

WRITING UCONN



Spring 1991

fiction essays poetry

WRITING UCONN



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CONTENTS

3	Matt Fitch
11	Scott Kolesar
13	Kristin Stueger
14	Michael Neckerman
16	Jaqueline Murray-Yeo
20	Jeffrey Quadir Jackson
21	Joseph Stinson
22	Tom Lyon
27	Khan Nong
30	Mary Kane
32	Thomas Dougherty
33	Dan Waters
36	Martin Heifner
43	Richard Martin
49	Kelli K. Johnson
62	Kristin Stueger

an hozomeen press publication.

Writing UConn

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Information about this book and other Hozomeen Press publications is available at the postal address:

Hozomeen Press
Post Office Box 654
Mystic, Connecticut
06355.

Matt Fitch

This fifth issue of WRITING UCONN has been prepared in order to present some of the best undergraduate writing at UConn. We would like to acknowledge those writers whose words have been honored by the University this spring.

The issue was prepared and edited by Matt Fitch, Hillary Neckerman, Mike Neckerman, Dan Waters, and Khan Wong. The cover design was by Doug Hodges and Matthew McLaughlin. The production and layout was by Adam Knight and Richard Martin. The writing was by Matt Fitch, Scott Kolesar, Kristin Steeger, Michael Neckerman, Jaqueline Murray-Yeo, Jeffrey Quadir Jackson, Joseph Stinson, Tom Lyon, Khan Wong, Mary Kane, Thomas Dougherty, Dan Waters, Martin Hafner, Susan Cossette Eng, Mark Dionne, Kelly Donagher, and Ken Cormier.

It would think, after so long, that the work you would have gotten pretty worn out. You still hear people say, "It's a little bit better." It's a little bit better, you know. One time there was a plane crash on TV and someone said, "That's cool." "Oh wow, that's cool."

CONTENTS

3	Matt Fitch
11	Scott Kolesar
13	Kristin Steeger
14	Michael Neckerman
18	Jaqueline Murray-Yeo
20	Jeffrey Quadir Jackson
21	Joseph Stinson
22	Tom Lyon
27	Khan Wong
30	Mary Kane
32	Thomas Dougherty
33	Dan Waters
36	Martin Hafner
38	Susan Cossette Eng
40	Mark Dionne
49	Kelly Donagher
62	Ken Cormier

This ninth issue of WRITING UCONN has been prepared in order to present some of the best undergraduate writing at UConn. We would like to acknowledge those writers whose works have been honored by the University this spring.

Tom Lyon and Ken Cormier shared the first place award for the Hackman Short Story Contest, Tom for his story "Saucy French Schoolgirls..." and Ken for "Flat Land," a story not included in this edition. Mark Dionne, Dan Waters and Jacqueline Murray-Yeo received honorable mentions in the same contest for their stories included here. Of the poetry included, Khan Wong was awarded first place in the Wallace Stevens Poetry Competition, and Mary Kane received an honorable mention.

In keeping with our objective to publish student writing at UConn, we once again invite students to submit work for consideration. Regrettably we cannot print all the good writing we get. We wish we could. But we promise to give each submission a thoughtful review.

Matt Fitch

A COOL 1

There's a dude in our town that has had the cool market cornered for so long that nobody remembers what his name really is. Everybody just calls him the Cool 1.

Cool, I guess, is still slang the way it's usually meant. I imagine people started saying it right after World War II, during which it was always good to have a cool-tempered person around. I don't really know. This is something of a made-up history. Anyway, one thing led to another and bam, the Fonz was cool in the fifties. Although it's true that the Fonz was not around during the fifties. A surprising number of people aren't aware of this, but I'm speaking practically-- to a lot of people, the Fonz epitomizes fifties cool. I've also seen a lot of posters of Dean riding around in a '65 Mustang.

You would think, after so long, that the word cool would have gotten pretty worn out. You still hear people say it, though. It's meaning is a little different now, perhaps broader. One time there was a plane crash on TV somewhere and some person looked up and noticed it and said,

"Oh wow. That's cool."

I don't mean to criticize. I was there, and I'll admit now that I was thinking the exact same thing. I just didn't say it, is all.

In other words, cool now applies to things, places and events as much as it applies to a person. And the Cool 1 so embodied this stab at a contemporary definition that I feel compelled to explore some of his mystique, his freakishness, his impact on local society-- in short, the things that made the Cool 1 cool.

The Cool 1 arose in one's awareness the way, say, rock music does. You grow up and you hear it all the time; you hear about it all the time. But there's one day somewhere in your life where it really hits you. The myth becomes real.

Yeah, I even followed the Cool 1 for a while, in high school. Labor Day, 1983. Fresman year. The parking lot in front of Food Mart. There was I-- tossing rocks into a sewer with some of my boyhood pals. It was something of a summertime ritual, grown heavier and more languid now that that the season was coming to an end. I checked out everybody's new sneakers. It was pure. It was ignorant.

A bright, hot day-- my pals and I squatted in a ring around the sewer. Occasionally, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Him gliding around the edges of the parking lot on His skateboard. I hadn't taken much notice of Him. None of us had. We were a herd of water buffalo and the Cool 1 an automobile or an airplane, something so enigmatic to us that there was no point in noticing.

A short time passed. Then, all of a sudden, I heard the unmistakable sound of skateboard wheels coming up on me.

My pals lifted their heads.

The harsh sound grew louder.

This can't be happening, I thought. What could the Cool 1 possibly want with me?

My pals all looked at me pityingly. Their eyes said.

So long, man.

I was afraid to turn around.

I closed my eyes. Something happened.

When I opened them, the world had stopped. Nothing moved. Nothing made a sound.

Slowly, I turned around. The first thing I saw were His impeccably soiled Fast Times at Ridgemont High checkered shoes, one resting lithely on the skateboard, the other planted not two feet from my face. I raised my eyes and took in His jeans, His white tee, His black leather vest. His head blocked the sun. He was smiling.

"Come," he said. "You have been chosen."

And He turned and left me squatting there on the broiling pavement, blinded.

Dimly I thought, People in Russia would kill to have just a tiny piece of Him.

I rose and followed, of course. I scarcely remembered my former pals, still hunched around the sewer behind me. All I could think was,

This is the Cool 1. I have to be cool.

"Pardon me for asking," he said, "but are those Zips you're wearing?"

"Uh--"

"It's okay. Zips are cool." And he lit a cigarette.

We travelled to the Cool 1's apartment, where we drank beer, listened to the blues, complained about girls and society-- basically all the things a cool person does on an average afternoon.

It's a little frustrating to try and describe the Cool 1, what he looked like. It sounds so corny. "He had a faraway look..." I can tell you what he wore. But his actual looks? Guy's envied them, girls adored them. That's about all I can say.

Remember, I was fourteen when I first followed the Cool 1. It was a time of total upheaval. I figured, if all the girls loved the Cool 1, then it stood to reason that one or two might kind of like his friend. Over the long run, this premonition turned out to be right on. Very right on. Because, even as the girls stole glances at the Cool 1 and secretly wished to be with him, everybody knew that his steady was some wierd art-chick from across the river.

The chick's name was Maria. She wore a lot of black and cut her wrists about every other day. I met her a couple of weeks after the day in the Food Mart parking lot.

"For Christ's sake, Cool," she said. "He's wearing Zips."

But she was okay. She just said a lot of what was on her mind.

Following the Cool 1 changed my life. No longer un-self-conscious, I became an adolescent. People were taking notice of me.

"Hey, I heard you're hanging out with the Cool 1 now," said one girl. She put her hand on my arm and fixed me with an earnest gaze. "Like wow."

What sorts of things did the Cool 1 and I do when we hung out? Well, at first we did a lot of skateboarding, until it got cold out. I don't know. We just hung out. It was no simple deal. If, say, we three (the Cool 1, Maria and myself) were to go out to lunch, the Cool 1 would first park the car and have Maria and me go into the restaurant. Then after ten minutes he'd saunter in, blow smoke in the waiter's face, and order a large water.

Sometimes we hung out at Maria's and listened to music. Sometimes we hung out at the mall. Anywhere we were, we

were hanging out. As opposed to just being there. That was the whole point. The Cool 1 taught me about this important difference.

Of course, I was not the only disciple of Cool. He had many friends and many followers. Cool knew everybody. He had a checking account and a black Caddy. His cheeks were imprinted "A Cool 1." No lie.

One time, I was in conference with the other disciples and one of them, a kid a little younger than the rest of the us, posed a question.

"What makes Cool so cool?" he asked.

There was a short silence, and then the rest of us just said,

"Man, if you have to ask..."

But don't get the idea that the Cool 1 was a social-type fellow. Quite the opposite. It's strange, but if you wanted to talk to him, you'd first have to come to us, the disciples. Then we'd tell him what you said. He might get back to you. He might not. None of us knew why, but it was important that the Cool 1 not be bothered by a lot of people. And truly, it did seem that a lot of people wanted to bother him. The Cool 1 knew an awful lot. In addition to knowing where to get the best grass, Cool knew the answers to a lot of the semi-important questions that life so often tosses us on the sly. Like, are license plates state property? And, which is worse for you, the paper or the tobacco? Cool was also a big fan of leaders past. Caesar, Napoleon, you name it. If you had a paper like that, Cool was the man to see.

The tendency people had to badger Cool made going to parties very interesting. The thing to do was to hop all over town Friday and Saturday nights. Cool would huddle in deep and secretive conversation with the host over a beer. They might remove to a smoke-filled room for those particularly esoteric topics. After an hour or so it would be time to get along to the next party. I met a lot of people this way. The appearance of Cool at a party hinted intangibly at its success, and the next day people would say, Man that was some party.

By the time I was sixteen, I was the Cool 1's right hand. I did everything with him, except maybe use the bathroom and screw Maria. Two years had gone by, and I had begun to wonder about some of the issues which, I'm certain, you are probably wondering about. For instance, how old was Cool? Who were his parents? Where was his money coming from?

"Man, money means shit," said Cool on one occasion.

On another, he explained that his mother was dead and that his father was in a sanitarium.

"Whereabouts?" I asked him.

He paused for a second before replying,

"California."

And one time we were really drunk and I asked him how old he was. This is what he said.

"Man, I'm as old as this fucking country."

Cool had a very philosophical streak in him.

In other words, the Cool 1 kept certain details of his personal life strictly to himself. He claimed that they weren't important. What was important was being cool and having a good time. Hey, folks, this was high school. Still, I took clandestine offense at Cool's unwillingness to part with a few simple facts about himself. I began to suspect that he was really a very strange person.

Thus began the second phase of my relationship with the Cool 1. That is, I realized the need to have a little self-expression. At parties, I took my good time and didn't care if Cool and the other disciples left without me. I tried out for and made the j.v. baseball team. I spent certain Friday nights doing homework. I was rebelling. And all the while I did my damndest to figure out exactly what was up with Cool. For a while I thought he was an orphan who learned the streets at an early age and all that. Then I decided that he was Maria's brother and that their mother had kicked them out, but that was way too wierd. Finally, I developed a theory according to which Cool was an alien somehow able to deceive those around him into thinking that he was just a kid in high school. When I actually started to believe it, that is, act toward Cool as if it was fact, I knew that I ought to stop wondering about the whole thing.

Mind, I still hung out with Cool. On average I saw him once or twice a week-- outside of school, that is. I knew that, deep down, he had gotten a sort of weary fondness for me. Unlike the other disciples, who could only give their obedience, Cool knew that for a time he'd had my heart as well, and it pained him to know that it was slipping away from him.

One time Cool, myself, and the other disciples were sitting around Cool's apartment drinking bourbon. I was

pretty stewed, and I guess we all were. Anyway, Cool asked me if I remembered that he had loaned me a couple of dollars the week before. I was feeling a bit wily anyway. I told him to fuck off. I don't really know why, though.

