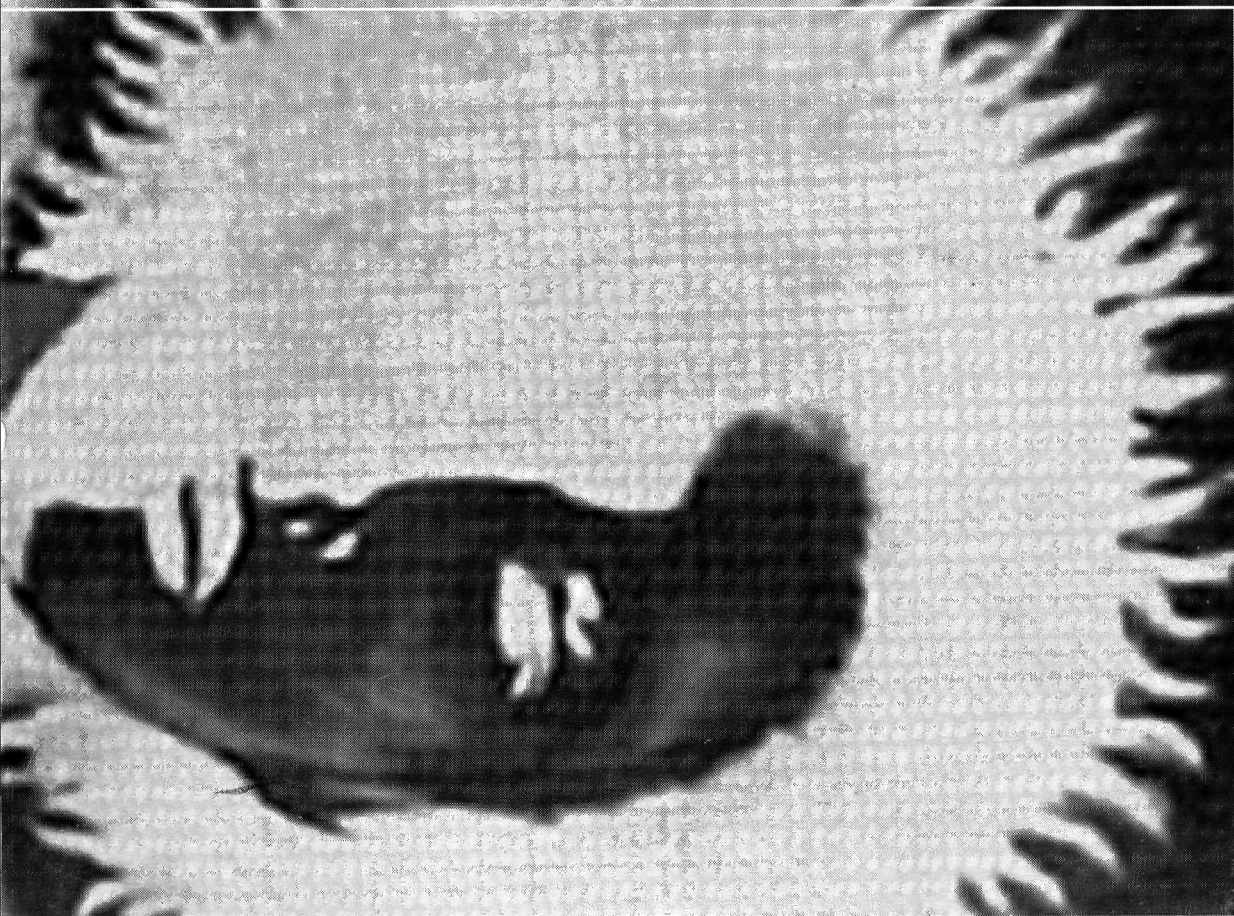


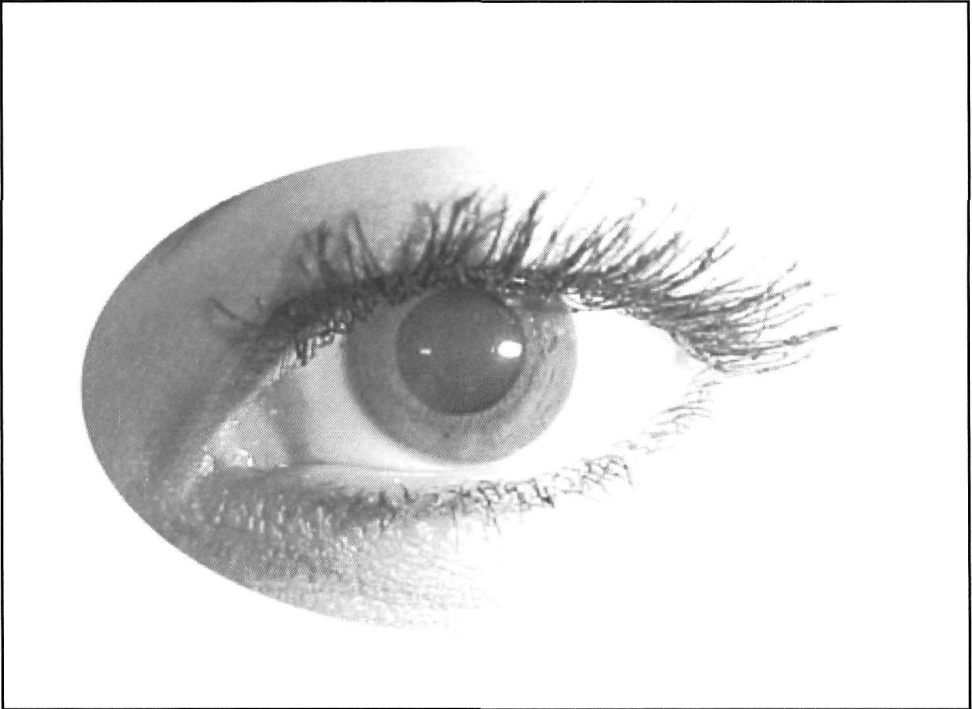
Cornfield *R*eview



An Annual of the Creative Arts
Volume 18 2000

Cornfield

Review



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Cornfield Review

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here I lay

And here I lay
on grassy leaves
spread wide and wet
I let myself come around
the sense of you.
And what can we now say
about the sense of you
defined by some
jetting arrogance?
I do not have
lumps of life
nor do I pierce and conquer
but I am
the smooth moon
turned upside down
and let open
giving birth
to thousands of galaxies
decorated with
liquid space and stars
and where are you here?
Where is your arrogance?

Maybe I can find you . . .
pull up the lightly heavy
atmosphere . . . okay,
let it fall, you're not there . . .
maybe tip over the earth,
the sun...you're not there...
maybe I should
lift my feet and check my foot-soles . . . are
you there?

Here, come out
from where you're hiding,
behind that simple arrogance.
You will not find peace there . . .
if you want it,
ask me.

i Am Not Big Enough: 1 Peter 2:11¹

my mouth opens
dripping, wet, sweet.
The largest burner
(back left)
is on high and
the pot isn't big
enough to keep
blood bubbles,
thick and juicy
from spilling over.

Sand takes the place of saliva
and the texture of my mouth
goes by two names: fear and doubt.

Greediness consumes me
and pulls me from my faith.
Arrows of sorrow²
sink into my chest
“Now, now, now!”
they scream tugging
yanking ripping me forward
their edges
cunningly caught on tissue
and bone, points curved
so they can't be pulled free.

Once Lust has broken my body,
made his way through weak barriers,
my soul lies naked,
the wares of spiritual warfare
lay scattered across the countryside.
my shield, my sword, all of it
in pieces because I refuse to pray.

The world and his lusts
have made a friend of me
and i have made enemies of my friends³
and i am so foolish

Where have i been walking?
On the insides of peaches?
On the insides of me?⁴

Filthiness, mud, stringy muscle,
blood and ripped tissue
hang out of my beaten vessel-
i lay scattered on the countryside.

We should each know
how to possess our own vessel
in sanctification and honor⁵ and
i thought i knew.

i thought i alone was big enough.

¹ 1 Peter 2:11 “fleshy lusts war against the soul”

² 1 Timothy 6:9 “some have strayed from the faith
in their greediness, and pierced themselves through
with many sorrows”

³ James 4:4 “those who are friends of the world are
enemies of God”

⁴ Galatians 5:16 “walk in the Spirit and you shall not
fulfill the lust of the flesh

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:4

Afternoon Nap

I dreamt of you today, your face
Before me, the depths of blue-pool eyes
Searching for tender hollows to place hands,
Tracing pathways for the mouth
To follow. Breathing fire and passion
Into a love-starved soul.

I think I saw the beauty of the soul
At that moment when I ached to face
The tanglements of passion.
I saw the gleam of you sapphire-soaked eyes,
And the curve of your sweet malleable mouth
That I swear was crafted by the hands

Of artist angels. I felt the need to place my hands
Upon you and feel the velvet roughness of you soul.
I wished for you to feel me touch, tingle, tease, your mouth.
I hungered for you, burned to taste the contours of your face
With my fingertips, caress the lashes of your eyes--
Drench themselves in tears of passion.

I waited long to feel that passion,
And craved for the feel of hands
I could not have. Your fear pulled me into your eyes
And I saw the sadness of your soul.
You feared that you would face
The pain of your mouth
Mingling to my mouth
Like colors on a palette, only to have the passion
Fade like it had before. I saw the faces
Of different girls mock you as you held my hand.
I felt the pain in your soul.
You saw the pain in my eyes.

I look into different eyes,
Now, and mingle to a different mouth.
But I cannot change the contents of my soul.
In my dreams we can feel passion
And have no fear as our hands
Can at last caress each other's faces.

I wait to nap to see you face and kiss you mouth,
Behold your eyes and embrace the passion.
It is in my dreams beneath your hands that we shall find
our souls.

Breathing a Man

I love to breathe a man
Touched by the sun.
The sun's caress draws forth
Life from a man.
That which binds
Muscles in winter
Seeps through pores,
And I breathe it.
I can breathe the
Pumping blood, and
Heated body water, tinged
With salt.
The sun and wind lick
Skin and layer
Traces of wood and
Grass and dirt and
Water to the body's sap.
What I breathe in is
Not sweet or false.
It's not bottled up,
Not created in sterility
But is created within
The man, and by
The Earth.
It is elements melded,
Made whole and smooth.
It intoxicates the mind,
And I breathe it in
Freely, praying for drunkenness.
To breathe a man
Is to breathe fire
that burns as it travels
The body, but leaves it
Wanting more.

Hoarse Yodel

Death, tastes so alive when coupled with salt
The tears of whom loved trickle down to despair
I watched him grab at his soul, it fled the flesh uncaught

A loss is a loss mad blame and no fault
A house sits full of darkness, but bare
Death, tastes so alive when coupled with salt

It can't be had in the next life, relinquish all you've wrought
Deviant demons and devils teased by dare
I watched him grab at his soul, it fled the flesh uncaught

I wonder if his ghost is haunted by my thought
Frozen by a soul less and blank stare
Death, tastes so alive when coupled with salt

Boarded door official tape body imprisoned by, chalk
Clues are many and few, footprints defined in thin air
I watched him grab at his soul, it fled the flesh uncaught

When an old man does with young men test
Then an old dies a young man's death
And death tastes so alive when coupled with salt
I watched him grab at his soul, it fled the flesh uncaught

For Sam "Yodelin' Yoke" Stallworth
RIP 1953-February 11, 2000

Pali Gap

When I listen I see my life in pieces
From a boy's height I see dope heads
On missions, hookers on the stroll
Stick up kids prepared to pounce
Pimps and pushers roll, into
Pali gap
I see moms in front the record player
Her Afro in a caster fingers snapping
In the air, six-foot colored feathers
Rise behind a wicker chair, into
Pali gap
Flowing down in a whispering avalanche
The foundation for the fury, electric sprinkles
Of the flange and decay storm, gunning midnight
Lightning cretinous to the time of
Pali Gap
Acupuncture is indeed a meditation
Needle point licks stitched swiftly to riffs
Mixed gently with bells on the ankles
Of tired souls walking into
Pali Gap
Jimi James lit a blue flame
Burning hot but slows at 98.6 degrees
Black sand beaches trade wind bent trees
While the metronome flashes
With the bedazzlement of a richter
Scale needle on a meteor struck moon
Like a last day of life's sunset coming
too soon, Even when you've done it all
you will fall, again into
Pali gap

Was I

Was I
just thinking about your forever brown eyes
and luscious smile

Was I
A humid June stroked on summer's piano a tune of late night
word exchange teetering on the edge of destiny different
from now on

Was I
Wanting the whole of the piece I Was given on a night where
Hail Mary played and Alize stayed in the bottle no longer
than the tipping

Was I
wanting you, inside of you, and next to you, Was I
To do what a kiss premeditates like a senior prom night
is the honey moon while it's still too soon to say "I do,"

Was I
A gentle reflection in the eye when last we talked and played
the role, you mentioned your meeting me half-way so
maybe now we have a goal.

