

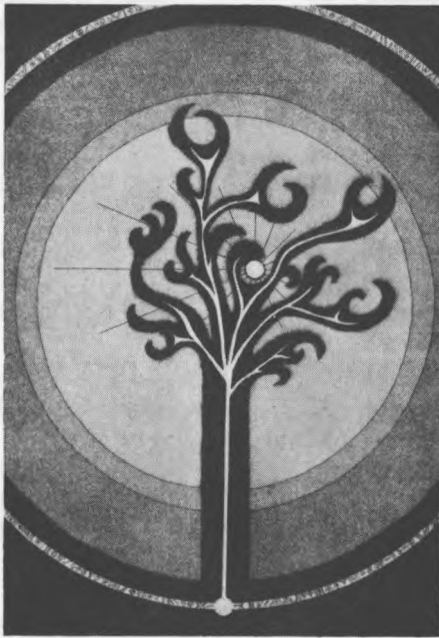
HARBINGER



Spring 1982

HARBINGER

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF STEPHENS COLLEGE



Colleen Kuckelman

Spring 1982

HARBINGER is a literary magazine publishing the works of students enrolled at Stephens College. HARBINGER is published annually in the spring. The student editors are responsible for the design and content of the magazine.

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HARBINGER

The moon shone
Very brightly
The old woman looked up
and smiled at him.
"Come here," said
the man, "I have something
I would like
to show you."

"What," she said,
I should like to see
but I'll go.
The old woman took
the man's hand,
and they went
to the door.
"Go," she said, "I'll
be there when you
return."
The man looked at her
and smiled.
He laughed
under the moon
and walked.

MARY BETH LEON / *Fourth Fall*

The leaves then
were burned hands
that fell warmly around me
and smelled of fire.
Uncle Bert said
the sun had been too hot that year.
I nodded—
didn't talk yet.

Uncle Bert said
I should know all about fire
and Hell—
the portwine stain on my cheek
was the devil's mark.
Once,
when he was drunk
he said:
"Eh, let's see if yer a witch—
ya know they melt in fire,"
and he touched a cigarette
to my arm.
The skin burned like he said—
witches' skin.
He laughed.
Under the ash
it bubbled.

To put her fragile face, processed and enlarged,
Upon white paper would show you
The pain that carved her bones.
You would uncover the image of a child who died
Screaming at the age of eight,
Remembering only tall fences,
Disappearing family, and a door
That leaked suffocation from its hinges.
The child entered the low, dark room.
The smell of her people, profuse as death
Filled her lungs as flames and ashes
Blinded her eyes.

Now the air is clean
Until she sees you, you ask
If you can photograph her:
She leaves you with no answer
For in your cheekbones she sees starvation,
And your hair smells of rancid burning.
She remembers you
In dreams, in sirens, a friend
Made and lost in resounding screams.
So she runs from you, not to save herself
For it already shadows her footsteps,
But to save you:
Because the living should sleep
Without the heat of death
Burning in their hearts.



Suzette Miller

SHARON HELENE O'NEIL / *Tourist*

I sell no postcards of my mind
yet you brought a pen and wrote-away
with your discovery, leaving
sleazy marks on my body and eye.
I don't know what you couldn't find,
but the scribbles of verse you left
remind me of the trespass.

I am a woman, daughter of a womb
that won't take me back before thought.
I don't need a man, to dance,
or teach me how to fear;
I was born, that's all you need to know.
I just am, under the stairs,
within my own reach.

You are the striking surface
but the match breaks between us.
I say I am strong
but I am afraid of the morning
when I have to become human
and laugh without the light,
the heat, that once held me asleep.

In this free, beauty country
ankles and wrists are billboard-bound
and minds tapped with ideals.
Conditioned actions (reconditioned at clever inter-
vals) still nurse the stronger arms
that hold the world above our reach.
And these suspending arms are afraid now
that we have deviated from their family plan.

And if we start to love the rapist's child,
they will take him to their war
and send back the one rib his father gave.
There is something too bold
about this country—this sealed closet—
but history does not give itself
to such thoughts.
United, we can block the intrusion
and rewrite our bodies, "free," for the final choice.

Flesh and bone amaze—
such concrete resilience.
Breath returns
freezer burn explosion.
I want escape—
all those chalk dust pills
leading me to the reaper.
A cruel joke,
this antiseptic madness
these bloodfilled tubes
WHITE on WHITE on WHITE
I am a thinking corpse
a hungry zombie stalking release.

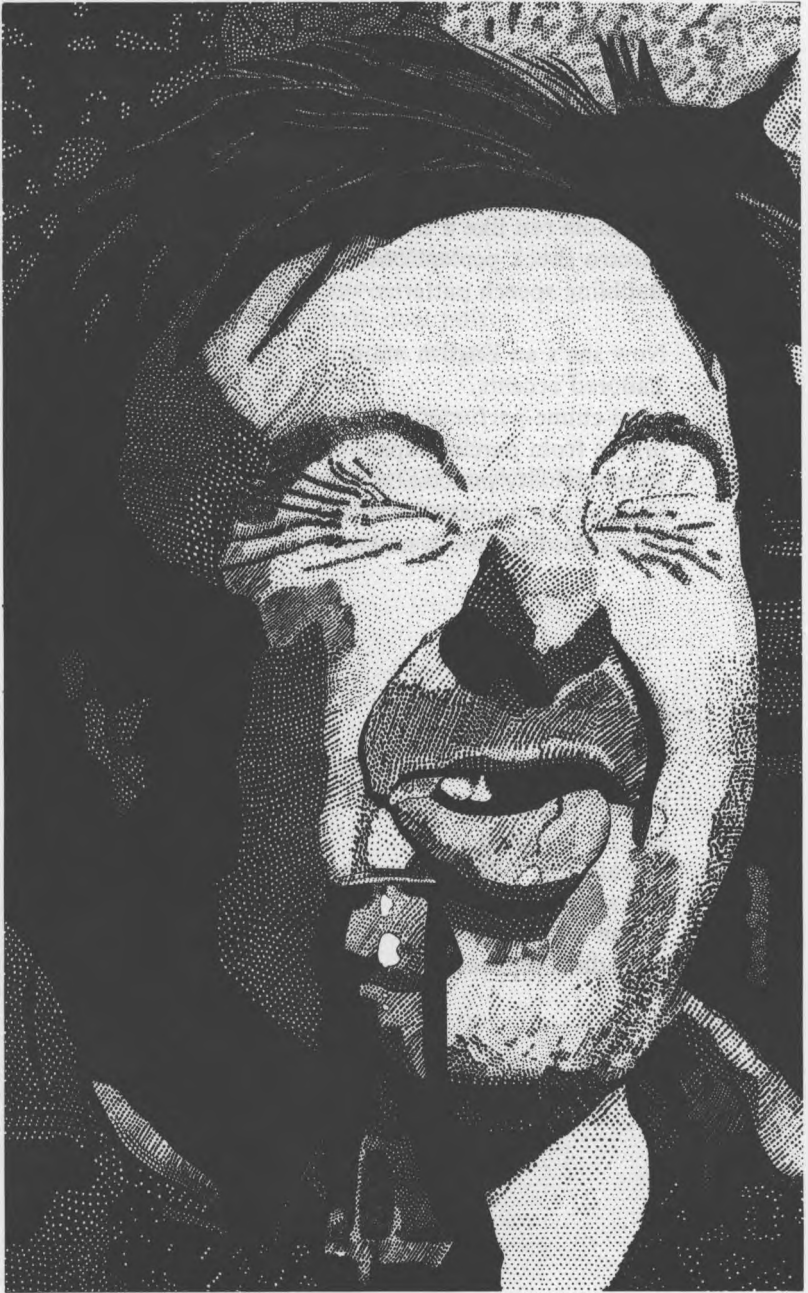
TERI CIACCHI / *Obesity*

Innocent years ago
she smothered herself in McDonald's grease.
Paranoia ran like a chicken in her head:
Electro shock perceptions.
Babbling speech patterns.

Now she's an English major.
Tailored accents,
wind-chime-perfumed,
breeze from parched lips.
Responsibility punctuates her habits.
She rusts in a quagmire of work.
Obsessed, her mouth makes love to Oreos.

Living Alone

My life has prism clarity,
bell jar isolation.
I strain for "What's for dinner" dialogues
and senseless passions.
Home is a waystation,
an endless reproach.



Lisa Singer

Sheilah
moves in feral feints
talks too fast,
fidgets thin cigarettes
drives her 'stang
and drinks Tab
all at once.

In bohemian restaurants
she tries to relax
and remember the
rules in *Games People Play*.
On weekends though,
since Rick,
she wears hand-me-down jerseys
and gym shorts,
and gets relevant
with racquetball.

CAROLYN KELLEHER / *Your Smile*

Your smile: fiction-faceted.
It pours from you,
This numbing distance does,
Runs through me like a scared thought.
Leaves me breathless, jaded.
Some sirocco pitches tumbleweeds in you
and evaporates me; studiously.



Days fall past:
Shavings curl crayon red.
Through glass and water
Stems look fat,
Harmless.
But thorns prick,
Draw the blood
That lingers—
Then falls.
I read drops
like tea leaves
And headless
Flowers watch.

MARIE WILSON / *The Swallowtail*

I open the small wood box
and lift your fragile weight,
a child's breath, in my hand.
Your black wing drifts to the ground,
a veined transparent leaf
with five pale moons splashed like rain.
Your underside is one with the sea,
the mist of the waves sprayed
silver blue
like the iris of my eye.

Hell is a series
of clamoring granite
blocks.
Smooth, perfectly sharpened
impossible rectangles
stacked one
upon another
and another
and on into
an oblivion
of gray irony.
Figures spot the monotony
fuzz on blank
television screens
that swallow sound
and the abandoned
in a sucking vacuum of emptiness.

MEGAN RADDANT / *Detroit Impression*

I don't know the city
but I have seen the streets
and the merchandise women
who own them
and I remember
palsied hands and toothless pleas of
help me out help me out
and a black man
leaning over and breathing
Ripple on me
asking which way is Cass Corridor
and I laughed once
at a wrinkled Indian lady
wrapped in a tarnished sari
who lives from a discarded Hudsons bag
and swears at the Greeks and
the sign of the cross.
But in the name of the father
and of the son and of
the holy spirit
I ask in ignorance
if God knows this city.
I have not seen him here
unless he blends into the sooty brick
like the tired prostitutes
along Michigan Avenue.



Rohena Diane Axtell

BARBARA THOMAS / *Valora Fruit Market*

In the privilege of dawn
I run down 54th
the crunch of gravel
beneath my Adidas
and the Valoras' history
moving me. My rhythm
echoes, slows and stops.
In front of the market
I inhale a fruit bouquet.

