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William J. Klebeck

Sting

touched by the flicker of a matchstick coaxed by the wheezing breath of an old man the faded newspaper is devoured by flames now licking the slats of the broken boxes piled on top the dry pine wood claimed easily by fire scorching plaster and cement reaching upwards to the beams the low ceiling hugged by smoke thick clouds of it continuing to build and the old man's mind sucking it in but the body coughing not willingly taking it eyes squinting the sting rubbed in by knobby knuckles the smoke like fog billowing each gasp for breath catches another mouthful of burning expelled with wracking upheavals of the ribcage a reluctant body geared by the man's mind set to stay and die in the heat of hell but when the flames tug his pantleg when knothole sparks land like fireflies on his gray knitted sweater he beats away the survival reflex

I enter the poolhall, smell the stale cigarette smoke, hear the low cursing laughter, the sharp crack and thud of a good shot. Comfortable feeling. Home.

"Hey, Whip." to the thin-haired, obese man sitting on a tall stool behind the wood counter.

"Hey, Bob," he says, looking up from the watch he's working on. He raises the magnifying eyeglass off his right eye. "Home for seeding, eh?"

"You bet." I walk up and lean against the counter. "Thought I'd stop in town before heading out to the farm."

"So how'd university go this year?" he asks, pulling the glass down again.

"Okay, I guess. Find out how good or bad in a couple weeks when the marks come out."

Whip leans forward, studying the inner workings of an expensive Gruen. "What are you taking again?"

I drop a quarter down on the counter and reach behind him for a cellophane-wrapped Beef Jerky. "Engineering. One more year to go."

"Then the big bucks, eh?"

In the back of the hall there's an outburst of high-pitched cackling from a group of boys too young to legally be there.

"What's that?" I tear the plastic off with my teeth.

Whip speaks without looking up. "The boys are playing jokes on old Iwanicki. Step-and-a-Half. You remember."

Looking back, I see him, wearing a faded yellow sportcoat, scurrying along the wall near the back table. There's more laughter. I remember him from when I used to hang out here in high school. He's an old Ukrainian, short, hunchbacked from picking things up off the ground. Called Step-and-a-Half because he always steps out big with one foot, then swings his body around, bringing his bad leg up even with his good one.

"What're they doing?"

"The Urzada boys got hold of some clear fishing line, strung it through a needle, and put a cigarette on the end of it, and then when Step-and-a-Half bends over to pick it off the floor, they jerk it away."

"You mean he falls for that trick more than once?" I ask, turning back to Whip.

"Ah, he's nuts. Mind's gone. He don't remember from one time to the next. He's always looking for butts, collects 'em, scrapes out what little tobacco's left in 'em and rolls his own. He sees half a cigarette lying around, he's right there. And then the kids jerk it away from him again."

I shake my head. "Seems kind of cruel."

"Yeah, big joke." Whip says. A little gear from the watch clinks onto the counter. "Shit."

On my way out to the farm, I can't help but think about Step-and-a-Half. I know we farm what Dad calls the Iwanicki Half but I'm not sure of the connection between it and the old man.

I pull up in our yard and the folks are out to greet me before I even get the trunk open. Percy, our hired man, gets hold of the biggest suitcase, lugs it into the house. Mom's got supper on and we have to sit right down. Everyone's in good spirits. Even my younger sister is being dutiful, helping Mom with the setting and serving.

Percy nudges my arm with the plate of roast beef. "Sure is good to have you home, Bob," he says.

"Only reason you're saying that, Percy," I say, stabbing a slab of meat with my fork, "is that you know there'll be less work for you now."

"Oh, Bob." From my mother. Percy laughs.

After we're talked out about university and the Stanley Cup playoffs, I mention that I'd been wondering about whether there was any connection between the land we farmed and the old man in town named Iwanicki.

My Dad looks up from his dessert, cocking one bushy eyebrow. "How come you're asking?"

"Just that I saw him in town today." I push my empty plate away from me. "Some of the boys in the poolhall were playing jokes on him."

"That would be old Miles, all right," Dad says. "It was from him that I got those two quarters."

"They call him Step-and-a-Half down at the poolhall. From the way he walks."

"That's 'cause he's got a clubfoot," Percy says. He's jabbing between his stained front teeth with a toothpick. "One time Miles Iwanicki and me, we shingled Jim MacGregor's barn, and he was more sure-footed up on that steep roof than I was, with two good feet."

"You used to work with him?" I ask. It seems like something I should know but can't remember.

"Actually," says Percy, "I worked full-time for him for quite a few years. I was working for him the year his wife died. That was the last year he farmed. His brother Charley worked the land for a couple years after that, but he was getting old, half-crippled with arthritis, and that's when your Dad bought the land."

"That's right," Dad says. "That's when Percy came to work for us, right after I acquired that land."

"And I been working here ever since," Percy says proudly.

"You know, that old man picks up cigarette butts off the floor in the poolhall," I say.

My father sips his coffee. "Old Miles, he's had a hard time of it the past few years."

"Yeah," says Percy, "when Sophie died something in Miles just seemed to snap. He got listless, wouldn't do anything. Didn't even seed a crop the next spring."

"The boys down at the poolhall were putting a needle threaded with fishing line through a cigarette," I say. "When Miles would go reach for it on the floor they'd jerk the other end, pull it away."

Percy leans back in his chair, rubbing his two-day growth of white whiskers. "I remember Miles, he used to be quite the practical joker himself."

must have been two dozen of us threshing over at Macy's and come night those of us who were single or lived too far away would catch a few winks in Macy's bunkhouse

this fellow Alex Greneau a Frenchman a big country boy all pecker and feet who left here long before you ever saw the light of day used to hang his overalls on the clothesline when he came in from the field and one morning he comes stumbling out of the bunkhouse with sleep still crusted in his eyes and he crawls into them overalls

next thing you know

Miles during the night had borrowed old Sam Macy's bee-keeping outfit and moved a wasps' nest from the ceiling in the machine shed to the pantleg of the overalls

Alex he was a-yelling screaming rolling around on the ground like a dog with fleas up his ass and he must have got ten fifteen stings before he got rid of them overalls

next morning when he stepped into 'em his eyes were wide open

Salter's threshing time again and at Salter's we had an outhouse right near where we bunked only half a door on it so you could see a fellow's feet and maybe the top of his head if he was standing up

you know the first thing a guy does in the morning is head to the john for a leak and one morning by the time I got out there some of the boys were lined up already waiting on Miles you could see the special boot he wore for his foot under the door

the fellow who was first in line started grumbling he'd been waiting ten minutes already and pretty soon a couple more were lined up behind me and we all got to go so bad we're hollering for Miles to get out of the john but Miles he ain't saying nothing so after a few more minutes a couple of us can't hold it any longer and we're hanging it outside when big Ben Salter a man who liked to be on the giving end of orders came storming down yelling that breakfast was late let's get the lead out and what the hell are you men doing there's women up at the house

one of the boys tells him Miles is holding up the privy and big Ben shouts at Miles to get the hell out and he raps on the outhouse door which swings wide open and there's nothing inside but Miles' boots

then we heard this laughing coming from behind the outhouse and when we walked back there was Miles laughing so hard you'd have thought his eyes would pop out

Most of the summer goes past without another thought about Iwanicki. Late one afternoon in early August, Dad and I are working near the shed, changing knives and guards on the swather, getting ready for harvest, when the MacGregor boys roar into the yard in their half-ton, skid to a stop not ten feet away from where we are. And they're excited. Tom's red face is more flushed than usual and Scottie is waving his hands in the air.

On the way back from town driving by the Iwanicki homestead they noticed smoke coming out the windows of the old farmhouse. Probably some oily rags in the basement, it being August and hot and all that. Combustion. Anyways, the house is on fire good, and with the dry grass and the wind and the bins—

"Which are full of wheat," Dad says.

"Probably need the firetruck," Scottie suggests.

Dad runs off towards the house. "I'll phone, meet you over there."

Fighting fire. Oh boy. "There's some shovels in the shed." I throw down the wrench and crawl out from underneath the reel. Tom and

Scottie are already out of their truck, pitching into the box a few empty five-gallon pails that we had stacked up against the shed. I grab some blankets from underneath the workbench, throw the shovels and blankets into the back of the half-ton, hop in with Tom and Scottie. We fill the pails from the slough on the way over and, when we bounce into the overgrown farmyard, water is sloshing all over the back of the truck. We see flames spouting out of the basement windows. No hope for the house, empty anyway save for a few storm windows. All we can do is attack the wild fire starting up in the long dry grass. We run around with wet blankets, slapping and beating on the ground, stamping with our feet patches of orange. Nick Wasalenka and his boy show up; they'd seen the smoke from their farm. They start smacking on the flames with spades. Dad pulls into the yard in our truck and the six of us work hard trying to contain the fire, it being August and hot enough already without this two-story frame house throwing heat in our faces.

Finally, Milligan's new lime-green firetruck rolls in, siren blaring, lights revolving, three men in fire helmets on the stoop behind. The small of my back feels stretched and tight. The east wall comes shuddering down and the Wasalenka boy has to jump out of the way. The close heat singes his eyebrows. "Stand back!" Bill Casper from Country Motors shouts from underneath a fire helmet. He's dragging a hose out from under the tank on the truck. Another man, Leonard Todos from the tire shop, is twisting open a big valve. A gush of water livens the hose and Bill directs the spray towards the fallen wall. Ten or twelve cars and trucks, all carrying workmen and shop owners, have followed the firetruck in, and soon another hose is active, arcing water onto the roof where the shingles are beginning to curl up. When one more wall collapses, the roof caves in, bangs to the ground, showering sparks. I soak the blanket in a pail of water, drag it across smoking grass that crumbles into grey, black ash. Others are throwing shovelfuls of dirt onto flames springing up. The roof's ablaze when I hear the last hiss of water meeting fire. The tank of the firetruck is empty. Bill, one foot on the running board of the truck, watches the flames intently as he talks with my father, who's nodding.

Dad walks over to me while the firemen roll up their hoses. His eyes are red; his nose is runny. "Bill figures it wouldn't be worth the trouble to go and put another tank of water on the truck for a final dousing. He figures it would be easier to get the deep tillage and make a fire-guard around the house." Dad leans forward, presses shut one nostril with his thumb and sends a shot of snot out the other. "Be a good idea if you stayed around until I can get Percy up here with the tractor. To keep an eye on things."

I lick the sweat off my upper lip. "Sure."

"Oh," Dad says, smiling as he turns away, "some of the boys up on the

road got a few beer. If you're thirsty."

The sun's splashing fire-red in the west over the treeline behind the round plywood granaries, and I'm still out at the Iwanicki homestead. Alone. Watching blue wisps of smoke funnel into the air off scarred studs and shiplap. Listening to the crackle and pop of the old house, the hum of mosquitoes out now that the wind has died down. I sit on a five-gallon pail, doing the Thinker Pose, wondering what the hell happened to Percy and the old man. Got better things to do on a Friday night than swat sparks with a wet blanket.

And that's what I'm doing, beating on the grass ten yards away from one of the full bins, when Percy chugs into the farmyard, the engine in his '56 Chevy half-ton missing worse than ever. I rub the toe of my workboot into the smudged grass, snuff out the last of the upstart fire. As I walk over to the truck I drop what's left of the blanket beside the empty pail.

"Thought you were supposed to bring the tractor out," I say to Percy, who's rolling down his window. He surveys the collapsed house, the grass blackened in an uneven circle around it.

"Looks like you had some excitement, all right."

I slap a mosquito on my forearm.

Percy motions to the other door. "Get in. I got some supper for you."

