ESSENCE

LITERARY AND FINE ARTS MAGAZINE
ESSENCE

VOLUME II
SPRING 1977

STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: David Michael Hinrichs
POETRY EDITOR: Deby Coulston
ART EDITOR: Denise Findora
Maureen O'Brian

FACULTY ADVISOR: Jack Lindeman
GRADUATE ADVISOR: Cynthia J. Quackenbush

LITERARY AND FINE ARTS MAGAZINE

KUTZTOWN STATE COLLEGE
KUTZTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA 19530
Big Fat Bowie

By Earl W. Lehman

Our backyard was about three thousand yards long in those days, and there was a grape arbor all the way down to some trees where our parents used to have a garden. In the summer, they would be down there every night after work pulling weeds and killing mosquitoes, while my brothers and I carried buckets of water for the vegetables. But the weeds and the mosquitoes were really persistent, and our parents finally gave up.

When they did, we moved in and claimed the territory. We excavated a huge area in the weeds and completely cleared it of all vegetation except for a few scruffy patches of crabgrass here and there that we left in to simulate woods. And then we went to work building a town. We built farms and housing projects and quarries and mountains and tunnels and roads and bridges. We built stores and country estates and barns and lakes and rivers. We spent every day down there behind that grape arbor, and not a day would pass when we would not invent something new. We never had a name for this town we played until one day my brother Greg said "Let's go play guys."

"Ok," I said.

And that was that. There were about twelve other kids on our street besides my brothers and me, but only one of them ever played with us. They played football, and baseball, and basketball, and hockey, and all kinds of other games. But they never played guys. Sometimes we played football and baseball, but always by ourselves. There were four of us: Greg, Chris, Key, and me. We'd play two against two or three against one or two against one. But most of the time we didn't play any of the other kids played until we were quite a bit older. And none of the other kids ever played guys.

The reason for that was because they were Protestant and were going to hell and we were Catholic with a capital C and they didn't like us. They were not allowed to play with us, and even if they were, I don't think they would have. They hated our guts and although we couldn't figure it out, eventually we learned to hate their guts too. Anyway, that's how we got started on guys.

We didn't have many real toys so we used blocks of wood, clothespins, or smooth round stones. Sometimes we used the blocks of wood for people, but most of the time we used them for trucks and cars and boats and steam shovels and that sort of stuff, and we used the clothespins or the smooth, round stones for people. Greg and I would spend hours grinding the bottoms of the best looking stones on the concrete steps cut in back of the kitchen to get them flat so that they wouldn't rock. We each had a favorite store that we used to represent ourselves.

Most of the time Greg and I were either farmers or we worked in the quarry. Being farmers was our favorite occupation, and we would have hundreds of different colored stones representing chickens and cows and all the animals we felt like having around our farm. Our second favorite occupation was driving quarry trucks or jeeps.

Greg and I not only took care of our own places, but worked everything else in town as well, something like a game of chess. For example, when Greg and I would go to the store, I would not only move my piece, but would also handle the storekeeper, the other players in the store if there were any, and the dog and two cats that always hung around the store. If we went to the farmers market, we'd both have our hands full moving around people, clucking for the chickens, quacking for the ducks, honking for the geese, mooing for the cows, and grunting for the pigs. We both got pretty good at doing all these things, and to this day, we can both carry on a good conversation with a chicken or a pig or a cow and a good many other creatures. We lost the knack of talking to ducks and geese though, after our voices changed.

One hot, summer afternoon, I think it was Tuesday, Greg, Chris, and I were back behind the grapes playing guys when we got bored, which rarely happened, and decided to go mountain climbing. A bunch of men were building a house in the lot that connected with ours in the back.

The dirt from the place occupied by the cellar of the house was piled up almost to the second floor, because it was a small lot and there was no room to put anything the except on top of something else. Anyway, we went over the back fence and climbed up on one of the piles of dirt. We discovered that we could see the kitchen window of our house from up there; the grape arbor wasn't high enough to hide us. So we dropped down the other side of that hill and climbed almost to the top of the biggest hill, on the side away from our house, and dug out a flat area with some sticks so we could sit down.

Greg ran down the hill and disappeared around the side of the new house and came back with a big piece of cardboard.

"Look what I found," he yelled.

"Keep it down, will you," I cried. "Mrs. Elmore's gonna hear us."

Mrs. Elmore lived next door to the new house.

"O boy! We can use it for a toboggan," Chris whispered excitedly.

So we looked at all the mountains for the best place to come down. There were a couple of really good slopes on the side facing our kitchen, but we were sure we'd get spotted from there. The only good place ran right down from where we were sitting to the deep hole around the house, but it the only choice. We found a good-sized piece of plywood and wedged it between the house and the edge of the drop-off.

"I'm going first because I found the cardboard," Greg said.

So Chris and I sat down and held on to one end of the piece of cardboard. Greg straddled it, dug his heels into the ground, and sat down. Then he bent the downhill end of the cardboard up like the front of a toboggan.

"You guys holding on?"

"Yeah."

He put his feet up under the curl of the toboggan one at a time and yelled.

"Ok, let's go."

Faster than we could even think about it he was down the hill in the hole next to the house. We heard him yell as he went over.

"Chris and I tore down the hill as fast as we could go."

"Greg! Greg!"

We looked over the edge and he was standing down in the hole smiling up at us, dust filtering down through a shaft of sunshine.

"Boy am I glad you're all
right. We thought you were dead." Fortunately, when the plywood gave way he let go of the cardboard and went down feet first.

"Come on down, it's really neat down here," he said.

"Yeah! Let's go." "I'm not going down there," said Chris.

"What?" "It's too deep." "It's not too deep. We'll make a ladder." "I'm scared," "There's nothing to be scared about." "It's dark down there." "It's not dark," yelled Greg.

"Come on down." In the meantime, I went looking for some stuff to use for a ladder. The only thing I could find was a four by four skid. I could hardly move it. "Hey Chris, give me a hand with this thing, will you?" It took us a long time to get the skid over to the corner of the house.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" Greg yelled up from the hole.

"We're getting a ladder." "Watch it, you're dropping dirt all over me," Greg yelled. "Keep it down, will you?" I yelled in a whisper. "Somebody's going to hear us." "Now what are you going to do?" "Get out of the way," I pushed the skid over the edge.

"Hey!" "What up! I told you to get out of the way." "We better be quiet," Chris whispered. "You almost hit me with that thing," Greg said angrily. "I'm sorry," I said, meaning it.

"Come on down. I'm getting tired of being down here by myself." "You go first Chris. I'll hold onto your hands." "I'm not going down there," he said, backing away from the hole.

"Come on!" Greg yelled up. "What do you mean you're not coming down? Are you chicken?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," I said.

Chris started backing toward the fence. I started after him and he turned and ran but I caught him before he got to the fence and held him. "Come on, there's nothing to be afraid of. We're not going to let you get hurt. When I was five, I used to go in holes like that by myself." "You did not," he said, half crying.

"Yes I did. There's nothing to be afraid of." "Come back here you guys!" Chris and I bolted for the hole.

"Shut up you idiot! I yelled in a harse whisper, getting a handful of Chris' shirt. "He tried to get away."

"Come on down or I'm getting out of here," Greg said, getting angry.

Chris was hesitant, but I held onto his hands and lowered him down to the top of the skid and he climbed down the rest of the way into the hole. Then I climbed down.

We went around the front corner of the house in single file, eight feet below the front door, and there, lying in a puddle of water with little creatures alternately surasing and sinking was a cinder block submerged to the second hole.

"Hey!" Greg said. "There's a cinder block!"

"So what," I said, thinking he was out of his mind.

"What's that?" "I said, still thinking he was out of his mind.

"What are we going to do with one muddy cinder block? Anyway, they're too heavy." "So what. He'll be the biggest guy in the territory." Chris started laughing. Greg always had a sick imagination.

"The biggest guy in the territory!"

Big Fat Bowie was so big and so powerful that the very next day the whole town voted to make him mayor, even though he was a newcomer. He said he didn't really want to be mayor, he had always been a pig farmer. But the town elected him anyway, and he was allowed to live outside of town on his farm. It turned out to be a good thing anyway, because he was so big that he was dangerous to everybody even if he didn't mean to be.

There wasn't any roads out to Big Fat Bowie's place, because his farm was far away. He didn't think it was very far, but it was a long way for the rest of us, and all the land outside of town where everyone else lived was his. He owned the rest of the world. He needed that much room because he was so big. It was dangerous to go out there because you were liable to get killed if he wasn't in a good mood, since he didn't watch where he was going when he was annoyed. And you were gone if he ever stepped on you, or especially if he ever sat down on you accidentally. Many people were crushed in this manner, so we were extremely hesitant about going out to the farm.

But from the day he arrived, Big Fat Bowie was the most popular guy in town. Whenever he came in for supplies or to take care of some paper work in connection with his official duties as mayor, he always drew large crowds.

One day Chris was really mad at Greg and I for not letting his play guys with us. Chris was the youngest and he got angry when he played and accidentally wrecked things. It wasn't as though he destroyed things on purpose. It wasn't his fault. But kids don't like other kids wrecking their stuff, even if it's accidental, and even if it's your brother, so we wouldn't let him play with us.

Then it happened. He ran out from behind the grape arbor when we weren't looking. Our eyes watched in stupid disbelief as the death-blow smung a slow arc over Chris' head. The masonic hammer slammed into the cinder block, breaking it into a billion pieces.

Things were never the same again, and the crater in the weeds became a town without a name someplace in the United States of America where three brothers grew up.
pro life (for the living)

taken with me
without any hesitation,
no second thoughts
or revised editions
internal conflicts
poisoning my system,
voiding a memory,
i only ask calmly
when will the love, the pain
be measured by volume?
(instead of weight)

When my brother came down the aisle he got a great big hand from the crowd, and it gave me goose bumps all over to hear that. Me and my pop were sitting in the first row behind the press tables, and we were making pretty much noise all by ourselves. Foster was already in the ring with his handlers and manager, and he was bouncing up and down and shooting out his arms, limbering up. Tommy walked past us, and my pop balled up his hand and shook it at him and yelled, "Just fight your fight, Tom!" But Tommy didn't take notice. His mind was all on the fight. Gosh, he was in the greatest damned shape you could ever want to be in, and it gave me a good feeling to see his big, muscular forearms hanging out of the flappy sleeves of his terry cloth robe and the robe flapping across his wide shoulders. He went past the reporters and climbed up to the apron of the ring and slipped through the ropes, and Spook Wilson and Billy Barrow and two other handlers followed him in. Tommy lifted up his arms and turned to each side of the ring, and the crowd got real noisy for him again, and just then Foster came over from his corner and fancy-stepped a circle around Tommy, all the while filling the air with lefts and rights, and that sure teed me off, but Tommy just stood there and laughed and went to his own corner. My pop leaned over to me and said, "He's a smart ass, nigger, all right, trying to show up Tommy that way!" Hell yes he is, I thought, but all he got out of it was a lot of boos. Tommy had the crowd, yes sir. He was some popular boy. He was the kind of a fighter who would get in there and slug right from the start, and how the fans have always loved a guy like him. Course, he was fighting a colored guy, and I guess that was a part of it in St. Louis.

