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### The Gallery, Vol. 2, No. 1

Connecticut College

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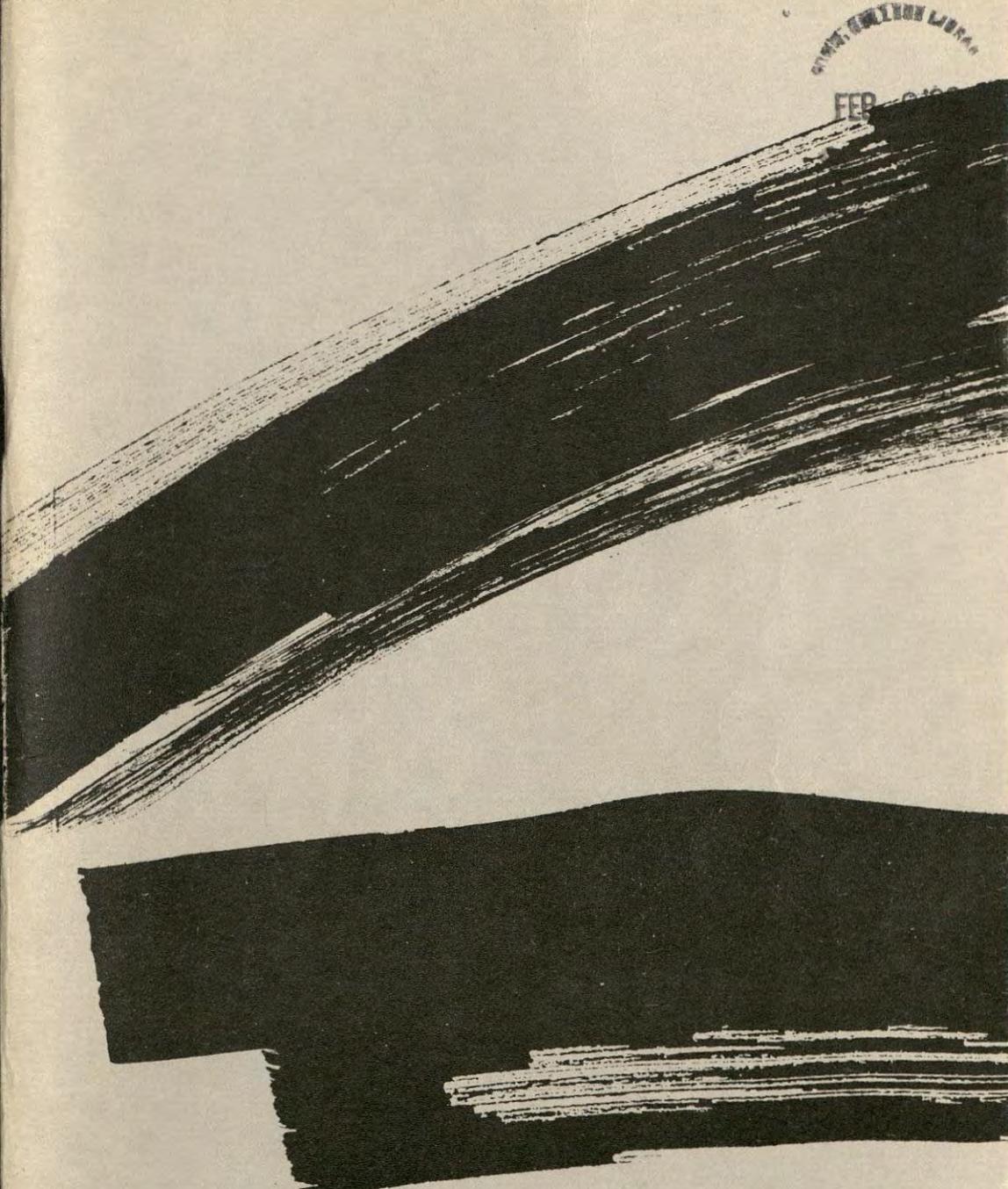
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# THE GALLERY - -

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Blanche McCrary Boyd

Address all correspondence and submissions during the 1982-83 school year  
to The Gallery, Box 1303, Connecticut College, New London, CT 06320.

† † † † † † † † † † †

The Gallery is published twice during the school year to display the work of  
the students and faculty of Connecticut College. We thank you for your sup-  
port.

the editors

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Artwork on the following pages by:

- 5. Caroline Kercher
- 13. Susan Levin
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- 43. Deborah Jacobs
- 47. Debbi Flashman

*Cover Design* by Shana Rae Kaplow



## There Are Some of Us Falling

There are some of us  
gone to Vermont this weekend  
to watch the hills fall.  
I am taking tiredness to the hills,  
I am falling  
into Vermont  
that climbs  
into colors of fiery, burnished things  
like aging bricks  
or the stages of rust or  
ripening apples and pears.  
Back there  
a house stood, black charred  
till it was only stilled ashes.  
I wonder how long it will take to fall,  
this passing shadow  
in the midst of color,  
of fiery, burning things.  
And the sadness is soothed  
when clouds lay their cool  
white arms across the hills  
and steam

## Tending

"A plant keeps feeding dead leaves."  
My mother spoke,  
tending her plants too  
with a mother's touch  
she snips them off,  
helping young green  
heal, grow.  
Now the plant feeds only  
living limbs.  
"You help it if you just get rid of them."

"A plant keeps feeding dead leaves."  
Even as they wither,  
dry and die,  
veins carry nourishment  
on to forsaken parts.  
The pump and flow is instinct,  
though the giving  
is to those condemned.  
Resurrection is seldom possible.  
"A few leaves fall from every healthy plant."

## Needle's Eye

In the clean white hot  
of the promised land, the holy city,  
Jerusalem,  
there is a gate:  
The needle's eye.  
Camels can pass  
through, if they have nothing  
other than their camelness  
to bear.  
No bags, no bundles, no burdens.  
Piled possessions outside the city wall  
slip silently down to desert;  
the winds sweep a slow sand  
over them all - - gold, frankincense, myrrh - -  
till they are swallowed  
and camels long gone.

Many find the eye,  
few enter.  
But the camels have reached  
Jerusalem.

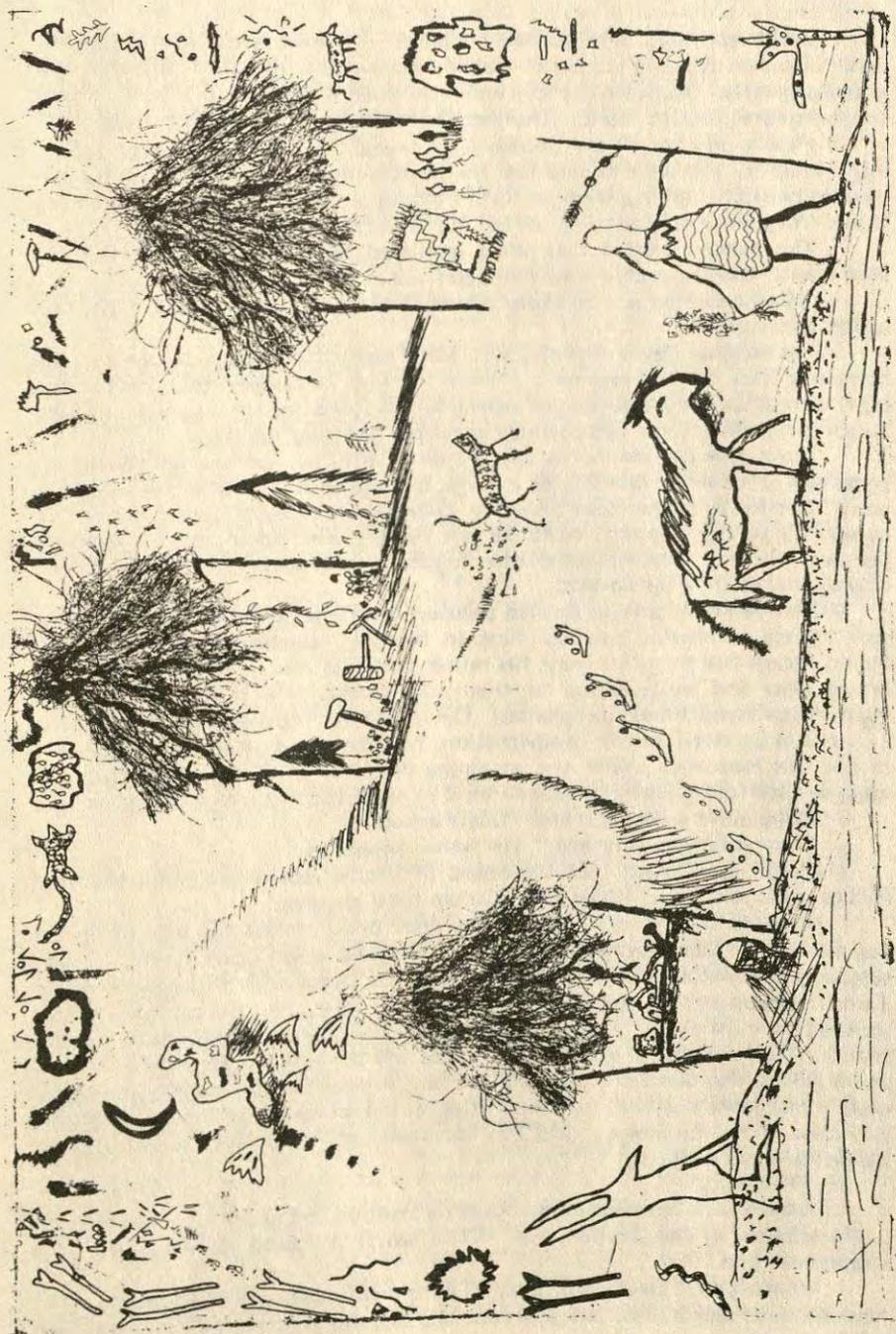
## Oz

There is only travel,  
through storms, or by balloon.  
We've always never been asleep.

We know of course  
Kansas isn't changed;  
fields flow the same gold,  
pigs and pigtails still.  
Tornadoes happen once in a while.

One needs to have seen Oz  
to live in Kansas.

JoAnn Elizabeth Coppola



Caroline Kercher

## Red Light

David read the boldy printed headline. "Woman slept with forty corpses." Beneath it was a picture of a sallow brunette with very white skin and large glassy eyes. She wore a simple white sundress with a modest floral pattern embroidered across the front. The caption described her as a "morgue rat."

I am a prisoner of my necrophiliac urges," the girl was quoted as saying. "In all truth, I wish I could like the boys in my school, but unless they're diseased or sickly-looking, they just don't excite me. Besides, the dead are kind to me. They never say bad things or tell me I'm committing a sin."

The police reported that she'd admitted to having had at least forty dead lovers. They suspected there had been more.

"Aretha Benton is a seriously troubled girl," the police psychiatrist was quoted as saying.

Yes Aretha, David thought, you have many troubles. He placed the newspaper back in its metal rack. It was his turn at the register. He put the quart of beer on the black rubber surface and watched as the Spanish girl rang it up. "Dollar fifty," she said parting her purple lips only slightly.

David gave her the money and thanked her as she handed him the brown paper bag. He paused, waiting for a reply, but she didn't speak or even nod her head. The rouge on her face drew her cheekbones upward giving her the illusion of a smile. The next customer put his groceries down and she checked them off with one hand while the other tapped at the register. Her body moved only slightly as her arms worked.

The darkness outside seemed painted onto the window of the fluorescent bodega. Overripe bananas hung in blotchy bunches against the glass. Puerto Ricans like them this way, his father had told him. They fry them with brown sugar and molasses and eat them like candy. His father had been to Puerto Rico many times on business. David and his mother had never gotten a chance to go along, but in compensation, his father had often taken them out to Los Dos Hermanos. And over steaming plates of frijoles negros, arroz con vieja, and ice cold pitchers of sangria he'd extolled the virtues of caribbean life.

"Why don't we move there?" David asked.

"I'm ready to go anytime." His father answered.

David later found that the board of health closed the place the year he'd gone off to college. It was really Cuban food anyway.

The bell tinkled as he pushed the door open against the wall of humid summer air. The heaviness of the air weighed down upon David's broad shoulders and reacted with his pores, making the sweat soak through his white T-shirt. His underwear felt clammy beneath his jeans, and his canvas sneakers squished as he walked. Closing his eyes, he was treading through a marshy swamp. The mud slid up in between his toes and the rough grass itched the skin of his ankles. He plodded along until he saw Aretha Benton posing limply beneath a mangrove tree with her dress lifted in her bony white hands. Standing very close to her, he spoke. "But I'm not dead yet." Her eyes stared off into the murky green darkness.

"You'll do."

David rested his lean frame against a Pontiac and gazed at a row of T.V.s in the window of the Zenith store. "The worst it's been in five years," the weatherman said.

"Fuck you," David muttered. These heat waves are all the same. The tension builds and builds, and everyone sits around waiting for the giant heat-breaking storm.

David stopped listening to the news and just watched the twenty units flicker. A head in each of them danced like a candle flame. His nearsightedness took the definition from the pictures on the screens. It reminded him of the last

time he'd tripped. It was an overcast day in November and he'd spent most of the day feeling nauseated at how ugly and imposing everything around the campus had looked. Even the trees bared their teeth at him and snarled. He returned to his dorm and went up to the third floor to find Marcy. She was sitting on the floor making wide arcs with a black pastel on an egg-shell white piece of paper. She tilted her head at him, letting a shock of long chestnut hair fall across her shoulder and chest. The corners of her mouth drooped slightly and a cigarette hung limply from the left side. David began to cry, and through the blurry filter of his tears, he saw her face turn grey and fade in detail. "What's the matter with you?" she snapped, and the echo of her demand hammered repeatedly in his brain.