Fruiterers
the Valora brothers call
themselves, and we're
three alone at dawn.
Mornings, a bit of
their ancestry
is revealed to me
in an apple
a peach
or a word. Before
I was born
they traded a year
of their fruit for a mare
to lead the wagon
their father built.

Leaning on the wagon
whose seasoned wood rests
and hints of the past,
I follow invisible tracks.
I used to make
the first purchase each day
until Joseph Valora
tossed me a smile
and their best plum
whose lingering taste
helps me to explain
why other markets
are dark at this hour.

Grandma waits, but

George Forrest

(1889-1973)

didn't even carve the turkey
those last twelve years he lived.

Hunched in his paisley chair
which faded around him

he'd smoke unfiltered Camels
watch TV boxing

sound turned down,
a shot of Jim Beam between rounds.

She used to apologize
knowing he hadn't dined

since '61.

I sketch him
trying to remember a face

when his brows weren't taut
from waiting

like I wait for a slow waitress
or like Grandma waits

for him to carve the turkey.

for Elizabeth

I.

I am standing in a shop on East 52nd,
my face pressed to a glass case
that holds a crystal swan. I see us
crawling around together in its belly, coiled
like packing twine.

I am walking past the Barbizon Hotel for women;
(I've no business here, you've flown to Boston)
I linger, roll like a cigarette
not fully stomped out. I wish
we had room 1039 again;
we could watch Elvis movies in our slippers,
hang out the window smoking,
hoping to catch a kid's gaze,
then turn away.

I cannot help but feel
when I walk down Lexington without you,
that it is the pawnshop of New York,
the gaping city's neon sign. When we're apart,
I carry you around like a suitcase.

II.

My mother dreamt her heel broke on a grate
on 3rd Ave. She thought she was falling
into the city's open mouth. Today,
the city is not talking; it is grinding its glass teeth
while sleeping off the week.

III.

The lines on the faces of New York women
run parallel like Lexington and 3rd,
or oval, wrinkles sagging like pears
sold on the corner. The streets are scarred.
Cracks run like frayed veins on a woman's calf.

I have been too long watching old men bend over
under the guise of recovering lost coins
just to stare at a woman's thigh, charred
with sewer spray. New York,

at night your subways run
beneath the metal grates of my dreams;
I wake at five, the brakes of my sleep
whinnying like sirens. New York,

city of the bag lady. Clouds sit
like grey paper sacks
above her tangled hair,
city that has given me notes
scattering like trash
on Saturday's sleeping streets,
city where I am a foreigner, lost
in the sleeves of an American overcoat.

ALICE GOODMAN / *Martin Luther King
Was Shot in My Hometown*

I.

My friend, Charlie, Shot
in Memphis, was too coarse
for the sheriff.

Leaning from the attic window,
his blonde hair, a tuft around the vault
of his brain. Charlie,
insisting he be called
“Dr. Charles.” Charlie

set up in a house whose yellowed kitchen walls read:
“Love War”; he painted it there in blood.

I feel the law, the Sixties,
the south. Politics
sleeps in dorms
on university campuses.

II.

“Honey, I should have ducked”
—Ronald Reagan

You should have ducked, Charlie,
hid behind the rocker
cradling shadows in the attic. Ronald,

you could have run behind a sturdy agent.

Who shot you? A by-product of the Eighties, his gun
spitting his last pennies. Charlie,
who shot Charlie?

A middle-aged officer
who doesn't like scholarships
or sholars. Charlie,

dead in his attic. Reagan,
wounded in front of a hotel.

Summer, students tuck their books
in trunks like bodies
vaulted in an ambulance.


CAROLINE ST. JOHN / *Coy*

Red pupils like cat's eyes
struck by headlights
stare a cigarette burn
in your black jacket
as white breasts lean down
in the red folds of her dress.
Tossing her head she whispers
"Love is merely a madness"
in your buttercup ear.



Kirsty Buchanan

ROBIN LARSON / *Utopia*



When x-ink kisses and paper stamps
leave us void of dalliance,
and havoc lumps intestines
as the radio plays our song,
When Lancelot kisses Guinevere
or Katie loses Hubble;
When social attempts become futile,
all reveries reaffirm it:
Not part, but all or none.
And if by choice we face this duress
in folly freed by Daedalus,
Then I know I love you
and there will be no other.

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ANDREA SKOWRONEK / *Dance with Me*

Beat
Through the shake
Pumpin'
For the jump
Give me a break
Dance this mess around
With me

Jerk
With Iggy
Hit it
Squeeze the sounds
Bang, bang
Be a happy man
Tonight
With me

Hop
Pleasure pop
I'm ready to move
The sting
Reverberate your blare
Dance
Under ladders
With me

CAM-LELSIE WILDER / *a preference for j.d.*

for billy

a potter Came one
summer as *high* as
his pocket could
have told you, was
He Ever been to a

Cat
house in nevada? *Come*
in, said the Madame, re
Gal on her own percent
age/parentage In *doubt*

He
sits, caressing a whiskey
shot w/beer, shootin the
shit, countin his cash for
mademoiselle and decides
upon a quiverliPPed
blonde slinKing
beside the stool, golden
frizzes nuzzle his groin

&Awaken beFore he is
forced to wash; as
opposed to all other
SituationS the man
has been In,
it is *he who*
says "perFORM" and she Does.

oh, and Does she!hips
th/robbing boneFlesh
Thigh rides Blade of
Shoulder as he gulps
down

grEEdily a thing
he can not name. *man.*
and to further thrusT
his lusT/he Enters/to
a skilled, but IOose . . .
w/faked *orgaSmic* con
TraCtions /he Comes/
/He Goes/ relinquishing
the womb/ShockShrivels
in Society'S f/Rigid
satiation/he sits at
his wheel
And *stares,*

hoping his eyes
will create the
piece he knows
is in his Gut
and *Fuck Them loQuacious*
asshOles with No *vision*
for self
concePtion
and *Stares,*

betrayed by
the tasete his tongue so La
Viciously savoured betWeen
babyfattedcheeks. his eyes
then closeD some in Extasy/*now Open/*

*THE TASTE/*put him to ruin,
foreverunning from Them
Damn Fucking Broads—scared
not to pay them, lest he be
scarred by paying someThing
much more he isn't capable
of giving or even if he owned *it/ OF LOVE.*

and still He stares,



Stephen Carroll

AMY KNOX BROWN / *Transparency*

Sitting on the splintered dock, our feet in water,
we watch the moon flatten silver rings
against the shore. Over the dam, the sound of blues
wavers like a coin in water. Your hand
flashes as you throw rocks in the lake; I watch, twisting
the silver chain around my neck. Summers never change.

Other nights, we sit in bars, leave small change
sticking to the table-top. I drink scotch and water;
you always ask for Tanqueray, with a twist
of lime. My glass smears wet rings
on the table and you watch me, playing your hand.
Drunk, I realize I never noticed your eyes are blue.

Afternoons the cloudless sky burns blue
in a promise that the weather will never change.
Trapped like a dragonfly under your hands,
we lie outside in air bright as water.
Sunlight shatters on my ring.
Sometimes you are so handsome I can't twist

away from you. But then we hear "The Twist"
and you want to dance slow; your grandfather's blues
records spin endlessly on the stereo. I count the rings
around the 78's when I go to change
them, tiny black lines like circles in water.
Then, I feel the distance; your hand

leaves mine. It is like those times I watch your hands
as you talk on the phone to someone else, fingers twisting
in the cord. Through a window clear as water,
I study the sky, ignore your conversation and blue-
shirted back. Sometimes, I want you to change,
to be able to ignore the telephone ringing.

Tonight is cool enough to be fall and clouds ring
the moon in the shape of a hand
cupping water. Rocks sink like loose change
in the lake and when you turn to me, your mouth twists
in an odd smile I've never seen. Eyes darker than blue
look through mine, as though I were transparent as water.

I wish I had the courage to melt into water, leaving only a ring,
a spreading circle in the blueness; but when your hands
reach for me, I don't twist away. Summers never change.

PAM SUMNERS / *The Magician's Daughter*

"Never ask a magician to do a trick twice,"
She says, the magician's daughter.
Her hands, I think of when I think of her.
Her hands perform miracles.
They weave, in and out, such tenuous dreams
As form my life, they fabricate.

She is the magician's daughter:
She can mend holes in the air
By hanging ten crystal prisms in the window,
She can mend the holes that the carefulness
Of small moths knitting the air cannot.

Her body is a long and brightening star
Whose glimmerings and faintings are
A thousand words in diffident signs.

Her trick is this: to make longing chill
My silent breath, make me a thousand times
Stand with the silence of Herod and dream
Of when dreams were younger, (if dreams be
All that bind) makes me eat
With curled tongue my perfect hunger.

Her trick is growing like a flower
Into the soft sweet loam of my soul,
Into the soft sweet earth
Of me, in some agony of afterbirth.
From each of her bold eyes sprout my breasts,
Quick as the early dreaminess of love,
But still, still as death and resurrection.

Her trick is this: hands flying into strenuous birds
To choke me on strange inadequacies of words,
When facing the curious sympathy of naked flesh
In whose fabric need and longing mesh.

Is it modesty, that she does not guess,
Fair monarch of realms of trembling bliss,
Does not guess that my lips must know her,
Must wholly kiss her, that my flame
In her bright shadow must quiver,
That my frail dream in her calm hands
Sparks and shivers, that my slightest syllable remembers?

The blood will remember for her what the brain
Will forget one day heavy with sleep,
Will remember bodies in the shapes of stars
Cartwheeling off, remember laying in the magic box
Waiting to be sawed through, flying like a mad rose
Into the gritted teeth of death:
Resurrected, complete, intact.

She would be a dazzling storm
Or a lone swallow waltzing free-form,
A broken petal exuding fragrance
A mad petal, a splash of light
In a land where blossoms are crushed by night.

PAM SUMNERS / *For Your Leaving*

It's a nice night for trains,
For traveling,
For insects that fly by the stars;
But I know nothing of trains.
I know the long solemn tracks
That unfold for me in long dreams,
And in my long dreams I have paused
For that pedestrian, love,
Which should never have overtaken me
At all the crosswalks of this (my brief
My little) life, but poets I think
Should know something of trains.
So I listen: I watch the tracks.
My great grandfather, they say,
Built the tunnel through Lookout Mountain
Over the tracks that run
From Chattanooga to Vicksburg,
And during the Civil War
Bragg's men fought off the Blue
In the tunnel my very Southern
Alabama rebel ancestor built.
But that is all my knowledge of trains.

I have stood by the bend in the Warrior
And dreamed of heroes on the tracks
And wished I had made this river,
Built these tracks, with my body
For a spade tunnelled through rock
And left my purple shadow dying
On the walls of the tunnel.
I have prayed for some knowledge
Of trains, of journeys, prayed
And strained to hear the sound of the tracks:
Dissonance and steel.

