

THE CAULDRON

SPRING-SUMMER
1994

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"So far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality... poetry is being, not doing. If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling, you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being... Nobody else can be alive for you, nor can you be alive for anyone else... There's the artist's responsibility, and the most awful responsibility on earth. If you can take it, take it—and be. If you can't, cheer up and go about other people's business; and do (or undo) till you drop."

—e.e. cummings
i (six nonlectures)

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culture shock FINDINGS Hunger

the feathered ones

dance to burst

ing drum beats

one leg hopping

one leg bent.

even here,

i lose

track.

happy ending fade

into pulsating sighs—

a movie-screen kiss

brands the flesh of believers.

those who know

surround

us,

closed and translucent. they fail

to confess their sins

and in their eyes i am falling.

Hunger

Today, when I was returning from the library, I gazed at the snowman in my front yard. He looked so good, I wanted to eat him apart—right down to the beady eyes. He would taste so tart and so sweet. I think that it was my frost bitten toes that made me want to nibble and chew him. Yes, it was the dripping snow and the howling wind that made me want to taste him, to eat him up till he bruised.

THE SURROUNDINGS

ground twists and spins
cries out in the piercing voices of nails
with an echo as of bones rattling

within that shallow space
the life caught between
hovered somewhere too close to miss
and too far to question:
the air roars thick with distortions
pressing in, it swirls densely about,
leaving the eyes to water
slightly
and the brain to question itself

once begun it is difficult to stop
(or in fact to recall) as i remind myself
eyes that blinked and shuddered in the light
hands folded cool and close
as though guarding some secret place or heart
and the face-
too far and sweet in repose
to question.

within that silent space
the beat of the heart resounded too close,
the gushing black-red sound of it
opening and closing,
the petals slick and shining with dark,
and the cupped waiting ears,
straining against its rhythm yet longing to hear
terror splashing itself through thick-walled veins
pumping desperately, ragingly against the arteries
slammed against closed valves
battering against themselves
a sickeningly tiny spatter
drips down the gleaming petals.

surrender—he exclaimed and continued:
once again you refused to kiss me.

mouth closed, teeth covered primly
and the soft questing tongue at rest,
glistening pinkly in the dark cavern of the mouth.

pale, creamshell eyelids fluttering
(like drifting apple blossoms, i think)
blink open
and close once again
now the proper teeth may smile.

lost it and People

deep into wine, a
girlchild voiceless
in the din of onslaught,
a tyrant's crew look
ing for the sacred cell

follow a swerving eye,
a pupil black, need.
and a vision splinters into
a damp scar

put the shell to your ear,
and you can hear her
screaming in the sea

Moramy says I am smart and daddy says that I can almost multiply
and teacher wants me to read but I can't read. I can't even do Mac and
Tali and people say that I should but I can't and I don't want to.

Anthony is running but now because we are all scared of Greg and
he jumps up on the big brown wood flat thing that Jesse and I were
under and he climbs the ladder to what Debbie says are monkey
bars. Yeah, Debbie's my bestest friend in the whole world. And Greg is
not too and he's on the flat thing now and when he's on the ladder, but
Anthony's climbing on top of the monkey bars and he moves slow and
Greg is there, up there. Honey, Anthony! Get to the end! Greg is behind
him now and he's smiling the bad people smile and I don't like Greg and
Anthony doesn't, now he's there. Anthony is afraid to move because he
looks down and he's scared now and he won't move and there's Greg
behind him and he's smiling the bad people smile and I don't like Greg
and I don't like the bad people because Moramy said God doesn't like the
bad people and bad people make me angry and Greg makes me angry but
I'm scared too because he's reaching out to Anthony and Anthony isn't
holding on he's just sitting there and Greg is reaching and he pushes and
anthony anthony anthony anthony is falling down and he won't stop

strike!
drummer of my everything
beating deep agonizing cadence
 in time to my breath
and follow soft behind with apologetic roll.

—or your beauty which entrances me—
eyes of silence; saying such of words
which they do leave behind
...these sharpened fingers which prod gently
 achingly
my uninterrupted bones...

(and crying, take your leave of all!
that isn't and has been, of which *what* shall become)

(chances are,
you see,
that sooner or later we shall all
resolve ourselves to an unliving state anyway.)

The Bad People

I'm in the play place and the big sun is lighting up the whole place. It's falling through the trees and now it's green and darker in here than out there. We're playing tag around the big wooden thing that you can climb on. I'm not it because I'm too fast and nobody wants me to play 'cause they never have any fun, they say. Greg is it and I don't like him at all. Not at all. Most people I like. Not Greg. Greg is one of the bad people. I told my mommy about him and she said that Greg is one of the bad people. I don't like Greg but Greg is it.