David opened his beer and took a long thirsty pull. Already the bitter liquid had become lukewarm. He drank again and then decided to toss it away.

The avenue was brightly illuminated by street lamps that stuck out like crabs' eyes from the pavement. Beneath them David's shadow stretched long and thin as he walked and then snapped back to a dark puddle at his feet. A few sweaty shapes leaned against doorways or sat on stoops like melting figures in a wax museum. David walked faster, hoping to outrun his own perspiration. He was looking for a telephone booth.

At the corner he saw one, green, graffiti-covered and empty. For some odd reason he remembered "Get Smart." A phone booth in the show served as an elevator that led to an underground passageway in which door after thick steel door opened obediently in front of the fast moving Smart.

David stepped inside. Smells like piss in here, he thought. He pulled a dime from his back pocket and fit it into the slot. His fingers dialed with practiced ease.

"Marcy, it's me."

"Where are you?"

"Listen, I'm sorry Marcy. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me."

"David don't apologize, o.k."

"I'm just going to walk around the block and cool out. I got to get some air. I'll be back up in a few minutes. Do you want me to pick up anything while I'm out?"

"No, that's alright. But thanks anyway." She sighed. "Come back soon."

David hung up, and still holding on to the receiver, he leaned close to the telephone, fogging the shiny metal with his breath. He stayed this way suspended until the acrid smell of urine drove him out. It was a little cooler outside of the booth.

Back in the apartment Marcy had the television playing loudly. David could hear the strains of voices in the background while they talked. He thought about her sitting there on the couch, her round mouth and soft nose hidden behind a cloud of cigarette smoke, the nicotine stains on her willow wand fingers. The smell of tobacco when he kissed her hands.

The apartment was small. Two rooms, one a bedroom, the other a messy space with a couch, television, kitchenette, and a bathroom had shrunk considerably when David moved in. Marcy had lived here since she graduated. Almost a year now. Her art work covered the walls and most of the floor. The place was downtown from where David used to live while his parents were together. When his father left, his mother gave up the apartment and moved to her mother's house in the country. Marcy offered to let him stay until school started again. That was in June.

David passed by the window of the record store he had worked in for a month. Iron accordion bars outlined the store in the grid pattern. Louis the Fourth Records. Buttons and paraphernalia lay in a very organized fashion on the black velvet display case in the window. The owner spent quite a lot of time

sampling the latter in the back of the store. David indulged as well, liking his bald-headed boss in a stoned way. In the dusty backroom where records lay unsorted and boxed, David laughed at his boss' flustered way of taking down detailed inventory and then losing the lists he'd so carefully made up. His forehead wrinkled and his thick grey mustache twisted upwards at the ends as he searched about. "Where are the Dead Kennedys? I just had them a minute ago!"

Behind the counter was a specter of himself, red-eyed, his blonde hair short and uncombed but finally growing after the drastic clipping he'd given it in May. His thin face and aqualine nose were accentuated in shadow by the overhead lights. X played loudly through the tinny old Radio Shack speakers and jangled in his head with nervous intensity. A customer approached.

"Do you have the new Gang of Four album?"

David looked up from the counter at a face disfigured by severe burns. He stared blankly at the badly patched scar beneath the man's left eye. The flesh hung on the side of his cheek in crumpled folds where the grafts had been.

"Well?" the man said. David choked. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his black pants and shrugged his shoulders. The man's words weren't making any sense coming from that twisted mouth.

"Goddamnit what's the matter with you!" he demanded.

David's boss appeared behind him and moved him out of the way. "David! I'm terribly sorry. What is it you wanted?"

David found it impossible to explain to Marcy why he'd quit his job. She took his head in her hands and shook it a little. "You o.k.?" His lips raised half-heartedly into a smile. She kissed them softly and pulled away. David held her tightly around the waist and returned her kiss. "No David," she said turning her head to the side.

"Just hold me will you. I won't try to make love to you. I won't even try to kiss you. Just hold me goddamn it."

He felt the stubble on his chin scrape into her sweater like tiny blonde anchors. She held him tightly.

David let his hands fall from the window of the record store. He noticed the sweaty handprints left on the surface and carefully wiped them off with the front of his shirt. The marks disappeared beneath an even larger smudge created by his damp shirt. David laughed silently.

His last day of work had also been his last day stoned. He'd made an oath. As a consolation for the absence of pot, he thought he'd start feeling more energetic. Marcy had said "It's probably a good idea." She was working on a large painting and had flecks of white and red acrylic in her hair. The canvas was hung high up on the wall so she had to reach to work on the top section. She stretched her arm out long and moved the brush vigorously across the canvas making her breasts shake beneath her shirt. David stared for a moment and then left the room. His longings followed him out into the bedroom and onto the windowsill where he sat with his legs dangling out over the street. The oak in front of him rustled softly in the evening breeze.

Not long ago another pair of legs had swung next to his. Together the two of them had talked and listened to the soft music of those leaves. Later they made love, their bodies blanketed by the soft luminescence of the oblong pool of light that streamed in a dusty band from the streetlamps outside.

David lay awake for a while afterwards while Marcy slept. Her balled-up form pressed against his hip and her head rested on its side, leaving her back exposed to David. He ran his fingers lightly up her spine and caressed her fragrant hair. Her back was strong and supple. Asleep she seemed even more sensuous and beautiful. He found the longer he looked at her and touched her, the more he wanted her again. If he could only wake her up, kissing her gently, and revive the passion they shared moments ago, he would do so and continue

to do so all night. But she was somewhere else, somewhere he could not be. He loved her so much that it ached.

In the windowsill, his desire cooled in memory of the inevitable rejection it would provoke. Without being high, he thought it would be a little easier to control himself when with her. Maybe now he could go to sleep without putting himself through the torture of trying to touch her. Maybe, he thought, but it was doubtful.

David waited while the smudges on the window of the record store faded. Enough time had passed for him to have walked around the block, but he really didn't feel like going back to the apartment. I'm going to stay out a while, he thought, maybe there'll be a storm.

In the direction of Marcy's place the street yawned open like a familiar door. David hesitated at the threshold.

The rain came down in huge droplets and David was soaked to the skin. It was late spring and the worms were crawling out of the cracks in the pavement. He opened the door to the apartment, hopped to the bathroom, stripped off his clothes, and wrapped a terry-cloth robe around himself. In the living room, his parents looked surprised to see him. They were sitting opposite each other on the blue couch.

"What are you doing home so early?" his mother asked, "You're drenched."

"Yeah, the rain felt great." he replied.

"I thought you were going out after the movie?" his father said.

"No, Pete wasn't feeling up to it." He stared at his parents. It struck him as strange that they were sitting there like that. "What's going on?"

His mother glanced at him and then looked away. There were dark red shades beneath her eyes. His father put his palms together and rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. "Nothing," he said, "Your mother and I were just talking."

Just talking. It seemed very strange.

He needed more time. If he went upstairs now he might break down again. He was sick of the yelling and crying, the apologies and "forget-its." Marcy had a way of gazing blankly at him while he raged. She stared at him like a cow hypnotized by the swaying haystacks in the field.

"Marcy will you listen to me!"

"What?"

David clasped his hands into fists and boxed his way down the street. An invisible body flopped and jerked at the impact of his blows. He threw a final devastating left hook, and the body collapsed and disintegrated. A fresh sweat appeared on his face, and he licked the moisture from above his lip.

"I don't love you like that, can't you understand?"

"But why? What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened. It's just . . ."

"What's wrong with me?" His voice grew shrill. "What's changed?" Everything, he thought, lots of things. Nothing.

"David. I don't know what to say." she said quietly. David got up from the couch.

"Go to hell!" he shouted, "Just go to hell!" He slammed the door behind him, and the metallic crash followed him down the stairs.

David passed by the street where he should have turned to go back to the apartment. He quickened his pace to a jog for five blocks and then briskly walked for another three. He stepped into the entranceway of a small apartment building and relieved himself against the locked inner doors. He scanned the list of names on the intercom next to his shoulder and pushed one of the buzzers. He thought about inviting himself up. Hello, I'm young, hot, and

sweaty and would very much like to make your acquaintance. Behind each name he fashioned an image of a lovely, bored housewife dressed only in a short robe and a cup of coffee. Oh won't you come in and have a drink young man. Why yes, I'd love to.

But the housewives vanished and a throaty old women's voice croaked through the speaker. "Yes, who is it?"

The urine splattered as it hit the glass door and drained down into a puddle at its base. Little rivulets spread outwards. One touched his shoe while he zipped up his fly. David saw other shoes stepping in this puddle. Black high heels slipping on the wet surface, spongy slippers soaking up the yellow liquid. "Shit," he groaned and slammed the front door open with his palm. His sneaker hit a crack in the concrete, and he fell awkwardly onto his side, scraping his hand on the gritty sidewalk. "Shit!" His hand throbbed painfully and began to bleed.

"You better be more careful honey," said a voice behind him, "You wouldn't want to hurt that cute ass of yours."

David sat up and faced the young woman who was now squatting next to him. She parted her bright red lips and spoke again. "Had a bit too much to drink tonight?" She winked at him flickering her long mascara-covered eyelashes and revealing the semi-circles of lavender eye shadow on her lids. Rouge covered each cheek in angular upward swathes. As she leaned over him, her long dark hair hung stiffly from her forehead like two large brushstrokes. A feather dangled from her right earlobe and rested on her shoulder. She reached under his arms to help him up. David took hold of her pale bony wrist and got up to his feet. "Thanks," he said. She was almost a foot shorter than he. Small but firm breasts poked conical shapes in her pink halter top. She wore a black miniskirt, fishnet stockings, and leopard skin vinyl boots.

"Hey no problem," Her voice had a little girl lilt. "Oh but look." She took his hand in hers. "You've got a boo-boo." She kissed it dramatically.

David brushed himself off with his free hand, leaving the one that was hurt in the girl's smooth palm.

"Thanks," he said, "Only I'm not drunk. Just spastic." He pulled his hand back and inspected the ripped up surface. "Son of a bitch!"

"Come on now," she teased, "Big boys don't cry."

"Well I'm not a big boy," he said.

The girl twirled the feather in her ear and shaped her mouth into a tiny red circle. She cooed softly through the ripe cherry of her lips. "Don't get so upset. I was only kidding."

Hand on her hip, she shaped the small curves of her body into seductive emphasis. David found himself staring at her and wondering how old she was. Her voice, with its sing-song tone, and her face, so wide and cute, made her seem very young. Yet standing that way with her shoulders thrown back and her hair coyly falling across her eyes, she added years to her appearance. David imagined that she practiced this pose and applied it in the same way she painted her lips and eyes. She was like an eight-year-old who put on her mother's clothes and makeup and pranced in front of the mirror.

What am I thinking, he stopped himself, she's a hooker.

"So what's a handsome guy like you doing without a date tonight?"

"Just out for a walk," he replied. She sidled up to him and placed a forefinger on his cheek.

"A walk?" She batted her eyelashes.

"Yeah, you know, it's too humid to stay inside tonight." He pointed to her legs. "You must be hot with all that on."

Her hand reached up and tickled the skin behind his ear. "Red hot." she said. David laughed a little, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"I think you're cute," she said drawing her hand across his cheek and down his neck to his chest. Her hand was warm. "Do you like me?" She

lifted the edge of his t-shirt and ran her hand up and down his chest. "No hair. Mmm, I don't like hairy men." She began to un-snap his jeans. David drew back.

"Hey I don't want to be rude but . . ."

"But what?" she breathed. Her arms encircled his neck and her body pressed up against his so that her breasts mashed into his chest. Her hips revolved insistently.

David felt himself burning inside.

"You want to be my date tonight?" she whispered.

I can't David thought. His hands clasped behind her back. I've got to get back to the apartment. She chewed gently on his ear. The feather tickled his shoulder. I can't do this. His hand touched her behind. She began to kiss his neck and shoulders.

She took his arm and led him towards a blinking sign that hung in the front of an old hotel. The Hotel Victoria. A few of the windows were lit, but most were dark and many broken as well. In one, David saw an old woman's face and red geranium in a clay pot. The face withdrew leaving only the geranium, its flower sagging in a slow arc to the street.

A low buzzing sound rattled inside his skull and vibrated up and down the length of his body. His flesh prickled beneath the clothes that now felt like rough, earth-sodden bandages.

They stopped in front of a brightly lit entrance way floored with yellow tiles. An old man sat in the adjoining room watching a small black and white T.V. He swiveled in his chair as they walked inside and faced them. He wore an old baseball cap that tilted sideways on his head. His fleshy jaw slacked open and he scrutinized them. "What do you want?" he demanded.

The girl's boots clicked loudly on the tile as she stepped around to face David. It was as if she hadn't heard the man speak. "I've got to have in advance," she said.

Marcy, David thought, Marcy. He saw her naked body stretched out across the crisp summer sheets. She was sleeping, dreaming maybe of someone else. Dreaming of the way she would tell him it was all over, that he had to go.

The girl slid the key into the lock and opened the door. A stale, moldy odor hung in the door frame like a trellis of wilted flowers. She clicked on the light revealing a small bedroom with a large pink-blanketed mattress that leaned slightly in a broken metal frame.