"Supper?" I say, walking around the truck. "Christ, without the tractor—"

"Been having trouble with the hydraulic all day," Percy says when I get in. He lifts a lid off a pot on the seat. "That's how come I didn't bring it out here. Your father and me been working on it the last couple of hours." I notice the oil splotched down the front of his shirt and trousers. "We need a new hose and can't get it until tomorrow, so the goddamn cultivator's stuck in the ground over on the CPR quarter. That's how come we couldn't get over here to make a fire-guard."

I take a plate off the seat, dump thick stew out of the pot onto it. "Without a fire-guard," I say, "means we'll have to stay out here most of the night."

"That's why—" Percy reaches under the ripped seat.

"There's still sparks popping off far enough to catch the grass."

"-I brought this along." Percy holds up a half-full 26-ounce bottle of whiskey.

"Shit, Percy." I shake my head as he unscrews the cap, takes a pull. I eat the stew and mop up the gravy with one of Mom's homemade buns. Then I light an after-dinner Rothmans.

For the next couple of hours we sit in Percy's truck, drinking the whiskey, bull-shitting. After a while we roll the windows up to keep the mosquitoes out. The windshield begins to fog, chilled by the autumn air outside, warmed by our breath inside. A few times one of us—we argue

every time whose turn it is—has to get out and run over with the blanket to a patch of grass put on fire by a spark belched out of the smouldering wreckage, flying like a flare in the dying light before it lands.

middle of November he went on a hunting trip up to Hudson's Bay with three farmer friends Won't be back until the sixteenth Soph he told his wife but the moose didn't show a single-shot's worth so he arrived home two days early on Wednesday in the evening after driving most of the day after dropping the boys off he discovered Sophie's not there probably visiting the MacGregors down the road or in town at her mother's he thought chuckling at the notion taking seed in his head and by the time Sophie arrived home the half-ton was parked in the barn and the house was dark just like she left it to take some eggs to the MacGregors who sent back the jar of cream she had in her hand while walking through the gate up the stone path to the door she opened reached for the light switch but there was another hand over it the jar crashed to the floor she fainted so quickly she didn't hear her husband chuckling and she died in his arms a moment later without hearing his I'll-never-do-it-again words

Across the smouldering embers appears a dark figure, a deeper blackness against the round dark shapes of the bins, looming larger, the spectre of a hunched woman in black advances towards us, blotting out now the stand of poplars behind the bins and the head, even slumped forward as it is, pokes into the purple sky. "Holy shit!" I grab the armrest.

Percy rolls down his window. "Hey! Who's out there?"

I rub the steam off the inside of the windshield and Percy flips on the headlights. On the other side of the burnt house a small man in a gray sweater looks up in the path of light, raises an arm as if to protect himself.

"What the hell?" I say to Percy.

The man in the light steps forward, then swings the rest of his body even with the stepping-out leg.

"Miles," breathes Percy.

"Step-and-a-Half," I say. "What the hell is he doing out here?"

"Good question." Percy gets out of the truck. "Miles? Miles Iwanicki, c'mon over here." He gestures to the old man, who lowers his head and cries nothing short of a whimper.

"It's me, Percy." Percy walks around the ruins of the house. "Percy, remember?" He puts his arm around the old man's shoulder. "C'mon back to the truck. Awful cold out here with only a sweater on."

Before the two of them reach the truck I hear the "sorry sorry sorry" whine of the old man. His brush-cut head sways back and forth; his shoulders are shaking. When he gets into the half-ton, he turns eyes red as pickled beets towards Percy. "You can take me to jail now, boys."

Percy laughs. "Ain't nobody taking you to jail. Only place we're taking you is home."

Step-and-a-Half rubs his ruddy cheek with a big thumb. His head drops until his chin hits his chest. "I'm sorry. . . ." he cries.

Percy puts his hand on the old man's knees. "It's all right, all right." He glances at me behind the wheel. "Let's go, Bob. We'll take Miles back to town."

I look out through the bug-splattered windshield. "The house—"

"It'll be all right. Wind's died right down and there hasn't been a spark in the last hour and a half." He motions with his hand. "Let's go."

I back the old Chevy up and stall it only once before getting onto the grid. Old man Iwanicki cries tears, babbles incoherent words, most of the five miles to town. We don't ask how he got out to his old homestead, what he was doing out there. He probably couldn't tell us anyway.

Whipping the GMC into an angle park in front of the poolhall, I bang against the curb harder than I intend. My face is powder-puffed with dirt, my eyes raw, from swathing barley most of the day, and the only reason I'm in town is to get a goddamn idler arm welded at the machine shop. But since I am in town. . . .

"Hey, Whip," I say, striding into the dimness, walking up to the counter. "Two packs of Rothmans."

"Ain't we a sight." Whip turns on his stool away from his game of solitaire and plucks the cigarettes off the shelf behind him. "Two-ninety."

I give him the money and put the smokes into my shirt pocket.

"So how's the whore-vest and come-bining going?"

"Not bad," I say, walking away. "If the weather holds and the frigging swather doesn't break down again, should be done swathing by Saturday."

Whip nods, flips over three cards. "Don't work too hard."

I stop in the doorway, hesitate before re-entering the afternoon glare. Step-and-a-Half rounds the corner of the building, carrying a handful of grimy popsicle sticks. "Hi Miles," I say but he doesn't even look up. He just plops himself on the bench in front of the poolhall.

A long-legged young woman I don't know, a tourist probably, wearing bright yellow pants and high heels, struts by on the sidewalk. I follow the rear end, think of grinding gears. She flicks a half-smoked, lipstick-smudged cigarette out of her hand as she enters Pip's Department Store. The butt rolls up against the leg of the bench Step-and-a-Half is sitting on. He leans over, reaches down towards it.

"Hey," I say. "Miles." I pull a pack of smokes out of my pocket and hand it to him. "Here. You can have these."

The old man stops in mid-motion to look up at me. I advance with the outstretched hand. "Here."

His sunken eyes stare blankly at me. I see sweat beaded on his lined forehead. I put the smokes on the bench next to him. "You can have 'em."

Step-and-a-Half looks away. He picks up the woman's smouldering cigarette, brings it to his lips.

I get in the half-ton and head out to the farm.

BACK SEAT PILOT

I have an axiom about the equality of times

As the Champ took off from the grassy strip
Jim waggled its wings to Jennifer
down in the car doing her math homework

The highways were a fine set of geometrical shapes
I noticed an interchange like an infinity sign
with the ray of a freeway bisecting its middle

and could have believed our vector was unlimited
except when an occasional bump of warm air
from a plowed field reminded me of earthly ties

After the landing we went back to the car
and tapped on the glass to get Jennifer's attention
She had spent a dull half hour on one assignment

Times equal to the same time are not equal to each other

MADAM CHAIRMAN, HONOURED GUESTS

We're here to honour gifted children
by launching a volume of their writings
With folded arms three minor politicians sit
on folding chairs in the little theatre
Each one represents someone important
who couldn't come but wanted to be here

An interpreter transforms every speech
into the fluent gestures of the deaf
The politicians have good words for the book
but their speeches are made of pre-fab phrases
many of them damaged in the assembly –
"This is a warm-heartening event"
we're told
and the interpreter
makes a quick move with the hand
fingers outward away from the mouth
then traces the outline of a heart
with index fingers on the chest
I'm astounded to see a speech
gaining so much in the translation

IN THE MOVIES

My mother was six in 1931, the year
of Karloff's *Frankenstein.* When the monster
and the little girl began to play
by the lake, tossing flowers in the water,
my mother stood right up in the *Strand*
and yelled out, "Run, you crazy fool, run!"
That scene was soon cut from the film.
A few years later, a strange man sat by her
in the dark and ran his hand over her body.
She didn't yell, not knowing what would happen
if she did. I can't imagine her as a child
when there are no snapshots—a cold family—
so I always imagine a Shirley Temple
in curls and cuteness. More than forty years
after *Frankenstein,* her uncle Eli was coming
for a visit, and she broke out in a rash.
Finally she realized the strange man
hadn't been a stranger. Memory made the cuts
it had to, but the body remembered
the monster wearing a family face.

MOTHER SAID DON'T

touch yourself there.
Your hands will fall off.

But I did and I did and
sure enough, my
hands fell off.

With the stumps of my arms,
I placed them gently in a
brown paper bag and

quietly carried them
to the garbage can.

Then, I carefully sewed
small ladles to the empty
spot on my arms
thinking
all things could be done
with spoons.

Mary Hagey

The Long Way Home

Livvy Harris leaned forward in the driver's seat. She peered over the steering wheel, holding it with both hands, and seemed to be concentrating intensely on the road as it unfolded beyond the shiny blue hood of the car. The exaggerated caution was for her parents' benefit; the car was new and belonged to them.

Despite Livvy's efforts to appear totally in control, her mother, sitting in the front beside her, pressed down on an imaginary brake at every stop sign. Her father relaxed in the back, smelling up the car with his spicy after shave. Livvy longed to roll down the window but knew it wouldn't get halfway before her mother would complain about the dust in her throat, the wind wrecking her set, or not being able to hear herself think. It would be nice, Livvy mused, to not be able to hear her mother think.

"You know, Olivia," said her mother, interrupting Livvy's thoughts, "you really should sit on a cushion when you drive. You can hardly see over the steering wheel." Livvy assured her she could see just fine, but her mother continued. "You look just like Oaffie. He sticks his nose up in the air like that when he smells another dog coming around."

"Thank you, Mother," said Livvy, unconsciously tilting her head downward a bit and taking a deep breath to prepare herself for the speech about being short that she knew was coming. She wished they'd gone straight home from church rather than taking this unnecessary detour. Her mother had talked her into it—said they should enjoy the autumn colours.

"You might as well face the fact that you're short."

Here we go, thought Livvy.

"It's not the end of the world. You could be crippled or blind or something. There are nice clothes for short people now, and you can wear as high a heel as you like. Think of poor Margaret. Can you imagine being six feet tall?"

"Five ten," corrected Livvy.

"Is that what she tells people? Anyway, she has to wear flats all the time, which certainly does nothing for the leg. Having to sit on a cushion

is nothing to be ashamed of. . . being short is nothing to be ashamed of. Some very famous people were short: Napoleon, Einstein. . . . I don't know of any women."

"Laura Secord," said Livvy dryly.

"Was Laura Secord really short?" asked Mrs. Harris, looking at her daughter in amazement. "How do you know? Did you read that somewhere?"

"It's recorded in all the history books," said Livvy, pressing down on the accelerator. "Laura Secord: five foot one, one hundred and ten pounds, thirty-six twenty-four thirty-six, led her purebred Jersey cow through the American lines to warn the British. I thought everyone knew that." She could feel the muscles tightening at the back of her neck. She shrugged her shoulders a few times to loosen up.

"I can tell when you're being sarcastic," said Livvy's mother, shaking her head sadly. "It's bitterness, Olivia, and not a very attractive trait. I don't know where in heaven's name you get it. . . . Of course I don't know where you get your height either; there isn't a woman on my side of the family who's under five four."

"Why that's a fact, isn't it?" said Mr. Harris, turning his attention away from the medley of fields: grass, corn stubble, and those just freshly plowed. "None on my side either that I can think of."

"There's your cousin Alice," said Mrs. Harris in an effort to set the record straight. She picked some lint from her skirt, then, rolling the window down just a crack, pinched it through to the outside.

"She's stout, Ellen, but she's not short," insisted Mr. Harris. "She just looks that way; it's an optical illusion."

"There's no way she's five four," said Mrs. Harris with finality. Turning to Livvy she added, "There's one thing to be thankful for, Olivia—you'd really have something to complain about if you were fat like Cousin Alice. . . though I think you've inherited her heavy foot. Must we fly down the road like this?"

Mr. Harris stretched himself out sideways and remarked how nice it was to just sit back and let someone else do the driving. Livvy, relieved at the change of conversation, relaxed and when they reached an intersection, asked if they wanted to go home by Woolich road and stop by the quarry. Her father said he was game for anything and her mother, foot still pressing on an invisible brake, was agreeable on the condition that Livvy stop driving as though there were no tomorrow.