The other disciples were on their feet in a second.

"Hey, man," one of them said. "Nobody disses the Cool 1."

But Cool only raised his hand.

"Forget about it," he said.

Later, I apologized, but he only said the same thing. And I guess that was the beginning of the end for the Cool 1 and me. Or perhaps it was really the middle of the end. I don't know. Anyway, things weren't quite the same after that.

But it was still another year before I found out the truth about the Cool 1.

I went to Cool's apartment to get something -- I don't know, a tape or something. Cool wasn't there, but Maria was, and she was pretty out of it. I don't know what she was doing. She was on something. She was sprawled on the bed.

"C'mere," she said.

I sat down next to her.

"You know, baby, you and Cool have been friends for a long time."

I could only nod. It was the truth.

"But now," Maria said, "I sense that things aren't really the same between you any more." She started to remove a pair of false eyelashes. "Is this true?"

"Yes," I said. It was true.

Maria closed her eyes.

"I don't know, baby," she breathed. "I don't know. I don't know why, but I think there's something I ought to tell you. There's something you should know."

I realize now that tact required that I should fix her a stiff drink, put her to bed, and leave immediately. But that seemed so British. Instead I asked her to say what was on her mind.

"Well, baby," she said, "the truth is --"

And here she paused to get the second eyelash out of her right eye --

"The truth is --"

She leaned toward me and whispered,

"Cool really isn't cool."

I hadn't been prepared for this.

Maria nodded.

"It's the truth. He isn't the slightest bit cool. Oh, God, baby, I'm sorry to have to tell you this --"

"You bitch," I said. "How could you even say this?"

"Christ, baby, what are you, blind? Open your eyes, kid!"

I left there with a determination not to think about it. I did not want to confront the possibility. I went out and got smashed with a couple of the other disciples, but the damage was done. When I woke up the next day, it hit me after a second,

"God, he really isn't cool, is he?"

And it was true. It was more than true. Why, it was so obvious -- Cool was almost nerdy. He was a nerd! But nobody could see it! I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering what I had been doing for the past three years. I felt empty, bleak, cold. The new knowledge was like a knife in my ribs.

I was half-crazed for days, and in my delirium I made a tiny leak. It was to the girl who had so earnestly congratulated me freshman year.

She put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, my God," she said. "It's true, isn't it?"

Well, it wasn't long before all the vermin who held secret grudges against Cool became aware of the news. One of them even challenged him in the hallway of the school. It was a swift fight, and Cool came out on top, but from then on he was imperceptably damaged by the whole scene. He became a mere caricature of what he once was.

As for me, I graduated with the singular wish to forget everything that had happened. Maria broke up with Cool, and we started seeing each other. We plan to marry next fall.

"The Cool 1 belongs in high school," she always says. And that is where he remains. I've returned there several times with the aim of speaking to him on semi-important matters, but I haven't been able to hook up.

"He just went in the locker room," someone would say.

I'd go in and not find him and ask someone else if they'd seen him.

"He just left," the dude would say.

So in the short time since I've left high school, I never have been able to talk to the Cool 1, although I have glimpsed the black Caddy, on occasion, around town.

Looking back, I realize that the Cool 1 was, more than anything, something of a dream within the dream that was high school. I often imagine him in my sleep. He is a bright light that sings as it shines on a hill above a flat land. He makes a vibration through the body. In dreams, at least, the Cool 1 remains totally cool.

Scott Kolesar

TAKING THE HIGHWAY

She wasn't being paranoid, only cautious
smoking a joint near exit sixteen.
Red and blue flashing
in her rear-view
a few exits later,
the statie motioned her over
to the side of the highway.

"License and registration, proof of insurance,
how much dope you been smokin'?"
the officer asked as if it was standard procedure.

Scratching her nose, her
resinated fingertips reminded
her of the roach in the ashtray.

"Y'know, that sure is a nice decal there,"
said the statie, pointing
to the red, white and blue
Steal Your Face sticker in her window.

"Yep, ain't never seen someone
with one o' them stickers
who ain't been smokin' dope
nearly every day of their sorry lives.
Oh, sure, it used to be hard
to track down you and the rest
of those dope fiend hippies,
'til the government bought that sticker company.

Y'see, now they make 'em with
Metal Halide Phosphorus Iodes.
Y'know what they do?

Metal...Halide...Phosphorus...Iodes

pick up even stronger on my radar.
So even if yer drivin'
straight and slow, we know
where all of ya are.

So now it's even easier
for us t' pull ya over,
find a seed, or a stem,
heck, even a roach,
and throw y'all in jail.

Yessiree, damn good idear,
government buyin' that company.
Soon enough y'all be together,
jonesin' like the hippie dope fiends you are,
spendin' the resta yer sorry lives in jail."

She blinked a moment to clear her mind.

Red and blue flashing
the statie handed her a warning:
"Ma'am, your right tail light
was not functioning properly.
For your own safety,
I had to pull you over to tell you.
Please get it fixed soon.
Have a nice day."

She laughed at herself, stoned
and getting away with it.

She wasn't being paranoid, only cautious
as she continued back on the highway,
thinking of the grinning man
at the head shop pointing out decals
with standard procedure:

"Yep, that one will get ya noticed for sure."

Kristin Steeger

CERTAIN DUTIES

Mike is afraid to let me go
to the bathroom alone, NYC
Grand Central Station, New Year's Eve but
there are certain duties
of nature
so I go; Mike warns me
not to talk to any strangers.
I feel about five years old.
The line for the ladies' room twists out towards Harlem
or wherever,
I step over the bums delicately and join the line.
I avert my eyes.
It is, after all, rude to stare at street people
sleeping in a huge pile, like newborn puppies.
At the front of the line someone is pointing out
available stalls.
I wonder why--everyone can see which ones are empty--
but the attendant insists
and calls me honey.
Perched inside the stall, I convince myself
that I am becoming suburban
that I am becoming my mother. I shudder.
I smile at the attendant
as I walk toward the sinks,
imagine myself suave and cosmopolitan.
The attendant throws her arm over my shoulders,
releasing a cloud of odor around us.
"Do you have any money? I haven't eaten since yesterday."
The smell is stale sweat and bourbon.
"N-no. My boyfriend has all my money."
She starts to philosophize at the back of my head
as I leave, wiping my hands on my jeans.
I see Mike out in the rotunda, just where he said he'd be
picking out constellations on the ceiling.

THE IDIOT PLOT

It was the size of a bear and had shaggy brown fur all over its body. Huge muscular arms ended with horrible razor sharp claws. A powerful jaw was lined with many jagged teeth. And these teeth had killed and eaten nineteen people in the past week.

The attacks were gruesome. Body parts were strewn all over Mulberry Street. This was the only place the attacks occurred. Authorities had warned everyone not to walk on this treacherous street at night. This being the only time the attacks took place.

But John and Barbara were in love. And they were young. And it was the beginning of the weekend. And they had lived on Mulberry Street their whole lives, the only people who hadn't moved out of their homes during the killing spree.

"Oh, can't we go on one little stroll?" asked Barbara.

"But it's getting near dusk," said John cautiously.

"But it's so beautiful out today. Tomorrow is the fourteenth and it's supposed to rain."

"Oh why not?" said John.

Their walk was very pleasant. They passed by many houses, some stained with the blood of their neighbors. But they didn't mind. Mulberry street had always been a source of fond memories, and they weren't about to let a few petty mutilations tarnish that.

As it started to darken John said. "It's starting to darken and, you know Barb, all the slayings occurred at night."

"Do you think we have enough time to get to the dead end of the street before we turn around?"

"Oh, why not?"

When the couple reached the end of the street, John realized he had to go to the bathroom. "Wait right here, Barb," he said, and disappeared into a dark set of bushes. "Hmm," he said, thinking he saw an incredibly large inhuman shadow lurking in the bushes, "must be my imagination."

As he stepped over a bunch of bones which looked suspiciously like one of his neighbors, he spotted a large cave. "Oh this'll be even more private," he said to himself as he entered it. Just as he started to relieve himself he heard a terrifying howl, and the creature tore at his right arm. Thank goodness he was a lefty.

"Barb! It's the creature!" yelled a stunned John. "Run for it because it's after us!" And they did. And it was.

"Oh No! My purse! I must have dropped it!" said Barb. "Aunt Tooty gave me that purse. We've got to go back for it!"

They ran halfway back and found the purse. And the creature found them again. They ran towards their house with the creature in hot pursuit.

"I'm exhausted!" shouted Barb, looking full of energy.

"Don't worry! Our house is right up ahead!" said John, stopping to see if the creature was still following.

As they made their way up the front steps, John realized he had forgotten his keys when he went for the walk.

"I forgot my keys!" he yelled.

"I have mine!" Barb shouted.

"No! It's too late! Our only hope is that old, deserted sawmill!"

Just behind them, the creature made a blood curdling scream, and they sprinted for the building.

John smashed in a glass door, and they ran to the first room they could find. They quickly barricaded the door with a desk and waited. No sound could be heard. John sat on a couch next to Barb. She looked into his eyes. "Do you think it will get us?"

"I don't know," he said, drawing her closer. Their lips touched. John began to run his hands down her back and quickly lifted up her shirt. She, in turn, did the same to him. They kissed passionately for several minutes. Just as Barb said, "It...it unhooks in the front," they heard a sound.

"What was that?" said the now braless Barb. "Doesn't that sound like horrible, razor sharp claws scratching at the other door?"

"No, Barb, but it could be large, long, jagged teeth hungrily gnashing together, although it's probably just the building shifting."

The creature began to thump at the unbarricaded door. "That door was built to withstand a battering ram held by fifteen men," said the expositorally lumping John, "and you know, Barb, the creature only has the strength of ten men."

The door blew off its hinges into the room and the creature entered. John, noticing the creature shied away from the room's only source of light, a small lamp, quickly unplugged it and threw it at him. This stunned the creature, giving John and Barbara time to unbarricade the first door and escape. They moved into another room where they barricaded both doors and waited. They were safe.

Hours passed but it was not quite dawn. "You know it's probably left by now," said John. "It has to go back to its secret lair before the sun comes up. I'll make a break for it and send back help."

"O.K., hon, good luck," said Barbara.

John quietly took apart his barricade and stepped into the hallway. Suddenly the creature appeared out of the predawn darkness. "Oh my God! The Creature! But how?!" cried John. The creature sliced and diced him. "It's killing me, Barb!" And it did. Then it entered the room for Barbara.

She screamed. Then, Suddenly, a man appeared between the creature and Barbara. He was dressed in black and carried a large gun. The creature took a step back from him.

"Who are you?" asked Barb.

"I'm the hero," replied the man.

"Hero?" she said.

"Of this story."

"Can you stop the creature from eating me?" asked Barb.

"Yes I can," replied the square-jawed, cleft-chinned hero with sparkling blue eyes.

"But how will you do it?"

"Well, I am carrying this incredibly large gun," he said. "I call it my anti-stupidity gun," he said to her as he pointed it in her face. "The creature feeds on stupidity," he said as he cocked it.

"But how will that help?" asked Barb.

Jaqueline Murray-Yeo

DAFFODIL WOMAN

After walking since dawn from the village to the desert, Tara made a cold camp under clear moonlight. As the heat of the day drained away, she unwrapped her vision-blanket from her pack and swung it around her shoulders. She stood and bowed to the full moon, the stars. Guardians guide me to my vision. Let me fulfil this quest with honor.

She took a deep swallow from her flask. Although the taste was bitter, she choked it down. Dream water brings true dreaming. Then Tara lay down in her blanket on the hard ground.

Dreaming, she watches a beautiful woman run across Pinon Mesa in the desert. The moonlight glows brightly on her naked legs. She pulls off her tunic, casts it away. Still running she leaps into the air. Feathers fluff across her breasts and sprout from her arms. Now an owl, she hunts through the night sky. The owl screeches. An anguished sound that echoes off the ground.