Jessie and I are running away and Greg still has to count to twenty. He's only on 12 and I can count to 1,000 and he can't. He should be on 15, but now he's chasing us. He cheated! No fair! He's chasing us anyway! Jessie and I run under a big flat part of the brown wood thing that stands on four legs. It has four legs, just like a horse and horses never fall over so Jessie and I know we won't get smooshed. Greg is chasing Anthony now, but Anthony gets away. Greg is coming back and Jessie and I move and run away again. Greg is chasing me now and OUCH my ankle hurts and I'm too slow. I run past Anthony and Anthony is just standing there and Greg starts chasing him now because I'm running and Anthony isn't and Greg isn't chasing me anymore. Mommy would say I was smart to make Greg chase Anthony.

Mommy says I am smart and daddy says that I can almost multiply and teacher wants me to read but I can't read. I can't even do Mac and Tab and people say that I should but I can't and I don't want to.

Anthony is running fast now because we are all scared of Greg and he jumps up on the big brown wood flat thing that Jessie and I were under and he climbs the ladder to what Debbie says are monk...monkey bars. Yeah. Debbie's my bestest friend in the whole world. And Greg is fast too and he's on the flat thing now and now he's on the ladder, but Anthony's climbing on top of the monkey bars and he moves slow and Greg is almost up there. Hurry, Anthony! Get to the end! Greg is behind him now and he's smiling the bad people smile and I don't like Greg and Anthony doesn't know he's there. Anthony is afraid to move because he looked down and he's scared now and he won;t move and there's Greg behind him and he's smiling the bad people smile and I don't like Greg and I don't like the bad people because Mommy said God doesn't like the bad people and bad people make me angry and Greg makes me angry but I'm scared too because he's reaching out to Anthony and Anthony isn't holding on he's just sitting there and Greg is reaching and he pushes and anthony anthony anthony anthony is falling down and he won't stop

The Bad People

until he hits the ground. And crunch goes Anthony as he hits the ground and he's crying and I am mad and Greg is red and everything is red and Greg is smiling the bad people smile. I want to hurt him but that is a bad people thing to do. I don't like the bad people and Greg pushed Anthony and Anthony is crying and Greg is smiling and I'm mad and Anthony is crying and Greg is smiling and I am mad. Everything's red. I don't like them at all! I don't like the bad people and Greg is smiling the bad people smile and laughing. I don't like the bad people and I DON'T LIKE GREG!!!

Sometimes I Am... Christmas

I. *It is a mass ordeal*

Sometimes I am
a child, my
purple kool-aid tongue sweet
between caterpillar lips, blow
rainbow spheres dancing
over fresh cut grass—
smelling summer wind, or
shadow fingers inching closer
lit by flash fire in the sky
clawing at the glass

Ice cream bells of laughter or
warm mothers' arms soaking
up the tears

II.

Sometimes I am
a woman, my
tongue sharp and back
straight against the quick
tap tap of steps, behind,
upon the walk
Cold keys between fingers
clenched so tight they cut
Ghost shadows crouched
before the steps

Throat fills with wet cement
and closes
biting back a scream

III.

Sometimes I am
a mother, watching
my laughing children, dancing
on a tight rope between
fear and joy
cloud shadows consume
the sun, and a stick-man frame
shakes within my arms
tears soak through the cotton
but I won't
let go

IV.

Sometimes I am
a juggler, balls are
shining faces, fresh
painted; plaster is
cracking from behind
First one goes up
then two, then three
Two become one, joining
what's left is unbalanced
one falls
shattered
Who am I now?

Midnight Mass on Christmas

I left as mass ended
Go in peace
I believed it
a massive French cathedral
beautiful soft warm stone
color of the coldest winter sky
stained glass as vivid as tie-die
but dark now
taciturn statues of saints
redefining consistency
curved, arched ceiling far above me
patiently carrying the load
high enough to fit heaven inside
big and awesome and solemn

I left the godly structure
choir still singing
their voices clean
like glistening white marble
but gentle now
and otherwise silent night
so heavenly
snow falling musically
soft white lumps
sweet as frozen milk
red cobblestone streets covered
a sea of solid white fog
the world was white
the color of peace
small and peaceful and happy

Yellowstone or Bust

summer-hot seat vinyl
sticky, red-tongued little girls
Rocky Mountains formally dressed in white
snow carelessly tossed
on faces, covering hair
delighted with the novelty of snow in July,
two girls leave imprints of
four angels
that will disappear come spring

Nine-year-old with no aim,
until today:
a snowball, wet and white,
lands smack dab on lens
of Daddy's
new, expensive, Japanese camera
"What the-fuck do you think you're doing?"