If I knew of trains I might know
Why you watched your dreams
Undreaming themselves, might
Be able to put down this simple poem
For you. But I am ignorant,
Wanting only to stand by the tracks
At sunset, to be enlightened
And thus not altogether light.

Nevertheless this is for you,
My mark on it is clear and honest
As you, I have not done this to praise you
But because the audacity of your fiber
Flows into me like dreams, or rivers.
I have made my way alone, carved this
From a hopeless pile of timber and stone.
I have made it because your eyes have a geography
All their own, they make me wish
I were a traveler of trains,
An architect of tunnels or possibly
Some bright fixed point in the heavens,
Decisively spinning my mortality out,
Coming again and again to dragon storms
And lead you on through the dark,
A conductor of trains, saying to you
"Let us run our destinies along these tracks
And let us go at night, let us follow
The single searchlight of my brightness gleaming
And let us ignore this absolute and improbable
River that runs alongside us;
Let us know only urgency and longing."

I know nothing of the greater urgency
And secrecy of trains, why they go at night,
But I have heard that once in Arkansas a maniac
Was almost caught by the police even
As the train came by, that he escaped

By jumping over the tracks just before it came,
Over the tracks and into the swamp.
So I know a little of the saving grace
Of trains, how they take pity sometimes
On the pursued and the pursuer and
Sometimes leave us alone to breathe
Our own days to their deaths, to bear alone
The hushed continuity of the wind.
I do know a little piece, enough, perhaps.
I do know that sometimes, disgruntled
With so many impossibilities, a train can come.

In the season of my innocence
I have played chase with trains, played Christ
With trains, asking if there is a way
For one to pass me, a way to jump
In front of it and cross to the other side,
To hear the crack of my foot on leaves
On the safe side of the tracks
And know it is past, that every sound
Of leap and branch pronounces the shortness of time.
I wish trains had never stopped to claim me.
I wish I had never thought of trains,
Never known grief, never despised
The absolute depravity of passion.
But that is not the nature of trains
Or a watcher of trains; we must
Follow the little length of lonely track
Before us and not wish to have made it.
We must be blameless and we must not blame.
I don't blame you, boarder of trains,
Night-traveler, I make my little peace
If you will take a little pity.



Rohena Diane Axtell



Rohena Diane Axtell



Patty D. Davis

JOAN RANQUET
An Aversion to Blondes

Mrs. Jennings sits on the bench. She is humming "Singing in the Rain." Bill is in swimming trunks, a towel around his neck, tennis shoes and mismatched socks. He is reading a book.

Mrs. J: (Singing, she pulls out a compact to look at herself and peeks at him through it.) 'I'm hap-py again, I'm smi-ling!' (As she smiles at her reflection, she picks her teeth.) You know don't you, that if you don't floss your teeth regularly and properly, you're bound to have a plaque build up in no time.

Bill: What?

Mrs. J: *I said*, that if one does not floss, he is likely to find a very thick plaque build up, and there is nothing worse than teeth and gums heavily coated with plaque.

Bill: Oh, I see.

Mrs. J: I don't need you to keep the conversation going. Who needs insincerity?

Bill: Who says I'm insincere?

Mrs. J: I didn't say you were insincere, but you needn't hold up your end of the conversation on my account. Lord knows I get my fair share of conversation in a day, even in an hour. So don't think you're doing me any great favors. (Starts to look through her purse) Just don't talk to me, go about your business as though I weren't even here. Not a word.

Bill: O.K. . . . (Reads)

Mrs. J: (Still delving in her purse, she looks at the compact again, sighs as she observes the beauty of the day, and then leans toward him.) What did you say your name was, young man?

- Bill: I don't believe I told you my name. (He hesitates a moment, then mockingly adds—) *Madam*.
- Mrs. J: (Surprised) You didn't! What is it, then? (There is an awkward pause.) It's Bill, isn't it?
- Bill: No. (He continues to read.)
- Mrs. J: I knew it was. Bill.
- Bill: You're nuts.
- Mrs. J: What a very rude and disrespectful reply! Don't try to provoke me.
- Bill: (Still reading, not looking at her) I'm sorry.
- Mrs. J: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, have you no manners at all? (Aside) Apologizing and having the nerve to stare down at his book! Says he's *sorry*.
- Bill: (Leans toward her and looks at her levelly) I *am* sorry. (He begins to read again.)
- Mrs. J: (Taken aback) Well that was an improvement, but—
- Bill: Mrs., or Miss, what do you expect me—
- Mrs. J: (Interrupts him by holding her hand out to him to display a wedding band) It's Mrs. *Mrs.* Jennings is my name. Mrs. S.D. Jennings. (Proudly) S.D. are the initials of my husband.
- Bill: (Pauses, then, remotely interested) I don't mean to be nosy, but what is *your* name?
- Mrs. J: I'm glad you asked, Bill. I've been Mrs. S.D. Jennings for so long, I couldn't imagine being anything but Mrs. Jennings. My checks say Mr. and Mrs. S.D. Jennings; my stationery, my napkins—and of course all the towels, too. Come to think of it, the guest towels don't, they have a momma and a daddy and a baby owl. They are so cute, three little owls sitting on a branch. Why some time I want to be a guest at my own home, just to use the towels with the owls on them.
- Bill: Mrs. S.D. Jennings, just out of curiosity, what is your first name?
- Mrs. J: Thank you, Bill.
- Bill: (Pauses, bewilderment on his face) You're welcome. Thank you for what?
- Mrs. J: (Pauses, looks at watch, counts seconds) You may now . . .

- now you may call me Mrs. Jennings.
- Bill: *Mrs. Jennings.*
- Mrs. J: I like the way you say it.
- Bill: I don't mean to be rude, but what *is* your first name?
- Mrs. J: I don't find it appropriate to tell you at this time. Besides, I've forgotten it.
- Bill: How could someone forget their own name?
- Mrs. J: William—do you mind my calling you William? That is your real name, isn't it?
- Bill: I do mind your calling me William.
- Mrs. J: What do you suggest I do?
- Bill: I suggest you call me Bill. Unless of course, you tell me your first name. Then you may call me William.
- Mrs. J: I have forgotten my name.
- Bill: I can't in my wildest dreams imagine someone forgetting their first name!
- Mrs. J: (Aside) Your dreams must be fairly dull then.
- Bill: What?
- Mrs. J: I said your dreams must be pretty dull, William.
- Bill: (Mumbling) They must be. (Playfully) I wouldn't know, I've forgotten them!
- Mrs. J: Forgotten them! How could anyone forget his dreams? (He begins to read again and she shakes him.) William! I'm asking you?
- Bill: The same way you can forget your name! You can't.
- Mrs. J: But I know my name, it's Samuel Daniel.
- Bill: What is? I thought it was Bill.
- Mrs. J: No, my name, or rather, *his* name.
- Bill: Whose?
- Mrs. J: My husband, Samuel Daniel.
- Bill: Even friends call you Mrs. Jennings?
- Mrs. J: Even the closest, most personal friends! What else would they call me?
- Bill: I don't know. What does your husband call you?
- Mrs. J: Sometimes he called—I mean he calls me *Honey*, darling even. (Forced) Oh, and love. (She pauses.) Isn't that the concept behind marriage? A name is for identification purposes, correct?

- Bill: Ah, I think so. (He begins to drum with his fingers on the bench.) What is taking the bus so long? Don't they come every half hour?
- Mrs. J: (Scanning for the bus) As I was putting my last little dry dish into the cupboard, all nice and clean, I could barely see a bus go by, but it was a blue bus. It is highly unlikely that a blue bus would ever go downtown. Blue buses are in such great demand elsewhere. Of course there are those rare moments in time when the blue bus could be summoned by the city. (Looks again at her watch) William, it's time again.
- Bill: (Scanning for the bus) Time?
- Mrs. J: Oh, the nerve of that woman!
- Bill: What?
- Mrs. J: Nothing, I was just talking to myself. (Bill reads.) Cynthia is no saint herself. Just because she's Mrs. Reborn Mother become career woman doesn't exempt me from living because I'm not. (She rises.) I have enough to do than to worry about any career. Just my daily household chores are enough for me to grapple with. There she was up in her kitchen, chatting away on the phone (pantomimes) and me (gets down on her knees) down there playing with my pansies. Though she couldn't see me, certainly she could have heard me wrestling with those roots. But no, she was just too busy yacking. One cannot help but notice when one is being talked about. I never even got one planted, just listened to her speak about me. (Bill is fidgeting, trying to concentrate on his book.) Me and my sad existence! Sad existence, baagh. The truth of the matter is *her* existence must be pretty sad if she spends so much time worrying about me.
- Bill: (Cuts her off) Do you have a pencil?
- Mrs. J: (Again she hunts through the purse, spills it, and produces a pencil.) Don't you ever talk to yourself, *ever*?
- Bill: No, and I don't talk to strangers, either.
- Mrs. J: No, no. You can't honestly tell me you don't talk to yourself, *ever*?
- Bill: Never.

Mrs. J: William, it wasn't a fluke that we were given mouths and a voicebox. Haven't you ever walked into a grocery store? (Demonstrates) You're pushing your little cart around, not even thinking necessarily about what you need, and then suddenly you see what it is that you want—canned peas. And as you see it—(She reaches for the imaginary peas.)—the words lightly tumble from your mouth . . . (Whispers) Canned Peas.

Bill: Well, maybe.

Mrs. J: Haven't you ever been looking all over the entire house: upstairs, downstairs, back upstairs, then down again, looking for your wallet, knowing you put it on the desk in the study—and *all of the sudden* your eyes come upon it on the counter—(picks up the wallet that had spilled from her purse in the search for the pencil)—and you mutter, 'Oh, there it is.'

Bill: Well, I suppose . . .

Mrs. J: It's extremely healthy to talk to yourself. I would have to say that one is living dangerously if he does not talk to himself. Don't you know that Billy? (Billy puts pants on over swimming trunks)

Bill: About the name Billy—

Mrs. J: William, shame on you! I wouldn't call anyone who talks to himself weird, but those who don't, I would laugh at and call weird. You're weird! (She laughs at him.) And you were such a sweet child. (Pauses) Take a good look at me, for instance. I am constantly talking to myself. I spend hours talking. I at least can keep myself entertained.

Bill: I believe it!

Mr. J: What did you say?

Bill: I said *I believe it*.

Mrs. J: You are a very impertinent and tasteless young man. And worst of all, (starts to laugh again), *you're* weird.

Bill: Well, I think *you're* weird.

Mrs. J: (Astonished) *I never!*

Bill: You probably have to talk to yourself because you don't have anyone else to talk to.

