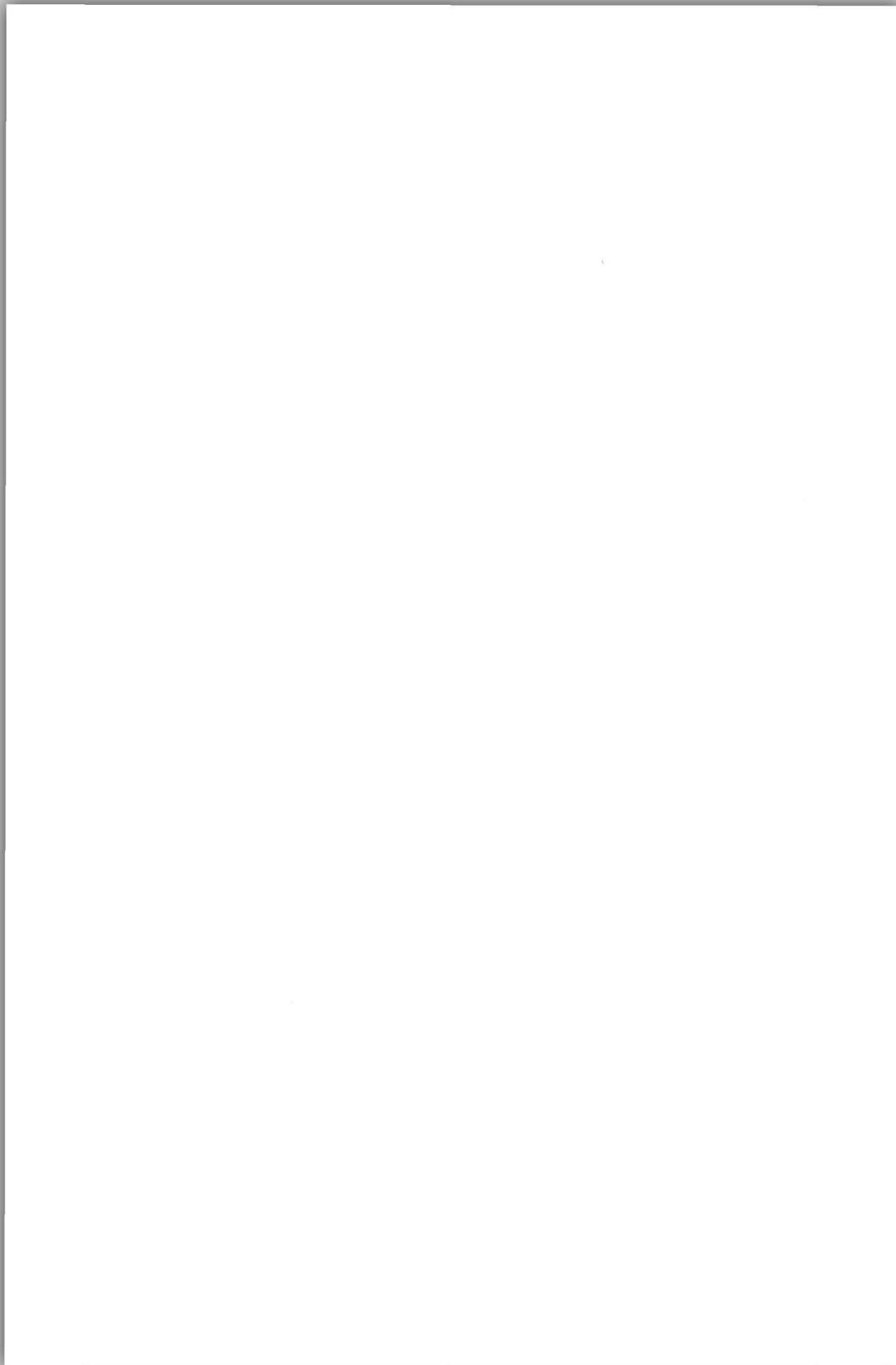


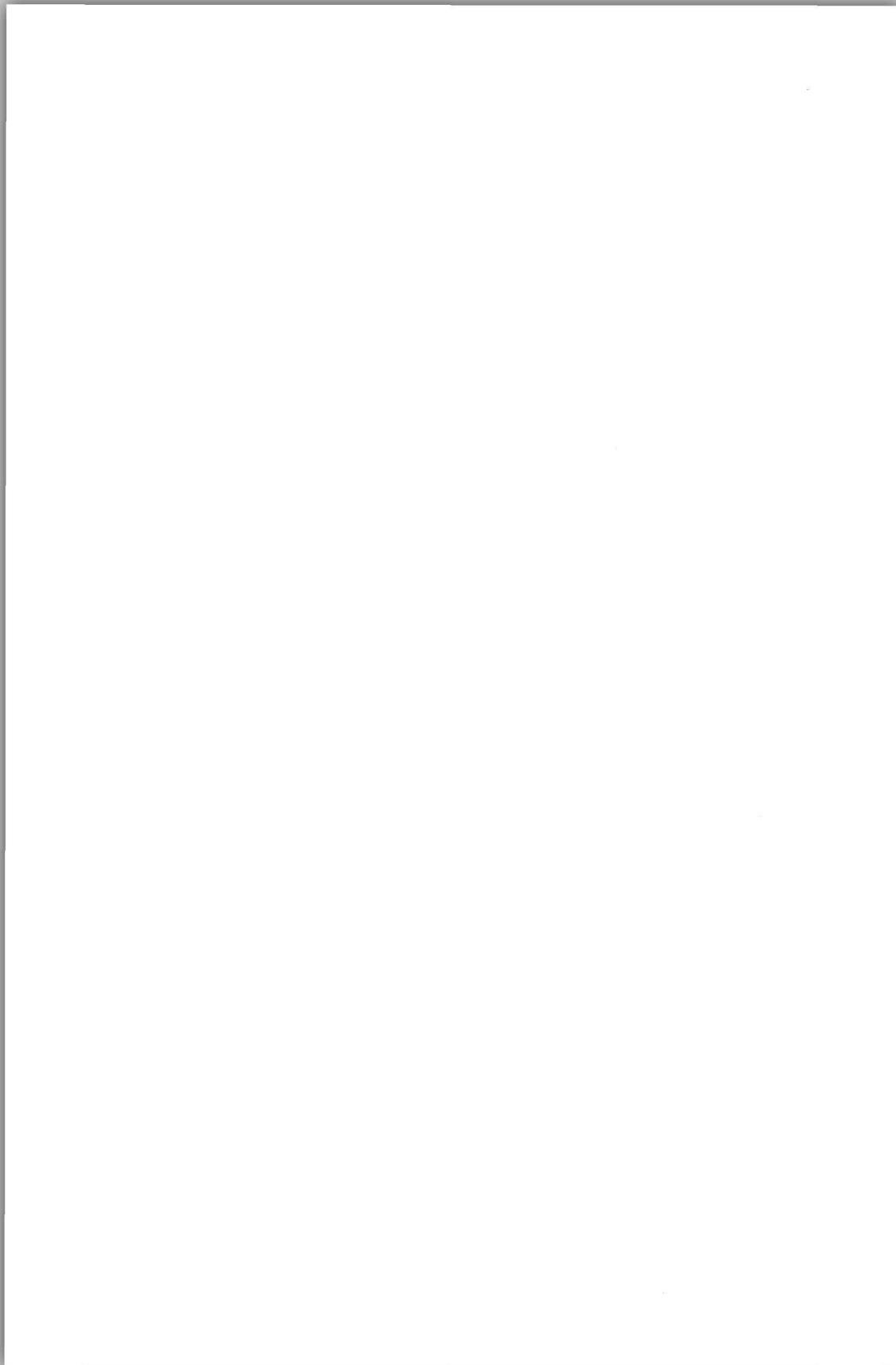


PRISM *international*

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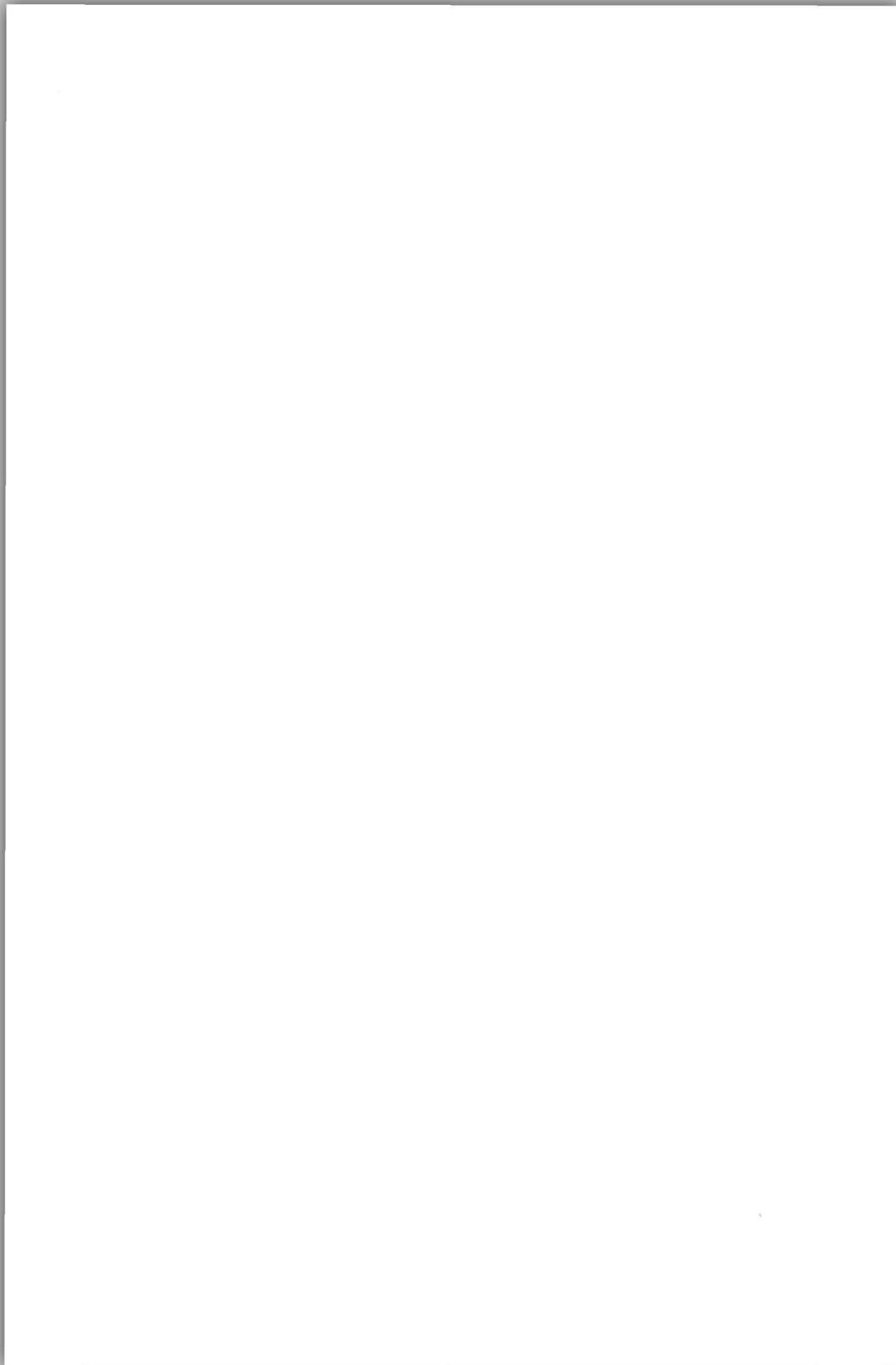
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Lewis Horne

The Walk Away

One afternoon Borden DeWitt walked away from his car. The car was still running, stopped at a red light on a busy four-lane street. His daughter, recently graduated from college, sat in the front seat, and in the back seat his wife, fanning herself. It was a July day in 1968, and very hot. He opened the door of the car while the car was stopped, opened the door while he still had control over himself, and walked away with the pedestrians' green light.

"Borden," called June, his wife, "what are you doing? Borden? Borden?"

He did not run, but he walked rapidly to get out of range of her voice. He knew she would continue to call even after he was around the corner and gone from sight, sit there and cry out the window until her voice cracked or Madeline told her, "Shut up, Mom, for heaven's sake!" and, sliding over behind the wheel, drove the car away. If he didn't leave the car, escape the shrill quarreling voices, he knew he would snatch the thermos beside him and hammer the windshield while the yell scaled up inside. Or he would leap to find a brick to hurl at the glass for a more devastating shriek. For a moment, he wondered if that's what he was doing now, searching out a brick. But glimpsing in the shop windows his forward motion and the desperate restraint of his scissoring legs, he knew he was not looking. He was leaving.

He was soon out of sight of the car, walking down the street of pawnshops, hardware stores, seedy motion picture houses. He did not look as though he belonged on such a street. He dressed carefully, even when he was on a trip—a "vacation"—as he was supposed to be now. Owner of a men's clothing store, he worried about his appearance. Without being fastidious, he knew how he—Borden DeWitt—should dress: dark modestly checkered summer trousers, a light sport shirt, sandals and socks. His manner was neither conservative nor radical.

He was a man of average height. His hair was thin on top, thick on the sides. Sideburns swelled along the edges of his square and solid-looking cheeks. His body as he walked tilted back slightly, and he tucked his chin down a bit as though to counterbalance that tilt. Arms swung at his sides, strong and tan and hairy.

“Borden.”

He could still hear her. He ducked quickly into a theater, buying a ticket without checking the billing. Inside, the air was cool. The air-conditioner in the car had broken down before they'd gotten twenty miles from home. The lobby was quiet and dimly lighted. Thickly carpets took his footsteps. The air filled with years of odors.

The theater was nearly empty. He felt comfortable at last. Finally on vacation. He settled to watch the movie. He went to so few movies anymore that he didn't recognize any of the actors. Madeline would tell him, were she here, what movie he had stumbled into. How had she gotten so fat? Like her mother. June had complained since Madeline was a child about her weight. She had dieted her from the time she started school. Now here was Madeline as fat as her mother. He watched the movie, trying to get hold of the story, to get away from wife and daughter.