"I've got to wash this off," he said, gesturing with the bleeding hand. He stepped towards the bathroom, and she grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"No, don't bother."

She sat him on the edge of the bed and knelt down to take off his shoes. He ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the blanket and snagged one of them in a cigarette hole. It touched the cool sheet below. He looked down at the top of her head where the dark hair turned a lighter brown at the roots.

"Can we turn off the lights?" he said.

"Sure." She got up. "Some guys like it with it on," she said.

David's eyes were unaccustomed to the darkness. He felt a pair of hands pull his trousers down around his ankles. His shirt lifted above his head and landed somewhere with a muffled sound. He raised his legs and his underwear slid off. The open air swirled around the space between his legs and cooled his heated skin. The girl was struggling with her boots, bouncing back and forth on the side of the bed. "These fucking things!" He got up and helped her remove them. Squatting low next to her stockinged legs, he felt like an animal. The blood pounded in his temples. "Thanks," she said, "Here, help me with these too." Her stockings made a silky hiss as they peeled away from her thighs and calfs. The fishnet pattern left tiny diamonds on her skin.

David traced his fingers over the marks and touched one with the tip of his tongue.

When the rest of her clothes had fallen to the floor, she lay down on the blanket and propped herself up on her elbows. She dropped her chin to her chest and let it rest at the edge of a large purple bruise that spread from her breast to her collarbone. "Come here," she said. The whiteness of her skin glowed dully through the black veil of darkness.

David slid on top of her, and she guided him inside her. He drew a quick breath and exhaled slowly. Closing his eyes, he slid in and out of a body that was unfamiliar to him. The bones of his ribs pressed into her breasts and his stomach slapped as it made contact with hers. She lay absolutely still while he moved.

Marcy's face slowly formed itself in his mind. He was kissing her lips and they were cold and unyielding. He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her eyelids, her cheek, and her neck. She rolled over on her side and yawned. "Goodnight David."

He opened his eyes and the face vanished, replaced by the smeared makeup of the girl beneath him. Behind the purple crescents of her eyelids, David felt himself disappear. He was no one to her.

Slowing down his hips, he began to move with more care. He parted her lips with his own and forced his tongue into her mouth. She relaxed her jaw and let his tongue play back and forth against hers. He stroked her shoulders and removed his lips to kiss the ink blot stain on her chest. David felt her hand settle like a feather on the back of his head, and when he looked up, he saw that her eyes were open. She smiled and brought her hips up to meet his. Their legs entwined.

A snake began to grow inside David's body. It began as a ball that flexed and wriggled. Coils of muscle tensed and swelled, slithering in and around themselves. The head of the snake swayed tenuously and darted its tongue.

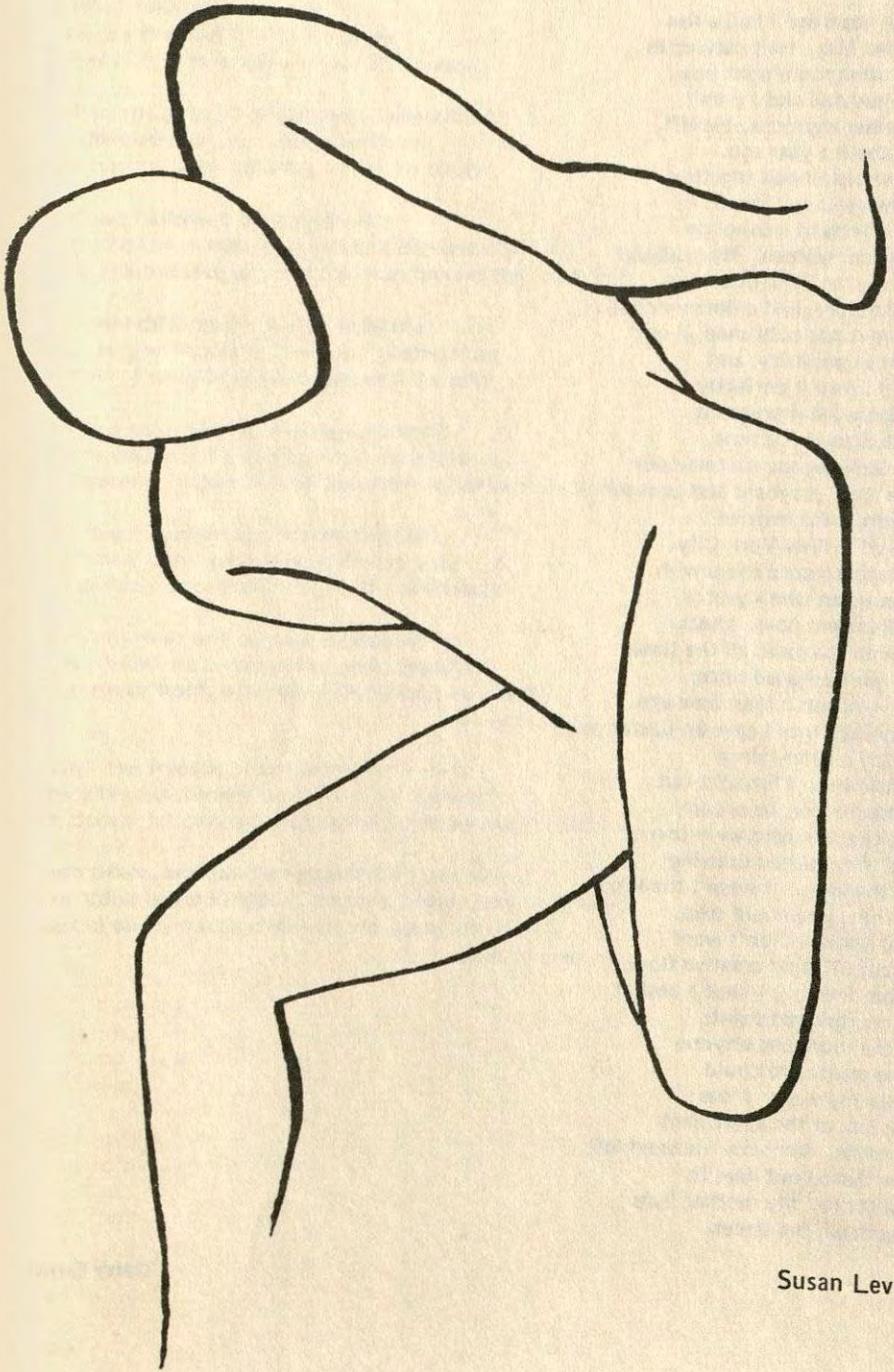
His arms began to shake so that he could no longer hold himself up. She reached her arm around and pulled his head against her chest. His back arched and fell with increasing speed, and her hips matched the rhythm. David felt her shudder and her hand grasp his hair. She's feeling this, he thought, she's feeling this. The snake reared back and jumped, sending a trail of sparks and flashes of light up his spine to the top of his head. His body jerked and constricted. A white light filled him as if he were hollow, lifted him, and suspended him by invisible hands. And then it let him fall, slowly, gently onto the soft cushion of her body.

The girl sat huddled with her arms around her knees and watched him as he dressed. The rouge was smeared on her cheek, bringing a red shadow to her jawbone. David's clothes felt damp and heavy. It was an effort to clamber into them, and he wished he could toss them out the window and leave without them.

He looked at her sitting on the bed and felt his heart sink. She's younger than I am, he thought. He went over to her and brushed a long strand of hair away from her face. He bent over to kiss her, and she raised her eyes for a moment to look at him, and then let them drop. "You paid your money," she said, "Now why don't you just get out of here."

David nodded his head and crossed to the door. He opened it and turned to see her for the last time. Her dark eyes glistened in the pale frame of her face. "I hope your hand gets better."

He examined the dried blood and dirty surface of his palm. It will, he thought, soon.



S. Levin

Susan Levin

**Karen S.**

Four years ago I had a son  
named Max. He's playing in  
the other room right now.  
My husband and I aren't  
together anymore. He left  
me about a year ago.  
We wrote a book together  
a few years ago about  
the effects of alcohol on  
pregnant women. My husband  
is a doctor. The book was  
half a story, half a documentary.  
When it was published, it got  
a lot of publicity, and  
we'd timed it perfectly  
because I was pregnant  
with Max at the time.  
We looked good on television  
like that, pregnant and proud.  
Before I was married  
I lived in New York City.  
I made a record there with  
a musician who's pretty  
well-known now. I hear  
him on the radio all the time.  
We were engaged once,  
but that was a long time ago.  
Anyway, once I gave an Easter party  
which is funny since  
I'm Jewish. I brought out  
some markers to occupy  
the children who were there,  
and they started drawing  
on the walls. It wasn't the kind  
of thing you could stop,  
you know, I didn't want  
to cut off their creative flow.  
From then on, I kept a basket  
of crayons and paints  
in the room and anyone  
who wanted to could  
color my walls. I was  
the talk of the apartment  
building. Since my husband left,  
I've moved out here to  
California. My mother lives  
just down the street.

**Daisy Smith**

## The Lord's Prayer: A Penance of Distance

Father, who art in heaven,  
you are the first to make a show  
of what it is to know and not to know:

the hands at work beside me in the kitchen,  
in the classroom, in your church —  
the hands I may not envy, want, or touch.

Father, hallowed be the names  
but also the bodies who give the names a meaning!  
You tell me this, and yet the man behind this screening

tells me differently, would have me  
talk to you in words I've never understood.  
Father, I would tell of closeness if I could.

Father, your kingdom came last night  
in the instant of being soothed by a friend;  
the careful fingers, words, belonged to three of us then.

But must connection, however brief,  
continue to be a miracle, and then only  
on dangerous or lucky days? If I am lonely

for you, your will all over stretching  
like a hand, hovering in the dark, refusing  
to push or hold, what can I know of, but a tactic  
you are using?

Lord, the freedom I've been given — is it  
the gift to be alone? or the gift to connect?  
O, deliver us, one unto the other, that we may protect

each other, and fill the reaches with our selves.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
passed on by hands that wake to aches less readily  
than to love.

## Presence

I did not see the shape  
of that thin hand,  
altered by nature unnaturally:  
the thumb in its lonesome curve,  
the two fore-fingers  
pressed to an eyelid that,  
in closing, knew  
what the eye had seen.

Instead, I chanced,  
in furtive glances as we talked,  
to note the smoothness  
of its side: inward-curving, solid,  
whole — like mine.

And I would have asked  
to touch it, feel for bones,  
but did not; having felt it much  
already without looking.

He liked to lay it on his lap  
along the inside of his thigh,  
then let it leap from your  
calm, partial view of normalcy  
into the shape it really has.

And then he'd slip it back again,  
filling the cross-legged niche,  
a hiding place, with absence flaunted  
like a thing.

And I would have said, "Stop gesturing  
so freely! Use the other hand!" For I  
cannot stare it down in daylight yet,  
or see the form it has.  
Or call it what it is.

But I said nothing, and stared  
as a pianist stares: at the spaces  
that the notes and the fingers leave.

## Dilemma

I sit in my desk chair replete with doubt  
and filled with passion and some inner fire.  
And though my countenance seems cool without,  
Inside a mobile's hung with tense, taut wire.  
The trappings grind and spin amidst dense waste  
And in a rush I rise and start to pace.

Too long have I been reeling at this pace,  
My mind hung blind by feelings of sad doubt  
That all my work and play is laid to waste  
And ought to be thrown into coal-white fire.  
With fervent longing I await a wire  
From men whom I can now not live without.

I see each body lean and still without  
My soft white hand caressing at a pace  
That's slow and smooth. One man is thin as wire,  
But muscular. He fondles me; no doubt  
He likes my hair, my smooth, small face on fire,  
My lips red, wet, words gone or now a waste.