My sales pitch was neither too deep or shrieking high,
My speaking for what my seeking my thinking for fine hairs
and layers of lust and flares for lovers to see the way it's
done and not have to try, but

Was I

What luminous reflected black face leers down between the
trees? Is it Mr. Destiny leaving us frozen at what if . . .

I have heard the others were but

Was I
a tipsy conversation
a drunken no hesitation
Am I more?

Icy Night Sestina

We were all gathered around, we were all
Sitting about talking bull round the fire—
Pit, laughing loudly, talking and drinking
Beer. Near us against trees leaned two guitars,
And as the night grew ripe and as rude smoke
Wafted somewhat upward, I reached down in ice

For another beer. Ah, in summertime ice
Serves well for beers, and these swell beers all
Were icy cold. I opened it and lit a smoke,
And sat awhile silently by the fire,
Until Jay and Travis grabbed their guitars
And started strumming—Not yet done drinking,

No, they drank between chords. Soon I sang,
drinking
Upon pauses. Between songs I flipped chipped ice
In the fire just for fun. Then, again guitars
Strummed, while I trance-like sang. It was all
Alright that night, the breeze agreed, and the fire
Blazed yet livelier, sending wisps of smoke

Wildly our way. Travis paused to roll some smoke
Into a fat joint. We were stoned, drinking,
We were all talking and laughing. The fire
Illumed our faces. Jill looked silly—I tossed ice
Right on her, then she at me, and soon all
Of us were wrestling, laughing, the guitars

Lay there waiting— but we lost our music, our guitars,
When Bill and Robin, coughing hard from smoke,
Fell hard on them. Sobered for a moment, all
Gazed down silent. We resumed deep drinking,
Quick now until no beers lie in our ice,
Jay and Jen went off for more as our fire

Blazed yet brighter with fresh logs. Watching that fire,
We waited for them to return. The guitars'
Sad shards blazed too. When sirens wailed I felt ice
Inside. We all shut-up and lit a smoke,
Always aware this could happen, drinking
Always—as wailing claimed the long lane, it was all

Over. Now I hear guitars and start drinking;
I smell smoke and again I see it all;
I feel fire inside while outside all is ice.

Thick Rich Foretastes

Lurching through the kitchen late
Last night, I faltered by this
Chocolate cake with thick
Rich icing—it illumined too
Much luxury; *it could surely*
Hurt you sometime.

And the knife that lies
Lazily beside it—*could*
Easily cut you sometime

Your art does not nourish,
No, mere smeared guesses are
Clearly less cherished than thickly
Spread frosting; your red flesh
Though, it might—divinely spiced—
Frightfully delight them—maybe
Brain pudding, pounded and
Blended, or simply whipped,
Dollops plopped onto porcelain
Platters—or—expertly sliced and
Diced by this gleaming knife
With blots of thick dark
Chocolate (inklings of Peruvian
Laborers' blood let) smudged
on its hard sharp edges.

Waxing Impressions

i
am
not
done
. . . today . . .
Sexagonal reality
Waxing, impressions come
Buzzing,
Maybe humming; if honey
Holds harmonious qualities; if
Hives leak tornadoes of
Swarming beings; if your
Black and yellow stripes match
My red and whites; if our
Beeswax candle burns at
Both ends, waning, yet it flickers and
Hints at bigger blazes;
—yes if—
Honestly—you sense it so,
Well, you're human—someone
To sting me—definitely human,
See—so be with me a waxing
While, calmly combing the
Excess of my being.

Mossy Afterthoughts

You came, came
While I slept,
Yet I dreamt, dreamt
Of dark dark canyons
//Rifted//with//your//rhythms
As I hike D

o
w
n
into

Mossy afterthoughts . . .

sopping below and subtly slick, oh i can't slip here--

i'd slide,

i'd sl-

-ide

along a long long s

l
o
p
e

a
n
d

p
l
u
n
g
e

. . . cease- ceaseless- ceaselessly- cease- ceaseless . . .

forever i'd fall,

fall for you,

My Lover Is a Lizard

my lover is a lizard who looks at me every morning through The window as I make coffee. I can count on him to be there and never stray far away. He'll cock his head and look at me as though he already knows what I'm thinking. I'm not embarrassed to sing to him and I know my voice reaches beyond the glass.

since my lover is a lizard, there are no expectations. And I know he doesn't do drugs or carry herpes. His goals are simple and straight-forward and he will never lie to me or one day sleep with a man. He is handsome, honest, healthy & hard-working. I worry for him but not too much because he is so independent.

my lover is a lizard so he doesn't need much from me and he never hurts my feelings. I can count on him to stay the same so I know I won't be dissappointed. He may be too small and too green to careless, but it's easy to put my hopes in him.

Abel

Singular chances fall upon deaf hearts
though you loved me in leaving
the stay was back at the start
Regret your eyes dry,
but pay what you owe
Reunion. Communion
was not scripted, I thought you should know
Here I go.
Porcelain bellies
are not recommended for snakes
You put down your money
before looking into the stakes
Disillusionment comes like a cheap glass of whiskey
Sit on your poor-me and drink it down quickly
Comes the Blow—Here I go
Sticky old memories are not such a hoot as they seem
Thinking in reallys; the nightmare's the same as the dream
Find some nice mommy or sweet little girl with glass eyes
She'll not rock or change or question your world as did I
no surprise
But, baby, I didn't know, still . . .
Here I go
The face of love, to me, looks much like old bones
Though your heart was not genuine, I have no right to throw
stones
The quaking of pleasure is kin to a death
But talking with you, I feel life much less
End of Show
Here I Go.

Sliding down Jackson Avenue

Sliding down Jackson Avenue
The old oak trees enclosing
my hair, following the wind
And the smell of fall in New Orleans
 brings back memories
Of things that used to give me joy
 but can, no longer
But the memory of that joy is enough
 to trace a smile
Audobon Park, the grass, the ducks, the crisp air
 of winter—playing
The father who used to take us there
The industrious grasp of small hands
 climbing
The roar of the street car clickity-clacking past
 in the distance
And the shoosh-shoosh of brown leaves
 that never get covered with snow
The absolute quiet that cold brings to this place
 is unfathomed by most
The irresistable peace of walking down the crooked
 Sidewalks, abused by roots
And you can be alone here and at home in minutes
 on some anonymous street between
 St. Charles and Magazine

A “Good Night”

Watching the TV set’s voices dance on her cheeks
she sits beside me silently

Head turns and watches the wall rust with color
autumn leaves on her jaw

Frozen stare

I want to kiss her porcelain skin
where ear meets neck I find my hand

Backs of fingers slide down to the collarbone

I bend to a ball in her hair

A the wild brown beautiful curly catastrophe

Caught in her net

breathe me to sleep

Late we shake outside in the cold dry air

it blows between chilling our bellies

she sways with the sliding clouds on the moon

I take anchor in her coat

numb noses tough

I want to cry as her arms wrap warm around me

I touch her face like a blind man

Speak with a kiss

Melting together in the moonlight

Sunlight Streams of Hair

Sunlight streams of hair
Silence neon hum and boredom.
Voice slips in wet tongue
on ear warm belly
Slow hands moan
And whispers, "Someday"
I'll know whom I speak of there.
We'll be fields and flowers,
moonlight and song,
wet grass on toes,
laughs to the tree tops,
scurrying wind through cattails,
tearful fights and makeup,
waltzing on empty
street dance floors finger
rubbing my moist palm,
lips that sew themselves to my neck,
and an old quilt on my knees
together in the medicine hell nursing home.

Good Things Must End

Good things must end
Not in a blaze of White Heat
A James Cagney yell,
Good things fade
like sunset.
Good things wilt and
fall to the earth or
lift away in the breeze.
The place where I
think and write and love
will just die.
The grass will consume
the flowers and the
brick will green and
Crumble.
My chair
Will be without me
I without it's comfort.
Good things pass away
like old men.
Good things die.
Most are already
Dead.

Girl in the Second Row I'm Watching

Her hair hands frizzed in
A blonde masterpiece by
Her ears pierced with the golden glow of
My eyes watching from
Two chairs away the back of her neck

Her shoulders curve softly up
From her arms holding fingers
With slim knuckles and
Long nails scratch her jaw and
Golden skin beckoning lips to her cheek.



Dream Analysis (a sestina)

The night is pushing me underground
with its quiet fingers poking my head
my eyelids are slipping
shut, brain shutting down.
thoughts settling—a stagnant puddle
drifting in and out of sleep.

No, I cannot go to sleep
although my brain is buried underground
inspired by the dried up puddle
no longer rippling in my head.
I proceed to look down
as my eyelids start slipping.

as my thoughts begin slipping
away, drifting off into hazy sleep
I just want to lay down
like being buried underground
my dreams, a sloshing puddle

as I float along that puddle
memories, some just imagined, are slipping
through my deep snuggled head
slowly digging through sleep
as if burrowing underground
Peeling back layer upon layer, heading further down

but the mind is too thick to get down
far enough, as I struggle to wade from the puddle
of aesthetics, digging to the past deeper underground
but getting nowhere, only slipping
in useless circles around my own head.

Ah, I cannot escape my head
strewn forever down
submerged in empty sleep
drowning in this rancid puddle
the last trace of rationale slipping
past my muffled screams, echoing underground.

dreams forever lost underground, down
deep within the head, sanity submerged in puddles
of unconscious desire, slipping in & out of restless
sleep.

Clean Your Room!!

an awkward crumple
over absent-strewn
thought, mumbling ancient reminders

“I thought I told you to straighten . . .”

Oh, enough of that already! I have grown
accustomed to my built-up surroundings
end over end of my best ideas
that I just cannot seem to

Let
go . . .

Falling flat on face, flustered,
Unable to recover
Remember where that
Homework
—or was that a bill—
was

heaping abstractions
& mounds of undulous drivel
sweeping up the walls.

“Man, where’d all this shit
come from?”



Varying Degrees of Living

The sun is barely coming up as I loop my car around the exit that takes me home. I try to recall the last time I was here. It sort of scares me once I realize I can't remember. Maybe I've blocked out the memory. Which is more or less what I'm hoping to do after all this is over.

After pulling in the driveway, I stand up and stretch, glancing at the rows of quiet, dark houses. I fumble through my purse trying to find the key that will unlock the door, but I'm coming up with nothing. Once I find it, I slide into the kitchen as quietly as I can, trying not to startle anyone. I almost head to tell Mom that I made it all right, but I think better of it. I don't know the last time she slept. The house is a wreck, naturally. Casseroles and assorted foods line the counters, the neighborhood's attempt at sympathy. Someone left the teakettle on all night, and the room has a burnt odor to it, a stiff smell that makes you want to get fresh air.

I dash silently, shutting off the burner, opening the west window that brings the breeze in faster. I start a pot of coffee, hoping to air out the kitchen. As I open the freezer, I shudder as I see a note written in my little sister's haphazard writing. *Mom, Lisa called off and I have to go work her shift. Be home a little after ten. Love, Rach.* Just seeing her handwriting makes my stomach clench, the finality of the situation hitting me.

I try to keep going, measuring out coffee and pulling clean mugs out of the dishwasher, but I can't stop my hands from shaking. In all the commotion, no one bothered to take it down. Maybe they wanted to leave it, maybe it helped them understand. Maybe this was Rachel's suicide note, the explanation we all were searching for.

I was getting ready for work yesterday morning, just like every other day. I promised Alice, my partner in the gallery, that I would get there early to finish the final painting and help set up the new exhibit, and Luke was one step ahead, moving his sculptures out of the loft and down the stairs. As usual, I was already late, brushing my teeth and applying make-up simultaneously. When the phone rang, I was totally content to go on and let the machine pick it up. What good is a machine if you can't screen every now and then? Just as I grabbed my coat, Luke picked up the phone. Two more inches and I would have been safe. He got a playful expression on his face, holding the phone away from his ear. "It's your Aunt Lillian," he said, rolling his eyes. "I think your Mom is having another crisis or something."

"Of course, she times them when she knows I have something to do." I grabbed the phone. Rather than a cheery hello, I greeted my Aunt with the usual, "Good Morning! What's wrong now?" I could hear my mother sobbing in the background. I glanced at Luke, who was smothering laughter with the back of his hand. "*This better be good,*" I mouthed to him.

"Elaine? Oh, Elaine, I'm so glad we've caught you." Lillian sounded anguished, her voice hoarse and emotional.

“What? What’s going on? Tell me what’s wrong.” I was used to being middle ground in family therapy, used to the early morning calls and the never-ending crisis that is my mother’s life.

“Elaine, Rachel—Rose found her early this morning. There isn’t a note. We’re still looking for a note.”

“A note? What do you mean a note? Did Rach run away? What?”

“She took some pills—her epilepsy medicine. She’d stopped taking it. She took the entire bottle.” My Aunt’s voice dissolved into gentle sobs. “But there’s no note. We can’t find a note.”

I felt the room spin around me. I dropped my cup of orange juice. I scared the cat. Luke glanced at me, guided me over to the couch. I found my voice again, probing Lillian for answers. “Listen to me, Ill be there as soon as I can. Is she in the hospital? Did you call nine-one-one? Where is she?”