Tara bolted upright, listening again for that last horrible scream, straining her ears to hear... something. A distant wailing. Cupping a hand to her left ear Tara turned slowly. That way, she decided. While she slept, the clouds had occluded the bright sky. How can I find my way in the dark?

The wail drifted to her ears again. As if in accompaniment the wind blew, Soroo, soroo, through the rocks and eddied around her. Tara felt it brush by her face as gently as a feather. Then it fluttered away again leaving the pungent odor of pinon.

Thus encouraged she set out in the darkness. After a while the cry became clearer. Why it's a baby, Tara thought in surprise. She quickened her pace. She rounded a large boulder, brushing her shoulders carelessly against it, and saw... light.

As her eyes adjusted, ears ringing from piercing cries, Tara saw the baby lying against the rock in a spectral puddle of light. The child's naked skin shone like the moon's reflection on still water. For a single moment Tara hesitated. Was this a trap of some kind? But the child's miserable cries dissolved her suspicions in a flush of shame. Gently she cradled the baby girl against her body, pulling her vision-blanket protectively around it.

Tara rocked and cooed in a wordless sing-song but the baby wailed. This near, Tara could see the glow change from silver to ice-blue and black. The baby's soft skin bore delicate silver traceries in the shape of exotic wetland flowers, lillies and daffodils. Tara kept examining the child, trying to figure out the source of distress, thinking I hope it's not hunger. She felt anxious to give the baby comfort. Only one spot on the baby was cold --her right ankle wore an ugly rawhide loop. Tara's hand numbed when she touched it. This is the reason, she realized, and quickly cut it off with her knife. It crumbled into black dust as her knife cut it, and Tara carefully brushed the baby's ankle clean with a corner of the blanket. Tara recognized it as an evil thing: a malignant charm that blocked magic. Poor child, how awful to be cut off from your own nature! Tara's hold on the baby grew tighter.

The child stopped crying, then cooed at Tara. Within moments she was sleeping in her arms. Gently, Tara outlined one delicate brow. Why these are feathers! she thought. This must be the Owl Woman's child: no wonder I dreamed of her. All dreams are true on vision quest. Now, which way to Pinon Mesa? She sniffed the air. The wind brought her the scent of pinon again, and Tara walked in that direction. She walked a long time; and in the darkness she often stumbled over the uneven ground, but the child never stirred. The wind still sharpened her senses: she scented the pinons that marked Pinon Mesa and her ear caught the change in echoes as she neared her goal. She could even see a tiny bit, too, because the baby's light reached out dimly before them.

Finally Tara reached the mesa. She held up the child and called out softly, "Owl Woman, I've found your child." Owl Woman fluttered down and transformed into human shape. This close Tara could see the same delicate outlines on her skin as on the baby. Mutely, she held out the child. Owl Woman reverently lifted her daughter and hugged her against her chest. After pressing a desperate kiss against her daughter's neck, Owl Woman raised her head and gestured Come closer. Her fingers warmed Tara's cheek as she lightly traced a pattern. She smiled broadly and vanished.

Tara returned to her village with the rising sun. She met the shaman waiting by the well. The morning's lucid light glinted off the silver daffodil on Tara's cheek. The shaman held out her arms, "Welcome, shaman," she said and embraced her new apprentice.

Jeffrey Quadir Jackson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

You think, you got hard times Young-blood?
What's that you say?
You don't understand
why Mom and Dad work all day and nite
it seems like, they want to
keep their faces outta sight?

SHHHIIIT!

Fifty-five hours a week
You'a... Crying 'bout a new pair sneakers
Fo'ya feets, you have Pro-Keds
So what, an uncut head
Water and Bread's, on ya plate
Ev-ery nite, before eight

Wait.

Young-blood
Look at me
I've been lying in this gutter
before you was born
No Mom. No Dad.
Nothing on my feets.
Just a half glass of water
and a slice of bread

a Week.

LITTLE BOY BLEW

little boy Blue
Blew, so Hard
His face was RED
little boy Blue
YELLED
"HE'S COMING, HE'S COMING!"
little boy Blue
Blew, HARDER
He yelled, "SLOW Downnnnn!"
BOOM!
little boy Blue
little boy Blew
He's DEAD.

Joseph Stinson

SONG IN THE PARK

A man in the park
sings his whole life
into the night.
The clouds cover
the moon
like unfulfilled dreams.
People pass by
closing their eyes
as they drop silver
in his hat
and unconsciously wipe
their tears.
When the man is empty
he picks up his hat.
Hidden in the jingle,
a child laughs.

FAITH

Tears fall from my eyes
the way life is leaving my body.

On the top of a hill
I scream words,
at the nothing
between the stars.

Where is there a God?
I don't see him
in the sky.
I don't feel him
in my fingers.

I don't believe.
but
fear
is a weight
around my neck

driving me
to my knees.

Tom Lyon

SAUCY FRENCH SCHOOLGIRLS
WHO CAN'T SAY NO

I come runnin down the stairs for breakfast and Mamafishbait says, "Yushakin the house down. Can't you walk down them stairs." I see my shoebox on the counter then I see Vernon lyin face down on the cement patio. I see him through the slidin glass doors. He ain't movin. "Mamafishbait," I says, "Did Vernon lock himself out again last night?"

"Serves him right forgetting his keys like he does. Always forgetting his keys. That boy's always forgetting his keys." She placed a bowl of hot oatmeal on the table in front of me. I says, "You'd think he'd remember his keys especially since the neighborhood dogs takin such a likin to his new cologne." Then she started cryin. First just a little but then she threw her hands over her face and started ballin like she was to blame for Vernon's secret shame. Then I started cryin.

"Git up you useless-goddam-You got both yer mother and Carl cryin inside. I ain't gonna scrape you off this here cement patio every other day and I ain't gonna-gonna-Git in the house and clean yerself off." That boy's a loser. I shudda beatin'im more as a child. "Fanny, will ya please just shut the mouth. The boy is fine. That's a smart lookin shoebox. Me and the boys down at the lanfill'll make... "

"... That's Carl's shoebox." Fanny says.

"Is that right Carl?" I says. The boy nodded. "Well look it's crushed." I crushed it. Fanny over in her corner not payin attention says, "Carl's keeping a toad in that box so you just keep your hands off it." I thought the boy had gone into shock.

*

I know it's not like I haven't got enough on my mind with computer school and now driving the bookmobile twenty hours a week, but I got to live in a house full of loonies. Is this a typical morning or what? I pass Vernon coming down the stairs. He's just gettin to bed. He looks like he's been fendin off a pack of wild dogs all night. I mean it's not like we don't all know about his secret shame. You can just see it in his eyes. Not now but when they're not so swollen. He's got twenty dollars clenched in his hand.

I suppose Pa's givin it to him again. Then get this, I thought I'd make myself an English muffin or something and there's Pa beatin on Carl's chest trying to resucitate the boy I guess. It's as if I'm invisible to this family. No one even has the courtesy to say "good morning." Mama says something like, "Make sure he don't choke on his tongue." It's funny how quickly they forget who is the youngest bookmobile driver in Tornado Plains. I just grabbed a Diet-Pepsi and snuck out. I didn't even ask why there was a horny toad hopping across our breakfast nook.

I said, "Don't go killing your own son until you get your mother's smelly carcass out of my garage." I tried to tell him ever since his mother died this family has not been the same. I told him to use the insurance money for a proper burial, but see if he listened. I told him in thirty years with this global warming we aren't even going to need a Toro snowblower, not to mention it hasn't snowed here in Tornado Plains for sixteen years. Course the stink from the garage is causing some talk around the neighborhood. Next thing we'll be seein buzzards circling overhead. If he'd just finish the coffin already. You know I had to convince him not to throw his mother's carcass in the landfill. There's laws pure and straight. I think that was the only time I ever got through to him. Then and when I convinced him to send Vernon to modeling school.

*

Mamafishbait didn't believe me when I told her I couldn't go to school because I'd had a near death experience. She'd like to think I faked the whole stroke, convulsions and all. Never did find Godzilla's remains. Mamafishbait says he'd been sucked up to heaven, body and soul. She suggested I tell my near death experience for Show'n'Tell. I said, "But I ain't got anything to show," and she handed me the reshaped shoebox and says, "Here, take this." So I did. Just then we heard Vernon wretch on himself. I said, "Bye, Mamafishbait," and went out to the busstop, not even waiting to get my milk money. Prescilla was informin the boys at my stop that she was drivin the new bookmobile in town. The boys asked if the bookmobile lent Nintendo game cartridges. She said, "Sixth graders should have more on their minds than just video games." The boys asked what the smell from the garage was.

If Fanny don't get off my back about Grandma. Not like I don't work 38 hours a week so my son can fail out of beauty school. You know, it wasn't so easy gettin that promotion to the Red Bag incinerator. Some people around here really got something against suspected arms for hostage dealers. Wish I'd never met that Kashoogi fella. But I've always said that's all behind me now so screw 'em. What

vernon needs is a decent job like I got, that's all. Good boy. Just a little confused. I seen he's taken to drinkin since he's come home from beauty school. I'm honest with the boy. I told him when he enrolled that he was plum ugly and not to expect a whole lot. Cilla's the one who should be a model. She's got her mother's ass. There's gonna be trouble when she starts courtin.

Vernon set us up a couple of lawn chairs in the front yard so we could watch Prescilla make her debut behind the wheel of the new bookmobile. The neighborhood boys were already lined up alongside the curb. I never seen so many youngins so intersted in books. Carl's friends usually spend all their time playing that Nintendo. There it was. The big, lumbering library on wheels was turning the corner. There was my little girl behind the wheel of a three ton machine. Imagine my pride, her taking after her Granddaddy and all. We were all smiles. She pulled right up in front of our house, set the air-brakes and opened the doors front and rear. Vernon had fallen asleep in his chair. I gave him a nudge. When Prescilla had gotten the job we were all so proud of her that we all filed down to the Tornado Plains Public Library and got ourselves lending privileges. Didn't cost nothing. The whole Blanston family with card numbers 100789 to 100792. Course Prescilla already had hers. There was Gern now, back from work, pulling in the driveway just in time to catch all the excitement.

I pull around the goddamn thing tryin real hard not to hit the bastards and that's when I see the black ooze tricklin down the driveway. Then I realize it's comin from the garage. "For the love of Jesus." I pull right up to the garage, coverin the leak, hopin Fanny hadn't seen nothin of it. I acted quick and real responsible-like.

*

"Come on in! Mama, Vern, Whatya think of my new toy?" I said.

"Child," mama said, "I'm so impressed!" I never seen her smile so. "Jason, say something to your sister."

He just gave that look like he was going to cry. He was truly happy for me but his secret shame left him speechless. He hadn't said ten words to me since he came home from school. I said, "Jason, why don't you look around, maybe you'll find something that interests you." He did that.

"Who's this, dear?" Mother showed me my Anais Nin book, House of Incest. I snatched it quickly. "That's nobody special, Mama." I threw it in the book return bin.

I asked where Carl was at and Mama says he was inside with his games. She said, "I don't know why he didn't come, seems like most of his friends are here."

The boys were startin to line up with their books. Billy Sweeny, one of Carl's friends was first. I said, "Billy, what you readin?" and he showed me. Hulk Hogan's Pop-Up Adventure and the Illustrated Encyclopedia of Human Anatomy. "Don't those look interesting?" I said. I could tell the whole time he was starin at my chest. I stamped his books and passed them back with a smile.

"Thanks Cilla," he said

"You take care you cute thing," I said. He blushed. Suddenly Pa comes runnin up the steps nearly knockin over poor Billy. He grabs Vernon and says quickly, "Hi Cilla, Fanny. Mind if I steal Vernon? Thanks," and rushed out with Vernon.