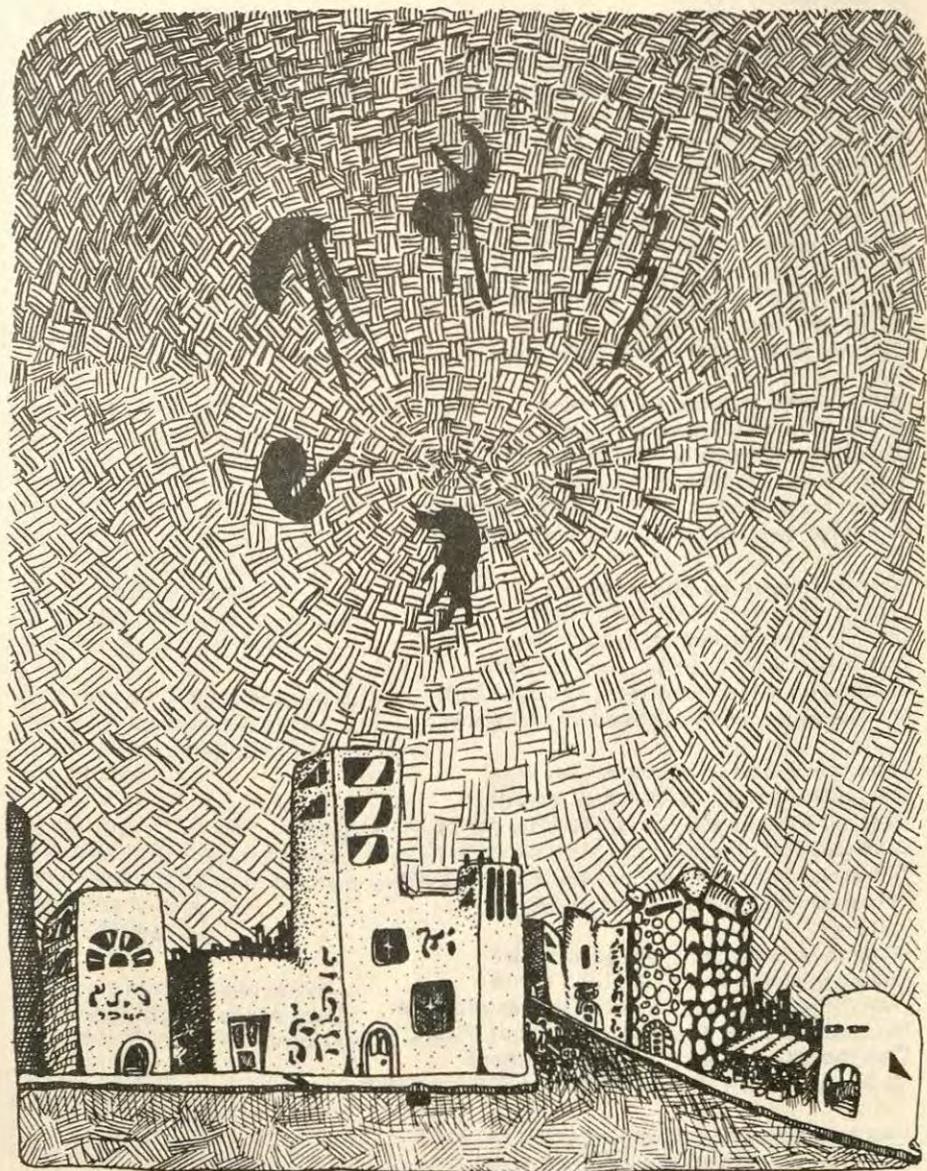
In fantasy there is no time to waste.  
In truth, no fantasy can do without  
The lull of time extinguishing each fire  
That doesn't want to be put out. So pace  
Yourselves, my loves; one thing I do not doubt:  
The ease with which you stretch my inner wire.

I check the mailbox, looking for my wire,  
And find it, read it: "Life is such a waste,"  
He says, "Without you I am plagued by doubt.  
Come back." Left up to him I'd be without  
This small, cheap rent, without this room to pace  
In. He would have me dancing by his fire

In rooms he rents. But I am burning fire  
And ice to write. And I will, too. I wire  
Him: "Need this place, my own, to fret and pace  
In. Saying loss and doubt surround you! Waste  
Your thoughts and charity on girls without  
My brains and gifts." He'll cringe and sigh, no doubt.

Cool publishers don't doubt *my* artist's fire,  
And I can live without my love. His wire? . . .  
His flesh will waste away the more I pace.

Patricia Daddona



Kent Matricardi

## Conversations

The painter saw them, sitting,  
drinking tea.

He painted thousands of tiny circles  
and there they were, in round sleeves and round hats  
sitting in the shade of a cafe.

The observer saw them  
posed within the storm of dots.  
He carried away with him a gift from the painter:  
they had become stick figures; he imagined  
he heard them rattling, brittle and thin.

He saw their familiarity and felt himself weighed down  
by their bones.

Today, at every table,  
others all lean back and laugh.  
They lean forward and listen.  
Out of each mouth comes thousands of bright circles.  
They glow and swell in the air;  
but the observer looks around him,  
and sees each mouth full of sticks.

Kimberlee Morse

## Ten naked women . . . left alone:

one cries  
another hides her eyes  
one turns around to face the other way  
one giggles and jiggles and laughs  
another closes her eyes  
one looks at the women beside her  
one stares at the ground  
another gazes at the sky  
one runs away  
one sings  
    she sings to the first woman

Lisa Mintz

## The Final Play

I was being blinded by my own sweat. It trickled down from those ugly wisps of hair my mother had cut for me last winter to save the forty dollars we would've had to pay a hairdresser. They hung like strands of overcooked spaghetti, dripping, sticking, and poking me in the eyes as I strained to see through them to my father. He was rounding the corner of the track, his long muscular legs straining effortlessly to sprint that last quarter of a mile. His black hair, which was soaked with sweat and clinging to his head, looked like a Spartan Warrior's helmet. It was still as full and void of grey as when he had graduated from Yale twenty years earlier. Of course, if you asked my father, he hadn't changed at all since he'd been starting quarterback for the Yale Elis. At six foot three, he had a good nine inches on me, which might explain why I always found myself a quarter of a mile behind him. An avid jogger, he had persuaded me to join him in his daily five mile run around the reservoir in Central Park. He told me that I was getting too old to sit around the house watching soap operas all day, as if turning eighteen had made me a prime candidate for a heart attack. I had consented, partly because I decided that I actually could benefit from some exercise, and partly because I felt a certain obligation to my father. Being an only child, it never seemed to be enough that I got straight A's all through high school, or that I was the most popular girl in the senior class. What really mattered was that Kenneth Steiner, Yale Quarterback, had not borne a son to carry on his legacy. My youthful hours were torn between Barbie dolls and punting practice.

He was sitting on a rock waiting for me. It was obvious throughout the run that he'd had something he wanted to tell me. He'd actually listened as I rattled off a list of the clothes I needed. The tension between us was as obtrusive as an expectant mother in a bikini. Of course, today had been another day spent playing charades, my parents and I frantically mimicking a happy middle class Jewish family living on the Upper West side of Manhattan.

"A little slower today, huh Liz?" I gave him my cruelist "cut the crap" look. Jesus Christ, who did he think he was anyway, my coach? People walking by smiled at us, the father and daughter sharing a run through the park at the height of the autumn foliage. I look a lot like him with my dark hair and green eyes — my grandfather says that it's a shame I wasn't a boy because I'd certainly be the spitting image of my father. I think I have my mother's nose, the slight upturn at the end that she wrinkles when I complain about school. He cleared his throat.

"There comes a time in a man's life when . . ." He sounded like a politician. Nixon resigning.

". . . so your mother and I have decided that it would be best for us all if we don't live together anymore." I wondered if he meant that they were going to go live somewhere else without me. I decided that I wouldn't mind. Someone next to me wearing my father's face said the word divorce.

If it hadn't been for the sun, I know I would've been all right. It was shining with that blazing brilliance of Indian Summer, slipping down side streets, chasing me as I ran. If it had been raining I wouldn't have even cared. When it rains you can cry because no one really notices the extra moisture. But the sun mocks tears and dries them on your face before they can release their sadness.

I collapsed on the stairs of our brownstone on Eighty-sixth Street and Central Park West. I noticed that our window box of geraniums was dying. There was one flower left, and it was turning brown at the edges from lack of water. Its virginally white hue had been violated by the city smog so that it now appeared a greyish, nondescript color. I pictured my mother in her dirty khaki pants and Vassar sweatshirt. Hunched over the flowers, trowel in hand, she looked like a surgeon and I believe she thought her task was equally important. Sometimes I played nurse, pulling weeds and providing company and conversation. I learned about men, menstruation, and marriage amid the smells of

manure and marigolds. I tried to understand why working on the Commodities Exchange made my father come home looking like he'd fumbled the winning touchdown.

I felt like a movie actress. I wondered if I was acting out my sorrow for someone else's benefit. I decided that if I was, I was doing a very good job. There should have been TV cameras. They should have asked me how it felt to be the accidental product of an unintended marriage. Have you ever seen something shiny on the sidewalk and stopped to pick it up, thinking it was money? And did it ever turn out to be a bottlecap? And as if that weren't bad enough, you couldn't just throw it back down because you were at a crowded bus stop and everyone was watching you. So you get stuck with this worthless piece of metal that you have to hold onto until you can find somewhere to throw it out. Have you ever stopped to think how that bottlecap might feel?

I decided to go inside and see if maybe someone else really lived there, if maybe that man had told the wrong eighteen-year-old girl that he was leaving his wife for another woman. The remnants of last night's feud were welded to the kitchen walls. At three a.m. I had been awakened by the sound of shattering glass. I stumbled downstairs and watched my parents throw jars of homemade strawberry jam at each other. When I woke up, there was a jar of Smucker's Grape Jelly sitting on the formica counter next to my orange juice. My mother glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, like a stray dog caught ransacking someone's garbage.

"I'm sorry. I know you hate grape."

My father sat hunched on the bed like a sack of dirty laundry. I immediately wished that I'd stayed outside. I remembered that my favorite pair of blue jeans lay at the bottom of the too-old laundry pile. I did the dishes, my mother did the laundry. My father used to get angry at her for doing the laundry.

Once, caught cowering in midcycle above the washing machine, in blatant violation of training regulations, she broke down into tears. The machine droning its sudsy song, I in the corner studying Biology (we have bugs in the cellar), my father sneaking up like a spy. I looked at him looking at her so pathetically prone, paying homage to her Westinghouse washer/dryer set. A wedding gift. (Did they all have to be returned now?) Crouching in the dank mildew of our brownstone basement, I watched as my father's shoulders started to twitch, almost imperceptibly at first, their massive musculature uncomfortably unfamiliar with this new exercise. The first tear always falls unnoticed. I didn't notice my first tear either but all of a sudden we were all three of us crying. I looked at them looking at each other and knew that it was better that I couldn't determine why we were crying.

When I found my father sitting on the bed, he looked strangely comical, folded in on himself like some forlorn Raggedy Andy doll. I watched him for a few moments, hoping he would be absorbed by the folds of the bedspread. Then my mother would come home from her aerobic dance class at the sixty-third street "Y" and not have to worry about putting dinner on the table for the Wall Street executive. We would go to the Macdonald's on the corner and sit around watching television. She would do the laundry and water the geranium and make jam. She might ask me where he was, and I would tell her I didn't know, just like that other time.

He had called the babysitter and told her to come right over. I was eating cherry jello that wasn't quite hardened, and spilling it all over the floor because no one was helping me eat it and play with it, telling me to watch it shake like Santa's belly. By the time the sitter arrived, I was hysterical but my father left anyway, muttering instructions and locations of bottles and frozen food. We played with plastic blocks. My mother came home and saw the babysitter. "Where is he?" She had asked, but I think that it was not aloud, but rather one of those questions which, as soon as they begin to take form on the

back of your tongue, think better of it and dissolve into saliva. But I answered her saliva with my babyish drool and told her that I didn't know. I pretended that he was lost somewhere in the park with my doll.

I walked in and sat down beside him on the bed, my legs barely resting beside his. The proximity of our bodily fluids produced a reaction which was more than I could handle. When he reached over to hug me, his sweat soaked T-shirt blinded me, suffocated me. His unmistakable maleness made me gag. I ran to the bathroom and made myself get sick because I had betrayed her and allowed him to get so close to me.

Outside the sun still shone, spitefully shimmering, casting ravishing rays on my street, my block. I wished I had a giant hose that I could aim at it, point blank, I would extinguish that burning ball that was blaspheming my sorrow with sunshine. I was trying to will a solar eclipse when I heard a knock on the bathroom door.

"Lizard darling, are you alright? Please let me in." My mother's voice penetrated my vomit-filled cell. I wanted to tell her that I was no longer her Lizard, that she lay in her crib waiting to hear her father's footsteps sneak up the staircase. She was squatting in the basement watching her parents watch their marriage get flushed down the drain with the rinse cycle.

"Come on in. The door's open."

We sat on the edge of the bathtub perched like seagulls on a dock. I explained to her that I really didn't care at all, that the thing that I was really upset about was that there was no strawberry jam left. Hadn't she promised that there would be enough to give some to my friends? Their mothers all had careers and couldn't cook. She stroked my hair and promised to make some more. I wondered if divorced jam tasted the same as married jam.

The sack of potatoes still sat on the bed, his packed suitcases surrounding him like a barricade. The quarterback in the midst of the huddle. I avoided looking at him when I came out of the bathroom. I noticed that my mother had a run in her stocking just above her left ankle. The bedroom rug had two stains on it, one right near the bathroom door and the other near the foot of the bed. It also needed to be vacuumed, I could see particles of dirt and dust embedded in its thick shag. My father was wearing his good shoes, his Passover and Yom Kippur Temple shoes. I walked downstairs with them because I wanted to water the geranium. There was jam on the kitchen walls when I filled the glass with water. My hand almost decided to smash the glass against the wall because it was angry about something. We wouldn't need as many glasses now anyway.

Outside, the sun was swamping our stoop with streaks of crimson and orange. Even when it sets it torments you, refusing to simply slip neatly into its slot behind the buildings like a coin in a piggy bank. It creates a monologue for itself and ardently acts it out, sinking slightly with each successive scene.

I opened the door and saw them standing on the stairs, bathed in that haunting halfflight. The wind was blowing the leaves off the trees, their fluttering gold and scarlet skins mimicked the sun's finale. My father hugged me so hard it felt as if he were trying to uncreate me, to somehow squeeze his sperm back out of me and unfertilize the egg.

The final scene was ending, the sun spewing its final few stanzas. The yellow taxicab rounding the corner blended in nicely, I thought, watching it pull up in front of my house. As I watched it drive away, I caught a glimpse of my father's hat, silhouetted in the back seat for an instant. It looked like a caved-in football helmet.

I watered the geranium and went inside.

Jennifer Farbar



Ann Gallager

## Scene 92: Lunatic's Cell

-- adapted from Henrik Galeen's script for  
F.W. Murnau's film, "Nosferatu"

The madman seems to have discovered  
an opportunity. Softly,  
he sneaks up on the unsuspecting  
guard and takes away the newspaper  
sticking out of his pocket.

The first moment he's  
alone, the madman unfolds  
the pages (trembling  
with expectancy) and starts  
reading (searching  
for something) with wide-open  
eyes. Now he's found  
what he was looking for  
and is rivited to this  
passage.