Tommy sat down on the stool, and Billy put the eight ounces on Tommy's hands, and he got his hands in just so, and then Billy tied up the gloves and spit on each one and rubbed it in for good luck. My pop thought it was corny for Billy to do that before every fight, but I loved it. Tommy smacked the gloves together hard a few times. His blond hair was sweated down on his forehead. It must have been awful hot under those ring lights because it was bad enough where I was sitting. Kiel Auditorium was packed, and it didn't seem like there was enough air to go around, but criplis, I wasn't worried none about the heat getting to Tommy. After all them sweltering days of roadwork and sparring up at the training camp he was ready as ready could be. Yes sir, he had done his work hard.

Gosh, but I had a great time up at camp, though. I'd always be tagging after Tommy and helping out in some way like by setting up the weights for him or keeping time when he spurred or fetching headgear or towels or sweat shirts, things like that. Any way, Tommy and me used to kid around and pull stuff on each other, too. It was no more than good fun, and after a while it became expected in camp. All the guys got a heck of a laugh out of it. Tommy would be working out with the rope, and I'd make fun of him, telling him how sweet and cutesy he looked, and sing one of them rhymes the little girls do when they're skipping rope, and then he'd pretend to get mad, and he'd throw a pile of drinking water at me or wrestle with me on the ground until I thought I'd bust from laughing. That's the way it would go between us. Once after Tommy had given Willie Moore a rough go for five rounds, I told him if he let me in there, he'd get a good workout just by picking himself off the canvas. Well, Tommy went along with it and waved me on up. Billy slipped a pair of gloves on my hands that made my arms look like match sticks, and as soon as I got in the ring Tommy started to run the other way from me like he was afraid to death of me, and I chased him around the ring swinging like a windmill, and then I did a real fool kid thing and tripped over my own dumb feet and fell against Tommy's knee, and it knocked the wind out of me. I just laid there doubled up trying to catch my breath, and Tommy knelt beside me quick and rolled me over on my back and told me that I'd be all right and to lie still, and then he loosened my belt and tugged on the top of my pants, and my wind came back. I could tell by his face he was mad as hell at himself even though it wasn't his fault. He wouldn't have done anything to hurt me for the world.

Course, I was more embarrassed than anything else, and when all the boys sat and relaxed out on the front porch of the lodge that evening, they sure joshed me about it, but I didn't mind any. Gosh, I liked the attention. It was sort of a big family up there. Yes sir, it had been a great time for me, but, say, you could be Tommy had trained diligent. He had trained very diligent for this fight. I mean, everybody knew that the winner would be one fight away from a crack at the heavyweight title against Nate Francis. It just came down to beating the ex-champ down in Miami in December.

Anyway, the microphone was lowered, and the ring announcer reached up and grabbed hold of it and brought it down close to his mouth. He was a short fat guy and he looked
awful funny in a tuxedo. He made the introductions in a high, drawn out voice that cut like a sharp knife and announced they were to have a brief, and I felt especially proud to hear that "un-d-e-e-feated in twenty-seven bouts, Tommy Barnes" part. Course, it was only after Tommy had made told name for himself and the purses had gotten bigger that my pop was able to retire from his factory job back home in Cincinnati and start traveling the world as a sparring partner for his bouts and soon too, when my school didn't interfere and my pop let me go. Spook had brought Tommy along, away from the boxing club and ring, and I tell you, about Tommy's record around my pop, he'd say that if my mother were alive she'd be proud of Tommy because he was, what my pop called a credit to his profession, not like Foster and some of those other fighters who ran with trampy women and hung out at all the wrong places and got their names in the papers over some stunts they've pulled or scraps with the law.

Looking at it, I knew what's he was, all right. He was a gentleman outside the ring, and goch, he sure had come up with the green stuff for me and my pop and had bought us a house out in Cheviot and a new car and lots of other things, and it was nice, thinking that my mother never saw a part of it, all because of all this, and it made me more prouder of him.

After the intro, the referee waved Tommy and Foster out to center ring. They came out, and the ref patted both of them on the back and then started in telling them what a referee was supposed to do. Foster was moving his legs up and down a little and jiggling his arms at his side and giving Tommy a big grin, but Tommy was just standing there, not moving a muscle, and staring right through Foster like he didn't even exist. They went down to their trunks now and were all shiny under the lights from sweat. Foster went in at one ninety-one, but he looked almost thin next to Tommy. He was all legs and not much shoulders, and he had about three inches on Tommy. He was one of them standup, classic fighters. One of the sports writers for the Globe-Democrat had written up the fight in the morning's edition, and he was all about the difference between a scientific boxer and a brawler, and when my pop had finished reading that, he said Foster better go to the ring and discover: a new punch for himself because that Fancy Dan didn't have one now that could hurt Tommy. I had to laugh, but hell, some of them sports writers. You'd think that Tommy didn't even know to bring the left foot frontwards and move the right foot up even, basic stuff.

Well, the referee sent them back to their corners to wait for the bell, and Tommy grabbed the top rope and did a couple of quick rounds, and then Spook bent over the ropes and put his arm around Tommy, and they put their heads close together, and Spook gave him a second earful, and Tommy nodded his head fast to what Spook was saying. The crowd was hopped up like a crowd can be right before the opening bell. Billy fitted the mouthpiece between Tommy's teeth, and Tommy turned, and then the referee counted him charged out, and Foster met him, and they touched gloves, and you could see how it was going to be from the start. Tommy trying to cut off the ring on Foster, trying to take a hold of Foster and take away his reach advantage, always, always going in low, with his shoulders down up and his head bobbing up and down. And Foster, moving and jabbing, moving and jabbing, standing up straight with his arms held high and the left stuck out. Hell, Foster looked awfully sharp, and I don't mind telling you, he had me plenty worried. Tommy was working all the time to get inside to hook, but he couldn't get through Foster's left jabs and straight right.

Say, Foster had fast hands for a heavyweight, and it seemed like his punches had radar the way they were finding Tommy's head. Foster wasn't really hurting Tommy, but he was putting him off balance and upsetting him. When Tommy would start to get in there Foster would grab him with lefts or counter Tommy's lead with a cross and follow it up quick, and then he'd circle away, and Tommy would try to block the circle. All over again, Foster would throw a cross around, Tommy was bright red on his forehead and around his cheekbones.

It was pretty much the same through four rounds Foster was just plain making the fight away from the ropes. He had to give himself room to retreat. Hell, he sure didn't want to get caught on no ropes and have to trade punches with Tommy. Tommy was a pure bruiser, yes sir, and every time he was able to get underneath Foster's jab he'd come up slugging, and I thought some of them body shots would come out the other side of Foster, but mostly Foster was doing an okay job of tying Tommy up tight when he'd get in too close, so that Tommy could only paw at Foster's ribs or the side of his face. Say, he was doing an okay job with the lip service, too. He was mouthing off to Tommy so much the referee gave him a hand, and it was no rule against talking in the ring, but all he'd win for it would be a broken jaw if Tommy slammed him when his mouth was open.

Anyways, Foster's counter punches gave him the point lead. Tommy was making the fight, but being offensive ain't enough by itself. Tommy wasn't landing anything, but Foster was getting a lot of it on the shoulders and arms.

You couldn't tell by the crowd, though, but most of the fight fans don't know a solid hook from a roundhouse. Foster was retrograding and scoring with both hands. Spook was yelling at Tommy to keep his right hand up so loud you could hear him in the back row. Tommy couldn't drop, but it wasn't thinking only to throw the left hook, and just like that Foster would come in with the sponge, and one of the handlers massaged his legs to keep the muscles loose because he had the short, thick-muscled legs that would cramp up. His face was all up his nose, and that sweet smell of ointment of his. I remember Tommy had gotten cut on the bridge of his nose the first time I ever saw him fight in Louisville, and it had been three years since my pop I wanted to leave. What a laugh it'd been.

When the ten second buzzer went off Billy wet down Tommy's face with the sponge, and one of the handlers massaged his legs to keep the muscles loose because he had the short, thick-muscled legs that would cramp up. His face was all up his nose, and that sweet smell of ointment from Tommy's face. Tommy stood up and I could see white over the cut against his red face. Foster was facing him in his corner, and he was feeling a punch down as he sucked deep breaths of air through his big flat nose. Spook slapped Tommy on the back and said foster was a good man.

Tommy started to get through to Foster on the fifth. There was more infighting because Foster's legs were heavier, and instead of stopping with his jabbing Foster was taking the side and circling away, Foster was coming down on his toes and letting Tommy come straight in and drive him backwards, right on him. Tommy was all over him, his outside leg out. That was his style to work on the body first and then the head. Too. Near the end of the round Tommy got Foster up against the ropes, and Foster chopped at him with a left, and Tommy stood it and then let his right go, and it thudded smack in the middle of Foster's pitch-black face, and his head snapped back like a rubber band, and blood started pouring out of his nose. Gosh, didn't Tommy just look like a guy blew by from the nose like that. The blood was just gushing, and that wouldn't help his wind any. He came off the ropes and draped himself on Tommy till the bell, and it took just that little time for Tommy to be smeared all over with Foster's blood when he went back to his corner and if somebody would've looked at him and looked at him, he would've thought Tommy was getting lambasted. My pop said to me that if a Jew fighter had caught that punch his corner men would be picking bone splinters out of his cheeks.

Foster stretched out on the stool, and his seconds came around him, and his legs stuck out like a butt and his head back to the turnbuckle, and one of the corner men pressed a white cloth against his face. It was great to watch Tommy start to take the fight away from Foster when he'd been losing, and I'd been wanting to win so darned bad, but I was thinking now that it was awfully rough for a guy like Foster against Tommy because he didn't have a punch in any hand and just couldn't afford to tire.