Mrs. J: When I am lonely I tend to talk more, like when I'm scrub-

- bing the dead skin off of the bottoms of my feet in the bathtub.
- Bill: (Softening) Well, I'm alone a lot also. But it has never prompted me into conversation with myself.
- Mrs. J: (Jerks away) Then you *don't* know how I feel. There you go, being insincere again.
- Bill: I'm not trying to be insincere. If anything, I was trying to be understanding.
- Mrs. J: You could never understand. You're too feeble-minded for that. Besides, it's none of your business. (Aside) *Understand*, he'd never have the capacity for understanding, he doesn't even talk to himself.
- Bill: Whether I talk to myself or not is none of your business.
- Mrs. J: (Repossesses her pencil) You're absolutely correct, Bill. It is my duty, however, to warn you that even though it is none of my business, (confidentially), I think you're on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Look at you! You're certainly not *ugly*. And if one didn't know you were a snotty-nosed child, one might even like you. (She straightens her back against the bench.) Billy, I think it is high time you were married.
- Bill: Married!
- Mrs. J: Or you could have a mistress. A mistress with peroxide blonde hair, her black roots showing on the top of her head. False eyelashes, and lots of makeup, a nice figure, maybe a bit too busty—Gina. Yes, Gina.
- Bill: Mrs. Jennings! (He puts the book down, still holding his place with his thumb.)
- Mrs. J: Ah, ah, ah! Back to step one. Mrs. *Samuel Daniel* Jennings.
- Bill: If this bus does not get here very soon, I'll walk, hitchhike, crawl . . . Who the hell is Gina?
- Mrs. J: William, you are being ridiculously impervious! (Aside) Who's Gina! (To him) Who's Gina! Why she's your little fakie blondie.
- Bill: I don't know any blondes, especially fake blondes. Or fakie blondies as you call them.
- Mrs. J: You don't know *any* blondes?

Bill: Well, sure, passing acquaintances. Well, except Kelly. She was blonde, a real blonde, blonde eyelashes, blonde eyebrows. She was beautiful, my lab partner for chemistry, very bright girl. I always wanted to take her out, but when I would look into her hazel eyes, doe eyes, she just looked right through me. And I couldn't do anything but stare. After a while, I just couldn't look at her. I wanted to, I mean—I know she wasn't really the witch I began to see her as, as she'd mix her potions. Everyone loved her, I did too. I thought she was wonderful, but everything became so mechanical. 'Hi, how are you?' 'Did you get your project done?' And then we'd just work. I finally realized, it wasn't her at all, it was me. If I couldn't stand up for myself, I didn't deserve her.

Mrs. J: Well, Gina can restore your faith in blondes.

Bill: I don't even know any blondes named Gina.

Mrs. J: Oh come on, fake blonde even . . .

Bill: She's not a fake, through the hole in the shower—I saw her.

Mrs. J: So you *do* have an aversion to blondes! I was blonde once, many shades ago. And you're afraid of blondes. (She laughs.)

Bill: I am not afraid of blondes, she was beautiful. the bus is more than welcome to come now.

Mrs. J: Why don't you just walk. I wish you would. (Gets up and demonstrates) You'll be walking along, up that big hill, perspiration running down your face, from the heat and the strain. And I'll be sitting on the bus, calmly, enjoying the view. 'Oh there he is.' (She points.) I'll spot you, and smile pleasantly and wave—(She waves at him.)

Bill: You think you are so cruel. (Aside) Telling me I have an aversion to blondes. And Gina, where the hell did she get Gina?

Mrs. J: What do you mean, where did I get Gina? You're living with the woman now, aren't you?

Bill: O.K. (Closes the book, exasperated) This has gone far enough.

Mrs. J: (Contemptuously) When your shirts smell of cheap per-

- fume. Certainly you could buy her something with a little more taste. The phone calls didn't bother me at first—
- Bill: Listen Jennings—
- Mrs. J: I actually thought nothing of it.
- Bill: (Raising his voice a notch) Mrs. S.D. Jennings—
- Mrs. J: But when she would come over, that was *it*. How could you?
- Bill: *Mrs. Samuel Daniel Jennings*
- Mrs. J: *William*. Must you raise your voice like that? I have *extremely* delicate ears. I've had two operations in the last six months.
- Bill: I'm sorry. I didn't know.
- Mrs. J: (Annoyed) Didn't know what Billy?
- Bill: I didn't know your ears were delicate.
- Mrs. J: Oh, yes, they are, very, as every woman's should be. But mine, *extremely* delicate. Their extreme delicacy always leads back to my upbringing. A little caring went into my childhood, unlike the loose techniques practiced today. And you, Billy, are a product of this mistreatment. Malnutrition of values is what I would call it. I consider myself very lucky and have the deepest sympathy for you, son. (She pats him patronizingly on the shoulder.)
- Bill: (Sarcastically) Don't exert yourself on my account.
- Mrs. J: Don't be sarcastic or insincere with me Bill. You don't deserve sympathy in that case, and you won't get it from me. (Shakes her head remorsefully) Your poor mother. She lost the battle with you years ago.
- Bill: Oh, and I suppose next you're going to tell me you're an example of the perfect child.
- Mrs. J: How dare you! I don't believe you really consider before you speak.
- Bill: (Staring past her in confusion) *Gina?*
- Mrs. J: My God, you have nerve! If you think you are revealing any great secret, take a second look young man—because you're not. Youth these days. (She hits him lightly.) Always trying so hard to be profound. So you think you found me naked, stripped me of everything?
- Bill: (Feeling sorry and faintly confused for feeling that way) I

- didn't mean to. (There is a long pause as Mrs. Jennings sobs.)
- Mrs. J: (Sniffing) Your apology is accepted. (She leans over and kisses him. Then she pulls her compact out and looks in the mirror once more.) Oh, look. I've smeared my eyeliner. Always when one makes the extra effort, something has to go wrong. Lord knows I'll praise the day when babies are born with eyeliner on. What women go through to look nice!
- Bill: (Trying chivalrously to smooth her ruffled vanity) You don't need to wear makeup.
- Mrs. J: Oh Billy, your youth and naiveté amaze me sometimes. It covers my scars.
- Bill: (Examines her face) I don't see any scars.
- Mrs. J: Then I must have done a clever job today. But they are there.
- Bill: What are they from?
- Mrs. J: A brain infection I once had.
- Bill: *Brain infection!* (He rolls his eyes.)
- Mrs. J: A brain infection. (Her decorum regained, she is now irritated.) You are just so dim-witted. It stuns me daily. Honestly Billy, you can't be that shallow. My best advice to you is to seek professional help. Immediately.
- Bill: I hate Billy. Let's go back to William.
- Mrs. J: Don't you get smarty with me young man. I've tolerated enough out of you already. You just can't avoid help. You can't go on living and carrying that much weight on your shoulders. It is simply not healthy. I would suggest that perhaps you consider going today even. Forget the beach, it will be there tomorrow. But your sanity might not be. Get down there today, while there is still hope.
- Bill: Hope?
- Mrs. J: Yes. (She grabs his arm.) Hope of saving yourself in time, William! Don't play games with me. You are going crazy, boy! I don't know how to get through your thick little skull. You could crack any time. Anyone with the least amount of common sense would recognize this sickness and seek help immediately.

- Bill: Me? You're telling *me* to get help! You're nuts lady, N-U-T-S. Nuts!
- Mrs. J: Don't lash out at me because of your condition Bill. I'm the last person you need to defend yourself before.
- Bill: (To himself) No, this isn't really happening. I come here and sit down. A nice sunny day, one of my rare days off; planning to hop a bus and go to the beach. Play frisbee, swim—
- Mrs. J: Billy, you're too much of a dreamer. You have to look at things a little more realistically. (Miming) Life is just not a frisbee tossed from one to another. I can help you climb out of your dream world Billy, and get you to help. Today, before it's too late.
- Bill: O.K. (Pause) First I want to finish this book. It's pretty good. I've just read how this young guy kills this bag lady in Central Park. Once I've read where he stashes the body, I'm ready for anything. Even help if that's what you want. (Sighing a little, he starts to read once more.)
- Mrs. J: Don't go getting things twisted up in your warped little mind, Billy.
- Bill: (Looking at the pages, a wild enthusiasm in his face) Wow, he was dragging her into these bushes and he gets seen—
- Mrs. J: Billy, calm down. I can get you help in no time at all. It's natural for you to feel a little anxiety, but we—
- Bill: So he gets seen and he tells this guy to go get help to save this poor old woman who was victimized by some maniac.
- Mrs. J: Don't worry about it Bill. There are even places for the maniacs in this world. (She takes his hand sympathetically.) You see Billy, I can feel the energy, even in your hand. You're going nuts, boy! (Sobs on his shoulder) I'm so sorry.
- Bill: When the police get there, the guy, Jesse, he gets away scot-free, because he tells them he found her dying and the reason he has blood on him was because he was holding her before she died, so all he had . . .
- Mrs. J: *Billy, don't you understand! This is it. You've had it! You are not only completely out of your essence, but there's little hope of your recovery.*

Bill: Relax. I know. So anyway this guy has . . .

Mrs. J: Billy, *listen* to me. (Shakes him and he brushes her hands off) I am on my way to visit a friend, and it just so happens that he's a psychologist. And my son, there's always hope.

Bill: I *said* I'd go.

Mrs. J: *That's it!* I can't tolerate you any longer. You're rubbing off on me. I'm leaving. (She gathers her purse up and stands very peremptorily before the bench.) And you can forget lunch next week.



Chella McNeice Garrett

[The text in this section is extremely faint and largely illegible. It appears to be a transcript of a conversation or a series of short paragraphs, possibly related to the image above. The text is arranged in several lines, with some words being more discernible than others.]

SHARON HELENE O'NEIL

Mama

Mama was real sick when she was pregnant with Billy. She cried all the time like she knew a real bad secret. She'd touch her stomach like she was afraid she'd wake up the baby . . . or maybe she was testing to see if it really was her stomach holding another one, kind of pinching herself to make sure it wasn't just a bad dream.

Her back hurt more than it used to but she kept her cleaning job at the school. She had to, since daddy was in jail again. After work, she'd put her feet on the yellow table and smoke about five cigarettes, one after the other. She'd use the one she was smoking to light the next then take one more drag before she put it out. I liked watching her breathe the smoke and then push it out in straight, powerful lines. She doesn't smoke no more and she's gotten real tidy, scrubs the dishes so hard that my little brother, Rufus, thinks they're getting thin and will break easy.

Bobby's two years older than me. He's living in the youth center 'cause Mama couldn't stop him stealing and getting caught. He'll be going to the army next year when he's eighteen. My oldest brother, Tom, joined the army 'bout half a year ago. They're teaching him how to fix radios and things like that so he can get a good job when he comes home. Mama always says, "Army's the best place for boys, keeps 'em out of trouble."