"Wait," I said, "He didn't check that out!" Vernon had left without properly checking his book out.

"Can't you finagle something, dear?" Mama said.

"Mama," I said, "that book is public property." I ran out to get it.

Pa said, "You git back in there and mind yer own business. Me and Vernon got some things to take care of."

"The book, Pa. I need the book." I looked at the book in Vernon's hand.

"The what?" Pa squinted. He lokked at Vernon finally and saw the book. "You steal this book, boy?" Vernon just stood there dumb.

"Pa, he just didn't let me stamp it." Pa took the book from Vernon and handed it to me.

"Well here. Take it." He looked at the cover. "101 Organic Facials? Burn it... and Cilla, put some clothes on."

*

It was just me, Cilla and Mamafishbait for dinner. Tunafish salad and macaroni and cheese. Pa and Vernon were in the garage hammerin away. "I wonder what's gotten into your father?" Ma says. "Looks like Grandma's finally movin out of the garage." Prescilla kept askin Mama to make me chew with my mouth closed. I says if she don't stop cryin

I'm gonna peek in on her when she's takin a bath tonight. She's all paranoid about the bathroom lock being broken. She says, "You do and I'll run over your Nintendo with my bookmobile." Mamafishbait says, "Cilla, you leave your brother alone or I'll call your father."

*

I was running the bath water wearing only my thin kimono when Pa snuck in. Nothing perverted so don't be gettin all worked up. Anyway, he tells me to shush and asks me outright if he could borrow the keys to the Tornado Plains Public Library Bookmobile. I told him I'm trusted with them keys and that they weren't mine to be lending.

First he tried threatening me. He said he'd kick me out of the house but I still said no. Then he got smart and bargained with me. He said, "Give me the keys to the bookmobile just for tonoght, and I'll give you the keys to the Dodge Dart this weekend."

"Pa," I said, "that car smells like landfill."

"What do you want, then?" he asked.

"I want you to stop yellin at Mamafishbait. Stop terrorizin poor Carl. I want you to talk to Vern about his secret shame, and you should start readin more on a regular basis."

"Deal," he said.

"Deal." We shook hands and I got the key from my secret hiding place.

That night Grandma left us forever. Pa was real sweet for a couple of weeks but I knew it couldn't last. He never did read any more books, though. The whole family watched "Cosby" that Thursday. Kinda like a family pow-wow. We all talked frankly about Vernon's secret shame while he sat there quietly and listened. After that we couldn't shut him up. Vernon, that is. Now that he was back to normal I knew it was only a matter of time before Pa would be kicking him out into the street again. Soon after that Carl learned to touch himself, and the Nintendo went into the closet.

The next time I went to drive the bookmobile, the fellas down at the library gave me a funny look and asked me what I'd done to stink it up so bad. They told me that if I wanted to keep my job I'd better park the thing like I'd been taught. I apologized, saying that I'd had a bad bean burrito at Taco Bell. They laughed and I asked them later if they'd help me with my Dewey Decimal. They blushed.

Khan Wong

SANDSTORM

1. Men are born on these fields

Men are born on these fields of honor.
So he's been taught.
But waiting here, in the sand
There is only an awful stillness--
Dry, stagnant heat.

His father was a soldier
In a world on the brink
Of maturity.
This world feels old.
Though he enlisted, he never thought
He'd see war.

The history of this land
Rose from the bones
Of ancient warriors:
Infidels put down
By the righteous lovers of Christ.

When he woke this morning,
It was already going on 90 .
He got up soaked in sweat
And wished he could just walk around
The desert shirtless
But they're told not to strip.
It'll dehydrate them
And, he suspects, offend
The Arabs.

They trained with the chemical gear
Earlier, he thought
How lonely it would be
To die that way--
Of some plague unleashed
As an act of war.

He wishes something would happen.
He'd fight, and not
Wonder why.

It's too late now.
He knew what he was getting into.
He needed money for college.
He signed the contract.
He's here.

When night falls, it's cooler.
Relieved, he lies back to look
At the stars.

2. You just sit

You sit until there's
No thought, only confusion
Swirling around with the sand,
Glinting off chopper blades,
A man's life is less than the treadmark
Of a tank rolling by.

Missiles are the spears
Of this crusade;
Hit 'em from a distance
So you have fewer (and weaker) foes
To cut down with your sword.
Trouble is,
They cut as well
And this is their turf
After all.

Don't pretend to understand politics.
People say we're fighting
For all sorts of things:
Oil, the balance of power.
The list goes on.
Does it matter?

3. Soldier's journal

Once in junior high,
I picked a fight with the new kid
I just couldn't stand.
I thought he was a fag.
He kicked the shit out of me.
I lay there all bloody,
Humiliated, angry.

I don't want to end up
Like that now.
When I think of the loneliness
Of dying
There is nothing
Worth saying.

4. You're not supposed to

You're not supposed to think
About your actions; just perform them.
It facilitates killing.
There's no time to realize
The thing you mince
With your M16 is human.
No time to acknowledge
Targets on the screen are homes.

5. All those worlds

When the whole fucking thing
Blows, who'll be screaming
From the pit of all we are?

Who won't notice
The smell of burning blood.

Who won't remember friends
Zipped in body bags?

Who'll fire the gun
With precise training
While the enemy collapses
Like their cities, crumbling to rubble?

They've done their job fo Allah,
Spilling their blood on the sand.

6. I'll watch the whole thing

Like a Rambo movie,
It will unwind
And when it's done,
When the sound of bombs
Ceases, there will be smoke
As history turns to ash.

Wind will rise from the desert,
From the bodies of the slain
And the bodies of the survivors.
Their rage will burn them,
Stinging sand; screams won't stop
Before the flames die out.

But I'm getting carried
Away again, all I
Can really do is lie
Here and try to sleep.

Mary Kane

Parthenogenesis

Daily I give birth
to unfathered infants,
fairies that slip in
through window screens,
from nowhere, from night.
These babes learn to dance
to the unsteady tapping
of a manual typewriter.
The moon's children
fit together in neat
silver stacks, like spoons.
I wash them, polish them dry,
lift them to my mouth
and eat from them each afternoon.
They are the family I have made
with competing voices,
some louder than others.
Some of them, the strong,
leave, like adults, to go out
into the world on their own.
We lose contact. Then, when I am out
a friend or a stranger
may ask about one of them
and I remember its early birth,
my long painful labor
or its lonely holiday wail
when it came out kicking
afraid of too much music and cheer.
I have abandoned more than a few
of the stubborn ones -- the mute,
the ramblers and the nonconformists.
But at night, when the moon has set,
when the sirens start up or the family
next door starts to quarrel,
when I awake alone from chaotic dreaming,
I gather my children about me,
read each the story of its birth
and tuck them neatly away. Then I go
to my window and repeat slowly
the word mother
until I'm fat
and ready to write.

GOOD FRIDAY

Most of the parishoners
had to bend slightly, standing
before the priest and his
twelve inch crucifix; their
eyes faced down over the top
of Christ's head as they bowed
to kiss his tortured feet. Not us.

Children, we were always
eye level, staring into the blood
stained ceramic flesh and
real nails, our necks strained, eyes
looking up into that hollowed face.
Pressing our young lips to his
young feet left us with a bad taste,
not from the act itself but
the alcohol rubbed on by altar boys
to clean him for the next worshipper.

I learned then, and on consecutive
Good Fridays, that pain precedes rebirth,
and that some, more than others,
have to look it in the face. But it
was all so grotesque then, all so horribly
visual and physical -- his pale skin
stuck to bones, sucked in around his
ribcage, his nail punctured flesh.
There was clarity in the holes in Christ's feet,
promise in the story that followed.

It doesn't happen that way for us.
We can't always find scars or nail holes,
we can't wipe away the blood
of unrecognized sufferings. We can't
count on a three day death.
And whole congregations don't gather
in devotion
to kiss our wounds away.

Thomas Dougherty

CREATION

So!
Some doctor of something said
That Angelo's The Creation is actually
A picture of the human brain. He said the shroud
Surrounding the scene is supposed to be a cerebellum.
What the hell does that mean?
Is Mike saying we are God? That we create our own creation!
Or does God have his dirty fingers in my brain. Is he pushing
and poking around with dried snotty fingers? I hope not.
I don't want anybody pushing and pulling on my frontal or
Any other lobe. The big cheese or not. the only snot I
Want in my head is my own. Then again big Mike might not
Be saying that at all. If he is however, maybe God is standing
Naked in time square. Blasting out waves of light for shoppers
To bask in. I know that for me, I would much rather have God
Make me and let me go. Like a wind up something or other. Let
Me go and do what I want. I don't think he pushes or pulls there
And then laughs with his buddies at the reaction.
Perhaps this Doctor ought to be doctoring instead of
Writing. Then again maybe not. Maybe he should
Be painting masterpieces or writing poems or
Picking his nose.
With snotty intellectualism.
Thanks to someone or something maybe a huge pulsing cerebellum,
He is not.

Dan Waters

The Garden

There were walls in her garden, but they were not meant
to enclose anything. They were more a point of reference,
lending the frantic green landscapes form and constancy.
She never knew what she would find when she climbed over the
overgrown, rain-washed stones; perhaps a cluster of fiery
tropical flowers, perhaps a fountain ringed by nymphs or
gargoyles. Only the walls remained constant. The garden
itself shimmered and shifted in an ever-flowing river of
green.

She visited the garden while at work, while waiting for
sleep, while on the phone to friends or family. "Ellen, are
you listening to me?" her mother asked. "Ellen, I am
speaking to you."

She danced barefoot through the fields of clover,
gladiolas, and poppies, shady willows and fronds and
sunflowers. Ellen cultivated her garden during the in
between times of her day.

*

Slicing carrots, she feels the weight and crush of the
jungle. Its hot, moist breath is on her neck and the
kitchen feels small, claustrophobic. She drops the slices
into the water and shudders, hearing the bellow and step of
primordial beasts as they plod through the garden's dark
heart.

The door swings open and her husband, Tom, walks in.
He drops his coat onto a chair, places his lunchpail on the
table, and kisses his wife. She stiffens at his touch, and
relaxes only when he has sat down with the evening paper.
She checks the chicken. His pained eyes watch her over the
edge of the paper. She pours milk. She watches sluggish
leviathans wrestle and lurch in the hot mud. Some of it
splashes on her naked chest. It warms her. She smiles.

*

After dinner she clears the table and her husband walks
into the livingroom and turns the TV on. She takes her time
doing the dishes. She watches a pair of German Shepherds
run across the grainfields. Laughing, she races to catch up
with them. She follows them into the pine forest without
breaking stride. The needles sting her bare feet.

Her husband's voice takes away the clean smell of the evergreens. "Honey, could you get me the chips and a drink when you come out? Thanks."

She frowns and reaches into the cabinet for the bag of Fritos. Multicolored birds alight on palm trees near the goldfish pool. Rainwater beads and collects in the hollows of fallen trees, on mossy stone walls.

She hands him the bag and a can of soda. He mumbles his thank you and returns to the game. Or the sitcom. Or whatever else is on. Ellen sits in the chair next to his and pretends to watch also. Wind rustles through dead leaves.

He asks if there is anything wrong. He has to repeat his question because she cannot hear him above the wind whipping through the great, twisted willows.

She shakes her head no. This seems to please him.

*

Later that night, when he is on top of her, making impassioned and angry attempts at love, she thinks of violets. Fields of violets and daisies. Her lack of response angers him, and he moves with frustrated jerks. He tries to hurt her, but he cannot harm the garden. He only clarifies the gently swaying flowers in her mind. Violets tinged with deep lavender at the edges. Bright yellow centers. Blue sky. Green grass. Her eyes are wide open. She sees nothing in the room.