Well, he didn't come out slow for the sixth. He was and Foster had meant business, like you'll see a fighter do when he ain't strong no more, and he's trying to show that he's got his second wind. He did jab Tommy with a long string of lefts and right hands and made his cut worsen, but he couldn't escape the ropes anymore. Tommy took the wind out of his sails, all right, and about halfway through the round Tommy muscled Foster into his own corner and drove in a pike driver left to the heart, and Foster's head jerked down like your head would jerk down if you were hit over the heart with a punch like that, and then Tommy ripped a right uppercut between Foster's gloves to his chin that almost lifted him off the canvas, and Foster sagged down on his knees and put his arms around Tommy's legs, and Tommy took a hold of Foster and held him out of the picture for the first time in the fight, and Foster went on all fours. Me and my pop and everybody else were up making a lot of noise, and the referee started to count over Foster when Foster was laying down at the canvas, and the blood was dripping from his nose, and I was wishing the ref would speed up the count and screaming, "Stay down! Stay down!" But Foster got back up, he was just trying to last the fight now, and Tommy was just trying to put the stopper on him, and that's the way it was, and Foster had knew it, and everybody in the building knew it.

Tommy had shut Foster's mouth for him. Foster wasn't saying a word in there now. He was covering up and dodging around and mostly not punching, but each time Tommy got in close quarters with Foster he hurt him a different way. Say, I don't think Foster could do a thing. All that pounding Tommy had given his arms and shoulders was adding up, and the snap was
out of Foster's punches, and he was flicking little lefts that had nothing behind them. Tommy had all kinds of juice and could do that to a guy. He was such a bruiser that he could make a guy's arms awful heavy after a while with his pounding. Tommy dumped Foster on the boards twice in one round, but both times he topped it off with a left hook to the head, and there was only about thirty seconds to go in the round. The second time the bell saved him because of the kick on his can and shaking his head at the count of eight, and then his handlers helped him back to his corner. He was sure beat to hell, and I didn't think he could make it to the bell, but I was watching him, and he was sure raising a beef with his manager and making faces like a fighter only would do if his manager wanted to throw in the towel, and he wasn't having any of it. I guess he wanted to at least lose on his feet to a knockout artist like Tommy. He was sure beat to hell, though. The right side of his face was swollen up, and he was bleeding from his nose and mouth, and it didn't show, but his body had taken an awful battering just the same. But anyhow, he was real game, and that was all right by the crowd because a crowd always wants to get its money's worth and then some, but I don't know, it's kind of me because that's the fight game, but I didn't like it when it turned out that Tommy had no choice but to keep pasting a guy so terrible. Foster stayed on his feet, and it was as if he were the worst kind of chopping block, and it seemed like Tommy was wound up to punch forever. It was funny how I had hated everything about Foster before and now it was different. Now that Tommy had the fight I couldn't feel the same about Foster anymore. Tommy sure was a machine to keep up the pace like that. The crowd had been jumping all along, and the auditorium was even more steamier now. My pop was wearing a light colored shirt, and the sweat had turned it dark on the front and the back. Hell, the sweat was rolling off everybody. There sure were better places to hold a fight in August than in St. Louis.

Foster came out so fast for the last round, he could've had lead in his legs. I'll bet it seemed to him that a few ex-wraps round slips in somewhere between the first and tenth. They went through the glove touching again to show it was all a sporting thing, and then the referee. Foster was knocked out on his mind like always, Foster was flatfooted and carrying his arms lower. He had nothing to keep Tommy out, and it goes along with Tommy just shaking off the jabs and taking Foster straight into the ropes, not wasting any of his muscle as he's working, and then the referee would stick his nose in there and make them break. That's how it goes along, and Foster was staying up, and I got to thinking that Tommy would get the unanimous decision. Then it had been the ropes on the ropes, his right in front of where me and pop were sitting, and I couldn't see much of Tommy because of Foster's back and arms were in the way, and just then Tommy's right came out of nowhere and around Foster's glove to his head, and Foster sort of halted staggered and slid along the ropes a little ways. Tommy was on him, and he stuck up his hands in front of his face and leaned on the ropes, and Tommy just measured him and hooked, the punches catching Foster on his ribs, and Foster was moving in, and going off the gloves and half-hitting his head, and then all of a sudden Foster came out of it sort of peakobao style and really started throwing leader at Tommy, swinging wild with both hands, and that got a rise out of the crowd which was already yelling, and he was groggy to open up like that. He started swinging wild, using every bit of energy he had left, and Tommy covered up and stood it for a second, and then he waded in and just poured it on, and Foster's knees buckled up, and he would've gone down, but he couldn't because somehow or other he got his left arm hooked over the top strand, and he was sagging down on the middle strand, and I knew darn well he was out cold on his feet because his other arm was just hanging at his side. Tommy opened his punching bag, and Tommy hit him with a straight right solid to the face and followed it with a left hook that almost started from the deck and landed him in him. Then Tommy dumped Foster pitched off the ropes and hit the canvas face first and went over on his side. He laid there not moving at all except that his one leg was twitching, and it sent chills through me seeing that.

The referee started to scream the count, but Foster sure wasn't getting up. His head was hanging down against the top of his stretched out arm, and his face was toward the press tables, and I could see the white of his eyes because they were rolled back in his head, and his mouth was open and all bloody, and his slimy red mouthpiece was lying on the canvas in front of him. The referee counted ten and waved his arms over Foster, and my pop did the same thing with his arms right along with the ref, and then the bell dinged, dinged, and Foster's people jumped into the ring and rushed over to him. Spock-and-Ends and he other handlers came around Tommy and patted him on the back and were all happy.

Billy took out the mouthpiece and wiped off his face and chest, and then Tommy walked over to where Foster was still laid out. They had him on his back, and they were working on him, and he hadn't moved any on his own yet that I could see. Tommy gave Foster a look-see and then put his glove on the shoulder of Foster's manager, and they said something to each other, and Tommy nodded at the other guys, but they weren't looking at him, and then he went back to his corner.

Right after that, the referee pushed down the rope across the way, and the ring doctor came through to check-out Foster while the announcement was being made by a knob off in two minutes twenty-five seconds of the tenth round. Tommy had his gloves off, and he put his one taped hand up in the air and waved it and then raised his shoulders with the other hand, and the doctor started to look at Foster's eyes through some metal thingamajig he was holding, and I was taking it all in and cheering for Foster, too. And then my pop said to me, "I picked up some easy change on this one, Paul." I remembered then that he had put down a chunk of money on Tommy and made a side bet that Foster wouldn't go the distance.

"What do you make of Foster," I asked him.

"Ah, he'll be okay," he said, "He probably won't be himself for a while, though. Worse luck for him that the rule book helped him out of the eighth."

Well, the doctor didn't waste time, and when the stretcher was brought down that got the crowd to buzzing about just how bad Foster was. He was lifted onto the stretcher real gently like he was made out of glass, and his robe was put over him, and by this time Tommy was and through to the aisle and was going back up to his dressing room slowly with a lot of people around him. Then they slid Foster under the ropes and got him down, and the nurses were a sorry sight with the robe tucked under his chin and a shot to hell look on his face, and some cops kept the aisle clear while the stretcher-bearers took him up everybody gawking at him.

Me and pop went along a rampway under the seats with a crush of people leaving and then broke away from them and went down some steps and along a smelly, cement hallway that curved around to the dressing rooms.

The way it turned out then was that they took Foster over to the general hospital, and I was sent back to the hotel in a cab, and my pop went along with Foster with Tommy and the others. I wanted to go there, too, but my pop didn't go for that. He smiled at me and mussed up my hair playful like and told me that it would be better for them to wait for them at the hotel. Once we were out on the street in front of the auditorium he hailed down a hack and gave me five dollars and sent me off back to the Park Hotel, and I got the rush.

Well, I don't know what time it was when they finally came back, but it was late. I'd fallen asleep on a chair, and the sound of my pop coming in woke me, and I sat up, rubbing my eyes, all loggy from sleeping, and when I got the sleep out of my eyes and got a look at him standing there looking at me with his down-in-the-dumps face, right away my heart started to go faster because I knew something was wrong.

"Where's Tommy?" I asked him.

"He went back to his room to get some sleep," my pop said, "It's half past two. You should've gone home, Paul.

"You were at the hospital all that time?"

I asked. And he didn't answer me but came over and sat down on the other armchair and leaned back and looked to his knee and his head down. "Well, how's Foster?" I asked him then. And just by the way he looked at me, I knew it then. I knew it just as sure as anything.

"They operated on him, but it was no good," he said.

"What?" I asked him, also, going all cold inside.

"So Foster died," my pop said. "He never came out of it."

And hearing him saying it made me feel like something rotten was put in my guts, and

"Died. But how could he have died?" I asked him.

"Brain hemorrhage," he said.

"Could they help him, Dad?" I asked him.

"No," he told me.

"They should've been able to do something"

I said, "No, there was nothing to do," my pop said. "It's hardly anybody's fault, and I'll help him again." Then he sagged back in the chair and shut his eyes. "You better get out of your clothes, Paul," he said to me.

"Why did they operate on him then?" I asked. "Maybe they did something wrong, Dad. Maybe if he would've had better doctors he wouldn't be dead.

"No, Foster was as good as gone when he was still on the canvas," my pop said, "But Dad, he was no second-rater," I said, "He was a top fighter. Maybe he wasn't right going into the fight. Maybe they missed something at the physical."

"No, Paul," he said with his eyes shut yet.

"If his manager would've thrown in the towel," I said, "He should've, Dad. It wouldn't have never happened if it wouldn't have gone that far." I don't know. I didn't think of it all being on Tommy's head.

My pop didn't say anything, and I thought he'd gone to the side of his head, and a rea- tioned voice, "Tomorrow, Paul. We hit the sack now."

"He wasn't married was he?" I asked. "He was married," my pop said, "I guess he has a family somewhere, though.

I said, "I wouldn't know,"" he said. But Foster probably had a family somewhere, all right, probably a big family. He was the kind to come from a big family with a lot of brothers and sisters.

"How does Tommy feel about it?" I asked him.
asked.

"How would he feel?" my pop said. He
got up and stretched, and then he started
switching off the lamps.

"What did Tommy say?" I asked him
then.

"Come on, Paul," he said.

"Is he going to go on fighting?" I asked.

"Paul," my pop said, looking at me sort
of funny like he always does when he's upset
with me, and that was sure lousy. "You know
better than that," he said then. "This is a rough
business, but it's Tom's business."

"Yeh I know, Dad," I said to him. "It's
just that a guy's dead."

