, over the roof. A small hand of leaves just grazing the screen. I was on the sloping back porch that ran the second story width of our duplex. Though it was only four feet deep and dipped low on the farther side from the house as if it was ready to fall off. A slim iron black desk in front of me holding a manual typewriter. The enormous and hideous green chair that we found there when we moved in. It was damp and it stank. We threw towels over it to sit on but it still stank. I did love it out there in the afternoons. Leaves lit up with lime. Writing bad poetry and scenes, and we thought I was bordering on brilliance. But it was the brilliance of sunlight through those leaves, and the great bough that hung over the house.

The front room was shaped like a box, with bookshelves, a sad couch that was there when we moved in, and an ancient dark wood coffee table that we got at a yard sale for seven dollars. We kept a penknife on the table. We carved initials and diagrams on it. There were two windows on the North side with browned and burned window shades. The heat was enormous. We were clothed with it. Our shoulders would burn, and the back of our necks and arms.

The kitchen was tiny. Below the cabinets there was a framed black and white photograph of a cluster of full steel garbage cans on a brick street. There was one large window on the North wall. We had a few odd hand me down dishes and a faded pink drain board.

What I loved best were the long afternoons that we spent in the bedroom. The windows were all on the North side, which Peck had twice draped. Using a thick cloth and duct tape to create a dark curtain around the A/C unit. No speck of sun could come in and ruin us. Doors to the back porch and kitchen shut, making the room less hot in the daytime and cool at night. Love making and afterward, lying in a state of near slumber, rediscovering every inch of her. Lazily, unconscious of any thought that could lead me to any task, or even a need to speak.

I was lying on my back propped up by two pillows. She was lying beside me on her stomach, supporting her head with her hands under her chin. Her left leg across me, squished up against me. I was smoking a cigarette, looking at the curve of her back, and how it flared out forming her beautiful white ass. We were listening to the Who and Jethro Tull.

“Radley, I want to tell you something seriously,” she said. “You know, in my whole life, I have never ever been this loyal to anyone. Cause I knew if you left me, I would have lots of opportunities.”

“I’m your opportunity.”

“But at home I could have Freddie, or one of Diane’s friends, or if I ever got real lonely or desperate I could know in the back of mind that I could have a fling.” She slapped my chest, and lay her face down.

“But I can’t,” she said. “The idea of it makes me sick to my stomach.”

“It had better.”

I picked up a glass of coke from the floor by the bed, the cubes clicking.

“Why do you have to make me feel like this is tenuous,” I said. “Didn’t we agree to five years?”

“Hush. I said I couldn’t do it.”

To go to sleep she would count on my arm with her fingers. One tap for each word in a sentence or phrase that she would repeat over and over. There was an equation that she lived with that involved survival, safety, and fear. Safety was the highest evidence of love. In the dark, in our bed, she would wind her body tight around mine and say that she felt safe.

She was happiest when every possible worry could be discarded for the time it took to play Gin Rummy, Crazy 8’s, or Scrabble. She critiqued my poetry. She cultivated figures out of play dough, drew with crayons and charcoals, and she could sing.

She wrote odd songs for piano and voice. She was better at nearly everything than I. And we were competitive. The bathroom light was on over the ancient sink, in the contours of which she had fixed two flat faces made of clay. The smaller one was a baby's face, pale and uncolored, but true to life. The other was painted brightly. It was a caricature, modeled, she said, after Cindy Adams, an infamous fourth grade friend.

A vast park, complete with large oaks and elms and tall grass bordered us, beginning at the base of our elm and running to several acres. I can remember walking the length and depth of it more than once, scouring for enough change for a can of Chef Boyaredee and white bread at the Jitney Jr. I never thought of us as being poor. We had friends in town that would get us a meal when we were short. Some had, and we did the same for them. Or with a few dollars of gasoline we could go to Grandmaw's house and she would feed us like a king and queen, and put us up in large beds in air-conditioned, separate rooms. We just seldom wanted to see anybody, and only did on our terms until August. Anyway, in Mississippi, it seemed like anywhere we went was a thousand miles.

I was on the back porch, leaning back in the old green chair, my feet on the screen with six shots of rum in me, smoking Camels and letting the wind dissipate bad thoughts, smoke, and the stink of the old chair. Peck was in the kitchen probably, fooling with the kittens.

Welcome gave birth on a pillow in our bed one evening while we were out. We named them: Ursula, Roscoe, Lily, Irene, and Dog. We had to rescue Irene when she

started crawling away from her mother, crying. Peck put down some blankets and a sheet for us on the floor. In the night there was a thump on the floor by my head. Peck woke up, and we watched Welcome carry her kittens, one by one, and lay them down under the couch in the front room. Peck carried the last one to her.

I knew a storm would pass through. I had watched the air grow heavier, and through the leaves of the big elm I saw a darkness off to the East. The wind was steady, almost a drum beat. I held out my numb hand, palm upward, waiting for the rain. All the light around me had gone black, and still the storm did not come, so I went inside. I saw that she was gone. The air-conditioner was going full blast. The kittens were huddled together in a corner of the room. I went to the fridge for a beer. I went out, leaving the front door wide open, and sat down on the front steps. It was quiet out. The wind had stilled. I took a long pull on the beer and looked out, thinking how perfect the blackness is. The presence of opportunity to color it. A rush of leaves chimed and the drops came down heavy. I killed the bottle and tossed it, heard it crack on the walk.

Whatever starts an argument is never what is remembered. In the heat of exchange we got thrown off the original content.

“You were falling all over that guy. He’s looking at me thinking he can fuck you if he wants.”

“Well I’m not bringing him home, Baby.”

“Do you have to lean on men?”

“I’ll do what I want, Radley. God, I should have gone to Florida State. I had a scholarship there. I would be doing what I want.”

“You can go anytime you want. You think I need you?”

“I don’t need you. You’re not even that handsome.”

“You’re saying that to me?” I said, “You think you are the hottest piece I ever had?”

“I know I am. Who are you thinking of, Monica?”

“She was just a friend.”

“Oh, you liar.” There was the glint of a smile in her face that made me want to kill her.

“At least she was sane,” I yelled.

“You’re such an asshole. I’m leaving you.”

Then she would walk out, promising to never come back.

I decided that I really didn’t care that she wasn’t there. I could play with the camera maybe, or go back to the porch. She could be in a bar. She would let someone hit on her, but she wouldn’t go with him. What if she was smashed? She could have just

gone to a movie. Or to a friend's house. She was on a barstool, her dress draped over her bold thighs, hair hanging over a drink but looking up at him in those loud blue eyes, cradling a cigarette in her right hand, *So what do you do when you're not teaching philosophy?* But her curled smile would give her away, she was acting. She would try again. By the time she came back I was stumbling on the porch with my last can of beer. She waltzed in on her long legs, fresh and sober, talking about the movie that had made her feel so good. All of the verbal barbs I had intended to throw at her fell useless. She pulled off my clothes and pulled me into bed. That night we felt something huge step over the house. We lay and listened to the rain drumming on the roof.

We met doing a Terrance McNally play in my Junior year. I was quick to notice her fluorescent blonde hair, blue-gray eyes, and her full bouncing breasts. In one of the early scenes of the play, her lines to my character were, *Is that your dog? Cuz if I fuck anyone that's been near a dog I break out in hives.*

I've never seen that dog in my life.

She worked harder than anyone on the sets. I did too, thinking I should since I was new, and lucky to get a good part. In those days I was waking up late, drinking with some of the boys in the dorm during the day and going to rehearsal at night. Blowing off all my classes. I was always hungry after rehearsal. I didn't have a car, and one night I announced that I was hungry as hell, and Peck agreed to take me to the Big Boy. I made

her laugh by choosing weird things at the salad bar. Green gelatin, ice cream, bean salad, tapioca pudding, lettuce, and potato chips, all covered in mustard and brown sugar.

We decided to drive to the coast. She stopped the car, still North of Jackson, and went out to the woods to pee. She was gone for a while, so I got out of the car and called for her. She ran up through the brush, I put my arms around her, slipped my hand down the back of her pants and felt her warm ass and that was all that it took.

We stopped at three hotels in Jackson before finding one that would take one of her Union 76 credit cards. She made me wait ten minutes before going in to the room. When I did, she stripped off her bra like she was willing but wanted me to make the first move. I don't remember anything after that very well. Sex and slumber over and over.

For the next several weeks we spent every night together. In her dorm room when her roommate was out, or on a friend's living room couch. She would get up to go to her classes, letting me sleep late, and then it was back to rehearsal. Everything about her was just so bright. Her thick smiling lips. Her eyes that were blue or gray or green, depending on what color blouse she was wearing. She left gifts by the bed for me to wake up to. An Easter basket with hard boiled eggs, candy, and post cards written by fictitious characters she had invented. Or a brown paper bag with jerky and airplane sized bottles of gin or rum. We went to parties, played games, danced in the library to old records by Johnny Mathis, and we debated what we thought were the largest questions in life. I always lost those arguments. She could talk me into believing

anything, and my old gallant and lonely ideas about who I thought I was, and what this life was about began to change.

“You know, Rad,” she said, “You are such a romantic.”

We were sitting on the base of the statue in Scott Field.

“No I’m not,” I said. “I am a complete realist. A believer in death.”

“You believe in true love.”

“Yes. I guess. But nothing is ever forever.”

There were two other people there, smoking a joint, and I began to feel conspicuous.

“You are a bluebird on my shoulder guy, Baby.”

“Zippity doo-dah,” I said.

“Take this for example.” She sucked on a roach given to her by a tall skinny girl, and handed it back.

“You want to be a writer.”

“So.”

“Why?”

“Because I think I have things to say. Things to teach people.”

“You think you have some special knowledge that no one has thought of before?”

“Well, no.” I accepted a toke from the skinny girl.

“Anyway,” I said, “You’re the romantic. You believe in this caring god.”