“Elaine, no. She’s gone. She’s gone. When Rose found her she had been gone for hours. They haven’t taken her away, yet.”

“Lillian, what can’t you say to me?”

“Elaine, I think you—”

“I need to hear you say it, Lillian. Tell me.”

“Your sister’s dead. She committed suicide.” I didn’t make a sound, more like a silent scream as the entire hand went numb. Luke could have been trying to get my attention for hours, I’m not sure. Finally, I swallowed and spoke to my Aunt.

“I’ll get a few things together, and I’ll be there by morning. Early.”

“Please hurry, honey. Elizabeth’s on her way. David and the kids will be here early on Friday. Your mother needs you, all of you.”

“Laina, what happened?” Luke gave me this concerned look, scared almost; I struggled to find the words to explain what had just happened, but nothing came. Luke, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, squeezed them gently. “It must be bad. Just tell me, please? Let me know.”

“It’s Rachel,” I found myself saying. My voice sounded disconnected, far off as if it were coming from someone else.

“Rachel, is she all right? What?”

“She’s dead,” I said simply. The words finally connected and the bluntness of them hit me in the face. “She took these pills. It’s suicide.”

“Oh, Laina,” he whispered, his face going blank. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m going to grab some things and go in a few hours. Hopefully I can drive all night and make it by morning.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said supportively.

“Stay and help Alice. There’s too much to do. You can catch a flight Friday morning.”

“We’ll drive back together, though,” he said, as he helped me drag empty suitcases into the bedroom. “I’ll run this stuff over. You just stay here, all right? Give yourself a little time. I’ll bring back some bagels or something.”

“Don’t, Luke. Let’s just get this done so we can get back. We can push the opening back until after the funeral.”

“I just—” Luke paused, stared at the ground. “Listen, if that’s really what you want—” he said, grabbing my hand.

I sighed, closing my eyes for a second, my head spinning. Finally, I squeezed his hand and stared up at the worry playing on his face. “Let’s go. We’re late.”

The smell of coffee must have been stronger than I thought, because I can hear stirring in the back of the house. “Elaine? Is that you?” I stare into the perfect face of my older sister, Elizabeth.

“Hi, Lizzie,” I say, as she reaches for a hug. “How have you been?”

“Fine, just fine. Up until now, that is. So, how have you been? How’s New York? David and I say we’re going to take the kids on a tour of the city, but we never get around to it. It’s such a pain.” She smiles that too perky smile, the one that makes her a fabulous third grade teacher. My mother told me once that parents request her by name—her classroom is busting at the seams. Funny how she became everything I avoided.

“The city’s great. The gallery is doing good. I’m fine.” Small talk isn’t doing me any good right now. “How’s Mom?”

“Her new psychiatrist has been in a few times. He gave her some medication to help her sleep last night. As far as I know, it worked fine.”

“So it’s pretty much as bad as I figured it would be.” I sigh. Lizzie smiles weakly at me, letting me know without a word that I’m right.

“She can’t figure out why Rach would do something like this.” She explains, in half-hearted defense of our mother. “She kept trying to tell me about when she found her. I didn’t want to know.”

“I don’t blame you. Where’s Lillian?”

“Had enough of Mom. Went to call all of the cousins and let them know about visiting hours, the funeral.”

“Early and late visiting hours tomorrow, funeral Saturday?”

“Right. They wanted all of Rach’s friends to be able to make it.” She reaches for a mug. “I still don’t believe it. I’m in shock. Why would she do something this thoughtless? This dumb?” I swallow at the protests rising in my throat and find my calming voice.

“I don’t know, Lizzie. Have they found anything, a note? A letter?”

“Nothing. We’ve searched all over the place, top and bottom, read her journals, her diary, her homework. I even called the school yesterday, talked to her guidance counselor and a few of her teachers. Not even a trace.” She hasn’t even been dead forty-eight hours and already they’re invading her privacy. I assure myself that I’m not cynical for recognizing the importance of it.

Lizzie’s voice brings me out of my thoughts. “Lillian, called Dad. He’s flying in early tomorrow.” I nod numbly, not sure of what to say. Everything’s been so sudden, I haven’t even stopped to consider my father, or the fact that he’s going to mysteriously reappear in our lives yet again.

My father left my mother when I was fifteen; Rachel would have only been nine. He sat the three of us down, explaining that he needed time, needed to go away for awhile, assuring us that it wasn’t anything we did. Sometimes parents just can’t stay together. They just needed time and space away from each other. And as much as he wanted us to be with him, it would be better for everyone if we just stayed where we were. Lizzie and I were both fully aware that he was leaving because he couldn’t deal with my mother anymore, but Rachel was just a kid, totally unaware of anything that could have been wrong.

My Dad found all the space he needed across the country in San Diego. After that, we saw him maybe once or twice a year, when he’d suddenly resurface, show up on the doorstep. Granted, he did send us letters all the time, lots of phone calls, telling us he loved us and how much he cared. I’ve never been to San Diego.

“I think that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” Elizabeth mumbles into her coffee, jolting me out of my thoughts. “Looking Dustin and Rebecca in the face and telling them Aunt Rach died. They wanted to know how, why. And I couldn’t tell them. I couldn’t tell them that she did it.”

“Lizzie, they’re still young.” I mean to be soothing, but I don’t know how to justify anything without sounding cliché, so I let my voice fade out. My sister looks up at me, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“So, she just stopped taking her medication. Didn’t anyone notice? I mean, didn’t she get sick? Someone had to have noticed. Do you think it would have made a difference? I mean, was that how she did it? Is that what happened?” She turns to me, her expression confusion mixed with desperation.

“It might have,” I say quickly. I don’t want to think about it, what may have happened to her. And I know Lizzie wants to find a reason, an explanation. Lizzie looks ready to fire another question at me when I hear the raspy sound of breathing as my mother’s dazed face pops around the corner. Tears well in my eyes as I take her in my arms. “Mom, are you doing okay? Mom?”

“Elaine, Rach is gone. She’s gone.” She whispers, **laying** her head on my shoulder. “Why did she do this?”

“I’m not sure,” I say gently, hugging her tightly. Lizzie pours her some coffee.

“It’s good that you got some sleep, yeah?” She whispers to Mom, urging her to take a sip. “Feeling better?”

“A little,” Mom admits, sitting down at the kitchen table. “There’s so much to do.”

“Don’t worry yourself, Mom. We’re going to take care of it, Elaine and Lillian and I. I don’t want you pushing yourself,” she says sternly. I can only watch, wide eyed. Lizzie leads Mom back to her room, whispering calming things to her. Just *once* I’d like to be the basket case.

A few hours later, the three of us have nearly finished the planning. We decide who’s going to speak, what music we should play, and what to serve at the reception. I’m amazed how nothing phases us as we go over the most morbid of details; the color of the coffin, what she should wear. And once it’s decided, we dive into the grief buffet and have chocolate cake.

The door to Rachel’s room is closed tight. After searching for a letter they nearly sealed it off. Part of me wants to push my way inside, say I’m sorry to whatever pieces of her are left. Oddly enough, my mother’s room is almost the same way.

The only person to venture in is Lillian, who brings her tea and pleads with her to eat something. Even Lizzie can’t find the courage to mouth soothing words to her now, to tell her it’s fine, just to get some rest. And I know I can’t. Hell, no one’s giving *us* that. Even though we stiffen each time we hear the mournful moaning coming from her room, we don’t rush to her side like we did so many times before. We give each other an awkward hug and head for bed as Lillian says her good-byes and heads for the sanctity of her own house.

I toss and turn all night, faded memories of my childhood playing in my head. I never realized my family was any different than any other, but I know Lizzie did. Being three years older, she had already seen other kids’ families first hand. When my mother would have an episode, my father would send us down to play in the basement, turning the television volume up, so *The Electric Company* could drown out our mother’s ranting.

We played with Barbie dolls until the pizza man came, and Daddy sat down to tell us that Mom would be staying with Aunt Lillian for a little while, to help her out around the house. Even though we knew there was something wrong with that excuse, there was no way to know she was in and out of the psychiatric ward. If we weren’t in the basement, it was off to the neighbors when Mommy was sick in bed. Whatever we did, we weren’t to disrupt her or her nerves.

It didn’t take me long once I started kindergarten to realize my Mom wasn’t like most others. She never volunteered to be room mother; she never baked me cookies for snack day. I always came with the distinctive bakery cookies, hoping to somehow impress the other kids with the fancy box. I also noticed that most other mothers didn’t stay in bed all day, crying, saying they couldn’t deal with life. Most mothers don’t have a nervous breakdown every other day. Or maybe they do; they just deal with it and move on.

Maybe, after Dad left especially, we made up for Mom being insane in our own ways. Lizzie was ideal. She defined perfection in everything she did: captain of the cheerleading squad, president of her class, honors student, homecoming queen. I was the outcast, dark and moody, always writing poetry and drawing pictures, counting down until I could get the hell out. Lizzie went off to college, studying to be a teacher. Two years later I did the same thing—went to college and worked too much, waiting for the day I could move out and call myself an artist. I finally did, one day. Packed up and headed off to New York City. It's funny—I call it one of the happiest days of my life, second only to meeting Luke. And when I called home once I was settled in, I found out my mother'd been inconsolable, in bed for a week.

In a way, I think we're taking this so hard because Rachel was almost our daughter. Lizzie and I did everything after Dad left, and we did quite a bit while he was still here. We taught her how to ride a bike; we were the ones who skipped school to take her to doctors appointments, nursed her through seizures, taught her how to deal with her epilepsy. We fixed her toys, we threw her birthday parties, we baked her cookies for snack day.

Lizzie was more like the bad guy to Rachel, always making sure her homework was done and her room was clean, enforcing bedtimes and punishing her for the D's in Math. I was the one she could go to when she and her best friend were fighting, when she had a bad dream or when she was sick. I felt a special bond with her because she reminded me so much of myself. She, too, was the outcast—dark, moody, and artistic.

Once, when I actually came home for Christmas, Rachel shyly showed me her book of poetry, sheepishly asking my opinion. I told her she was incredible, not because I wanted to make her happy, but because it was true. She'd found her way of dealing with everything, and she was amazing at it. I had this feeling Rach would be some great artist, some fantastic writer. She'd move to the city, and we'd split a cappuccino and eat lunch at Serendipity's. I felt, deep down, she was going to overcome our family and be something wonderful. Rachel was going to fly. I don't even flinch when I use the past tense now. The thought makes me shudder as I close my eyes and pull the covers over my head.

I wake up early on Friday morning to the smell of coffee and the sound of voices. David and the kids have arrived. I place my bathrobe over my pajamas and splash water on my face before going out to face everyone. When I get into the kitchen, I find David and Lillian engrossed in some deep conversation, while Lizzie is cooking breakfast and the kids are playing basketball in the driveway. And it's all a little too happy for me.

My brother-in-law is exactly the same as the last time I saw him. Perfect hair, movie-star smile, booming deep voice. It must be terrible to face him in court, the perfect lawyer for any occasion. David smiles and gives me a hug, telling me how good it is to see me, how sad he is we

have to see each other like this. He, too, feeds me the line about wanting to take the kids on a tour of the city. I tell him any time. Instead of pulling up a chair and joining the discussion, whatever boring subject they're going on about, I head outside and hug my niece and nephew.

"Aunt Elaine, is Aunt Rachel really dead?" Rebecca asks me innocently.

Yeah, Becky. Aunt Rach really died," I say softly, brushing at some strands of hair that have worked their way out of her ponytail.

Dustin looks at me thoughtfully. "How did she die?" He throws me his basketball. I try to shoot, but as always, miss the basket by a mile.

"It's kind of hard to explain," I say, tossing it back to him, watching as he effortlessly shoots a basket. "Are you guys hungry?"

I glance in the mirror, adding the finishing touches to my make-up and smoothing my black suit one last time. God, I look tired. I use a half bottle of under eye concealer, but it still doesn't cover up my dark purple rings. On the up side, they do match my outfit rather nicely. Luke called from the airport a few minutes ago, to tell me his plane just landed and he was on his way. I'm glad. The thought of smiling at people, standing in front of my sister's coffin, saying, "Thank you for coming" is too frightening to face alone. I've let myself forget just how much I love him.

I'm reading the last chapter of *Super Fudge* to Becky when a knock on the door cuts me off. Lizzie and David are still primping and Lillian is trying to get Mom ready, so I head to the door. I catch it before the second knock and stare into the face of my father. He looks much older than I remember. Then again, I probably look much older, too. The years gone by and the situation seems to have that effect on us. I step back wordlessly, letting him in the house. He smiles at me, but again, I can only try.

"Elaine," he says simply, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "How are you doing?"

"Fine thanks, Dad," I respond, crossing my arms tightly, unsure of what to do with myself. We head to the living room where the kids cheerfully welcome him. Lizzie and David appear, both black-clad, looking chipper despite the pain I see in their eyes. We all sit around the living room, making awkward small talk, waiting for my mother to come out of her sanctuary. There's another knock at the door, and I jump up to get it. Relief fills me at the very sight of him.