Livvy turned down Woolich road, passing the familiar farms, noticing touches of recently painted trim, repaired fences, thinking how she really should drive over some day and visit old Mrs. Mason. She wondered how someone so old and wrinkled could stand being alive.

"Potatoes!" burst out Mr. Harris suddenly, sitting up and resting his arms on the back of the front seat.

"Where?" asked his wife skeptically. She knew that no one for miles around grew potatoes. And anyway, it was too late in the season.

"No," he laughed, "I'll bet it was the potatoes. Remember Liv? I used to say, 'Eat your taters Puddin-head,' and you never would. That must've been what did it. What d'you say, Livvy?"

"I say, why don't you talk about my nose for awhile. It's been days now since anyone has mentioned my nose."

"What d'you mean?" he asked, leaning back, offended. He tried to think what it was he'd said that could have been taken the wrong way.

"She's being sarcastic again," explained Mrs. Harris to her husband. "She always has to take everything so personally. She's at that age."

Why hasn't she told me how I'm ruining this lovely Sunday drive, wondered Livvy.

"The other day I just mentioned to Olivia," continued Livvy's mother, addressing her husband in a very controlled voice, "I said if she wanted to, she could have her nose fixed—made a little smaller. Only if it's what she wants. I mean lots of girls in her position would jump at the chance."

What position am I in; am I in a position? Livvy blew at the bangs on her forehead. "It's hot in here," she said, and opened the vent on her side of the car.

"It was just a suggestion," Mrs. Harris went on. "Ann Landers says, and I agree, that there is absolutely no point in going through life with flaws if it isn't necessary." She gave a dry cough and gestured towards the open vent. "We can do without that arctic breeze, Olivia."

Livvy inhaled a deep breath of the fresh air and pushed the vent back in. "I like my nose," she said, surprising herself at how much she meant it; she had despised it for as long as she could remember. "If I had it *fixed* I'd look just like everyone else."

"That's ridiculous," argued her mother. "You can't look like *everyone.* You'd look more like me, I think. You got that nose from your dad." She reached over and took a strand of hair away from Livvy's eyes. "You'll ruin your eyes letting your hair hang in them like that. I don't think glasses would suit you either."

Livvy looked at her father in the rear-view mirror. He was running his finger along his nose and looked as though he was about to say something. Protest, likely, Livvy figured, about being responsible for *her* nose. He started whistling the children's hymn from the morning's church service: *All Things Bright And Beautiful.*

"Let's just drop the whole business," suggested Mrs. Harris with a deep sigh. "This over-sensitivity is ruining the drive. Just look at the sunshine. How could anyone be so touchy on such a beautiful day?" She straightened her skirt and settled more comfortably in the seat, as though starting over.

I must have a personality flaw, thought Livvy absently. Her father's whistling played on her nerves. She looked back at him, glaring, thinking maybe he'd see her eyes and get the hint. That nose looks fine on him, she thought. It matches the rest of his face: big, square. But he's no movie star. Mother's just fixed him up, trying to make him look as though he's not a 'dirt farmer'—make him look like he matches her in the same way she matches her renovated kitchen: clean, efficient, colour co-ordinated. Livvy glanced at her mother. Mrs. Harris was peacefully looking out the window, toying with the gold pendant that was usually down in her cleavage. Big tits, thought Livvy. Always saying, "Olivia dear, you should wear blouses with tucks or gathers to fill yourself out a bit. . . don't slouch. . . don't be ashamed of your breasts." I must have got my tits from my dad.

"You're speeding again, Olivia," said Mrs. Harris, annoyed that despite all her efforts, this was not turning out to be the nice Sunday drive that people go out on. "Would you look at that," she said, perking up and pointing to a farmhouse. Livvy slowed down. "The Wilsons have finally got their circular drive put in. And paved yet. Seems ridiculous to have a driveway paved when even the roads aren't done, don't you think, Edward?"

"Oh well," said Mr. Harris, "that's George for you. He'll be happy now. He's been planning that thing ever since we put ours in five years ago."

Mrs. Harris was shaking her head incredulously. "Why has Ethel gone and put her shrubs in those awful tractor tires? It's so tacky. It's ruined everything really. Why spend a fortune on a driveway and then plop those. . . those *things* there?"

Livvy started to shake her head too, thinking sarcastically, Why oh why has she done that? God has made all things bright and beautiful and Ethel Wilson with her tacky taste is messing it up.

"Livvy. Livvy!" said her mother in exasperation. "I know I said to slow down, but this is ridiculous. Are you tired? Don't slouch. Good heavens but you need a cushion!"

Livvy leaned back trying to look casually competent, thinking how she *was* competent. She'd had her license for over a year and her driver training instructor had never mentioned anything about a cushion.

"Is that Caroline out raking leaves?" asked Mr. Harris, sitting up and looking keenly in the direction of the young woman he knew full well to be Caroline. Caroline looked up when the car passed but not in time to recognize them. "Honk the horn, Livvy! Livvy. . . you should have honked the horn."

"I think it's a shame that no one observes the Lord's day anymore," said Mrs. Harris.

"Some people find raking leaves relaxing," Mr. Harris said, sitting

back again, flushed, annoyed that he hadn't been driving. "I don't think you could call it work." He thought about how it would have been if he had been driving the car. He could see himself tooting at Caroline, stopping to remark at what a lovely day it was for raking leaves. His wife would have made some comment, he thought. Something that would make him feel ridiculous. He started to feel ridiculous. Caroline was barely older than Livvy.

"That Caroline is a lovely girl, though," said Mrs. Harris. "A wonderful cook too." There was a note of condescension in her voice.

"Oh, for sure," said Mr. Harris, confessing, "I had a piece of her sponge cake at the strawberry social this year. That girl will have no trouble a'tall getting a husband." He felt better; it was all such a lot of silly nonsense, he thought, wondering why he'd gotten caught up in it again.

"The men hang around her like flies," said Mrs. Harris, thinking how silly her husband had looked last June hanging around with the others, making such a fuss over an angel cake.

"I think Margaret is a much better cook," said Livvy. "The things she makes aren't all fluff. And she makes all her own clothes too."

"She has to, she's so tall. . . and since when have you been so thick with Margaret?" asked Mrs. Harris. "I didn't know you were chummy with her."

"We're not *chummy*," said Livvy abruptly. The car swerved slightly and the wheels momentarily spun through a ridge of thick gravel. "I just think she's nice. . . smart, too."

"All right, all right, let's not get ourselves killed," said Mrs. Harris, hanging on to the dashboard. "Maybe your father better take over driving since you seem to be in a mood."

Is that what this is, wondered Livvy. Is it a mood when you feel like going a hundred miles an hour with the windows down, the radio blaring and your parents screaming for mercy?

"Don't you worry your little head about Margaret," said Mr. Harris soothingly, staying settled in his seat, making no move to do as his wife suggested. "Her folks have a nice farm set-up there for a bright lad with an eye for more than just a beautiful girl. The good Lord has a way of compensating."

Why doesn't he go back to whistling? Why doesn't he just shut up and whistle, Livvy wondered, then said, "Margaret isn't sticking around to marry someone who likes her dad's farm. She's going to university next year." Livvy wanted to say that *she* wasn't sticking around either, but she didn't have the nerve—and then what if she *didn't* leave? She wasn't an 'A' student or outgoing like Margaret.

Mr. Harris said he hadn't heard of Margaret's plans.

"They change with the wind," explained his wife. "First she was going

to be a biologist, now it's a doctor. Margaret's always thought she was better than the rest of us."

Livvy clenched the wheel and said, "It's just not true." Then they drove on in silence.

Mr. Harris felt at a loss for words. He knew something was troubling Livvy but wondered if it wasn't some 'woman thing' that he couldn't do anything about anyway.

Mrs. Harris was thinking about how her husband had referred to Caroline as beautiful. She cleared her throat. "I wouldn't say Caroline is *beautiful,* Edward," she said.

Oh, oh. . . Livvy thought.

"She's really a bit too thin," continued Mrs. Harris. "Her elbows are just two little knobs. . . her knees and ankles are bony too. There should be enough flesh to smooth over the frame. It's more feminine."

Poor Caroline, thought Livvy. Throw her in the quarry and she'd probably drown. Not enough fat to keep her beautiful teeth and blond hair afloat.

Mr. Harris thought it best to change the subject. He drew his wife's attention to some burnt ruins off in the distance.

"The Miller place," Mrs. Harris cried. "I haven't seen it since the accident. Slow down, Olivia."

Livvy obeyed, bringing the car to a crawl. Now we're going to hear all about the very handsome Larry Miller, thought Livvy, his beautiful fiancée, and how there was something very fishy about the whole case.

"You know Edward, there was really something strange about that case if you ask me," said Mrs. Harris. "He was such a nice boy. I just cannot believe he'd do such a thing. I remember when he ran out of gas once over by our place and came to borrow a gallon. Tall—he bumped his head in the doorway." Her voice softened. "Such nice manners. You couldn't ask for nicer manners."

"The shed he killed her in is gone," observed Mr. Harris. "Somebody probably took it apart for the wood. City people likely, finishing their basement. Wonder if his folks are going to rebuild or stay in town now. . . foundation looks okay. I could never figure out why he dragged her into the house and set fire to it. Why not just bury her?"

"I don't think he could have done it," said Mrs. Harris. "He was such a lovely young man." She leaned her forehead against the window for a moment; her breath made a circle of steam.

"Did he pay for the gas?" asked Mr. Harris. "When he stopped by—did he pay for it? Did he bring some back or what?"

"It was almost a year ago, Edward. How am I supposed to remember some little detail after all that time?"

Mr. Harris took a white, folded hankie from his breast pocket, shook it loose, then reached forward and wiped the steam from the window. "I

always remember when people pay for things or bring them back," he said. "Miller did it all right, Ellen—killed her. There's no doubt of that."

"If he did it—and I'm not saying I think he did, it was probably because he was too smart. You know, sometimes people are very intelligent and something just sort of snaps. They say he was really very clever."

Livvy stifled a laugh, thinking, clever Larry banged his head twice a day for five years getting on and off the school bus because he was so busy thinking deep intelligent thoughts. But not thoughts about how to strangle his beautiful half-naked girlfriend and drag her body across the yard to the house so he could fry her up like a chicken.

When the Miller place was behind them, Mrs. Harris turned to her daughter. "It's nice to see you smiling, Olivia," she said. "If you're feeling better maybe when we get to the quarry we could get out for a minute or two; it's always quite nice in the fall."

Livvy turned off Woolich Road onto the narrow laneway that led to the quarry. They were less than a mile from home—the quarry had been one of her favourite childhood places. "It *is* nice," she agreed. "But it could be so much nicer. They should tear out some of the wild bushes and lay down some sod. What the place needs is grass and some patio blocks—what the place needs," she said, smiling with mock earnestness at her mother, "is total landscaping."

Livvy's parents looked at one another. Mrs. Harris could tell that her husband was thinking it was *her* Livvy was making fun of, and she hated him for it. She turned and sat looking straight ahead with her arms folded, thinking how the Sunday drive was being ruined. And weren't they speeding again? "Slow down!" she commanded.

Livvy tried to lift her foot slightly from the pedal; it felt numb. She wondered what would happen if she couldn't control herself and put the accelerator to the floor. She could imagine the car bouncing wildly and the trees and road blurring in front of her. She blinked her eyes, trying to clear away the image.

"Now Liv," said Mr. Harris patting Livvy on the shoulder. Their eyes met in the mirror and he thought it looked as though she was about to cry. "Let me take over, Livvy; it just isn't your day, is it?"

"I'm just fine," she said, looking back at the lane and shrugging his hand away. "Who couldn't be fine on such a beautiful day." She honked the horn. "That's a cheer for the beautiful day."