“How do you think we got here without God?”

“Cosmic accident,” I said. The skinny girl and the young black man with her began to dance in the field to music that only they could hear.

“Who created the conditions for this cosmic accident?”

“Okay. But it is just a spirit. Not like he can hear your prayers, or speak to you.”

“So you think the creator of the universe can’t speak English.”

“You give him too much credit,” I said.

She had me thinking, though, and we started reading the Bible to each other in bed. Hosea and the gospels made her cry.

Peck had spells sometimes. She would just go blank. It could come with screaming and crying when she retreated into childhood, and there were broken sentences to and about her mother, and she was not really present until waking up the next day.

More often she retreated into nothing. The first time I saw this she was driving through campus to drop me off at my dorm. The car started to slow down, and she was looking straight ahead, but seeing nothing. The car stopped and we sat there for some minutes. I pulled the stick into neutral and pulled up the parking break. Waving my hand past her unmoving eyes, "Baby? Do you want me to drive?"

She mumbled something.

I shook her shoulder, "Where are you, Peck?"

"I don't know."

I pulled the car into gear, drove with my left foot, steering with my left arm, and rolled us into the Rice Hall parking lot. We sat in the car. I didn't know what to say.

How to fix this.

"I'm alright." She sounded half asleep. Her face was perfectly still.

"Where are you going now?"

She looked at me like she had never seen me before.

"To my room."

Her eyes blinked and I felt she was alive again, but she walked to the door like a somnambulist. I stood, leaning against the car and smoked a cigarette. I thought, *Well this is it and it's not goin' away.* I had heard boys use the expression, *She's got snakes in her head*, when talking about a girlfriend that just did not agree with them or do what

they wanted her to do. I thought, *They have no idea. I've got a whole nest of them, and I'm in love.*

Some nights there was an orchestra I could hear from the porch. In trees, further off, there were high-pitched leg scratchers that kept a continuous beat for five minutes or so, and then shut off for five minutes. A bass line came from the near bushes, more raw and sporadic. They all got going at once in different rhythms and pitches to complete their song. I suppose they were calling to find mates. But there were so many of them. Perhaps they were just singing to celebrate their life.

Peck's Aunt Pauli gave us a little money. I pulled out of my classes and took a job at the Kwik Mart. So we took a small trailer at the Bulldog Trailer Park. It was just a terrible little box. There was an opening under the front door so it was freezing in the Winter and like a sauna in the Spring. A bath, a kitchen and a long narrow room just large enough for a double bed. But that was all we needed. We spent the nights in bed or on the carpet playing games. It wasn't unusual for a game to end up in a fight if I trumped her. All fists and feet, she would attack. I would have to wrap her up and throw her on the couch to keep from getting hurt.

One day, when I got home from work, she dragged me all the way to campus to show me a notice on the YMCA bulletin exchange board. Someone had kittens to give

away. We drove out to the place, about an hour drive into the country, to a beat up old trailer. There was a fat woman with long kinky black hair lounging out front. She took us inside, and there, on an old picnic table, bathed in flies and food crud, were two kittens stretched out in the heat. A long blonde male, and a calico female. Peck couldn't decide so we took both of them. We gave the woman five bucks and took them home. Peck named the male Spiker, and the female Welcome. They sparred when they were not sleeping together. They would follow us around the street corner on a walk to the Kwik Mart. They would leave pads of shit on the horrible orange rug. Peck would launch the evil doer overhand out the trailer door. She would scoop up the pile, run gagging to the bathroom to flush it.

“They do keep the house from being lonely while we're not here,” she said. And she sprayed shaving cream on the round stains. Through the window I watched Welcome get impregnated by a large black male one day, and when we moved to North Jackson street she had a belly full of fur balls.

Peck, the only reader of my poetic attempts, constantly criticizes me for my lack of spontaneity.

“You should be able to write a good poem in one day,” she says. “It loses something when you brood over it for so long.”

“But that is how a poem is made. Step by step you work it and—“

“No. You are going to write a poem in two minutes. Pick a subject.”

“The subject is ... You can't just pick a subject, often it comes as you work and rework.”

“No. Do me. I'm your subject. Now, you have two minutes.”

caped; kryptonite sore

water legs it to bed

milk drawn brown body

teeth to flesh

nimbly lecturing

baby baby on you Thomas Jefferson wet mouth

blocking the blocks

building the bricks

count my toes.

“How much time left?”

“Nine seconds.”

At times, when I saw this as forever, I felt afraid. I was attracted naturally enough. A fast convertible and a soft underbelly, but there was no foreseeable escape. She had the particularly irritating ability to talk sensibly to me at any time that was to her advantage. So often, I did not want to have sense, or to think rationally or logically. I

thought it hides something. Having sense was sometimes a loss. I felt so much more comfort in stomping through fields, (some dry field somewhere) with her, playing with a camera, collecting cattails, dancing in our heads, funny words on the wind. Or even in our hot bed, the heat driving her to murderous abusive tendencies. She, made up in her uniform, grabbing her purse, telling me with conviction and surprisingly accurate proofs of how I was the ruin of her. All that was bearable in her life I had driven away. That had sense too, but was coupled with a body function, more juice in your midsection, cross section was pumped in right away. You could feel it through the pith of you. Only when the marrow of me was involved, was I convinced that something had happened. Otherwise, how would you know? There was so much on the surface that was only a breeze. Only killing time or planning a wedding.

One night we made the long walk to campus. Peck wanted to get at the piano in the auditorium to play me a song, but it was locked up. We got in to Lee Hall and went up to the third floor. We were fucking on the floor in an aisle between desks when another couple walked in, and left right away, with an audible smirk. We lay there for a while, breathing in each other's breath. She climbed up into a window and walked out on the wide ledge. It was breezy and cooler that night than usual. She said she should throw herself down because we never would last forever. And that we should die before failing at true love. I was on my knees, promising her everything that I thought she wanted to hear. She jumped. I called out, hearing a thud and stress against branches. By the time I

ran down all three flights and around to the side. Some guy had come to her aid. He was lifting her up out of the bush in his arms. She was laughing.

Irene, Lily, and Dog stopped eating and left little yellow turds on the floor.

Within 48 hours they were no longer the furry miniatures that they had been. They were skinny and lacked any want to eat or jump and run, or arch their backs. The three died and were buried together one night. Ground under the elm was soft dirt but not muddy. I took the shovel out. Working under a bright moon, I dug them fairly deep so the dogs wouldn't dig them up. I wrapped the bodies in newspaper, covered them with earth and stones. Small graves near the trunk of the elm.

Peck was not in the house. I guess she was outback doing something related to household chores. I was in the front room sweating like a pig. It was late afternoon and I had woke up just an hour ago. Had stayed up very late last night playing a mindless game by myself. I am capable of doing that for days on end without interruption. I was sitting on the couch, and on our end table made of milk crates before me there lay two pages torn out of a spiral notebook. The first page contained a list of words and an original draft of a poem entitled *Bunnies*. The second page contained two other drafts. One was crossed out. The other one was a finished piece. My first finished piece. Entitled *John Wayne*. I had put my first poetical lesson into practice. The only important element in poetry is action. Action is the passing on of emotion, or idea, which rises above the

importance of mere words to the reader. The words should actually disappear to the reader. To complete the action the reader must be affected. All that was left to do now was to test *John Wayne* to see if an action could be produced. I felt confident and satisfied with myself. I stretched out on the filthy snot green carpet and grabbed Roscoe to hold him close to me. I lay there waiting until my impatience was too much, then went outside and went around the side of the house to the back. I didn't find her there. The sunlight was orange but it was still warm. I wandered around for a time picking up things off the ground. A toy soldier, an old spool of thread and some pennies. I felt an hour pass. Peck came up the brown path that borders the street and leads to the Jitney Jr. She steamed some vegetables while I sat at the table in the narrow kitchen by the window and watched the sky go orange to red. Squash, green beans and carrots. We ate without saying much.

“What were you doing all night last night?”

“Nothing.”

When I realized the sun had gone down completely and that it was already after 8'oclock, I retrieved the paper from the front room and brought it back for her to read. She read through it quickly, and her face grew red, and she laughed in a high-pitched tone. She said, “It embarrasses me.”

The action was complete. The poem was a success.

Two days later I heard a news report on television announcing John Wayne's death. With his death I decided that the poem had lost all value. I tucked it away in an empty shoebox and threw it on a shelf in the closet. Peck was the only reader it had ever faced.

I was working early morning shifts at Sears, and when I got off it was still too early for Peck to come and pick me up because she would still be pouring coffee for the old men at the Big Boy. She would always have the car because my walk home was not as far. But it was hot at that hour and I tried poking my thumb out as cars went past. A blue sedan passed. It stopped, and backed up to where I stood. I got in the back seat. There were two men in the front. The driver was white, with nearly white hair, nearly translucent, and the passenger was black. They both took a good look at me. Introduced themselves as Matt, and George. Matt was the driver, and he said that he had left his wife and kids in Michigan three days before, "I just thought about it, I mean it just hit me right, and I knew I had a full tank of gas, and the rent money in my pocket so I thought, fuck, I'm gone." He had picked up George in Virginia. "Troutville," George said. And claimed that he had been traveling, with no real strings attached to him, but could not afford the ring job that his car needed and had no real option outside of walking until Matt happened to stop at that same station and offered him a ride. Now they wanted me to come along. "I think we'll head for Santa Fe for starters, cause I've just never been there and I like the name. But we could end up anywhere." As I think about it now, perhaps I should have been terrified. But I wasn't, and took it in as just a regular day's

event. George offered me what he said was their last beer, and I turned him down, thinking only that I don't like beer in the heat of the day. It makes the brain turn mollusk, squirming, and confuses me. Matt kept talking about his own idea of freedom. "What could be more freedom than just taking off, going anywhere. This old bird has got the strength to go a thousand miles and so, you got a part time job that sucks, and a woman."