Two sisters
snuggling to keep warm
will a quick journey home
Mom tries to talk sense to Daddy
with the door shut, while the
nine-year-old listens through
thinning bedroom walls
"Bill, tell her that you love her."
She doesn't even know you love her."

Silence
The camera is fine,
no water damage.

Minor League

We watched a baseball game somewhere
I think it was Pennsylvania but I don't remember
It was a tired and cobwebbed town
The home team had beautiful white uniforms
Their caps were the color of cool asphalt, almost black
A dark grey stripe ran down their legs

The game was simple, like baseball should be
I don't even remember most of it
A hometown batter came up to the plate
He walked with muscled legs wide as if he knew he'd get on
But his eyes were weak like a guttering candle
His stroke was too easy, like swatting a wounded fly
He hit the ball hard and it sailed high
He ran hard around as many bases as he could
The ball was caught and he sat down to wait
He didn't look so strong then

We saw his next turn, the evening sky changing to purple
He stared at the pitcher, all sweaty and lanky
His gaze had enough power to start a barren truck
We never saw the ball land
It was stolen by the sky, the color of a bruise
Baseball is just like life, Josh said

I Think/I Need

I think/I need
To tell someone
My admission of defeat.

I think/I need
To call that 1-800 number
That was always for the unfortunate
(you know, you used to sit up late
at night
in and easy chair
with a snack and the remote control
and the TV would blink light
and life
and remind you brightly of those
who are incapable
those emergency numbers
toll-free and someone to talk to
if you are upset
you are safe in the recliner.
you change the channel and eat a pretzel).
Remember?

I think/I need
To go to my first grade teacher and ask
"When I was a little girl could you tell?"
I would fail.

(picture—that cheerful classroom
with miniature desks in neat rows
and all those colors and all that sunshine
and the smell of chalk
and the mats for nap time
you were never tired at nap time
but you laid still anyway because you were good
eyes squeezed tightly shut
against the day
till you saw spots
that entertained you
you were bored in the first grade
and sometimes you got in trouble for daydreaming

but were you marked?
the one that wouldn't be able to handle
the past present future?
Somewhere in your rounded little child face
did your blue eyes cry—loser
did your stature in your denim jumpers say—weak
did your pigtails flopping on either side of your head indicate—
Tragedy?)
And if so, why wasn't I warned?

I think/I need
To explain to my poor mama
That this isn't her fault.
 (Her nature is
 to blame herself
take it personally
you were always her reflection
and when you succeeded she beamed
and when you fell flat crushed she winced
but now this will hurt her
and that's not fair she tried
but what language do you use to tell her
when she read you stories
and baked you cookies
and took you shopping
and assured you you were pretty
even when you knew you were
ugly as sin.
Your first grade teacher didn't spell out
"Repeat after me.
'Mama, I am so sorry but
I am crazy.'")
Why not? It's useful.

I think/I need
To go to him and say
"You started this."
 (that strange restless night
thunder crackled and you believed
his touch was truth
you were always so cautious
so careful, objective
what a mistake it was when you gave way

gave in
to betray worse than anything
you'd ever known
you saw spots like at nap time in the first grade
eyes squeezed tightly shut against the light of day
Denial.
and you felt your mother smooth your hair
and wind it into pigtails gentle
and heard her soft
"what a pretty girl some day the boys will be
after you"
and you realized one night in the easy chair
with your pretzels
that your A's didn't matter
and your trophies didn't matter
and your writing didn't matter
but
only this—reality.
You were stupid.
You were used.
You were blind.
You were foolish.
You are to blame.
and you realized you could never leave the easy chair
again
because life is not only exceedingly uncomfortable
but cruel and bright as the mall when you went shopping
with you mother and you were fat fat fat
in a bathing suit
as cold and harsh as the red yellow green blue
first grade classroom where you learned
letters and numbers and how to be a good girl
but not survival.
and 1-800 flashed in the dark
and you are unfortunate, pitiful
you cannot move or think or breathe.
Life was a game and you gave your best hand to him
And he threw it away).
Maybe someone could help me to live through that.

I think/I need
To tell someone
Or (die).