I don't see why Tom had to go to the army, he never got into trouble. He's real good-looking and gentle-like; he reads books. Daddy said he should quit reading them and learn to work 'cause nobody's never fed a family just reading books. Daddy used to make a lot of money that Mama said was dirty. But he dressed sharp and drove a big car, used to park it on the grass. That made Mama mad, but it didn't matter 'cause the grass was all pretty dead anyway. He tried to make Mama happy—buying her presents and all—but she wouldn't take them. I miss him, can't visit until I'm eighteen.

Mama hasn't visited him since she got pregnant. She probably doesn't want to worry him or make him think he needs to make more money when he gets out. Tom will be home from the army soon anyway. He'll take care of us, he's always been Mama's favorite. She says Tom looks just like daddy when she married him. Daddy doesn't like him. He says he don't want no priss for a son and called Tom a queer faggot when he got mad. But it's not true, Tom's just gentle-like. Sure he don't bring girls home but he don't bring boys neither.

I get real curious when Mama gets back from visiting daddy. One time I got her real mad with my questions.

"Mama?"

"Yeah?"

"Did they let you sleep with daddy last time you visited him?"

"Don't be asking questions like that, girl."

"They don't allow that, do they?"

"What are you asking girl?"

"Whose—?"

"It's not your daddy's."

"Whose?"

"Girl, I ain't gonna sit here and talk to you if you ask questions that ain't none of your business."

"But—daddy's gonna know when he gets out."

"No, he ain't."

"He's not getting out? But—"

"He'll get out, but not for five years, if he's good."

I got a job at the tower, selling quarter tickets to tourists. It's real easy. Not many people come to see it, and a lot that do stay in their cars because they're scared. Who wants to see a tower of junk anyway? Mama says it shows that people can make something outta nothing. But I don't see what good a tower of junk is. I think tourists come to look at us. They act like we'll attack or something. I feel like I might sometime. I stare at their cars real mean-like and they drive away fast.

A lady like my brother Bobby's social worker been coming by a lot to talk to Mama. Mama's gonna have the baby real soon. She talks to her stomach, calls it Billy.

I asked her, "Mama, what if it's a girl and you're already calling it Billy?"

"It don't matter if it's a girl, or a boy," she said.

One day, I came home from school and Mama was back from the hospital. She was holding the blanket she knitted when she was a girl and singing to it. She didn't have no baby, just a blanket, but she was calling it Billy, real soft.

"Mama, was it a boy or a girl?" I said.

"Can't you see, girl? Ain't he pretty, gonna grow up real gentle."

I didn't know what to say, so I left Mama there, holding her blanket.

Mama's happy now, I guess, she doesn't cry no more. She's always talking to her blanket, kind of scares me. I'm glad Tom will be home soon. He'll know what to do.

I'm afraid to say anything. I don't want to see her crying again. She looks real pretty, like she feels young or something, holding her first baby. She makes me promise not to leave Billy alone when she goes to work.

"Girl, you take good care of Billy while I'm gone."

"I will Mama. Mama? When's Tom coming home?"

"I told you girl. He'll be home in five years, if he's good."

PAM SUMNERS
A Ball of Twine

I came to Jasmine's house with something of the sinking feeling I had when a parking lot was put over the cemetery where I played as a child. I came not because I meant it when I called Jasmine my best friend but because I believed in the sacred principle of obligation. I came because her voice had always been trembling and apologetic to me and because I knew I was the last vestige of her childhood she could bear to confront. I came because I saw her faults plainly, with the same detachment as one notes the creases and blemishes of a woman who wears her make-up too thick. But I came.

When she opened the door she was cool and unruffled; I stood steaming and stale from the hot vinyl of my car seat. She balanced like a model out of some women's magazine, arms spangling the wide French door, cellophane smile taut. The compelling aqua-blue eyes, "eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase," were as I remembered them. Her fine blonde hair was today pulled back from her forehead with two brown speckled combs. She wore a shirt the color of roses I saw once in my Grandmother's basin, an ambiguous shade of pink. Her trousers were a thin linen, laced at the ankles above spiked shoes. In high school her pants were creased in precisely the right places; her blouses were immaculate and trim. She had even bitten her fingernails neatly, nibbling the tips off exactly even. I went on registering her: click click click I ticked off the warm glow of her cheeks and her Gucci belt. She was not much changed, with that frame of melted butter sunlight sliding down around her shoulders. She was still the loveliest woman in the world to me, the woman whose English themes I revised, the one I spent spring breaks with in college. Her eyes were still enough that I could see the wistfulness there, a pensive uncertainty in her expression. It was like watching a performer inching along a tightrope. I thrust forward stiffly to embrace her. She tapped impatiently on my back. She smiled again, a thin wisp slanted sideways to

reveal the fine straight cut of her lips. I used to wonder where she had learned that smile that was sometimes charming and always patronizing.

“Shannon.” The bellrope jingled when she flung the door back. Her voice—those thin, papery wind chimes the Japanese have.

“Jas. I’m sorry I didn’t find time to help you get settled. I should have made it.”

“No. Now that you’re here!” She hugged me then, the kind of hug I got stepping off of planes or on New Year’s.

“Are you happy to be back?”

“Yes,” she floated over three syllables. “You’ll never guess what I found this morning.” Like her, to abruptly shift conversation, cutting me off in mid-smile, galloping past the pleasantries.

“What?”

“I have every note you’ve written me since tenth grade.”

I remembered the barrage of letters, all signed “Sincerely, S.” I had been very sincere, those days. Sincerely angry, sincerely jealous, sincerely hysterical. She was waiting for me to say “Yes, I have yours, too.” But I took my life out like a winter suit my sophomore year at Duke and looked for mothholes. I threw away my prom corsage, swimming medals, her letters. I imagined hairline fractures in Jasmine’s veneer as she searched for something to say. I was sorry that I’d been angry then, anxious to accomplish some small vengeance against her for folding herself into a secret I couldn’t guess. I was sorry I had thrown her letters away.

“Well, what do you think?” She gestured expansively to the pastel walls of the foyer. “Here, come up. I love this place, so I know you will.” I tried to look appreciative of the bay windows, the veranda, even the pantry. It was a nice house, the kind I wanted, once. I told her it was lovely and remembered the way she paused for approval of a poem she had written to me or the way her prom dress hung on her. She smiled her vague, self-centered smile and pushed a sliding comb into place. Her hands, bony at the joints, slender, blue-veined, capable. She still wore the diamond ring I had given her when she graduated from Vanderbilt. Those hands of hers—always reaching, fingers flexed and greedy. I thought of a child adding up candy canes on a Christmas tree, so intent on their impending delight that he loses count. I wondered if Jasmine had lost it or kept reaching.

The kitchen was clove-scented; two flower-crested plates gleamed, with napkins folded into crips pyramids at their centers. Jasmine pulled a tray of meats and cheeses from the refrigerator. The gold bangle on her wrist twirled as it had when she made turkey sandwiches for me in her parents' apartment. Still the same diet soda she drank in high school—somehow this atoned for the harem pants and Gucci belt. And she still licked her lips, delicately, like a cat, chasing them for the last hint of what she had eaten.

She asked if she could come next week to my studio. I said "Absolutely" and thought of staying with her spring break. I came from the shower to find her sprawled on the floor, reading my journal. She had not closed it suddenly, abashed and apologetic. She had gone on reading, holding me off with one arm. That same week she invaded my notebook, stuffed with poems and sketches of her. Then, when she was sure that she was still the parallel lines between which my life was written she smiled with satisfaction, just as I came into the room. I watched her eat, transfixed and awed by that resolve she always radiated. She was saying something.

"Milk?"

I studied the furtive creases of her forehead, wondering how Jasmine of that memory, Jasmine of that tenacious intellect, could have failed to file away the fact that I didn't like milk.

"No," she said, pulling herself in, "you never touch it." Then she laughed, that wild, unexpected laugh that covered for whatever lacked in the conversation. "I remember," she gasped, "you never ate anything but M&M's and barbecued potato chips." Through her paroxysm of brittle laughter, I saw the tightrope image again. Her chin trembled; she brought her hands up before her eyes. Her shoulders began to quiver, but I did not move toward her. I remembered her tears at graduation during my speech and when I was in the hospital with spinal meningitis. When she thought I was asleep she had begged me not to die. She was the woman I had painted, with lips quivering and her mascara clumped, a madonna whose vulnerability bound me to her as strength never could. She dabbed her eyes and stood, slamming her chair under the table. The hand with the diamond smoothed her hair back. I felt faintly jealous of that hand.

She sniffed. "I guess you think I'm pretty weird, crying for no reason." Even now, seeking my approval. The photogenic image was

gone.

“No.” I pulled the chair out for her. She looked at me for a minute and then flopped back down.

“It just went wrong somewhere.” She laid her palms flat on the table. “Wrong choices.”

“Don’t think that.”

“How I envy you. I always did. President, embodiment of the *alma mater*. You could be lying around a room half drunk with your pants unzipped and still have that respect.” Her liquid eyes trained on the ceiling. “Everything I got because of you.” She shook her head.

“High school was a long time ago, Jas. We’re not the people we were. You went on, and so did I. All this talk—makes me feel like a homecoming queen at a football game ten years later.” I couldn’t get her to look at me until I lifted her chin in my hand. “You got your degree, would have gone to med school—”

“Would have. See the difference? You are. You are what you’ve always wanted to be.” She leaned back and looked at the wall.

“No. I wanted to be great.” I stopped tracing my initials with the tines of my fork and looked at her. “I don’t have your looks or your money, or the passion to achieve you always had.”

“Well I don’t have it now.” She laughed weakly and punched me confidentially in the arm. “You get tired of the grind.”

“So you got married.” I said it like an accusation and hoped she didn’t notice.

“So I got married.” She clanked her fork against the table. I looked at those hands I loved, imagined those surgeon’s fingers writing *Occupation: Housewife*. I remembered them covered with silver stuff when she came from a seven-hour lab—our freshman year, her eyes burning as blue as copper passing through a flame in one of her experiments. Her eyes burned that way whenever she talked about titrations or cosins or the instruments she would inherit from her uncle.

“Do you remember,” she asked distractedly, “when we wrecked your car?”

I remembered.