Luke is standing on the doorstep, wearing his suit, slightly wrinkled from the flight over. I stare at him for a few minutes, as if I'm taking him back. His hair is cut, and he even shaved. He self-consciously pushes up his wire-framed glasses, the ones he wears if he's been working or just too tired to put in his contacts. I reflexively grab his hand, and he kisses it softly. "Hey, Laina," he says. "I've been worried about you." I nod, managing a small smile.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you right now," I whisper. He smiles slightly, and I know the feeling's mutual. As the two of us walk into the living room, there are a few more hellos and more out of place small talk before we hear the door unlatch. Out comes Lillian, in navy blue

from head to toe, guiding my mother out. Mother looks frail, almost afraid. Her hair is pinned up neatly, and she's wearing a plain black dress and heels. It's easy to tell she's been grieving; she has the same glassy-eyed look that we're all sharing.

My father stands up, tears filling his eyes. My mother nods to him, clutching the edge of her dress. She's not crying; she's not reacting. I'm almost proud of her. At this point, my father's face is wet, and he's trying not to sob. He opens his arms wide for her, and she gives him a polite hug. His voice is shaking as he whispers to her.

"Jesus, Rosie, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." My mother's eyes glisten with tears, but she refuses to let them fall.

"I'm sorry, too, James. I'm sorry we lost our daughter." With that, she heads out to the cars, and we all follow like lambs, my father the last to leave the house.

Visiting hours were just as strange as I could have imagined them, seeing Rachel's friends and the teachers I used to fear telling me how sorry they truly were. For the first set of them, I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Through all this, this numbness and anger and sense of duty, I'd forgotten it was all about Rachel. And seeing her in the coffin for the very first time scared me, shook me down to the very bottom of myself. She looked so pale and peaceful, in her favorite dress. Lizzie and I agreed if she would have picked something, she would have picked the purple dress.

After I had gotten used to the idea, we had to go out for an uncomfortable lunch and head back to the funeral home for the last set of visiting hours. My father was silent, my mother amazingly collected, Lizzie still too happy, the kids and David surprisingly calm, and Luke and I still holding hands, afraid to let go.

The second set was worse than the first, with more people coming, telling us just how sorry they were and commenting on the flowers. For a moment I felt sorry for what they were going through. What could they say to us? *Why did she do it? Why didn't you stop her?* Instead, they commented on the beautiful floral arrangements and told my mother it was good to see her. I've never been so relieved to get out of one place and into fresh air as I was to leave the funeral home.

I still had trouble sleeping that night, knowing tomorrow was the funeral, then everything would be over. My father would disappear in a haze and be back to his life; Lizzie, David and the kids would go back to theirs, and Luke and I to ours. And God only knows what would happen to my Mom. Now that she would be alone. Now that Rachel was really gone. But I still would have these feelings, be scared, be shaken up. I tossed and turned. Luke wrapped his arm around me, telling me to just relax and get some rest. I wanted to, but I couldn't. His steady breathing finally lulled me off to sleep.

Saturday starts off as a blur, a quick breakfast and lots of strong black coffee. Lillian arrives early, a few of her daughters tagging along. All we need is more small talk. I'm getting nauseous already. Dustin and Rebecca ask Luke about the city. He's telling them all about Central Park and FAO Schwartz, about the Empire State Building and Broadway. It makes me, in the midst of all the madness, smile. Luke notices, as together we promise to take them to see *The Lion King* when we get to the city.

We're all dressed and waiting, almost sharing a family moment as Luke, David, and the kids play basketball while the cousins, Lizzie and I sit on the porch and watch. My father is sitting alone in the living room in silence. Finally, Lillian appears, in black this time, matching all the rest of us, leading my mother. She again looks tired and miserable, but she's not reacting. Dad follows behind, again swallowing the sobs he doesn't want the world to see. This time, we don't wait for anyone's lead in a single file line like before. We all head in different directions, climb into our respective cars and go.

The funeral is slow and deliberate, with the preacher droning on before Lizzie and I stand up to say a few words. Lizzie talks in honey-coated tones as she tells the large crowd all her favorite memories, reading a poem by someone I'm sure she considers a genius. I stand up and read something by someone I know was a genius. In a calm, clear voice, I stare out at the sea of faces and read my favorite poem Rachel ever wrote. And just like that it's over.

We shakily stand and head to the cemetery. My parents solemnly climb into the funeral home provided limousine as we go to our cars donned with the magnetic funeral flags. Luke drives as I stare out the window at the scenery. It's a beautiful day. The leaves are green and the sky is clear. We hardly say two words, but what we're not saying is all we need right now.

If there's anything harder than seeing Rachel in her coffin, it's seeing it at the cemetery and knowing this is the end. We gather under the small tent, which seems wrong to me somehow. It's a gorgeous spring day; we should stand in the sun. Yet we sit in the dangerously old folding chairs and listen to the preacher read his "ashes to ashes" line. I become aware of the tears on my cheeks, just as I'm aware of Lizzie, Lillian, and Dad crying softly. Luke glances over at me, his face wet with tears as well. He offers me his handkerchief, and I take it gratefully.

My mother starts reacting now. She tries to get out of her chair, falling to the ground, sobbing. "My Rachel, my Rachel," she manages, hyperventilating, becoming more hysterical by the second. My father and Lillian, both still crying themselves yet looking dignified, stand up and go to her, helping her up, leading her back to the limo. The rest of us don't respond. We don't even cry harder. The preacher, no doubt used to outbursts like this, raises his voice slightly.

At last, all of it is done. I don't know whether to be relived or just to stay where I am, unmoving, not wanting to leave Rachel. Finally, we all sniffle and step out into the sun. The limo is already gone, no doubt off to the hospital. We should have taken bets.

Everyone is waiting by the cars as Lizzie and I walk the edge of the cemetery slowly. “I can’t believe she did that. I thought we were so close. God, I can’t believe anything anymore. How Mom is the way she is, how Rachel could be so stupid.”

I suddenly can’t hold everything in anymore. It hurts too much.

“Rachel wasn’t stupid!” I yell, rubbing at the pain shooting through my temples. “Just because she did this, it doesn’t make her stupid!”

Lizzie looks at me, ready for the fight. “What else would you call giving up? She had so much life ahead of her.”

“Are you telling me, growing up how we did, with our mother the neurotic and our MIA father, you never once thought about it?” I’m angry. We’re practically screaming now. People are looking at us, but no one is moving.

She looks up at me in surprise. “No, no I never did. Why would I end everything? I knew that that was only a part of my life! That there was more to come!”

“I thought about it, Lizzie. I thought about it a lot. And because I thought about it and struggled with it, I know Rachel isn’t stupid. This can’t make her any less of what she was.” I had thought about it. And God forgive me, the first thought that entered my mind after the shock wore off was that Rachel did something I’d never had the courage to do, and I couldn’t even admit it to myself.

I can recall so clearly working the late shift at the department store that got me through college, the security lights glinting off the silver razorblade we used to cut packages open. I remember sitting on the floor, watching the light dance on the sharp edge, and practically feeling the cuts on my wrist almost guiding me to the right place to slice. I wondered what it would feel like; taking that deep breath of air while my hand shook mercilessly.

It was a good ten minutes before I set the blade down and continued cleaning up. After all, Lizzie was at a student government retreat, a free trip to Cincinnati, and Rachel had an early Junior High basketball team meeting. Someone had to get her up, feed her breakfast and get her to school without being too late to my eight o’clock class. But how close I came to this day makes my hands shake. And if I try, I can still feel the guiding lines on my wrists.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” she says, as if she’s come to a realization. “You’re so sympathetic with Rachel’s situation because you’ve thought about doing it yourself. That makes everything all right for you, I guess? That you think you know what she was thinking? Well, why didn’t you? Why didn’t you go through with it?” she screams, her face violet.

There is no worse feeling in the world than feeling without a doubt that you’re right, and having someone make a valid point in the opposite direction that you can’t argue. I don’t know how to react, can’t think of anything to say. *Because I had too much to do, because I was scared, because.* Tears stream down my face but the words won’t come out.

“I’ll tell you why!” Lizzie goes on. “Because you knew that you’d move on and find something that made you happy! You were thinking about what it would do to our crazy mom and our absentee father, what it would do to me and Rachel. And you didn’t want us to hurt like that! You *knew* it would kill all of us. You *knew*.” I can’t hold back anymore; I’m sobbing so hard I’m sucking in air as Lizzie rages on. “But you think because you read Rachel’s poetry and you told her she was good, it makes everything all right. That you called her once a week and sent her letters it makes it good. I did the same thing, Elaine. I did *just* as much for her as you did and you know it. We may not have always been close, but we both loved Rachel—we raised her.”

I’m starting to understand now that maybe what I saw as a fabulous relationship with my little sister—where Rachel knew I loved her, where I called her and sent her letters and told her what a great writer she was—just wasn’t enough.

As I was off living my wonderful dream life, as Lizzie was off living hers, we’d essentially done the same thing our parents did to us: abandon the one we’d brought up. The two sisters who’d raised her went off to live their perfect lives and leave her alone with a crazy mother. Lizzie and I always at least had each other, and if we didn’t have each other we had Rach. We were never fully alone with her. There were only two people that ever accomplished that, Dad and Rachel. One left, the other committed suicide.

The same thing I hated my father for, couldn’t look him in the eye because of, was the exact same thing I myself did to Rachel, and I expected her to be all right with it, to keep loving me back. Rachel had never been to New York City *or* San Diego, and I wasn’t any better than he was. I’m sick with grief, can’t see the sun through the tears in my eyes. I swallow, trying to find my voice again.

“That may be true—in fact, all right, it’s true.” I fire back at my older sister. “We left Rachel alone with our mother. We didn’t even do that. And pulled a Dad on her, expected her to keep loving us and being close when really we left her alone and shut her out of our worlds. But it wasn’t because we didn’t want her there; we did. We were just too happy to think about it. And I’m not going to stand here and let you call her thoughtless and stupid, because she wasn’t. She was *alone*. And we didn’t help her, Dad didn’t, and she couldn’t do it herself. Rachel was talented, loving, and wonderful. And somehow she didn’t think it mattered to any of us because we didn’t show her that it did. You’re right, Lizzie, but at the same time there’s so much that you can’t see.”

Tears run down Lizzie’s face as we both stand in the cemetery, still facing one another, staring each other down. There’s so much left to say, but we’re completely drained. We don’t have enough strength to keep this up.

Luke and David make their way over and break up the war. Luke brushes my hair out of my eyes, wipes away my tears. “Shhhh, it’s all right, Laina,” he whispers. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not all right, Luke,” I sob into his shoulder, finding all the tears and the weakness I know are there and finally let them out. “I thought Rachel knew I loved her, but I’m just like my father.” I lean against him, crying harder and louder than I ever knew I could. His voice brings me back down to earth.

“No, Elaine. You’re not.” He lifts my chin gently, and our eyes lock. “Your father was trying to balance his career and support your family, and take care of your mother, which is a full time job. Being a dad was the easiest thing he could let slide. And because of that you and Elizabeth, you took care of each other and you protected Rachel. Your Dad decided it was too much, and he just gave up and left. You were put in this weird situation where you and Lizzie were the parents to your Mom and Rachel. But you know that it isn’t the same thing. No one ever expected you to stay home forever to be a Mom. You were the kid, okay? Kids grow up, and they leave home. That’s what’s supposed to happen. Rachel knew you were both going to leave; she just held on to this hope that maybe you wouldn’t. And it’s not your fault. You left the nest, Elaine. That’s normal. Your father left his family, all right? He left his wife who was sick and his three kids to deal with her, and you picked up the pieces. I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through, Laina, but you can’t compare yourself to him like that. It’s not the same thing. Listen to me. You loved Rachel. And she loved you.”

My defenses are down. I can’t hide anything, anymore. Luke holds me tight, as I have a long-awaited nervous breakdown of sorts.

The reception is short. People fix plates and we muddle through the last bout of small talk. People ask Lizzie about the kids and her class, and they ask me about the city and what exactly it is that I do. No one asks about Mom or Dad. Lillian arrives at the house looking pale and worn down, helps herself to a Long Island Iced Tea as she tells us they’ve already committed Mom. She also says Dad has no intention of leaving her side. I don’t know what to say.

Lillian fills us in on the details as she packs some of Mom’s clothes to take back. She tells us the new psychiatrist won’t be releasing Mom for at least two weeks, until he’s sure she won’t do harm to herself. She also mentions that it’s impossible for our mother to live on her own. She’d been dreading bringing up the subject until now. Lillian, with her blessed sense of timing, offers to take care of her for the summer. This way, we can look at all the options, take our time. After thanking her quietly, no one says a word.

Lizzie and I are perpetually nice to the people sitting in the house, pretending this is all normal. We’re professionals at it. Once the reception comes to a close and it’s just us, we clean up the house and throw away the paper plates and cups and split the leftovers between us for our drives homes. Lizzie doesn’t speak to me, and I don’t speak to her. The kids are watching television, David is sleeping and Luke is reading a novel Rachel left lying around. Once every-

thing is done, we don't even acknowledge each other, just peel off our mourning clothes and head off to bed. I stare out the window and at the ceiling, realizing I may never sleep again.