"You're not the least bit funny," Mrs. Harris said calmly, telling herself she would not give her daughter any satisfaction by getting upset.

Something white running among the bushes ahead caught Mr. Harris's attention. "It's Oaffie," he said, pointing. "For a minute there it looked a bit like Sheba."

"Sheba," repeated Mrs. Harris softly, remembering. There was no way Oaffie could look like Sheba. "Sheba was one in a million," she said.

"A purebred. Oaffie's a mutt, for heaven's sake!"

"Sheba was special all right," agreed Mr. Harris.

"She didn't run all over the country either, getting sprayed by skunks and mating with anything," said Mrs. Harris. "Never again do I get myself attached to an animal like Sheba; it's better just to have a dog like Oaffie."

"Oaffie's a good dog," said Mr. Harris. "He's a whiz at rounding up the cows."

"He's a wonderful dog," said Livvy. Tears blurred her vision. "You gave Sheba liver and hamburger and let her in the house."

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked her mother. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Slow down Liv," urged her father. "The potholes along here are pretty deep—you shouldn't be doing more than ten miles an hour."

Livvy's hands gripped the wheel as she aimed the car down the middle of the lane. "Oaffie gets stale bread, soggy with bacon fat," she said.

"Are you going to let her drive like this, Edward?" demanded Mrs. Harris.

"Liv, stop the car," insisted Mr. Harris, leaning over the back of the seat.

"Leave me alone," Livvy hissed. "Both of you just leave me alone!"

The car jolted as it hit a pothole. "For Godsakes Edward, the quarry's not far..." cried Mrs. Harris, grabbing for the dashboard, her face twisted urgently towards her husband.

Out of the bushes on the right hand side bounded a white mongrel. He raced alongside the car, tongue hanging, ears back, eager. In a burst of speed he started to cross over to the other side of the lane the way he often did when racing with the tractor. To Livvy he was but a small fuzzy image that moved within the blurry tunnel of the trees, a white splotch that seemed to hang suspended for a second in front of the car before she heard her mother's scream, a deep resonant thud, and her foot, quite on its own, found the brake.

There was a moment when the noise of the engine roared in Livvy's head, distorting her mother's voice nattering about a cushion, about how she knew something like this would happen. Her father reached for the keys, turned off the ignition and got out of the car. With the silence came a vague realization of what had just happened. "Oaffie," she cried, quickly opening the door and following her father to the ditch where the dog was lying motionless.

She knelt next to Oaffie and watched her father as he stooped and examined the dog—his hands moving with the quick efficiency of a man who'd handled animals all his life. "He's in pretty bad shape, Liv," he said. "His hind legs are both broken—no more chasing skunks. And there's no telling about internal injuries."

Livvy leaned forward and stroked Oaffie's forehead. "If we take him to the vet right away, Dad. . . ."

"Don't go getting blood on that good wool skirt, Olivia," yelled her mother. She was out examining the bumper.

"How's the car?" asked Mr. Harris.

"It's all right," she said, running her hand over the surface. "Is. . . is he dead?"

Livvy tried to blot out her parents' conversation. She scratched Oaffie gently behind his ears. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "Wake up. Please, please. . . ."

"It was an accident, Liv," said her father. "Now go on back to the car." He pushed back Oaffie's eye-lids, then went to the car and opened the trunk. For a moment Livvy's hopes rose; she thought maybe they'd take Oaffie to the vet after all. Her father was removing his suit coat and rolling up his sleeves. He took some tools out of an old feed bag and left them in the trunk, bringing the burlap back with him. "Go on, Livvy," he said sternly.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Are we taking him to the vet?" She could hear her own voice rising, shrill.

"No Livvy. . . there's no point taking him all that way and paying thirty, thirty-five dollars for what I already know."

"You took Sheba when she got hit. You took her and she was already dead."

"We weren't absolutely sure. Anyway, it's not the same thing." He shooed Livvy aside and placed the sack on the ground next to Oaffie, easing the dog over onto it, his hands avoiding the knots of burrs that were now wet with blood. "He won't suffer this way, Liv. You don't want him to suffer, do you?"

"How are you going to murder him?" asked Livvy. "Are you just going to throw him in the quarry? That's what you're going to do, isn't it? Isn't it!"

Mr. Harris picked up the dog, struggling to get a good hold. "I'm not going to *throw* him. I'll just put his head under for a minute. He won't feel a thing." He adjusted the sack to protect his clothes and headed down towards the water.

"I'll take care of Oaffie myself," cried Livvy, calling after her father. "I hate you," she screamed when he didn't stop. "I hate both of you," she yelled, turning towards her mother, who was sitting in the car with the door open. "I want you to know I gave him hamburger. I gave him all kinds of things when you weren't around."

Mrs. Harris looked through her purse for a kleenex. She found one and held it up motioning for Livvy to come and get it.

We musn't look a mess, thought Livvy at the sight of the yellow tissue. Not even out here with no one around. "No!" she yelled, backing away

from her mother. She turned and ran, stumbling through the brush along the ditch, tripping as her high heels caught on clumps of earth and stones. She crossed over into a field at a place where the fence was down, and headed toward the hill that faced the quarry.

Mrs. Harris watched her daughter and thanked God that the teen years would soon be over. She thought that maybe it would do Livvy some good to run home—let off some steam. She turned to see her husband attending to things at the water's edge and wondered for a minute about Larry Miller and what it was his girl friend had done to provoke him so.

Mr. Harris knelt on a flat white rock that jutted out into the small lake. He held Oaffie over the water, the brown sack drawn over the dog's face so he didn't have to see death quite so vividly, and to protect himself in case the cold water should revive consciousness. When he lowered Oaffie's head into the water the small furry body convulsed, almost making him lose his balance. He felt a shiver flutter through the dog; bubbles gurgled up to the surface. He thought of Oaffie rounding up the cows, darting eagerly into the woods searching out the strays.

Livvy scrambled to the top of the hill. She had discarded her shoes; her feet were bleeding and her stockings were riddled with holes and runs; bits of weeds clung to her skirt and sweater. She stood panting, wiping her hair from her eyes, and looked down over the quarry where she could see her father huddled over the dog. For a moment she imagined she saw Oaffie snap to life; she could picture him tearing away from her father and racing back up the lane toward the car where her mother was sitting with the door open. She could almost hear her mother scream, see the horror on her face as she reached too late to close the door on Oaffie, who lunged, teeth bared. . . . But Oaffie did not rise, did not fight back.

Exhausted, Livvy sank to the ground. She breathed the crisp autumn air and slowly pulled the clinging weeds from her clothes.

Before her lay the quarry, the leaves on the trees dazzling in the sunlight; and the water, usually dark and cool, reflected the vibrancy. Even Oaffie, lying now on the ground, looked from a distance like one of the little white rocks, speckled with beautiful red leaves and radiating warmth.

Richard Harrison

THERE ARE MOTHS WITHIN MY MOTHER

There are moths within my mother
beautiful moths, large
with wings like the faces of owls
moths named for the moon and its madness

Within her they have been born
lived
within her they have slept
and dreamed the sleep of changes
within her they have been safe
and when they awoke
it was beneath the pale white light
of her translucent skin

This is a story, one inside me
that I tell and re-tell. I look for
its image within my work.
In the words themselves
it happens:
the word moth
within the word mother
the word mouth,
where poems begin,
opens the same way
in the same act of speech.
Each time I begin these words
it is the same.
The others are silent in the one
and struggle to escape.

This is a story. It is of how we,
as children, took some caterpillars home
and hatched them with care into moths
and how they died in our home
unable to get out,
how I saw them
reaching for the light
with their tattered wings,
how even the death of insects
speaks of pain,
how the body
does not release its own

and dying
they flap against her skin
like mouths
she does not hear.

Jascha Kessler

Dafne

Indian Summer. The Mohawk Valley. The rolling countryside of Oneida County. On College Hill, actually, out back on the north side, beyond the football field, following the fairway as it slopes up and delivers you onto the mount of the 7th Green, atop which, after putting, you can pause to survey three small valleys—and consider the conclusion to summer's works. A pattern of greens: cornfields, beanfields, fields of broccoli, brussels sprouts, potatoes, hayfields and stony cowpastures, clumps of maple, oak, ash and beech copses glimmering aureate, blistering into scarlet, slowly burning and dropping their shrivelled, cooling embers to reveal, from this height, their interwoven branches that will look like great grey nests for crows and winter snow. Among them the farmhouses standing out more clearly now, the roadside hamlets like Paris and Oriskany and Hinman Corners down below where the creeks wind, those withering old New York wooden houses, shapeless and shambling, leaning together in peeling poverty for a hundred years now. Smoke curling in the still air of October, partly from fireplaces and leafpiles, partly from the garbage dumps or car bodies forever smoldering in the wreckers' pits that mark these nearly nameless places littered and dying around this harsh region. Here and there the new ranch homes or redone Greek Revival specimens of gentlemen farmers, the squires and merchants and bank presidents who prefer the countryside, bleak as it is, to the decrepit cities and industrial suburbs of the long valley to the west towards the Great Lakes far away. A fine prospect though during Indian Summer. Best time of the year. For spring is melting snowpack and running red clay. Summer humid, oppressive, empty. Winter a hell of ice glare or howling blizzard of sleet and unending drifting snowsqualls. But in autumn there is that distant view of grey-black foothills to the north, the Adirondacks; and over them, high up, the faint feathered clouds darting through the stratosphere, presaging those ponderous black bellying low clouds that sweep along the ridges and drop the damp, immolating snows of late November. Yet, these few weeks of clarity we have, and vision comes as revelation, as fulfilment before the end.

I am not, this late afternoon hour, mounting the tumulus of the 7th Green, putter in hand, but helping my friend's wife up. We have strolled out here for our last portion of the still and limpid air. It's the Saturday of the annual Sigma Chi Halloween Party. The cars have all pulled away from the football field, crowds scurried off to their various celebrations and cocktail hours. After several years of this regular Halloween bash, we have grown weary of the Sigs of Sigma Chi and their sluttish Vassar dates back there before the First Tee of the golf course. In the hall we have just left, the Sigs, suavely cheery in their Brooks tuxes, snotty and condescending, pouring out bourbon and champagne to the faculty by the insulting case, are introducing their dates, vivid twenty-year-old girls, healthy, fresh-skilled, tireless, stunning in their Bendel and Saks dresses, and flushed with roaring the afternoon away in the football stands, with booze, and brimming over with eager sex. The Sigs and their dates enjoy hosting their professors; they get a sardonic sort of kick from watching their intoxicated teachers weave off into the night, staggering among the fraternity's Porsche, Triumph, MG and Mercedes roadsters that lie parked carelessly outside like a few dozen hunters tethered at a country inn toward the close of the great Fall Hunt.