Ever since they'd brought Madeline home from school last month, the two of them had been at it. Sometimes about weight. Sometimes about what Madeline was going to do with her “life.” This had been the first year Madeline hadn't come home during the term. When they drove to Colorado Springs to move her out of the dormitory in the spring, Borden had been shocked to see her, looking on her almost as a stranger. He had wished James were along. Sometimes he could talk to his sister. What would he have thought, though, to see her waddle toward them in blouse and cut-off Levis—puffy arms, wide hips, huge brown thighs? June said right away, “You've put on weight.” “So?” “Well, I hope you intend to do something about it.” Madeline had said, “Mother, my intentions are my business, don't you think? Daddy, you can bring my things down anytime.” “Don't talk to your father that way,” said June, “he's not your servant.” “I wasn't talking to him like a servant, Mother.” “It certainly sounded—” “Never mind,” he had said, “we have a long way to drive today.” Then watching the two of them walk across the parking lot in front of him, he had seen them from behind and recognized their resemblance to each other. “It doesn't look good on you,” June was saying. Even the irritation in their voices was similar.

It had been a difficult month with Madeline around. He was glad he had the store to go to. There he arranged the tables and racks. He had excellent goods. He didn't have to browbeat his customers. “Can I help you, sir?” He moved about the store, tracing out the lines of jackets, suits, trousers, the tables with socks, shirts, underwear, sweaters. He knew what belonged here. He knew what each piece was worth.

At home, the situation grew worse. Madeline lay about drinking beer. She had a couple of girl friends over during the day, went out with boys in the evening. He didn't like either set. The boys all had an ominous indifference toward anything he could think to ask them about. The girls lay in the back yard with Madeline, sunning themselves and drinking beer. Disruptive. On weekends he liked to work in the yard. He kept the

lawn trimmed and neat, and he was proud of the flower beds in the back. With Madeline and her friends stretched out on chaise longues, flesh exposed as though it were for sale, he was unnerved. He wasn't squeamish about how little they wore, but faulted his hypersensitivity to all that flesh. His sensitivity, at last, turned to perversity and—shocked and shamed—he took to gardening in the back only after work. It happened one Sunday. Sweating, he had removed his glasses to wipe his face. He left them on the grass beside him. As he edged down the flower bed toward the patio where Madeline and a large friend lay, he glanced at them and failed to look away quickly enough. Thought and dream threw off covers. Dirty jokes from fraternity and army days crawled in. Then—and not before—it struck him that he was looking at Madeline and not at her friend. All his lascivious thought had been directed toward his own daughter's body. He felt sick—recalled her as a little child, a baby, a pink-cheeked thing going off to school for her first class. Then Madeline guffawed. It was remarkably like June's laugh, and he wondered about himself and June in their college days. June's soft flesh. Talk in the fraternity house. Was June so? His thoughts? He picked up shears and trowel and rushed away, head down, not speaking, not looking, and reeled up the street, block after block until he found himself at the store. He didn't go in. He looked for a long while in the windows at the mannequins, the jackets and ties and swimming trunks laid out. He noticed the shears and trowel still in his hand. When he got home, Madeline and June were surprisingly civil to each other. The girl friend had gone. Then Madeline said she had to shower because—who was it? Barry or Pogo or Leif?—because somebody was coming by to go to a movie.

He couldn't get interested in the movie. The story line was not firm enough to pull him in. It was a western, full of odd camera effects, horses splashing slow-motion through streams, superimposed on fiercer chases and captures. Unreal. He should wait a bit longer, he decided. Madeline and June were likely driving the streets in search of him.

A couple of minutes later, as he waited, he felt the fingers slide on to his shoulder. He stiffened. He'd been half-conscious of someone sitting behind him shortly after he sat down. But he'd not thought. The fingers rested on his shoulder lightly, but he could feel them through the thin material on his skin. He wore nothing under his shirt. Each finger made a separate imprint. He hesitated just long enough for them to move. They stroked from his neck outward across his shoulder. One, two, three times. Then he stood. As he did, he turned and looked behind him. The man's dark eyes stared up at his own.

That was a mistake—to look back. The man followed him as though an understanding had been struck. He went into the lobby. His pulse ticked unevenly. He felt warm and puffy. June and Madeline might drive by. The man came now into the lobby.

Borden saw him in the mirror that ran above the long sofa. He was a

young-looking man, deeply tanned, and looked so nervous that Borden suddenly calmed. He walked to the water fountain and took a drink. When he turned, the man still stood there. Very slightly, he nodded, grinned. He was bushy-headed, moustached, his lanky and muscular body funneled into tee shirt and faded jeans, bare feet in sandals. Like one of Madeline's boyfriends.

Borden spoke across the fifteen feet or so that separated them. "I just walked out on my wife." Tongue-in-cheek tone. Self-deprecating.

"What?" The young man came forward quickly, eagerly. "What?"

"I just left my wife."

The man's eyes protruded a bit, and he blinked excessively. Borden saw at close range that lines cobwebbed his cheeks. The body appeared youthful, the face less so.

"Out there," said Borden. "I got out of the car and left her."

"A marital spat?" Asked without interest.

"I guess you would call it that. Except I walked away. I don't know whether I'm going back."

Why was he saying this? Maybe to forestall any advance the man might make. Maybe to announce a decision he was still not sure he had made. Maybe simply to be friendly in compensation for deceiving the man here, for letting him think—though he'd not intended to—that he was open to proposition.

"My wife doesn't drive but it's okay because my daughter is there. She drives." He realized that if he kept talking he would mention James, his son in Vietnam, describe the house on Partridge Street—spell out the whole tableau of his married life. Explain how joy had gone out of June's life at some point after James was born, vitality of spirit dying, feeding plumpness that feasted into obesity. Describe how the "fun" girl became the loud and unhappy woman. So he stopped. In the silence the young man's eyes slid over him—feet, body, face. He was a nervous man, hesitation and expectancy drawn to the surface where they skittered like long-legged walkers on ice.

"Hot outside," the man said. His eyes were wet. He blinked rapidly.

"Yes, that's one reason I came in."

He nodded his head, "Yeah, yeah." He had stuffed his hands in his back pockets and tilted his pelvis forward. Each time he moved, each time he smiled or gestured, he watched for Borden's reaction.

"I was walking quickly before my wife and daughter could follow me and I was getting very warm."

"You want to go downstairs?"

The abruptness of the question startled him, the voice low and tense like tires in gravel. "What?"

"The restroom's downstairs. Let's go down there."

"No, no."

"You got someplace then?"

Borden shook his head. "I just came in to get out of the heat. I didn't want my wife and daughter to follow me."

"C'mon—!" He rubbed his arm with his hand. The sound was dry, the pale rasp of one fingernail on sunburned skin.

"No, I have to go now. I'm sorry." He backed away. "I'm sorry if you thought—" He looked toward the opaque glass doors leading outside. The light through them showed how bright the sunlight was. Suppose June and Madeline were still out there? But he could not stand here. "I'm going now. I really just came in—I didn't mean—"

At the doors, he turned back. The man still watched, thin and solitary. No contract. Fearful his hesitation would be misinterpreted again, Borden pushed through. The street flashed. He did not glance back until he was around the corner. No one followed. Then he looked for the Chevy. Maybe Madeline and June had already started for home. Without him, he knew they would not go any further. The Grand Canyon was too far away for the two of them to drive, picking at each other as though trying to tear off pieces of flesh.

The best thing to do, he decided, was find the bus station. He would stay mobile that way. He had a twenty dollar bill in his billfold. June handled the Traveler's Checks when they traveled. He had some loose coins in his pocket. How far that would get him he did not know.

He found a phone booth on a corner. He was never good about directions, always depending on someone else to read maps while he drove. But set here on his own, checking the street he was on and the direction in which it ran, he positioned himself mentally from the map in the telephone book. He wanted to get out of the neighborhood as quickly as possible.

He looked once more over his shoulder, not expecting to see the homosexual and relieved that he did not. As he walked, the heat was like something to push through. A metallic taste to the air soiled his tongue. He reached one street and turned. Stepped steadily on. He passed taverns, barber shops. One block frightened him. He counted two pornographic book shops, three taverns on one side of the street. Outside one of the taverns stood a noisy group of soldiers from a local base. One sat on the fender of a car nuzzling a heavily made-up girl in a short skirt. The soldiers were profane. Did Madeline's young man talk so? Once he'd heard Madeline come close. But he'd grown so enraged, exploded in a way that startled and frightened Madeline and her mother. Even in the fraternity house—

But the soldiers scarcely noticed him. He wondered about James. He had wanted his son to go to Canada or to fight for a conscientious objector status. But James, lacking the will, had gone into the army, saying it was easier, saying that perhaps he was a coward but he'd rather not bother. Maybe he had been right. He was in a Headquarters Detachment doing clerical work, as safe as any GI over there could be. All the

same, intimidated by the casual glances cast on him, he wished his son were beside him.

"Hey, man—"

He was frightened. Once in the bus station he should be safe. From the whites. From the blacks. The malingerers and molesters. He thought of his store again, the carpets, the pleasant lights, the soft music. "Can I help you, sir?" He found himself looking back too hard at some of those faces he passed. Once his shoulder was bumped, deliberately, but he would not let himself turn. He might have been better off in the theater. He had closer connections with that man than he had realized: both he and the homosexual had shied from women, though Borden had walked away not for sexual reasons. If the man had been willing only to talk—

He was approaching an alley when he made his error. James would have warned him. He knew the three youths—the two boys and the girl—had been watching him all the way down the block. But a blue Chevy turned the corner. Thinking it was June and Madeline, he ducked past the three standing there, eyes dull and heavy on him, and slipped up the alley. He planned to cut through to the parallel street a block over to where the bus station should be. He stopped before he was twenty feet inside, though, swerved to a halt by the clanging of his pulse, the sudden vulnerability he felt in his back. Heard the footsteps and turned. The three of them—the boys and the girl—stood at the entrance of the alley. Up half its length the alley was bare building wall, beyond that were fences, high board fences, but he didn't know what they hid. He intended to stand his ground as the three approached him. It would be useless to run, knowing the effect of his own floppy sandals, his lack of coordination. But as they came near, he suddenly found the wall at his back, shuffled against unwittingly, warm against the fingers that he pressed against it. He pressed them firmly, waiting like a traffic violator the patrolman.

A dark-haired girl and two boys of equal size, just a bit shorter than he. One was lean in build, his face so drawn that cheekbones and teeth showed beneath the tanned and harsh skin. The other was heavier, with pale reddish hair and eyelashes. Light freckles covered his face. His teeth were cream-colored.

"You in a awful hurry, man."

"I'm going to the bus station."

"In a hurry, man. Like we said."

The girl said, "He's kind of cute. Kind of." Voice flattened with monotony, what she said, though an obvious taunt and jest, came out with leaden seriousness.

"He's too old for you, Julie. Couldn't get it up, could you, man?"

"What do you want?" he asked.

The light-haired youth shrugged, pursed his mouth, glanced at the others. "A bargain, whatcha say? Your billfold first."

They made a partial ring about him. Hard muscles ridged the boys' arms, small knots stretched along the bone, shiny. He was ashamed at the way his hand trembled. The shame of his fear, as the boy took his billfold, made him tremble harder than the fear itself. When he realized, though, that they'd seen fear in a man before, that they'd be surprised, even angered not to see it—a reflection of their power and menace—then, strangely, a calm came over him. Knowing that others had trembled before the three made him part of a brotherhood. A brotherhood of the beaten, the hampered and hindered, of the dream-lost vagrants of every street he'd walked or not walked on. Like the man in the theater. Where could you draw the lines of membership? Could you stop even with these three? Somewhere—out there, out on the streets where everything was going on normally in some separate rhythm—somewhere out there was the knife-wielder they each feared. "It isn't much," he said. The apology in his voice surprised him, the same tone and manner he used with a customer he was not able to assist.

The boy first took the loose papers—driver's license, membership cards, old draft card, student ID card from his college days—and dropped them on the ground. He did it deliberately, glancing at Borden to see what he would do. Borden hid his feelings under rigid but tiring face muscles. Then the youth took out the twenty dollar bill.

"What else you got?"

"Very little."

"Suppose you think. You're buying something from us, see?"

He nodded. He could yell. But nothing could happen in time. He looked at the thin boy with the knife. The girl, when he looked at her, let her tongue slip out and over her lips. A lascivious gesture. A wide and thin mouth.

"You thinking?"

"I don't know what you want."

"How's about the watch?"

Borden shrugged, and handed it over. The other side of the alley was shaded. He was spotlighted in the glare of the sun.

He lifted his hands. "No tie clasps. No cuff links."

The girl smiled. "I see a wedding ring."

He had to struggle.

The light-haired youth said, "This guy ain't got no sentiment. You got any sentiment at all, man?"

The thin boy with the knife said, "I'd like them buttons on his shirt." The boy's own shirt was unbuttoned, the collar turned up about his neck. He stepped forward and with his knife hand flipped the buttons off, one by one. "You pick them up now."

Borden sank down on hands and knees. The buttons had flown some distance. He found one and started to stand and go for the other, but they stopped him.

"We like you that way."

"Like a puppy dog," the girl called Julie said. "Maybe that's why he seems kind of cute. Kind of."

The pavement was rough under his hands but more so under his knees. He had to put too much weight on them because he didn't let his toes drag. He found one, two, three, four buttons.

"I think there's more," the boy with the knife said.

Dizzy under the sun, Borden wanted to flatten out, head on his arms as though in bed, and sleep. Maybe someone would enter the alley, he thought.

He squatted on his heels. Julie stood with her weight on one leg, a bony hip thrust out against her jeans. She was bony thin. Madeline bulged. Julie was all skin and bone. Still her jeans were tight, tight and creased at her crotch. She saw him looking, and her smile faded.

"What you looking at?" she said. Her voice hardened. "Anything disgusts me it's a dirty old man."

A foot struck his shoulder, and, caught off balance, he fell. The missing button lay under his cheek.