"Maybe she sucks too," said George, and they laughed.

"Come with us, man."

I didn't think so. "Thanks anyway, man."

"So you gonna stay pussy whipped in a cage."

"Hey," said George, "don't call the man names just cause he's got a different idea."

"Awright."

"Right here is good," I said.

He slowed and stopped at the curb two doors south of my place.

"I'm just tellin' you, man, and you seem like a good guy. Real life is callin. Real freedom is callin today. It ain't tomorrow, it ain't next year. "

"Leave him alone," said Gorge, "He ain't ready."

“Okay, okay, I respect that. I respect people who have their own choices. Have a good life.”

“Thanks.” I got out of the car. They sped off toward their own idea of freedom, consequence, and probably crime.

Roscoe and Ursula were not immune to the sickness that took Dog, Irene, and Lilly. Peck tried to force feed them with an eyedropper filled with a mixture of wet cat food and milk. One night, coming home late from a baseball game. Ursula was wasting away. Peck cradled her in her arms and tried to make her eat. She may have actually drowned the thing, then she turned it over and massaged its chest as if she could force it to breathe again. She went to bed and would not talk. I took Ursula down to the elm and dug another little grave.

On a small wooden bridge off the Natchez Trace. Standing over a low shallow swamp-like stream. Two joints in my shirt pocket, smoking the third. Feeling the sun on my forehead, right side of skull, and on my right shoulder. Peck was at home grieving for a small black kitten named Ursula. I was standing on this bridge, knowing that I would have the familiar urge to throw myself off. I would resist the urge. There was beauty in the stream and the patches of sunlight on the water. In some places I could see through to the shallow brown bottom.

Death was an ever present near possibility. Not for us. I don't mean it that way. And I don't mean it philosophically. There was her dream of a young boy's flesh being stripped away from his body, and waking the next day to learn that our neighbor had died on the highway the night before. There was a night in an old church yard where she believed that she was being chased by a long skeletal hand and I had to run her down, and tackle her in the wet grass and hold on until she could see it no longer.

She tried to kill me one night. I don't remember what the argument was about. I must have said something careless. I saw that face tightened up and her tongue turned under and pressed between her teeth. And she chased me into a corner in the kitchen with a meat knife. I caught her arm and wrestled the knife from her leaving a small red streak on her wrist. Passionate in argument as well as in love. Difficult to understand. It was not as if she did not stop to think, she was always thinking. But often, her belief, once arrived at was aflame, and demanded from herself a reaction.

She was not the one that discovered they were coming, and remembered their name. I saw the first of the black mass up next to the back end of the house in the tall grass. They moved over our lot like a glacier. She was out there each day with a note pad marking their progress. At night in the heat she made us sweat it out with all the doors and windows shut, "cuz the cats will get out and eat'em," she said. "And they are so pretty in their own way. I wonder if they come from Texas."

"No," I said. "They don't."

But I remember one day, having nothing to do, we threw handfuls of them into the highway and counted the few that made it back alive.

“Texas grasshoppers, theyz among the more intelligent of insects,” I said.

“Oh they’re not,” and the smile fades off, but what it left was not emptiness, was not bad, actually.

They were with us for three weeks as they progressed across our lot.

“I wonder if they call them ‘Texas’ because they have those thin orange lines on black bodies, looking like a cowboy’s string tie.”

“I think that it is that they travel in herds,” I say, “giving them the name.”

“Oh,” she says. “Oh boy. I like ’em.”

“There’s gonna be a storm,” she said.

I almost laughed.

“It is,” she said.

Looking down at her feet, her back to me. We were sitting on the front steps in the afternoon. “You wanna throw grasshoppers in the street? And count how many make it back?”

“No.”

“Wanna get drunk?”

“I want to play my game,” she said.

She wore this thick of light material, fishnet tank top, a deep and bright lavender. Her very blonde hair. Her eyes were round wide open. She got up, crossed around me, and I watched pounds melt off of her as she walked into the house. Her weight fluctuated irregularly. She was born without the right number of organs. No one was sure which ones were missing. She told me once that she passed pieces of her liver on three consecutive days. They had been so certain she was going to die that they had a coffin built. One morning, as she was bent beside me, setting a plate of eggs on my knees, I made a note of the thinness of her face and her pencil wrists. The same night she was a sagging peach unwrapping itself at the foot of the bed.

“I’m a sponge,” she said. And she demonstrated by stretching out her leg, pressing hard on a point below her knee. It punched in like a melon, then folded out again slowly. That was proof. I suspected she housed severely imbalanced chemical levels. Who knows? She was alien.

She sat in the corner of the living room, always looking down at this board on her knees. She rolled a six sided die. On each side there was a different group of four letters. She entered the letters in a square on the page in a small spiral notebook. I don’t know how she arranged them.

It could have been the lack of lunar pull, I guess. Or the excess. Maybe a curse or blessing from God. Who knows of the possible repercussions. Her spirit and moods changed as severely as her weight and colors. Possibilities were endless.

The bed was a thin and flimsy old mattress set atop of an old open set of springs. I heard his claws against the old iron springs before I knew it was Roscoe struggling to climb up and be with the other two living beings in the house. I could not count, and time is different in that sleepy state, but it must have taken him five full minutes to make it to the mattress. I picked him up and put him on the floor again. Immediately he began his climb again. Working thin brown limbs to pull himself up, and long claws for such a small creature hooked around the weird pipes, vertical circles of iron that made up the side of the springs. Up to the mattress, and I put him on the floor again. This may have gone on for several more rounds until Peck reached over, scooped him up, curled on her side holding him against her chest.

“That’s ok Roscoe, you can sleep with Momma.”

In the darkness of early morning I made the fifth small grave under the elm, covered with gray stones.

CAT HISTORY TWO

I have a picture. A Polaroid. She is in a green and white print dress, standing in the sunlight. She is holding a Polaroid picture in one hand, and her tongue is folded over between her clenched teeth, and with her right hand she is taking a swing at me.

In September, after our first year together, we packed up Garbo, who was full of kittens, and all of our stuff into a 19 foot truck and moved to Northern Virginia. We both landed jobs in department stores and took an apartment in Fairfax overlooking a courtyard that consisted of one large tree and a picnic table. Coming home from work one night our first week there, we found Garbo and her kittens on a stained pillow on our bed. There were two grays that Peck named Sue and Boo, a calico named Phoebe, a black male we named Mojo and another female named California.

I woke up on my back in the bed, threw my arm out to the other side feeling for Peck but she was not there. I was wearing jeans with the legs rolled up to the knees. My hairy belly and thin chest had been painted a field of blue, striped with white and yellow lines. My eyes felt like broken eggs and my head was a cannonball too heavy for my neck. There was face paint on the sheets and the pillows. I lay there for sometime before trying

to get up. Launched myself out of bed and across the hall into the bathroom. I wanted to fall asleep sitting there, but I could hear Kurt and his girlfriend Maureen in the house. Kurt's voice was like blasts from a trumpet. He was a thick-chested, boisterous man with a spark in his eyes that was a little evil. In the kitchen, Kurt was holding the refrigerator door open, drinking from a jar of orange juice.

“Yeah. Good for a hangover.”

Maureen was in sweatpants and a t-shirt, twirling her car keys on her finger.

“Now I told him that he has to make you a birthday cake Rad. I have to pick up my kids. I'll be back.”

Kurt handed me the pitcher and I took a big swig and gagged. I should have known better.

“That's a lot of vodka.”

“There you go,” Kurt slapped my back. “I'm going tree climbing.”

Walking fast, “You need more decoration Rad.”

He indicated with his hand the young tree that had been snapped down the night before and propped up in the dining room. Kurt went through the sliding glass door to the balcony and tried to heave himself over the rail and toward a large branch. But he missed his grip and fell. I heard him hit the ground, and an immediate trumpet blast.

Unintelligible. A few minutes later Kurt started at the bottom and shinnied up the trunk quite quickly. He looked through the window and grinned at me like an idiot.

There had been a costume party the night before, and Kurt decided that the apartment needed a costume as well. He tore down a small leafy tree that was planted somewhere on the grounds, brought it in and propped it up.

“Now it’s going as a forest,” he said.

Ben came as a woman. He wore a large set of clackers under a tight white shirt.

Big free-rolling breasts. Gray temples under an orange wig, heavy lipstick and pink nails. His marshmallow girlfriend, Beth of the North, wore Bermuda shorts and a mustache. Fred’s wife, Bonnie, dressed as Minnie Mouse, in a tight black shirt that made her large tits prominent. White gloves and mouse ears. Fred and Kinison lamed out, with only camouflage hunting pants and green hats. Peck wore a long gold and green gown with an aluminum foil halo on her head. She carried a little wand with a star at the end. After much to drink she started poking people in the butt and it had to be taken away from her. Kurt used an eye patch and some black paint as whiskers to come as a pirate, but he looked more like a laundry accident. His girlfriend, Maureen, dressed as a dominatrix. She didn’t stay long, as she had to work, dressed already in her work clothes. I just went crazy with the body paint and fake nails and wore a sheet for a toga.

There is a particular pleasure in parties. Barriers are broken down. You are at once bright and funny, and everyone else is bright and funny. We were walking in circles around each other talking and pointing and passing around shots of bourbon and rum in the kitchen. Peck said she had to piss. I followed her into the bathroom and the rest of the party followed me. Six of us standing in the bathroom. Bonnie and I standing in the tub. I reached over and turned the lights off, and felt her up. I turned the lights back on and everyone was laughing. I turned the lights back off repeating this maneuver several times until Fred grabbed his wife's wrists and pulled her away from me and out of the bathroom. The party continued to roll back to the kitchen for more shots and out on the balcony for a joint. Kinison, a tall guy that went to Virginia Tech, and had large mutton chop sideburns, took a hit and passed it to me.

"Do you mind me being here Rad? Not that I'm willing to leave."