Luke and I pack up everything and are ready to hit the road by nine. We all feel like we should stay a bit longer, at least until Mom can come home, but we have to get back, we've all got lives waiting. I notice that when we appear from the bedroom, Lizzie and David are already packed and ready to leave.

Dad comes to say his good byes. He tells us that he's staying a tad longer than he'd expected, to be with Mom. When he's not at the hospital, he'll just go ahead and stay at the house. He mentions looking into getting a job with his old office, but I'm not holding my breath. When the guilt wears off, he'll change his mind and be gone. He mentions getting together in a month and going through Rachel's room. Even though the thought makes my head spin, and I'm sure Lizzie feels the same, we agree. I'm surprised at the tears in my eyes when I hug him good bye. I'm even more surprised that before I can let him go I whisper, "I'm sorry."

Elizabeth walks up to me and hesitates slightly before giving me a hug. I hold her tightly, and both of us are crying again. "I love you, Elaine," she says firmly.

"And I love you, Lizzie," I respond, almost scared to let go of her. We stand for a few minutes, just hanging on to each other. Once we finally let go, she heads to her car and I go back to mine, and with a few final farewell waves, David eases the car out of the driveway. It's just Luke and me, and I'm not sure what to say. "You think she knew how much I loved her?" I ask softly. Luke walks up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. I sigh, leaning my head on his shoulder.

"She knew, Laina."

"But Lizzie was still right—"

"She didn't tell you anything you didn't already know," Luke points out. "Elaine, I'm so sorry about all this, about Rachel, your Mom, your Dad. I don't know what to say to make things better."

I kiss him lightly. "The fact that you *want* to is enough for me," I say quietly. We reluctantly let go of each other and climb in the car. "I have to stop by the hospital before we leave, to see Mom."

"We should," Luke says, starting the car and opening my sunroof. "How's she doing?"

"The same. I guess they've got her pretty medicated. Some things never change," I joke, leaning back against the seat. "Thanks for driving."

"No problem," Luke says, turning up his CD. "You get some sleep, all right? I think you've gotten three hours since everything started."

"Thanks," I say softly, leaning back, sighing. "So what happens now?"

“We go home, I guess,” Luke says, pushing up his sunglasses. “We do have that exhibit to open.”

“God, that’s right,” I moan. “I’ve got so much to do.” And no strength or desire to get it done. “I should take a vacation.”

“I think it might be a good idea,” Luke says, grinning. “As long as I’ve known you, you’ve never taken a day off. Ever.”

“I may just have to surprise you then,” I say, trying to be lighthearted. It’s not working. “It’s going to take time,” I say softly, wiping at the annoying tears. I’ve gone from hardly ever crying to becoming a pro in a matter of days.

“That’s right,” Luke assures me. “Everything is going to get better. I promise. Just give it a little time.” I succumb to the drowsiness, closing my eyes and picking up his hand. I smile sleepily.

“Thanks,” I whisper. Now the faded memories of my sisters playing in my mind, memories of Rachel seem less painful; now they’re slightly comforting. And I’m holding onto them as I answer Luke, “I needed that.”

The Telex

the great maker of chintz
Mr. D.H. Chow
chinesically addresses me personally now:
Mr. S. E. thks/regards
howled at the moon
hurled to the stars
textile orders
telex lies
metallic sleepers in satellitic eyes
Attention: Mr. S. E.
brassieres in prod.
3000 large/2000 mod
kindly, thanks
best regards
howled at the moon
hurled to the stars
information from mad Jack Chong
mysterious Mr. Hong Kong
He knows me too, like S.M. Ling
who shares the sky
whose telex sings
of spectral orders, a quotidian kind
letters of credit that need be signed
On Sunday rests
Mr. D. H. Chong
his textile orders
his telex song
Just one small note
thanks/regards
howled at the moon

Doubtless

The trees stand doubtless,
apish in grub rich stares,
curmudgeon white but for dark rain
stripping away modest November mottle.

Curiosity runs like sap
on crushed samite
its season snagged
its will, a shallow tree-god's roots
feeding a wooden fate, intricate
and disposed to topple
the certainties that wet birch
sends in both directions

Even from this distance
and through this winter-fly window
an unusual touch—
the trees penitent;
the rain forgiving.

A World Revolves in Past Regret

A world revolves in past regret
Where men persist with stolen breath
Avenging souls cannot forget
Those pains enduring after death.
No laws existing shall dismiss
The rage beyond mortal control
Those wronged, alone in their abyss
Cry out for us to pay their toll.
Be wary should you cross the brink
And find yourself alone and lost,
Before the eye has time to blink;
Too late to see those bridges crossed.
But blame me not for what you feel,
I am not he who turns the wheel.



Another Lonesome Sundown

Twilight has come once again and the day comes to a close.

I'm still thinking of letters that were never sent.

I'm still thinking about days that have went.

Maybe I should move on or maybe I should stand in place.

I do all this thinking as another sundown graces the winter sky.

The cold climate teases to the bone.

I have the cut that has to moan.

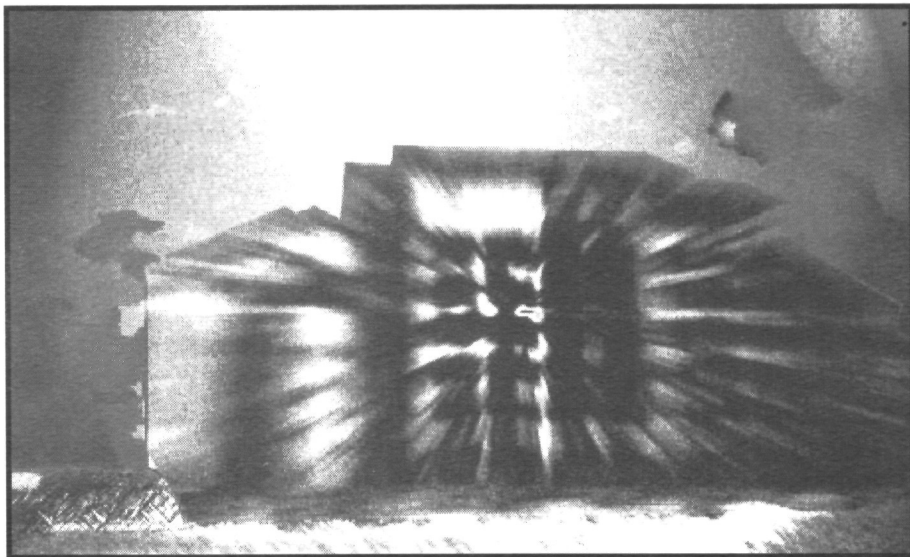
For the western shores of you.

You were so contained but never rearranged and I watched you roll away,

with a week's pay into the sunset.

A pale frown followed you down the dirt moving forward to the coastal plains.

And I didn't even get a chance to wave my name.



O Cap'n My Cap'n

Sailing in this sea of lactose
On a quest for nutrition.
It is early, so early in the day.
Still Drowsy, I steer.
My vessel bobs, and dips—
I strike a cornberg!
I am thrown overboard
Amid a spray of gelatinous sugar and
10 essential vitamins and minerals.
Yet I shall rejoice!
For it is by this disaster I am saved,
Able to emancipate myself from the Sink of Death
And tread once again upon dry land.

Kosher Dills

I do not like to
Eat pickles on my ice cream
Nor am I Jewish.

Angel Golden Wing

Angel golden wings
Flitter to and fro

Like a firefly
On the longest day.
Early night enfolds
In the satin lap

The moon rises full
And bright to smile
On the life below

A swell of love's dizziness
Engulfs the girl as
Her lover worships
Her imperfect body.

The earth shoulders
As life crawls up her spine ,



Miss Treated

Smoky, stagnant air hanging.
Anxious movement. Legs crossing,
uncrossing, waiting for a song.
Spotlight dancing across the stage.
A slow riff breaking the silence.
Big black beauty belting blues.

I wonder what make Koko blue.
Did a lover leave her hanging?
Asleep, then waking in silence.
When was the pivotal crossing?
What drove her to the lonely stage?
Who made her sing such a sad song?

Swaying, sweating. This ain't no love song.
I focus on her top. Blue
sequins floating on the stage.
Harmonica notes hanging.
Whole audience crossing.
Everything but blues is silence.

The last note. Amazed crowd sits in silence.
Then an outburst. She got pride for a song.
Quickly, I leave my seat, crossing
the empty stage bathed in blue.
On a door a crooked star is hanging.
Asymbol of her life on stage.

Is this the same woman I saw on stage?
I stare, confused, complete silence.
A brown curly wig is now hanging
next to her teeth. She hums me a song.
I lay, drifting to sleep in a blue
couch. Gazing at her broken cross.

Lifting her body she crosses
the room as she would a stage.
She says, "Your daddy can play the blues."
I sit, wishing that she would break the silence.
I remember her quiet song,
she rocks me to sleep, dreams hanging.

I dreamt of a hanging, lighted stage.
She crossed it in silence
The song begins, Mean Mistreater Blues.

A Writing Assignment

A poetry assignment before me,
I sit staring at the goldfish for hours.

Outside, the wind blows through the chimes,
and my neighbors argue over a broken ladder.

Around noon my father stops in for a while;
we talk about my allergies and the weather.

Leaving, he asks me about the assignment.
“I think I’m doing okay,” I tell him.

3 Haiku

every leaf falling
every leaf falling
casually

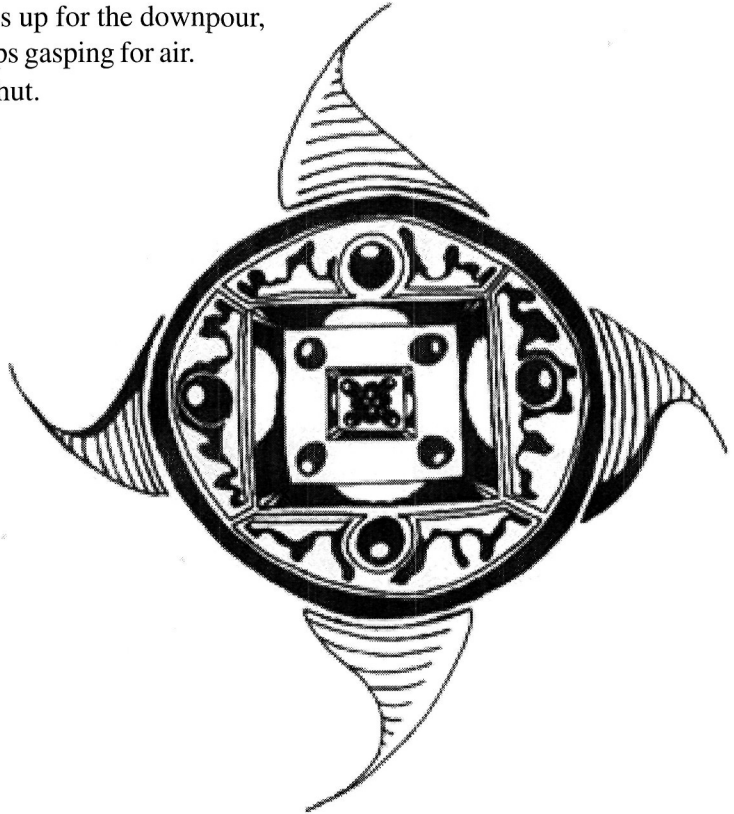
“It’s snowing!”
- even the dog
very quiet

even more than sex
the taste
of your finger

s

Curdling Milk

The smell of curdling milk makes her head jerk back.
Her mother's hands callused and dry from years of hard work.
Smell of wet wool spelunking her nostrils and tastes
like bitter wine where it rests on the tongue.
Dusty fields can sense the oncoming rain.
Clouds grow dark
The earth opens up for the downpour,
drinking in gulps gasping for air.
Cracks swell shut.



The Box

How do we find that place
where dreams go?
Can we build each day
out of hope? I think
they live inside the hunger
of the dying night.
When you plead with
God to turn on your light.

Let me say goodbye
to this old man, and
his February freeze. To take
just one breath through my
bare feet. This is the dream I
want to own. When my hero
packs up and goes home.

Now I know a boy, who
Couldn't take his hope home, so
he built a box, with his collection
of sticks and stones.
He told me not to fight against gravity
while standing on a planet that
insists. He placed his dreams
inside the box, and
closed the lid.

Ole Blue

I've spent the year in the hole
of a tree that no longer has any leaves,
and birds that sing
only at the strum of six strings.

Once flowed a river, which I crossed a thousand
times, and never saw the signs she held, until
she carved a message that ached in my palm.
Deeper the well must be dug,
to feed the fruit of one's true song.