Close-up: the newspaper:  
PLAGUE!

In Transylvania  
and the Black Sea ports  
of Varna and Galaz,  
a plague epidemic has started.  
Young women fall victim  
to the scourge in large numbers.  
All victims show  
the same peculiar wound,  
marks on the neck  
whose origin remains  
an enigma to doctors.

The Dardanelles  
are now closed to all ships  
suspected of carrying  
the epidemic. It is out  
of the question that  
the epidemic will reach  
Western Europe.

Medium close-up:  
the madman's  
mocking, triumphant face  
assumes an expression of demonic  
grandeur. He straightens himself  
up, lifts up his head, raising  
his arms as if greeting  
the evil.

## Significance

In the language of signs,  
words grow limbs and  
anyone could notice these few  
slight differences:

the thumb and the index  
and the tiniest  
fingers point airward,  
motionless --  
*I love you,*

the index twirls  
magically but still like  
dishwater down sinks --  
*I love you plus always,*

and this last flies  
back over the shoulder  
without touching, attempting  
touch --  
*I love you joined*  
with that irrevocable gesture  
meaning past.

## Long Island Sound

Staring at waves,  
you want desperately to hear  
voices, good news or  
even warnings. These unlikely  
fortunetellers slap rock  
with a finality that comes and goes.  
You hear nothing and  
if there's ill will  
in this scenery, you've put it there.  
If there's a blessing to be given,  
it's among seaweed and you've  
put it there. The ocean is this body  
of water and nothing more.

## Hansel Alone

You were always the smarter child, my sister, whether you knew that or not. Despite all pain or threat of pain, one tiny hand held firm to the living, one to my weak arm. You struggled to bring me home again, singing lullabies our mother might have, though she'd died many years earlier. And they worked for a while (I walked away with you a ways), but I'd fallen in love with the oven, the promise of warm brick and darkness. You couldn't help then when I stayed behind in this hamlet: the smallest intimation of warmth beckons me always.

But come back for me. I need those marvelous arms to reach for - - to grip my hair violently and drag me out of this place. Oh Grethel, please, I cannot stand the heat. The skin on my palms blisters, blows up like cruel balloons. My sister, my beautiful twin, get me out of this kitchen.

*Time's up!* the egg timer chuckles.  
Open the door, the door.  
Oh, please - -

David Craig Austin

## fireworks

my twin,  
the constant torch  
demanding these explosions:  
(is the fiery technician himself  
ever certain  
just what parades he'll supply)  
this flame here  
is pale yellow  
only apparently,  
while inside it is rich orange, red falling  
into deepest blue.  
this flame is for you,  
my sweet you, my new you - -  
we are sleek flint and perfect steel  
and in your arms i am sudden flame  
dancing at the speed of sight.

(you are deceived:  
the fuse stutters - -  
a false chamber  
of dense, empty wadding  
is burned through.  
a flame burns  
into the real room.)

and you  
my other you  
i saw you there,  
though fading you  
though slight and elusive your image.  
i saw your shade left dangling in the sky  
chasing a spray of falling stars.  
dangling and slipping  
from grey smoke to airy thinness.  
vaguely  
you hovered  
and i saw your vacant eyes.  
it was me you saw  
it was for me you held your shape just so long  
it was me you accused  
and me you've been forgetting.  
these explosions are our traditions,  
you must not deny them.

then, they shoot off everything they have left.  
we are lost in light  
and smoke and color  
and noise.  
the reverberations are fierce  
and electric.  
there is an immense danger in the static  
just above our heads,  
a sudden (but escapable) treachery

you and i leave behind these ashes

we have come this far  
and do not deny them

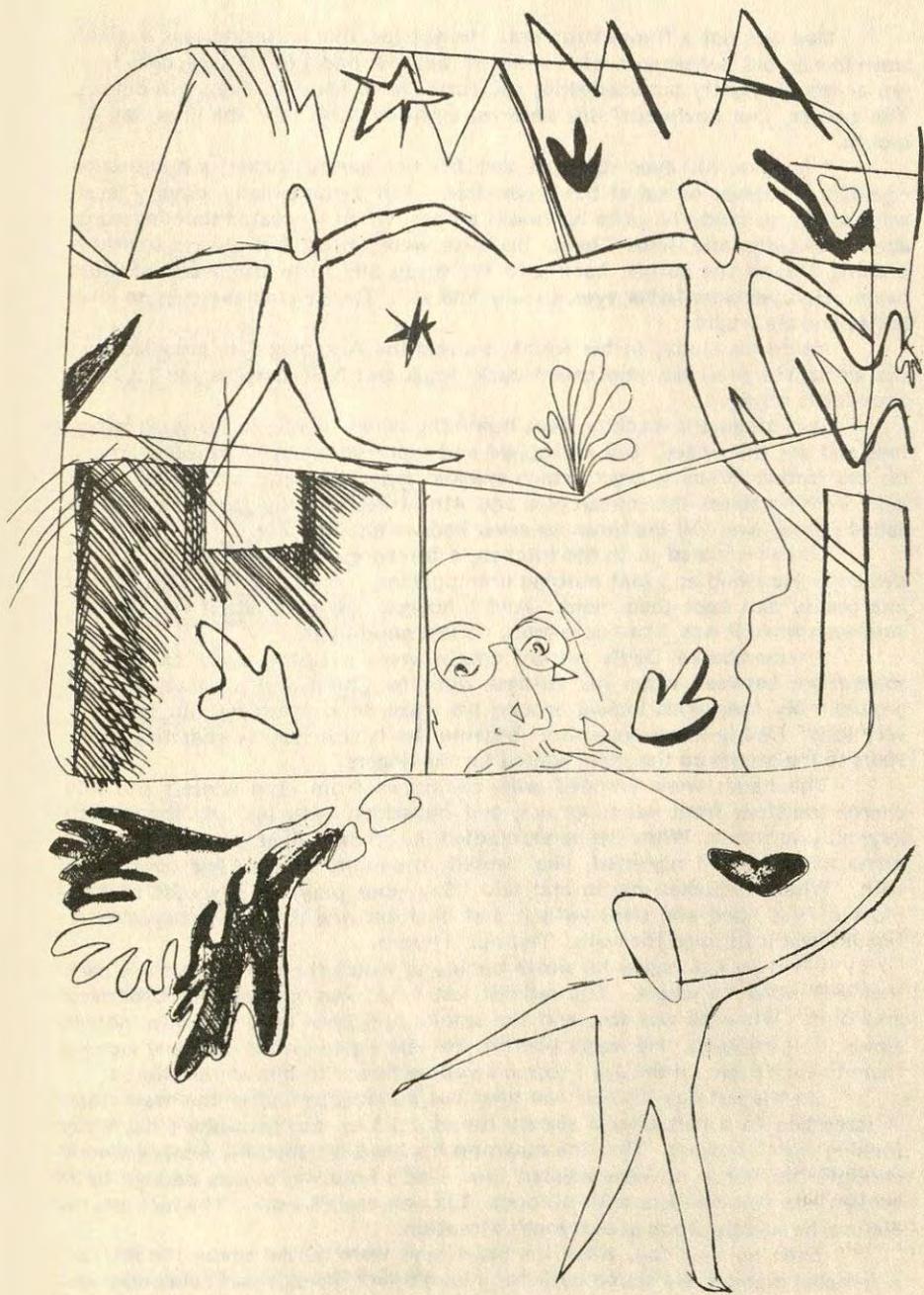
these grand displays of finality.

Stephen Pelton

### After "Rhapsody In Blue", Two Drinks, And A Cigarette

play, play sweet stupid saint  
play for your life  
in Tin Can Alleys of  
drunken inspiration  
they'll steal your soul  
for a cup of blackheart all-night  
supernatural coffee  
served hot and weeping  
glorious blood, joe  
see, see those lines  
aren't for you but for the living bread  
see the radiant pain  
feel it soak your skin gray  
rooftop spiral dance pigeon  
tenement clothesline flag  
shine homburg black shoes  
hear the Market -  
crash!  
O! everything is so slow  
and gritty black and white  
play your dead dream brother  
sister father  
play your starving son  
play the bittersweet memories  
play the blues, brother  
sing for me sing for you  
play the crescendo of weeping hope  
welling from the brownstone  
laundry radio living room gangsters  
cement urban Harlem get up  
saxophone savior's smoke-filled clubs  
play the national anthem sweet and  
sad,  
oh chile, kin you see  
my baby leaves me?  
"cause I loves my baby  
better than I do myself"  
sing for me sing for you

George B. Pratt



Shana Rae Kaplow

## Daddy

Dad was not a flimsy structure. His outside, like his inside, was weather-worn like an old leather sofa left out in the rain. He had a rough face; deep folds ran across his lightly browned skin, and surrounded his eyes like small pillows. The creases, like downward dry streams, emptied flesh into the lines near his mouth.

I imagine his eyes squinted and his lips gently sucked a home-rolled cigarette whenever he sat at the typewriter. But I don't really know - he always sat in his study to write his books alone. When he ceased thinking words about Arkansas and Jesus Christ, his eyes were on us, but always somehow peeking around the corner, back into his study and onto the sheets of white paper. His eyes were father eyes, so wise and sad. They were baby eyes, so long-lashed and absorbent.

Inside his study, in his womb, he was the Arkansas City troubled boy; the ex-Baptist preacher who called back Jesus and New Orleans and his black back-roads nanny.

Sometimes the machine kept humming when I came in for some father-ness and got the writer. But it stopped and I purred when he swiveled around his old leather tilt-back chair, which creaked especially loud when I sat on his lap. Talking about the motorcycle and 4th street and my true loves that he called puppy love. All the times we never had we had in there.

When he joined us in the kitchen, a forced quietness ensued at his stern demand. He stood and said nothing unimportant. I heard every southern word like poetry and kept them hard. And I hugged him hard like it was the last. And even when it was, I had no regrets, no lost good-byes.

I remembered Dad's prickly cheeks were a tiptoe away on the day somewhere between when his selfness went to Christ and his mass into the ground. My long arms locked around his waist so comforting, but never for very long. Daddy kisses were short because the typewriter reverberating downstairs to the glasses on the shelf, waited for his fingers.

The hands were branded with chainsaws from cold winters and wild cherry tomatoes from warm springs, and imbedded with ink and the Olivetti keys all year round. When the hands cradled my spidery fingers he said "They're piano hands" and I regretted, like himself, the many things I had never stuck with. When he tucked me in and said "Say your prayers" I wouldn't let go. I cut off his hand and slept with it and he took one back to the typewriter. I could hear it through the walls. Thump. Thump.

When he was happy he wrote books, of which there are now many parts that will never be whole. The saddest last word was his unfinished business and ours. When he was sad, and the smoke and beer kept us away, he was alone. Self imposed. He wrote poetry. He left a pile on his desk and we read them to each other on the day I tossed a yellow flower to him at the church.

On the last day his hair had been cut but it grows after the heart stops. It screeched to a halt after a sweaty run at 2:23 on the Saturday I was dizzy looking up at heaven. The fine down on his head touched his Howdy-Doody ears and the hair in his nose was cut too. Dad's nose was sturdy enough to be broken and still compete with his eyes. Like an eagle's beak. The face was his stature; he silently stood at everyone's attention.

Even on that day, when his hazel eyes were buried under the lids like a rumpled blanket, we stared back for a long time. His face was cold and it was no longer him in the brown tweed jacket with the elbow patches. Bought in a thrift store, by a wanderer stopped short when his breath was too fast and his heart could no longer carry a writer's mind so heavy with unspoken words.

## Rite

Taking her time,  
the farmer's wife slices lunchtime bread.  
We taste her chokecherry jelly  
then spread it, thick  
over even grain.

The children are in  
from the henhouse.  
Egg-happy,  
they pull off their boots  
and begin  
a ritual wiping-off  
of what eggs pick up from nests.  
Black flies buzz low and land.  
Unasked, they share the summer kitchen.

Across the fields  
the cows are loose.  
Past tumbling stones and barbed wire  
they skulk through foreign grass.  
Wide-eyed and criminal,  
they chew a clover purpler  
and the neighbors' spreading yews.  
Dung puddles everywhere, unasked.  
Black flies buzz low  
and land.  
Taking her time, the farmer's wife  
slices lunchtime bread.

## Cleft

i.  
Sky through the glass  
of a moving car,  
old scissors in my mind.

Our legs lift skin  
from the vinyl seat.  
Sweat sticks.

ii.  
I am a child with clouds in her eyes.  
You trace the shapes.  
Naming, we constellate with air.  
There are no stars.

iii.  
Twin blades  
in my small head imagine cloud cuttings.  
The seahorse  
head for you, its tail for me.

Uncertain symmetry, at best.  
We must keep our eyes on the road.

## Messages

Apples  
tea  
cheese  
candle.

My father  
has had  
a conversance with snow

he says  
and sings seeger  
and guthrie.

We drive into the northlight, pure.  
dawn.  
leaves.  
sun. cloud.

Jung,  
you say,  
    connects trains  
with mothers.

(I dream of  
one  
and not the second).

If you were a boxcar,  
conversance  
would be just  
    ahead  
    and just  
behind.

Imagine  
cigars in hospital lobbies.  
Offices. Bars.  
Pink and blue  
cellophane,  
printed. announcing   IT'S A FOOL

Apples  
cheese  
tea  
candle. The poem selects its own society.