“You hated me for always wrecking your things and stealing your awards.” She said this with deep conviction, as if it mattered after ten years who dated which football player or won what award. This was not what I hated her for. Her unpardonable crime was deserting me in

her haste to bridge the gap between pigtailed and cocktails, between our rum and colas and her mother's vodka tonics. For pretending to be a woman she was not, for hanging onto the arm of a bland boy because he wore Oxford shirts and took her to expensive restaurants where neither of them belonged, where they pretended sophistication but manifested only embarrassment, I couldn't forgive her. I thought I had buried it all, but it was a ball of twine winding through the years, past her lovers and mine. She felt the long cord unleashing, too, though she thought it was for a perjured essay and a plaque on the wall. All these years she had called long distance to keep open that single line of communication that was the connection to her guilt. That guilt was why I kept loving her, why I come to her house.

"You were my maid of honor." She looked at me with a pathetic intensity that made me sorry I never told her I didn't care about the plaques. How could I tell her something she wouldn't understand? In Jasmine's world people and things were as stereotypical and symbolic as anything that stepped out of a Toulouse-Lautrec. She wouldn't apprehend her own betrayal. She would believe that all women chased men with money and manners and pretended to play golf in order to secure an invitation to the country club. She would uphold to the end the deceit and superficiality without analyzing any of it.

"That's what best friends are for," I said. I watched the little ripples at her throat when she swallowed. She brushed the crumbs from her hands and shook her plate and mine over the sink.

"Say," she said, "come upstairs. I think I might have something that would fit you. I found it the other day in my trunk and thought of you."

I recoiled at the thought. Ten years ago playing dress-up with Jasmine would have been attractive to me. Now I didn't want to wear Jasmine's clothes.

"No, really."

"Oh come on. I used to eat your pizza crusts."

Out came the clothes, musty from disuse but still faintly scented with her perfume. She held up a blue cashmere that was short in the sleeves. She proffered a beige wool skirt that hung low on the hips. In these I posed like a dummy in a store window. She packed them in a neat white bag and rang up a guilt-free sales slip. When she beamed at me, I smiled back. Without realizing it, Jasmine had furnished me

with a whole new ball of twine to roll out between us. When we sat in her uncluttered kitchen it would bind us together. I would perhaps come one day wearing her wool and cashmere.

She marched down the stairs and I followed like an automaton, taking crisp wooden steps. The phone rang.

I studied her back as she twined the cord around her fingers. "No, I don't care." She played with the knob on the drawer, twisted it into the wood. "Well, I won't be here." She shoved her hands into the skinny slit of her trousers. "I don't care what the hell you do." She sounded a little hysterical, the way she had in high school when I made a cutting remark about Terry. "We didn't move here because of me, either." The next thing I heard was fine, she'd just have dinner with me. I had always been her weapon against boys she didn't want to date. Once more I was an excuse for a pimply, over-anxious lab partner. "Have a good time, Terry." She hurled the phone toward its cradle but missed. The cord dangled from the secretary. Even when it began to beep and whine she didn't replace it. She merely pushed her hair back into place with one of the combs. I heard it snap as she refastened it.

"Well, Shannon, looks like I've invited myself to dinner with you."

"That's fine, Jas."

Nothing fancy, she said. She didn't really want to go out—could we eat at my place? I was thinking what an expensive habit she had been in the days of T-bones and Cordon Rouge. A pizza, she suggested. I was about to say I'd expect her at seven when she said, "Pick me up at seven?"

At the door I stood bearing the sack like a scarlet letter against my chest, symbol of her guilt. I felt it seeping into me, felt myself falling again into the endless vat of her ego and coming out not quite clean somehow. I shifted the sack to the other arm without looking at her face. I didn't want to look at her, feel pity, understanding, love: I wanted to give her clothes back to her and place blame for all the years of in-between. I didn't want to see in her eyes the desperate driving past Terry's office to see that his car wasn't there and remember all the nights she had driven past my house. My mouth smiled at hers.

She pressed the door to a close very softly. I heard a click and then the bolting of a latch. When I pulled out of the drive, I could see her through the window, drinking coffee and chasing something around

on the table with one finger. The motion was precise as an incision, left to right. Shannon to the rescue again. Once she took twenty dollars from her mother's purse to pay for a blouse in layaway. She hid the purse until she had time to replace the money. I gave her a twenty. Another time I stole the carbon of the honors convocation from the vice-principal's trash. There, in bold letters, was *Jasmine Forster, Bausch-Lomb*. She was waiting around the corner, her eyes that strange blue.

Only a few weeks after we became friends, I dreamed that she invited me to a tea party. She served the tea in front of a cardboard lemonade stand like the ones children build in the summers. She was dressed in a long blue apron; she looked like a greeting card caricature of a "nice girl." She served tea and biscuits. Then as I sat she became a short, thick snake with swirled patterns. She asked if I was afraid of her and I said yes. She asked if I would stay anyway. When I nodded she was again Jasmine in the blue apron.

At precisely six-thirty I grabbed my car keys. In high school I had come from the school board office to discover my car had been towed. I was supposed to have been at her place at four-thirty. By the time I tracked the car, it was a quarter past five. She told me to leave, she had called Terry and made a date with him. When the phone rang that night, I didn't answer. Instead I broke a rum bottle beneath her window. She watched me do it. I pictured myself late again, explaining among her potted ferns.

She answered my buzz quickly. I knew she had watched me come up the walk and thought it improper to open before I had knocked. I looked at her eyes. She hadn't cried. She smiled. I was getting used to the automatic courtesy again. She always smiled and chatted with even the most hopelessly inane people, people who to the death would begrudge her a superior score on the SAT.

"I'm glad you're early. I was starting to pace."

"I was afraid I'd be too early."

"Oh no. Look." She procured two bottles of *liebfraumilch* from a sack. "Just like old times tonight, Shannon." I remembered the last bottle we had drunk as I unlocked her door and went around to my side.

Jasmine was wearing a gold watch with diamond insets. I liked it; I knew without looking at the facepiece that it was a Wittnauer. I didn't

tell her I liked it. She took it for granted that she was attractive and her jewelry tasteful. She clasped her hands in her lap. There wasn't much to say. I wished I smoked so I could look too preoccupied to speak.

"Do you mind dinner? Because really, you don't have to. I know I've taken a lot of your time today."

"Jasmine. Shh."

She played with her wedding ring. The diamond was gaudy, but that was Terry's taste, not hers. She had always liked things of understated quality, beauty resulting from perfect propriety. She never wore anything that wasn't calculated to make an agreeable impression. When she got out of the car, I noticed her slacks, the same blue as her kitchen curtains, and the blouse that billowed out above them. I opened the door of my house, ashamed that it smelled like acrylic and plaster instead of cloves. Her perfume, a smell of spice and flowers like the ylang-ylang that draped the walls and fountains of Japan when I visited last summer, hung in the air like an incongruous phantom.

"Just as I remember it."

I was sure she did remember it that way, my bookshelves crammed with Eliot and Matisse, my walls crowded by women with raven or auburn hair the poets write about. And a photo of her still hung above the stereo. It was a picture that made me think of mint juleps and picnic umbrellas.

She stuck the bottles in the refrigerator, banged the pizza tin around. "Do you remember how I came over when your parents were out of town? I'd fix you steaks and tacos—"

"Of course I remember. You kept me from starving."

"We used to get so drunk. I'll never forget when you bought that Cordon Rouge at the Hyatt and we watched that dirty movie." She was smiling now, almost happy.

"We've had some good times, Jas." I, too, was almost happy in knowing she wasn't thinking of Terry. The fortune teller told her she'd marry in her second year of college. She had. With a full scholarship she could afford to. We all placed bets on whether she'd get her degree in biochemistry. When she did I thought she'd go to some world-renowned med school and become an entry in a professional journal. I felt a pang at what I had always wanted for her: to see

those hands bloody, for her sake, bloody with healing, surgical lights bouncing off them the way electricity bounces in the air at a carnival, and later I wanted her to sit quietly in a bar with me sipping margaritas and feel no certainty that the salt taste was not blood. Instead she went home to Terry, whose shirts were starched, not by Jasmine, who liked his scotch and his collars neat.

She asked me to put on the record we had listened to those other nights at my house. When I came back to the kitchen she said, "I wish we could have stayed that way forever, Shannon."

"It might have been easier that way. No lovers or families, only our friends. You and I were always such *friends*." I instantly regretted the pettiness of throwing her words back in her face.

"When we say there were no complications—there always were. It's easy to see all my faults magnified when I look at you. We were always the same." She spread the red paste over the dough without looking up. She uncorked one of the bottles. "I was afraid I'd come here and there would be no Shannon to put the pieces together again. Today was like picking up a book that was your favorite a long time ago but you haven't read it in awhile. You still get the same old feelings from it." She filled our glasses and began spreading cheese over the paste.

Liquor had never affected me the way it did Jasmine. She finished her glass and we went into the den, she with the bottle. Jasmine liked to talk when she was drunk. She shook the combs out of her hair and put them on the coffee table. Her hair was mussed from driving with the windows down. She saw me looking at it.

"Am I still pretty when my hair's a mess?"

"It is pretty tangled."

"Do you remember the first time we made pizza at your house and got drunk?"

"I threw up on the carpet and put a towel over it until the morning."

She poured another glass. "That's not what I'm talking about." She cocked her head. It was her come-on look; it must have worked well for her to have kept it all these years.

"I have a good memory," I said.

"Do I look hideous, with my hair all—"

"No Jasmine, you don't look hideous."

"Awfully tangled."

“Hopelessly.”

She was waiting, with that same patience she had for a bad lab partner. Finally she said, “Did you miss me a lot the first few weeks after I got married?”

“I got over it. Come on. It’s not like you went to Egypt or something.”

“Did you miss me?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Bullshit.”

“Irrelevant.”

“Yeah, I guess maybe it is.”

I sipped the wine. “Here,” I said, handing her a brush. “You should wear it straight more often.”

“You! You always like me when I’m plain.”

“I never was one for condiments. Besides, I was always the plain one, doll.” I got up to check on the pizza.

“Bitch.”

When I came back she was on the couch brushing her hair. I set my glass down and took a seat on the floor.

“I should’ve lied to you. If I’d said I had to get married because I was pregnant or something, you might have understood.” She looked at me contemptuously. “Why are you sitting down there?”

“So I can have a clear view of who I’m talking to.”

She was quiet for a few minutes, swaying her head with the music. “I made a mistake, Shannon.”

“I know.” Something in me softened and I wanted to let her know it would be all right now. “I know babe. You had no way of knowing. Marriage is love forever and little red cut-out hearts. We’re all supposed to march off to the beat of a drum to find that other person who is our dream manifest and presto! Wake up to find that the dream was a nightmare and the drummer was a madman, or maybe just monotonous. But—” The anger was rising again, that crazy buried anger. “But no. You didn’t marry for romance or fascination. You married for comfort.”

“Do you blame me for marrying him?”

I didn’t want this conversation. I didn’t want to remember those times, to think why I kept loving her. Finally I said, “Why should I blame you for doing what you thought you had to do?” The trick had

worked. Already I was thinking of nights I had lain awake on the cool sheets and blamed her for loving someone besides me.