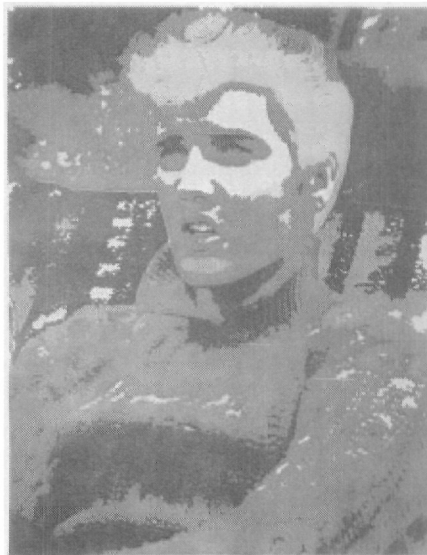
Yet the cost of fame can be torturing, when the
world becomes a stage, for everyone
to see your life, through the window pains
crafted into a glass cage.

If I could become a single string, I'd
wrap myself in nickled twine, my life would be
the song that it sings, and I would be free from
wishing that his hands were mine.

I shall exchange the crown, this head has never worn
and remain unnamed to a world, that
that is more entertained when a star falls down
giving hope to own the glitter of the crown.

In San Francisco

Lazy afternoon in the city
To relish in the sunshine I will endeavor
Golden Gate, the Avenues, Haight Ashbury or Marina
I peddle on to North Beach
To Washington Square to laze
In the grass
To watch passers-by of a million colors
Wearily my heart beats slow
And my mind drifts off to bliss
In the grass I am one
A flavor of the masses
As fog moves in my senses awake
Blades of grass imprinted in my cheek
I catch my breath for motivation needed
To peddle onward towards home



Mother

With raging torment in she steps
Stumbling on towards me
Fiery eyes and sour breath
Burn me beneath the sheets
Here today, now lost tonight
This is her existence
I tremble at the thought
Of a lifetime affected
By her forever gone
Oh mother of mine
I look upon you without an understanding
Of how you let sadness imprison your soul
Caught up in selfishness that is mine alone
Longing for the lost bond
I must forever remove myself
From you
The burden of being alone
Will be mine for an eternity
with agonizing regret.



The Devil's Churn

Winter storms announce themselves as they gather strength approaching the Front Range. A lone cloud sitting atop Pikes Peak in the morning calls the bitter eastern winds that carry the heavy snows to the plains skirting the mountains. Southern gales yield a yellowish sky forcing the land to appear bruised and beaten before a restrained storm strikes a meagre blow. From the north, winds hold clouds that are cold and quick and blur the land into a muted purplish gray, allowing no distinction between mountain and sky. But when a winter sun rises red, the mountains bleed with color, and an evening storm borne of the western wind is at hand. The air on these days is gentle and warm, and the land seems vulnerable in anticipation of the coming spring. On such days, the farmer may plant early crops, taking advantage of the still weather and pliable earth. The Ute Indian used these days to search the heart in solitude by praying to ancient spirits inhabiting nearby caves. A troubled and tortured mind would be cause enough to rouse the *Great Spirit Manitou* from his wintry sleep, and with careful listening from the prairie lands below, he could be heard moaning and whispering names into the wind from deep within the mountain.

The four arrived together.

Marcus came by foot. He hitched from Pennsylvania to St. Louis, to Kansas City, and on into Colby. Then he walked. He walked through Burlington, around Limon, and past Calhan and Peyton, finally stopping at the Diamond D. Leaning his full weight on the front doorway, he greeted me. "I'm your cousin from Philadelphia. We met about seven years ago when you came for Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary. I'm Marcus, Jess and Joan's oldest. Remember?"

I didn't. I remembered going back east for a Wetherall family reunion when I was in the fifth grade, and I remembered meeting a lot of kids who were all introduced to me as first cousins. There were so many, the faces blurred together, as if someone had placed everyone into a giant bowl, stirred, and out came numerous children who looked and acted exactly alike. "Are we expecting you?" I gave the screen door that separated us a little push. The latch had never worked right, and whenever the wind kicked up, the door would fly open and any old thing would blow right into the front room.

"I'm a surprise." He dropped his duffel at my feet, mixing road dirt with porch dust in the air between us. He took off his jacket and handed it to me. "I've walked all day today and yesterday, and in this weather, too." He wore a tired pair of jeans, faded away to white strings in some places, brand new tennis shoes, and a T-shirt proclaiming that *Reading Rots the Mind* from Kent State University. He hugged himself to keep warm and hopped up and down, making our

porch boards squeak. “The wind is strong today.” Having said that, he leaned all the way through the door and blew inside to the living room. “Nice place. How long have you lived here?”

He was tall, with dull brown hair, a rounded nose, and saw things through classic Wetherall eyes. Tired and faded, just like his jeans. Some ancestor must have passed these eyes to his children as a sort of joke not realizing that he was marking an entire clan. Now, the whole family always looks as if we are in desperate need of sleep. Marcus certainly looked like he was in desperate need of something. Even though he spoke calmly and evenly, his voice seemed to be permanently pitched at a high tenor. He seemed anxious. Not nervous, but anxious, moving here and there, looking at the pictures on the wall, the sofa, the fireplace, darting about like a moth caught between two lamp posts. Not knowing where to stop, or when.

“Planning on staying long?”

“Don’t know yet. Need any work done? I’m pretty handy with engines.” His words spilled out of him, all lumped together, as if they were made of sticky molasses. Syrupy, smooth, practised. “You have tractors or something? I’ve never been on a ranch before, but, hey, there’s a first time for everything. I can stay as long as you want, or I can leave tomorrow. Choice is yours. I’m a free agent, and go whichever way the breeze blows.”

“You’re lucky then. Most of us are expected to stay put.”

“You don’t have to, man. You can do whatever you want. This is still a free country.”

“Maybe it’s free where you come from. Here the country’ll kill you if you let it.”

The wind forced the issue, and the door closed.

The statue came by wagon. Starry Kempf drove the large bronze sculpture all the way from Denver to our ranch. Ever since his accident he’d taken to driving an old buckboard along the sides of the highway. “You don’t need a license to steer a mule,” he said once. “You just have to put up with a lot of shit.”

He showed up wanting to unload his debt to my father, hoping to find a spare bottle in the kitchen. Starry was an artist. A good one, too. He cast bronze sculptures, and quite a number of them found their way into museums, fine art galleries, and private collections. If he had been able to keep his earnings instead of drinking them away, he would have been considered eccentric. As it was, he was simply a talented bum, whose art paid his legal fees to my father. He had been out to our place many times and didn’t even bother to knock anymore. He just opened the door, leaned his way through, and made his way to the liquor cabinet.

We needed to fix that door.

“Here’s for the divorce.” Starry had hold of a large bronze statue, about three feet high and cast into the smooth shape of a whale’s tail. The head of the whale was non-existent, or had

disappeared moments earlier, plunging downward into a small bronze boat, casting bronze timber and bronze men into a wild bronze ocean. It was named "The Devil's Churn," and on the base were small faceless men carved in pain and wretched with fear, frozen in a perpetual bronze hell.

"Who the hell are you?" Starry, hands artfully curved about a bottle of Haig and Haig, finally noticed that there was another person in the room. Mom used to say he could sense things. But then she'd add, he'd have to because his eyes were always mostly closed and they probably couldn't focus too well anyway.

Too much bronze work would be my guess.

"This is Marcus. He's my cousin from Philadelphia."

"Hi, glad to meet you." Marcus extended his hand, but withdrew it and waved it at the statue when Starry upended the bottle, making small clicking noises as his ring hit against the glass whenever a big swallow hit his throat. "Did you make that?"

"What's he doing here?" Click. Click. Click.

"Don't know. He just came a few minutes ago."

"I'm not doing anything here. You a cop or something?" Marcus walked in a tight circle around the table that held the statue. "I can be here if I like, man. This is a free country. I can be here if I like."

"We'll be the ones to decide that."

He walked a faster, smaller circle.

Starry's stare was as quick and cold and certain as the bronze he had made.

My father came by car. His practice was in Colorado Springs, but many of his clients lived south, in the Cucharras Valley. Several days a week he would make the drive down to Walsenburg in his rusted-out '62 Scout International and set up a makeshift office at the local Republican headquarters across the street from the courthouse. There he would organize his papers, make his phone calls, type his own motions, and hope for better things than divorce cases or collection work.

"Officer on deck. Man the bar."

For as long as I could remember, my father greeted his home this way. Just for the record, I've never saluted him.

"Starry," he said, smiling. "What have you brought us this time?"

"You bastard." Click. "I give you my best works. And I know you can't appreciate 'em." Starry forced his sleeve cuff between his mouth and the bottle to catch the extra liquid that washed onto the side of his chin.

Maybe this is why he never changes his shirt.

"Not here at the house. Starry, I'm on my own time now. Save that lawyer lingo for

town.” My father admired the statue. He ran his hands over the tail, stopping just short of those damned faces circling the base. Those coarse hands travelled up and down the smoothness of the whale, delicately traced the curves of the fluke, warmed the cold lower body of the whale, and tested its heft against his own by slightly pulling the tail toward him. Up and over the whale, and back again, coming close, but not a finger clipped the bronze boat. Not once did he ever touch the rough faces at the base of the statue. Staying out of the sea altogether. My father was like that with art. He felt a need to touch it, caress it, soothe it. He had to handle everything. Even paintings. Before he could stand back to look at it, take it all in, he had to feel his way over the piece. Whenever Mom would finish a work, she would hide it for a few weeks until it was completely dry. Only then would she allow his fingers to flow over the thick, dried lumps of paint piled high on a cloud, or trace the outlines of the grooves and ridges flowing near a river bank. One of the few things that I remember about her was that she was afraid Dad would rub all of her colours away. To some extent that happened. In the six years since she left, he has practically rubbed her out of the family portrait.

“We have a guest, Dad.”

As if on cue, Marcus walked out from the kitchen, holding a sandwich in one hand, a beer in the other, and his face in an obviously practiced grin. Not quite a full smile, but enough teeth showing to make a photographer and a pushy mother happy. His chin pushed forward and up, away from his chest, and then he tilted his head, slightly, to one side. He posed upon the floor, chin out, head tilted, and teeth showing. I recognised him then. It was the grin. He’d smiled that way for every photographer, each year since he was in third grade. Aunt Joan always included a set of school pictures with her Christmas cards. She must have considered it a tradition, just like it was a tradition from schools to take pictures of toothy kids, tilting their heads to one side, wearing green plaid shirts. Marcus probably practised his grin for weeks before his picture was taken.

There never is enough time to do things properly.

Without taking his hands off the statue, Dad looked up at Marcus on the landing above the fireplace and said nothing. Well, that’s not completely true. He stared Marcus down to his level, giving him the best John-Wayne-I-can-kick-your-ass look that I’ve seen for a long time. Marcus just grinned through his sandwich and beer, missing most of what Dad said with those tired Wetherall eyes, but getting enough so that he began to flitter about the room again.

The wind rattled the shutters, and we could hear the branches of the old cottonwood sway out into the force of the wind, then snap back into place.

Rotted to the core.

The storm came by nightfall. An Albuquerque Low had settled in and pulled warm, moist air up from the Caribbean. A Cheyenne High pushed cold, dry air down from Canada, and both

met together along the Front Range. It was already snowing on the Peak and we could see swirls of wind and snow change the shape of Mt. Manitou. Puffs of snowy cloud contorted the old mountain into a grizzly, mean sort of creature. Out east of town, on the high prairies, it was still warm, but the wind had changed, coming from all directions at once. Swirling. Dirt and hay devils appeared and disappeared before my eyes. Just beyond the barn and the trees, I could see demons twirled in a hellish dance to a mournful tune, just as the snow began. Stockman's warnings played on the radio. Outside, the wind whined and wailed through the caverns on the west side of the ranch, like restless spirits looking for a bit of peace before continuing their long search for a way back to their mountain home.

My father stared at Marcus, Marcus stared back, Starry stared at the bottle, and I went upstairs.

* * * * *

The *Great Spirit Manitou* commands the winds. The downward *Zephyr* is a warm and welcoming harbinger of Spring. The inward *Notus* is still and silent, and calms Summer anxieties as the night slips by. *Eurus*, hot blooded, bitter, and bad tempered enough for Autumn, fights an unending upward battle with the mountains. *Boreas*, cold and hard, skips sideways along the front ranges before turning outward toward the plains, and gives troubling impetus to any winter storm. The four winds meet each other at the base of the Rockies, spinning and twirling in a complex dance. Magic can happen when they come together, or else the four forge themselves into a demonic force that man, forever grounded in reason, could never hope to untangle. Legend holds that the *Great Spirit Manitou*, when roused from a deep, cold sleep, rides these mighty winds down onto the plains, creating miracles or mischief as whim and wind desire. In the dark, these winds tumble about the snow, watching for *Manitou*, and hoping.

They danced.

Spinning downward into the cold, hard waters, the whale destroyed the small bronze boat. The mast and sails folded across the bow of the splintered craft. Men, naked and thin, hard as metal, clung close to the sides of the ship with a desperation that only the doomed understand. Beneath them, beneath the icy waters of the ocean, beneath the whale's beginning, laid the faceless horrors of hell. The devil himself held onto the whale, forever spinning him, and through this craft, created more demons, reaching for more souls willing to sell an eternity for a better lot in life. "That statue moves," I said, as I walked a circle around the living room, around the bronze. "It moves, Starry."