Well, my pop didn't say anything to that,
and I'll tell you, I didn't want to go to bed
then. I couldn't think of sleeping because you
know how it is when it seems like there ain't
anything you can do except to just keep on
talking and hope the other guy will finally say
something that'll make you feel better, but we
went into the bedroom, and there was no
breeze at all coming through the screens, and I
got undressed and laid down on top of the
sheets, and then my pop turned off the light
and got into his bed, and almost as soon as his
head hit the pillow he went to sleep, and he
started making those little snoring noises of his.
And me, well, I laid there wide awake and
looked over at him in the dark, feeling like the
kick was out of everything and, hell, just trying
to figure out how to make what happened
easier to think about.
mainstreet woes
    to a kid with the blues
the paint was cracking
and the floors falling through
afraid of the dark
but comforted by a spark; a lonely gaze.
the brightest lights shown on my face;
ever losing grace

dining on wine,
macaroni and the speed
of light
coming on by night
but never losing sight
sweet dreams and good-byes
you were right:
lake country white
i could never be your wife

Coffee

When a letter finally came
It was a notice
From the United State’s government
Saying something about signing up
For another installment
Of R.O. Box 124
But I decided not to do post-graduate work
On loneliness
And went out and bought some coffee
With the money I saved

Leaves

Empty and broken
They crawl into corners
Or scratch about the sidewalks
Complaining,
Whispering to themselves,
Wondering at the world...
Monuments of change and
time

YOUTHANASIA

boy slides off dam breast
sleek bottom ride down
over moss-covered death
sunlight freedom spent

Billy walked along the gravelly path
carrying his grandfather’s .22 rifle in the crook
of his arm. The path ran through the meadow.
He could smell the wet grass. Above the
meadow, there was the old caked manure and
then the red barn and the silo. The tin, conical
shaped top of the silo glinted in the morning
sun. To the left he could see, beyond the slope
of the meadow, a stubble field and the
abandoned apple orchard and the ridge of
evergreen trees. Far beyond the trees, there
were the bluish mountains, faint against the
sky. He walked steadily on, looking only at the
path, his face set grimly. He wanted to get to
somewhere in the back country.

Billy turned then onto a dirt road that
had the imprints of heavily treaded tractor
tires. The road climbed gently. He went on,
past the length of rusty wire fence and then the
rotted, hoary wooden body of a hauling wagon,
past the dry weedy stream bed that was built
up where the road crossed and the overgrown
remains of the foundation of the old grist mill.
Narrow fleecy clouds were coming with the fall
wind over the wooded hills that made the
horizon off to his left and moving high in the
blue sky. The air was cool and fresh to breathe.
Billy heard the raucous calls of a flock of crows
somewhere down behind him. He kept along
the road, making a long shadow in front of him.
He was resolved now. Last evening, he felt at
first, bent over holding his midsection,
the jacklight on the ground, as if he had been
kicked in the belly, and after the jolt,
the numbness, and he went home, and something
inside of him went a long way away, and he
felt empty and sickly cold, and then there was
the feeling of outrage, and he got into bed with
it and lay with it for a long, long time, and
finally he went to sleep. When he awoke this
morning, it had not died out. It was there,
burning inside of him. Now he was quite
resolved.
The road ran on, parallel to the hills that extended on ahead in a sweeping, southward arc. The roadbed was softer now, and then rocky and then there were clumps of thistle and brierwood, the roadbed narrowing. The road came to an end. A log lay across it. The trail he would follow cut up from the road toward the woods on the slope of the first hill.

Bilgey held up. He looked back down over the open country, across the lush, overgrown, upper pasture full of blackberry and sweet briar, past a line of rail fence and a cut field of grass and another rail fence and the lower fields, beyond the stream flowing close to the embankment of the macadam highway, to the higher ground along the long road of mounds that ran to the dam. He looked at Helen's bedroom window showing tinfoil over the crest of the slate shingle roof of his own home. He knew she was still asleep. He put his foot against the log, his weight on it. He lowered his head, shutting his eyes tightly, and in the place of Helen fitted wonderfully under him, full lips parted, tongue playing, the sweet taste of the mouth, the long tapering fingers cool on his shoulders, small hard breasts against his chest, the slender legs holding on, he saw her and the Wesch in one, and in the light of the moon, from the other side of the hedgerow as he was crossing behind the dam toward the stream to spear his way home, but he drew them together on the blanket, finished, done with it, Helen on her knees, trying to do something with her hair, the flaps of her blouse sagging along with the trousers, the top, the Wesch, his jeans unzipped, tucking in his shirt tails.

Bilgey jerked up his head. He started to walk. He wanted to get to somewhere farther on. He was quite resolved. It had been more than sexual desire. It had been, getting to know, and knowing, and trusting, and confiding, and sharing, and security, and happiness, and right, and always making sadness and wrong happy and all right again, and intense affectionate concern, and liking as well. Now it was all dead. Well, he would not see her again. He was through with her. It was all dead. He would not see her again, but he could not stand the thought of the Wesch getting it. He supposed he hated the Wesch more than he had loved Helen, 

“...the son of a goddamned bitch,” he said.

He looked around. He had become aware of his surroundings. He was going along the trail. The ground was lushly covered, the coarser grass growing heavier—sagging, clumps of short shrubs, scarlet sumac.

Ahead of Billy, there was a cottonall on the edge of the meadow near the stream—squirrel, and the rabbit only crouched tensely, its ears layed back. He snuggled the butt of the rifle into his shoulder and cheek and quickly trained on the rabbit. It finally broke cover and ran up the trail and out of sight in some brush. Billy had locked the rifle to its movement.

“Go away! You stink somewhere,” he said, lowering the rifle. “I don’t want to shoot you.”

He walked on. Up about one hundred yards, the hardwood timber commenced, extending out beyond the steep slope of the hill, the trees spaced well apart, the understory heavy. He made his way through the brush thick enough for him to see only the tops of the trees and a few mossy rocks close in front of him. He and his grandfather had hunted along this edge of the southern slope—many a boy’s first visitation with his grandfather’s chop-mouthing Bassett. One time he and the Wesch hunted together. It was the first and last time they hunted together. The Wesch made a joke out of hunting. The Wesch behaved as though he was on a hike, resting his gun on his shoulder, inattentive, not watching the way the hound worked, not watching the small lanes and openings to either side of the thickets, chattering, distracting, questioning Billy’s instructions. When the hound jumped a cottontail, the Wesch did not move forward for the first opening the chase crossed and wait patiently and smartly for the rabbit to circle back to his home ground after it had unlimbered a bit but went on helter—skelter. Billy went home after the Wesch shot a jay out of a tree. The Wesch shot it and was out hunting. It was no joke. Billy loved to hunt. The Wesch killed that day for him. Billy had loved Helen. Now it was all dead. He sliced through the thimbleberrybush, that made a light brushing when he skimming it up the hillside. The trail steepening sharply. He went up the hillside, stepping over the exposed tree roots on the rutted trail. The foliage of the trees was still thick, shades of red and yellow. The sunlight came through the leaves and shone in splashes on the underbrush and ground. He kept on climbing. His mind had been working for a long time beforehand; he was selective. All he had remembered of the Wesch was no good, starting last night and repeating itself, and with each remembrance there was the visage—up inside of him.

The trail levelled off and then rose again. He was in the thick, mixed woods now. He looked up ahead through the timber. The woods was not still but with early autumn colors. The leaves rustled gently against their neighbors. He stopped and listened and breathed heavily. He leaned back against the trunk of a maple tree and slid down to a sitting position. He stretched and then his right hand reached up—dark leaf loam, the rifle across his lap. From here he would have to go on to the top of the hills, along the ridge, and then down—slope before he hit the creek downstream. It was a long walk to there from any direction. A leaf fluttered down and landed on his knee. He picked up the soft yellow leaf by its stem and turned it between his index finger and thumb, staring absently at it. The Wesch had made money on the creek this past summer by illegally selling the good-sized trout he caught to the hotel in town. Billy knew that. The Wesch had him again. And he had seen, wedged between rocks in the creek, small dead trout with those moldy sploches on them. He did not find it a fish story the creek, knowing only that the Wesch did. He crushed the leaf in his hand and threw it aside. Then he straightened up and flexed his knees. The Wesch did not think things. Billy was sure he hated the Wesch more than he had loved Helen.

He continued on, making toward the height of the trail descending, but it always climbed again. He got into an oak grove. The trees were old. Their roots bulged above the ground. He saw cuttings where the squirrels had worked. This was good fox squirrel territory, but his unsustained movement and sound had cancelled out their activity. He went on between the broad trunks of the oaks. He was not hunting now.

He hiked on up, holding the rifle down by his side, the sweat cool on his brow. Underfoot the ground was lumpy and soft. The trail came out on the top of the hills. He had reached the height of land that was the highest part of the wooded hills that paralleled the dirt roads and had seen both the trail in a westerly direction along the shoulder of the ridge of hills. The wind was blowing through the ridge timber. Leaping over each with one bound, he followed it running along the trail back of him, the wind determining his path, keeping toward the west. From a slight clearing in the trees where every bush overhead, he saw the higher ranging hills to the north across the valley. The top of each hill was like a grove in the timber. Two hundred yards on, Billy turned off to his left toward the creek. He started down a stretch of steep slope. He walked carefully, placing his feet carefully so that he would not lose his balance. His pants leg caught on a thorny vine, and he stumbled and had to go against a tree hard to stop his momentum and then impact with his back in the formern. Then he worked sideways downhill, his shoes digging into the ground, reaching out now and then to brace himself against a tree trunk.

He dropped down a small stretch of level ground. No sunlight came through the branches of the trees. The trees were drooping. The sun was down behind the hill. The ground rose on and then dipped again, not so steeply. He went down, but with constant ascents, to reach the creek that flowed over the farm hill.

After passing under an uprooted maple tree that had fallen in a storm and wedged in the fork of another maple, Billy stopped. He removed from his pockets some beggar’s—lace that had pried his ankles before going on. This was the same kind of stickweed that had thickly blanketed that stretch of ground, oddly enough, all along the Tons River, impossible to avoid, covering his clothes readily. That was two and a half years ago. He and the Wesch had gone on a weekend trip upstream to fish the Tons. The first night in camp, he found out the Wesch had packed two fifths of whiskey in his back pack. Billy was again, this time knocking away in the early morning trips of this sort. The Wesch on a drunken whim wanted to break camp the first night and make the return trip of one hundred miles to his home town. His friend, Billy, managed to talk him out of it. A storm came up, and it rained hard the next morning and into the night, and the Wesch was drinking drunk again. Early Sunday morning, he awoke hung over again. He started an argument about the way to make the coffee. Then he went back to sleep, and Billy went down to the river, but the fishing was no good after the storm. That was the way it went. That was two and a half years ago on the Tons River. He was only acquainted with the Wesch then, and he had not yet met Helen. That was the way it went. He had gone up to the top of the rise and over, and now had come back gradually sloped hill. The creek was at the bottom if this hill. He could not see it, but keeping the distant position on the creek, he dropped down there. Billy slowed his pace, approaching the creek quietly, cautiously. The best fishing, he knew, was up in the open this time of the year, the open hills, and he now walked along a deer path, and now the white birches that grew on the off side of the creek came into sight between the tree trunks. He approached carefully and quietly. He could see laurel shrubs and fern and the banks of the stream as a notch in the woods floor, but he did not see anybody. He went on down and through some firs, growing knee—high, to the bank.