Eleven Ways of Looking at Raw Skin

I

In the body's
sleep, skin
traces the origin
of a finger
or a wrist
determines
the shape of
toes

II

Sometimes woman undergoes
changes,
like the moon and its phases
like and earth and its seasons,
her skin groaning in the windy
night

III

The air itself
shares skin, inhales
exhales, breathes
private space

IV

Rats that
live
inside, underground
eat the skin of
thick, raw
skulls

V

Skin is always useful:
covers eyes,
and anchors
lashes

Eleven Ways of Looking at Raw Skin

VI

Front teeth grasp human
skin in
forceful bites
when food
is scarce

VII

On the porch,
skinhead man
eats towering spaghetti
on red, red sauce
and licks
the plate
clean

IX

Skin rises high
in the night
in the bed
raw, essential
rhythmic, sensual

X

Blood nauseates heroic
warriors who
know their
military eats skin, eats human,
eats heart
wears down shell

XI

Animal instincts,
inside the skin:
flesh, water,
desire

The Leopard

One morning you step out your back door,
look up into your oak tree, and see
a leopard, golden and spotted black,
like a leopard should be. It blinks
and looks at you, sleepily.

Wedged between two branches just below it
is your neighbor's German Shepherd,
head hanging unnaturally to one side.

What do you do? Go back inside and say
"Honey, there's a leopard in the tree?"
Call the Animal Control Unit
and hope they're prepared for a job this large?
Call your boss and say you can't
drive to work—there's a leopard between you and your car?

You saw a PBS special once that said
most of them don't eat people, really.

The eyes look back at you, hungry—
for what? a gazelle? India?
love? a dark place to hide?

You could run inside—
you could try to coax it to you—
"Here, kitty kitty"—go ahead, try—
or you could just leave
an awful lot of Cat Chow on your porch
in an awfully big dish.

It jump down from the tree
and creeps toward you
slowly, close to the ground
You stay put, afraid to provoke it.
When it reaches you
it almost knocks you down
as it rubs against your legs and purrs.

You start to pet it.
It pauses for a moment,
then runs, easily scales your neighbor's fence
and the next three fences over
and disappears behind a tall bush.

FRAGMENTATION

head detaches
I am afraid everyone must see
my naked thoughts
spinning crazily
within the crystalline cavern of my skull
each separate limb
lies in an isolated floating place
eyelids sinking lower,
I can see the insides—
it is the same pulsation
magma and liquefied blackness
itself, drifting above
as I'm still aware
disjointed—if I reach out
I know I will see
my own hand
fingers outstretched
flow slowly across the room
and out the open door
into the darkness beyond
or within.
inside my mouth
laughter bubbles and swirls
in frightening uncontrol
close it off, shut it away
no one must see
no one must hear
the darkness within
or beyond—
I cannot tell.

The Dark Knight Waiting

She sees them, silhouetted
against a moon stained
the rotting yellow of an
old wino's teeth.

They sit:

Three creatures
born of fire-lit shadows
in a madman's dreams.
Marble wings enfolding
crouching demons, talons
grip their perch above
rain-soaked pavement
far below.

She watches, dreaming:

They will fly
soon; wings arching upward
cloaked in shadow,
haunches coiled tight
to launch, gliding
down, down,
to the city below.
They will cleanse it.
Angels to end the
steel gleaming pure
from the shadows
till it cuts; then it hides
mottled in the red-black
drink that mingles
with the rain
and booze
and urine
in the streets.

But she dreams.

They are
only
stone.

She stares, probing
the shadow creatures' lair
for something
anything
like movement: the slow—
almost too slow to
capture in the eye
and recognize—
slow shift of
shoulders beneath
the stone mantle
of wings.

She rubs her eyes;
burning dry
from the vulture like mist
which lingers round
the dying city,
product of the
thousands of cars, and
cigarettes, and
rotting sewage in
the gutters where
too many sleep.

She looks, again,
and they are there.
Two demon sentinels
etched in the shadows
of a thousand
un-natural lights.
They are as they have been,
and the other
rides the shadows
to a scream muffled
by the growl of
the living streets.

A Stitch in Time Unravels

Mrs. Marlin stood stiffly on the simple chair, her arms stuck out from her body like the branches of a dead tree. These fitting sessions always frightened her. One never knew whether these second generation immigrants could manage to pin up a dress without stabbing the client's ankles.

"What's taking so long?" she demanded irritably.

The young woman gave no reply, but merely continued to fold the fabric up so that the hem was parallel to the floor and pin it securely in place, fold and pin, fold and pin. Jennifer worked hard at her job and did not appreciate being rushed by a lazy, stuffy woman who had probably never sewn a stitch in her life. It won't always be like this, she promised herself. Someday I will choose my tasks for myself and no one will tell me what to do. Mrs. Marlin shifted her feet in frustration and the fabric swayed elusively out of Jennifer's hands.