"Should I mind?"

"No. Why should you?"

In our first two years in Virginia I went through three jobs, each one more gloomy and deathlike. It hurt my soul. Walking on my hard soles into the shoe store, the department store, the bread store, to trade in my living hours to help an owner or a faceless company make a little money.

Peck began working at an employment firm where they tried to recruit (or steal) workers from one company to sell to another company. Despicable business, I thought. She spent her days on the phone lying and changing her personality or interests or mood to whatever made a connection stronger. Whatever made the sell. Her co-workers were awful people I thought.

Nan took out her gold leather cigarette case. It held a pack of short Winston's, and a flap on the side held a pink Bic lighter. She laid it on the table and lit one for herself. She had long thick black hair, glasses, and cruel eyes. Peck was smoking also. I sat beside her, my hair unkempt in thick black tangles and stray ends. Peck said I wore kittens on my head, and laughed. We were drinking scotch in a classy bar in Arlington.

"How's your job, Radley," Nan asked. "What do you do?"

"Retail," I said.

"That must be interesting."

"Why."

"It's kind of interesting," Peck said. "I mean the way he talks about, describes, the people, his boss. He's a boss too."

She exhales smoke, looking at Radley, "He hates it."

"Too bad. I hate my job. But I love it too."

Nan's friend, Laura, was in the bathroom. Nan decided to "Check on her." Peck followed. While they were gone I drained all the drinks on the table. The piano player would take requests written on napkins. I started writing out titles of old blues songs, and making too many requests. When the girls came back I ordered another round of drinks and drank fast. The girls were talking about their boss who was married, and had the hots for one of the girls in the office.

"She's practically a high school kid."

"I know," said Nan. "He left her a love note. I copied it."

Peck acted surprised.

"Well, I protect myself," said Nan. "I'm the best swindler in the office, aren't I?"

"You have the ethics of a snake." I stared at her eyes. "I think you need to be plowed," I said.

"By you?"

"You can't get it from weak people you swallow, and you can't get it from other snakes," I said. "In fact I think I will give it to you good on the back seat. You don't mind, Peck, do you."

"Of course not."

I stood up, intending to order another round and find a napkin to write down the perfect song for the pianist.

“Hey, I have a secret,” Peck said in a loud whisper. “Come here.”

“What, Baby.” I leaned my ear next to her and she bit my face. Hard. I must have yelled.

“I’m afraid the gentleman has had enough,” said a waiter at our table.

Instead of driving home, Peck took us to a drive-in. I puked out the window on the way. Once there, I wanted French fries, and got lost coming back from the snack bar. I looked in car windows, looking for Peck instead of the car. She had to retrieve me and make polite excuses to a couple I stared at too long.

The kittens ran their mother off. Still trying to nurse when they were adolescents. After letting Garbo out one night we never saw her again. I expected to see a flat black furry mess on the highway but never did. The teenagers were happy and they had the run of the place. We left the patio door open just a crack and kept the litter box on the little balcony. One evening we came home to the front room covered in feathers that the kittens were still chasing and playing with. We found a small pile of entrails under the most dense pile of feathers.

I sat down and opened a pack of cigarettes. I crumpled up the plastic paper and threw it on the floor. The kittens fought over it, batted it around the apartment and chased it headlong as if it were a living animal.

“I want to go home.”

She sat on the floor in cutoff jeans and a red and white striped top that was tight around her breasts.

“I don’t have any friends here,” she said.

“What about at work?”

“They’re all fake.”

I knew that was true. “What about Bonnie? And Ben and Maureen. And you like my old friends.”

“They’re fun, I guess.”

She was feeling her knee with her hand, looking down at it. “They don’t really know me. With these people I am someone else oh the gay funny Peck. The party-girl wife. At home they’ve known me all my life.”

She sprints to the bathroom and comes back with three bottles of nail polish and sits at the table across from me.

“What should I be?”

“Purple.”

“I don’t have that.”

“How about orange?” She wriggled her fingers at me. Growled low in her throat.

“I think you just miss being a kid,” I said.

She huffed. “I wasn’t a kid when I was a kid.”

We passed the rest of the day with a bottle of wine and watched the sun go down on the concrete expanse and highways that scarred our world.

At the store where I was working, there was a Georgia woman who wanted to be a peach. She worked as the head register. She had a crease in her face, big eyes, frizzy blonde hair. If any manager stood too close to her she would curl her leg around his on the open floor and roll her tongue around her open lips and stare at him like a baby on the floor in front of all the cashiers. She scared the younger girls with her tales of sexual conquest and exploit.

She sat by me at the cafeteria one day with a plate of fried chicken. Picked the meat with her finger nails, cleaning the bones. She put her hand in my lap and continued talking like this was the most common thing. She told a story about a friend of hers that was a runner, and ran with a married couple. Her friend got the husband to divorce his

wife and marry her. They went running with another couple. She nailed that husband too, and though she herself does not run, she likes to run around. So it was a like a business offer.

One afternoon, weeks later, I was set to walk home from work and I knew Peck was at work so I asked Georgia for a ride home. She did have a nice ass going for her. As I was pulling down the shades in the apartment, she looked up at me from the couch and said with relish, "Let's screw."

Her flesh in my hands was sickening to me. But I satisfied myself with her twice on the section couch that would eventually be repossessed by the rental place when we failed the payment plan. When Peck came home I made myself hungry for her and we had a murderous thick hearted romp. I felt better.

Phoebe went in heat and started howling at the door. She was driving us crazy so we started letting them all out. Mojo became a street cat, and came back occasionally when making the rounds in our building. California just wandered off. Sue and Boo kept regular schedules, coming inside during the nights for food and sleep. Within a month and a half Phoebe was full, her sides bulging. Coming home late one night we saw her cross the kitchen to her water bowl. She was slimmer. We rummaged through the bedroom and the office and the closets looking and listening for the kittens. They were found when Peck opened up a bottom cabinet by the stove. She took them out and laid a towel on the office floor and moved them there. She named the yellow male Saul, the

tawny one Bear, the females were Nebula, Frankie and July. Phoebe ignored them. They did not seem to move around much. I think they had a cold. The next day I went in to look at them. At least two were dead. I gathered them up in the towel and I could feel their fading warmth against my chest. I took them to the basement and put them in a steel garbage can. The yellow one moved a little.

I was sitting at my desk when Peck came home and walked directly to the office to see about her babies.

“Where are the kittens?”

“They died. I buried them.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, baby.”

Peck did not argue. She never wanted to see the dead, or the graves. She just stayed in bed for two days. I brought books to her. Kept the little TV at the foot of the bed on a sitcom channel. Tried to interest her in drinks, food, or me. She just took her time to get over it.

My desk was once the heavy front door of a grand home. White on one side, orange on the other. I had the white on top supported by old metal filing cabinets under each end. There was a stool just the right height and an electric typewriter that hummed

and gasped when it was turned on. Everything on the desk was hidden by the avalanche of white paper. I kept a hunting knife to fidget with, and sometimes throw at the desktop, or carve with. On the opposite wall, under a window, was a slim iron desk holding only a coffee can full of pens and pencils, and a clean writing pad. At night I watched, through the window above it, the long lines of red lights. There were so many. And yellow pairs, fewer in number, moved at a more steady pace. There was a single sheet of paper tacked to a wall. It was an unfinished poem on typing paper, and the words that Peck had written in pencil. *Please Love me. I love you. I love you.*

We had a ritual on Friday nights. Ben and Beth, Kineson when he was at home, and Peck and I, would go to Fred and Bonnie's to watch movies. Always one good one followed by a porno. I became bored with it and started staying home to work on my sex, murder, ghost novel about an insane gunman, a boy that could interact with the dead and a drunk girl, in a wedding dress, on her knees in the rain. The cats sleeping on the carpet behind me. So I left Peck with Kinison and the others.

Those nights alone, I wrote what I wanted that no one ever would read. I wrote about the red haired jogger girl. The first time I saw her she was struggling to make ground. Her flesh, her large breasts were flopping around. The last time I saw her on the sidewalk she was cruising and everything was bouncing in unison. I thought about Peck. I knew that our five year commitment, made years ago, was not real. Words and agreements are not human enough. I thought we were the same blood-need, and shared

the same bones for the good of it and the bad. It was not a choice for us. The bind is not the sex or the talk, but the simple sharing of present time. I can remember laying in our bed with the window open, just lying and listening. Over the apartment grounds, we heard fights, cursing, arguments, loud car motors. Curled on our sides together. One night we heard a cry of such desperation. Someone's world had fallen apart. We ran out to look for her but could see nothing but the haze of night.

Peck suffered with an anguished depression. Alcohol and conversation about her past family life were always a dangerous combination. She would break into a long loud crying that looked so painful in her face, and she disappeared from me. I worried. But this was nothing new or unfamiliar. During all of our years together there were nights spent like that. Though unconscious, she would sob loudly, scream in broken phrases. I never knew what to do. I could not wake her out of it. Sometimes I screamed back at her. Until she slipped under into a silent sleep, I could only watch and wait. When she woke the next morning, she said she felt like she had been electrocuted. When she was a child, her mother, her only safe harbor, had left her, had died. This left a wound that never healed.

She also went through fits of violence, always directed at me. I would say something stupid or fail to agree with her or fail to notice something that I should have. And after a few angry words she could be chasing me around the table with a knife. If she had been a more athletic girl I could be dead.

We had to park around the curb and walk through the thick snow in the yard to get to the party at Ben's house. There were bottles of whiskey and tequila. People shouting and laughing and misunderstanding. Stumbling and dancing. Ben puked in the wrong half of the double sink. His roommate slinked against the counter and started bailing it into the disposal with a Rebel Flag coffee cup. There were erratic group dances and singing. Peck became amorous on the dance floor. She hung onto Ben's shoulders for awhile and then mine. We shared deep kisses on the living room carpet. When it was time to go she could not find her shoes. Everyone looked but they were never found, so she borrowed Kinison's galoshes.