## Exit

We are no longer standing  
past a door marked Ladies.  
No one is smoking  
and nothing flushes.  
The faucets are off  
and no dark woman  
turns mirrored eyes from yours,  
lifts brush from purse and  
begins: a smooth untwisting,  
a pained untangling - -  
hair from hair  
life from life

Julia Hewitt

## Cancer

In chill cracks  
Where green angel hair  
Wimples in the smooth  
Flush, smooth rise,  
He sits complete with  
All clicking crab parts.  
Fearing light.  
Aware of night.

Tumbling sand tinkles into silence.

He sidesteps deep  
Into jagged walls  
Furthering his shell,  
His reflection at the  
Top ripples like  
Fire.

Hungry antennae beat electric fast.

A broken brother  
Skids down the rock face,  
Lands meat-oozing  
Next to him.  
He picks to remain.  
Two twitching eye poles  
See himself:  
He scuttles under  
A ledge with the  
Leaking carcass.

David Laserson

## Look in the Mirror and Be Ugly

There were two things he could do. One, he could stuff the letter into the quagmire of other letters in his top drawer, watch it sink and become only a part of the pointy bulk, or two, he could fold it into pocket-size and carry it with him on the way to Lora's flat.

Seth Anderson, then, a sometimes boring, sometimes sluggish person, stood there like a wet banana studying the intricacies of the harlequin's costume on the stamp. The letter entered his right front pocket sealed. It was from Jessica. Seth wondered if guilt was something that burned forever or if it could be smote by gliding time. He doubted guilt dying. But then, Seth was a doubter.

The day clung wetly to the stout buildings.

It was never an annoying pour, just a deliberate piss that proliferated wobbling umbrellas all day long. And as Seth stepped out, he cursed not the water, for the north wall of his room was well-nigh all glass, and had told him earnestly of the weather, but cursed the space between his ears. The space that proved oblivious to most things.

"You'd think I'd learn to bring an umbrella. Jeeze Louise," he said mincingly, to a telephone booth.

Now the walk to South Kensington was more like two hops, three skips, and ten good healthy jumps, than anything right around the corner. On a sunny day it was a happily cogitative time to winnow problems, but on gray drippers it was take the forty-nine bus or forget it. Seth would have said forget it, but he was somehow not an original person. There were many like him, sure of fiery spontaneity within themselves, but always putting off that hot craziness for a rainy day. The truth is, Seth tended to have more rainy days than most, but on them ignobly declined from acting out his free spirit. And one night, when he was playing an eerie album, and no shadow shivered, he looked at himself because of this, and when he smiled the mirror did not. Seth was sure he saw himself dead.

Seth Anderson waited impatiently in the defective alcove for the forty-nine bus. It was defective because the rain was not stumped by this structure in the least. And if that wasn't bad enough, a grave harridan crept over in her permanent hunker, waiting.

"Oh, would you like my alcove?"

The raggy woman grunted ungraciously in. Seth looked down the slick King's Road, an irrelevant number eleven bus listed in the clogged traffic. Then he remembered his letter.

The rain moved in pelting curves along the sidewalk. It was only for a minute, Seth lied to himself, the forty-nine bus would be there soon enough. If ever there were a phlegmatic bus, it was the forty-nine. And in the rain you might as well forget it. But Seth had come to terms with the fact that he could not forget anything. Not really.

But lo, it careened around the bank dreamily, and stopped with a dinosaur squeak precisely at his feet. Seth ran up the spiral stairs to the second level. He wondered what kind of mentality sat on the first floor of a double decker bus.

Seth Anderson was not only uncoordinated at ball and balance sports, he also couldn't walk in moving buses very well. And when he got up from the floor he was sure the woman with the dual wens on her nose was laughing at him.

Seth's blond afro had taken the rain aesthetically quite well, but his neck was not appreciative of the cold ooze.

He tugged out his letter. It came out wrinkled, wet, and not half the size of its former self. Seth hoped it was not from Jessica at all, that it was from some erotic cherub who wanted to further complicate his life, who just happened to flare her s's the same way. But nope, it was a Jessica letter from the start.

Dear Seth

In America it is fall. What a corny season to do anything in. If you're born in the fall it's corny 'cause then all the orangng trees are for your innocent eyes to see for the first time. It's so beautiful everyone says. It's so beautiful. Make me sick.

If you die in the fall then you're just truckling to nature, a mere summer weed, tired, expired, a nothing.

Right now I'm completely naked on my bed, my rimose body awaits the touch of a man who fucked me over. And we both know what that is. I bet you think I'm a snivelling, pathetic, emotionally parasitical old bat. I bet you hate me.

Seth was poked by the attendant who had a white wiry head and who jangled his coin box in his face. "Thank you." Seth didn't like the way - in England - everyone said thankyou in such sarcastic circumstances. He delved into his pocket, an unruly fifty p piece came out like an easy birth. "Thank you." The officious attendant wound-off an adding machine receipt, turned like a robot, and sunk back down the steps.

Seth reread 'I bet you hate me,' and continued.

I've been thinking far too much these days. About taboos as dark as life. About my fingers on your face. About the goo inside my head.

A year ago I'd have never been so sure of an answer. Ah, but Seth, you beautiful, merciless reprobate, there is an answer. It is stringless, waxless, shining, and mine. All mine. Past all irony, it is a treasure to stomp and romp on. It is glorious.

Raindrops slid across the metal separator between the two windows in the front of the bus, fell as if for a target. Seth had had Jessica letters before. Bombastic reproofs in her nauseatingly steady script. But there was something altogether shaky here. Pieces missing.

The bus lurched, forestalling the green light. A taxi controlled its fish-tail, but hit the curb anyway. The awkward red giant had been overcome, and so it was free to stir mist down Sydney Street.

Seth Anderson thought of Lora's winsome body, her meek mind, her smooth hips moving. Jessica was not a simple matter like that. Jessica was wild black hair and eyes full of sorrow and wrath at the same time. Jessica was complex, a pit of want and love and hate.

The bus stopped. Seth sneered past the woman who had laughed at him.

The sky was one gray cloud. It was the same sky as right after the accident, that had drifted its bland expanse like a shadow five years late.

And then the ifs started again.

If I had let her drive. If I wasn't such a fool behind the wheel, if I had just squashed that stupid dog. Just standing there like a spacey cow. If that tree had just decided to grow somewhere else. If Jessica's face was still beautiful. If I could smell her skin. If, stupid If. The sky spread in a saggy dome over the worn streets.

Seth bought a tube ticket.

"Forty p please."

"Eh?"

"Forty p please?"

"Wut station please?"

"Um, what is it, Charing Cross, yeah, Charing Cross."

"Forty p."

"I know." Seth handed over the outsized coins, snatched his little yellow ticket and soon found himself just missing the train. "Damn."

The letter was repulsive but he needed it.

Seth ran nervous fingers through his afro, some parts uncurling, some parts snagging. He sat alone in the empty tunnel.

You think this is an easy letter to write? Huh? I swear, I wish you were someone else. I wish I'd been screwed by someone worthy. You're not good enough to make me unhappy.

I wonder who'll get to clean up the blood. I'm really into bloody deaths. Why go out peacefully? That's corny. I say blow your stupid brains way the hell across the room. Let everyone know.

Maybe I should go into Sara's room. It's so nice and white and anti-septic. Dirt and blood and grimy juice of me all over the dapper place. She's always been too tidy anyway.

So Eddie comes up to me (God I hate that faggot), comes up to me and says hey, Seth's girlfriend in London is stunning. I hate when clods like Eddie Sortfeld use words like stunning. I said, oh yeah, well why don't you pop that stunning zit, or is that your face.

I'm not only a witch but a bitch. A sour fat bitch.

Seth was not an easily worried man. If he were twenty-three years old, then he would have been worried, but he was only twenty-two. Just a hod of unformed anxiety. And where other clowns went into an ague over a football game, or worked homework to its tedious end, he didn't care. About anything.

If each person were all pumped up with air pressure according to their specific aspirations, the most ambitious the most taut with pushing air, then Seth wouldn't even pop when a pin was stuck in him. He was already deflated.

But he tried to look interested. And he was beautiful. So women fell in love with him.

The Picadilly train stopped. Seth picked a remote seat, afraid, but more curious than any letter had ever made him.

I wish you could hear how quiet it is here Seth. Not to change the tone of this letter or anything, but it's like the space between cricket chirps everywhere. See my Mom's at work, and my Dad's away on some "business trip." Even fluffy's out of the picture. She's getting her hair chopped off at the vet. I hate the way she always comes back like a bunch of balls on a stick. I hate my dog.

So you're probably wondering where I got the weapon from. It's sheer Charles Bronson. Cold sliding steel with a barrel that is just aching for my mouth to be slid over it.

Ahem, I'm now going to write a normal letter. Imagine me writing a normal letter. Imagine the darkest hole in the sea and crawling in.

I was digging around in the kitchen drawer. Ya know, the one by the phone. I found a whole shitload of junk. A rusty retainer. That pen of yours that has the girl who strips when you turn it upsidedown. I like to get her dress to dissolve only a touch, just so you can see half of her nipples.

But then I found this picture of us when we were kids and all. You were so cute. You had your fist on your cheek, right above the dimple. But you know what? I was cute too.

So I tried to fondle the past, I mean stroke the jocund dimension of my mind then. My mind was a pond. And I could see that it was calm because the trees were soft curves snaking. Because it was black to reflect. And there was my face holding it. Simple. Eyes rendering pure the life that looked so happy then. Isn't it funny that a picture smiles so happy, I mean like even after things have been drained and even after you're, well you know, a stiff.

So I went to the store and framed it. Because I wasn't ugly in it.

Charing Cross station inched into the window frame of the train. Seth Anderson dug past why he was shivering, and saw Jessica.

Was it five years ago already? Nah, couldn't be that long.

"Don't drive that crazy Seth. Come on."

A car was a toy. A faster and faster whirlgig. At least he didn't kill anyone. What was one girl's looks. A face, an arm. The depth of hope shallowed. So what.

The train's lights were two red eyes of evil shrinking. A billboard was bold in plastic seduction. A girl's circular eyes knew everything in their brown mercury. She lagged behind her mother, for she never saw a man cry before.

Seth Anderson had a soft angelic pout, a blond mop, and seldom a tear.

But when he did.

He sat wanting more, but there were only dank oddments left in the silk lines in his face. The letter had more still. She, that she was, that she lived, was a viscid snare to clean thinking. He had trained himself the art of no-think, but the letter was his duty.

The other day I sort of pinned down this portent that's been slogging about as long as I can remember. It's in the surface of the spoken word. I mean like, you'll look at someone, anyone, could be your mom, could be Mr. Cusic or some such dingle-berry, look'em right in the eyes, say your little sentence, or listen to theirs, and then it's all empty. I'm talking years shallow. There is no real communication. It's just empty. Just dead vacant.

And had I not been sniffing for it, that solemn something, that, I don't know, too sacred to be spoken thingy, I probably would have never written you at all. I would have just found my hole without worrying you with something that goes on.

Now let me give you an example: You're in a car, the radio's broken, there's only two of you. Let's say it's someone you're pretty sure you love, I mean in the bleak corners of desperation you'd reach your hand out to them. So you're buzzing along, both of you inside yourselves, cogwheels spinning fresh gnomes to say, but somehow all that comes out is, "So, what's for dinner?" - and then the other person says, "oh, I don't know, how 'bout spa-get." They think they're real politic too, saying 'spa-get' instead of spaghetti. And then you crawl back into your respective heads, never really completing a circuit, just watching robust sparks fall unhad, forgotten.

See Seth, if I was sitting square in front of you, your apotheosis face in touching range, well, I'd never be able to get past the colorful facades of the spoken word. And I'm getting tired of writing in my stupid journal. It helps, sure it helps, but I thrive on the thought of you reading these fragments.

But in a lot of ways you're like my journal, neither one of you ever write back.

Seth peeled the onion skin sheet off, ready for the next page. He wondered if the bum bee-lining towards him, had waited for this hiatus between pages. He toiled, grunting along. The wrinkles in his coat increased as he neared. He sat on Seth's bench, his pants bunching-up exposing scabby regions on his shins. "Eh, bub," his white whiskers fused in his smile.

"What," Seth frowned.

"Well," A fetid cloud could have been soggy sweat, could have been boils rotting, "me lass 'n' I, well we needs a few shilings to make us a meal tonight. She's a good lass."

"Is she? How so?" Seth brought his denim kness up to rest his chin on, his hands loosely locked around.

"Aye, she's been a making ends meet now, out a'orts, for I don't know 'ow long. She has. Will do. Aye, and she loves me. Good lass."

Seth pulled out his wallet. He had several bills in sundry colors. He clasped them with refuted parsimony, and surrendered the Monopoly Money to the bum.

"God bless ya." He doddered away.

Seth's hair blondly undulated as he tilted his head back down.

But things have changed for me. I've been working at this real literate job. I do filing and crap for a publishing house. The money's decent, nothing near orgasm level, but enough.

At night I'm alone. Well no, I'm essentially alone every second of the day. At night though, certain walls emerge making me an anchorite by darkness.

See Seth, darkness tells me something. It is what I will become. Just purling black, soundless, ah, but with no crummy hope or sticky truths. I'm a monster. I have only one person who I could ever talk to and he shuns me, in another country, probably doesn't even think of me. How can he think of me?

Remember how gentle we were. And how we were the beautiful people. I was the goddess. I remember.

The doctors say my face is a zero. Meaning that I'll basically have to deal with repulsed gasps all my life. The doctor's omnipotent fingers won't touch me. It's a pity they say, but a zero's a zero. I guess you don't really want to hear though. Sometimes I don't think.