"You never married."

"What an astute faculty you have for noting the obvious."

"I made a wrong choice."

"No, you made a right choice for then. Maybe a right choice for always. You just chose the wrong person."

"I should have chosen you."

"Oh, Jasmine." It came out too soft. I wanted to be the woman in "Prufrock," settling a shawl about my shoulders and saying, "That is not what I meant; that is not it, at all." I couldn't. I felt a strange, self-righteous power choking me. It was only fair. It was only fair that she should need me as I once needed her. It was only right that I should turn my body just as she once had. She was settled on the couch now as she had been on that first drunken Friday night at my house. We had eaten an expensive dinner and come home to drink rum and colas. She curled up on the sofa now as she did then. That night after her third drink, weak, she talked about her mother's drunken rages, Terry. I nodded sympathetically from my chair until she said, "My mother used to hold me when I cried. I wish someone would hold me now." Then I came over to the couch and embraced her, touched her cheeks, her lips, her eyelids. A dozen times on my couch I had traced her hairline with my fingertips. Even now I remembered the pain of holding my body rigid in history class, watching her lean on Terry's shoulder in assemblies.

"I should have chosen you."

"I couldn't have given you a two-car garage in suburbia or a Mercedes to put in it. I certainly couldn't have given you respectability. Forget those things. Remember the night you said you didn't love me that way?"

"I can't forget that night at the Hyatt. You haven't forgotten."

"I made myself. I got letters saying it wasn't that way, that I had to forget, you wished it never happened. I felt like your little experiment in counter-culture. You gave me double signals, Jas. I picked up on the one that meant less pain. It's that simple."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what I wanted. I thought I wanted a Mercedes."

"Oh, come on. You sold out. I've never been angry with you for

just getting married. It was getting married and then giving up what you wanted, what you had to have. If you had loved him with all that was in you, I would have tried to understand. But first you sold out on me and then you sold out on the only thing I thought you could ever love more than me. The only thing you loved enough, your hands, your instruments—” Our eyes locked. “You gave it up on purpose.”

“I thought about you. All through school I thought about you. I thought about you every time I saw a TV program or heard a certain song, I thought of you times when I shouldn’t have. And then that night on the phone, when you said it was all right, whatever choice I made—”

“Yeah, I said that. After you once more made me feel like the whole thing was my fault, like I was some pervert. You had me convinced, doll. You had me convinced that I should head straight for the first therapist to learn how to lay the Chinese army in a dream.”

“You knew better. I thought you didn’t care enough to claim me. And then you stopped answering your phone, and you wouldn’t call.”

“I couldn’t.” I picked at the carpet, found a blonde strand. How many times after she had gone did I bury my face in her pillow because it smelled like her perfume?

“You told me if you were a man you would’ve married me.”

“I would’ve, then.”

“I want you now. I do need you, Shannon.” She came down beside me and wound her fingers through mine.

“I loved you for five years. You loved me back. You could’ve had me then.”

“I know.” She bowed her head.

“Five years is a long time. It was a long time to ache for you.”

“The years I’ve needed you are longer.” Her voice wavered. I traced a finger along her cheek. She was crying. “I wasted it, Shannon. I wasted a marriage, eight years, to find out I really wanted you. I always wanted you. Can’t you understand I was afraid?” I wiped at her nose with my sleeve. “Shannon, Shannon.”

“You’ve got me. You always had me, all the time. I never left you, and you know that.”

“I don’t want you the way I’ve had you all the time.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m leaving Terry.”

"Well, metaphorically speaking, you left him a long time ago."

"I mean I'm leaving him."

"Ah, get mad, pack up your toys and say bye-bye to the Mercedes and the barbecue grill."

"You didn't marry. You could never love anyone the way you love me."

"I recall loving a number of people who never tried to make me their martyr."

"It took me so long to be able to say this to you. I tried so many times. Shannon." She reached to put her arm around me but I squirmed away. She landed in my lap.

"No rain checks, Jas."

"I love you."

"Yeah."

"I won't hurt you again."

"Oh, Jas. You are such a game player. I learned it from you and still hate myself to think of all the people I hurt. A game player always hurts someone. I've been your yo-yo. 'Come here, Shannon,' and your hand creeping over to my side of the bed. 'Don't touch me, Shannon,' and you turning away and acting as if nothing ever happened.

"I made you out to be my mythos from antiquity, my muse, because I thought your voice was like chimes. It wasn't, it wasn't like that at all to anyone but me. You could've told me that the sun was a boiled egg in a cracked china plate and I would've believed. I had to, the honor code. You were my partner in crime. You held the knife while I turned for you. No thanks, now. I outgrew masochism on your first wedding anniversary." I watched her shoulders tremble.

"I love you." A tear dropped off the tip of her nose. The ice in me cracked. I smoothed the corners of her eyes with my thumbs.

"O.K., Jas. I don't know what to do." I pressed my face into her shoulder and felt her arm encircle my head. Then slowly, I swept the pieces into a neat white bag and handed them to her as she had handed me the wool and cashmere.



Chella McNeice Garrett

BARBARA THOMAS
Autumn Exit

Matthew had been right. Even though he was five years younger than me—"but only in years," he used to say—he was more qualified to be my babysitter than I was to be his. My father, in his haste to have the Brownings sign contracts with the University, combined with what I read as his desire to temporarily uproot me from the confines of our home, promised them that their ten year old son would be competently supervised three evenings a week by his teenaged daughter who enjoyed babysitting.

"Why'd you have to tell them I liked watching kids?" I asked him when he broached the subject one summer evening at dinner. I could tell he knew I wouldn't be receptive to the idea. He knew me. He knew I wasn't the least bit sorry that I had no younger siblings.

"Well, Katie, sweetheart—" he began.

"Never mind," I interrupted. I scooted back in my chair, making an annoying screech on the floor, and set my napkin on the table.

"Now don't run off mad, honey," my mom said, sounding reproachful, but looking apologetic for my father's business deal.

"I'm not going anywhere, I'm just getting some milk," I lied.

"You just sit back, I'll get your milk and our coffee." My mother was always trying to placate me. It usually worked. They both catered to me; we had our little games, and they weren't harmful. Sometimes I think our relationship as a family even relied upon them. I wasn't mad; I acted put upon, my parents dealt with me, and I acquiesced. I knew the Brownings would be valuable to the college of Arts and Letters, and my lack of patience with children was no reason to make my father's job more difficult.

So when Matthew's parents taught night classes, I babysat for him. *Babysat*. The first time I knocked on the door of their house, Matthew answered.

Had he closed the door right then, I would have described him as a

frail ten year old with curly, angelic blonde hair. Now, though, I'd have to call it straw-colored, because the only time I'd ever touched it—months later—I was surprised at its coarseness. Even when he smiled, his mouth pouted at its corners and his white teeth were evenly spaced, though, like his father's, one was annoyingly crooked. He was indeed small for his age, though not frail, and well proportioned, occupying a minimum of space with a refined sense of presence. His eyes weren't especially large, although his whole face seemed to frame them and accentuate their depth.

"Where are your parents?" I asked, looking from his eyes over his head and past the door, into the living room.

"My name is Matthew Browning, who are you?" he asked, still looking at me, his hand on the doorknob. His voice was a little rough-edged for a boy of ten, like a radio that needed to be tuned in more clearly. I found it not unattractive; it was, at least, eccentric compared to the nasal whines of my cousins his age.

"Didn't your parents tell you I'm babysitting while they have classes? Go get them," I said, impatient.

He stepped back to let me in and closed the door. Without looking at me he walked into the living room, which was cluttered with packing crates and stacks of books. I followed, leaving a few seconds of space between us. He knelt beside a box and extracted a bulky mass of paper.

"You're Katie and my parents left around five for dinner," he said.

"I'm positive they told me to be here by seven," I said. My father had always stressed punctuality, and I knew I wasn't late. I wondered what his parents would think if they learned he'd been alone for two hours.

"Acutally, I don't need anyone," he said. "I've told them not to waste their money, but they seldom let me stay alone."

"They *seldom* let you, huh?" I said, amused. *The kid must have learned a new word today*, I thought. He finished unwrapping what I saw was a teapot. It looked Oriental, an off-white color with a bamboo pattern. I liked it more than I did my mother's flowered teapot, which looked as though it would fit only in the center of a table of *éclairs*. The one Matthew held appeared to consider the tea itself more important than the vessel. He set it carefully on a stack of records and pushed around in the box, removing five smaller paper balls: teacups,

I assumed. The five tiny cups matched the pot and had no handles.

"I was about to make tea," he said. "What's your favorite?" I certainly didn't have a favorite tea, of all things, and I didn't imagine he did, either. Kids had always grated on my nerves, but his attempts at maturity were intimidating. He spoke and acted as he appeared: neither like a child, nor completely like an adult. His actions thus far had had a child's spontaneity and an adult's assured precision. He handled the china in a way that struck me as feminine. When my mother folded my clothes that way I felt slightly repelled: she'd smooth out the wrinkles too gently and I'd still feel her hands on them when I dressed. I realized I was hypersensitive; I studied the habits of those around me so scrupulously that I left no room for faults, or for friends. And little boys don't play tea in the evening and act as if the teapot is a fragile model car.

"What?" I asked, stalling as I tried to recall the name of a dark, spicy tea my Aunt Cecile had served me once.

"If you don't have a favorite, which is quite possible, since most people don't, I can fix one of mine."

He rose and lifted the teapot with both hands. This action looked incongruous with his jeans and plaid dress shirt. Its sleeves were rolled above his elbows and the shirttail was out, hanging too low.

"Could you take the cups, please?" he asked. I lifted one.

"*I'll not take tea this evening, Matthew,*" I said, satirically British. He turned his head sideways and looked at me steadily, then silently turned and walked away. I followed him to the kitchen with one cup. I didn't know if he realized I'd mocked him, although later he would tell me that he "had a rather negative first impression" of me.

When I think back, I regret entering his life with the overconfident presupposition that I'd play authoritarian to a belligerent child. But even that first evening didn't totally rid me of preconceptions. I still tend to generalize, and I still find it difficult to tolerate children, but I finally realize that Matthew should be placed in no category and must always be dealt with—or not "dealt" with—in an original manner, a fresh manner, like his own. His casual assurance when he faced a question was, I felt, superior to the convoluted games I used to approach, or rather to attack, life. Perhaps that was the secret: Matthew never attacked life, but let himself float on its surface, relying on his own faculties to support him. I didn't know whether it was a weakness

in my friend until I had had time to reflect—or should I say, “to watch the film in slow motion,”—which is how Matthew once said he liked to view his past.