Three of us standing in the snow. Kinison between us, arms in arms, he kissed me then Peck then me then Peck again.

"I love you guys."

"Calm down big guy," I said.

I saw the sky turning visibly lighter blue against the snow.

"Who's gonna drive?"

"Radley."

"Want the last hit?" Kinison held up a bottle of whiskey.

"I don't think so."

"I'll do it," Peck said. "I trust Radley driving."

She sucked in the last drops. She held her breath. Exhaled, and she was blind for a moment and came back to the world laughing. She threw her arms around Kinison. "I'll miss you Babe." She kissed his neck.

"I know we have interrupted each others lives." Peck sat on the couch, her feet under her, behind her I could see the sun expand as it was sinking.

"You didn't want this," she said. "Working everyday in jobs that don't mean anything."

"I hate it. It crushes me. If it weren't for you I wouldn't do it."

"I don't want that. Radley, there is so much inside me I can't get out. I'm not interested in mundane speculations, I want to do something. To be something. I want to be that satin twine that makes music magic."

I didn't know how to respond. How to make my point.

"You're twenty-four," I said.

"That's late," she said. "All we have is now. I love you more than anyone and maybe I wouldn't even trade it for anything, but you interrupted my life, Radley. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

She sat there, her eyes on mine.

"It just wasn't supposed to be like this," she said.

Peck sat up in bed. It was late afternoon, and I worried when we lived like that. Sleeping too much is a bad sign. She wiped her eyes and sniffed, became serious.

“How can people you care about forget you?”

“I don’t know, Baby.”

“I have a secret friend,” she said. “And he hasn’t written me or called me. How can people forget you like that?” Her eyes were wet.

“What are you talking about,” I said. “Who are you talking about, Kinison? I know you’ve been hanging out with him on Friday nights. Have you been fucking him?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Have you?”

She looked up at me. And there was a faint hint of a smile in her face that made my mind turn to fire.

“You like being a slut don’t you.”

“No.”

I threw a book at her. She blocked it with her arm. I jumped on the bed and pinned her.

“Tell me what you’ve done with him.”

She said nothing. I grabbed her jaw hard and tried to pry her mouth open.

“You’re hurting me.”

“God damn. What about me?”

“He knows me. He’s the only one that knows who I really am. I can be honest with him. Now he won’t even write to me.”

I walked out of the room. “Because he doesn’t give a shit. Don’t beg him like a damn fool.”

“You hurt me,” she said.

“How could you do it. You’ve ruined us.”

Reasonable words were hard to come by after that. My anger flared up over nothing. One night, after she had spent 20 minutes on the phone to someone I didn’t know, I got up and beat the thing against itself until it wouldn’t work anymore.

We decided to move and take an apartment in Manassas Park. I believed things could change. A small 2-bedroom on the ground floor that seemed always to be full of dry dusty air. We lost Boo and Sue during the move. When some of my friends came in without me to move some stuff out, they jumped off the balcony and ran. Peck and I went back to walk the grounds, calling out “Cat-food, Cat-food.” But we never saw them again. Phoebe came with us and she had a healthy litter three months later. Peck named them but I never remembered the names. We left the window open for her and she hunted

for the kittens. She would bring in grasshoppers. Their small pairs of wings littered the floor where they had been eaten.

There was nothing I could do. I could not run through a brick wall. My unsleeping, wired mind fought against me with imagery of their bodies together in our car, parked under a streetlight in front of Fred's house. It was not a question of true love. I don't think she saw him again. She went out with her false friends from work and I gravitated toward my old friends. We would leave the cats to come and go as they pleased.

The room was blasted by salty light coming in through the window. There was a puce towel draped over the back of a green wooden chair with a straw seat. We were pacing around the apartment, listening to the same records over and over. I pulled the cellophane off a cigarette pack. Crumpled it to catch the cats' attentions. I threw it and they caught and batted it about but lost interest quickly.

"We're like zombies," I said. "Just pacing and soaking this tired rug with our smoke and daydreams."

"The difference is," said Peck, "Is mine can come true."

We had no ideas.

Sitting on our knees on the carpet in the front room, we were into our second bottle of wine. Peck was drunk. She was crying. I could just see the outlines of the shapes of trees in the courtyard.

“If I have to divorce someone I’m glad it’s you, Rad Baby, I am.”

She fell against my shoulder, spilling some of the wine.

“I still love you, you know boy.”

“I know.” I watched her bleary lips and glazed eyes.

“I’ve invested so much of my life in you. You have too.” Gesturing with her finger. “All of the life that my mother wanted for me.”

I did not try to change the subject, did not enlarge it.

“She was my best friend,” Peck said. “That was the best part of my life. She still sees me.”

I felt myself disappear in her eyes. I lifted her and made her puke in the bathroom, helped her to walk to the bedroom. I laid her down and took her clothes off.

A few days ago I was going through the garage, pulling out boxes to put in a storage bin. I ran across an old one that held notebooks and photographs that were taken when Peck and I were together. I wanted to talk to someone about it but I didn’t know

who that would be. Two years ago, one of our mutual friends called to tell me that Peck and her husband were killed when their car ran into a bridge abutment in Vicksburg.

My mourning for Peck is done in small cells of time when I am alone in the house. And in odd moments, when the color of a street, or the sound of a voice, makes me stop and remember the hard fact of stone. And I am horrified.

Dancing in the room of salt light to Johnny Mathis. Two dun colored coats, a white profile under my shoulder. I pull her down into a ridiculous dip. She laughs. There are painted pots along the window ledge. Her thin white fingers on my shoulder extend to the walls, boards, like a starfish. And I become a dolphin. We wind along the walls wrapped in curtains. Sheets. Blue with white print. Her face looks up as a pale moon.

BIGGER SKIES

Well Bye, without rehearsal but not without intent, hello. It's been sometime since I've talked to those marble brown eyes above wavy mustache, always unnoticed, even when clean lipped or unshaven, Bye Boy.

I've wrapped up poetry for the year. And there is, lying to the right of this typing machine, a pad of white blue lined paper, and a pen of black ink, waiting for a full length screenplay. Standing empty now, but I hope not by the end of this letter.

And Bye, this is the letter. I began it twice before. Once on a May morning, and once on a July afternoon. Stymied first by joy, second by infestation. As I said, I wrapped up all of my poems with brown paper and that fine white string you can get at post offices. Wound them round a thousand times into a cylinder that I tossed into the top of my closet. I imagine them smoldering in their own cold smoke till the end of time. My time.

I hope you'll help me Bye, that through this letter, this one-sided (perhaps multi-sided) conversation, I will be led to something. A discovery? A finding of more questions? And a question. So how is the Missus? Or is there one? Oh, and the screenplay. How about these:

A lonely young woman, whose mother's been dead for several years, kills her very own dad, (who she hates vehemently for he is a cruel senile sonuvabitch) by berating him and aggravating him through a series of crescendoing heart attacks, then takes her own life at a lesbian party by hanging herself with twine from a rooftop. Her suspended body crashes against a large window, through which the camera sees into the living room of a serious Roman Catholic who is meanwhile fingering his rosary and himself.

Or

A fine young Democrat makes good with girl and industry, champions the downtrodden and later is blown to hell in a back alley by a junkie for the 23 dollars in his back pockets.

Or

Boy meets girl. Girl meets girl. The basic love triangle with the twist that never their faces are seen, and never their voices are heard except through telephone answering machines. I'll call it, *Messages Left*.

Well?

Another cup of coffee due. It is nearing dawn on this black Florida night when our arms are rolling with salt and saliva. The warm air outside is still. There is no breeze coming through my window. Perhaps I should start again.

What I hope for this letter I can't explain. You see I lost something, Bye. And I'm telling you because when I had it, you were there. Some of the time. It's not wrapped up with you. I don't know if you have lost it too.

When we were dancers in air. Lovers of the blackness. In eyes, in air, trees, sidewalks, back lots, and streets we flew through popped with bright spheres of green and white, red, and amber. And we didn't stop. Or if we did it was with a high encircling twist on-going and swift, like a swimmer's turn, a somersaulting idle, like treading rank waters in mid-air.

When I think about the way we talked and the things we wanted then, it seems so idealistic to me now. I want to laugh at us. We talked about talent. And class. Some people have it. And you know it. There is no explanation. You can't explain how it is. You just know. We knew there were Gods, and we wanted to reach them. We talked to people on the grounds of St Elizabeth's, yelling through the gate. We talked to people with shaved heads and white robes, the ones who give you flowers at the airport. (Corey loved the airport. He could spend the whole day almost anytime, just watching the planes land and take off.) I can see Nicholas, talking to a flower person or a member of a church choir, "Tell me about God. What does he look like? What does he say to you?" We invented games to play with businessmen and almost always lost. We pissed and vomited on neighborhood sidewalks. Invented characters to act against each other. Laughed at people, thought we learned from the wisest ones. If the whole world thought you a fool we gave our immediate respect. And reaching God was never something said

or seen. But walking through a threshold on a night of blackness. All confusion cleared away. Nothing seen, nothing heard. Only a feeling of pouring out onto the air.

“I can see the mechanisms, David, it’s so simple. So pure. Shit, I know the future, it’s easy.”

Another cup of coffee definitely due. And then some salty bubble-water. It really will be dawn in an hour or three. I’ve trouble with time when it comes in anything larger than years. And there are clothes and sheets to wash, and work to go to tomorrow.