"All the time under his stupid damn nose," said Julie. "If he was looking in the right place—"

He picked the button up. He stood, hoping he had earned the right to do so, and handed it to the boy.

"Dirty old man," muttered Julie.

He drew his arm across his chest, slipped his hand inside his open shirt, half-protectively. The skin had been scraped when he fell but not torn. His hair had come down over his forehead. He wanted to brush it back, made uncomfortable by its dishevelment, but he refrained.

"Anything else?" he said. He still spoke as though customers stood before him.

"I bet he sweats all the time," said Julie. "Greasy thing." She spit at his feet.

"Let's keep our bargain, watcha say?" The smile in the voice. Power. "You paid up now, man. Look that way." He pointed to the opposite end of the alley. "Turn around, man, and look."

Shoulder blades sensitive as though he'd had wings plucked from them, he saw figures cross against the bright street. The sunlight beat on the side of his face. Strings pulled him back against the three standing behind him, and he leaned forward as though to resist that pull.

"Now," said the light-haired one, "I'm going to say go. And I want you to run."

"And then?"

"Don't ask no questions, man. You just do. Okay?"

He felt himself swaying toward the street ahead and then giving to those ties behind, waiting for voice or touch. When he heard, "Run," he jogged forward, wondering what kind of game? what kind of game? He

thought for a moment he heard their footsteps so he slowed.

“Run!”

“Run, you dirty old man!”

He increased his speed. He passed the wall of the buildings, came to the board fences that had run-down, two-story, turn-of-the-century houses behind them. Were they freeing him? A bird within began to beat wings. He ran faster. From far behind he heard again, “Run!” and he ran then as fast as he could. He ran as though he were in a dream, for it seemed that the alley’s opening ahead never came closer, that no matter how many boards or telephone poles or garbage cans he passed in the alley he never came closer to the place he wanted to be. The three youths were behind him, watching, he was sure, but he wouldn’t let himself look back. Weight, as though air piled in front of him, blocked his breathing. He thought he would collapse, before a burst tilted him past a chinaberry tree and a collection of three garbage cans, tripping him at the entrance to the alley. He slid in the rocks and pavement, his cheeks grinding as though trying to dig down to the earth.

He lay, wondering if his nose were bleeding, wondering where the wet he felt had come from. Had he vomited? Then he smelled oil and realized he had fallen into a slick dropped by a vehicle. Noises, fumes, heat struck him. Slowly, he raised his head. Then seeing someone coming up the street, he stood, steadying himself against dizziness. He held his shirt closed, not moving until the two men—dressed in shabby clothes, men rushing impatiently along the sidewalk, one of them saying angrily, “But you can’t do it that way, how many times I got to say you can’t do it that way?”—not moving until the two men had passed. Then he tested his footsteps and found he could keep his balance. He leaned momentarily against a building. But he didn’t stay long. He didn’t know whether or not the three youths might follow him.

No need going to the bus station now. He should get out of the city. If he could find the highway, he could hitchhike. As he walked on, he regained his equilibrium, his strength, his mental balance. His senses tuned themselves, his sense of direction revving up to the point that he walked straight to the highway. He got a ride out of the city quickly where he was let off by a farmer turning down a country road, apologizing for not going any farther. The sun was sliding from its noontime peak down toward the west, beating in on a slant. He walked along the edge of the highway. Rocks slipped in under his socks so he walked on the pavement. Soon he would lift his thumb for a ride. He rubbed his hand over his cheek. He would have scabs there. On his chest, too. The knees of his trousers were scraped. God, what kind of mess had he gotten into?

Something had hollowed out of his life. He couldn’t say what it was or when, as he walked there on the highway, sandals flapping.

He had walked away from the car . . .

What about the man in the theater? June? The complaints about

Madeline — they came forth with a kind of relish, a grotesque spicing of faded and fading days. Of days like fence posts, dark and light, dark and light. They were only different sides of the same coin, the days — flight and pursuit, leading and following, blessing and damning. Who was victim? Predator?

“Can I help you, sir?”

He ran to the car that stopped up the road. A soft-voiced man in an air-conditioned car drove him all the way to where he had begun that morning. He walked from the freeway exit the six blocks to his home. The Chevy was parked in front. The lights were on. He heard Madeline’s voice, crying out at her mother — a preparation for alarm. *Can I help you, sir?* And he went in, question forming.

PEG

A clothesline in Bermuda
or elsewhere, in the same
kind of story.

A naked woman come evening,
her hands pegged to the line,
pinned to the low sun.

Or is it morning?

Every blouse on the line without
buttons. The crotches torn
from her underwear, maybe
bitten.

The helpless sleeves, now,
and then stiffening.

The woman's hands pinned.
Her ambiguous cries
into the afternoon.

Your timid smile. What's to be
said? Your cheeks puffed out
with mother-of-pearl
buttons.

LINE

In a breadline, in a classless
society, waiting for bread.

A woman at the head
of the line, just to one
side, not really in it,
attractive enough, but low
on coupons.

At the very back: you,
looking forward, the line
all too slowly advancing,
one loaf at a time.

Your coupons sewn into
the lining of your jacket
with the crumbs. Your hunger,
not only for bread.

The woman, licking her lip,
as in some other movie,
one arm on her hip, the other
extended, without coupons,

hinting at her great ability,
recognizing your equal needs.

Cathy Ford / *Two Poems from "Saffron, Rose & Flame—*

The Joan of Arc Poems"

POSEUR

the painter, by favor

tries to get a *par mon martin* painting of me
in the rain
to shove across the centuries
despite the men.

He has their faces here in the grey light,
they've left behind clean shadow, spirit,
but i waver on canvas
shrug the responsibility of drying. Dying.

They stand sweating & patient behind me
while he fights to mask his impatience
attempts to get me acid onto the sketch
a tinted outline to be handcoloured later, when he is past
being bored. Surely nothing will come of this

but his acquiescence. The rain drips down his neck
the mud, grey
their faces, grey,
his eyes the one flash of fire in this whole pageant.

He would feel better
shuddering like lightning through the trees
toward something, to court, to flatter,
even if he was death afraid, is,

i hate to stand still as a rabbit
facing what i can't see.
Consider that an arrow is on the wind.
Consider that i do not ride well.
Idolatry, you are a false god.

We kneel for this poor apprentice, & pose not for anyone
—i understand a little, while trying to place him,
in front of the steaming horses,
this grey, this army,
he has no interest in something he has not done

& cannot read
himself

DOPPELGÄNGER

devils cannot deal with virgins
the head reels, shakes dizzy, throbs,
the fool, tested again.

Wearing the dress of a young, noble, man
who would not call me to question
brocade & silk with fur
puce velvet patterned over shining ground
still, i do not bleed.

They find me pregnant with death
never that hermaphrodite double, my twin
whose separate eyes qualify doubling
the wager of incest or sin against chastity
bluff, guarded preference to a denial of faith.

Carrying these examinations for virginity
on & on, red velvet chignon, tours cloth of gold,
rouen leather, sheaths for the first sword at my side,
noble crest stitched eyeballs tucked in bird's bellies,
the embroidered male, pheasant's tail. Eating birds
crushed nervous delicate birds

still the fight
is
on

still the fight goes
on

Alison McAlpine

BABYSITTING WITH GRANDMOTHER:
Watching Hitchcock's *THE BIRDS*

And sometimes
my grandmother'd say
Let me tell you about
Hugh de Veer Coningsveedralingcourt
And we'd turn on the TV
my brother and I
we'd watch the late shows
And grandmother, she'd draw out
long words on her glass
counting her drinks with the rings
on the table, grandmother
she'd be listening for Filipinos
They were raiding her liquor chest
Didn't need her aid, she'd say
She could hear the lid drop shut
like a thick brown stone

My brother and I
we moved up to the screen
up to the people
they are boarding up
their shades
calling the birds
calling them more beautiful, more beautiful
than their mothers
They are boiling up roots
They don't want to see out:
The moon spreading her oil in the night
There was thick evening, dust
in the town

Cold weather, grandmother says
She is weary of the rain
The water setting in her bones
desire in her lap
like a weak drink
And the dirt, she'd say
The Filipinos won't clean
You can see it on the dresser tops
You can see it in the drapes
She is pulling them apart, sweeping open
the glass doors

And the moon is kicking out light
There are wings in her belly
Birds flying out like bees
stinging from the sun
There are birds on the house
grinding out caws
And the children
they are sneaking out the back
running for the well

We are under the piano stool
My brother and I
We are patching our eyes
with our hands
There are wings in the sun
And we remember crowbars
Remember grandmother
She is lighting up the ceiling
She is walking the streets with a cage
Grandmother
She is calling the birds

Robyn Sarah

REFILLING THE SPIRIT LAMP

For awhile desire is fuel.
And the distance gained
always is illusory.
There's a luminescence young
leaves can't hold very long
in their greening, or the air
in early spring, when it is cool
and frangible, that is
something like what we thought
had been promised:

how a cup, a lamp, a chair
are so much more than that,
or the scarf you left behind, a
handful of loose change on the bureau.
Someone saw a common thread there
and named it, but he didn't know
how close a brush it had been.

What burns now
is something else, something we hope
could be more dependable, riding out
a run of bad weather, how these
evenings find us back in our rooms
over paper, our lamps tuned low,
and an ear for the finest of nuances
bent to that tuning.

Elizabeth Gourlay

The Glass Bottle

a play in one act

SCENE: Sitting room of an apartment.
The sitting room is cluttered with books, paintings, scatter rugs. An old-fashioned paned glass door opens to a balcony. Sofa, chairs, drop-leaf table.

TIME: March 15, 1980

CHARACTERS:

EDITH is small, of fragile build; she totters around on high heels.

MILLIE, of a stouter build, walks with the aid of a four-pronged cane.

(EDITH and MILLIE sit at either end of the table. They are finishing a noonday meal.)

MILLIE: Aren't you going to eat your dinner?

EDITH: You know I'm not partial to fish. The potatoes are lumpy. I did eat the peas.

(EDITH picks up a bowl covered with silver foil.)

I wonder what's for dessert. I hope it's something delicious. I think I'll wish. Yes, I'll wish.

MILLIE: What good will that do? Whatever is there, is there.

EDITH: *(Eyes closed)* I wish for a lemon tart.

(She takes foil off bowl.)

Pineapple snow . . . oh hell.

MILLIE: Too bad. Puddings for ye old toothless gums.

EDITH: It's stupid, having to have dinner in the middle of the day.

MILLIE: Don't complain. Juice, main course, dessert for only \$1.75. Delivered. Courtesy of Meals-on-Wheels.

EDITH: I like Mrs. Carter. But that Mrs. Anderson . . .

MILLIE: I know. She thought you were ready for the loony bin. I explained, of course.

EDITH: She still never stops to chat. Always the same set smile.

MILLIE: But, Edith, Mrs. Anderson does so much for the 'golden agers.'

EDITH: You don't like her either? But I thought . . .

MILLIE: Like Lady Bountiful? I should think not.

EDITH: Pineapple snow. And on my birthday. On my birthday.

MILLIE: You'd forgotten until I reminded you.

EDITH: Eighty-five. Who wants to remember? My God, Millie, how did we get this old?

MILLIE: Speak for yourself. I'm only eighty-four.

EDITH: A mere kid . . . (*They giggle*) . . . I suppose, in a way, we're lucky.
(*MILLIE snorts in derision.*)
I mean, we've had all these years . . . a lot more than most. Some good, some bad . . . you had three husbands.

MILLIE: Some good . . . some bad . . .
(*They giggle.*)

EDITH: Yet, as a girl, you weren't particularly good-looking . . .

MILLIE: (*Eating her dessert*) Thanks.

EDITH: I guess you had sex appeal. IT. Like Clara Bow.

MILLIE: You mean to say I've lost IT. You can sit there and say I'm not glamorous? . . . (*They cackle.*)

EDITH: How I would love a lemon tart. I wish I hadn't thought of it. My mouth keeps watering.

MILLIE: Well, you can hold on to yourself. Teatime we're going to have a birthday cake.

EDITH: What kind?

MILLIE: It's a surprise. Mrs. Carter got it for me.

EDITH: I hope it's chocolate. Or lemon. Is it lemon?

MILLIE: I ain't sayin' so keep your shirt on. You know, Edith, I've been thinking, I've had quite a life, two husbands and Harvey. That's enough for anyone. And you.

EDITH: Harvey. Husband in name only. I often wondered how come you didn't know ahead of time.

MILLIE: Well, I didn't, snoopy. Poor Harvey. People were so intolerant then. I was a . . . camouflage, I guess.

EDITH: I always liked Harvey. He had a good sense of humour.

MILLIE: I *liked* him best, but . . .

EDITH: But! (*They giggle.*)

MILLIE: We used to think sex made the world go round.

EDITH: It populates it.

MILLIE: I guess these days people should desist.
 EDITH: People never will.
 MILLIE: No. You better clear away the dishes.
 EDITH: I will in a minute . . . the people are peasants . . . the country is mountainous . . . the people are peasants . . . and . . . and . . .
 MILLIE: (*Warning voice*) Edith! Are you all right?
 EDITH: Yes. I'm all right. I'm not running off at the mouth.
 MILLIE: Well, it sounded like it. Anyway, I wish you wouldn't call it that. It's a recognised medical condition. Sam calls it hypermotility of the speech centre.
 EDITH: It's a damn nuisance. It just takes over . . .
 MILLIE: I know. You've been good today.
 EDITH: Perhaps because I was a writer . . . always searching for words . . . now they are having their revenge. Do you suppose?
 MILLIE: Old age, Ede. Like everything else.
 EDITH: Maybe. But then sometimes in the night when I can't sleep, words help me. Like last night. But only the first two sentences, but not the end. I know the whole rhythm but I can't get the last part. It goes like this—"the landscape is mountainous, the people are peasants and dee dee dum dum, dee dum dum, dee dum dee dum . . . that's the rhythm . . .
 MILLIE: Sounds dumb to me.
 EDITH: Oh. Sometimes, Millie, you give me the pip. You may know the ending if you'd only listen. The landscape is mountainous, the people are peasants and . . .
 MILLIE: The son of man has nowhere to lay his head.
 EDITH: That's a biblical phrase.
 MILLIE: Oh, is it?
 EDITH: I never thought of you as religious.
 MILLIE: Depends on what you mean by religious. I am. Quite religious. Matter of fact, I pray sometimes.
 (*She slaps at her legs. EDITH gives her an irritated look.*)
 EDITH: I wish you wouldn't do that.
 MILLIE: Sure. Everyone prays. In the pinch. "O God, help me!"
 EDITH: What do you pray for?
 MILLIE: Money.
 EDITH: Money? Oh Millie, you're not keeping something from me? Have they raised the rent again?
 MILLIE: Have I ever lied to you Edith?
 EDITH: That's the one thing about you, Millie. I've never known you to lie . . . Mother always said she preferred a thief to a liar.
 MILLIE: Good old Millie. True blue Millie.
 EDITH: Yes. You have been the blue corded ribbon running through my life. A sturdy ribbon.