Marcus fidgeted. His own fault. Instead of taking one of the over-stuffed chairs, he chose to perch on the piano stool, and his legs pushed him first one way, then the other. Never daring to spin around entirely, but just enough so that his hair slapped at the sides of his face, giving him an off-balance, dizzying sort of appearance. "Where did you get the idea?"

To Marcus this was probably an innocent enough remark for small talk after dinner.

Starry has never liked that question. He told me once that art was a personal experience. More than likely he was right.

"Make your own trip to hell to find out." Click. "Until then, leave me alone. I don't cast bronze just for you."

He was probably right about that, too.

Dad said nothing. Nothing through dinner and nothing now. He just tapped his pipe, cleaned it, filled it, smoked it, tapped it, and so on. The Meerschaum was a rich dark colour, carved into the shape of an old man with a flowing mustache and beard. When he first started smoking this pipe, it was nearly white, and I thought the man's head looked like God. But, over time, and as I grew through my teenage years, Dad smoked it into a deep, dark brown. Nearly black, in fact, and God began to look like Satan, with hot puffs of gray smoke rising from his head. A primitive sacrifice to appease a more primitive god.

Marcus still tried to make conversation. "When was the last time you spoke to my father?" Maybe the silence bothered him. Maybe it was the wind.

Although Dad was silent, the draw of his pipe was not. Whenever something really upset my father, he would suck hard on his pipe, and it would make a whistling sound. When I was younger, I learned to stay away from him whenever I heard that whistle. His voice may have been calm. Even. Deceptive. But beneath the surface, he seethed, churned, stirred the waters. "Four days ago." Whistle. "I heard from my brother for the first time since Pop died. Just four days ago."

The storm took the power out. Marcus stopped fidgeting and spinning, and it was cold in the house.

Our barn smelled good. Even when the animals were inside for the night, it smelled good. Outside, the snow smothered all scents, but in the barn there was hay and oats and leather and smoke from the kerosene lantern mixing with the steam from our breath. Even with the animals inside for the storm, it smelled good. It smelled like childhood when mothers brought koolaid in metal-rimmed canteens so that I could continue being an American pilot shot down over the Philippines. It smelled like it was past midnight when my older brothers set-up a ham-radio station and spoke to someone far away in Australia. A little rattle every now and then, but mostly just the

quiet good smell that took me back to calm winter mornings before Dad took up the pipe. With the storm winding into a fury, the inside of the barn was quiet.

“I can’t take much more.”

“Can’t you carry another one? If we get a little more we’ll be good until morning.” I couldn’t tell if Marcus was overloaded yet. I had no idea how much wood he could hold. He looked pretty scrawny, especially when he tried on Starry’s parka for size. A bean pole buried in a cloud, but since he had nothing but that thin jacket, he had to make due on a borrower’s lot.

“Not this,” Marcus said, cocking the giant parka hood toward the woodpile. “Your Dad and his friend. I can’t take much more of them. They’ve hardly said a dozen words to me all night.”

“Well, what do you want them to say? What do you want me to say? You show up unannounced, and say you want to stay here like we have no choice but to take you in. Aren’t your folks missing you in Philadelphia? What are you doing walking all over the country anyway?”

“They don’t know where I am. They only know I was supposed to report to Biloxi last week.” Marcus unloaded his arms, dropping everything at my feet. “I left, but didn’t go to Mississippi. My folks probably found out when the base came looking for me.”

“Great. Thanks. Thanks a lot for telling me. Give me that wood.”

“What’s the matter?”

“If I knew that this afternoon, I’d of told you to shove off.”

“I should’ve guessed. A farm boy like you would never think of doing anything right. Always doing what you’re told, huh? You might as well be in the army now.”

“I’m not *for* any war.” I bent over and loaded Marcus’ wood atop my own. “We have our own problems around here. I don’t need any yours. Just go to Canada and leave us alone.”

“Look, I’m not sure if I want to do that yet. I think I do. It’s just that leaving the country seems so final.”

Probably not as final as dying in Vietnam, though.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do? I mean, if your number comes up?” I had. Often.

He stooped to gather a few logs in his arms. “You could come with me. Canada, I mean. We could go up there together.”

“C’mon Marcus, let’s head back. Without us there to ignore, they’ll end up talking to each other.”

The wind ripped at our faces and blasted our backs with powdered ice-pellets. Snow drifted against the house, so we waded our way to the front door. Marcus stayed close beside me. I was afraid of the storm, too.

On one side of the room sat Starry. His arms were crossed over his chest, layered one on the other like logs in a wood-pile. The room without electric light had a sleepy look to it, and Starry's eyes were slowly drooping to half-mast. Directly opposite him was the fire, cracking loose the bark off the pine logs and hissing black shards that dipped and danced their way to freedom up the chimney. Dad stood by the bay window and every time he moved, the four candles on the sill bobbed after him in unison, like a crowd of yes-men cheered by small gusts of tobacco smoke. Their life was tenuous. Marcus crossed away from him, toward the front door, where the floorboards had worn themselves so loose in spots that every footfall registered hollow creaks to the four corners of the room. In the firelight, the statue moved in the space between us, as if the bronze had been liberated by the fire that spawned it. Behind us the fluke flickered and fell across the walls. The light bent shadows to fit the room, blurring the wall with the ceiling, till no one could tell where one stopped and the other started. The men moved in their own small circles, crossing each other's paths and forging a heavy chain on the shadows of the floor from one end of the room to the other. As the circles grew smaller, the chain tightened and secured them to the center of the room, near the statue. Leaving no firm ground to stand upon.

"I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't."

"You have to go." Whistle. "It's the right thing to do."

"Killing is never right." One candle blew out.

"You may not have to kill." Click. "You may not even have to go." The poker fed a flurry of sparks to the darkness of the chimney.

"How can killing ever be right?"

"Don't make moral choices out of legal issues, son." Whistle. "It never works." The floor shifted from our weight, the storm, or the shadows.

The circles tightened.

"What if I leave and don't come back?"

Two candles out.

"I'll go after you." Whistle. Click.

"What if I go and don't come back?"

Three.

"I'll bring you home."

The chain laid heavy and dark on the floor, beneath the whale's shadows, beneath the roughened timber of the roof, beneath the storm.

All its life the cottonwood had been sculpted by the wind. On one side, the tree pointed thick, stubby fingers toward Pikes Peak, and on the other, the branches flowed away from the trunk, like a woman's hair imprisoned in the water by unseen currents. During the summer

months, I sat beneath its branches and listened to the leaves clap together in the breeze. An ovation of thousands at the foot of the Rockies. In winter, these branches thrashed about in the wind, fighting for their freedom from the parent tree. Some have succeeded. The trunk bore scars where earlier branches won their liberty and snapped away from the main trunk. Nothing more than a foolhardy dash for glory. A dash to death. The branches all died, of course. Not one was able to grow without being rooted in the soil. A lesson lost on others. Every now and then, when the wind was particularly tempting, and the chore of holding snow away from the trunk weighed too heavily, another branch made a bid for freedom and broke away from the parent, only to die in the snow drifted at its base. In the spring, the bark healed, and a new scar was formed. I've seen trees that have lost all their branches. In springtime, the tree dies.

The Meerschaum whistled from one side of the room to the other. Starry's snore hummed beside the shadows of the whale. Marcus stretched his frame across the couch, and I stoked the fire to see the sparks dip and dance their way up the chimney. And to keep warm.

* * * * *

The *Mighty West Winds* can be heard thundering down mountain canyons long before they tumble over the foothills and rush out onto the plains. For reasons unknown, they will whine and wail above the prairie, stretching downward to fan the heads of the tall grasses. Wave after wave of blue-stem and prairie-doc crash into mounds of snow drifted against wrecks of broken fences, forgotten cabins and lost homesteads. Scattered derelicts ground into the land. Some pioneers survived by abandoning ideas of taming the country and only dreamed of living with it. Others struggled and lost ground to the seasons, growing mad at the wind. Day upon day, loneliness stole their spirits until the wind was the only voice they heard on the prairie. Most left, but some of them grew mad. The Ute believe that each soul is granted one wish, and to waste that wish is to throw life away, as to scatter seeds upon the winds. According to legend, the *Great Spirit Manitou* can know a person by examining his secret wish. Should the wish be frivolous or without just cause, he will leave it to weaken and wither within the winds. But should the wish prove worthy, *The Manitou* will cherish it, and take it back with him as a special treasure. Warming him while he sleeps though the winter, deep within the mountain.

They broke.

Just as night visions invade the day, so too, does reality slip into dreams. I remembered thinking that I had heard a great crash, but instead of waking, I let go my hard grip on the world and slid beneath the waves of sleep into a warm and welcoming ocean that harbors

dreams side-by-side with nightmares. I saw hundreds after hundreds of bronze soldiers thrashing through the water. Some clinging to barrels or buckets or long pieces of wood. Some grasping hard to each other. Some going under our ship's wake, creating a low hum rising from the water as if the devil himself controlled the machines of death. I looked in the sky and saw the rising sun through a swirl of dark tobacco clouds casting a bronze glow over the ocean and churning under a yellow peril with blood and ash. My arms rested upon a large, gray gun, and I kept aiming at the water prisoners and felt a thrill as I sent one after another beneath the waves, beneath the ship, beneath everything. I was afraid of myself. I was afraid that war would teach me to smoke a pipe. And I would like it. I shivered, but before I could take up the gray gun again, I woke to a cold fire and a large limb from the old cottonwood crushing part of the roof to the floor.

Dad pulled the remnants of the door-jam over to the bay window. "Lend a hand, son. If we can't move this beast soon, the cold will freeze us out."

Noises from the kitchen told me that someone was rummaging through the ice-box. Probably Marcus. It had been hours since he'd eaten.

Walking around the statue I stood shoulder to shoulder with my father, and braced my weight against a splintered post that threatened to give up and bring the roof down. "Where's Starry?"

"Checking the barn for broken bottles. Hold steady now while I break this branch away." Snow drifted into the house, riding the wind as far as the couch.

"We could use Marcus out here."

"I want nothing to do with that boy. He's walked away from his folks when they worried over him. He's walked away from his country when it claimed him. No way in hell am I ever going to let him walk away while I need him. We can do fine by ourselves. Just like we've always done."

Right. We're doing just great. I can tell by the snow piling up inside the house how well we're doing.

"What did Jess have to say?"

"Only that after he'd been drafted, Marcus played right along, signing up, getting everything in order. They threw a big party for him, and the next day he even had them drive him to the bus station." Dad nodded toward the short, thick branches on one side of the limb. "I'll need to saw those off. They'll make good whittling pieces. Remember?"

I blew a puff of steam into the air and watched the cold sell my breath to a gust of wind.

"You okay?"

I was great. Standing in six inches of snow in stocking feet, no coat, with my back literally flat against a wall, holding up the front part of our roof, and an older cousin eating my breakfast. "Yep. I'm okay."

The snow had drifted onto the base of the statue, covering everything beneath the whale. Take your time.

The only warmth came from the stove, so I stayed in the kitchen hoping that the heat would warm my feet enough for me to feel them again. I propped them upon a short stool Mom used to hang pictures and waited for feeling to return. I could hear humming in the next room. Dad on the hammer and saw and Marcus blowing into the chimney, trying to catch a fire from last week's newspaper. Hunched into the hearth, he sounded like a wiffen-poof, puffed against the cold and blowing his song to some stone-deaf thing. He sputtered and it smoked, and I could tell that both never caught on. The snow drifting in beside them made them panic together; the hammer, the wiffen-poof, and the curled rips of glowing newsprint. Sunlight broke through the clouds. Patches of blue drifted in and out of the billows, and the land changed from last night's stormy purples to this afternoon's bright, clear crystals darting in and out of the shadows. In and out of the sunshine. The wind picked up, coming straight from the north. Hard, sure, frozen breath whistling past Starry, who scraped out the dead core of the limb and left the snow blackened and charred with rot, past Dad nailing grayed barn siding to the house, past the whale's tail perched alongside the hearth as a paper weight, and into the fireplace, sending crimson tinged newsprint flying around the room.

"I can't see a thing."

"Hang on. I'll get it." The breathless wiff-poof-poof stopped.

"Not you. Nothing from you."

"What is your problem, man? What have I ever done to you?"

"Get out of here and get Starry. Hell, drunk he's twice what you'll ever be."

"And what's that? What do you know about me?" I heard heavy metal dropping onto wood. Tools, probably the hammer, testing the hollow spaces between the floor-boards and the dirt foundation.

"I know you're a coward. Running. You'll always be a coward, and you'll always be running."

"And you never ran?" A log scuffed across the hearth, dragged over the brick and toppled the brass poker, shovel, and broom near the sofa. "You ran. You ran as far as you could. They bombed Pearl Harbor, and you ran to enlist. Then, you ran as far away from Philadelphia as you could get. All the way to the Philippines. Running, and then running back again. Grandma said that after the war you didn't even come home. You just sent her a postcard telling her that you were going to live out west."