Down in a hollow where two slow roads crossed, in one of those big house neighborhoods, we were all illuminated somehow on a night when you would never notice a simple street lamp. There was a fine delicious mist of a snow coming down and I was walking in broad circles gathering up the image of my footprints filling up. Feeling clean, warm and cool and faraway. Harl was trying to drive this ten-ton golden Olds up a slight incline. (His mother’s car that we called *The Good Ship Hope*.) But the fat new tires would catch nothing but the misty white stuff, and with the windows down his harshest voice cursed God and Man, and slipping closer with each attempt the edge of the blacktop and a precariously positioned bright yellow fire hydrant. Corey was rolling on the floorboard, or half hanging out of the car, his one arm braced against the open door, and his other encircling his chest that hurt from laughing so loudly that the rows and rows of closed doors that always surrounded us must have felt threatened by the echoes. Harl cursing him, “Goddamn it’s not funny. This is my fuckin’ mother’s car.” Nicholas, I

knew was oblivious to the situation, sitting quietly on the back seat, jacket collar closed around his neck, open mouthed, concentrating so completely on one piece of a puzzle, that the whole picture would be lost, unable to hold with the logic it took to create the single missing piece. But he would still believe. He was the greatest believer. And where were you Bye? Turning when I heard the thick aluminum bunt sound, two tires escaped the street and the car door (having hit the hydrant) visibly dented, and Corey was face up in the white gutter still erupting in laughter loud and long and senseless as all of America's blackbirds. Damn.

That steely light is trying to come through my window now. So, one piece of chocolate for some added sugar-stress, or I'll be dead to the world till two. Like I said, sleep has a way of forcing itself and I'm sounding quite ridiculous now.

But do you know what I mean? There was an exhilaration. It came all wrapped up in the music and the wind.

Well, here we go again, Bye. I was about to tell you of a night we spent on a dead end street, sitting on top of the Good Ship Hope, smoking from our pipes and cigarettes, with some form of (what was to us then) magic popping in the black air around us. There was a house on a hill above us, shut up tight. There was a little league baseball field to our left, and a shrubby forest of shrubs and sticks and brittle frail trees, facing us. And we were boys sitting on parked cars (large rolling boxes) feeling a certain strength with the fear we sensed, coming from inside those locked houses. Of course we posed no threat. We were the brothers of their children and they sent their oldest and

most lonely children to us. It sounds ominous now, as I spell it out, but it was simple, really, and human. And a man has a way of seeing all his most real and darkest fears in a brother's eyes.

Boy, we were reeling on those nights. The black air was our thin blood and speed we were, kicking down our own wings for the thrill of falling. My own private desire was to loose myself. To go so far away that finding any hope of home would be impossible. "Knowledge is never familiar," I thought. And part of the excitement was our collective anticipation. We wanted the whole world to roll over on its heels for us, or to come crashing down so fast as to crush our bones. And we were certain of its coming.

He lit up, like candles in his dark eyes. Waxy.

Corey: I'm mad, Charles, mad as a clock on the wall.

David: Yes. Of course.

Corey: Yes, and I bite too.

Nicky: Do they really fuck cows in Mississippi?

Corey: Of course, yes. Now be quiet.

David: Uh, I don't know the percentage.

Corey: Hush now. I want to tell a story. Oh! I'd love to bite you, baby.

David: Make it hurt too.

Corey: Ooo, yes. Hu-hah!?! Now, listen to me.

David: Buy me another drink, Core?

Nicky: I want one of those things with lime peel.

Corey: Now hush! Both of you. I want to tell you about Sandy but you won't be still. Now! My mother was volunteering work part time at the hospital for persons not right in the mind. And she met Sandy. Sandy was a girl.

Nicky: Sandy was?

Corey: Yes. Now-

Nicky: What happened to her?

David: I feel a great and specific need for that girl over there with the crossed knees.

Corey: No. She would tear you apart.

David: That's what I want.

Corey: No, David. Her solace is only temporary. Do you understand?

David: I don't think I care.

Corey: Hush, now. I'm trying to save you.

Nicky: What happened to Sandy? She died. She died.

David: What was she like?

Corey: Like this, (cocking both hands like a hen, walking with a queer

arched back, and the brown of his eyes invisible under the lids) can I clep yore hens?

This morning I am in fine fettle, as they used to say. My brain is a sieve where there eases through a pleasantness affected by the strange molecules of an imperceptible drug saturated in the breezes that bleed through my window originating from the leaf berries of those young palms planted in the courtyard.

There are so many eyes here. Where I work every night, where people come to check in, I hate them for approaching me. I curse them. I damn them, for taking me away from whatever book I am reading, and I try not to notice their eyes. Because if I do, no pair of eyes are blank. And eyes are not windows to the soul. They are beyond. Because if I do see their eyes, notice the fine definition, the lines and colors and form of them, I will love them and stop cursing. Eyes are the window to God, our common soul, our birth.

I work in a declining hotel in a small, growing, (but dying also) southern city. One night I was talking to the other desk clerk about a double murder that had taken place in our city the week before. A young woman killed a new mother and grandmother, and stole the baby. We both wondered how fucking crazy she must have been to want

one so badly. And how she could have simply adopted, and how afterward, she really believed it was her baby. She believed that she had gone through labor to have it. James, our bellman was there, he leaned one elbow on the desk. His eyes looked different, smaller, blacker. He said, "My experience. My advice is t'dopt. My first wife got pregnant. We was living in New York City then. I was working the railroad. An' I was somewhere towards St. Lou. Well she died, and the child too. That morning. I was in the train. About to close off and go to the hotel. And my boss man. But I knew it was when I see him. Because to make that special trip out there and when he come up it was like all the lights was out. Like. All the cars, through the whole train. Was all black. Empty. I never forget it. I never let my second wife try. Just too dangerous." We couldn't say anything, we were so surprised. He had never before, nor has he since, related anything personal to me. He put one hand over his mouth. "Yeah. My advice, t'dopt. If ya want chilren."

But I'm not here to talk about babies, births or deaths. Or old black men. Or the one pair of eyes that give me a gentle freight every time I walk into the elevator. Let me get back to our days of old.

On those summer nights there was something in the black wind rushing through the windows that thrilled. Corey and me, speeding through those broad neighborhood streets of big houses, and we could tell where there was a party by the cars on the curb, high school kids on the lawn, and shades of music in the backyards. We would go to the

back and Core would get us into these little groups. His methods, so transparent, but direct.

“Hey, I know you. Annandale High, right?”

“No. Woodsen.”

“That’s right. Got anything for the head?”

“Nope.”

I’d stay a foot behind and to the left of him. On to the next group.

“Hey! Larry.”

“Steve.”

“Have a shot of this, Steve.”

“Thanks.”

“Know where we could find a little brain food?”

“Well I might could help you on that one.”

“Lead the way Stevie boy. Lead the way.”

I know I’m not really coming across Bye. You’re sitting there wondering what the hell this is coming to. Let me blame it in sentimentality, that you think you can detect

in my sentences, and maybe that's it. Lost youth you say. Well you're closer to the mark there. You know I'm not talking about a single event, or a series of evenings. It's a flavor really. That's all.

Something about things that we did that none of us understood. It was a way that we played. Like one night very late, we decided to go to the campus of a junior college that was in our domain. There were art works on display there. Large sculptures. We stood in front of one for a long while. Just taking it in. Not saying anything. It was a huge metal sheet that hung vertically from wires. There was a slice through one corner of it, lines of color running through it vertically. Nicky walked up to it and screamed at it. Then he stood back, as if waiting for an answer. Corey took from his pocket an empty film canister and threw it at the thing. Nicky picked it up and threw it at Core, who let go of a large harsh laugh. Then the three of us started running at each other and laughing and screaming hysterical phrases that made no sense until we were worn out and finally Nicky decided to run through the sculpture. He hit and fell backward laughing like mad, with his head cut open and blood running over his face.

Now, I can't understand that. But at the time it felt good. I guess we just had too much energy and not enough to do. There was so much inside of us I guess we just had to go crazy to try and get it out. We were expressing ourselves that way, but damn, I wish I new what we were saying.

Well Bye, I need a big caffeine kiss to escape the lure of my bed. So I will press on and try to finish this thing.

Susan and Sharon came straight across a wooden bridge, bought by their fathers' taxes, and the taxes of all fathers like the creek bed it crossed and the scrawny wood for their boys to play in with sticks and plastic guns, to muddy their pants in glances of brown and green to grow on. Susan was wearing a silver disco belt and a thick beige sweater, too loose for her thin arms. She appeared to be, and possibly was, the thing of the world we anticipated. Knowing only Core, still they walked straight to us, into our shadow circle, and held out to me her closed hand. I took the thin bone pipe, made from an antler, and filled it for us.

It's hard to remember exactly how I felt during that period. I can't recapture being there, though I can still see it plainly. Her thin body, bare arms, her hollow face of dark shadows. The curve of her ass so strong. Her eyes were hesitant, but looked to me as if they had seen everything. Her lips were like a child's. She stirred me up through the center of myself. My eyes caught open and clear, my cool nuts quivered and shaking, my mind spiraling up and out onto the cool star inflicted air.

I stood behind her, wanting to encircle her with my shoulders to prove that there was warmth, that she was as alive as I was. There was a feeling of aloneness and bondage between the two of us, though Nicky, Harl, Corey, and Sharon were all there too. Forming a circle of faces, our temperatures soring. When the police wagon came, throwing up at us its erratic pattern of white lights, I took the soft bone pipe from her

mouth and threw it as far as I could into the black field behind us. They told us to go. We drove off. Susan and Sharon walked back over the bridge towards their fathers' houses.

Well Bye Boy, I'm not coming any closer. I wish I had finished this the first time I had started it. I had woke up one afternoon in June, my face damp and hot. My arm had been stomped on during the night and lacked any feeling at all, and the foremost thought in my mind was "Move bed away from wall, fool." When I walked into the kitchen I discovered that the place was teeming with fruit flies. Thousands or millions. They scampered around on the counters, danced on the walls, played games on the frig, copulated on my typewriter. It took me hours to find the nest. A basket of old potatoes turning to sod. With my face wrapped in damp towels, I lugged it out to the dumpster and sent the little bastards on to someone else. That did not rid me of them completely, but they only live a day or two you know, and without another proper resort area for them, they died out quickly.