Margaret and I had left them while it was not yet dusk though, to watch the twilight come on, as well as to escape the swelling din of orgy. Her husband was standing with his nose in the 90-proof punch cup, paying court to Prexy, an unctuous ex-minister who'd been brought up by the Trustees to beef up the venerable institution by augmenting sociology, political science and psychology—the wave of the future, as he calls these subjects. He may well be correct: we are working hard at transforming Sigs into lawyers and admen, into our social managers, our chiefs. Canny, these ex-Presbyterian ministers, who are caring properly for this world of ours. Margaret's husband was listening hard to the President, who had remained as usual next to the big bowl to dip his cup frequently and get the obedient attentions of his faculty as they came up and returned for more of the same. Margaret's husband was laughing at all his jokes: he hasn't finished his thesis yet, and his position is still unsure. He is only halfway through a study of voting behavior in the former colonies of Africa, a Harvard idealist who'd helped in formulating their constitutions as a prize undergraduate interning in Washington over the summers. But over the last six years, six of his seven countries have been restructured into native tyrannies, and he is persona non grata in them all: if the records he needs are not destroyed, they are in any case sealed to him. Between that, and Margaret's six-years' barrenness, he has work ahead yet for his laurels. Still, his old preppy ties at Rockefeller and Ford keep him in firewood, and Margaret in gowns like this ivory, gold-embroidery-edged raw silk thing she has on tonight, her fine breasts floating free in it as she takes my hand to clamber up onto the 7th Green with me. Her shoulders are protected from the cooling air

by a thick ermine jacket. For three years now we have been friends. Margaret is happy here after nervous, smug, perverted Cambridge. Her childhood as a poor white in the tobacco-sharecropping hinterland of North Carolina haunts her, but these clothes, the great old college house, and the position comfort her. Great wide eyes and a fine head she carries erect above those sloping, firm shoulders: these ought to more than suffice for her here in this small, closed community among the old Indian hills, populated by pigeon-toed and gaunt professors' women or chapped-handed and haggard, pregnant instructors' wives. Often she seems melancholy to me after a few bourbon and waters, wistful. This vestige of her miserable childhood is charming: she has grown up, not as a weed with tiny flowers in some briar patch, but into a handsome, big, velvety magnolia blossom. She walks with a long sway, but proudly tall, and in that white gown, pacing across the 7th Green, her gait is a caryatid's.

"Did you know," she says, "the fruit of the magnolia flower's a spiky, hard, dry, heavy cone, about as big as your fist? We used to throw them like grenades when we were little kids. I have a scar from one too." And she lifts the mass of auburn hair that shaded her cheek: on her left temple there is a faint round set of tiny, stippled scars, like an old smallpox badge. I touch it gently.

Around the valleys strung out below us to the north, to the east, and the south there are bonfires lighting: they look like torches lifted here and there on those slopes facing us. Too far off for us to make out the knots of children running or dancing about them like savages. The sun has just vanished behind our backs in the southwest, beyond the distant Alleghenies. Oriskany Valley, laid out beneath, is a clear gold, red, black picture puzzle. There are stone markers standing in the woods that show the border of the English colony a little more than two hundred years ago. We are standing a few miles outside that pale, in Indian Territory, up here on the golf course. Margaret has laughed at everything I've said during the last hour. Margaret has smiled at me with affection, tenderly, even when I've said nothing at all. Margaret tonight is gay, yet grave. A handsome woman, but in this twilight now, as I touch that scarred temple, her loveliness stuns me. I see beauty itself. And I tell her so. She smiles, and in that murmuring drawl replies, "Why how poetical the liquor's made you tonight." No, no, I say, it's something about you. "My new gown, child. Isn't it ravishing?"

Look at that! I say. It's perfect: the full moon has come floating up in the east. A primitive artist has painted it a deep red-orange, pumpkin colour, laid on for Halloween. The long hill over which it sails gives it rondure. What a pity it would have been to have missed this sight by standing back there in that Sig pen swilling hard punch. But, glancing at Margaret, I realize that she gazes up at it with no joy. Tears fill her

wide, green eyes; her hands lie crossed, palms cupping her breasts. Margaret, I say, are you grieving?

The moon's light lies pooled in those eyes as she looks at it. From the gray, old stone mansion of the Sig house, a patch of lights beyond the golf course, behind the pines, comes only the syncopated thudding of the rock band's bass. We stand alone in the circle of close-cropped green grass at the 7th hole, its green now a black platform in the scarlet moonlight. Margaret tries to answer me. Her lips quiver, but she can say nothing. The tip of her tongue emerges to taste the tear that has trickled down beside her nose, and over her lip. I think, I should like to taste Margaret's tears myself. I say, Margaret, what's the matter? A reply, faint, "It's nothing dear, nothing at all." At a loss, I try, It's beautiful, isn't it. "Yes. For the moment only." Is that what makes you sad? "I'm not sad, really. It's these headaches I've been having. I'm on tranquilizers, you know." I did not. "And they make me laugh, they make me weep. As if I had feelings."

Her words perturb me. "But," she adds, "I don't have them, you know. Isn't that awful?" With a catch of laughter or of tears, a sob, she tosses her head proudly. She is gorgeous. I turn and take her in my arms, consoling. It is awful.

She clings, burying her wet cheek in my throat. For a moment. I don't know what I hold in my arms: the ermine jacket has a thick animal musk, and her breasts against mine shake as her breath comes in broken gasps. A long moment it is, until I feel her calming. It must be some fine animal I have caught in my arms, and now it rests here, without terror. But it's unpredictable, I know. Then, "Oh, look!" she cries out. I release her and turn. She points at the sky near the moon, suffused now with an expanding aura of shimmering golden light. "What's that!" Above the globe of that moon, and far beyond it in space it seems, there's a point of bright light, brilliant as the evening star. It is rising fast, towards the zenith. It is not Venus, for that one sparkles over the horizon at our backs, above the abyss into which the sun has fallen. This wanderer swims steadily, wavering slightly in the tremulous atmosphere. "What ever is that?" she cries again, "it frightens me." Ah, that must be a satellite, I say, one of our space stations. It's picking up the rays of the hidden sun. Look how fast it flies out there.

"Suppose it's one of theirs," she says. "Suppose it's coming for us. Suppose it's carrying the Doomsday Bomb." Ah no, Margaret, I say, stroking her arm, don't even think of it. "Suppose it is, and suppose the end of the world will come in twenty minutes. What would you do!" Her hair is disarrayed, drooping in an auburn-black shield over her cheeks. Her eyes are fixed on me. She has seized my hands in hers, and is pressing them convulsively, as though trying to utter a phrase in sign language. "What would you do if you'd only twenty minutes left to live?"

Well, I say, I think I would. . . . "What!" She's smiling at me, curious. Well, I'd fuck.

Margaret flings my hands away, in disappointment, or despair. She turns away sighing. "Oh, you!" Well I would, I say, coming up beside her where she stands poised at the edge of the Green. Deeply, ruefully, she sighs again. She's staring like a diver down into the wild ground below, the coarse weed stalks of summer gone, down along the disused, rutted path wandering off precipitously to the woods that border the golf course here, a path tangled with fallen branches, deep drifts of leaves clotted with mold and mud. Quite calmly she remarks, "I'm afraid it wouldn't do me much good. My legs are like logs for the first ten minutes, like dead wood. It's all I can do to hold them open, you know. And it takes me thirty minutes to come. . . if I do come. Isn't that awful? The world would be over by then. I'm sorry, darling." And she begins to laugh, too loudly now, pointing up at the satellite that has climbed into the velvety black zenith overhead. "Twenty minutes to go," she cries, "only twenty minutes!" I am looking up at that moving point, puzzled.

A violent tug at my throat snaps my neck painfully. She has ripped open the knot of my bowtie. And she's flitting down the steep slope off the Green on her heeled white sandals, dashing along that dark path, running towards the wood, a white, weaving form. I hesitate up there on the high mound of the dangerous darkness down the hillside. I listen to her steps fading. Then her voice comes back, a poignant cry of pain. Then, silence. She must have fallen down there in that obscurity. Like a wounded creature, she is lying in her fine white silk and fur, waiting for an end to it.

Jascha Kessler

Cassandra

"In ten years, you'll forgive this night."
Never.
"Another ten, and you'll forget it."
Never.
"Ten more, and you'll wonder what the fuss was about."
Never, I said, finally.

Cocksure. But it went beyond that with him. Decathlon Silver Medallist. I'd watched him scoring all those years at school. He knew it, too. And after a triumphal return from the Games, he came to me at Thanksgiving. I was alone in our Newport place, Mother and Father away at St. Moritz, my future husband grounded in San Francisco. Years of adoration—now there he stood at the door, the very form my eyes had admired in action on the fields. My knees quailed. Who wouldn't have let him in. We made drinks and talked, gazing out into the grey, deserted lagoon, where hundreds of shrouded boats rocked their masts in unison, swayed by the pelting of the season's first storm.

Though fame has just come to him, his reputation was really long-established with me: my Sisters had each taken him on, and boasted of it. Charming, all muscle, and rare skill—who wouldn't have. Yet I'd held out. Still, here he was, as if he were keeping a card on our Class in my Sorority, all of us scattered around the world now a year after graduation. I'd eluded him for five years. It was the only promise my mother even extracted from me: not him. Not that I possessed the strength to keep that vow. Twice luck was with me because of the ways things fell out. The first time, Dad's plane to Los Angeles was scratched, and he stayed on in Palo Alto to take me to dinner. The next time my turn came round to be initiated by him into the mysteries, Mom's mother died in her sleep, and I took flight for Syracuse. Close calls.

Two martinis towards the evening, another front of the storm pouring black, heavy clouds in low from the wild Pacific everywhere to the West, the fireplace burning mossy oak logs. The Silver Medalist lies glowing at ease on our thick buffalo robe, the orange light glancing warmly over the harsh facets of his unmarked face. No escape this time. My belly seems as hot as the flames pouring up into the chimney. Between my legs a

giant rose opens slowly, its petals twisting, rustling almost audibly. An hour and more I hold out, until the docks and the boats vanish, drowned in the dark and pounding rain. I don't want him, though that rose sighs. I keep him off, making him tell about the Games. No use. He simply stands and removes his clothes. After which it is nothing for him to strip me naked. Yet, in some infinitely small place somewhere behind my forehead, my whole, true self is compressed, concealed from him. Before I slip, frenzied, into the net of his arms and am grasped by his wall-hard thighs, I am capable of one thing: I take my grandmother's diamond from my throat. I can recall that I managed to unfasten that tight antique catch on the fine platinum chain, despite my trembling fingers. And that I placed it on the night table beside my parents' bed.

Nevertheless, I fought him all night. What it was really like, I cannot say. Not since then, certainly not before then, have I experienced such a long, dark night. Rape we call it nowadays. Perhaps it has always been rape. Yet to be truthful, I wasn't violated. Passion, and possession too. Not union. We entered it consciously, and, after a short sleep as profound as coma, emerged at dawn fully conscious again. Knowing him, rather, knowing his track record, how could I have been surprised. Or blamed myself. We become utterly our bodies in such hours. All right. But it may also happen that we are outside them at the same time, watching. You read of people who die, and say they have looked down at themselves and said farewell—only to return, to be called back or forced once more into the partnership through the intervention of a doctor or some passerby who found them in time. So with me that night. Not right away. After our first bout, before the ecstasies that were to come.

Where was he? I heard my hidden self ask. He'd come for me; he was taking me; I'd taken him to me—yet, I sensed that he was not there at all. Though not a machine, the self-loving stud you meet and even take on sometimes for the hell of it. Something else. I was afraid, not of his absence from me, but from himself. I could endure the not having him—almost all of us have known that agony. But not the horror of the latter. For one night, I'd thought, I would have that beauty I'd missed for five years, just as my Sisters had had. This was unimaginable. Towards morning, hatred—its metallic taste filled my throat—turned what the sweet, rich flesh gave to sudden harshness. And even then, not to the lips and tongue: but towards the one who woke and watched us: my self in me. All through the dawn, through the hour of dripping silence between two waves of the vast storm that kept on coming in wet masses from the tumbling skies, lit at last by a cold light in the grey East from a sun that would not be seen for three more days.

What was it? I wondered. What was so terribly wrong? I was too young then to know. Still, he was aware of it; he knew. It made him cruel. I had come to, raw, weeping. I didn't know that it was despair, that I had been destroyed somehow forever. After twenty years, I know what a night like

that should end like—not with uncontrollable weeping and a body that is one great, torn wound. Quite the opposite, in fact: a body that may seem to be crushed, powerless to move, but nonetheless a body that smiles, humming with quiet praise as it knits itself miraculously again, and rises as though just created like beauty itself from the spume of the black waves rolling against the shore. No, it was not like that. And he knew it. He was cruel, never drying my tears, never consoling me for what he'd done to me. Unlike the others, I'd guessed his secret: all the the gifts were his but one. He had no . . . what? No soul. His prowess, his fine form, his irresistible charm—it was monstrous. He knew I'd glimpsed that emptiness even before we sank through midnight. Yet I'd gone on with him, knowing what I did, until morning. Out of what necessity, because I was too young to know better? Perhaps. Now I guess that it was compassion. That, or perhaps, unable to believe that such a thing can be, needing to hope that it might not be. Or, miserable that I could have been so deluded, mistaken in my longing, in my body's response to him.