MILLIE: You might even say, fat. (*They laugh*)

EDITH: I count myself lucky. Living here with you . . . in a room with a view . . . having the occasional joke. I couldn't bear . . . I simply could not bear . . . to be where everyone is confined and regimented.
(*MILLIE makes no answer.*)
I would curl up and die. Yes, I would. Curl up and die. So would you, Millie.

MILLIE: O, I don't know. It might not be so hard. Your room cleaned. Meals prepared . . . (*pause*) . . . No responsibilities.

EDITH: They would serve pineapple snow every day. Every day of the week, pineapple snow.
(*Starts to jig up and down.*)
Snow on the roads, falling past the windows . . .

MILLIE: (*Warning voice*) Edith!

EDITH: Sifting . . . sifting into all the crevices . . . piling on the rocks . . . underneath the wheels . . . on the windshield . . .
(*MILLIE reaches over and grabs EDITH's wrist.*)

MILLIE: Stop it! Stop it!

EDITH: The north wind doth blow and we shall have snow and what will poor baby do then, poor thing . . . poor thing.

MILLIE: O God. Edith . . . Edith . . .

EDITH: Drifting . . . drifting regardless . . .

MILLIE: It's all right. All right, Edith.
(*EDITH looks down, becomes aware of MILLIE's hand on her wrist.*)

EDITH: I've been . . . running . . .

MILLIE: You're all right now.

EDITH: I wish Sam could give me something.

MILLIE: Those pills made you worse.
(*Pause.*)
You'll be all right the rest of the day.

EDITH: On my birthday . . . (*Pause*) . . . I wish I'd taken the baby to another doctor.

MILLIE: Let's not start that. Anyway, they didn't have pediatricians in those days.

EDITH: It was partly my fault. I blame myself, Millie. If only I had insisted . . .

MILLIE: Over and done with years ago. You can't turn back the clock. It's your birthday, Edith. Don't harrow yourself . . . (*Pause*) . . . Come on, let's play our game. We'll reminisce about something . . . something happy.

EDITH: I don't know whether I can.

MILLIE: Of course you can. If you try hard enough. Remember that party of June's . . . dinner in the garden . . . and you met that novelist . . . what was his name?

EDITH: Harvey.
MILLIE: No, no, Edith. Not Harvey! We were just talking about Harvey.
EDITH: (*Suddenly*) Hewitt! Hewitt Eastman. He had a face like Nijinsky's.
MILLIE: The dancer? O come on, we can't go that far back.
EDITH: (*Nods*) I had Nijinsky's photograph pinned on my wall at college. As the Spectre of the Rose. I graduated in 1917 when I was twenty-one. The next year I married Henry. Let's see. I must have been already forty when I met Hewitt. I remember feeling so heavy . . . so heavy with desire. Funny the way it affected me. All the time I felt there was this mountainous rock in my pelvis.
MILLIE: Yeah!
EDITH: YEAH! (*They giggle.*) But I stayed faithful. All my life faithful to Harvey.
MILLIE: Henry.
EDITH: Henry. Too bad . . .
MILLIE: Too bad, what?
EDITH: Too bad I can't say the same for him.
MILLIE: I knew you were going to say that. Poor Henry! I don't think you ever quite forgave him.
EDITH: No. Not deep down.
MILLIE: A one night stand, Ede. You were back east and he was lonely.
EDITH: The bastard.
MILLIE: You never forgave him. And yet you forgave me. Didn't you?
EDITH: Yes.
MILLIE: I think that's strange. Are you sure . . . ?
EDITH: People are strange. (*Smiles*) That's what makes life interesting. Come on, Millie, help me remember that last line. The landscape is mountainous, the people are peasants . . . and . . . and . . . dum dee dee dee dum dee dee dum dee dum dee dee . . . dum . . .
MILLIE: Tweedledum and Tweedledee agreed to have a battle.
EDITH: I wish you wouldn't try to be funny. Now you've broken my train of thought. The landscape is . . . the people are . . .
MILLIE: (*Slapping at her thighs.*) And I wish you wouldn't keep on about people and mountains. It's making me goddam nervous . . .
EDITH: Nervous! Well, I'll tell you what makes me nervous. You always banging away at your legs. I don't see how it makes them feel any better . . .
MILLIE: Better? (*She snorts*) They'll never get any better. Never.
EDITH: You musn't give up hope, Millie. There's always hope.

MILLIE: Dreamer! You weren't always such a dreamer, you know that, Edith? Once you could face the facts. You didn't try to run away. You didn't try to hide behind words. Once you were able to write this.

(MILLIE takes a piece of paper from her pocket.)

EDITH: What are you talking about? write what?

MILLIE: It's dated March 15, 1955. It's your handwriting, and it says, I quote . . . "Who wants to live forever?"

EDITH: March 15. On my birthday.

MILLIE: To be exact. On your sixtieth birthday.

EDITH: Imagine being sixty!

MILLIE: That was the day we made each other a solemn promise, we entered into a kind of pact . . .

EDITH: A pact? As kids, we pricked our fingers and swore a blood oath to be friends for always. My finger got badly infected . . . remember?

MILLIE: You can stop playing games, Edith. You remember perfectly well when you signed that paper, when we stashed away those sleeping pills. It was the year after your mother died.

EDITH: My poor darling little mother, I loved her so! O God, Millie!

MILLIE: (*Inexorable*) We promised that if we lived to be really old . . . in any way incapacitated . . . or a burden to our families, we would swallow these . . .

(MILLIE reaches in her pocket and brings out a phial of pills.)
See, Edith, these!

EDITH: But we're not a burden to our families, we're not incapacitated!

MILLIE: You can hardly see. I can hardly walk. Come on, Edith, face the facts. When we put these pills away, we knew what we were doing.

EDITH: What are you saying? To-day, on my birthday, you want us to swallow a bunch of pills, and wake up dead to-morrow morning?

MILLIE: Edith, let's face it, we've nowhere to go but down.

EDITH: Many happy returns of the day!

MILLIE: Don't you see? This way we can quit while we're ahead.

EDITH: You talk as though we were stocks in the market, horses in a race.

MILLIE: I am just being practical.

EDITH: When we signed that . . . that ridiculous paper, eighty-five seemed like the end of the world. Besides, I was mentally upset. I'd been through so much with Mother. I didn't realize I'd feel this way inside. Just the same as always. My glass bottle is still bright, still intact. So's yours.

MILLIE: Glass bottle? Glass bottle! What, in God's name, do you mean by that?

EDITH: Louisa always called it that. You remember Louisa, my best friend? This feeling of self we were born with. Essence. Identity. Glass bottle. We still know who we are, Millie. We still have a lot of laughs. Don't we?

MILLIE: That's what I mean, we should quit while we're ahead.

EDITH: It's because of my . . . affliction, isn't it? . . . (*Slightly tearful.*) That's it, isn't it? You can't live with it any more, so you're using this piece of paper . . . this paper . . .

MILLIE: Your . . . affliction has nothing to do with it. Nothing. You hear me? I swear it! Now, stop your sniffing. We'll forget about the whole thing.

EDITH: O, Millie, let's. Let's forget about the whole thing.
(*The doorbell rings.*)
There's the doorbell. It's the doorbell, Millie. I wonder who it is.

MILLIE: Answer it and you're likely to find out. (*EDITH goes out.*) And don't trip. Always wearing those goddam high heels. At her age.
(*MILLIE sits, still holds pill bottle. Sighs. Returns bottle to her pocket. Rubs her thighs.*)

EDITH: (*Coming on stage*) Millie! O, Millie. Guess what!
(*She comes down stage, carrying florist's box. Bumps into sofa, chair. Gives box to MILLIE.*)

MILLIE: You should know where the furniture is by now.

EDITH: Open the box, will you, Millie? It's flowers. Flowers for me.

MILLIE: I guess Helen remembered this year.

EDITH: Of course.

MILLIE: Sometimes she forgets.

EDITH: Poor child. Divorced. Having to fend for herself.

MILLIE: Child! She's sixty if she's a day.

EDITH: She's very busy . . . working . . . and with so many friends. Still I do wish, . . . you know how much I wish . . . she would write more often.

MILLIE: Or telephone.

EDITH: O, hurry . . . I am dying to know what kind of flowers . . .

MILLIE: Roses.

EDITH: How do you know? You haven't even lifted the lid.

MILLIE: (*Lifting flowers from box.*) I guessed. Yes. Roses. Tall red ones.
(*She hands the roses to EDITH. She buries her face in them. Separates each rose carefully. Six.*)

EDITH: Roses. My favourites. The most beautiful flower in the whole world. And they smell as lovely . . . as they look. (*She peers at them.*)

(She puts out her hand for more.)

MILLIE: That's all of them. Half a dozen.

EDITH: Only six. But she always sends the full dozen. Surely her own mother is worth a full dozen . . . I mean . . .

MILLIE: Don't be childish. Roses have simply skyrocketed in price. Long stems like this cost . . . at least I think they cost . . . up to \$2.00 a piece.

EDITH: But her own mother.

MILLIE: Don't be greedy. Be thankful she remembered.

EDITH: I am. Of course I am. She knows how much I have always adored roses. Smell Millie! Remember my rose garden? Gloire de Dijon, Josephine Beauharnais, Ena Harkness . . . I grew them all.

MILLIE: *(Ironic)* A rose is a rose is a rose . . .

EDITH: *(Smiling)* Is a rose. Funny the more you say it, the more those words seem to . . . to . . .

MILLIE: What?

EDITH: Spiral up into the sky.
(Stands centre stage with roses in her arms.)
"Gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing to put . . . to put . . .

MILLIE: "To put thy pale lost lilies out of mind."

EDITH: *(Still declaiming)* "To put thy pale lost lilies out of mind."
Good for you, Millie. You always come through in a pinch. You know what I think about you. You are the bright blue ribbon threading through my life. I think that often.

MILLIE: I know. You've told me.
(MILLIE gets up with difficulty.)

EDITH: Where are you going?

MILLIE: To get a vase. Customary, you know, to put flowers in water.

EDITH: No, let me. I'll get it, Millie.

MILLIE: It's your birthday . . .

EDITH: You sit still. *(EDITH starts to go offstage.)* If you want me to be surprised, you'll have to set out the cake . . . and make the tea too. Besides, I want to pick the right container . . .

MILLIE: Which?

EDITH: The tall white one. The Wedgewood. You know.

MILLIE: Should. I gave it to you as a wedding gift.
(Before EDITH goes out, she has handed the roses to MILLIE. MILLIE pricks her finger on a thorn, sucks it. EDITH returns with a vase. She takes the roses from MILLIE, puts vase and roses on table, begins to arrange them.)

EDITH: You know, Millie, this is the best vase, (*She picks up a flower and peers at it.*) What a lovely colour! Such a clear red . . . simply . . . simply delicious!

MILLIE: (*Slyly*) Almost good enough to eat?

EDITH: (*Instant recognition*) Georgie! O Millie remember . . . on our way to the church hall, Georgie stole the rose, and then he had to show off some more and so he ate it.

MILLIE: Ate it. The whole rose. Lock, stock, and barrel.

EDITH: Stem, stamen, petals. And you know, Millie, it didn't even make him sick. Georgie Buchanan!

MILLIE: It was our first party with boys. Pretty damn exciting.

EDITH: Georgie was my date and you went with Flaxon Penellegan . . .

MILLIE: And I let Flaxon kiss me goodnight. He had protruding teeth. Went right through my lower lip . . . (*They laugh*) What was the minister's name?

EDITH: Young. Awfully nice. He confirmed us. Remember? He preached a sermon about Judas Iscariot because I asked him how come Judas had to burn in hell forever. Didn't seem very Christian, not to forgive Judas.

MILLIE: O, what was his name? We both had a crush on him.

EDITH: And now neither one of us can remember even what he looked like. I hate not remembering. I hate looking at my freckled hands. I never look at my body any more. And I used to. It was a good body.

MILLIE: I loved to dance. Hell, but I loved to dance. And I was a darned good dancer.

EDITH: (*Nods*) At dancing school, you led and I followed. You were easy to follow.

MILLIE: Big people are often light on their feet.
(*MILLIE looks down. Pause.*)

EDITH: When I die, I want red roses heaped on my coffin. Like Edith Piaf.

MILLIE: Balls!

EDITH: Millie!

MILLIE: I can't stand that side of you. All that romantic . . . nonsense.
(*Pause*)

EDITH: Sometimes I wish I'd died long ago, when Henry did, when Helen was still with me.

MILLIE: Oh, you do, do you? Well, that's nice, that's very nice.
(*Pause.*) Anyone would think Helen was an . . . an angel.

EDITH: (*Picks up vase, starts to depart.*) I'm not going to sit here and listen to you insult my daughter.

MILLIE: I'm not.

EDITH: Yes, you are. Dear Helen, not here to protect herself. I wish she was.

MILLIE: So do I.

EDITH: Is that a snide remark? (MILLIE *shrugs*.) I presume that means yes.

MILLIE: If you want to take it that way, you go right ahead.