The stream was narrow here, and clumps of moss overhung the undercut banks. Billy looked up the stream to where it flowed out from under the low branches of beech trees that grew close on both banks and down it to where it curved slowly when it flowed around a rock shelf. The water swelled over cobbles and swirled foamingly against jutting rocks and water—logged wood debris. Where the stream flowed through the rocks, it flowed smoothly fast. Leaves floated down with the current.

Bilgey lay laid down on the spring moss and put his crossed hands in the clear, dark water, colored by the bed. He drank from the stream, seeing in the water the darkly distorted outline of his shoulders and head. The water was achingly cold. He looked into the stream. He had not given much thought to afterwards, but he would do it, all right. Afterwards was all very vague. He did not care what was happening afterwards, but he would do it, regardless of the consequences. The main thing Billy had learned
so far was that anyone could do anything, anywhere, if he was willing to take the consequences of the action. This was the main thing he, William Christopher, had learned. Still, there were other people to think about. That was the hold of it. You could not do anything without involving other people. It would be awful for his grandparents. They loved him very much. Billy loved them. He would have to go away somewhere. He did not know where. Somewhere. Maybe he would be taken away. He did not know. He did not want to think about it any more.

"Ahm, Christ," he said impatiently. He must be off. He pushed himself up to his feet and started along the bank, going upstream. He came onto an absolutely bare, ancient piece of bank where there were old deer tracks, distinctive in the water smoothed but now dry ground. On ahead, there was a muskrat hole on either side of a rounded rock embedded in the sandy, opposite bank. Billy kept along the bank. He saw a trout break through the surface of a deep pool in under the exposed, curved root of a beechnut and then go back down into the stream. He pictured the trout resting thoughtlessly, carelessly, on the pebbly bed, its snout into the current, pectoral fins waving. He went on between the beeches, feeling the fallen beech nut burn under his shoes.

Now Billy cut away from the stream farther up in the timber. He would keep above the creek from here on. He eased through the woodland, taking it quietly, moving slowly, looking down to the creek. It just showed between the trees.

He was all ready, a little keyed up, but only for the expectancy. He would do it. It could not be long now. Billy wanted to get a sure shot. He knew he would. He was not after any smart fox squirrel, wits sharpened by being hunted, so acrobatic, which plays a game of hide and seek. The Wosch did not have a chance, not anymore. He already had his chances, and Billy would get a sure shot from a concealed position. He did not want any talking to the Wosch to even see him. He felt a strong reaction against that. He did not want that. Suddenly there was a heart stopping thunder of wings as a ruffled grouse exploded from underneath him, flinching back, breathless, raising the rifle, the bird spiraling out through the trees and away. Wings beating in the air.

"Gez," Billy whispered, letting out his breath, his heart going-sing, feeling the anger now that comes after being frightened. It was all right, only a ruffled grouse. He had not expected to walk up a grouse here. He was calming down. He went along. Now he was all right. He walked around a gnarly, gray limb that had splintered loose from a dead walnut tree. Looking down on the creek, he came closely by the trunk of the walnut and the barrel of the rifle slanted through a hanging loop of a climber plant stem. The leafy stem catching his wrist, tearing away from the trunk, he stopped to pull back the rifle clear of it. Billy picked a piece of leaf from the rear iron sight and then ran his hand along the cold gun metal jar of the barrel. The .25 bolt action rifle would do. He, of course, had dismissed using the single—barrel 20 gauge shotgun his grandfather had given him last year on his birthday. He had first shot from the gun rack the .270 Winchester, but there were no cartridges for it. He had loaded the chamber of this rifle with high velocity .22 Long Rifle. His aiming point would be the head. This rifle would do, all right.

He had gone on in the shade of the trees, and he could see sunlight ahead through the timber where there was an open meadow in the woods. He went on to skirt the clearing above the stream. He was continuing to carefully look over the course of the stream, but there was no sign of the Wosch. Now he stopped abruptly, almost at the edge of the trees, seeing movement diagonally down in the timber across the meadow. Then quickly he ducked behind a tree trunk. He had caught sight of the Wosch. He felt nervously excited to see him. Well, there he was. There was that goddamned Wosch. Billy was waiting behind the tree and watching him walk downstream in the sunlight now, having left his trout—bag back in the shade, holding his rod in one hand and the bait box in the other, his landing net slung over his back. There was that goddamned Wosch. Billy felt nervous, a little weak in the legs. The Wosch stopped closer to this side of the meadow by the near bank, seventy yards down, and knelt in the deer grass. Billy felt nervous. He was disappointed that he felt this way and was telling himself about the Wosch, trying to remember it anyway. Things had not changed since he had resolved himself to come here. Nothing had changed.

The Wosch had bated up and gone over to the stream. And now Billy moved around the trunk of the tree and went down, crawling, slowly and softly, on his knees, holding the rifle in against his chest by the groove fore—end of the stock, his body close to the trailing plants that matted the ground, going on from behind one tree to another, keeping watch on the Wosch. A big elm tree grew about thirty yards up from the creek, its branches extending over the meadow, and he lay flat now, feeling his heart pumping against the ground, and then forwarding himself with his elbows, the rifle across his forearms, came down behind the tree.

He lay on his stomach with his legs drawn up a little, the side of his head touching the bark of the thick trunk. This was close enough. The Wosch was on the south bank of the stream and was not able to hear well for the flowing water. But Billy could not go any farther. This was close enough. Sweat was coming out on his face, his breath catching, his mouth dry. He was acutely aware of just how close the Wosch was now. He felt as though it would be better not to move at all, but he went over on his side, and craning his neck awkwardly, glanced out from the shadow of the tree at the Wosch, big—shouldered, blond—haired, holding his rod low over the water, the sun shining bright on him. Well, this was it. The time had come. This was it. Now. Right now. Billy released the safety on the rifle and flipped up the aperture sight. His hand was trembling. Very quietly he repositioned himself, settling down behind the trees, his elbows, resting the rifle barrel on a bulking root.

He drew in a deep breath now and slowly locked home the bolt, and steadying his elbows, holding onto himself tightly to keep his hands steady, feeling the corner of his mouth twitch, the sweat trickle down from his armpits, he looked through the aperture and placed the top of the front bead on the center of the Wosch's head, but did not squeeze off the trigger, and now, turning the stock flat in his hand, hanging his head down, he knew he could not. It had all died out of him. He could not do it. He did not want the consequences. He could not do it. He lay there behind the tree looking down at the Wosch. The hold over himself had relaxed. He felt all emptied out. He felt like crying. In his mind he had killed off the Wosch, and now there he was, and Billy was helpless to do it. But things were just as they were when he had resolved himself. He could cry at that. Now he saw the Wosch swing his rod against the current, the tip of the rod jerking, the Wosch reeling in, pulling up the rod, and he got onto his knees slowly, pressing his shoulder up against the trunk, and watched. The Wosch, working the trout, rushing, upstream, brought it, bowing the rod, in and did not use the net but swung the trout up and onto the bank. He laid down his rod and went up along the bank a little, picked up the trout from the grass by its gills, and unhooked it, flopping in his hand, shiny. It was a good trout, and he baited its head sharply against his knee. Then he walked upstream toward where he had put the trout—bag. He started whistling.

"Oh hell," Billy sighed softly. "I might as well go home!"

He stood up behind the tree and waited for the Wosch to reach the edge of the timber and then started up through the woods, in a crouch, the tree in line between himself and the Wosch. Now he had the long walk back home.
NEAR DEATH
AT THE UNION SQUARE

By David Schiller

Ceiling fans caress the air, whirling gently, barely enough to displace the smoke rising from Squirley’s cigarette. (Anyway, Squirley is silent now.) Propped against the ornate cash register, Frank, the bartender of the Union Square, stares at the same labels and calendars and whiskey ads, all grey with dust. Further down the bar, which is tunnel shaped and dimly lit, sit old, very old men like a row of vessels waiting to be refilled. Squirley and I passed them as we walked in, on their faces the expression of the expressionless, but now it’s almost impossible to see them through the haze, though I can imagine them all, gazes hollowed, fixed on the tap or the bottle. But not desolate. They won’t crawl over the bar to appease their thirsts. They are motionless, serene. The entire bar is extremely serene, extremely quiet and motionless; as placid as a pond surrounded by tall trees. I can envision us there, you and I, our heads lying on the windrows of leaves, suspicious of who would throw the first rock into the pond, shatter the surface with ripples. You would, I know it. You have already.

“Hey, Frank,” Squirley says, nodding at the empty glasses. Frank, an enormous Lebanese man in his twenties, waddles towards us. Fascinated by his eyes. Marbles of polished coal, too intense for such a dreamy, confined place. Made to see far away, over highlands, sights too distant for others. Maybe a thousand years ago, he’d be the chief of a tribe of nomads. Much too lazy now. He returns. He smiles lazily (or else omnisciently), barely lifting the corners of his lips. He waddles back to his post at the tap, dropping Squirley’s change from one cupped hand to the other like a man sitting sand.

The sound of the falling coins, rattling at precise intervals, has the same effect as a ticking clock. And then I notice the only clock in the bar. Hours too slow. It glows faintly above the door, advertising Schmidt’s beer and lost time. When we entered, the bar felt infused with decay, the rotten smell of split beer, of dust, of mildew under the linooleum; and the hunched over figures, the gloom. Another era. Even the fans, wooden blades, and the pressed zinc ceiling, decorated with griffins and cherubim. I should hear the echo of a tinny piano, the laughter of bustled ladies. Perhaps. Perhaps I should. But after the drinking, after breathing the stale air, adjusting to the weak light, lost time seems too abrupt a description. Too much change involved. Beginning is implied, as is end. No time is much better. We’ve wandered into a niche, secluded from the rest of the world. The old men not tabescent but—No. No. A spell. It’s just a broken down bar with broken down old men. And, I guess, one broken down young man. And Squirley the consulor. And Frank sifting his coins, proprietor of the destitute. And you. Of course, you. Lurking in the shadows. Always there. Even the beer can’t scare you away, not even the beer—

Squirley drags his cigarette. It makes a sucking sound as if his mouth couldn’t enclose it completely. The dumb bastard. I was just beginning to recover until he brought me here. Forcing on me the old men. Gruesome spooks.