He was cruel because he could be nothing else. Perhaps he wanted to disclose that secret to me, as if my sharing it could lessen the burden of nullity. Had he soothed me in his arms, had he pretended that all was well with us, that our night of hard loving was something to be remembered as one of the possible fulfilments of life, the sort of thing that comes into existence, and remains, he'd have been kinder than most men. Though I should have hated myself for letting him pretend. Instead, he showed me truth—and it was too cruel to be borne. Adding those hateful words, "You'll forgive," and, "You'll forget. . . ."

And as I swore, I've never forgiven, nor forgotten what I suffered that night. Rape's such a weak word for it. A thing without a soul in my arms. A thing like that in me.

When he left, he took something from me. Not what he'd come for—although there have been moments when I was nearly ready to give it to a lover. He took my grandmother's diamond pendant. He didn't think I'd seen him pocket it while he dressed, as I lay on my parents' bed, tear-blinded, my legs and arms strengthless. As he went out, he said, "At least you'll never have to see me again, if that's how you feel."

I'll see you dead first! I choked out.

Down the hall, laughter. Laughter as the door blew in under a gust, and was yanked shut once more. Outside, laughter through the cold sheets of rain, the sloshing of his deck shoes on the wooden planks as he trotted away.

I couldn't know how much I'd meant what I'd said in my rage that morning. After twenty years I realize it, neither having forgiven, nor hardly forgotten that night. Now he lies here before me in the Hyacinth Viewing Room. He did well in life for twenty years. He made a fortune in yacht brokerage right here in Newport, more than ten million a year

in sales. He couldn't have missed. Today there's not a foot of dockage to be had. And I am down here by mischance, clearing up the estate after the fire, only to see the obituary. He died by water. Aboard some plutocrat's 220-foot cruiser, the Palace, that ran aground in a fog off Anacapa and broke up in the darkness. He was found drifting in his lifejacket two days later, miles and miles away. And he looks marvellous: the soft blonde hair silvery after twenty years, the squares of the bronzed face hardly needing the cosmetician's brush. Dressed appropriately: the sportsman's blue blazer, the white flannels, the graceful black patent leather slip-ons. Calmly sleeping at ten in the morning. Viewing's set for eleven. I'm quite alone with him in this air-conditioned chamber heaped with floral arrangements: anchors, cruisers, sailboats. The ventilators purr; the lights are very low; the electric candles flicker beside the bier.

When the sad Muzak comes on, I realize it's late, almost time for the obsequies. Nothing is changed; nothing is solved; nothing more is to be known. It comes to me then, like an inspiration: my jewel's with him still! I want it back. Against the force of my loathing, I reach over into his coffin—oh, it's fine polished rosewood, with heavy antique bronze moldings for handles—and put my hands to his neck. Yes, beneath the knot of the crimson and white silk rep, there's a lump. My fingers thrust through the shirt—my eyes, I realize, are shut tight against the vision of that immobile carcass full of cold, blue chemical fluids—and they yank. The big, oval gem, with its large, old-fashioned facets, comes away in them with a bit of chain, not the fine platinum of my grandmother's legacy but some contemporary 18-karat goldwork in flat, S-shaped links. The Muzak turns up: his family and friends will be filing in any minute now.

I have to get away. Through the Exit on the other side of that coffin. The door's flush in the wall, without a knob. How does it work? Behind the recessed panels around the ceiling, the lights are brightening. A plate beside the door has two switches in it—which one's for what? I flick one. The door doesn't budge. But there's the sound of machinery somewhere near me. Turning, I see a panel in the far wall slide away, and then, the whoompf! of a gas furnace igniting beyond it. A sudden whoosh, with the flare of intense fires. Whirring of belts. The far end of the coffin drops away, and his body begins sliding out, as though on some plank, head first through that opening in the wall. The feet tilt up in their shiny black shoes, and he slides helplessly, steadily down towards the flames. As the feet disappear, another panel with a thick, quartz glass window comes down, sealing the chute. The whole room flickers as the body seethes in the blast of that incinerator. Now the top panel of the coffin is swung up again, and the empty box remains here with me, its satiny white padding molded in the shape of his missing form. I don't know whether I'm laughing or crying, but I fumble at the other switch. The door slides away noiselessly before me, and I step through and down the

narrow corridor as fast as I can, my heels turning in the thick, brown carpeting.

At the other end, the heavy door yields easily, and I find myself out on the black asphalt of the parking lot, dazzled by the August sun overhead. Lincolns, Cadillacs, Mercedes, and a notable number of Rolls Royces are moving sedately in line towards the entrance of the mortuary and chapel. Getting into my car, I drop my grandmother's diamond into my change-purse. My hands are shaking, and it takes a little time for me to get my key into the ignition. I can hardly see through my sunglasses. But I drive out as fast as I dare, trying not to think of the fuss that is being made back there behind me now.

Al Purdy

CHOICES

Small shrines beside Mexican roads
tiny adobe chapels
or mere piles of stones
with artificial flowers sometimes
surmounted by the inevitable cross:
where a farm laborer was struck by a car
where a poor paisano died
some ragged Jesus or billowy Maria
and their relatives and loved ones
erected these small memorials
Above all they are not ostentatious
wealth has nothing to do with it
even a pyramid of six or seven stones
has the same meaning
as the slightly more elaborate adobe chapels
They mark the sadness and grief of being loved
loved so intensely it is like a flame
as if some clotted choked emotion
hovered tangible in air
even after blood is washed away in rain
which is all the living can give the dead

There are never any names
no indication of identity
and most can't write anyway
but there is never any doubt of love
which is so commonplace and rare
that it must be genuine
as well as part of religious protocol
It makes me wonder about myself
and which should I prefer:
a poet's brief undying fame in words
or this love
that shrieks silently beside the highway?
But there is no choice possible
neither my little whispering words
entombed in books and magazines
nor the shrieking stones

Yucatan

TERESA & THE DOUBLE DEATH

Flakes of amber glow down the avenida
through palmetto arches, night's corridor
to the black harbor beyond.
Teresa shows me
Lisbon in the quake,
makes bells toll in cathedral towers,
makes the fissure open, swallowing the faithful
on All Soul's Day.

Alone by the sea
I read a stone cross,
this cruz erected by don Nobleman
por some sailors, morte off this coast.
Their skulls light the ocean bottom
like japanese lanterns; the waves come at me,
mile-long freight trains hurtling sideways in the dark.

I am buried to my neck in sand,
the same paralysis as the dream where a man
is strapped in a wooden chair & the only sound's
of weeping beneath the black hood.
Yellow smoke
enters his lungs;
he slumps, deceasing, down,
then strangely through to a double death.
The tide rushes over my head;
I am carried by the undertow to the fissure
where crimson magma burns the habit of judging out of me.

Down the strand,
a woman sings *fado*, her voice
many voices, elohim, sheaf-gathering lullabies,
six thousand years gone.

She must know the fissure
as opened lips where songs spread.
She must know the tiny birds who stab at foam,
running to escape the kiss of waves.
She must know.

SHROVE TUESDAY

The same old women
who lit candles thirty years ago
in my parish church pray in red-stained light
to thunder like knots of tarred rope
in Lisbon.

My sons stand near the altar,
a glass coffin with St. Teresa's effigy inside,
covered with dresden roses like Sleeping Beauty.
They wheel, staring at the cupola,
open-mouthed, sick with Jesus whipped
& crowned with thorns.

How can I tell them
to look past?

When the nuns catechized me
they asked, What are the evidences of God?

That sudden Spring blooms,
that bellshaped thrushes arrive from the invisible shore,
singing up dawn, making ships appear, flags astern,
signs of the other harbor through which
we first sailed, through which
we will return.

It was the same as singing
"blackbird, blackbird, in & out my window"
as we wove under Sr. Benefice's wide sleeves, knowing
who the blackbird was, & later, writing letters
to St. Mary, which we would burn,
sending our petitions up in smoke to her address.

Evening.
My sons & I walk San Petro,
listing what we saw in the thieves' market—
prehistoric radio tubes, duelling pistols, field glasses,
cracked plaster Jesuses, unnameable junk of centuries—
when, on the land, a lungfish gasps,
hauls itself on pectoral fins, re-evolving the world.
I see my sons as babies,
crawling across the kitchen floor.

A white moon hangs in the purple sky, pulling on my blood
with the desire, not to be shriven, but changed
into a trumpet, triple-tonguing the waves
as they break in the foam of exhaustion.

Séan Virgo

ASHANTI

Death is an elephant,
Torch-eyed and terrible
Vachel Lindsay

1.

Vaguely the world was wrong.
At every dawn a flicker of anxiety
like thin summer lightning
unleashed the day.

There was no leisure, no
rhythm of hours, just
constant turning back
at the edges, the
shifting edges.

Constantly, every year quicker,
the clearings bled
into each other
and parched to dust.
It seemed that there was
more clearing than forest.

Feeding was snatch and run;
the young were trampled;
the grey herd would panic
after nightfall
at a bad dream.

The starving, intelligent rays
from mind to mind were muddied;
idiot rages broke out at a whisper;
their dung was liquid
on the jungle floors.

Only the half-grown mated,
under the goad of a week-long
insatiable rut. For the others
the old will to couple and cruise
down the slow year
withered.

The young bull met men
at mid morning.
The brimstone, the raging
of buckshot over his eyes,
the rusted wire throttling his breath,
the pit in his side.

2.

The meat, quarried in clumsy hanks,
trucked off to market,
The meagre ivories chopped
by the still soft lips.
The wiry spine-ridge razored,
the delicate penis tip scalped.
The legs stumped. Scarcely
were the dark eyes mantled
when, under night,
the jungle rats
swarmed in the rib cage.

3.

Three nights and three days
an old man and a boy
breathe dust, strange ghosts,
the question of leopards;

Finding the news true, bones
almost intact and quite clean.

They work on the spot, their
load will be lighter
when they're through.

4.

The boy hacks the shoulder bones free,
gashing his foot.
The old man discards
the bright knuckles slowly,
his fingers raw
from the old brass hacksaw.

He settles his back to a tree
and the great, angled bone
through his knees.
As he carves
he speaks to his grand-nephew,
memories,
lacking the heart to translate them.

The clearings are spreading,
his patience
is not the old patience of caring.
There is no time, working
for the sons of his daughter.

Face follows face, hatched deep
on the fresh
fatty bone. They are memories,
echoes
of faces before the clearings.

5.

The next night
an old sheep's cough
coming closer, a
stink of tomcat

A leopard across the trail
crunches the rib-bones.

The boy sleeps, the man
remembers fear but thinks only

how, with a shotgun,
the spotted peltry
could make them rich.

6.

His daughter stops up
the honeycomb tunnels
with cheap wax, holding
the bone on her full
widow's belly, locking up
ants, a spider,
a moth's cocoon.

Worn by the journey
the old man eases his
gums with goat's milk;
daubs soot from the hut's wall
languidly
on the naked faces.
Above
on the thatch
a rooster crows
at the moon.

MY PIRATE CAME BACK FROM BOGOTA WITH POWDER-BURNS ON HIS LEG

and a .38 in his briefcase
and a pocketful of lead.

Afterwards we drank orange juice
and talked about emeralds

there was a moon, I remember,
a cold slit in the sky,
and a war going on in Ecuador
and another in Guatemala.