EDITH: I can put up with your gruffness, your untidiness, the way you never have a handkerchief, but when you start to insult my daughter, I have to draw the line.

MILLIE: Old aged E., can't see the line, let alone draw it!

EDITH: Old aged M., can see the line but she can't walk it. (*Pause*.) You are mean, you know, Millie.

MILLIE: And I suppose you're not. Bicker, bicker, bicker, that's all we seem to do lately.

EDITH: And on my birthday!

MILLIE: Golden agers! What a hell of a misnomer that is. It's youth that's golden.

EDITH: "Golden boys and girls all must
Like chimney sweepers come to dust . . ."

MILLIE: "Golden, *lads* and girls all must."

EDITH: What? No Millie, you're wrong. It's *boys* . . . golden *boys*. You're thinking of . . . of another poem . . .
"With rue my heart is laden, for golden friends I had,
For many a roselipt maiden, for many a lightfoot *lad*."

MILLIE: Allow me to know something. Shakespeare said '*lads*'.

EDITH: *Boys*. After all I should know. Considering I took honours in English Lit.

MILLIE: Honours! Some honours! Second class.

EDITH: That's despicable . . . a despicable thing to say, Millie. You know perfectly well I got First Class Honours all through college. And if I hadn't gone out with Henry the night of my General English Examination . . .

MILLIE: (*Nods*) And you had to stay out all night . . . until five in the morning.

EDITH: We stayed to watch the sun rise over Mount Royal . . . the whole sky was pink . . . flushed pink as a rose . . .

MILLIE: (*Grinning*) Yeah.

EDITH: (*Grinning back*) Yeah. (*Pause*.) Is it time for the cake, Millie?

MILLIE: Not teatime yet.

EDITH: I'm hungry.

MILLIE: You didn't eat your dinner.

EDITH: I'm quite hungry.

MILLIE: I suppose we could take tea early. If you want.

EDITH: I'm the birthday girl, remember? (EDITH *gets up*.)

MILLIE: All right. You can put the kettle on.

EDITH: (*Going off. Goes to kitchen.*) Where did you hide the cake?

MILLIE: Never mind. Leave the rest to me. I want to, Edith. I can manage. (*Calls after EDITH.*) And put the brandy bottle out. There's some left.

(MILLIE *sits. She massages her legs. EDITH comes back part way into the room.*)

EDITH: Know what I was thinking, here in the kitchen?

MILLIE: I've never professed to be a mind reader.

EDITH: All right, snarky. If you don't want to hear, okay.

MILLIE: I didn't say that.

EDITH: I don't think I'll tell you anyway. You'll laugh. Or get aggravated.

MILLIE: No, I won't

EDITH: Once, long ago, I had this most wonderful dream . . . about a rose and a huge white bird. I was up in the sky, miles high I was, and I was riding on this monstrous . . . well, a sort of swan. I was riding on it, and yet I was part of it. As I looked down over the universe, I saw everything unfolding in the form of a rose . . . all the solar system in the pattern of a rose . . . opening and opening and opening . . .

MILLIE: Edith!

EDITH: It's o.k. Millie. Yes, Millie, I'm o.k. Hard to explain. Squares evolving out of circles everywhere making a multitude of stars . . . shifting . . . and sifting . . . and circling . . .

MILLIE: Sounds like forever and ever.

EDITH: Yes, it was like that. Lovely.

(MILLIE *shudders.*)

MILLIE: Scared me to death as a child. Forever and ever and ever. The thought of it was beyond me. Beyond imagining. Made me want to cry.

EDITH: You wanted an end?

MILLIE: I guess. (*Pause.*)

EDITH: Eighty-five. Imagine. Do you know what we are, Millie? Octogenarians, that's what we are.

MILLIE: Yep. Fifteen years past our allotted threescore and ten.

EDITH: Mother lived to be ninety-one . . . There's the kettle, Millie.

MILLIE: Yes, I hear it.

EDITH: Well, she was in her ninety-first year. (*Pause.*) Time for my party, Millie!

MILLIE: (*Not moving.*) Yes. I guess it's time.

EDITH: O, don't just sit there then!

MILLIE: You should know I have to muster my strength.

EDITH: Oh . . . I'm sorry. Shall I do it?

MILLIE: Good. Here's your tea. (*Watches EDITH enjoying the cake.*) I had a hell of a time deciding what flavour, chocolate or lemon, so, in the end I said to Mrs. Carter, "Use your own discretion."

EDITH: Something's the matter with this tea. It's bitter. Bitter as gall.

MILLIE: I told you. It's the new tea bags. (*Tastes hers.*) I don't think it's so bad.

EDITH: There must be something the matter with your taste buds.

MILLIE: (*Sipping*) Different. I say it's different. Here . . . try some brandy.
(*Pours some in EDITH's cup, her own.*)

EDITH: Ugh, that's worse. The bitter tea of General Yan.

MILLIE: What?

EDITH: Sometimes a phrase flies into my head out of nowhere. That was the title of a book I read years ago. (*EDITH pushes away her cup.*)

MILLIE: You're not going to drink your tea? You're not going to drink your tea after all my trouble? I should think you would try not to be so childish. (*Pause.*) Take it, Edith, with a bite of your cake.

EDITH: Uhuh, can't. It tastes like medicine. Bitter like medicine. The Bitter Tea of General Yan. Don't remember what the book was about.
Perhaps General Yan was poisoned. Perhaps his tea was poisoned.
(*MILLIE takes a big gulp of tea.*)
How could you, Millie? How could you?

MILLIE: What are you talking about?

EDITH: You know what I'm talking about. You put something in the tea.

MILLIE: Don't be silly, Edith. It's new tea bags.

EDITH: You put something in the tea. Oh, Millie, you put those pills in the tea! Why, Millie, why?

MILLIE: I . . . didn't want to worry you.

EDITH: You didn't want to worry me, instead you try to kill me!

MILLIE: Jesus . . . if you could only see beyond the length of your own nose!

EDITH: That's right. Blaspheme!

MILLIE: Edith! I can't cope with the pain in my legs, I can't cope with trying to get food in the house, with trying to keep us clean, nor with the fact of our poverty, yes, I did lie to you, the rent is going up . . . and I can't cope. (*Pause.*)

EDITH: I wish you wouldn't always try to keep things from me. I'm not a child. If we need money, we'll sell my diamond ring. Those three large stones are quite valuable.

MILLIE: Your mother's diamond ring.
 EDITH: Yes.
 MILLIE: You gave it to Helen two summers ago when she was out visiting.
 EDITH: Oh. I had forgotten.
 MILLIE: But that *is* an answer. There's Helen.
 EDITH: Of course there's Helen. What do you mean?
 MILLIE: I mean she's your daughter. With a daughter's responsibilities.
 EDITH: Oh, Millie. Helen's a very busy . . . woman. She has a host of friends . . . a very . . . exacting job. Her apartment is not big.
 MILLIE: It has an extra bedroom. (*Pause.*)
 EDITH: The truth is, Millie, she wouldn't have me. (*Flash of spirit.*) And anyway, I wouldn't fit in. How could I be myself there? I'd . . . I'd wither. My glass bottle would cloud over, corrode and crumble away. (*Pause.*) No, I couldn't go to Helen's, Millie. Neither could you if you were in my place. (*Pause.*) I suppose . . . I suppose I'll have to swallow crow and agree to go to . . . one of those "Homes". As a matter of fact, Mrs. Carter says some are . . . quite nice. They have lounges with a fireplace . . . television in the sitting rooms . . . and afternoon tea . . .
 One thing, Millie, we'd be together . . . and we'd be ourselves . . .
 (*Pause.*) Well, don't just sit there . . . blinking like a blind cow . . . or a great grey owl . . .
 MILLIE: (*Fighting tears.*) I didn't want to tell you, Edith. These homes, they have certain . . . certain rules. I would have to go where they take wheelchair cases . . . and you to a different kind of institution.
 EDITH: Me to the loony bin? Is that it? Is that what you've been keeping from me?
 MILLIE: No, Edith. A . . . separate insitution. But we . . . couldn't be together.
 EDITH: I won't. I can't. I won't go to the loony bin. I won't, do you hear? I'm all right. I'm intact. I'm . . . Oh, Millie, Millie, please don't let them put me . . .
 MILLIE: (*Breaking down.*) God, don't you see? I may not be able to help it! (*MILLIE sits weeping.*)
 EDITH: Don't Millie. Oh, please . . . don't (*Pause.*) Don't Millie. Oh, please . . . don't (*Pause.*) I've never seen you cry before . . . it's liable to . . . liable to send me . . . send me spinning off . . .
 (*Pause.*) O Millie . . . please . . . Don't Millie . . .

(EDITH reaches out, takes hold of MILLIE's wrist. Takes her own hankie, tries to dry MILLIE's tears. MILLIE takes handkerchief, dries her own eyes.)

Better?

MILLIE: (Nods, blows her nose vigorously.) Better.

EDITH: (Picks up teapot, feels it.) Millie, it's still hot . . . we should drink this tea while it's still hot . . . Shouldn't we, Millie?

(MILLIE reaches for her cup. EDITH picks up hers also. They raise them to each other.)

MILLIE: Here's to . . . General Yan.

EDITH: And us, Millie! Here's to us!

(MILLIE drinks deeply.)

Oh, not so fast. I don't want you to go to sleep before me.

(They sip their tea.)

MILLIE: Mrs. Anderson comes tomorrow.

EDITH: She'll knock, and no-one will answer, and then she'll barge in, calling in "Yoohooo, yoohoo, anybody home?"

MILLIE: She'll be carrying the tray with our dinners . . .

EDITH: The gravy congealed . . . as usual . . .

MILLIE: And then she'll arrive here . . . in the living room . . . and there we'll be stiff . . . still as boards . . .

(They giggle.)

EDITH: O, poor Lady Bountiful!

(They sip their tea.)

I lied to you too, Millie. I still see red when I think of Henry taking you to bed. You, my best friend! Might as well be frank now. I still consider you were . . . a proper bitch.

MILLIE: You're not telling me a thing I didn't know. But for your information Henry didn't take me . . . I took him. It was partly your fault.

EDITH: (Setting down her cup.) My fault?

MILLIE: (Nods) You're such an egoist. So wrapped up in your desperate grief you couldn't see Henry's problem.

EDITH: I still think it was a hell of a time for you . . . to . . . to . . .

MILLIE: And it wasn't my sex appeal either. Matter of fact I never thought sex was so damn important.

EDITH: (Nods) Important. Look how much we talk about it.

MILLIE: Men liked me because I was comfortable . . . and accommodating . . .

EDITH: I see. You were just doing your Christian duty . . . like Mrs. Anderson . . . (They snicker.)

Sometimes I still have dreams about Henry. He was a handsome man, wasn't he, Millie?

MILLIE: (*Nods*) Well built. (*They sip their tea.*)
EDITH: (*Softly*) "Golden lads and girls all must
Like chimney sweepers come to dust . . ."
(*MILLIE rubs her legs, gives a slight exclamation of pain.*)
EDITH: Your legs that bad?
MILLIE: Yep.
EDITH: You'll be glad . . .
MILLIE: Yep.
EDITH: Well, I won't. Even now . . . with the world . . . shrunk,
there's still . . . roses . . . our jokes. Sometimes, in the bed-
room, I still take deep breaths just for the sheer pleasure of it.
MILLIE: Remember what you wrote on that paper.
EDITH: Death was far away then. (*She bends over, peers at the flowers.*) I
can't help wondering what it will be like. You know, Millie,
it might be . . . better than we think. It might even be, well,
nice. I mean, we can't remember being conceived or born. I
can't remember a thing until Grade 1. (*Pause.*) What do you
think it will be like, Mil?
MILLIE: Comfortable . . . and dark . . .
EDITH: And accommodating . . . (*They smile.*)
MILLIE: Pass the brandy bottle, will you, Edith?
EDITH: Here. It will ease your legs.
MILLIE: (*Pours some into both cups.*) Might as well finish it up. We don't
want to leave it for Mrs. Anderson. (*They giggle.*)
EDITH: One thing about you, Millie. You always listen. Henry used
to shut his ears to me. As though anything I had to say was
unimportant. I had my revenge once though. I must have
told you. Did I ever tell you about the time we lived in Ham-
ilton?
MILLIE: I don't think so. I don't remember.
EDITH: It was soon after we were married. You know how much sex
you have when you're first married? Well, we'd gone to bed
early, right after dinner, and I kept hearing all this com-
motion in the hall outside, shouting and banging, and I
wanted Henry to go and investigate but he said I was hearing
things, that it was nothing. "Pay attention," he kept saying
"Pay attention. Will you pay attention?" The noise kept
going on, but you know me, Millie, fluid as water, always
thinking the other person knows best . . . suddenly this guy
wearing a red hat and carrying an axe comes bursting into
the bedroom. . . there was a fire in the apartment build-
ing . . . he came bursting in just at . . . just at . . .
MILLIE: At the moment of truth!
(*They laugh.*)

EDITH: Lord, I haven't thought about that in years! Funny, I don't feel the least bit sleepy. You feel sleepy, Millie?

MILLIE: Not yet. Expect we will soon.

EDITH: Perhaps the pills are slow working. Nembutol takes quite a while. Seconal works fast.
But I wish I could remember that phrase. It keeps nagging at me . . . right there at the back of my mind. The landscape is mountainous, the people are peasants and . . .

MILLIE: And I'll bet my money on de bob-tail nag . . .

EDITH: Mil-lie!

MILLIE: Somebody bet on de bay.

EDITH: O God, I almost remembered; it was right on the tip of my tongue. The landscape is mountain . . .

MILLIE: I wonder how long these pills take. Where's that bottle?
(MILLIE *feels in her pocket. Brings out the phial. Picks up glasses from table. Settles them on nose.*)

EDITH: Oh, Millie, Millie! I've thought of it! I remembered! Listen! The landscape is mountainous, the people are peasants, and the problem is, as always, to stay alive!
(MILLIE *looks up, laughs.*)
What's so funny? I don't know what can be so . . . so . . .