I watched him fix tea. He set a half kettle of water on the stove to boil and carefully measured two flavors of loose tea into the teapot. He picked up a knife and fork from the sink and began to rinse them.

“I can wash them,” I said, thinking it wouldn’t hurt to do something babysitterly. There was only one place setting’s-worth anyway. Matthew smiled for the first time.

“O.K.,” he said. “I was hoping you would. I hate touching dirty plates.” He removed the kettle from the burner just before it had time to whistle.

“I think you’ll probably want some of this tea,” he said.

“Thanks. But really, I’m fine. I really don’t want any.” I refused his offer out of stubbornness. My second mistake. The second game I had tried to play. That, however, was the only evening Matthew drank tea without me.

“Where’s your TV?” I asked.

“Nothing good’s on until Wednesday,” he answered.

“How old are you?” I asked, irritated at his assumption. I wanted to remind him of his age.

“I’m ten, how old are you?”

“Sixteen,” I answered. *Or thereabouts*, I thought.

“You don’t look that old,” Matthew said. I couldn’t take this as an insult; he had said it so matter-of-factly. “I should say, I believe you, maybe it’s just that you don’t wear makeup and everything.”

“Your mom has good taste in teapots,” I said. I assumed his “and everything” referred to my chest, which did not, admittedly, look sixteen. Or to my clothes, which curiously resembled his, although I had my shirt tucked in, for the time being.

“I chose this teapot,” he said, accepting the compliment in his matter-of-fact manner. “But they bought it for me. For my birthday.” I nodded as if I found a tea set a normal present for a boy.

“Where’s the sixth cup?”

“In Japan, there’s a whole tradition based on preparing and drinking tea,” Matthew answered. “I saw it in one of my parents’ art books. Five is the number of people most conducive to a good tea ceremony.”

I had accepted his precocity by the time his parents returned from class. We had sat on the floor with his tea set for almost an hour, Matthew asking me the conventional school questions I should have been asking him. I was curious at his interest in my responses, and at his way of listening, which led me to expound more than each question deserved. I was even careful to clarify my answers, which surprised me as I spoke. My usual distance would allow me to answer people with careless ambiguity, but Matthew brought out the good in me.

"I mean, I never really try to excel," I heard myself admitting to him, "except to please myself. I like to write, but it's not usually what teachers like to read. Buy as long as I like it, I'm satisfied, even when my parents dwell on my grades too long." He'd been watching me and unpacking paper-wrapped items simultaneously.

"Will you continue writing when you go to college?" he asked as he pulled wadded-up paper from a blue glass vase. I was beginning to notice that Matthew had the ability to extract the most important thing I'd say and use it to question me.

"Probably. But I don't even know where I'm going to go. I don't want to stay here."

"Why?" he asked.

"Too close to my parents. My dad's on campus a lot."

"It doesn't matter what institution you get a degree from, it's the knowledge that matters." I looked at him, skeptical at what was apparently a parroting of his parents' doctrine. He changed my assumption immediately, adding, "My father had to live at home and work his way through college. But my mom got to go to school on the West Coast, at Stanford. I know she went to a better school. But I think they reconciled the quality of education question when they met in graduate school. They're intellectually compatible. I've learned a lot from them even though we're different. About as different as a set of parents can be from their child."

"How are you different?" I asked. I had never thought about whether I was different from my parents. This was the longest he'd spoken about himself and I tried to capitalize on it.

"Well," he began, setting a stack of wooden coasters on an end table, "they get really involved in pedantics. I just relax and experience things without knowing their names or terms. That's learning, too." I didn't reply, because I didn't know what to say. "You're

more like them," he concluded after a pause. When Matthew's parents returned I felt a little guilty accepting money.

After the third evening with Matthew I had accepted him as a friend rather than a ward, speaking with him as I would have spoken with all the friends I'd never made. I revealed myself to this boy, not through a conscious mental effort but through, perhaps, an unconscious sense of Matthew's inner value. I was envious of his perception approaching wisdom which neither I, nor many of the adults in my life, had yet developed. I was alternately envious, skeptical, and intimidated. These feelings finally metamorphosed into an acceptance of Matthew as my friend, and I offered the honesty and trust which I had heretofore reserved for an unnamed future friend, mentor, or husband, perhaps. It became easier for me to accept such mature ideas from a child. He became the exception to the rule around which I had based my teenage philosophy: never trust anyone with your real thoughts. I had disguised and altered mine so much in conversation that, before I knew Matthew, the only time I had honestly revealed them was before bed, when I wrote in my journal.

Sometimes I would forget his age and relative inexperience, forgetting that emotional, social, and spiritual maturity didn't necessarily include academics. My textbook knowledge of dates and numbers, but especially biology and human physiology, was a source of questions for him and gave me a shadow more security after he'd expounded on symbols, or death, or any of the other areas which schoolbooks had not yet covered for me. What can't be learned, what must be assimilated in the mind, was already congealing in Matthew's.

"If that happened to me, I would accept it. Don't think I couldn't," Matthew said after I'd related the inevitably fatal disease which had stricken a girl in my class. "I admit I don't have the highest tolerance for pain, but the death part—don't think of that as *the* end. Do you really think that's what it is?"

I didn't know. I certainly hadn't thought about it enough, at least not to the extent that he had. Matthew was my initial encounter with a personal philosophy; his views were my first. That he was, in years, a child, that he was my *first*, that I would not let myself tell him, or anyone; that a physicalness was a forbidden element in our relationship, changed my moods constantly.

This began to affect the hours we spent together. My spontaneous

visits to his house and my hesitant afternoon waiting near the steps of his school were met with no surprise, as opposed to my shock at seeing Matthew waiting for me at the Lincoln Street intersection after my piano lesson.

"I thought you'd want a milkshake or something," he'd said. He looked to me, I thought, as possibly the older sister he didn't have, or the best buddy, the peer he'd never won over as a friend. He was content and I was obsessed with the lover-figure he played in my mind. I wouldn't dare touch him, and thinking about it was uncomfortable for me. I repressed the idea, but when I even felt like grabbing his hand, I dwelled on the thought too long, so that had I done so, it would have been glaringly unspontaneous. So I changed the impulse into an aggressive one, teasing him mentally and physically, introducing hostility into our previous amity far too often. "Do you need me?" I wanted to ask him, no games, no hedging involved. The question would echo so clearly in my head that each time I heard it, I'd glance at my friend to see if my mental trespass had shown.

"Sometimes I like to pretend that the weather is my emotions," Matthew remarked to me one evening late in November. I peered outside through the Brownings' living room window. It was after seven and already dark. The wind was bending the branches of the younger trees and rocking the porch swing. The warning signs of winter had passed and it seemed that nature was pausing in a state of inertia: a tension existed which wouldn't break until the first snowfall. I reopened my book.

"That's impossible," I replied. *What a conversation stopper*, I thought. An easy way to protect myself. I had begun to exercise them with Matthew whenever I felt uneasy with my own thoughts. I wanted to soak him up, even if it meant drowning, but at the same time I had to protect myself. I wanted to replace my cynical attitude with his childlike innocence and originality, and yet I wanted to hurt him until he, too, became cynical, and thus safe, as if by hurting him I could protect him. I wanted to put my arms around him until I could feel his innocence, but at the same time I wanted to hurt him, and let his innocence escape through the wound. When I thought I'd hurt him, though, Matthew wouldn't retreat—or even better, turn to me for help—but he'd treat me even more gently.

"If it can happen in your head, it's not impossible," Matthew

answered. "It's not *my* mental weather today, anyway." He rose and turned the television off.

"Turn that back on," I said.

"Why? Let's make tea, then I'm going to bed." *Not yet*, I wanted to say. *I never want to see him again*, I thought, *but I want him here right now*.

"That's my problem," I said quietly.

"What is?" he asked.

I didn't reply. I knew he could never understand and I certainly didn't want him to know I spent any time thinking about him.

"Your problem is that it's not winter yet," Matthew said as he poured our tea. I looked outside. I could still hear the wind and I watched it force a single sheet of newspaper against the pole of the streetlight near the Brownings' driveway. The wind would subside for a moment, but before the paper could slide to the street and blow away, the wind would force it to shudder back against the pole. Matthew watched the steam rise from his teacup in thin, tender swirls and disappear. The newspaper was still shuddering outside and I leaned over and drew the curtains with one quick jerk.

"Your other problem is that you're always closing the curtains on your thoughts."

"I don't want this tea." I stood and faced the closed curtains for a moment before taking my tea cup from the dining room table.

"No," Matthew said, while I held my breath. "I can do it." He raised his head so I could see his slightly pleading eyes.

"You always wash your tea set. Like if I touch it I'll spoil it." What was I saying? I liked how Matthew treated his tea set, and how he catered to me. His expression changed to one of what seemed like hurt and I was immediately pleased.

"Sit there and enjoy your tea; I'll take care of this," I said, leaving the room. I stood in the middle of the kitchen waiting for him to say, "But I won't enjoy it without you!"

"Katie." I jumped because he was at my elbow. "Washing this cup has nothing to do with anything."

I faced him. "Well I think it does." He, too, held the cup, because I was too stubborn to release it. The tea was still warm and I wished it weren't too late to return to the dining room and begin again. He was right, whether he really understood or not. Washing the cup myself

would prove nothing to him. It was pointless, like closing the curtains. But it was too late and I couldn't let myself retreat from proving a pointless point. No. I'd wash the cup. I looked down at Matthew. He was looking at me.

"Wash it, then." He neither looked nor sounded hurt, just patient. My cynical, rough nature, derived from what I thought was strength, couldn't penetrate Matthew's inherently gentle, true reasoning. I wanted to hold him and tell him that I didn't mind needing him. I could almost feel my hands on his back. But I *did* mind.

Our fingers released the cup.

I grabbed a dish towel from the counter top but before I could kneel to begin soaking up the tea, and hide my eyes, Matthew pulled it from me.

"Needless to say, you don't have to wash it," he mumbled. I retreated a step without offering to help him. He didn't move to clean up the tea or to gather any of the cup's pieces. I remained speechless, knowing I couldn't apologize for an accident. I needed to apologize for *wanting* it to happen.

"So maybe I should leave," I said. I didn't want to leave him, not even then, but I wanted the cold wind to push me home, to penetrate my wool scarf, to make my eyes water.

"You should," Matthew answered.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I know," he said.

"But what if I leave?" I asked. He was silent. I took my jacket from the back of a kitchen chair and put it on, checking each pocket and fastening it carefully. "Well," I said, with effort.

Matthew knelt and gently set each piece of the teacup onto the dish towel. Some tea began to soak into the knees of his jeans.

"I don't intend to *never* see you again—" Matthew began. I tried to appear as if I'd realized that. *It's only a teacup*, I thought. "But not in this weather."

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