“Strange place, huh?” he asks. More chatter. “I don’t like it,” I answer. My voice sounds peculiar, a part of me cast out into the gloom, it hangs there, detached. “For the tenth time, do you care to leave. Just tell me, we’ll leave. It’s up to you.” He spews smoke when he pronounces the hard consonants of ‘tenth’ and ‘time’. I wave it away, annoyed. The rest strolls out of the side of his mouth.

“No. You know, we’ll stay.” “Your decision. I really don’t mind either way.”

Stop being so goddamn accommodating.

“No,” I said. “We’ll stay. There’s a message here. A heteroglyph.”

“But we’ve come to make you forget, not to find. Well anyway, drink up.”

He gulps down one more beer. I hear him crunching his cigarette in the tin ashtray.

“And besides,” he says, swallowing, “what could we possibly learn here? C’mon, drink.”

Yeah. Cheers. Clink of glasses. Warm camaraderie. And the bitterness slips into my words again. Exchange of blood. As if he really wants me to forget (as if he could really learn something here). Skol. He’s been very slick about it, swiveling towards me, persisting in being my big-brother, father-confessor. As soon as he heard what I . . . what happened to us, he calls, takes the day off, buys me lunch, brings me here—it’s so damn quiet, I can hear their stagnant breathing, feel it congealing in my nostrils—to ‘drink and forget’. But he’s persistent, yes, he wants to know. And to know he has to drag it out of me. A ‘get-it-off your chest and you’ll feel better’ strategy, all these rehearsed questions, his condescending advice. Show it, Squirley. I don’t want it off my chest. I want to absorb it and eliminate it quietly, privately. Why doesn’t he send me into oblivion with the magic carpet of his monotonous voice? Nosey. Yes, he’s got to be sympathetic about it. And that, as the bastard shrewdly knows, is only an approval of my remembrance. A disguised request, in fact. And a damn hard request to turn down for mingled with it is the generous offering for me to pity myself. Luxurious pity, handed out like nickels and dimes. Ah, if he would only be his old boring self and talk endlessly about the faults in a film he might have seen the other day, if he would only babble on about the virtue of European wine. Then I might be able to drift off into some fuzzy region, then you might release me, then—

“Are you buzzing yet?” he asks, raising
his glass. I nod.

"This brew is real pisswater." 

"I'll do it." I hope.

"Pisswater with alcohol." He lights another cigarette and twirls the match in the air. Squireuil could be read just by the way he smokes. Often, nervously. Right now I can tell he wants to speak, sitting there like a bird of prey, waiting.

"Faded stars. And those lips that lay on his mouth like pink earthworms. Revenge: it's all there. But that's an illusion, that's not Squireuil. A gossip yes, but not evil. Unless, ha ha, you took me away from him. Squireuil, a perverse lago, filling my mind with poison and lies to snatch me away. We were close, almost very close friends until you met me... No. That idea I reject. Not only too far-fetched, but too incomprehensible.

Squireuil stares at the ceiling, his steel nose pointedly upwards. He pretends he's no longer interested, pretends to study the rare mythical patterns above. Dilettante lago plotting his next approach. Not that I care what it is, just another variation...

Suddenly the quietness of the bar is broken, by a coughing. Peels of thunder. It is one of the old men. And mine are the only eyes drawn towards him, the vibrating man convulsing with each cough. Squireuil flinches but refuses to look. Frank has ignored him. And the other old men just shuffle around on their stools like cats who's sleep was temporarily disturbed. Only I react. I react to his sickness, his shuddering with each cough. Peels of inhuman thunder. Protests. The old man stops. His head rises in a silent challenge (I have worked me quite well down, waiting for the echoes to pass.) I think he sees me watching him, I can feel those lifeless eyes trying to be defiant. But soon the strain must be too much because I can see the shadow of his head sink to its normal, oblique droop... and that's the wisdom of age? And those the wise old men some people worship as immortals? Definitely not, not these old men. A frightening thought, like believing your soul is cast upwards or down on the roll of dice... (as frightening as just believing).

A final gulp. Frank spits my glass, saucers over, and refills it. Returning, he throws away the discarded cow, and replaces it with a new one. A square with a logo in the middle surrounded with graphically written German words. A very symmetrical affair. The beer glass centers perfectly in the little design... restless...

Frank seems to hover at our end. Right now he squats down, nosily counting the pretzel and peanut supply beneath us. What do you want to hear, Frank? His ears have perked up every time Squireuil has opened his mouth. A bit of curiosity sparkles in his eyes. Ah... yes... he doubt he's rubbermarching, trying to piece together the whole story. I'm sure we form a strange pair in this desolate bar. Frank, once sheltered by old age and death, (death, time and the age it brings) now gives me his eyes.

Squireuil looks at Squireuil lying on the floor. "Nathanial, I'm pleased to see you taking your medicine without so much as a grunt. It's good for the soul!"

"Mmmm. Miraculous." If he'd only sniff

the greedy flame in his eyes.

"Don't be so damn cynical. Drink it up. It helps. Listen, before you know it, those rainclouds will be swept away. Kaput. Happier days ahead." "Yes, don't they always." "All right, all right. I can take the hints. But listen, Nate, she's all tuckered out now, so we'll be out, correct? The future; ever hear of it?"

"My face must be betraying me."

"So what do you go doing when she gets up? Do you go..."

Red and hot...

"Cuddle her like a kitten?"

I strain to keep my eyes pointed in the other direction...

"Cares her? Let her cry on your shoulder?"

"Shut up. I'll... Suddenly I do need someone, "I don't know." But can't. I don't even think about it."

"Sure."

The facade of nonchalance doesn't fool Squireuil in the least. He knows, I know. But really I have been trying not to think about it. About you, me. If I could only crawl upstairs and rent a room for a week and not think. Sleep during the day and sleep during the night, unaware of the sun or the crows on the ceiling or the dust I breathe in through the pillow. Unaware of all. Of you. Just sleep.

"Nate, you have to get some idea of what you're going to do, Christ, you can't fog yourself ever again." Why not, Squireuil. They do.

"Maybe it'll stay in limbo like this forever?"

"Yeah, Right.

Exactly... shit. How I'd like to smash this glass or bust one of those old grey heads. Right. I know I'1l have to go up there again. It will undoubtedly be raining. There you'll stand on the curb with the cheap suitcase and a magazine over your head, a re-rosupping grin on your lips. You'll get in the car but then what? What the hell are we going to say to each other? "How've you been?" "Nurses treat you nicely?"

"Get me." Anything except what we should be talking about. Anything but that. And we'll drive away, back to that dingy, oppressive apartment building only straining to listen to each other's fluttering hearts, hearing only the squeak of the wipers as they glide back and forth over the windshield, the tapping of the raindrops as they strike the roof. Ah, but the car will be washed clean... a long, twilight road... another night in bed with our eyes separately seeing the shadows on the ceiling... the goddamned quiet..."

"Frank, how much for your smile? How much for that smooth indiferent smile?"

Squireuil softens his grey eyes and pats my knee with his hand, I automatically recoil. A look of disappointment flashes across his face and then vanishes.

"Perk up, Nate. You seem all wrong out." "Uh." I shrug my shoulders, bury my face in the glass of beer. "Yes, sir. Fine company you make." "Expect any better?"

"I guess not."

"Well good. Don't look so damn let down then.

Squireuil pauses, pondering something. I've convinced he doesn't know and what he knows he suspects as being erroneous. He's too restrained, too baffled. He is trying to feel me out. But he'll never know. Never. Emphatically. No one will. Stay with me, Christ."

"Think you'll take her back?"

"I can't tell. I imagine so." I say it weakly, unpersuasively.

"Maybe you should just stay away."

Oh, that's excellent advice. Damn good.
Squirl in a panic gesture. He's talking to Frank. About me. I wonder. I walk on with dread and just as I'm about to pass them, the one on the end nears me, the one who coughed earlier, starts coughing again, a thick, bazy cough emerging from ropes of phlegm which give it a peculiar, gritty timbre. I take a quick look at his most unattractive face and hurry past. His eyes are rheumy and his hair droops over his forehead in sparse, matted tufts. Perhaps the worst of it is that he's eating the same food, eats away at his cheeks. I nearly sprint through the deserted dining room and immediately open the bathroom door.

Squirl: There is no purgatory, no Hades, no underworld. The bad places exist in some shadowy realm below the earth. We sinners are crammed into the bathroom of the Union Square where hundreds of old men with palsy spray the floor, exuding the stench of disease. Falling on, I walk in front of the nicotine-colored urinal, overpowered by the reek, staring down at the mesh closet with cigarette butts, dry spume, unnameable wrappers. I still hear the coughing in the background providing a bizarre counterpart to this miniature damnation. Will I pay? Will I pay to be able to zip up my fly and trot to a dampened mirror to give the old man a chance to clear his throat and witness the effects of this sudden catharsis. Though bearded, thinning, I see how haggard my face has become over the last five days. It is the first time I dare to look. Lines promenade over my forehead, my cheekbones protrude slightly from my cheeks, they have changed dramatically. It's not just the film of alcohol, no, much more glasses them over; perhaps sorrow, perhaps that sudden shock when whatever... whatever it was that clutched my veins, burst forth from some region I had only once recognized intuitively, vicariously... you used to like my eyes, remember? Dark, rich. You even... I feel like that child again... you even said they were fathomless... but now you know the depth... lashing out... I can't. I cannot. I can't accept it. It, It... You made them dull. Yes, you wouldn't like them now, you wouldn't be complimenting them now on their beauty, you wouldn't spend those long, pining minutes trying to discover how much love my eyes held, those disgruntled minutes trying to strip out my soul because of your petty insecurity, sucking it right through the pupils... Goddamned mirrors. Can I say I'm sorry? I refuse to look, to remember, to accept. I refuse can someone hear me? I race out of the bathroom, drained, exhausted, staggering.