MILLIE: The problem is, as always, to stay alive! Edith, these pills have an expiry date. They expired twenty years ago!

EDITH: You mean . . . we're not . . . going to die?

MILLIE: (*Laconic*) Seems General Yan is impotent.

EDITH: Alive . . . I'm alive . . . you . . . we're alive! Oh . . . I think I'm glad. Yes, I am, I'm glad. Why am I glad, Millie?

MILLIE: (*Massaging her legs.*) Damned if I know.

Christopher Levenson

WOMEN'S NAMES

As often as they like they are allowed
this vanishing trick, to disappear behind
the Spanish screen of a husband, taking on
new contexts, expectations.

Then suddenly
in a dedication or an obituary
the first name reappears like a trinket hidden
all winter under the snow, or a skeleton
leaves had too long obscured, – the father's name
and with it hints of a provenance, Italy,
Hungary, Poland or Armenia,
and all they had once lived down or passed beyond,
taunts on the schoolyard, alien credos, games,
a conspiracy of pride and separateness:
stones flash new facets in a different setting.

LATE SUMMER CROWS

Field upon field of wheat turns
in its cycle of green to gold
as I drive through summer's dying

Above grain that sends waves
in slow measure shore to shore
a still sky is glazed with sun

Against this duo-toned day
there is erratic unexpected movement:
black rags pinned on the line of sky

Here, enclosed only in mechanical sound
I can not hear hoarse shouts of crows:
they flap and dip in black silence

Harbingers of summer's decay, crows
read the cryptic messages of impending cold
muster their numbers in the gathering gold

Black flakes drift against late August sun
Sombre and certain as obituaries they sound
their grave announcement across the sky

THE HISTORY OF CHINA
(for Andy and Pat)

Three poets are walking backwards 7000 years
in Chinese history, caught in a frenzy of images
for the poems they are writing about China.
One has already visited that country and roots
poems in the fertile soil of both touch and dream
in a landscape he may never see again
except as ragged moths or reverie drawn
against the lighted windowpanes of night.
The other moves through myriad pages read
about Chinese sailors and immigrants who left
the precarious certainties of home to seek
unknown familiarities of distant shores.
The eyes of my friends are pools of vigilance
where strange fish swim delicate as silk
stitched into the fragile embroidery of remembrance.

And I am the curious third of this tentative bond
one who shambles through the silences of the others
who are so intent to draw to them the fragments
of voices that may speak to them today, somewhere
down this promenade of Oriental time. Perhaps
these antique voices that sing in their ears
may have some least words to whisper to me.

Ontario Museum of Science, May 31, 1982

AT THE ST. MUNGO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE,
DELTA B.C.

We crowd between the highway
and the Fraser, itself a highway:
a log barge ploughs the water.
On tour here, above the holes, we all listen
as the young woman explains
here they dug the hearth; this
grey line lasted 1000 years . . .
Among us today a retarded girl looks away
from the pit
and watches the big jets overhead
follow a path, one by one, down
to the edge of the sea. A boy
fondles an arrowhead he has found
(and wishes to keep) & we can almost see
the fish months between May & the cold,
before the first month on the Egyptian calendar
or the leap of the wheel in Iraq—
proto-Salish man looked at his river,
the glacial mud pouring past, & saw trees
stunted on the other shore,
no tourists

Later we sift some dirt,
our hands hungry for
what the hands of the past have touched—
grey lumps that could have caught a toe
in any age, and gratefully
the children are allowed to carry these
home, back to the buildings,
placed within the collection:
little faces stacked in a corner
waiting their turns to be taken up &
held, and dropped, and held again.

PORNOGRAPHY

Three years ago
he crossed the border into Blaine.

Three years— and the images
that splashed across his eyes
inside the dark dark
theatre (they were blinded
when they came out, into the afternoon,
the light as grey as the sea)

still splash up, flesh on flesh
and now he looks
back hard at the eyes of his friends
and sometimes they both catch
where the feasting aches to end.

Three years later
he might be anywhere in this city;
a bus will throw its hot message
across his legs and he might recall
the drive back across the line

along the salted shore
the waves toss up their spume;
at the edge they empty themselves and
fall back, fall back

Dave Margoshes

A False Moustache

In 1925, when my father came back to New York from Cleveland, he moved uptown to Harlem, where he hoped to find independence.

He was seven years older than the century, still a young man, and had spent three years on a small Yiddish newspaper learning the craft he would earn his living by for the next forty. His father and brother were both well-known journalists and it had been important for him to make his own name, on his own, and he'd gone so far, in Cleveland, as to actually change his name, to Morgenstern, which means morning star. He liked to tell me, years later, that he would often dream, in the cold rooming house attic he'd shared with a mouse he called Maleka, of returning to the city he'd once thought didn't have room for him, the city of his father's and brother's friends and influence, their reputation, like a bright morning star, burning on the horizon, forcing men to lift their heads and see.

In those days, with the war still seeming to reverberate in the air above the city like a subway train that has rumbled out of sight but not hearing, Harlem was already beginning to make the change which was to plunge it into the new world. The handsome brownstones which lined 125th Street and its dissecting avenues were starting the painful process of transforming themselves into neat, genteel boarding houses, like capped teeth in a once proud mouth—the smile is still warm, but it no longer glitters. My father took a room on the second floor of a Lexington Avenue house that had once belonged to a lawyer with Tammany connections. The lawyer had died in debt and now his solemn parlour was the domain of an aunt who had only her wits and boarders to keep her together. The room was clean, with a scrubbed window behind starched white curtains looking out on the avenue and one slim slice of Gramercy Park, one block south, that wasn't cut off by the buildings across the way. North of 125th, where the roots were deeper or the money of better quality, my father didn't know which, there were still families with servants living in the pillared, imposing brownstones, and from his window, on warm afternoons, he could watch the black nursemaids, who lived far south of the pleasant street, strolling with their charges to the

park, where they would sit on benches and watch the children play in the sun. He paid \$12 a week, and that included coffee and rolls in the morning, dinner sharply at 6. When he worked the night shift, which was often, his landlady packed him a wholesome lunch.

There was no mouse in the room on Lexington Avenue and, even though the subway ride downtown to Lower Broadway took almost an hour, my father enjoyed living there, far from the sights and smells of his boyhood and his working world. And his enjoyment was enhanced somewhat when, after several weeks, he ran into Shmelke in the hall outside his room.

"Shmelke," my father said, surprised and pleased, still new enough in his surroundings to be lonely, "what brings you here?"

"I have to go," Shmelke shrugged, gesturing toward the toilet at the end of the hall. At the other end, my father could see, a door hung open, the door to the room where, he believed, a traveling salesman with a lingerie firm resided. Or had.

"So go," my father said, moving out of the lean man's way, "but step in on your way back and begin the process again."

A minute later, they were lifting their water glasses to the memory of Cleveland. "May that infernal lake from which blows that infernal cold wind overspill its shores and swallow the infernal city up," Shmelke said, licking his lips with a peculiar sound, like small waves on stones. He swallowed the whisky with a single gulp.

He was a tall, fleshless man with ears like mushrooms springing out of moist earth, fond of suits a size too large, as if he expected to suddenly put on weight. His lips were the size and color of the patches of a worn inner tube. He was altogether the most homely man my father had ever known, quite an accomplishment in a world populated by men who worked too hard or kept their heads on too lofty planes to be physically vain.

"It was my partner, that infernal rascal Goldblatt, who forced me to descend," Shmelke said in explanation for his presence, both in the city and these modest surroundings. He was a humorless, literal man whose command of his second language was not up to his reach.

"The ticket selling?" my father inquired after a moment's thought. They had not been friends, by any means, but they had frequented the same cafe in Cleveland, a sort of expatriate Cafe Royale filled with poets, newspapermen, actors, artists, musicians and hangers-on, and during the three years he had known of half a dozen different ventures in which Shmelke had been involved. Artists' representative was what he liked to call himself; press agent was closer to the truth; ticket agent was, in fact, what he was the last time my father had heard.

"Let me tell you, that was no sofa on roses, that expedition. It was a service, a struggle of love, something to do for the people, you know

what I mean, Morgenstern? You think I could make a dollar on a thing like that?"

"Would I argue with you?" my father asked. He poured another two fingers of whisky into the dusty glasses.

"My partner, what a *shlimazal*, a head for business he had on his shoulders as big as this." Shmelke held up his thumb, examined it critically, then replaced it with his pinky. "As big as this, no bigger." He gulped down the whisky with a rubbery slap. "We had these tickets, this big order, something really expressive, for opera, Caraso, no, not him, but someone just as infamous, and it brought in a lot of money. A lot? It made me enervated having that much money so close. And was I right?" He slapped his narrow forehead with the palm of his hand. "That infernal *shmegega* had a chance—a *chance*, he called it, a hole in the ground would be more like it—to buy up a whole theatre for Gilbert and Sullivan, so he used all the money from the opera tickets. The whole cat and caboodle."

"Sounds like a smart move," my father said naively.

"A smart move? Sure, like suicide is smart for the widow and the dolphins." Shmelke glared at my father as if he were in the company of a fool. My father tipped the bottle over the glasses.

"So there comes the man from the opera saying where's the money from the tickets? So what do we say?"

"Tomorrow?" my father offered.

Shmelke peered at him with skeptical admiration. "Sure, tomorrow, that's context. But what happens after tomorrow?"

"Gilbert and Sullivan is sold?"

"Morgenstern, no offensive, but you and my infernal partner Goldblatt would be sweethearts, regular darlings, newlyweds you could be."

"You couldn't sell Gilbert and Sullivan?"

Shmelke's watery eyes rolled up and almost disappeared into his eyelids. "Morgenstern, you can *always* sell Gilbert and Sullivan. In Cleveland, Gilbert could be elected mayor, Sullivan the mayor, maybe."

"So what's the problem?"

"Problem? Who said anything about a problem? Morgenstern, you surprise me. *Problem?* What a cryptic. No problem, believe me. The Gilbert and Sullivan money goes to the opera and that accounting is closed, the book is finished, *kaput*. A little inconsideration, maybe, when the Gilbert and Sullivan cancels and there's the refunds to make, but a *problem?* *Noooo.*"

Shmelke glared at my father, challenging him, and, though he was tempted to say he didn't understand, my father held his tongue. After that, the two men saw each other often, in the hallway outside the toilet, rather than at the dinner table, as my father was working nights, and often they would share a glass of whisky in my father's room, occasion-

ally in Shmelke's. The man did not bathe often and there was an odor in his room which my father found worth the price of his whisky to avoid.

It was spring when my father moved into the room in Harlem and the city was opening itself up for him the way leaves and blossoms open themselves up to the insects that float on the warm breezes of April and May. The Jewish life of New York was rich and exciting in those days, its theatre vigorous, its literature strong and searching, its artists bold and sensitive with a freedom growing out of a new sense of purpose after a hundred years or more of lying low. There were a half a dozen Yiddish dailies in the city then and the competition between them was fierce, their pages filled with essays on the arts and philosophy, criticism, Talmudic debate, humor, advice on everything from self-improvement to affairs of the heart and body, along with news of the far-flung community and the world at large that owed as much, in its style and presentation, to Hearst and Pulitzer as it did to Spinoza and the learned rabbis of Poland and Russia. My father was a news writer, not an essayist, toiling for the paper called *Der Tag*, or The Day, but he loved the company of the great men he drank coffee with in the cafeteria at the corner of East Broadway and Delancy Street and at the Cafe Royale, where the lights burned all through the night like beacons.

Sometimes, he would encounter Shmelke there. The tall, skinny man with the pennant ears had secured a position as press agent to a rabbinical council and was also doing publicity work for a hospital in the Bronx. But his heart and soul belonged to the arts and he often could be found in the evenings at the Cafe Royale and other warm, bright rooms that sparkled through the gray streets of the lower east side like fireflies.

"Morgenstern, Morgenstern, join us. Sit down, my friend. Combine with me a drink. You know Rubenstein and Pashka?"

"Of course." My father sat, smiling. Despite the invitation, he knew he would pay for the whisky he ordered.

"Rubenstein, the steamed violinist, and Pashka, the clammed dramatist. Morgenstern, the novelist and poet."

My father knew both men—one a teacher of music at a Hebrew school, the other a stage hand at the theatre across the street—and the conversation was good, the evening warm. He lingered, although it was late. Shmelke and he rode home together on the subway.

"Come in, have a drink," Shmelke begged. "I've got something to show you."

My father's curiosity was stronger than his tiredness and he followed the bobbing head with its ballast ears into the cluttered room, rich with the smell of socks. On the rumpled bed, there was a peaked white cap like those he had seen the black nursemaids in the park wearing. Shmelke snatched it up and twirled it on a finger, grinning darkly.

There was a bottle of cheap rye on the dresser and my father poured two glasses.

"You should see her, Morgenstern," Shmelke said. "An angel, a dark angel, like devilsfood cake, like an animal of the night."

My father was moved by the intensity and clarity of Shmelke's description. He swallowed his drink and took out a cigarette. "You've had this woman here? In your room?"

"Right *here*," Shmelke grinned, patting the twisted bedclothes. "Why not?" He tossed the cap carelessly onto the bed, shrugging his shoulders. "What do I care what people think?"

"Very commendable, my friend, but does that include our landlady?"

The rubbery lips smacked at the rim of his glass. "Depression, depression, Morgenstern, is the soul of valor." He winked.

"And the girl? She's nice?"

Shmelke laughed, a cackling that reminded my father of the chickens that used to share the kitchen of his mother's farmhouse in the winter, years before, when he'd been a boy. "Nice, what's nice? To the Cafe Royale, I don't intend to bring her. *Here*," he pointed to the bed, "she's nice."

"Is it wise, though, one of those girls?" my father asked cautiously.

"Morgenstern, of you I'm shameless." Shmelke fixed him with a stern gaze, the rims of his elephant ears reddening slightly. "A man like you, a spigot."