Later, tired of talking,
we made love. I think it was
on the roof of the Hotel
Conquistador, I think it was
all we had left to do
given the night and the
thin moon which, when fatter,
lacks the same power.

You pressed yourself into me,
tired of living alone.
There comes a time when you
tire of a life together,
but that comes later still.

I remember I was thinking
how longing becomes regret
when you pressed yourself so hard
that a bullet tore into me.
It left an impression on the
inside of my thigh, as below me
in the doorway a blonde girl
kissed a black man goodbye.

She had her face turned
upwards to the sky where her
eyes burned like my trigger-hand
to pull and unload the
murderer in the heart.

You held on to me as if you thought
love could last forever.
The blonde girl left with her
poodle in a cab.

BLACK TULIPS

A hunchback followed me home
with an armload of black tulips,
a black hunchback with a waxed moustache—
he must have been a magician.

I say that because it was the wrong season
for tulips. The ground was covered with
leaves and just breathing I walked quickly;
the shadows were gathering like cutthroats
in the ditches.

Inside the house I felt safe from all
things though there were petals under my
covers, messages in my dreams. I think
because I missed you I noticed these things
so much. When you were asleep beside me it was
more than just enough.

But the hunchback had followed me in, it was
not an illusion. He was naked so I gave him
one of your suits, the one you never wore
that was covered with little stars.

The house suddenly changed; it felt colder
and I was a stranger. Even when he was gone
he still possessed me — I use the word possessed
because without him there was nothing left of me.

I threw out the black tulips. They smelled
of flesh, old flesh both fish and reptile,
and I think they finally died at the
bottom of the garden. I can't get rid of the
smell, it may be something permanent. You will
notice it when you come back, months from now,
in your white suit cut to perfection.

You will notice the scars, too, when we are
both finally naked. In the darkness split by
lightning our nakedness should be clear to us,
but love could be there to comfort us
through the bursts of dirty thunder.

Martin Robbins

MY FATHER MEASURED THE WORLD

With a metal tape he touched to floors
Whose shape he took to the drawing board.

And more: designs for waitress traffic,
Counters and booths, a backbar and stools;
A small half circle showed a door-swing,
An arc of dots stood for hidden lines
Where two planes, clearly seen, overlapped.

When he'd noted the dimensions I
Called out, filled empty space with people,
He'd press a button to clatter in
The tape—
which snapped up like his fly line,
Curling with his wrist's exact designs.

THE PASSING OF MY FATHER

My mother is stacked upon the shelves,
thirty-three per cent off, with coupon,

but she's just not moving; my father
sighs, "Goddamn chains. The little guy's dead."

He locks up, then peers across the road
at twenty-four-hour neon. "Prime

grandma, sixty-nine cents. Goddamn chains."
He walks home, and there is an angel

on his corner. My father falls
to his knees, crosses himself, says, "At last,

a little help. Whaddaya think, huh,
maybe a special on angelfood?"

The angel swallows the last fillet
of mother and takes my father's hand.

CHILD BRIDE

On the south porch of the Polish Home,
Widows knit. Hands dive into darkness,
Walruses surface in wool's rough scud.

Now the night freight moans on river flats,
Narcissus open beneath empty skies;
Rabbits nose frozen stalks and starve.

Pisces undulates in the deep drifts
Of space, mouth open, forming bubbles
Far beyond wherever you may lie.

STRANGERS

I talked that evening to a stranger
name of John
we spoke of love
but not as lovers do:
the first man I've told
about the love of woman
for woman.

"It's different then?" He
lost in thought, bemused.

No one's trying
to be master
prove a prowess
force a climax—
that is somehow
why it's different

"And is the touching
different?"

O yes, Each one knows
how the other feels
knows the other's need.

"Because you are *the same*?"

Exactly, yes
It's an opening up
of love
not a narrowing

"Then it's all right" he smiled:
"There's still room for a man!"

ARBUTUS
(for Anthony)

Wrapped in a storm
the tree crashed
onto the cliffside—
'garden sculpture' he said
and sawed through the grain

Those naked bones
stand upright now
leaning against the house
gleam white in moonlight
yellow in sunlight
or (sea's delight)
misted in rain
free from frost
winter's pain:
unliving—yet
in different form
alive!

We too, olding
cut off from roots
are part of the west's
seascape landscape
our faces sculptured
into the garden wall
our voices lilting
near far
through fronded forest
a part of frog song's
throbbed refrains

Not love now
but the memory of the tree
the memory of love
sustains

Rona Murray

Homecoming

She was glad she'd decided to take the first ferry over and although it was cool, she stood for some time at the railings staring down into the water and looking at the islands which floated by like mirages in the early sun. She'd looked eagerly at the people travelling with her, hoping to come across someone she'd known in the past. But there was no one, and the few travellers seemed sleepy and indifferent. They must be weekly commuters, she thought. Even when a pod of porpoises passed by, flukes shining as they leaped out of the water, few people were interested enough to come outside and watch them.

After driving off the ferry, she decided to detour and have a look at the city. It was wonderful, exquisite, to have this time to herself. Jaime had asked if she was sure she wanted to go over alone. Of course, she'd answered, already feeling the weight of her domestic life slide off her, already feeling young again, in command of the car which moved smoothly through the traffic, in command of her unencumbered self for two whole days. And she thought of him briefly in the other house, the one they'd sold, with the packed boxes waiting for the movers. David and Valerie had promised to help. After all, they were no longer small children.

Perhaps it had been selfish of her to want to go ahead, to decide on her own exactly where the furniture should go, to clean up if anything had been left undone, although their contract had specified the place be clean and all "extraneous matter" removed. But why should she feel selfish? After all, this was her homecoming, more special for her than for the others, and she deserved to have some time to herself. She pressed her foot down on the gas, found herself suddenly singing—it had been so long since she had felt like singing—as she drove towards the city she'd left nearly twenty years before.

Had it changed much? Going through the outskirts, she passed the generous architecture she'd missed so much, the large old houses and their spacious gardens. Well-behaved children walked along the sidewalks on their way to school. The town itself, as she moved into it, shone: old buildings had been cleaned and painted; new specialty stores

and foreign restaurants had sprung up; outside them, shopkeepers were sweeping the pavements, getting rid of faint traces of dust. On the hill in the distance she could see the university campus where Jaime would be teaching. She drove by her old school, the house where she'd lived as a child, long since sold, inhabited now by strangers.

And then, driving back north to her own cut-off, she'd seen him. Or it. A bicycling advertisement. A heavy, red-faced man of about sixty was riding an old-fashioned bicycle, each push on the pedals a frightful effort as he balanced himself under the weight of sandwich boards. He wore a brilliant red fox-hunting jacket, a white shirt-front, black tie, tight black trousers, black lace-up boots, and, on top of it all, truncated boards on which was written in italic lettering, White Unicorn Inne. On his head was a top hat, and his small, bright eyes stared out from under the brim at the traffic. She was so close she thought she could see beads of sweat on his forehead.

The hanging baskets on the lampposts, the picture postcard glimpses of the sea, could not prevent her drop into that dismal emptiness she had long since recognized as a part of her nature.

Why did he do it? Did he have to or was it some kind of joke? Had he any idea of the effect his humiliation might have on somebody else who was happy, driving through a happy town? And did they, the people who promoted this, really think he would encourage business at the wretched hotel, motel, or whatever it was? She remembered passing it, three or four blocks back, a huge place with a pretentious white unicorn in a wrought iron frame over the entrance. Well, she'd make a point of never going there. But of course the advertisement had already worked in a way: she wouldn't forget it. As she turned, she saw him briefly in her rear-view mirror, straining along on his bike, his large back with its obscene board crawling like a great beetle between the cars, back into the heart of the city.

When she was out of the traffic, she forgot him. Her road wound through pastureland and woods, sometimes passing stretches of white beach and oceanfront. Once she glanced at the seat behind her to make sure she'd brought her sleeping bag. That had been the last thing to be crammed in. It would be lovely to camp in the house by herself. To get the feel of it. To hear the sea at night, and the gulls.

The closer she came to her own gate (her own gate!), the more her heart lifted. Would it really be as she remembered? The house itself was old but the place was magical. There was no other word for it. They had bought so quickly, had not shopped around, had known this was it. They'd moved so often, but had never found the house, they'd told each other, that they would be happy to die in, and they had used this as a measure of their feelings.

She swung down the drive and sat appalled. None of the debris had been removed. It had been added to. But the contract? The large blond

woman had promised her sons would clean up the "yard", as she called it. She had five sons, she'd said proudly, and one of them had a truck. Everything would be in order. But now an enormous pile of junk sat on what had once been a lawn. Scattered through long grass and weeds all round her were cans. bottles, plastic containers, chunks of metal. The garage still had an old Buick in it and beside it an engine and crankshaft; nuts, bolts, lidless tins, old tools, parts of engines littered the wooden floor, black with oil. She parked outside, trying to shake off the sudden fury that attacked her. It was ridiculous. She hadn't felt really angry for years. Anger was childish and had to be controlled, like other things. The place simply had to be cleaned up. After all, if it hadn't been run-down they could never have afforded it, so why should she be upset now, despite agents and promises? And one day the garden would be filled with rhododendrons, roses—all would be restored: the hedges cut back, paths clipped into shape, dead wood removed.

Her children teased her about her sense of order and Jaime laughed at her, but gently. In their hearts, she thought, they know I'm right; lines had to be drawn between the way her family should live and the usurping state of affairs outside; small things held the civilized world together.

"Oh, mother," David would say, "you belong in the Victorian Age. I suppose it isn't surprising since you come from Victoria. Is everyone in that pokey place like you?"

And Valerie: "Can't we just sometimes eat dinner in front of the TV? Everybody else does."

And Jaime: "I'll never get used to this ridiculous butter knife and having to spoon salt onto my plate. For Christ's sake, can't we use an ordinary salt-shaker?"

Then the children would take his part: "I don't see why he has to carve at the table if he doesn't want to."

Or: "Why don't we use paper serviettes? Think of the ironing you'd save."

"The word is napkin. Anyway, think of the trees I save." And she'd laugh with them. It was a family joke. "You just have to put up with it. If I'm like King Canute, that's the way I am. A great king, after all."

"You have it backwards," David had said. "He knew he couldn't keep the tide back."

"It's all the same thing," she'd answered, knowing it wasn't. "If you abandon order in your life you turn into slobs."

"Slobs?" Valerie said. "It seems to me that's a new word in your vocabulary, mother. Are we winning?"

"Sluts, then." She'd been surprised to hear the edge on her voice, and they'd looked at her, not sure after all if she was joking. "And don't stir your tea with the sugar spoon."

The back door was left unlocked, as they'd promised. Inside, two pails of filthy water and rags sat on the kitchen floor. The hall had cartons in it, an ancient upright vacuum cleaner, stockings over the doors, corsets sprawled on dirty shag wall to wall carpeting. In the living room old-fashioned curtains hung crookedly, their bottom corners in strips: torn by a dog perhaps. The smell—was it dog urine?—made her close her mouth tight and breathe quickly through her nose. Did smells carry germs? She opened the french doors, opened the windows, leaned out and smelled the sea, noticed the dead flies on the windowsill. Couldn't bear to touch them; to sweep them away with her naked hand.

A telephone sat on the floor and a notepad with a carefully written note on it:

Dear Mrs. Phillips,

I am sorry to tell you we have had trouble with the truck but the boys will be out early Saturday morning to finish clearing the yard and pick up the appliances. Please phone me if there is anything I can do for you.