Marcus sounded out of breath.

"She cried telling how you ran to Colorado. As far away from family as you could get."

Newspapers and snow crunched beneath three or four thick boots, and the match-box gave out a small rattle.

“You’re right. You’re an expert at running, so I guess you should know all about guys like me. But I don’t want to end up like you and Starry. Always running away from yourselves and into a bottle or a run down old ranch in the middle of nowhere. Do you think I want to go to war and end up like you? Do you think I want to run away from my family or have my family run away from me?”

The roof creaked over the floor jack, and I heard the now-familiar groan of the ceiling beams as the jack was twisted up a notch and snapped into place.

“I have to get this done by sunset.”

A nail was squeaked out of one board and blasted into another. The wiffenpoof song turned over in my head and my feet ached.

A match was struck.

Night ran over the house, with the moon racing so fast that it left a sprinkle of stars in its wake. The sky was clear and cold and quiet, and the wind had drawn back to a whisper. Sometimes it was there. Sometimes it was not, and I could hear my heart beating but couldn’t feel my arms as I carried load after load of wood into the house. We had finished boarding up the hole in the porch and had hung the blankets over our handiwork to keep the night outside and the fire in. The wiffen-poof was replaced by Starry’s imitation of a bellows. Wheeze-in. Wheeze-out. A few heavy breaths. Wheeze-in, and so on.

I don’t know whether the fire started because of his expertise or the alcohol on his breath. Marcus and I hauled nearly a third of the wood-pile into the house and stacked it between the wall and the couch. In order to make enough room, we moved the sofa right next to the table that held the statue. By now, there was a steady roar in the fireplace.

I also will never know what really happened when Starry and I went back to the barn to check his mule. I don’t remember hearing anything more than a slight rattle of wind, but then the barn was always so quiet. When I returned to the house, Dad was sitting on the floor propped by the couch with a deep gouge cut into his arm and blood flowing down the side of his head, moulding the hair to his ear and casting the fire-side of his face in dark red shadow. The statue lay on the hearth, and one of the thin flukes of the whale had broken off and was in the fire.

Marcus was not in the house.

I had always operated on the basis that the movement of time was a fact, and I was a part of that fact. One planned on it, for it, and because of it. There would always be a sunrise followed by a sunset. No matter what happened during the night, morning would come, and the

sun would move across the sky, sometimes dragging clouds behind it, sometimes not. But it would move, and time would continue, just as it always had. No magic formula, nothing special or grand. It would simply be. Tomorrow would always be with me, just as yesterday always had. I never considered the possibility that the next minute might not exist. That time would stop. Not just for me, but for everyone. For everything. We would simply stop moving, changing. The whole world would be frozen and silent. No gains, no losses. We would simply exist for that one particular moment. Like soldiers before a battle. Like statues. Certain of only one thing, but nothing beyond. Both heaven and hell would exist within that one moment. Telling Starry would be hell. I could live forever in that moment before I would have to tell Starry about the bronze.

I imagine Starry could, too.

There was nothing else to do but wait until morning. Even if the roads weren't cleared by then, Starry could drive Dad into town.

* * * * *

Late winter storms are sometimes chased by the swift warm winds from the lands beyond the mountains. The Mexicans called these winds *Santana*, the Breath of Satan, and they claim that you can smell the heat of hell in the dead of winter. The soft-strong winds were called *snow-eaters* by the pioneers, for it was not uncommon to go to sleep with two feet of snow on the ground and awaken the next morning without a trace remaining. The Ute Indians called them *Chinook*, *The Mighty West Wind*, and held that *The Great Spirit Manitou* would escape his cave and ride these winds down to the prairie-lands below. Legend says that if a wish were thrown into these winds when he was riding his *Spirit Horse*, by morning that wish would come true. As a child I can remember casting my wish into the *Chinook* and secretly praying that *The Great Spirit Manitou* would catch it. One night he did.

They drifted.

“He’s going to be just fine. It’d take a lot more than *that boy* from Philadelphia to lay your old man under.” Starry had finished checking to see if the kitchen towels we used as bandages were tight enough. “Best to let him sleep.”

Dad was looking pretty pale. We positioned his arm high over his head so that the blood would have to fight its way out of the cut. It was his head that had me worried. It took us a while to figure out that there was a large, deep scrape behind his ear. When I poured cold water over his head to clean him up, I could see a piece of Dad flap sideways away from his scalp, taking hair and skin with it. I could see bone.

He had to handle everything, and now, color was leaving him, too.

“Starry, I’m sorry about the statue.” I said, turning away from Dad and toward the fire. “I don’t suppose there’s anyway to fix it.”

“Nope.” Starry looked down at the statue sitting by the stack of wood. It was getting warm by the fire, but not warm enough for his forehead to send a steady stream of sweat down his cheek. “No sirreee-bob. This is bronze, boy. Once it’s broke all you can do is melt and recast.”

“Do you still have the mold, then?”

“They break when I take ‘em out.”

“Dad’s hurt pretty bad, isn’t he?”

“He’s tough, even for a man his age.” Click. “But, yeah. He’s hurt pretty bad.”

I felt as if I was going to start sweating, too.

By midnight, a *Chinook* wind had ripped our makeshift wall to shreds. The fire had blown out, but the air was warm enough that it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered much. Starry and I decided that since the roads had cleared a bit, we were going to take Dad into town. It was still very warm in the house. The wind was strong and carried the barn-smell with it. It also carried Marcus.

“I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I said it was an accident.”

“Marcus, I don’t care. I just don’t care.” I pulled another blanket down. “Here, fold this around a cushion. We’re going to have to wedge Dad into the back seat.”

“It was an accident.”

“Okay. It was an accident. Are you going to help us or not?”

“Are you going to turn me in?”

“Look, if you’re not going to help, then get out of the way.” I charged passed Marcus so fast that he had to take a step back to hold his balance.

He followed me to the car where Starry was piling blankets and pillows around Dad. Even the blankets looked gray and colorless.

“I want to know. Are you going to turn me in?”

“For what? Running or causing this accident?”

The snow had melted away in enough spots that we could see the outlines of the road. There were still high drifts, though. Mounds of dark, purplish-blue snow, piled high around snow-fences and stands of scrub-oak. In the rear-view mirror, Marcus looked at the house, then at the barn, then smaller than he really was.

“I’ll be checking on your Dad on my way through to Denver. I’d have to take the highway anyway. None of these side roads are clear enough yet. Probably be a couple of days before I’d

be able to get through Parker.” The statue, without its missing fluke, was tied down to the back of the wagon. I guess that Starry thought it was too much trouble to dig the broken fluke out of the ashes. The rough twine looked unravelled but held the heavy whale in place. The small bronze men were laying on the floor, covered over with an old bathroom rug.

“Thanks, Starry.” For the first time without my Dad standing over my shoulder, I put out my hand for another man to take. “He’s going to like seeing you.”

“I suppose that your SOB cousin is gone.”

“Haven’t seen him since we got back.” I almost told him about the tracks I saw out back. They were really no more than large ovals in the snow by now, but before everything had melted, I could tell that they were footprints. They headed due north. Out the back of the kitchen, around the barn, and toward the Black Forest. Straight to the North. I was sure that Dad’s big down coat was missing, along with some canned goods and any money we might have had laying around. I was also sure that if I wanted to, I could catch up with him.

“Well, he seems the type. He didn’t even come with us to the hospital.”

“Hey, be fair. He was afraid that we’d turn him in. You know, Starry, you and Dad were pretty rough on him. He’s just a scared kid.”

“We were scared, too. Fighting in the Pacific wasn’t a high-school basketball game, and your Dad and I were younger than you and Marcus are now. We were scared, too. Don’t kid yourself. He’s no different than we were. He just has more options.” Starry scraped the mud from the bottoms of his shoes onto the edges of the wood that used to be the porch.

He hoisted himself into the wagon and clicked to his mule. “Your Dad’s going to do fine, now. Taking him into town was the right thing to do. It wasn’t easy, driving those roads at night, but you did it. Feels good, huh?”

I couldn’t feel anything.

When I came back from the hospital later that night, the snow was completely gone. The only trace of the storm was the gash torn out of the front porch. The only blankets I had to patch it with were stained with Dad’s blood. I tried to hang one, but the grayish-green blanket just deepened the color of the dark-black blood stains. It would be a few more days, yet, before they would be able to fix the power lines between here and town. Dad was going to be fine. In fact, the doctors think that he could probably come home tomorrow or the next day.

It was already getting cold. The *Chinook* had chased the storm away, melted the snow, and left the prairie clear and cold. The mud-ruts from Starry’s wagon were going to freeze overnight. Marcus’ footprints had all but disappeared. Dad’s big coat was gone, and so were

twenty dollars that I had in my dresser drawer. There was no trace of Marcus, like he had never been here at all.

I brushed out the fireplace, set new logs on the hearth, and lighted the fire. I up-ended the couch so that I could brace myself against it while laying on the floor, creating a pocket of warmth against the night. I watched the fire.

I watched the fire.

I saw that the piece of bronze was gone.

It was cold, and I watched the fire.



Contributor's Notes

Mike Anderson writes in his spare time for “Saturday Night Live,” which is why the show is tanking.

Shannon L. Bailey has been writing stories since before she could write them down, almost. She is an English major at OSU Mansfield, and her goal (her dream) is to become a writer. She says, “The best feeling in the world is to be able to write something that brings out a certain emotion in me, like happiness or sorrow, and to be able to share it with someone else—in hopes that they can relate to the characters and the situations. I love each and every opportunity that lets me do just that, and I hope I can keep creating characters and stories for a long time to come!”

Laura Behne is a junior majoring in English at OSU Marion.

Jackie Birtcher is a senior majoring in English at OSU.

Erin Bostwick has attended the Marion campus of Ohio State University for three years, majoring in History of Art. She is “currently unemployed, and not looking”

Steve Butterman is a Senior Honors student majoring in English on the OSU Mansfield campus. The two-year contributor to *Cornfield Review* has had numerous poems, short fiction pieces and other writing published in a variety of periodicals, along with two books on long-distance cycling. He enjoys reading, writing, cooking, and gardening.

Originally from Lowell, MA, **Thomas Cloutier** writes, “life has been varied, at least.” The former psychiatric ward housekeeper spent a year at the Lowell branch of the University of Massachusetts before moving to Marion, where he is now in his third quarter at OSU Marion as English major. He enjoys nature, reading on a variety of subjects and writing late at night.

Saretta Daniels is a junior at OSU Marion. She is majoring in English and hopes to become an accomplished author someday in the near future.

Amy Dobson is a past contributor to *Cornfield Review*. She is the 1999 winner of the Florence B. Allen Writing Competition (first and second place), and she is Co-Chair of both the English Club and the Creative Writers Group. She is senior at the Mansfield branch of the Ohio State University.

Didi Fahey, a native of Colorado, is hopelessly misplaced in Delaware, Ohio. She will be graduating from the university this December and hopes to continue her studies in both English and History.

Brian Hart is a student at OSU Marion.

Ryan C. Heichel is a senior psychology major at OSU Mansfield. He is involved with Campus Campaign for Christ and also writes religious and spiritual poetry.

Merese JonSun was a student at OSU Newark.

Alexis Jones recently graduated from the Marion Campus of The Ohio State University. She was an English major who developed “a sweet taste for the beauty of poetry.” After five years of school she was ready to graduate.

S. Joyce wrote these poems when he was a graduate student student studying in Vienna, Austria. They reflect and re-present a little part of his life at that time.

Dan Kiely is a freshman theatre major at OSU Marion. He is 19, and he resides in Delaware.

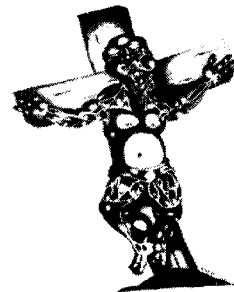
BethAnne Klingel is a student at OSU Marion.

Jared Leathem is a freshman at OSU Marion.

Douglas Lewis is not the main character in this sentence, you are.

Jonathan Riddle is a student at OSU Marion.

Elizabeth Stidham attends both the Marion and Delaware campuses of Ohio State. She is currently undecided in her major though she leaning towards music. When she is not serving at Bun’s Restaurant she writes poetry and plays the guitar.



Helena Townsend grew up in New Orleans. She was gifted with motherhood in Ohio, trying to compose the perfect song to sing upon her road, half-lion, half-child, learning what it means to be at peace.

Derek Waugh hates working at BP, likes the Marion campus, loves English, and therefore, it is his major. He also dabbles in artwork.

Tiffany Wilson is a student at OSU Marion.

Carol Zeigler has been an art student at OSU Marion for awhile. She has studied under several instructors and professors. She enjoys working with pastels, acrylics, oils, and graphite. She has enjoyed her work at the OSU Marion Prairie and at the Greenhouse. She enjoys gardening, travel, reading, and archery.