Well back to the meat of the matter, whatever it is. The crucial time, I guess, was one fall weekend when Corey and I drove down to Blacksburg with two pounds of pot in his gym bag. We had quite a trip down, Corey's car died about halfway there, so we walked for many miles until we hitched a ride with a trucker. He dropped us off on a dark empty highway in the middle of nowhere in the early morning hours. There was a

phone booth about 50 yards from the highway. It provided for us the only shelter from the cold wind, so both of us huddled inside of it. We would take turns running out to the highway to see if any cars were coming. After a couple of hours of this we gave up and Corey called the highway patrol. A patrolman picked us up and drove us to the Virginia Tech campus. It took us fourteen hours to get there, nine hours longer than it should have, and all the way Core was convinced that a spaceship had followed us, monitoring our every move and word. He was carrying a gym bag with two pounds in it that he wanted to sell.

We wandered around campus for some time before finding Susan's dorm. She was expecting us. Her roommate had moved in with a boyfriend. Her lights were off giving everything a gray hue. Every surface in the room was neat and clean. I imagined all of the books on her shelves were unread. I thought she must never turn on her lights even at night.

I wanted to slide down the wall and slump on the floor, I was so tired. Core left right away to go peddle his wares. Susan and I stood by the window and smoked. She adjusted the shade so we could not be seen but left a gap at the sill so that, stooping down, she could still see outside. It was bright that day. Very light out. Fairly warm and breezy. All the trees and bushes full with color. The drug, though I was somewhat immune, having smoked so much on the way down, did its best to unnerve me. Unable to speak, imagining my breathing to be audible and difficult. A Steve Miller album was on the turntable. Without it I would have panicked in the silence. Neither of us spoke

while it played. She stooped down to look outside every once in a while. She never asked me a question, nor did she seem to wonder what I wanted.

Then she took to the telephone. She must have made an even dozen calls. For what seemed like forever, I sat dumbly staring while she talked and listened and never laughed. She had a curious habit of moving her fingers while she talked. They danced like thin broken skeletons in time with the rhythm of her sentences. Her mouth seemed conscious of the way it formed words. I wanted to reach out and smooth her with my hands.

She never glanced at me while on the phone. It was as if I were not there. When finally putting it down, she sat up straight on the edge of the bed facing me. Holding the shade back, she peeked out the window.

“All of my friends are going out to sunbathe,” she picked at a nail. “But it really isn’t hot enough, I think.”

I stood up straight and still she wasn’t looking at me until I lifted her arm and she stood up, looking surprised and worried. I kissed her and we finally began to breathe freely. And it was a comfortable feeling as long as we were close and didn’t have to talk. It was natural and full and warm. I didn’t notice, she told me afterward, that Corey had walked in, and left, closing the door real fast. It was my first time, Bye.

While we lay there afterwards, it was easy. We were warm and beat evenly. I dozed a little with her head next to my chest. Freckles, thin and frail nose, timid

unconscious mouth. She moved only when my hands moved her. Her body so light. I could see every bone in her back, and curved my arm over her shoulders. Her hair, red and full.

For a long time we said nothing. Just like before. When she finally spoke, with her head on my chest, I could see only her hair and the side of her face.

“Other guys.”

“What.”

“Most guys never,” and I waited for her to complete the sentence. “Never just hold me after. You can get up and go if you want.”

“I don’t want.”

She was dressed when I woke up that night. It was early evening. She left for a few minutes and when she came back she sat on the windowsill where I had sat that morning watching her go through her ritual of phone calls. Core came in and said he had a ride set up but we had to go right away. I let him go out ahead of me. She was holding her arms around herself like she was cold. I took hold of her hand but didn’t know what to do with it and let go.

She said, “I don’t fit here. Anymore than I do at home, I think.”

She made a little laugh. And that is where I failed, Bye. I did not ask for her number or give her mine or tell her I would write or even see her again when she got

home. She said nothing else, and she looked like she didn't expect anything from me. She looked like she didn't expect anything from the world. Like she felt unworthy. That's easy to say now, Bye. But that is how I see that small mouth, red hair, jeweled eyes, that had been afraid for so long that there was only a tiredness left.

About that screenplay. I still have only empty blue lines on the paper and you are not helping me at all. I'm so full of bubbly water and caffeine that my dick has shrunk to the size of a peanut and my fingers are slipping on the keys, szee. I do have a vague idea though. I see three naked people in the middle of a field of cows. It is so dark that only three tall shades can be discerned. They start to run after each other, playing tag and laughing. There is more, but do you remember where Corey and Nicholas lived?

I know you remember Corey's room. It never changed. Nothing ever moved in that room but our minds. Gumby and Pokey were always set up on the air conditioner, and I imagine they still are. The desk never changed. There was a mirror there that he used to spread lines on, and a fat red switchblade for anyone, (usually me) to fidget with. His magic tricks stuffed away in a drawer. The waterbed always made up neatly. I swear to God, even dust never collected there. The walls stayed the same color. Yellowing white and pale green blocks, so pale a color that I must have been there a hundred times before I realized that the wall was not solid white. In the other downstairs room Nicky

kept his piano. It was a room carefully constructed for contained chaos. Only our thoughts got out of hand. I'll tell you about a scare I had there, Bye.

Nicky was playing and it sounded as nonsensical and steady as rainfall. I followed Core to his room. We left the door open to listen to Nicky's piano but had the radio on also. It was a talk station, and only suit & tie voices came over, too dull and small to hear the actual words but they blended with Nicky's music. Core took out a small stone pipe and filled it with red weed, and the thing smoked like a locomotive. He filled it three times and we took it down our tubes very fast, talking all the while.

"It's like a slap in the face, isn't it."

"Exactly, like when what is coming down out of the sky is not rain."

"I'm so close to it, David. I can see the shades of the mechanisms making our histories. "

"Susan is like that. A slap in the face. "

"Not at all. She's a candle that burns."

"She can be harsh as ice."

"No. She ruins quickly."

"She does, doesn't she? I bet she will die young."

“She is dying now, as we all are of course, but in her face you can see that she has already died once before and gone to dust.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that she has visibly inherited death.”

“We all do.”

“Yes, but she wears it on her cheeks.”

“She does.”

We walked back into the larger room where the childish arhythmic beautifully discordant melody kept falling around us. It was perhaps not music, but a manmade uneven breeze or flowing stream. He played on. I sat down at a table smoking a cigarette. Corey was over by the sliding glass door, pressing his mouth against the glass pane. He did this the length of the door. Something inside was beginning to bother me.

I had a vision of myself as a naked man, led into a small room by armed guards to be laid out flat on a huge concrete block and tied down with strips of yellow plastic bands. A terrific ache generated in my right shoulder and ran down the length of my arm to the wrist, and pulsed there. I got up and started pacing. Core, with a bright green plastic flute, took the chair I had vacated, moved it over to the piano and started playing the thing. Then there were two sets of idiot notes in conflicting half keys. They rained right through me. And everywhere they hit I felt a bruise. I felt those plastic bands

tighten around my wrists. And the men that marched me in and guarded me had no feelings. They spoke evil at me, and tightened the straps against my chest so tight I couldn't breathe. I was swerving like mad. I dropped a burning cigarette onto the carpet and stumbled toward the blur that was Corey. The individual notes were bombarding my cells. I grabbed him by the shoulders and saw that he knew. I couldn't speak for lack of breath but tried to gulp out, "Heart attack. Feels like." He took my hand and led me outside.

"I'll help you," he said. "Kneel on the grass." I stumbled to my knees.

"Take a few deep breaths." I couldn't. Something inside was piercing me.

"Now say, Jesus please help me."

"Je-Jesus please huh-help me."

The wind and Nicky's music dipped, rose together and stroked my face as careful, impossible fingers, and I began breathing. The pain vanished and I was as comfortable as the grass. My wet eyes cleared. I was no longer high. Awake and alive. Corey lifted the toy flute and began playing as if in ritual thanks, and their music was imbecilic and beautiful.

Well, here we go again, Bye. We'll have another go, I guess. Work was a bitch last night. Two black guys had a fight in the lobby. Something to do with a whore. We

had to mop up the blood. And, man, the food I just ate. Cannot even imagine what was in it. Real food is a dream to me. Hard to come by. But I only have myself to blame and why am I going through all this muck, Bye? I don't even know what I'm trying to say. But I guess by writing down everything I think of can get me there eventually. It's getting to be that hazy time again. Sleep.

Do you sleep well? I didn't for a long time. I'd slip under the warm blackness, and the next thing I knew my back would arch me up, and staring into nothing I'd say, *What? What's wrong? What's wrong? I know something's amiss horrible like. What am I supposed to do? What the hell is it?* No answer ever comes, needless to say. So now, what to do. I try to avoid it altogether, you know. I try to avoid it altogether and I beat my brain senseless and I wear my ass out until all I can help but do is keel over into the smooth sea of snooze. And I don't wake up for 12 hours. And that's that, Bye. A simple fix. Some things just require a simple fix.

That summer that I will talk about some, when Susan came home and never went back to school again. The first time I saw her she was with the twins. I know you remember them, Bye. Sharon the coy one, and Gail, the trooper, the true one. Well all I remember about that time was walking on the sidewalk in front of Susan's house. Walking ahead of her, the twins walking behind her, and I reached up, plucked a leaf off of a tree, and said something that meant nothing. I was trying to think of something to say. Something good. Simple. To show her that it was alright. She had run away, you

see. Corey had filled me in on it. She was gone about two weeks before her Daddy brought her back in his great gray Cadillac. She had gone by herself, and no one except Gail knew where. Someone said that she had hidden out in an unused office building just blocks away. Isn't that screwy. Why didn't she get clear? At least to Maryland, or down south, or New York, or anywhere. She was practically at home the whole time.