I figure you only have about one true connection in your life. One mind to lock into. I have needed your mind.

I see self-pity as a parasite that gnaws with frothy teeth at sanity.

At first sanity was a formidable mass. It grew almost, like a tender spider web, up and out. Then all at once my acid reflection melted right through all of sanity's mainstays. A big tent feeling for its support, all the posts and webby lines suddenly gone. It hangs in the air, aware of all it has been, but faltering, quavering, and so it settles, weakly resisting but still complying, an exhausted skin shivering in one last falling miracle.

Look in the mirror and be ugly.

Seth took the letter and folded it. It was an old trick he had, save the last page of a book for a brighter time.

He wondered, if people change, couldn't it happen in the space of a letter? In a sentence? He followed the 'WAY OUT' signs.

The sun wasn't naked, but many clouds had been sloughed-away and the light hurt Seth's eyes. He crossed Trafalgar Square. A disease of pigeons festered. Children fed them, became emblazoned by the moulting swarm. A bold pigeon made to land on Seth's shoulder. He shook his arm in frantic disgust.

He was stern. He pushed a plastic card into the wall of a bank. Money came out. The Goat in Arms had the best Guinness in London, that's what Matthew said at least. Matthew was a proud Londoner. Matthew knew. Seth pushed the swing door, walked up to the rich wood counter. "A pint of Guinness please."

The beer was handed to him with impalpable care. Seth sat by a window with wavy glass and watched diversified blurs slide past. He made a moustache with the creamy surface, then upped the bottom to the stained glass light fixtures. Some people found this behavior worthy of staring. Seth stared back with an I-don't-care glare at the fattest man who looked as if he had been sipping *his* pint since opening time. He mumbled imperceptibly and swiveled back to the monotony of the tweed conversation from which he had come. Seth almost admitted he was homesick. Instead, he walked into the loo.

He looked down so as not to see the mirror. One by one he drowned paper towels in the sink. He made wads out of the sop and stuck them all over his face. Soon only oblique holes were left for his mouth, eyes, and nostrils. He looked in the mirror and was ugly.

Seth Anderson hushed the buzz of the polished parlour. He walked, ashamed only of those pieces that fell in tiny mushes at his feet. Still only stray patches of skin could be seen. He quit the pub and walked back to Trafalgar Square.

The pigeon community jolted in a single mass, seizing the sky. They circled in a fear of the ground, then the unity faded, most landed, and once again the cement was moving with pigeons.

Four titanic lions crouched in the center of the square. Seth had seen a brazen fat man sitting on one once. It seemed the natural place to finish the letter.

He pulled himself up to the base. Then he tried hoisting himself up between the hind legs and the slick rump. After a few jump-ups and slide-downs he realized a side attempt would be a surer thing. He inched out on the narrow base, then heaved himself up, his head hanging over the other side as if he was a dead man riding a mule. He pulled his leg up, establishing the wide straddle, and leant back against the lion's head. The people down Embankment street turned the color of the Houses of Parliament as they neared it. A haze blended distance together.

He felt his face to make sure it was still endowed with lumpy, crusting scales. He opened his letter.

I was watching the leaves before. I was walking down Cove Road, and all the leaves were scattering on the smooth surface. And when cars would go by they'd all scramble from under the wheels and land stuck in the ivy. Seems like a leaf doesn't really die until it gets wedged somewhere.

A body is a leaf, or a shell. Just a form that gets pushed along by shame, grief, pulled by dreams, love, but I wonder if you said no if it wouldn't keep on rolling. An empty roll, yes, but a crackle would surely be left to append its echo to the universe.

Echo.

Ever say the word over and over?

Oops. Sounds like my mom's home. Wait.

Okay, now the door's closed, wouldn't want her to see me bestride my pad, nude and all.

A tomato burst on the mane of the giant lion. And although most of the red hulk was comfortably dribbling down a gutter in the vulcanized fur, bits splattered Seth's shoulder and face.

"Stupid capitalist mop-top." A short man made a face beneath his blue mohawk. On his scalp, in hair, was the word FUCK in bas-relief.

"What the hell's up your ass?" Seth sat erect, lifting his sinewy shoulders from the back of the lion's head - An adequate backrest when ruminating on a peculiar text, or even gray pits of mental isolation, but definitely not soft enough or smooth enough when a belligerent punk-rocker decides an American is pointing a satirical finger at him. Seth pulled himself up to the august sag in the structure. A more-rotten tomato hit his face. Smack dab. "Beat."

"You're making us look bloody ludicrous."

"What?" Dried paper towel softened and dripped with the ruddy slough. "I don't care what punk rockers do, man, you're a shithead."

Seth ducked, looked up, shifted, lost his balance-spot on the rounded back, fell to the cement corner of the lion's base, hit his hand-padded forehead and fell further to the square's surface.

Before he could think there were an assortment of altruistic pedestrians towering over this prone body. A man with bloodshot eyes put his arm under his shoulders, "all right then?" Children abandoned the pigeons and filled-in the cracks of the crowd. He stood up refusing help.

"I'm okay. No, really. It's cool." Seth walked feeling his bruised parts beat. It was a pain so complete it robbed him of all his previous twenty-two years of pleasure. Then the shadows of the pigeons got mixed up with the real ones, as though a locust plague had expanded its members.

He walked off his pain. He followed a street until a smaller one covertly opened up to the left or the right. Seth ran his fingers along the wrought-iron fence that broke only at active basement areas and stoops. He relaxed his hand, his fingers like clicking butter in the even spaces between the bars. Finally there came an end. Seth sat on the muddy curb, wearing the creases of the letter one bend deeper.

The ocean was crazy with a storm yesterday. I walked into the wind. Spray hit my face as waves disassociated themselves from the sea. Angry black smashers.

All the beach houses looked forlorn. One porch was alive with an empty rocking chair. It rocked back and forth as if an apparition was waiting for his wife to die. The faster he rocked, the more creakily impatient, the sooner the little darling would come to his world. Wouldn't it be nice having someone waiting for you on the other side?

I was thinking, maybe I'll be unique and pull the trigger with my left arm. I mean just like have them find the gun smoking out of my claw. It's really a lot better than a hand in some ways. For one, you can pick up hot things. For another, when you want that extra tough stroke after a shit there's nothing like it.

You know what really scares me though? What really scares me is the way probably a second after I pull the trigger another Jessica'll be born somewhere. And in twenty-two years she'll be as used to the name as I am. I can't tell you why that scares me, I guess because I live in an essentially egocentric place inside my head. I wish there were a new name for every person so that way we didn't have to feel so pawn-like.

I'm just a rinse cycle.

Look Seth, my mom's being a real bitch and making me set the stupid table. I have to go.

Love,

Jessica

P.S. There's probably few things in life worse than a letter without a p.s. Seth, I miss you, all right, I said it. Tell me something, how come you won't aim a few drops of your mind at me. The past is really just a bad idea, the future, well, you're in the future reading this, it's not such a swift place either. But I'm looking at a gap where every moment is the world's history, where there is nothing except now. Now I'm worried. Now I'm sad. Now I will step into my gap and cover my head.

Seth Anderson folded the letter and inserted it in a structured front pocket. He pulled out a pocket knife from his back right. It glinted with the gray and white sky. He went supine, waving the knife above his eyes like a wounded plane. He envisaged a brain's eye view of a slick-shifting blade. Dewlaps of tissue sliced.

He closed the knife. There was something ineffably valuable within the walls of his mere make-up. A happy grain of sand. Jessica's just talking again, he assured himself, a bunch of bunk, scaring me to write.

And yet.

Seth stood up, areas lame from the fall bubbled as he moved. The shadows of the fence strengthened, the serried lines pointed together, than a shift to a milkier sky, and all the bands softened. Seth Anderson thought how a ghost never has a shadow even when it's bright out, but how at least they don't ever have to watch their's dissolve. He shivered. The concrete answered no movement, only stared dumbly back, granting no form a shadow.

A pub across the street had people-twinkling windows.

"Let's see, um, three pints of bitter please."

The bartender had carbunkle cheeks and disobedient white hair. He pulled the left most tap, each handle with their lager's emblem carved into the wood. He suavely took pint glasses from the suddy row. "Three?"

"That's right. You close soon right?"

"Yes. One. Two. And three. One pound eighty please."

"Cheers."

Seth cuddled against a red cushioned corner. The pub was cleared of business. A weary old man slapped a mop hither and thither between the pale-light-reflecting tables, steaked with water beads from his quick sponge. A lingering regular finally bid his farewell, the door flapping less and less into the late afternoon pub.

The first pint was easy. The second warranted a breath in the middle, but had gone quick enough. The third pint would not go down.

Seth dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

He thought of each person as a ball of clay. And each day the clay would dent. And if one day you were hideous the next day you could smooth the jagged caverns in your face. Or maybe things would go against you, maybe smoking welts would form every time you didn't feel bad. Every time you laughed and didn't think of Jessica a green hole would form somewhere. On your back. On your eyeball. On your prick.

"Closing time, drink up."

What do you care, you have to count your money for a couple of hours anyway.

"Closing time."

I know. Stupid pub master.

What does Jessica think about? I mean really. I should have fucking splat the dog. I want to take a watch and press the hands back and say, why Jessica, my pearl, you drive home. I feel like riding in the passenger seat tonight.

"Closing time," the man snatched the unfinished pint. "Thank you."

Seth growled. Then planted his palms deeper.

And she would smile. And her skin. She'd see the dog, have plenty of time to stop. Then we'd go home and I never would have to see the relentless flash on her broken face. Red splash. Red splash.

"Sir?" the man tapped, "we have to close up now."

"Okay."

And then we could make love and I could say she was Venus in her hair.

"Sir?"

"Okay, Jeezus Christ. Can I use the loo?"

The sombre, paunched man pointed.

Paper towel and tomato remnants were stuck higgedly-piggedly all over his face. He washed slowly, then looked up seeing his marble skin shining. He looked in the mirror and was beautiful.

Seth yawned, did not go to Lora's flat, he didn't feel like it any more. He walked into a phone booth telling himself from the start that he would not become frustrated with the primitive device. He dialed, everything was fine, Lora said hello, but he could not get his coin to go in, the beep beep was interminable, the connection severed. "I hate these phones. They suck," he said to an unhearing woman walking her dog. He walked to the next booth, the coin entered, the beeps ceased.

Hello."

"Hello Lora? Um. I'm really sorry but my mom just developed a mental dysentery."

"A what?"

"You know, a brain homunculus."

"Oh my god. My uncle had that."

"Yeah well listen, I can't come over. I feel like rotten mashed potatoes. I'll call you."

"Well all right. I feel lonely today though. Know what I mean?"

"Look Lora, I just can't deal with you telling me you're lonely when my mother has an optic homunculus."

"I'm sorry. Still love me?"

"Look I gotta go to bed okay. I'll call ya."

"Bye Seth."

"Bye." He listened to the fumbled receiver, the outlandish hum, the ripples in the sound, watched ugly coats cross Manresa Road. He wanted to write a letter to Jessica.

Dear Jessica,

You sound a bit depressed.

You crack into my shell with your letters. You draw me into a place where tears are when I want to be a zombie.

A new pattern of sound entered the receiver, he watched a bus unload and load, the driver left too quickly, an old woman nearly fell off the back platform.

And then he'd say:

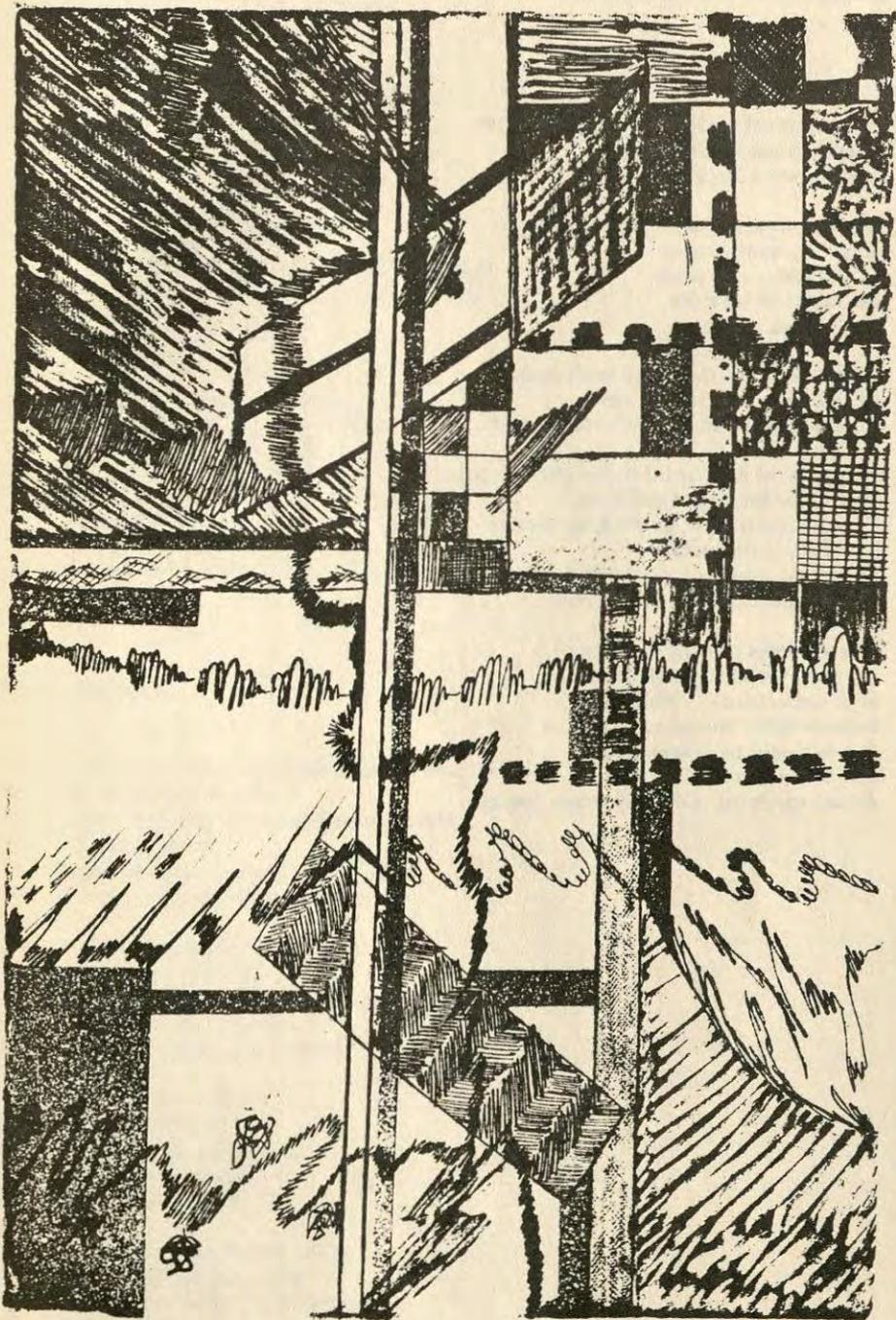
You lost your looks but I lost face. I'm the one who has to wake up every morning and remember. When I don't sleep I watch your face break into a zillion glass splinters. Good thing about insomnia, at least you don't have to remember anything in the morning.