*

During that first year of his return to the city, when my father was firmly establishing himself as a newspaperman, and some time before he would meet my mother, he had love affairs of his own, great friendships, nights of talk and whisky and coffee that lasted till dawn. He was active in Jewish Writers Guild, which got its start at the same time as the Newspaper Guild but soon outstripped its English language rival. He got a raise. And one night, in late summer, he was witness to a murder and wrote a story that made an impression on his editors.

My father had an interest in labor, but there already was a labor editor on the paper, a stern old man who had been a scholar and teacher in the old country and who wrote with the grace of an albatross. When this man, Jaffe, was busy, my father was often pressed into service to help him if there was a conflict, and on an evening in September he went to cover a meeting of a group of garment cutters who were organizing themselves.

The meeting was in a small kosher restaurant on 17th Street, between 3rd and 4th avenues. It had been warm when my father left Harlem that afternoon and he had not worn a coat, but as darkness fell it turned cold and a stiff wind was sending newspapers skittering along the empty street as he walked toward the restaurant, the collar of his suit jacket turned up against his neck. A man in a lumberjack's plaid shirt stood

lounging against the plate glass of the restaurant, a toothpick in his mouth.

"Morgenstern," the man said.

"Steinfeld, hello, you look like you're ready for heavy labor."

"I'm glad you could come," Steinfeld said. "Those shits at The Forward, they don't pay any attention." He was a big man with a sensitive face who drank coffee occasionally in the Cafe Royale with a thin actress he was in love with. In Galicia, my father knew, he had studied to be a doctor, but now he worked in the garment district, his quick fingers racing over patterns with a scissors. He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Heavy labor, sure. This is no kids' stuff, you know."

There had been a strike in one of the sweatshops that abounded like blossoms off the stem of lower 7th Avenue, and then, mysteriously, there was a fire in the building and two of the organizers of the strike were arrested, charged with arson. Steinfeld himself had avoided the police only by accident. The fire was the work of gangsters, everyone knew, but fighting back was no easy matter.

My father lit a cigarette and glanced up the street. On the corner, a light burned in a news stand but the other shops were dark. He would have liked to stand outside and chat with Steinfeld but it was cold and he opened the door of the restaurant. "See you inside." As he moved into the warmth and the clatter of voices from the already crowded tables, he heard the sound of a car on the street but thought nothing of it. The shot rang out just as the door was clicking shut behind him and it didn't register immediately; even when the glass shattered and Steinfeld's shoulders crashed through toward him, he didn't fully understand what had happened. Then there was confusion, shouting, a man rushing past him, jostling him, knocking him sideways, and he cut his hand on a piece of glass and found himself on his knees, staring into Steinfeld's wide open eyes. What he remembered most of that moment, even many years later, was the lack of surprise in them.

His hand was still bleeding when he got home, hours later, although he had tied a handkerchief around it. Taking notes, telephoning, typing his story, there had been no chance for the wound to even begin to glaze over. The handkerchief was stiff with congealing blood and my father was attempting to take it off, his head lowered, as he climbed the stairs, and he bumped into Shmelke, who was standing at the top of the steps.

"That woman, she's here, what should I do?" Shmelke said breathlessly. His massive ears were tinged with red along the rims like warning signs, and his lips seemed bluer than usual.

"So?" my father said, elbowing past him. "Excuse me. What woman is that?"

He went to the bathroom and snapped on the light, discarding the bloody handkerchief in the toilet.

"You don't understand," Shmelke whined. He was standing right be-

hind him, his face pressed close to my father's shoulder. "She's right here, in my infernal room."

"What's to understand?" my father said. He turned on the cold water tap and plunged his hand into the luke warm stream. "You should be congratulated, Shmelke. A charming young lady, visiting you here in your own room, and at this hour, no less. Wonderful. You are to be congratulated and I do congratulate you. And wish you good luck." He was filled with the events of the evening and would have liked nothing better than to share them, again, with anyone interested, even Shmelke, and the man's single-mindedness irritated him.

"*Morgenstern*, sometimes I wonder how such a dope can manage to climb the stairs, let alone turn the knob on the door." He pulled his head back when he saw the expression that flashed across my father's face. "You'll excuse me, I didn't mean to defend. But this woman, she's got me in such a tizzle. This *svartze*."

"Oh, that woman," my father said, his eyes widening. "She's here?"

"Here? That's nothing. Here I could live with. It's who she's got with her that sends shavings up my spine."

"Her boyfriend?" My father turned off the water and held his hand up to the light to examine the cut. It wasn't very deep but the glass had severed a big vein, an artery, perhaps, and the blood wouldn't stop seeping out. "Her husband? Her mother?"

"Worse," Shmelke said gloomily. His belligerence had suddenly faded and he stared at the raw wound on my father's hand as if he were considering how a similar gash would look on his throat. "What happened to your hand?"

"It's nothing," my father said. All of a sudden, he wanted to speak no more of it. All he wanted was to go to his room, drink a whisky, and lie on his bed in the dark, where he knew the sound of shattering glass would echo in his ears all morning long. "What is it, Shmelke?"

"She's pregnant."

"Oh, so that's it." My father turned back to his hand, wrapping toilet paper around it till it was bulky as a crumpled package.

Shmelke observed this in silence, pursing his lips like water wings bobbing in a rough sea. "You know, maybe, a doctor?" he blurted out finally.

My father looked up from his hand into Shmelke's face and was washed with a wave of disgust. He remembered the blank, stoical eyes of Steinfeld staring up at him and he felt, suddenly, very tired. "Sure, sure," he said. He brushed past Shmelke. "I'll see in the morning." He walked down the hall.

"And *Morgenstern*?" There was a plaintiveness in Shmelke's voice my father had never heard before and it made him stop, his hand on the knob of his own door.

"Yes?"

"You could talk to her, maybe?"

My father turned around. "Now?"

"Sure, now. She's in my room, waiting. She won't go. All night, practically, she's here. She won't give me any peace. And Mrs. Lowe. . . ." He nodded toward the stairs.

"Waiting for what?" my father asked. "Talk to her about what?"

"Tell her about the doctor you know. Tell her about how safe and sure this doctor is, how they take preclusions and it's no more than getting your tinsels out, just a little cut and. . . ."

My father didn't wait for him to finish. He went down the hall and into Shmelke's room without knocking. The woman was sitting on the bed, her knees together and her hands clasped on them like a schoolchild waiting to receive her lesson. "Hello," my father said. "My name is Harry Morgenstern, I live here, down the hall."

The woman looked up at him and blinked. She was a small, very dark girl, hardly out of her teens, with a pointy chin and shoulders that didn't seem to matter. Her face was so dark, my father couldn't clearly make out her features, but she seemed pleasant enough, though hardly pretty. There was a blue kerchief with little white flowers on her head. "Where's Louis?" she demanded. Her voice was small but strong, like a rain that seems innocent enough but wets you through.

"I'm right here, my little flower," Shmelke said from the doorway. "My friend Morgenstern, the novelist, he's a man of the world, believe me, to him this is nothing. He's seen this sort of thing dozens of times." He made a snapping motion with his fingers but they wouldn't connect and there was only a rasping sound. "It's only a trifle."

My father sat on the bed beside the woman. She glared at him, but after a moment, her gaze softened.

"Why don't you leave us for a moment, Shmelke? There's a bottle in my room, help yourself." He had to fumble in his pocket with his left hand for the key. They waited until the door had closed, Shmelke's footsteps sounded in the hall, and another door could be heard opening, then closing. Then my father and the black woman looked at each other again.

"He's very stupid, our friend," my father said simply.

"Ain't no friend of mine, not any more," the woman said. "But stupid, that's for sure."

"I'm not the man of the world Shmelke says I am," my father said, smiling, "but I can see trouble."

"I've got plenty to see." The skin on the woman's cheekbones was so tight it glistened.

"What's your name?"

"Adrienne."

"That's nice," my father said. "That's a nice name."

The woman began to cry, lifting her hands to cover her face, the sobs coming soft but steady for over a minute while my father looked away

and said nothing. When the sobbing became inaudible, he said: "You don't want him."

"I know that, mister. I *acted* the fool, but I ain't no fool."

"What *do* you want?"

"I don't know. I came here thinking I wanted one thing but now I don't know."

"A doctor?"

"A butcher, you mean? No, thank you, mister. I don't want no coat hangers and razor blades in me. Bad enough what I let get into me in the first place."

"Take it easy," my father said. "I'm not Shmelke. I just asked."

"I'm sorry," Adrienne said.

They were quiet for a moment. My father looked idly at his hand. A muted red stain was beginning to spread through the toilet paper wrapping like fog spreading through the streets in the Cleveland evening a lifetime ago. "Does Shmelke have any money?" he asked.

"That man?" She snorted. "He spends every cent on whisky and such with his fancy friends downtown."

"I can give you some money, if it would help."

"It would," Adrienne said simply. It was clear she wasn't asking, but she wouldn't refuse.

My father stood up. "What about him?"

The woman shook her head sadly. The whites of her eyes were pink now, and her face was blurred, as if it had let go of the bones beneath the skin. "I don't want to see that poor excuse again."

"Wait here," my father said. He went across the hall to his room, hesitating just for a second before opening the door. Shmelke was sitting on the chair beside the bed, an empty glass in his hand. His reddened ears seemed to flap, like flags of distress.

My father knelt beside the bed and took some money from its hiding place in his suitcase. There wasn't much.

"What are you doing?" Shmelke asked. His voice was tiny, like that of a punished child.

"Saving your life," my father said.

"What do you mean?"

"What in thunder do you think I mean?" my father snapped. I know his temper, and I can imagine the way his eyes must have darkened, his moustache bristling. "Her father and brothers would kill you. I'm buying that off. But there's one condition. You can't let them find you. You'll have to leave."

Shmelke was speechless, but when my father glared at him, showing no signs of relenting, he said finally: "I'll go tomorrow."

"Tonight would be better, but it's your neck."

"I'll go early. There are things I have to do, circumcisions I have to attend to. . . ."

"You know I don't mean just from here. I mean from New York."

"I know," Shmelke said bitterly. "I'm not stupid."

My father started for the door. Blood was beginning to drip on the bills he held in his bandaged hand.

"I'll pay you back," Shmelke said.

"If you want."

"I pay my debts, Morgenstern. I don't like to be a belcher."

My father shut the door and stood in the hall for a moment, staring at the money in his bloody hand. It was all he had, but that didn't mean anything.

*

The following year, my father was keeping company with a woman who might have become my mother, had he been a little less demanding. Years later, he liked to tell stories about this woman, whose name was Sarah, and kid my mother that he had settled for the daughter of a fanatic when he could have had a physician for a father-in-law.

My father was living in Coney Island at that time, in the same tiny apartment where he and my mother would share their first year together soon after, but Sarah's family was one of those which still maintained a handsome brownstone just north of 125th Street, a home with rich carpets on the parquet floors and servants living in the coach house. So, although he no longer lived there, he was a frequent visitor to Harlem, and he had occasion, once or twice, to pass Adrienne on the street or in the park. She had gone south, to stay with relatives, and had had her child. It was still there, with an aunt, and she was back, living with a man who fixed shoes in a small shop on 125th a few blocks east and tending the infant of a white family, taking it in its stroller for airings in the park, where the sun filtering through the newly opened leaves dappled the grass and benches with blotches of light and dark like footprints in the snow. My father, running across her with the stroller parked beside her bench, her uniform crisp and neat on her small, unremarkable form, paused to admire the infant, inquire about the other and shake his head sadly.

"It don't bear thinking about much," Adrienne said, and he agreed. There was no mention of Shmelke.

One Saturday afternoon in June, my father and Sarah took a short cut through the park on the way to Columbia University, where they planned to attend a free concert. As they walked, my father was suddenly arrested by a strange sight. A tall man wearing an overcoat was sitting on a bench under a chestnut tree, his ears big as the leaves hanging above his head. The overcoat was buttoned, although it was a warm day, and its collar was raised. The man wore dark glasses and there was a shapeless moustache over his bluish lips.

My father put his hand on Sarah's arm and steered her to a bench some fifty feet beyond the one where the man with the moustache sat, but facing it. "What is it?" Sarah asked. My father shooshed her with a finger to his nose. He crossed his legs and lit a cigarette.

Several people passed by, including a black nursemaid with a stroller and two small boys in short pants in tow. She wore her hair in braids and her silvery voice rose through the air like a bird's song as she chastised the lagging boys. They passed on, toward the far side of the park.

Before my father's cigarette was half gone, the man with the moustache, who had been nervously turning his head to and fro, became aware of the couple watching him and he bolted to his feet and began to hurry away.

"Wait here," my father said. He had to run to catch up with the tall man's quick strides.

"Shmelke."

"For God's sake, Morgenstern, my life is in jalopy, keep your voice down."

My father took him by the arm and gestured around. They were alone on a path that led through a small clump of trees. On the street, a hundred yards beyond, a fire engine raced by, its bell clanging. "Look, there's not a soul in sight. You're in no danger."

"I can't be too careless," Shmelke said.

They sat down on a bench.

"That false moustache is ridiculous," my father said. "Why didn't you grow a real one?"

"I was going to, but my wife didn't like it. It scritchted," he said with disgust, as if describing some loathsome insect crawling on his face.

"Your wife?" my father asked.

"In Dayton."

"I heard you went back to Cleveland."

"Are you crazy, Morgenstern? Only to get some clothes."

"And in Dayton?"

Shmelke's lean shoulders had to struggle against the weight of the overcoat to produce a satisfied shrug. "Not so bad, not so bad as you might think. I'm in business there, producing plays, bringing artists in, musicians, traveling shows, let me tell you, Morgenstern, what Dayton has for culture, you could put in there." He raised a thumb, examined it critically, then replaced it with a pinky. "No more than that. In Dayton, they got taste in their elbow."

"And you're married?"

"Well. . . not exactly married," Shmelke shrugged again, the tips of his ears flaring. "Bedthroned. The happy day is next week."

"And what brings you here, Shmelke? Taking your life in your hands."

Shmelke sighed deeply, the breath rattling through his chest like a cold wind through dead branches, and the brown caterpillar beneath his nose wiggled, one end hanging loose. "There was. . . there was something I wanted to see. With my own eyes."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to see if. . . My wife, the woman to whom I'm intended, that is, Hindel, she would like to have children."