May Lattimer (592-6453)

Saturday. That was today. She looked outside again. There certainly was no sign of a truck. The appliances: yes, they were everywhere. Besides the stove, which they'd bought, were two fridges, a washer, a dryer, dishwasher. Her disgust grew as she went upstairs: cartons filled with old hats and handbags, broken jewelry on the floor, underclothes scattered over worn brown carpeting. Then down into the basement, a large cavern with filthy windows covered by weeds: magazines, broken guitars, a record-player with no turntable, a chest of drawers with a drawer missing, junked bicycles, flower pots. But why so many, so much? Then she remembered: of course, there'd been old people living here, pensioners paid for by the government. What had happened to them? But the waste. Three vacuum cleaners. Nothing mended. Everything discarded. No order, control. A body run bad with cancer cells.

She went upstairs again. She'd have to carve out a corner where she could camp for the night. One room where the chaos could be forgotten. She plugged in the old vacuum, and to her astonishment it worked. She could clean the living room, leave the windows open so the smell would be gone. But would it? Perhaps she could sleep outside, tear the rotted matting off the verandah, listen to the sea all night. She dragged everything out of the room, cleaned up the dead flies, brought her things in from the car.

It was midday and still no sign of the boys or the truck. She'd have to phone, keep the anger out of her voice. May Lattimer was at the other end, bland, cool, unconcerned. Oh. Weren't they there yet? They must be waiting for their oldest brother. They would arrive soon. . . . When she stood up off the red shag, she found two fleas on her bare arm.

It was afternoon when they arrived: five boys in their late teens. An old truck, noisy, driven fast, screeched up in front of the house. Standing back from the window, hoping they wouldn't see her, she looked out. She was like one of those old women who peer from behind lace curtains, she thought, sickened. Old women with nothing better to do. She went back to the space she'd made, set up the card table she'd brought, started to unpack: wash things, make-up, underwear, a couple of books. She came to the cooking utensils and food, moved into the kitchen and started to clean off the counter tops.

The loud rock had been going on for some time before she allowed it to consciously irritate her. In fact, it had come in with them and now was reverberating in every crevice of the house. She went to a bedroom window again and looked out. Two boys were lounging in the cab of the truck and three were in the high, weedy grass. They were smoking and drinking coke. While she watched, one of them emptied his bottle and threw it into a clump of thistles. She could feel her face staring at them, gaunt and rigid, skin tight on her scalp. For a moment she hesitated. She was tall and that had always given her some authority. She was also good-looking, she told herself. Intelligent. Not old. Capable. It was her house.

She walked quickly to the front door and threw it open. The boys looked up, mildly surprised. They said nothing, their faces closed.

"Why aren't you clearing this mess up?" she asked coldly, nodding towards the huge pile of junk.

"We're waitin'," one of them answered, dragging on his cigarette.

"For what?"

"Our brother. He's s'posed to tell us what to do."

"I'll tell you what to do. You load this junk into your truck right now and take it to the dump."

"This truck ain't the one. He's got a hire truck. He's meetin' us here."

"Well, you don't have to sit around doing nothing." They didn't move. She turned to one of the boys in the grass. "Get up and get some work done. You were supposed to be here this morning, early, and have all this stuff cleared away. It's after three o'clock."

"I ain't one of 'em," he said, and they all sniggered. "I'm a friend. Just here to watch."

"Ain't our fault if the fuckin' truck broke down," one of the boys in the cab said, draining his coke.

"You've got a truck. Now get that stuff loaded into it. It was all supposed to be gone before we moved in. It's written in the contract." Her thick anger astonished her. She couldn't stop the shaking in her voice.

The boy in the truck shrugged his shoulders. A slab of dank black hair fell over his forehead. He seemed to be the oldest. "We don't know nothin' about that. Our Ma said to come and get the appliances. An' we'll get 'em when Jimmy's here."

"You'll clean up or I'll call your mother right now."

"O.K., O.K., ya don't have to blow your stack. C'mon, you guys." It wasn't the boy with the black hair, but one in the grass: one not so heavy, paler.

Slowly, they started to get up: heavy winter house flies, buzzing aimlessly, dying of lethargy. They threw their bottles on the junk pile, their cigarettes on the grass. As she went back into the house she heard one of them say contemptuously, "What a bag of shit."

"Yeah. Shit." And they laughed that vacuous, rough laugh boys may develop somewhere between being children and knowing they are men.

She watched through the window as they went round to the back. She heard them in the basement and watched again, through a back window, as they started to bring objects out. After two hours they had the body of the truck lightly packed. Then they started rolling on the grass, shoving each other, braying the laughter she found so hideous. She watched them pass a glossy magazine around, devouring it, shouting above the transistor: "Hey, look at that, will yuh, some pussy," and, "Howja like to get into that, eh? eh?" and, "I sure could use some, pass the cigs, Ben." There was no sign of another truck, another brother.

Now they were at the front of the house. The sea was at the back, and she returned there to look at it: desolate, steel-coloured now, still calm. A cloud with dark edges had blotted out the sun. The light had gone off the green of the island with its two sentinel firs in front of her. Far beyond, on a point of land, a lighthouse was blinking in the late daylight. A blue heron flew slowly by, neck outstretched, great wings beating against air. All her life had been trained to a kind of thrift; it had little to do with money, she thought now, watching the heron and the way he used his wings, used the air. It had to do with control, non-wastefulness. She could still hear her father telling her to turn off the light if she was not using it, to shut the windows if the heat was on. Every day she folded up the brown shopping bags, stacked the newspapers, put the vegetable peelings on the compost. Through long habit she had learned not to waste her emotions either. Anger drained; passionate love tormented.

She couldn't remember being so tired since the children had been born, since she'd felt no flow of energy would be a part of her again. She left the window after she'd cleaned it with Windex she'd found among the dozens of half-empty household bottles in the cupboard. She'd used a pair of underpants left in one of the bedrooms to wipe the glass. She looked at her watch again. It was nearly six o'clock. The day was draining away.

Exhausted, she walked to the front door and opened it. Her voice was icy, controlled, raised above the hard, beating rock. "Turn that thing down." They stared at her without moving. "Obviously your brother isn't coming, and obviously you aren't going to do anything unless you're

made to. Now pile all the junk you can fit in and take it to the dump. Go on. Go."

"We ain't taking nothin' more. This here's good stuff. We don't want that crap." It was the one with the dark bang.

"Oh, yes you are, you're bloody well going to help me. Now get up."

"We bloody well ain't, lady. This is good stuff. When our brother comes, then we'll get the rest—the washing machines an' stuff."

"Well, then, get out of here, or I'll call the police."

One of them whined, "Listen, lady, the fuckin' truck broke down. That ain't our fault. My brother'll be mad. . . ."

"Leave your fucking truck and your fucking brother out of this." She'd never used the word before. It gave her an unexpected sense of liberation. Then she had a flash of brilliance. "If I call the police that will be it. This is my house now. You won't be allowed back to get your appliances" (they wouldn't care about that), "or your car." That was the trump card. "Your car or your engine or your tools. They can sit there forever and rot as far as I'm concerned."

She stood above them and watched as, still slowly, they sorted out some of the larger objects from the garbage, barely making a dent in the pile.

When they drove sullenly off, she could hear them for some distance down the road.

Afterwards it seemed deathly quiet, and she leaned for a moment against the front door, surprised at the uneasy beating of her heart. Was it then that she started to be afraid, or was she too angry to be afraid as they took off down the drive, spraying gravel out under their tires? Would they come back, or would their brother turn up? Surely it was too late? But if they did? And she remembered that they had the house keys, if there were any.

She hesitated, not wanting to go back into the hulk of the house. It was growing cold; there was a slight wind and the sky was now heavily overcast. She took her cigarettes and lighter out of her pocket and lit a cigarette, then went down into the garden, collected some cartons and newspapers and set fire to them. Six-thirty. Another couple of hours of semi-daylight. She looked round for wood. There was plenty of it: parts of old chairs, dead branches, broken fence-posts. When she had the fire going, she started piling everything that would burn in the heap onto it. It was all dry: there hadn't been any rain for a long time, but it looked as if it would come tonight. Better to burn what she could before it became sodden.

She threw a heavy earth-encrusted rag into the fire, watched the end of it smoulder and then snatched it out again. Something about it looked familiar. As she stared at it she could just make out the texture of what might have been tiny *petit point* stitches on a canvas backing. She was going to throw it in again when she hesitated; if it was embroidery, one

of the old women who had been a guest in the house must have worked it. Judging by the ragged edge, it had been torn off a chair. But why? It hadn't any holes in it as far as she could make out. Might as well wash it and see what it was like. She threw it to one side and went on piling the fire. She sorted a carton, dumped it in, and then stopped, standing extremely still, as she looked down on what appeared to be, in the half light, a human head covered with grotesque hair—but no, it was part of a pool of wigs: red, grey, blond. They curled and sputtered when she threw them gingerly, one by one, on the flames. Sparks spread up, breaking into the dusk. A dark bottle lay on its side. It was corked and, thinking she would pour the liquid out before she put it on the pile of unburnable objects left for the dump, she opened it, smelled it, and realized it was alcohol. She looked at the blackened label. Dubonnet. The bottle was three-quarters full. But was it really Dubonnet? The smell was rich, pungent, delicious. It must have belonged to one of the old people: a hidden store, kept for a drink before dinner, a ritual gesture in bleached lives. She put the cork back carefully.

The fire was burning slowly, well banked, safe. Holding the bottle in one hand and the mud-covered cloth in the other, she went into the kitchen. She filled the sink with warm water, added soap, dropped in the material. Blackness rolled off it and she had to refill the sink again and again. Finally she found she was right. Yes, there it was, exquisitely embroidered work: flowers on a black background, without blemish, as the fire had only scorched the edge of the canvas. Who was it who had put hour after hour into making it? A dead person or someone still alive? Someone, perhaps, again stitching as the night came down on another "guest" house for the old, the dying. Tears came into her eyes (she must be tired), and she carefully laid it out on her only towel so it would dry without creases. The sink was black with grime.

She unpacked a plastic glass from a carton and took it with the bottle down to a rocky point stretching into the sea. How quiet it was. But it would soon rain; already a few scattered drops were falling. Two oyster-catchers cried mournfully as they circled the island before settling down for the night. She drank the wine, and it settled warm and comforting in her empty stomach. It was still worth it, right that they had bought the house, and that she should be here instead of those louts.

She heard it a long distance down the road. An old car or a truck, engine gunning, rock blaring. For a moment of pure, unreasoning terror, she sat without movement, knowing what she had refused to let into her mind, that at the edge of the oyster-catchers' grace, the island's floating quiet, this was what she had been waiting for.

It passed. Had it been them? Or others? Would they return? Would they torment her by driving past again and again through the night? Would they come in with their shadowy brother? Or had they simply forgotten her? Gone on in their refuse-scattering way, chanting, "What a

bitch, full of shit, the old bag," as they doubled up with laughter.

She'd almost finished the bottle. Very unwise, one part of her had been saying; she was not used to heavy drinking. She stood up and threw it from her, heard the splash it made in the sea. Then she ran over the rocks, up the overgrown path, through the huge tentacles of blackberries, tearing her coat against their thorns. She flung the door of the house open, ran in and picked up her bag with the car keys in it. She got into the frail safety of the car, turned on the windscreen wipers, stood on the gas, and swung out of the gate with a squeal of tires.

Only one hotel presented itself to her.

When she arrived it was pouring. The sandwich board leaned neatly against the building. He stood under the arcade, half in and half out of the drenching rain, gesturing people in with huge, unwieldly swings of a cape-covered arm. His face above the scarlet jacket was agonized, imploring, intent. Surely they would come in, he seemed to say, to the White Unicorn Inne, the most traditionally modern, the most friendly, of all the hotels in beautiful Victoria? His top hat glistened with raindrops, his red cheeks burned with frantic welcome.

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The Graphic Designer's of Canada have awarded *PRISM international*, and designer Derrick Clinton Carter an award of excellence for his series of three magazine covers appearing on issues 20:2, 20:3, and 20:4. Mr. Carter's design work is featured again on the cover of this issue, 21:1.

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