When it is over, she rolls over and her eyes close. Free of him and his desire she can walk down other garden paths. New paths, paths that will take her through immense redwood forests, or past clumps of cacti or cornfields or fruit trees.

Sometimes she will think about when there was something to say and something to do other than go to work and file files and come home and cook carrots, long before the gnarled tendrils of the garden took root in her mind. One morning she awoke alone in the garden. The walls were not meant to confine her. They were never meant to do that. Yet no one else has ever walked with her along the hedges and rows of flowers.

Sometimes there was a cold iron gate at the edge of her garden. It had been rusted for many years. She can see Tom waiting outside the gate. Often he waves. She never finds the strength to call him or pry open the rusted gate and let him in. Often she is glad the gate stands between them.

*

When she wakes up she is sore. Tom has already left for work. She showers and dresses and leaves for the office.

She admires the fall foliage as she drives by, cutting and copying the yellows and reds, saving the images for further garden walks. The great oak on the corner, the trimmed hedges along the street. They become images on a spiraling collage of green life. Thin, leafy ferns graze her cheek as she crawls through the darkness.

At work she is surprised to receive a half dozen red roses, fragments, pieces of her landscapes. There is a small card with them.

I am sorry. I wish you would talk to me. Can we go out for dinner tonight?

Love, Tom

Ellen flushes, confused. The roses were very pretty. She smells them. She touches their petals. She traces lines on paper with the dust that falls from them. She is suddenly very sad. The flowers are cut, dying. Dead flowers. Flowers without a garden.

*

After work, Ellen waits for her husband at the door. She receives him with a hug. The flowers are so pretty, she tells him. They look very nice in the blue vase, he tells her. He goes upstairs to change and tells her to think of a restaurant to go to.

But while he is upstairs deciding on which tie and what shoes, she is walking very slowly across a pathway of damp grass. She stops, lays down and presses her face into the rich, wet soil. She breathes deeply.

Martin Hafner

THE BLACK EYES OF AGE

I.

An old man of 89 years,
who leaves me twisted
white wire clumps
of hair tangled in
a comb near the toilet,
sits prostrated in
front of the television
each night holding
cable-ready conversations
with Bill Cosby & Dan Rather,
unaware of the forgotten
tea kettle whistling
its wet, hot alarm.

So this is what I have to look forward to.

II.

Have you ever seen a bug
trapped in amber? How it
hangs suspended in eternity
staring back with coal black
bottomless eyes reminding all
that time is not a field
to be measured in rods,
nor a sea whose depth is
determined in length of chain;

But the soft, low, meaty sound of a heart beat.

It's getting so that each morning
when I lift my jack straw body
out of bed, I am swallowed by
the same eyes while trying
to ignore a sharp pain that
dances up my ladder-like spine
I first noticed last year.

MY FATHER'S RAIN

To see the young child
Standing under the
Red flowered umbrella,
A mother's love held
High protecting him
From wet weather,

Makes me tremble
To think how
My mother could not
Protect me from
My father's
Stormy
Rage.

Susan Cossette Eng

DREAM OF THE SECOND COMING

The kettle screams; the steam
curls into an image of his face
that hangs over the counter, dissipates
when you try to touch it.
You know the water is ready for tea.

Every message on the answering machine
is his. In a language you haven't studied
since college, he tells you to return
your overdue library books;
bring a loaf of bread, some Cabernet
for Sunday's dinner party;
to chant with the faceless crowd
outside the apartment.
You don't understand the rest.

Overnight, his picture is everywhere:
in red spray paint on bathroom walls,
on sides of buses superimposed
over the Marlboro man, on tee shirts
sold at football games
tattooed on your husband's forehead.
(You aren't sure what this means;
you tell him to brush his hair forward
until you figure it out.)

He preaches on the morning news,
on afternoon talk shows.
He works in the grocery store,
doling out judgment
from behind the deli counter.
You take a number and wait
for forgiveness with the other wives.

Unafraid, you exchange recipies and gossip.

A GUIDE TO MODERN LIVING

You can buy the truth
in any grocery store.
By the register
near the candy and cigarettes,
fifty cents gives you
the untold story:
a fifty-pound lobster
found by the same retired schoolteacher
whose daughter lost a hundred pounds in two weeks
and married Elvis' ghost the following May.

Eternal youth is on special this week:
Aisle five,
between the diet pills
and condoms --
better grab a box or two;
no one knows where
to buy a cure for AIDS.

Twenty dollars a month --
the price of a cup of coffee each day --
feeds a needy child
in someone else's country,
but twenty dollars a day
won't feed the addict
you pass in your Saab every morning
en route to the office.
Tattered wildman bumming dollar bills,
preaching the love of Jesus
from his corner by the thruway entrance.

You are lucky:
You can buy God's forgiveness
any week night on the TV;
for a ten dollar donation,
Reverend Jim returns your soul --
liposuctioned, free of sin

even prettier
to your heavenly father
wearing those diamond earrings
you saw on the shopping channel.

Mark Dionne

REINDEER GAMES

Mike always attracted more attention than me. But I could live with that.

Mike always was the one to get the dates. I got his dates' girlfriends or, once, his date's younger sister. We were only in eighth grade, so a date consisted primarily of meeting them at the movies.

Mike's date, a precocious giggler named Tracy, set me up with her younger sister to conform to the double-date rule. When I was growing up, no one would go out with just their date, everyone had to bring a friend to double. That way you could be assured that at least one person on the date liked you.

Anyway, the problem was that Tracy's sister was only in the sixth grade. Questionable at best.

Once word of the date got out (these things were planned at least a week in advance), I took the expected ribbing.

"Look at it this way Jeff, you'll know you're the first one in!"

"Heyyy, she's probably too young to know what you're doing."

Dating someone from a higher grade was a sure sign of sexual skill, maturity, and superior status. But dating someone even one grade lower was a sure sign of, well, just about the opposite. I knew I was expected to go on these dates, but I couldn't feel the excitement my friends felt.

"Don't tell me you're gonna beat Paul to the zipper! You know, you an' him are the last ones."

Not that anything really happened on these dates. If I bumped date's arm while sharing an armrest, I was lucky. Everyone knew that nothing happened and everybody lied about it. Everyone also knew that everyone was lying, but nobody was called on the lies because, if you were suspicious of someone else's inactivity, then you must have been inactive.

I was inactive.

So all the other eighth grade studs bothered me. They wouldn't have been jealous if I didn't have a date. But they knew they'd be watching TV while I was with a girl. They'd be watching sitcom breasts while I was staring at the twelve-year old real thing. I would've changed places with any of them.

Mike elbowed me when I first saw my date. An old lady who saw us would think that we were the same age. Anyone with kids could have picked out the younger one. But to a harassed eighth grade boy, she was barely out of her diapers, not nearly a woman and not nearly dateable.

I needed this date to go well because I was trying to prove something to myself. No, I wasn't trying to prove something to myself, I was trying to prove something to them.

I always felt the eyes of friends on my back. I knew what they would think, so I knew what I had to think.

Mike broke new ground for the eighth grade boys that night. During Bond's climactic battle, Mike shifted in his flip-down seat, reached over to Tracy's shoulder and started kissing her.

I remember sitting next to them and nervously looking over, without turning my head. I knew then that Mike's stories were not lies like mine. Not nearly like mine. A drop of sweat slid down the side of my face. I didn't want anyone to see it, but I didn't want to draw attention to it by wiping at it. If I reached to wipe my face, maybe her sister would think I was moving to try and kiss her. But what should I care what the toddler thought?

But I did care, so I shouldn't move and show that I was even interested in their movie seat escapades.

Later, I was afraid Tracy would look in my eyes and know, with some alien, female-type intuition, that I had watched them, not with jealousy, but with curiosity.

*

Mike showed me what I was missing that night and from then on, I tried to watch the girls and learned to tell farmer's daughter jokes.

Mike told me those and the guy-walks-into-a-bar jokes. We listened. Mike liked James Bond and so we all did. Mike didn't like Luke Skywalker and so we all called the Jedi Knight a pansy.

Not that all of our choices agreed with Mike's. He just brought out our choices, defining them.

For instance, Mike was what I now call a gun nut. His father left when he was young, but for some reason the rifles and shotguns stayed in the house. Maybe he left in too much of a hurry to remember the guns.

Anyway, they were there for us to play with. Mike's house was usually empty, so no one would stop us from pointing the guns at cans, neighborhood cats or each other.

Paul Westerberg is now a Certified Public Accountant in the city. I understand he was married last year. His family wouldn't invite me to the wedding. He was always the outcast until I took his place.

Back then he was not rich, and he didn't have a girlfriend. Back then he was a scared kid at the wrong end of a hunting rifle.

"C'mon, Mike. Cut it out."

Paul was squirming against the basement wall with nowhere to hide and no manly reason to hide from an unloaded gun.

"Whatsa matter, gonna wet your pants?"

Paul couldn't take his eyes off the end of the gun. And the single eye of the gun didn't leave Paul's chest.

I bet the bullet'd go through you. They'll pull it out of the wall behind you."

Paul was trying to push himself into that wall, but it was unresponsive. "I wonder if you'll feel it tear through you."

In the age old traditions of youth, Mike stopped just after Paul started crying, slapped him on the back and said he was just kidding. We were all embarrassed when this inevitable moment came because we had to stop laughing at Paul and look away from his feminine tears.

That isn't what turned me against guns. I laughed as hard as every twelve year old.

After Paul's incident was long pushed out of our minds, Mike stole some ammunition, and we went into the woods with a folded up piece of cardboard to "target shoot." When we were deep enough into the woods, Mike walked ahead to unfold the target against a tree.

Mike managed to unfold the cardboard so that a painted deer's head fell perfectly behind my crosshairs.

"C'mon man, shoot."

I lowered the gun to see the entire picture. It was a sable-colored doe, standing in lush grass, heading away. But her head was turned back over her shoulder, to look at the gunman shooting her. It was as if she were walking along, perhaps eating something, perhaps looking for something to eat, when she was startled by the triumphant hunter. Her expression was the one a deer has when her ever-alert senses detect someone far too close and she is surprised, just before she leaps off without seeming to touch the ground.

"Man, are you gonna shoot today?"

"I didn't know there was a deer."

"I think it was my dad's, but he ain't around to use it. You're supposed to aim for the chest or the head, but if you shoot like you screw, you'll miss."

I didn't miss. If that had been a deer, her eye would explode, and her brains would be pushed out through the back of her skull. She would spill gray and red on the grass and die before she fell.

The painted deer was still standing, waiting to be shot again. I fired again. If that had been a deer, her a bullet would rip through her lungs, through her fluttering heart and continue out the other side.

"Nice shootin,' Tex! Do her again!"

So I shot again. If that had been a deer, her front leg would end halfway up her shoulder, and she would fall into the earth and thrash and bleed and cry until I looked down and finished her off.

For the rest of the day we attacked her cardboard body until it was tattered. If that had been a deer, her body would've been pounded to liquid, and she would seep into the earth and never be a decoration in a man's house.

*

Soon after, we entered high school and became the freshmen, once again a school's little people, the targets of jokes and initiations. Mike started working out on his father's weights. He said he did it for his health, but we saw him flex in front of a mirror to see himself the way others did and knew he did it for the girls.

At the beach, we saw him take his shirt off, as slow as possible, standing to be in full view. We pretended not to watch as he pretended not to flex.

I remember, I was watching.

"Hey, Jeff," Mike told me when we were alone, "why don't you start working out, man? It's good for you. And it makes the girls notice you, really. We could pump iron together in my basement and listen to cool music."

Mike didn't listen to cool music, but that's wasn't why I turned him down.

I avoided mirrors. Mike looked into mirrors and saw the way girls would stare at him. When I looked into a mirror, I saw myself exposed. Everything looked obvious to me. But if my feelings were this blatant to others, I would see the hatred and disgust in their eyes.

And they wouldn't let me play in any reindeer games.