Hate me Jessica. Hate me.

Sorry is an all-in-one cure that not only doesn't work but is cancerous. Sorry, gee wiz I'm sorry. Jessica is the only name I ever loved. No one is going to be your name again.

As Seth stepped out of the phone booth he thought how he'd fold this letter in half, bend corners, form wings, and open his window. How he'd let the plane made from his letter go easy, how it would arch slightly up, teeter on its pinnacle, and then divebomb down, beneath the muddy wheels of The King's Road.

David Laserson



Deborah Jacobs

## Notes From the Darkroom

*for spg*

Here we must trust our own dark touch;  
fingers probe foreign washes  
tending work in progress.

Blinking in semi-gloom, our hands  
know the gentle touch  
of airbrush - - we work  
the magic of layering  
two images into one.

Chemistry must be mixed with caution - -  
all solutions are volatile, speak  
of explosion in an instant's inattention.

We dip print after print in the shallow pans,  
tip rolls in the light-tight tank.  
The process is slow, studied, deliberate - -  
but there is no guarantee  
of success; shifts in contrast, density,  
and temperature can prove fatal.

The shadows moving here are of  
our own creation (their fate,  
also, undecided) - - Making lazy  
vulture halos 'round our heads - -  
it is too easy to over-expose  
and under-develop.  
All we can trust is our own dark touch.

## The Poet's Wet Dream

You are kneeling before me - -  
in my arms is a great folder.  
You say *I love you for your gift,*  
*your converse with the muse.*  
I smile and clutch the folder tightly;  
it is molting typed sheets.  
*I want to be caught in the center*  
*of your mind's complexity - -*  
*your body is neither spectacular nor essential.*  
I am smiling still - - the folder grows thinner;  
the sheets are a leaf pile  
forming at my feet.  
*I love you, and I want you;*  
*I need to be a poem.* I warn,  
*You do not even know where I am,*  
and I am standing behind you,  
clutching an empty folder.  
*You are here, and here, and here,*  
you cry, gathering pages,  
and you turn with the bundle  
to see where my clothes are standing empty.

## The Stigmatic

Tattoo George of Newport, red-bearded bear,  
flexes an emblazoned arm  
(blue-green montage from wrist to shoulder,  
one of a matched set)  
and bends the needle to my barren skin,  
daubs blood-beads between strokes.

Eternity is embroidered in my back  
in minutes - - one square inch  
of personality disclosed to subway goers  
and salesladies alike. I post  
my identity (ladies and gentlemen,  
myself) with this  
willful stigma, stained skin - -  
a deliberate marring of the  
generic perfection with which  
we're born, ornamentation for  
the naked and the daring.

This pricking spindles the eccentric  
in degrees of depth and colour - -  
for fifteen dollars I join the stigmatic  
and declare for life  
this character I am perpetually becoming.

## Sestina for the Nights

Again and again, these cramped, smoke -  
filled shadows threaten to bring me back  
to the land of glass ashtrays and lips  
exploring, where in one glorious stroke  
the world caved in, and there between  
day and day my mind sunk in the dark.

Always my favorite, that concentrated dark  
air where we labored and gasped, smoke  
filling my brain, behind my eyes, and you between  
my thighs; always light came back  
early, dawn's garish brush-stroke,  
the sun spit from the morning's lips - -

in those early hours I learned my lips'  
play, how to erase that hot, dark  
scowl, get caught in the metronome's stroke  
until the friction filled my mouth with smoke,  
and through thin walls, others' sounds came back.  
These were the lessons learned between

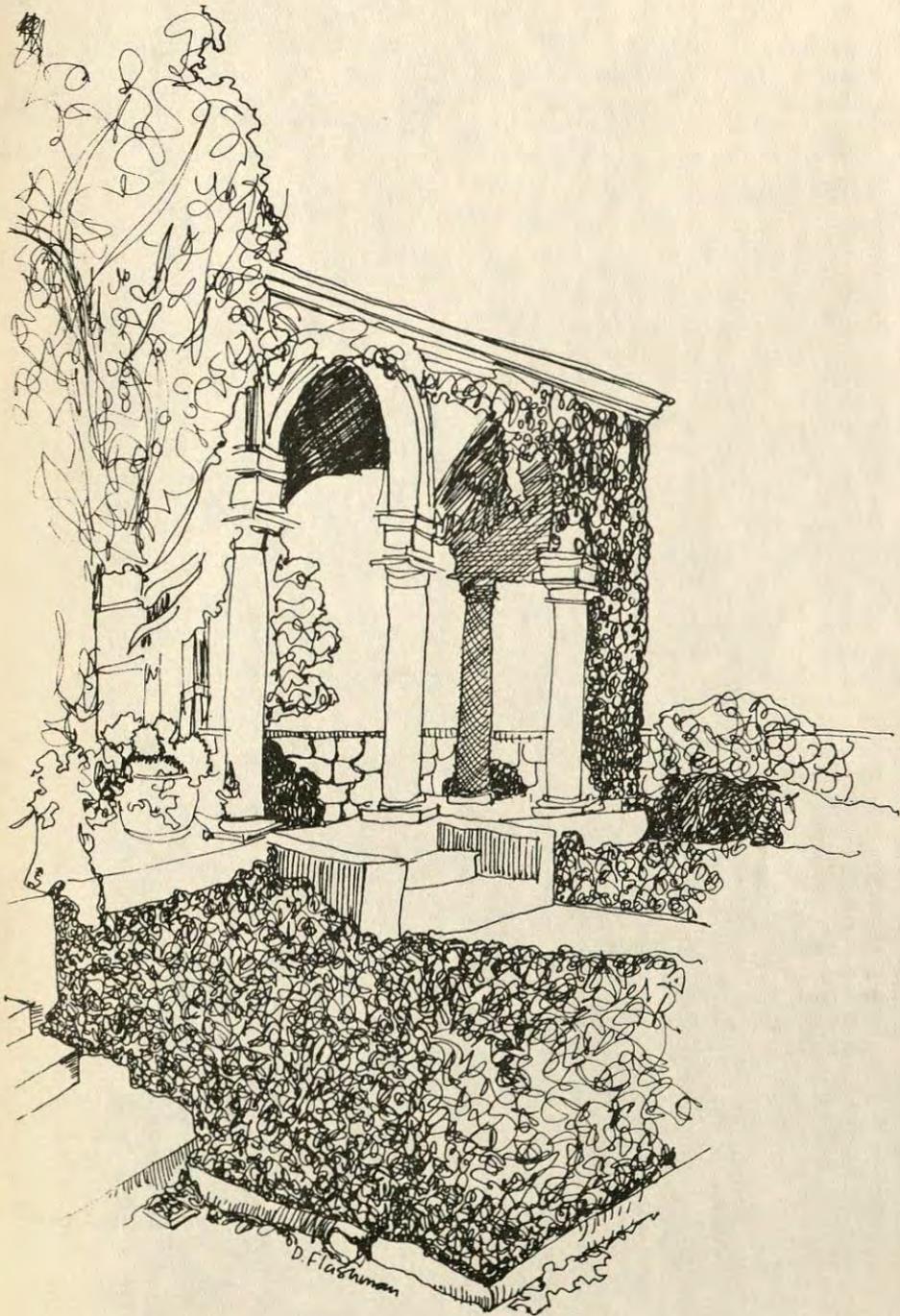
Days. It was I who slipped in between  
those denser hours to lie on the lip  
of neon light, speared through the back,  
and shine with my own dark  
incandescence, burst into slivers of shimmering smoke - -  
the fragmented subject of your cubist strokes.

Now alone, I find my own rhythmic stroke  
of ingenuity is enough for what's between  
these sheets washed once too often, and I smoke,  
curling forth perfect woolly rings in my lips'  
shape. Here in the quick, voiceless dark,  
if the shadows whisper, they'll say "come back . . . ."

And perhaps you, miles away, lying back,  
will hear this scream, a slicing sword's stroke  
laying me open to the bone -- through liquid dark  
and back, to weave together nights between  
familiar lies forming on your familiar lips,  
nights thickly past, haunting my brain with smoke - -

My arching back could break between your subtle fingers,  
and still these lips shrill with talk, would stop, but the heart,  
slowly filling with dark smoke, would match you stroke for stroke.

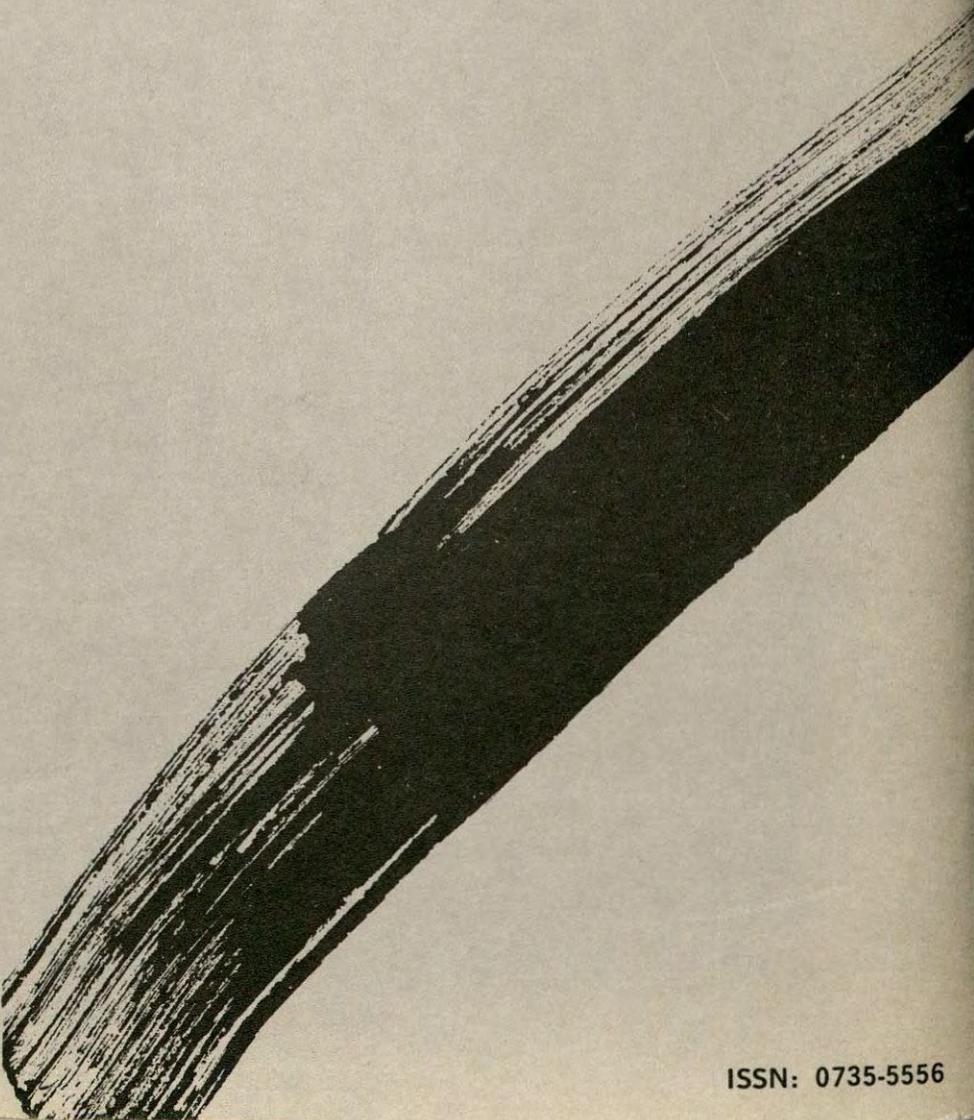
Kaci Kinne



Debbi Flashman







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