"So?" my father said. He took out a cigarette and lit it, wishing he had a bottle so he and Shmelke could share their ritual drink.

"So," Shmelke said, spreading his arms, "so I'm not such a thing of beauty, you know, but. . . and Hindel, well, she is a wonderful woman, but. . ." His voice trailed off and he looked over my father's shoulder, as if for inspiration in the trees.

"But what does all this have to do with your coming here?" my father asked.

"I wanted to see if. . . you know, Morgenstern, if the child looks like me."

"It doesn't have a moustache, if that's what you mean," my father said. Immediately, he regretted having said that. If there was one thing he had learned in the long years it had taken him to come this far, it was not to hurt people, that it always came back to him if he did.

Shmelke took off his dark glasses and my father saw there were tears in his gray, almost colorless eyes. There was no surprise in them, though, as if the man who possessed them had become accustomed to rebuff. He clasped my father's hand and squeezed it, and for the first time in many months the place where it had been cut began to hurt.

"Is it so wrong, Morgenstern, for a man to want to see his own spring-off? His own child? His own flesh and bones?"

"No," my father said. He disengaged his hand and got to his feet. Sarah would be wondering where he had gotten to.

Shmelke made a little sound in his throat and lowered his head, looking to his oversized feet for an answer that had eluded him so far in Cleveland and Dayton and would not easily be found here, either downtown on East Broadway or uptown in Harlem, where some people say the air is thinner.

My father didn't mention the money still owing, and neither did Shmelke.

Monty Reid

DRESSING MANNEQUINS

She has daughters, she tells herself, not
that it matters. Among the limbs, the rows
of heads, she puts a body together. She

has daughters, she tells herself, who could
wear these summer fashions that leave so much skin
exposed, that fit tight around the bodice. They are

so beautiful.

They wait for her, disjointed, staring
in distraction at the glass; they have been through

this before. And she almost feels the bodies
of her daughters in her hands, how she conceives them
in sun-dresses and ribbons, how they could never hold

still. She sticks an arm into its socket and
pins fabric around a motionless waist.
It is never complete.

Even when she joins the window-shoppers and stares
in from the far side of the glass at these fashionable
women who are not her daughters, whose contempt

for those nothing will fit is made harsh and
immobile by floodlights, she knows ways
to improve it. She knows they are talking

tho she cannot hear them, about Tokyo, Milan, Rome,
that they invent her every night, maternal and
made of easy syllables. She can see their lips

purse around her name, as if they had more
to say and were only waiting for the pedestrians
to pass. And she buys clothes

for her daughters, who can wear almost anything,
remembering their sizes, but never
at the store she works at.

Lorna Goodison

ON BECOMING A MERMAID

Watching the underlife idle by
you think drowning must be easy death
just let go and let the water carry you
away and under
the current pulls your bathing-plaits loose
your hair floats out straightened by the water
your legs close together fuse all the length down
your feet now one broad foot
the toes spread into
a fish-tail, fan-like
your sex locked under
mother-of-pearl scales
you're a nixie now, a mermaid
a green tinged fish/fleshed woman/thing
who swims with thrashing movements
and stands upended on the sea floor
breasts full and floating buoyed by the salt
and the space between your arms now always
filled and your sex sealed forever under
mother-of-pearl scale/locks closes finally
on itself like some close-mouthed oyster.

LeRoy Gorman

FOUR HAIKU: Billboard Series

on life insurance
she holds a smirk
her neon flickering

.

bulb's burned out
all that's left a shady crotch.
& faint hurrah

.

under the billboard girl's scrutiny
I cast my ballot
for a man who is dying

.

the little man who changes bulbs
is stopping off to dust
the paper lady's sunglasses

NOT ALL THINGS SLEEP

I
Not all things sleep

Not even the moon
which vanishes for the day,
nor the sun
which vanishes for the night

Stones do not sleep;
they study the earth relentlessly
with their hard round eyes

In me, the dance does not sleep
though awareness does;
the blood continues its circles
from head to foot to head
and a million cells split
fizzing like bubbles

That which does not sleep
does not deceive, does not dream
recriminations

Only in sleep is there hiding
and not everything seeks refuge

2

This is the way of the waking:
open mouths demanding food,
emitting sound, shuffling aimlessly
through any landscape, all landscapes

The waking are perplexed,
wonder what has happened
while they slept,
insist it must be spring
if they awake in April

They analyze and premeditate,
yet long always
for what the stones know
and the blood

MUTATION

You feel your sex close,
your legs lose their lust for walking

You are becoming
something earthbound and androgynous

The moon above you, remote
in its borrowed costume,
is halved like a harlequin,
a light and dark jester

You are in awe of its balance,
its cool celestial symmetry

Yet you want to better the moon,
to eel your way through the streets
like a silver worm
burrowing light in all
the night's possible directions

This is the aim:

to shudder with light,
to be within the world
shadowless, moving

H. C. Artmann

A STORY ABOUT MYSELF

in a mallorcan folk tale it is said that i once lived in the region of manacor and on my way home one night fell into an open sewer because the wind had blown out my lantern but i found nothing strange in that and marched on confidently after long wandering finally to arrive before a bright window that in my innocence i took for the city gate of a lilliputian republic and through this i climbed whereupon i came across a wondrous city in which every proper person was one-legged for which reason my two-leggedness created an uproar and a hullabaloo so that to save my life i leaped off like a stag and with difficulty finally found a hiding place and thus escaped the provoked masses there i hid my left leg in my broad plus-fours whereupon i was a welcome guest everywhere with no need to fear harm from any human hand.

once i had lived for a certain time in this city it is said i grew tired of hopping around and longed greatly for my hidden leg again and thus one night between dew and fog i pulled it out and quickly went on my way.

whether in the days i spent with those one-legged people i also married a pretty buxom one-legged woman nothing is mentioned in this story but only that i fell into an open sewer that same night because the wind had blown out my lantern but i found nothing strange in that and marched on confidently after long wandering finally to arrive before a bright window that in my innocence i took for the city gate of a lilliputian republic and through this i climbed whereupon i came across a wondrous city in which every proper person was one-eyed for which reason my having two eyes created an uproar and a hullabaloo so that to save my life i leaped off like a stag and with difficulty finally found a hiding place and thus escaped the provoked masses there i pasted over my left eye with cobbler's wax whereupon i was a welcome guest everywhere with no need to fear harm from any human hand.

once i had lived for a certain time in this city it is said i grew tired of squinting and longed greatly for my waxed-over eye again and thus one

night between dew and fog i freed it from cobbler's wax and quickly went on my way.

whether in the days i spent with those one-eyed people i also married a pretty buxom one-eyed woman nothing is mentioned in this story but only that i fell into an open sewer that same night because the wind had blown out my lantern but i found nothing strange in that and marched on confidently after long wandering finally to arrive before a bright window that in my innocence i took for the city gate of a lilliputian republic and through this i climbed whereupon i came across a wondrous city in which every proper person was nose-less for which reason my having a nose created an uproar and a hullabaloo so that to save my life i leaped off like a stag and with difficulty finally found a hiding place and thus escaped the provoked masses there because i could neither hide it in my plus-fours nor paste it over with cobbler's wax i cut off my nose whereupon i was a welcome guest everywhere with no need to fear harm from any human hand.

whether in the days i spent with those nose-less people i also married a pretty buxom nose-less woman nothing is mentioned in this story but only that i fell into an open sewer that same night because the wind had blown out my lantern but i found nothing strange in that and marched on confidently after long wandering finally to arrive before a bright window that in my innocence i took for the city gate of a lilliputian republic and through this i climbed whereupon i stood in my own vegetable garden gadabout my pretty buxom wife said for thirty days and thirty nights you abandon your house and wife the devil knows where you've been turning the world into a brothel again with strange whores and not with me!

after these words she stopped short and reached for my nose but it was no longer there . . .

since then it is said i have wandered through the region shunned by man and beast alike no hotel no hostel no nightly refuge accepted me without my nose i slept on the hard floors of empty houses where even the wood-lice and spiders ran from me yes i even intended to hang myself from a tree but the branch broke for repulsion at my terrible appearance.

that's a pure fiction on the part of these people who claim to have seen me one mild summer's night leaping like a stag through the city of manacor.

translated from the German by Derk Wynand

WOLF CALL NORTH OF TIMMINS

I am a wolf. I am
this particular wolf.
My stars cast starving
shadows. Through its creaking jawbone
of ice, the lake calls
back. The moon will not mate
with me. Snow bites hard
at my pads. Even a tail
needs feeding tonight. But this low
-slung howl hauls
up like a hawser, looping
generously over calloused hills,
fraying snow beneficently
into forests, seeming, as is usual,
endless. I hang from it, a single
hunger, its only possession.
I am all that keeps it going.

GRANDMA'S PRESERVES

These are the well-bottled
pages of her only diary.
Floating onions press
a crowd of faces to the glass.
Her children flatten their noses.

The moon would lose its memory
through so many phases
of pickled eggs. They shine
in a cloudless lunar vinegar
from the packed skies of her life.

Blueberry jams darken
slowly, sugaring with the stored
storms of her summers. Juices
squall against the insides of the jars,
rattling shelves like window-panes.

She never could stop beetroots blurting
out their red, though the gunshots
were years ago. A father in the Somme,
a son at Dieppe. She bottled
grief with beetroots anyway.

Her fetal beans quicken
in their amniotic fluid, coming
to term through glittering spasms
of glass, destined to inherit for her
the yet unpickled earth.

A HISTORY OF LOONS

When the first settlers struggled to the lake,
eyesight fraying at the edges from exhaustion,
the loons efficiently recorded their pasts,
among waves as black yet thumping as whole
generations of lost and tumbling family
Bibles. They cried "hogmanay-hogmanay"
over the water, tones sluicing round
and round as warm and easy as a good
malt in an earthenware bowl; then skirled
from morning mists as eerily as feathered
bagpipes, or highland ghosts with severe
hysterics. After three generations, it was hard
to remember another beginning before
the start of their song. Even when the lake
was calm, wave after wave of settlers
rolled in. The loons were ready for them. Calls
went wobbling over the water, as uncertain of their direction
as bent axles, lurching along
through a virgin mid-air to an ever-rimless
horizon. Bagpipes and highland ghosts
blended with loon's cries that billowed
across the lake as huskily as smoke. Burning
villages from distant lands poured
out of their blackened beaks, and whole
streets collapsed in a checkerboard of throats.
For several summers, the sunsets conducted
a thorough pogrom in the red of the lake.
Now, in the moving thickets of mist,
their voices recite a babble of histories.
Pasts swirl slowly and blow
through each other. Bagpipes lament in loud
ashes of synagogues; hasids step
out through their re-peopled heather.
A death in one past is consoled
by birth in another. It is hard to imagine
a more accurate chronicle than this song.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

LEWIS HORNE teaches English at the University of Saskatchewan. Thistledown Press published a collection of his poems, *The Seventh Day* in 1983; other stories of his have appeared or will appear in *Ascent*, *Chariton Review*, *Descant*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

DERK WYNAND teaches Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. His latest collection is *Second Person* (Sono Nis Press, 1983); *Fetishistic* is forthcoming.

CATHY FORD's latest collections are *Affaires Of The Heart* (Harbour Publishing, 1983) and *By Violent Means* (forthcoming, blewointment press). She lives on Mayne Island, B.C.

ALISON McALPINE lives in Vancouver. This is her first publication.

ROBYN SARAH, of Montreal, is the author of *Shadowplay* (Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1978) and *The Space Between Sleep and Waking* (Villeneuve, 1981). She is co-founder of Villeneuve and co-editor of the serial anthology *FOUR BY FOUR*.

ELIZABETH GOURLAY is a poet as well as a playwright. Her latest collection is *The M Poems* (Fiddlehead, 1983); her latest play, *The Cut Off* (produced by Langara College, 1983).

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON has published five books of poetry and two translations from 17th C. Dutch poetry. He teaches at Carleton University and is the Editor-in-Chief of *Arc*.

GLEN SORESTAD's poetry has appeared in a wide variety of magazines and journals across N. America. A longtime resident of Saskatoon, his latest collection is *Ancestral Dances* (Thistledown, 1979).

DALE ZIEROTH is presently teaching at Kwantlen College, Surrey and the Banff School of Fine Arts. Author of *Clearing* and *Mid-River* (both with House of Anansi), he has new work forthcoming in *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Forum*, and *Canadian Literature*.

DAVE MARGOSHES lives in Bragg Creek, Alberta and teaches journalism at Mount Royal College in Calgary. Recently his work was featured in the anthology *Third Impressions* (Oberon, 1982).

MONTY REID co-edits *The Camrose Review*. A new book of his, *The Dream Of Snowy Owls* is forthcoming from Longspoon Press. He lives in Camrose, Alta.

LORNA GOODISON previously appeared in 21:4 and is the author of *Tamarind Season* (Kingston, Institute of Jamaica, 1980).

LEROY GORMAN's latest collections of haiku are *Beautiful Chance* and *Heart's Garden*. He writes from Napanee, Ontario.

EVA TIHANYI writes from Toronto. Thistledown will bring out her second collection of poems in November 1984.

H. C. ARTMANN was born in Austria in 1921. He is a popular and leading poet, known particularly for his dialect poems.

ROGER NASH teaches philosophy, art and literature at Laurentian University and has published widely in journals and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. A collection, *Settlement In A School Of Whales*, is forthcoming from Fiddlehead Poetry Books in the fall or early winter.

DERRICK CLINTON CARTER recently received the Bomac Batten Award for best magazine cover design for his cover of volume 21:1. He is a Vancouver-based Art Director/ Graphic Designer.

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are undernourished has increased from 600 million to 800 million. The number of people who are malnourished has increased from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion. The number of people who are obese has increased from 100 million to 300 million.

There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the world population has increased from 5 billion to 6 billion. Another is that the world has become more urbanized. A third is that the world has become more affluent. A fourth is that the world has become more industrialized. A fifth is that the world has become more developed.

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