Mike was big on reindeer games, especially the ones with girls. I became a sort of go-between for Mike and the girls. They were too stunned, at first, to approach someone who looked as good as Mike. So each glassy-eyed cheerleader and every awe-struck airhead would ask "that shy, kinda wierd friend" what Mike was like and who was his girlfriend.

"Jeff, ya know, you're welcome to take some of these babes offa my hands. Some of the ugly ones, say."

"But Mike, they're all ugly. Seriously, they don't meet my usual standards; I like a girl who has maybe one or two brain cells."

"Taking a neanderthal to the prom is better than taking your right hand."

"You going without your right hand? Whaddaya gonna use, axe or chainsaw?"

"I'll probably find you at Charley's some night."

My heart skipped a beat, and my lips turned numb, like a kid asking for his first date. "If I'm there, I'm bashing."

*

Charley's was a bar on the very edge of the city. I can't say what it looked like because I never went near it. It was known as an eccentric place. But we knew just what

kind of bar it was. Mike beat up a guy under a streetlight in front of Charley's. He told the cops that the baseball bat had always been in his car, and the guy was asking for it.

The school's principal suspended Mike for three days, just what you get for skipping gym. The cops talked to him for an hour about restraint and self-control and told him all the San Francisco jokes they knew.

Mike knew most of the cops from the firing range. One of the lieutenants bought the vodka we drank on prom night.

I didn't want to go to the prom, but it couldn't be avoided. People could see me not dating, since eighth grade, and figure that I couldn't find the right girl or I was too shy. Because of Mike I was seen with enough girls and no one questioned. But nobody missed the prom.

I picked a girl who was friends with Mike's girlfriend and wanted to be Mike's girlfriend. I wasn't shy or afraid when I asked her because I had no romantic intentions at all. If she said no, then I would just ask a different bimbo to be seen at my side in the obligatory pictures.

She said yes. She wanted to be with Mike's group at the prom. When I asked her to go with me, she said, "Yeah, I guess so." But then she cheered up, "It'll be fun going with you guys." I didn't pretend to be offended because I didn't care.

For weeks beforehand, Patti would call to keep me informed of her plans. She would describe, in endless detail, her dress, the current choice of jewelry, and the best hairdresser, and the most fashionable shoes. She wanted everything to look - to be - perfect. My "dashing" tux would match her "gorgeous" gown. We would slide across the floor and smile together for the camera. I was even two inches taller than her. Perfect.

Every once in a while she would talk about herself.

She would tell me how excited she was, and I would continue to watch TV with the sound turned down. She was in the dark and I kept her there. She only wanted her prom to go well, and I was making a mockery of it. I began to feel guilty, watching the TV light flicker over my dark room.

But then I thought of what I wanted and how I was denied and my guilt vanished. It was replaced with anger and I punched the wall, pulled back and slammed my fist into the wood again. I wished I had worked out so I could hit it harder.

My secret anger turned to secret laughter when I picked her up. I thought I was clever buying a yellow wrist corsage. The 'wrist' part worked out fine - I didn't have to do any pinning. But Patti had decided to change her gown and didn't tell me. I knew where and when she was getting her hair done, but she decided not to tell me about the new color.

My only contribution to the date, the vibrant yellow roses, looked horrible on her pink gloves. Perfect. The corsage had to be left at home. They were dead when we returned, but Patti kept them anyway.

We drank vodka and orange juice in the limo on the way. "Girly drinks," Mike called them. I didn't want to be on a date, so I drank, and when we ran out of orange juice, I drank some more. My date looked at me with fake concern and leaned her alien body into mine.

But I didn't care, I just drank more until she was out of focus. I had to touch and hug her for the photographs. She wanted something to look at later to remind her how beautiful we looked as a couple. I felt like I was leaning on a piece of furniture that was watching me.

The chaperones decided not to notice the drunkenness or the close dancing. And we celebrated our graduation. And they celebrated their close dancing. And I celebrated my drunkenness.

My date noticed my unfocused eyes and green tint and knew it would not be wise for her or her frilly pink dress to dance close to me. We danced fast and apart. My face was numb, and my mouth was dry, and we were dancing too fast.

Mike hugged me from behind and made me lurch forward, almost falling. "Easy there, chief!" he said with his hand on my shoulder.

He had to catch me as I fell and hold me up in an embrace. I didn't care that anyone could see me. I wasn't even aware anyone could see me. The world got quieter and darker as my eyes closed and I slumped forward on Mike's shoulder.

"Hey man! Get offa me!" Mike pushed me toward my date, figuring somehow I was her responsibility. My hand slid off his back and onto her shoulder.

We left early for the limo. I slumped against the window while Mike embraced his date, who had a name, but I've forgotten. Our seats were facing each other, so we

watched what the other couple was doing as we drove through town.

Mike was too drunk to attack his date but not drunk enough to pass out. His date was searching his face for some sign of affection and finding none as he watched us intently.

I was looking out the window trying to figure out if I had touched Mike in any unacceptable way. Why he was staring at me? My date nuzzled underneath my arm. Inwardly, I laughed at her. I no longer cared if she wanted to put her perfumed body under my sweaty, drunken embrace.

Were Mike's eyes focused, and looking at me? Or were they unfocused, and dreaming of guns and babes and sobriety?

I felt Patti's hand on my knee and hoped it was there for convenience. But it started moving back and forth to caress my leg through her pink lace glove and my white herringbone tux. I exhaled painfully to make her think I might throw up, but she would not stop.

Her hand moved further up my leg. Soon she would find out just how uninterested I was. I thought of Paul trying to push himself through a basement wall and realized that I was forcing myself back into the limo seat. But it refused to swallow me.

A physical interest could not be faked. Even through the lace and fancy patterns she would know. Mike would see it happen, or see it not happen.

Once I started moving, I could not stop. I grabbed her hand and held it in both of mine. I didn't have to fake the embarrassment. "I'm sorry. Please don't... It's the booze. It does strange uh, things to a guy. I won't be... um."

I held her hand further up, above my knee. That I could allow her. I knew she heard me. I knew everyone heard me. I could feel Mike's eyes staring at me, but I couldn't guess what he was thinking. Too afraid to look across the limo and unable to see anything but the top of my date's head, I closed my eyes and tried to will my world away.

"I understand. You drank a lot. Some other time?"

"Of course," I lied. "I really wish I felt better." I told them. She nuzzled against me, and I allowed it.

The next day, Mike joked about my supposedly induced impotence and shook his head. I told him not to tell

anyone, as if we shared a real secret. This was as close to the truth as Mike would ever get.

*

Instinctively, I wanted to be a part of the pack, and not chased by it. I know what hatred and disgust looks like in other people's eyes and it scares me.

Mike and his mom packed up quickly and moved away a few months later, and we fell out of touch. Eventually, word seeped back to our town that one afternoon Mike took one of his father's rifles and aimed it at his forehead. Don't try to understand it. I accepted long ago that it made no sense.

I pictured Mike pressing the circular barrel against his forehead until it left an imprint like a third eye. But I could not understand what Mike was looking at and thinking about. I could not understand why, so I stopped examining the motives of other people.

I did not have as much sympathy as people thought I should. Friends looked at me with quiet, caring eyes and walked near me on padded feet, but I was not filled with grief.

Even though Mike is gone and had died in another state, I still believe as I've always believed, that Mike, or people like him, are watching me. Every time I get dressed in a rush, like a criminal, and every time I make the bed, as if hiding evidence, I think of Mike and his baseball hat, and I know the fear of a running doe.

Kelly Donagher

DAD

I know exactly how I want to start this story.

"Are you asleep yet?"

I jumped slightly at the sound of my father's slurred voice which came from the double bed next to mine. This hotel room was completely except for the glow of my mother's cigarette.

"No."

My "tough" voice could barely be heard above the air conditioning. I was supposed to be asleep. All kids are supposed to be asleep when it's late. Dad wants me to go to sleep and I'm tired, but I can't. Not very long passed before he asked me again.

"Are you asleep yet?"

I decided to try silence this time. Moments later Dad leaned over to Mom and whispered loudly. I felt really bad for her. My breathing prevented me from hearing what he said, but I knew it wasn't good. The cigarette glow smooshed itself into the nighttable and Mom coughed.

I drifted off but was almost immediately awakened by the noise of the bed next to mine. Loud creaking and my mother's muffled gasps kept me from moving. A scream filled my cheeks and nostrils, but it ended there. I wondered if yelling would help my mom or hurt her?

My gut feeling triumphed and eventually I forced myself to fall asleep, perhaps it was because I dared not move or it might cause my father to think I was awake. The pillow smelled of stale alcohol. My father had passed out in the bed the night before.

Not long passed when I shivered awake again. The light in the bathroom blinded in the blackness of the room and both Mom and Dad were in there. Mom, I wanted to say, don't yell. It will only make Dad angry. But it was too late, and I was right.

Suddenly the thought that there were people in the next hotel room and I thought why don't they do something. What time is it? It must be late... I would be mad if I were them.

"I didn't want to take this vacation in the first place; it was your idea."

"Don't blame it on me. You're the one that's drunk."

"I'm not the problem; you're the problem."

"Oh, I'm the problem?"

"You're uptight and frigid; you always have been. I don't know why I married a bitch like you in the first place."

"I wish you had thought of that then."

"Now I remember. You got yourself pregnant."

"I got myself pregnant."

I wish I was asleep. If it weren't for me, Mom and Dad wouldn't be fighting, and they wouldn't be here in Cape Cod, and Dad might not be drinking or maybe they wouldn't even be married.

On TV once I saw a movie where a girl my age said she wished she had never been born. I thought then that was a stupid thing to wish for, and my grandmother told me, "You should never wish for things like that because they might come true." Well I don't wish I'd never been born. I just wish I was someone else.

"I'm not too drunk to remember that."

"Keep your voice down; she needs her sleep. She's always so tired."

"Don't tell me what to do. Besides maybe she needs to hear this so she won't turn out like you."

"Oh you'd rather have her turn out like you? Would that be better?"

I'm not gonna be like either of them. And I'm never getting married, either.

Now they are yelling about Mom smoking. My dad says it's bad for her and she should stop. The whole room smells like smoke and that gross smelling whiskey. One time I stuck my finger in that stuff just to taste it. Yuck. It tasted worse than gasoline. I scrubbed my tongue with a sponge. I'll never try any of the stuff my dad drinks any more. It tastes horrible; it smells and makes him do stupid things. So why does he keep drinking? Maybe because

Grandma and Grandpa do. When Mom used to come pick me up after work, the bottle was always out on the counter when I got home.

I remember one time at Uncle Tommy and Aunt Sandy's house; Dad and Grandpa were yelling at each other. Dad stood up and threw all the money in his pocket onto the floor and yelled,

"I told you I'd pay you back. There ya go. I'll get the rest of it for ya tomorrow morning."

"John, I don't want the money now. You can't afford to pay me back yet..."

My cousins and I looked at each other and then back at the scene in the living room. Mom told us not to worry about it and to keep watching the Christmas special that was on TV. I had seen my dad like that before, but not Grandpa.

He always sits real quiet in his reclining armchair that rocks back and forth and listens to the radio or to Grandma talking. I fell asleep thinking about Grandpa sitting in his chair with the heavy-bottomed glass half-empty in his hand.

*

The next morning I woke up when Mom opened the drapes in the room and a blast of sunshine hit my face.

"Kathy, it's time to get up. We're going to get some breakfast."

Noticing the darkness of the bathroom I asked,

"Where's Dad?"

"He went to buy the Sunday paper. Hurry up because we're leaving as soon as he gets back." Mom brushed her hair by bending over and letting the straight brown strands reach almost to the ground. My hair was as long as hers, but mine was blond and at the moment very tangled like the "Before" in a Johnson and Johnson No More Tears commercial.