The old man's head has collapsed on the bar. His slippers foot bobs imprecisely on the tarnished rail. He quakes. No more thunderous cough echoes within the bar; only quiet contractions of his chest. And a whimpering sound, the old man's head, and a bottle of smelting salts beneath his twitching nose. The man's lips are bluish-purple, his face pale white. The strain must have crashed the sod on his face; watery blood mingled with another liquid runs down his cheek into his mouth. And a whispering sounds in his bedroom, moist, red patches, you face. I didn't bring you this close, the old man didn't bring you this close... The old man responds to the annunciator's fright, to the frightened, misty eyes open. He finds an old, encrusted handkerchief and tamps the sore on his cheek. In a faint voice he asks for brandy. Frank, like a nurse, fetches the bottle of brandy. I drink it. I walk back, walk away, as I've always walked away. The path to my stoop seems endless. I notice a sick, hollow agony eating my chest, and the thought repeating like a primitive drum in my head: why didn't he die? why didn't he die?

"I pegged the old man as a gook," Squirl in a panic gestures. "Why didn't he die."
"But I guess he's all right, Frank takes good care of him, of them all. It's a good thing, too."
"I could expect this clap-trap from you, Frank. My stomach aches, my head feels dizzy..."
"Yeah, Frank suggested you slow down on the thinking."
"So what? What the fuck does he know?"
"That's what I said. I said it's good for you right now, everybody has to lose themselves sometimes. But I assured him I'll keep an eye on you."
"Muchas gracias."
"Squirl, by now impervious to my cynicism, shrugs it off as naturally as one brushes aside a falling lock of hair. He sits quietly, waiting for my mood to change, flipping a cigarette from finger to finger like a baton. Frank roves around inside the bar of the restorant and order the peace and I found so soothing. The bar slowly returns to its fade. The old men have reconstituted into spectors inhabiting a far-away, uncommunicable corner. For only those moments of coughing did they seem to be a form of communication. With the old man's death, all force towards destruction... is there another... Frank has mended everything. He fills their beers. The creamy white head spills over the sides, huge glasses, don't lay back like this, with your hair spread like two wings over the pillow don't close your eyes and smile... don't glow in the sun... Pain. And the sound of fast water rushing over rocks, tinkling, cracking water, cracking water. I'm spinning in an eddy, vertigo all over me."

"Squirl opens his mouth, then shuts it. After a moment of what appeared to be perplexity, he clears his throat and says:
"Nathan. Everything else has failed, how about a little old-fashioned preaching. You're young, she's young, so why don't you just, you know, sort of forget about it. You're both pitable, able to adapt. Just write it off as a failed infatuation, infatuated failure."

"That's a lie."
"Or did I dream loved you?"
"Or did I dream loved you?"

"Think about it. At the prime of your life, sexually speaking, anything with two legs and a hole looks good. You probably just had hotpants."

"Oh, no. No. Much, much more than that." Why am I defending you so vociferously? My tongue flails."

"Possibly, but...

"Squirl, shut up, will you. Christ. Serenade me, patronize me, even slap me on the wrist, but don't..."

I drop it. I've broken through the laconial.

Squirl, worked up, calms himself down by tapping of his end of his cigarette on his long, broad thumbnail. Flecks of tobacco spray out of the top. After a few seconds, he recovers his sensitive, empathetic look and asks me if I've seen you yet.

"Yes, Squirl, Yes. I've seen her." Open sesame to a spanking new route of conversation. La di dah. I feel my mind tense and about to drool out of my ear.

"How did she look? Better?"

"Oh, not bad."

Vacuous. Grumous. A ghost. You lie there in bed, your once nice face dry and pale, eyes staring emptily at the blanched walls, arms folded lifelessly under the sheets, crossed to resemble a Christmas tree. And those flowers, so damn white, and that plant I sent you, cyclamen or whatever, something mysteriously attracting about it. I didn't know what a cyclamen was, so I bought one fresh. I feeble attempts to talk or apologize or romanticize, if I had the sense, I ramble on, if I had the sense to twist you by the plats of your black hair and tug both of us away with all the strength my goddamned body could muster. But instead, suffocation. But why am I telling you this now? I must run out for air, the room, my cheeks, flush and fevered, must run out... did I apologize for taking so long to visit you, me with my tall between my legs forever? How could I come, how could I show my sooty face, ashen, sunken, depraved?

But why am I telling you this? To demonstrate my concern? To make a claim to insanity, to ease the dark, purple blotches on your face, the swaths of white, white swaths blending in with the prophylactic walls... "Nate, which way to the little boy's room. "Paley's voice, lage voice, invades my reverie... I extend a shivering hand. Do the old men watch it falter, holding their own alcohol, golden ducks and admiring the steadiness that fifty years of non-stop drinking can produce? I'm sorry. I'm sorry interrupted your conversation. Squirl just wanted to know-well, you heard him. The bathroom. You know, we were there a few minutes ago, filthy, fucking hole... unwashed, undistinguished, feminized, can they find you a better room that this smelly place? Stinks. Stinks like years of piss and shit and disease and the accumulated last breaths of all the previous patrons who died. Yes, as they say, in the dead of night, perhaps, as they say, wasting their last breath whispering the name of some loved one, a pretense in some suspended regret. It returns the released message thinks, deep down deep, oh my god, I killed him. Like you. I nearly killed you. Beat you up and destroy you, and across and across, parallel and skew and obliquely through the oppressive terrain of our bed. No. I don't really mean to... make you bleed and comfort your face. I didn't... But your face, haunting me, piercing black eyes, small nose, twitching, and knotted, thick hair, jaw proudly protruding, sometimes... like. I felt the fever grip you held on me and I look at your pointy nails and sniffing nose and flicking eyes staring around the room and I couldn't decide whether to fuck you or kill you. I guess I decided... and those headshrinkers, I'd like to see them here with you and me, could they establish rapport with the old man, could they establish a rapport with a cancer? One by one he'd interview them in the bathroom... like a time capsule, like a vault it holds my guilt... but, maybe, don't lay back like this, with your hair spread like two wings over the pillow... don't close your eyes and smile... don't glow in the sun... Pain."

"Nate," a voice, floating on its back in the river.

"I don't feel so..."

"The Union Square. So I am here. My eyes are sore and unused to seeing. There they are. If I had the strength, I'd murder each one of them. Murderer. I feel Squirl's frail grip on my shoulders. Tunnel vision. Why are we viking so, slow swamphy?"

"You passed out back there. Next thing I know, your nightgown is soaking and sends the beer glass careening to the floor."

"I beat the piss out of her. I beat the piss out of her," I say in a daze as we drift through the damp, hollow corridors and suddenly gurgling in the back of my throat. I remember scurrying through the door, stopped dead from the shock."

"Massaging fingers stroke the back of my neck. Thick soup spills in the bowl, the sweat on my face is drying quickly, sending chills through my nakedness and cold."

"What?"

"You were just telling me, between
retches, about helplessness, lashing out at the silent darkness. Those were the words you used. Lashing out. Christ, Nate, you didn't have to keep it from me. I understand."

So it is all out. The never becomes a now. Another spin, more pain, mostly dryness, a trickle, essence fluid, maybe. These fingers keep massaging my neck. But I'm delirious. I thought they were yours, magical fingers, psychokinesis. Squirrely. You have the woman's touch.

I turn up to look at him. He, with a piece of toilet paper, wipettes the spit off my lips. And there, looming above the door of the stall, stands Frank, a slight smile on his face, a faint twinkle in his eye.

The sun has dropped below the hotel portico and sunlight streams in through the filmy window, spearing my eyes. No wonder the old men cluster at the other end of the bar. Light too strong, too real for their fragile eyes. The taste of cola-cola swishes over my tongue. Every few seconds I glance up, ignoring a Squirrely lecture, blinking. The light filters through the old men's hair, making it golden, alive. It dances on their outlines, giving them haloes, auras. Supernatural effect. They've become silhouettes, devoid of flesh or blood. Frank pours a beer with obvious enjoyment for he holds the glass up to the beams of light to inspect it. It gleams like ambrosia and Frank saunters down to the other end of the bar bearing this precious drink for one of those nebulous figures. It could be the old man who had the fit. Spooks. All the same, Evanescence spooks. Slowly, the whole bar seems to glow from the expanding sunlight, the figures on the ceiling prancing, the fans twirling and spaying the light onto all the dusty, protected corners, sometimes reflecting the light into the old men's eyes, luminous, numinous eyes. Like immortals in a majestic hall they inspire the conflict within me and smirk, ineffectual, decrepid, but still there, laughing, snickering, sometimes taking a bolder delight when one of us confronts them with rage but still yawning as their weak, tremulous hands wave it all to failure.

"Hey, Nate. Ah-remember us?" Fingers snap in front of my face. I still smell the puke in my throat. A swig of soda, a few pleasant Squirrely words.

"Daydreaming again?"

"Sort of."

"You ought to watch that stuff. It can get dangerous. How's your stomach?"

"Eh. Better."

"Head?"

"So so. The corkscrew is gone."

"Corkscrew?"

"Forget it. Buy me another soda, sport."

The only alteration in Frank's routine is the addition of ice in the glass and the pouring from the bottle instead of the tap. Expression unchanged. Gait unchanged. That one shirt tail flaps over his pocket in the same way. Automaton or superior indifference?

Even through changed eyes everything seems conspicuously the same. Squirrely sticks a cigarette between his worm lips, cups his hands around the shaking match, lights, jerks the match out vigorously, throws it into the ashtray with a distinctive ping. The sun has gone down sufficiently to deaden the atmosphere again, the old men have faded grey into the bar they prop their heads on.

"Nathaniel. How does this sound? I have an offer to make you." "Proposition?" I couldn't resist.

"Well, you look pretty bad. Pretty burned out, I should say," he has tactfully ignored it, "and in need of time and room to breathe. Why don't we take off for a while? I'll take my vacation now and withdraw a little cash from the bank. It'll help. Really." "Let me think about it."

"I'll give you both a chance to straighten things out. At least I know you shouldn't stay here anymore. You'll wind up in the booz."

Perhaps. Perhaps. Some fresh air breathed freshly. Maybe even a little salty air. Maybe the ocean. I haven't seen it, smelled it, tasted it, felt it. Most of all, I haven't heard it in ages. Could be centuries, now. Waves crashing on the shore endlessly, sucking in and out. Soon there's nothing inside but the waves rushing and retreating, rushing and retreating, leaving nothing in their path... maybe you--maybe you and I could go there sometime later. Sometime when you're recovered, when I'm recovered, we could walk along the beach at sunset, just like now, and not have to speak and not have to listen to the silence, but just feel the sand being tugged out from beneath our feet... but not now. Listen to the doctors, the nurses, your friends, parents, listen to their words and maybe we'll walk along that beach. Not now, though. Later.