Anyway, I wanted to say something like, *that's alright, you'll get clear next time. I'll help you. Or, we all want to run away. I think about it all the time.* But I reached up, plucked a leaf, and without even turning around to her, said something real simple. And that's all I can remember about it.

There is some kind of minor storm tonight. Wind or rain, I haven't lifted the blinds to see it. And it has subsided now, as suddenly as my decision to mention it. The madness lives on. I had a vision just now, Bye. You know the rows in a bean field, as seen from a highway; they click past your shoulder fast, so fast, too fast to count. And I think of a young boy beating off in the middle of a flat field. He leaves his jazz in the dust. All surrounded by trees. In the distance. One border or two extend for unobstructed miles and he can be seen for miles and miles. But there are only trees to see, or a dog, or a doe. And if I were to tell this to a girl I love. A woman that I love. Would she say, *on the floor boy, right now. Moo moo, and give us a moo.* Or more like, scratching a shy finger, *Uh, well you know honey, you haven't slept well for the longest time.* Oh what the hell, there is no woman that I love, only all of them that I see or hear.

In Core's car, the two of us, parked in front of a house on a sleeping street. We were drinking cans of beer. I could only see his silhouette. Medici nose, strung out hair. I talked about how it is so lonely being a human being. All wrapped up in one body. And why was it, that we couldn't just ease out of our pores like simple salt and mingle with each other. And I felt the darkness slip up on us some. He wasn't listening.

"I made it with Susan last night," he said.

We couldn't see each others faces for the darkness.

"In this car. Parked right in front of her house."

I reached over and turned off the radio.

"How long did it take?"

"What do you mean?"

He wasn't like himself that night. There was a sense of disappointment in him.

"Well what did you talk about?"

"Well the music was on, we smoked a joint, one thing led to another and we had a tug at it. You know. It's nothing David. She's a whore you know."

"How much did you pay her?"

"She's fucked a hundred different guys. It means nothing to her."

"Didn't you like it?"

“It was alright.”

He patted my leg. There was an equation there somewhere. I was trying to work it out. I thought of all the guys, the hundred of them. Two or three a night sometimes maybe. Maybe it was that she just wanted to take them all in. That if she took them all in, it was more than just them. It was their brothers and fathers and sisters, and she could know them all that way. Trying so hard just to attach herself to this place.

Well good evening, early, early, evening, Bye. How are you on this nearly night? What I want to tell you about tonight is interspersed between portions of our last parties that summer.

“My heart breaks for girls long gone like Martha Vickers and Jean Arthur.” I don’t know why I told him that as he filled my plastic cup from the keg. I was standing in the kitchen which was crammed like a sardine can. Wall to wall white slaves, all jabbering and singing his praises to me I love, etc. I thought I was lying down. Running down the wall like water. This boy with a furry unkempt face standing next to me, was looking me in the eyes, his mouth saying, “Plato believed the soul of a man to be a separate entity. He actually proved it with logic, that when the body dies, the soul, I mean the soul flies away.”

“What about memory,” I said.

“What?”

“What happens to memory?”

“The what? The memories? That’s in components of the soul by Plato. Memories are a component of the soul. Did you ever read Plato?”

“No.”

“He actually came up with the theory of relativity. But it wasn’t recognized till Einstein. Nobody knew what he was talking about. So Einstein got the credit cause nobody knew what nobody knew what the hell he was talking about. Hah.”

In a careful maneuver I launched myself, sprawled, across the room to an Old Milwaukee which was being offered to someone else and made the kitchen exit. Rounding a corner of low lamplight where a girl with crossed legs sitting next to an iron square table said, with a cigarette in her fingers, “...wasn’t about to take that from him, *snort snort*. So Tony handed the guy a ten bill, and I said...” And out the screen door, under the carport where Corey lay on his side in a lounge chair.

“My mind is not right. Tell me please,” I said, “Is it the medicine you prescribed?”

He sprang up.

“Or some that I have taken without note.”

“David.”

“Green green bare the bottle green. I need a strange song.”

“Will you sing?”

I flopped down on the cement and tucked my head underneath me, rolling to and fro. Rolling. Rolling. Rolling.

“It’s alright, it’s alright. Let it go now, David.”

He put his arms over me, “You have to let it go. You’re trying to breathe, you’re going to cough yourself into a spell now. Let me hear some sincere gulps. That’s right. Don’t worry. No one can hear you. It’s okay. That’s right, give us some wet ones, some real guffaws now, it will clean you out. I’ve got you. I wish you could see the sky right now, David, it’s a real shock.”

One Sunday we drove up in the late afternoon. You know how in summer the afternoons go on and on for so long. Gail was sitting on the curb, playing in the dust with a stick.

She said, “Susan’s not here. I don’t know where she is.” And in a quieter voice, “The party was over yesterday morning.”

Nicholas turned the engine off, leaving his car in the middle of the street. We all got out. Nicky and Core spoke at once.

“Have you seen her since then?”

“You always know where she is.”

“No I don’t.” She stood up and dropped the stick, “But I’m starting to worry a little.”

“You can tell us, Gail,” I said. “We are too.”

“I told you I don’t know. What are you guys doing here?”

“We were talking last night,” I said. And I walked past Gail ignoring her eyes, and around the side of the house.

“We had a bad feeling,” I heard Corey say, soft like.

And Nicky, “Have you seen her since the party?”

I went around to the back. Just to look at the windows, for any human movement, I guess. I couldn’t see anything. There had been a violent storm the night before, and the plants next to the house were beaten and broken down. I listened to them talking as they followed me to the back of the house. Gail said that she must have driven off with her brother, Robert somewhere.

“Her car is still here,” said Nicky.

“That’s her Mom’s. Susan doesn’t have a car.”

“Oh. So nobody’s home?”

“No.”

I was standing by a window where the drapes were slightly parted.

"I wonder if any of the windows are unlocked."

"I already checked," Gail said. "I wouldn't mind breaking in cuz they kind of wanted me-"

"Because they trust you," said Core.

"They left me a key."

"Do you have it?"

"I left it inside I think."

Corey bit his bottom lip.

"I can get in," said Nicky. He climbed up onto the tiny ledge.

"Well, maybe we should just-" Gail leaned forward against the house. Her face was pinched and pink. Her right leg stretched out behind her, taught.

Corey said, "Like at our house, remember Nicky?"

"Of course."

"Just. I don't want. Don't hurt anything." She picked at the way her yellow shorts fit around her.

"Oh, he won't," said Core. "He does this all the time. Don't you worry."

"Oh, right."

Nicky started pulling the top of the window down. "Are you sure no one will come driving up?"

"Yes. They're not due till Friday."

"Nicky, if you can't-"

"I've got it." He made an open space wide enough to reach the lock. "The phone's ringing," he said. He turned the lock.

"You've got it," said Core.

"Of course." He bent down and pushed the bottom window up. We all heard the phone ring one long ring. Gail's mouth was unmoving. Her eyes narrow. Nicky parted the drapes, and climbed through. The phone rang another long ring. We saw him standing straight.

"She's here." His voice sounded flat, unalarmed. "She's dead."

I waited, listening. The phone didn't ring again.

"No she's not," said Core.

Gail climbed up. I tried to help her through the window. She mumbled something like, "Sure she's passed out drunk."

Nicky stood still, looking toward the bed. Gail stood up, facing the same direction. She walked further into the room beyond our view. I heard a one syllable cry.

The beginning of a phrase unfinished. She backed up, turned around and went down on her knees, covering her mouth with one hand.

“Nicky,” said Core.

“She’s dead, Corey.”

“No, she’s not.”

“I’m sorry. She is, Corey, you can’t see her.”

“No. Nicky touch her. To be sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Just touch her. Just to be sure. Touch her.”

“No.”

The rogues we were, had no duties, performed nothing. Did not attend the funeral. Were not asked to. Surprisingly enough, I didn’t realize until much later that we had not tried to look for a note. I never saw any of her friends again. Except Gail. A few years ago I decided to pass by and spoke to Gail for a few minutes. She was in the midst of planning her wedding.

One more note on that afternoon, Bye. Our Nicholas exchanged a few words with the lone officer that showed up minutes before the ambulance. I remember

watching Gail's face while he went into the room, and then when he came back. It was as if she still had some unfounded hope that he would report something different. He didn't, of course, and her former expression returned. She lowered her head. The officer and Nicky talked about suicide and how severe changes in the weather affect the rate.

The officer said, "There are a lot of books in the library on it. But don't bother with the ones printed in the 60's and 70's, They thought everything was the environment. But it's chemical. Check the ones printed in the 80's. Such a huge part the change of seasons and the weather plays, really."

Well I haven't a lot more for you, Bye. It should be dawn in an hour or two. I never know what time it is in this room. And I feel that I haven't covered my subject. Something about how the houses, neighborhoods, youth, was it? One more thing and I'll give this up. There is still no screenplay. And I don't even remember what I'd hoped to retrieve. But that last party.

We fed ourselves on the usual drugs and desires for wild girls. None of which had much affect on me that particular night. It must have been late summer or early autumn. I don't know. Corey and I stepped out, while some other friends were still inside, most of them dead drunk. I walked directly to the small hill in the backyard. And a crazy little white duck came running like a ghost right at Core, quaking out a rage like it

must of thought it was a fucking guard dog. Corey quacked back, and ran it off, flapping his mad arms. Then he took a small leap in the air and let out a madman's victory laugh. I looked up at the sky for a while. Corey did too, a queer arch in his back, his hands stuck out, fingers pointing out awkward, a leer in his lips, and those tender crazy eyes rolled up. We said nothing for a good while. Just looked up.

“It's purple.”

“And it's big,” I said. “Do you feel sometimes like you are being pulled up, Core? Like drawn up out of yourself to be in it? Included in it?”

“Oh, all the time,” he said. “Always.”

There is no screenplay. There is no answer, as if all this complicated world could be reduced to a simple phrase. Just take your chances, Bye.