I could tell from the tone of her voice that I was supposed to act like nothing happened last night. She must have known that I couldn't have slept through it. She brushed my hair after I got dressed, but before she finished, Dad came back.

I ignored him but he didn't seem to notice. I didn't do it on purpose; it's just that my head wouldn't turn to

look at him. He sat down on the bed I slept in and scanned the front page. He rarely read it. He just liked to look at the headlines.

Mom and him were talking like nothing had happened, but she didn't seem very happy. They talked about what we were going to do today. I didn't want to do anything. I wanted to bite him; that's what I wanted to do.

At breakfast I ordered a Kid's Special. It had two eggs (over-easy), bacon, toast and homefries and a large tomato juice. I fell asleep in the booth, and Mom woke me up when it arrived. Dad asked me,

"Are you tired?"

Mom and I both looked at him like he was crazy. "A little."

"Kathy, look at me."

Up until now I had succeeded in looking either into my lap or out the window.

"Why?" I didn't want to look at him, but I didn't want to make him angry either.

"Because I want to see if you look tired. You'll have to go to bed earlier tonight." That did it. I looked up with my mouth slightly open, wondering if he really meant to send me to bed earlier. What difference would that make?

"John, I'm sure it's difficult for her. She's not used to such a big bed, and it's probably very strange compared to her room. The air conditioning and all." The waitress came back to ask if everything was alright.

"Honey, you haven't eaten your eggs. Don't they taste good."

"No, they're o.k." I had eaten around the yokes and I hadn't finished the rest of my food yet.

"She's not done." My mother in a what-business-is-it-of-yours tone saved me from the mercy of the nosy waitress.

*

One day about two months later, my mom arrived home early from work. She had with her a small bag from Bridlepath Pharmacy. Fifteen minutes and a "blue" result later, I had a sibling on the way. Ten years old, almost eleven, and I'm gonna have a baby brother. A brother, wow. And besides that, I found out before my dad.

That was the best part.

At some point during the following seven months a discussion occurred between my mother and father concerning family life. My mother felt that she had no right bringing another child into an unhappy family environment. My mother gave him an ultimatum. Stop drinking, or she would have an abortion. That scared Dad straight for a while, and he tried to be good; he really did try. With a few noteworthy exceptions, Dad stayed on the wagon until about the seventh month of Mom's pregnancy, at which point he began celebrating the impending birth of his heir.

My parents wanted me to be present for the birth. Not surprised by much and having watched my share of soap operas, the labor room was about what I expected. A sink, a clean, white bed, two waiting room chairs, and a couple of beeping, flashing machines next to a big hospital bed.

People have since asked me if I was too young to appreciate such an event when I was only eleven. But they miss the point. For one brief, shiny moment, my family was in on something big. I helped pick out the maternity clothes, learned the exercises in the Lamaze classes, etc. Basically, if it had to do with my brother, I was in on it.

So there I was, occupying one of the two waiting-room brick-red chairs while my mother breathed and groaned in the upright labor position. My father sat next to me in the other ugly chair. The doctor returned to the room with a chart that needed to be completed before my mother got too far along. He started asking questions like, "Do you have high blood pressure?" and I started thinking about what it would be like to have a baby around the House.

In the background I heard, "How many labors have you experienced?"

"Three."

"What?" I whispered to my dad.

"We'll explain it to you later... not right now." I sat back in that hard backed chair and tried to figure it out for myself.

Shortly thereafter the doctors rushed my mom into the delivery room. My brother's heart rate had dropped, so they decided to perform a C-section. They gave Mom a shot and she kind of fell asleep, but she could still feel my baby brother trying to come out.

Dad went in with her and told me to "stay put" and that everything would be alright. Nobody needed to explain that a Caesarian operation was nothing I wanted to see. After a while, I retired to the waiting room.

A whirl of heavy breathing, panting, drugged cries, sympathetic soothing words, and beeping monitors welcomed my brother into the world at 1:43 p.m. My dad came into the waiting room where I waited by myself and told me how the doctor handed him my newborn brother right after he came out, so Dad even helped clean him up.

Mom didn't get to see John until after I did. Dad walked down to the nursery to show him to me. The green-smocked nurse held him up so I could see him better. He was scrunched up like an accordion, and red all over. I could hear him screaming through the double-paned glass. I couldn't get over how tiny he was.

When my aunt got there I took her to see Little John, and she said that all babies were red like that so I shouldn't worry. Then she told me that he weighed seven pounds and seven ounces and that was a good weight for a newborn.

John was born on Monday, and instead of going to school I spent each day of the week with my mom and brother. Every night Dad would come and visit with us and then drive me home. On Wednesday night he arrived at about 7:30 and he was drunk. Every night after that he came at about the same time and in the same state.

His eyes were bleary, and his speech was slurred, but he held John very carefully.

I began to think all sorts of wierd things for no reason. Maybe Dad isn't really my dad, and that's why he loves John more. He doesn't like to look at me because maybe I look like my real father. Maybe that's why he yells at me a lot.

Little things rushed into my head. Last year I had to write an autobiography for school that included information about my parents. My mother refused to tell me when she married Dad. She said, "It's nobody's business." When I told her that I wanted to know for my school project she said, "We'll talk about it some other time."

I remember looking at pictures of my parents wedding. They were in a box in the closet. We don't have a wedding album like most families, just five or six pictures mixed in with photographs of fishing trips, vacations, and holidays.

When I get married it's not gonna be like that at all. I want to have a big wedding with lots of pictures and a photographer. I want to have someone there just to take pictures and a car to drive us away with a "Just Married" sign on the back. With cans and shoes tied to the bumper, just like my favorite aunt's wedding. We got to ride in a limo and everything, it was great. I wonder how come Mom only wanted a few pictures of her and my dad at the altar. You can't even see their faces.

I don't want my family to be like that.

*

A year later we moved to a different part of Farmington. By then I was in seventh grade at the town's only Junior High. We spent most weekends cutting firewood, mowing the lawn, house work, whatever. For some reason, the situation at the new house deteriorated rapidly.

One night I woke up to the sound of pounding at the front door. Running down the stairs I could see my father kicking it from outside. He didn't stop kicking until he heard me turn the bolt lock. He brushed past me as if the door opened of its own accord and went directly to his room.

I stared at the five pieces of cheap plastic molding that used to be part of the door. Then I saw the five inch dent that now decorated the door. What a jerk, I thought.

Arguments with my mother occurred weekly if not more often and sometimes took place in the garage, the farthest place in the house from my bedroom. Somehow John was kept almost oblivious to the situation. My father rarely arrived home drunk before nine p.m., which was when my brother went to sleep.

Sometimes my mother would sleep downstairs and wait until she heard Dad's car before she came upstairs. Then she would pretend to be asleep.

One night I remember sitting on my bed while listening to them scream at each other, and for some reason I could not stop my legs from shaking violently. It scared me. Somehow the motion reminded me of sitting next to a guy in my algebra class who could not sit still. Throughout the whole period he'd sit there with his heel tapping the floor.

"You just don't fuckin' listen."

"Listen to yourself, don't you think I've heard you by now? We've been at this for forty-five minutes."

"And we'll sit down here all night if that's what it takes. I want you to tell those fuckin' assholes down there that you have a husband and kids that need you home before 5:30."

"You're never home then. What do you need me home for?"

"Maybe I would be if I thought you'd be here>"

"I'm not holding my breath..."

"I want dinner on the table when I get home..."

"John, dinner would be on the table if I knew when you were getting home..."

"Maybe I could find a good wife somewhere else..."

"Good luck, but I doubt it."

"If you don't watch it, I'll knock the... And why is there always shit all over the place? Why don't you get that daughter of yours to do some work around here... this place is a pigsty."

Both voices had been growing increasingly intense. At this point I heard a sweeping motion from the kitchen, and I knew that my mom's work papers had been strewn across the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"You don't need all that shit. Consider yourself lucky that I don't throw it out. And get it out of my fuckin' house."

"It's my house too, goddamn it. My paycheck pays for it. Not yours."

Even though I couldn't see them I knew that was it; she had said the wrong thing. I ran down the stairs and into the family room. My father had just picked up a footstool when I came in and almost unintentionally stood between them.

"Kathy go to your room."

"Dad, put that down and I'll go back upstairs."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm not, Dad. Just put it down and I'll leave." To my surprise he put it down and sat down in his chair. Without looking back I went back upstairs and checked on my brother. He was asleep but had an uncomfortable, tense look on his face, almost as if he was about to cry.

I heard my dad pissing, that long urination that follows a night of drinking. I was quite familiar with it and with the fact that he never closed the door so that he could continue to yell at my mother.

Why does she just take it? They are both so unhappy; I wish they'd get divorced. I don't want John to have to go through this. He should be happy and not have to put up with this bullshit.

My moment of intervention took the edge off his anger, and he fell asleep in his chair about twenty minutes later. I went downstairs to see how Mom was doing. I found her in the kitchen smoking a cigarette.

"Should we wake him up?" I asked.

"I'll take care of him, you go get some sleep. It's almost four a.m."

I almost said, "You can't take care of him when he's awake; why should you be able to now that he's passed out?" We decided to let him sleep it off. Besides, Mom and I could not lift him; he weighs about 240 pounds. I knew what Mom was thinking. She didn't want to chance him waking up and getting angry all over again.

*

I really don't understand how she does it. She's the head of the Department of Income Management, and a mom, and still she puts up with his drinking. She gets up at 4:30 every morning to do office work and drives John to the babysitter's every morning and picks him up every night. Dad almost never offers to pick him up, and when he does, he never tells Mom, so she drives all the way over there anyway. What an asshole. But why doesn't she tell him to cut it out or leave? I remember one night I wished he didn't come home at all. I wished he hit a telephone pole and died. But afterwards I felt bad and took it back.

I feel bad about getting mad at my mother too. She needs all the help she can get. I shouldn't give her a hard time.

A mumbled string of events remains in my mind concerning this time. Dinner plates thrown across the room, my father passing out at the dinner table and his face landing in his dinner, my parents arguing in the family room when I had a friend sleeping over, midnight clean-ups when he'd order my mother and I out of bed to "clean the house," which always erupted into a screamer when she refused to throw anything out.

One night my father told me to sit down. I took my usual seat on the couch, and my father sat on the coffee table facing me. I could smell the beer on his breath.

"Let me tell you something, Kathy. I never want you to end up in a marriage like this because it's hell; there's no enjoyment in it. No love, no understanding, no compassion. If I thought you'd listen to me, I'd tell you to never get married, but at the same time I wouldn't want you to spend your life alone.

"Your mother is a wonderful person. The things that are important to her are her career, her children, her dogs, her cat, her household, her parents, and so on, but not her husband. Do you know why that is?"

"No. Why." I meant for it to come out as a question, but it just didn't want to. I nodded off every five seconds but Dad didn't seem to notice.

"Because we got married too young. I tell you this so you don't make the same mistake we did. You have your whole life in front of you. Do you understand."

"Mm-hmm." I nodded to make up for the fact that my response could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect.

"You know what other mistake your mother and I made? See, I'm not blaming it all on your mother. Whatever you do, don't get married right of college. Live life while you're young, because it's all downhill from there."

I snorted ever so slightly, and my mother frowned. Who is he kidding? Downhill from here? I wondered if it was possible. Maybe I won't ever get married. Why should I bring kids into the world only to make their lives miserable and to assure them that it will only get worse? What favor is he doing me? Does he honestly think he's filling me in on something I don't know? Life sucks, then you die. Isn't that the way it goes?

By now I entered high school and spent most of my time in a sleep-deprived craze. My best friend and I compared notes on our home lives. Her brother, who was a year older than her, was a druggie and came home drunk almost every night, if he came home at all. Their father hassled him every night when he came home, and it basically disrupted the whole family. We kept each other going with a positive outlook and a feeling that it will get better someday, or at least we won't always have to be around to put up with it.