"To the ocean, Squirrely? Should we go to the ocean?"

"Which one?" he asks with a light of laugh in his voice.

"Any one."

I pick up a quarter from the layered pile of change in front of his beer.

"Play some music."

"Good idea."

I walk over to the jukebox and stare at the columns of names and numbers. Frank switches on the machine. Thank you, I hear Squirrely whistling. I start to feel infected with his enthusiasm. I pull out my wallet to check my finances when I see your picture, the one we took in the photo booth at Woolworths all those years ago. Your long braid of black hair hangs over my shoulder, the innocent, clear smile, leftover from the funny pose you struck for the previous picture. Even your eyes sparkle kindly, lively, looking at me in the mirror.

Speculations

Based on speculations, We laid wager on love. You awarded the prize of the bitter-sweet, Lost the bet.

Still fragments of nights, November crisp. We clutched silhouettes in globes of white light behind wood sculptures whose delicate sharpness pierced the dream.

Why hang on barren branches? Paper sculptures against a ceramic moon. My reciprocal love is frozen in November. Deserting my Siberian love, And your November moon, I'm gambling again. But it's sure this time.

(nine chances out of ten.)

Pat Hauptly

AUTUMN ONE MORE TIME

I get off in autumn When winds fly where leaves follow And walking crunches caterpillar garbage; Ripened season skills help to numb where we've been toughed, The sun becomes a timid boiling rag to fit the scheme Leaving nothing to look for but sleep, A matter of taste: Better circles show no concern But autumn comes on softly strong.

Deb Coulston

Robert Furman
OLD SWEET SONG

By David Michael. Hinrichs

Inside the cafe it was cool and quiet and pleasant. The sunlight was filtering through the blinds on the front windows. On the smooth, plastered walls of the cafe there were soft, blue, muralic murals. The tables were shiny from polishing, and on some there were red and white checkerboard tablecloths. At the far end of the room there was a burnished mahogany bar. A speckled mirror ran along back of the bar. About a dozen people were sitting at the bar, and there were two deer antler trophies. It was early, and there was no one in the cafe except Billy, Christopher and the bartender who was putting pretzels in the baskets on the bar. Billy sat at a table in the corner on the window. He ate buckwheat cakes covered with butter and maple syrup. He was very hungry and the light, beautiful browned cakes were delicious. He finished eating, and then he took a swallow of coffee. He was waiting for the girl he had gone to bed with last night. They had agreed to meet here. The girl was late. Billy drank his coffee and waited. He would be disappointed if she did not come. He was just passing through Oneonta, but they could have this day together. After a little while the door from the street opened. A young woman came in. Billy thought she was a man at first sight. She wore loose, baggy jeans and a flannel shirt. She was tall, with square shoulders and a flat chest. Her hair was cut short and in a pompadour style. When she saw Billy she walked over to the table.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

"Christopher. Billy Christopher." She did not say anything but stood looking at him. He was very tall, with a big hooked nose, close set eyes, and tight lips. Her face was pale and sweaty. She seemed upset and angry.

"So?" she said.

She did not answer. She was looking at him.

"Well, what do you want?" asked Billy.

She did not answer. She was looking at him.

"Say," he said. "What goes here?"

She kept on looking at him. Billy felt very uncomfortable. He did not know what to make of this.

"Just who the hell do you think you are?" she said sharply to him.

"What do you mean?"

"You come into town and fuck the girl I love," she said angrily, "and now you want to fuck her again before you leave town. Where the hell do you get off?"

Billy said nothing. He was shocked.

"I'll tell you, you filthy prick. What we had was beautiful. We belonged to each other, and we had everything. It was so beautiful and good. And then I find out about this filthy business."

She spoke very angrily and bitterly, and glared at Billy while she talked.

"Now it's all gone, finished. Nothing can be the same again between us. Every thing has changed. It's all gone. You took what we had. You, You filthy prick. You damn filthy prick."

Billy had come to a complete understanding. He felt, vaguely, a little nauseated by his involvement in all this.

"Listen," he said. "Why don't you just go?"

"You're the pervert," she said, "not me. To you a woman is just a piece of meat. Just a gash. You're the pervert."

"Listen, you."

"You're filthy. You are utter filth."

"Why don't you just get out of here?"

"I'm not going to get out. You're going to get out of town. But not before you take a pasting, see?"

She stood tensely, with her hands clenched. Her face was white, her eyes wide. Billy watched her.

"Stand up," she said.

She held her arms up high, the left stuck out. She regarded herself.

"Cut it out," said Billy. "I can't fight you."

"You're not going to get out of it with that excuse. Now stand up, unless you want to take it sitting down."

Billy did not know what to do. He had no frame of reference. He did not move.

"Okay, you prick," she said. "I'm going to cool you off good."

As she stepped close to Billy and set

herself, the bartender, who had been standing at the far end of the bar with a newspaper folded open before him, came around from behind the bar.

"Hey, butch," he almost shouted.

"Where do you think you are?"

The young woman did not take her attention away from Billy.

"I know damn well where I am," she said.

The bartender came over and placed himself between her and Billy. "Well, you don't want to make trouble in here," he said in an even voice.

Billy had relaxed a little in his chair. "He's the one who made all the trouble," said the young woman.

The bartender looked at Billy.

"He's not making any trouble," he said.

"He just ruined my life, that's all," she said.

"He appears to be sitting there quite reasonably," the bartender told her.

"Listen, you want to take it easy, butch."

He put a hand on her shoulder, and she twisted away and threw a roundhouse right that glanced off his forehead.

"Why you crazy bull-dyke," he said calmly, and slapped her very hard and suddenly across the face, and then grabbed her by her shirt front and shoved her back. She lost her balance and sat down in a backward lurch.

She sat there on the floor, her face red, blinking her eyes, her lips working. There was no anger in her expression now.

"This wasn't your concern," she said, with tears in her eyes.

"You don't want to ever go to fight," said the bartender.

He took hold of her arm and yanked her to her feet.

"Keep your hands off me," she said huskily, pulling away from him. She slumped down on a chair.

"Oh, hell," she said, and began to cry.

"This is what I get for loving. This is the end of the trap you set. It's all gone now. It's all gone to hell."

"You run along now," said the bartender.

"You're the perverts, you're all perverts," she said and choked. She put her elbows on the table, covering her face with her hands, sobbing, her shoulders shaking.

The bartender looked at her dispassionately. Billy looked back and embarrassed. She lowered her hands now, holding her head up, looking at nothing, her cheeks wet with tears, biting her lips.

"Oh, the things I said and did to her, this morning," she sobbed, remembering.

"Oh, hell. Oh, oh, oh," she said.

"You better run along," the bartender said impatiently.

She stood up. "I could kill myself," she cried. "I could kill myself. I might as well kill myself." And then she wheeled around and left the cafe in a rush.

The bartender looked on after her and then turned to Billy. "That's all right, son," he said hospitably. "I'm sorry she annoyed you."

"Ahh, what the hell," Billy said, trying to shrug it off.

"What was the matter with her anyway?" the bartender asked casually.

"Billy told him.

"Well, I couldn't have her annoying a customer. Will you have another cup of coffee, son?"

"No," answered Billy.

The bartender went back behind the bar. Billy got up from the table, picked up the check, and went over to the bar with it. He took some coins from his trouser pocket and paid for the breakfast. Then the bartender continued reading the newspaper. Billy sat down across from him on a high stool.

"She won't kill herself," he offered, uncertain.

The bartender did not seem to hear. He seemed to have been put the incident out of his mind. He was interested in reading the newspaper.

"Do you think she'll kill herself?" asked Billy.

The bartender did not look up from the paper.

"No," he said. "But you can't ever tell."

"That would be a hell of a thing."

"The thing for her to do," the bartender said, "would be to just go out and find herself another piece."

Billy sat quiet. The bartender looked at him.

"You want some more coffee, son?"

Billy shook his head. The bartender turned over the page.

"Hello," Billy said. "I don't feel too good to think that she'll kill herself."

The bartender, who was reading the paper, did not appear to give it any thought at all.

"I wish I would've never come into this town," said Billy.

The bartender smiled at this.

"I'll bet I know someone else who wishes the same thing," he said.
#1

A broom waits two doors down the hall
while I stare at pieces of life
on the green rug.

Wrinkles in the curtain
stretch across the blast of morning sun
like the veins in the wings
of that moth that flew through the crack
in the screen last night.
Straight through the blades
of my electric fan on the windowsill
it flew
and now lingers in sliced silences
on the green carpet.

Downstairs the Coke machine is empty.
I find myself without a beginning again.
The words on my pages
dance for their own amusement:
I cannot lock them into meaning.
I sit half asleep
writing a declaration of withdrawal
from all that is not boxed up in machines.

#6

The nun across the aisle
is half in love
with the Hershey bar she balances
between fingertips.
Her ballet clutters my window
while I focus on a friend
who sits nearest the window
in a dark luncheonette across the street.

Retreating behind clouds,
the sun
thrusts my face onto my friend's
in the magic of superimposed reflection
captured for an instant
in glass.
The bus accelerates,
we separate.
In my window
the nun is breaking her candy,
eating the first piece
and saving the rest for later.

#20

Now the city crawls across my hand.
Old women sweeping front walks and pushing lawn mowers
lower their (jesus christ) eyes.
Your car trots by,
hauling more hands that will always know your address.
The headlights flare through fog.
I'm thinking
of a new name. Mine's been stenciled
on bus schedules and candy wrappers
that dissolve
deep in coat pockets.
Steam from a hole in the street
rises to shake hands with the fog:
"Mail your letters
and maintain."

Gary Lutz
acknowledgements:

CONTENTS

Page 2  Earl W. Lehman-short story
Page 6  Tom Hallman-drawing; Deby Coulston-poem
Page 7  David Michael Hinrichs-short story
Page 13 Tom Hallman-drawing
Page 14 Deby Coulston-poem; Robert Furman-poem;
      Earl W. Lehman-poetry
Page 15 David Michael Hinrichs-short story
Page 20 David Schiller-short story
Page 27 Pat Hampton-poem; Deby Coulston-poem;
      Robert Furman-poem
Page 28 David Michael Hinrichs-short story
Page 30 Gary Lutz-poem; Mark Dorlson-illustration
Page 31 Gary Lutz-poetry

LAYOUT

David Michael Hinrichs

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Reno Unger
Karen DeJarnett
Penny Bauman
Dr. Raymond W. Ford
Dr. Arnold E. Newman
Gary Maria
Mary Beth Emmerling
Mr. Burkhardt