The tension in my household gradually reached a peak. Dad's drinking became irregular and his personality became erratic. He was attempting to prove to his closest friend that he didn't need to drink. He only drank when he wanted to. This arose in the midst of another "discussion," when Dad got violent and pushed my mother. She hit the wall and yelled for me to call Mike.

"Pricilla? This is Kathy."

"Kelly? What's the matter?"

"My dad is really drunk. Is there any way Mike can come up here? I wouldn't ask, but--"

"Don't worry about it; he'll be up in a few minutes." I hung up the phone and could tell by the sounds going on downstairs that Dad knew I had called. He sat down in his chair and called me downstairs. My knees barely carried me there. I didn't know why he wanted me. He felt I was a traitor, but he didn't say anything.

We quietly waited for Mike. He was there within five minutes. Dad and Mike went out to the garage, and again Mom sent me to bed. She doesn't make any sense, why does she stay with this bozo? If I ever stay with an alcoholic, I hope somebody shoots me and puts me out of my misery.

*

At some point in the fall of tenth grade I had had enough. But the nights kept coming with more intensity and fear. The topic-of-the-night on one particular evening was my mother's housekeeping abilities, but this time I hadn't fallen asleep before the yelling began. I heard papers being piled into boxes (My mother's preferred method of cleaning) and my dad threw out questions like, "Do you really use this?" or "You haven't used this in years, right?" I wondered how would he know, the only time he spends in the house he uses yelling and screaming at her. Occasionally my mother would consent, but most of the time she fought for each scrap of paper or knick-knack. After all-- this was her life she was throwing away.

Her "uncooperativeness" struck a chord with him, and he flipped. He started yelling at the top of his lungs, and he grabbed her by her arm. I ran downstairs and through the dining room. I expected them to be in the family room and nearly ran into them in the kitchen. My mother looked petrified.

"Kathy, go upstairs."

"Let go of her and go to bed."

"Go upstairs."

"You've screwed up this family long enough. Let go of her."

"I've screwed up this family? She's the one that's uptight."

"You blame her? I'd be uptight too if my husband came home drunk every night." There, I said it. If I got hit, I got hit. So what?

Before he could respond, we all stopped. Upstairs John had started crying.

"Nice job, Dad. That's great, waking up your five-year-old son." This was truly a momentous occasion. Looking at my father I felt sorry for him. Only now did I realize this was how he was brought up.

I ran upstairs to comfort my brother. This was the first time he had been directly affected by my father's drinking. It had poisoned the life of another member of The McCarthy Clan.

John held out his arms to me when I came into his room, one of the only times in his entire life. I put my arms around him and told him not to be scared, that nobody would hurt him.

"Are Mom and Dad having a fight?"

"Yeah, but try not to worry about it."

"Are they gonna get divorced?"

"I don't know, John. I really don't know." Perhaps the mere fact that it wasn't definite consoled him; because he put his head back down and fell asleep almost immediately.

All was quiet downstairs. They didn't want to disturb John. I went back down. Dad had fallen asleep in his chair, and Mom was retrieving some papers from the garbage and piling them into boxes.

I knew we'd leave him there. To try to move him would be like waking a sleeping bear.

"Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight, Kathy."

*

It didn't happen the next day or the next week, but eventually my dad decided something had to change. In a rarely-seen mild, sane discussion, Mom and Dad decided that counseling might help. I wondered if anything could.

The four of us sat in a small conference room with a counselor and she asked each of us how we felt about Dad's drinking. She started with me, and I said something along the lines of, "I think it has hurt the family a lot, and I think it'd be best if he stopped... When I see that whiskey bottle sitting on the counter, I just want to smash it against the wall."

At the time my resentment was a little too much for my father and he shrugged it off.

Alcoholism is hereditary. They worry about me and my brother, and so do I.

Ken Cormier

THE DANCERS OF LISBON

- lisbon -

Pulling down the sun visor does nothing. The sun glares through his windshield, highlighting dirt, dust, streaks of god knows what. He squints, bobs his head up, down, rolls the window up, "shit," down, and before he knows it, the buildings are behind him. "What a small town," she says from the passenger seat. He pulls into a dirt driveway, clutch down hard, "come on now," finds reverse and pops back onto the road, the sun behind him. He drives slowly past a sign -- Lisbon Center -- and this time he is not blind. This time he can see:

on the right	*	*	*	on the left
MINNIE'S FOOT LONG	*	*	*	CHURCH OF CHRIST
HOT DOGS	*	*	*	COME PRAY WITH US
MRS MONTGOMERY:	*	*	*	SHECKY'S PIZZA
CUSTOM SEAMSTRESS	*	*	*	
	*	*	*	OLD BRICK BUILDING
WASHFAST LAUNDRY	*	*	*	EMPTY STOREFRONTS
	*	*	*	
TOWN HALL	*	*	*	DOWNWINDER BAR &
FIRE/POLICE DEPT.	*	*	*	GRILL

He pulls up to the curb in front of Washfast Laundry, steps out of his car and crosses the street.

- shecky's pizza -

She tries and loses her balance and braces herself and pulls the heavy door. Inside, to the left, three men in baseball hats, unshaven, overweight, old, look up at her, their eyes trailing from her face, down across her entire body. She shivers and walks to the counter.

"Jesus, why can't you wait?" she says, but he doesn't look at her. She focuses on the price board above the counter and whispers, "It's cheap here, isn't it?" She nudges his arm, "Will?" She waits a few seconds and nudges his arm again.

"Yeah," he says and draws back from her touch. "Get me a coffee," and he walks to a booth near the window. She watches him sit down. He lights a cigarette and stares out the window. She knows he is not looking at anything.

"Y'know whatcha gonna get?" She turns and faces the fat lady behind the counter, curly black-grey hair, thick eye brows, and brown, cracking lips. Everyone's old and fat, she thinks, and she can feel the pizza lady's eyes ooze all over her, down the front of her dress, over her breasts, up and down her bare arms. Her stomach feels thick and she leans on the edge of the counter with both hands. "A coffee with cream and no sugar, a small pizza with pepperoni and mushrooms, and a...", her knees shake and she straightens up. Her voice is unsteady, "... a glass of water."

"I bring it out to you." The pizza lady rips off a slip of paper from her pad and walks toward the huge ovens.

- the police chief -

Will watches the cop cross the street. The cop walks right by the window and he opens the door to the restaurant. The cop steps up to the counter and the pizza lady greets him with a smile.

The cop says, "How about a coffee, honey?" and the pizza lady pours him a coffee.

Will watches the cop stroll over to a booth where three men and a teen-age girl are sitting. "Afternoon, chief," says one of the men and the girl jumps to her feet. She looks nervous. The cop chuckles and says, "You can squeeze on over and sit in your daddy's lap, honey."

"No," says the girl. She looks awkward, long bony legs sticking out of cut off jeans, short-sleeve t-shirt a couple of sizes too small for her. "I got to go anyway."

The cop sits down and all four men leer at the girl. "What you want for dinner, Dad?" she says. Now the attention is focused on the father. He nudges his glasses into place and tries to speak.

"You want Burger King?" says the girl. "I'll go tell Mom and she'll pick it up. The father nods and she runs out of the restaurant.

Will watches her jog by the window and down the street. He lights another cigarette and looks at the plates and

silverware on the table. "Where did these come from?" he says. He waits. She is ignoring him on purpose, making little rips along the edges of her napkin. "Ellen." She looks up. "Where did these come from?"

"The lady just brought them out," says Ellen, "didn't you see her?"

Will scratches the back of his head and rubs his stiff neck and looks out the window. He takes a drag off his cigarette. "I wonder where there's a Burger King around here."

- the downwinder bar & grill -

Ellen sits at the bar and sips a gin and tonic. She doesn't even like gin and tonic, but it's the only drink she can ever think of when a bartender asks her. She looks up at the clock. They have been here for an hour. Will has struck up a conversation with the fat bartender.

"Pretty soon that's all you'll see is credit cards," says the bartender.

"Cash won't even exist in twenty years," says Will.

The bartender nods, "That's right."

"All numbers. You'll just add numbers when you get paid and subtract when you buy something."

"I'll tell ya, I didn't even want a damn credit card."

"Oh, me neither," says Will after a gulp. He slams down his empty glass.

"But you gotta have one these days. There's no gettin around it." The bartender picks up Will's glass, "Another?"

Will nods and says, "Give me a shot of Wild Turkey with that one."

"Wild Turkey," says the bartender with a smile. "Maybe I'll join ya in one a those."

Ellen tugs on Will's sleeves as the two men drink down their shots. "Will, we've been here for over an hour."

"Relax," says Will. He gulps the beer and wipes his mouth. "This is our vacation, right?"

She looks down at her hands. She's been biting her fingernails.

"So let's just relax, have a few drinks, meet some of the locals, and... oh wow."

Ellen shifts her eyes and sees the men come into the bar with their guitars, keyboards, amplifiers. She sighs and sips her drink. The watered down tonic is bitter.

She hears will, "You got a band playing here tonight?"

And the bartender, "Yeah, that's the Blues Express. They'll be start'n about an hour from now."

- the dancers -

He knows the bar is crowded. He knows the band has been playing for a long time. He knows the bartender will not serve him drinks anymore. He wanders from table to table, finding stale cocktails, sucking down warm beer from nearly empty bottles. He is lost in the crowd. He smiles at happy faces, sympathizes with sad ones. He sits with a couple and laughs with them and then he stands and wanders off, bumps into a bald man, a fat lady, he finds stairs and he walks up. At the top of the stairs he sees a huge screen, a basketball game. He watches for a while, cheers when the others cheer, boos and stomps his feet when the others look disgusted. Then he stumbles to an empty table and sits on a stool and leans on a railing and looks down at the band. From the balcony he sees the dancers. Leaping and twisting and thrusting and hopping. A man and a woman shuffle, rotate, extend, twist. They are perfect, mechanical. Three women dance in a circle, all dressed in black, grinning at each other, exchanging comments. One of the women eases over and stands in front of the band. The singer calls out and she responds. "Put your hands in the air... swing your hips... now lower, now lower... do you feel good?" And they do feel good, they squeal and groan their approval. One woman in jeans and a t-shirt dances alone. She prances on her feet and sways back and forth. Her feet move so quickly it looks like she may fall. Back and forth, back and forth and just when she is about to crumble to the floor, she stops, stands still for a moment and then begins to whirl around. She spins and spins and she bumps into the others and the others move out of her way and she twirls faster and faster and the music builds and the singer hits impossible notes and most of the floor is clear for the girl who just keeps spinning, her feet landing randomly, faster and faster, and the bass player is jumping up and down and the drummer is pounding all of his drums at

once and Will feels the beat through his stool on the balcony and he calls out, "Wooooohhhh," and it builds and builds and the spinning girl is a blur and the rest of the crowd claps and stomps to the beat and finally...

The song is over. The music stops. The girl slows down. She plants her feet, sway dangerously to the left, to the right and stumbles off the floor. Will cheers and hoots with everyone in the bar.

- interstate 93 -

Ellen wipes the tears from her eyes with one hand, the other hand on the wheel. She speeds down Interstate 93. The highway is empty and it is dark. "I told him," she says, "I told him if he ever does this to me again..." She opens the glove compartment and searches for a tissue, she knows there is not one there. She slams the glove compartment closed and says, "I told him." She sobs and her chest seems to cave into itself. "He's not stupid," she says. She uses her shirt to blot the tears from her eyes and face. "God damn it!" she yells, slamming the steering wheel with both hands. The car swerves to the right, across the two lanes and onto the shoulder. Ellen leans into the brake with both of her feet. The car slides and then stops suddenly. Her face bounces off the steering wheel and she feels her mouth fill with warm blood. The car has stalled but its headlights still poke through the darkness ahead.