"Now, Mrs. Marlin, you know that the more you move around, the longer it will take me to finish here."

Though Jennifer's voice was courteous and even, she seethed in annoyance. She was developing a burning throbbing cramp in her lower back from half-kneeling and bending at the waist. The pain had been slowly seeping through her muscles like a hot, thick fluid for the last two skirts. The last pin slid through the heavy cotton weave, and Jennifer sat back on her heels to examine her handiwork. The hem was a bit uneven, but her mother would fix that when she sewed it up.

Mrs. Marlin cast an appraising eye at her image in the full length mirror. The girl had actually done a decent job, and she certainly had been polite. Now that it was over, the whole experience really hadn't been as tedious as she had imagined it to be. She turned, grasped the sturdy back of the chair with one hand, held the other out to balance herself, and stepped gingerly onto the floor. Walking out of the room, her voice floated behind her like a ghost, "I'll expect the three skirts and the blouse to be ready on Wednesday for our trip to the Bahamas. George will just love that Hawaiian number..."

As soon as Jennifer was sure that Mrs. Marlin had entered the dressing room, she stood and left the fitting room through an unpretentious white door labeled "Employees Only." This was where all of the painstaking, time consuming work of altering the customers' garments actually occurred. The room was rather small and seemed even more so with the two large sewing machines jutting out from the opposite wall. Neither Jennifer's mother nor her grandmother were there. This struck

her as odd because, since Grandpapa's death a year ago, Grandma Olga lived more and more in her memories of childhood in a small Hungarian farming community. Her unwillingness to learn the English language in the forty-one years that she had been in America had left her with no one to talk to but the few remaining family members, namely Jennifer and her mother, Mary.

Jennifer had promised herself that she would never, ever live only for death to come, the way that Grandmama was living now. She had too much pride and intelligence for that. And she had her plans, too. By the end of the summer, and certainly by her eighteenth birthday, she would have saved enough money to leave this boring, stuffy town filled with old blood and people who fancy themselves intellectuals. She would not be able to afford a very expensive school, but there were some who wanted people like her enough that they would be willing to significantly reduce the amount of money that she would have to pay. God knows Mama couldn't spare any for her, what with the house payments to make and Papa's illness...but Jennifer would get along just fine.

In August of that same year, her seventeenth, Jennifer the seamstress went to the Old Second Bank of Lexington to deposit the last of her paychecks. Her savings account balance read an impressive seven thousand dollars accumulated from the two years that she had been paid for her work at the family's tailor shop. That would be enough to put her through at least two years in the Missouri State School System. The deep voice of the teller broke into her thoughts like a pebble skipping on a smooth lake.

"Quite an impressive savings you have there, young lady. There aren't many young people these days who can resist the temptation to buy, buy, buy." He wrote the current balance in the appropriate space in her bankbook.

"Thank you, sir. I worked very hard for it."

"Hard work *always* pays off," he said as he stamped the date in her bankbook.

"That's what my grandmother says."

"Well, here you are, young lady. God bless." The bankbook slid under the glass partition separating Jennifer from the teller. Somehow the deep reds of its cheap plastic cover seemed to shine with import. Her entire future lay on the counter, and as she slowly reached out to take it, she could feel the anticipation building within her. She let her fingertips rest on it for just a moment, and then snatched it up in her hand and walked quickly out of the building, feeling ready to take on the world.

The elderly receptionist who sat at the front desk recognized the

hope and excitement radiating from the pretty young woman and shook her head in pity.

"Ma'am," the doctor said to Mary, "I'm afraid that the test results weren't as positive as we had hoped." The forty-six year old woman sitting on the examining table in a blue hospital smock with her back bared to the cool air shivered. She knew it was terrible news when the doctor's next words were merely tossed in her general direction.

"It seems that the lining of your uterus has a small bump on it that we at first thought was absolutely harmless. Upon further investigation we discovered it to be cancerous, although it did appear to be benign. The most recent battery of tests do not support that conclusion."

Mary's hands were gripping the edge of the table so tightly that her knuckles were growing whiter by the second. It couldn't be as bad as she feared. Even with Roger's illness, they could probably spare two thousand dollars for an emergency. The doctor's clinically sympathetic voice broke into her thoughts again.

"The cancer is definitely malignant. It must be removed before it spreads any further."

"How much..." She hesitated, her voice uncertain, but the question had to be asked. "How much will it cost?"

"There is a minimum charge of two thousand five hundred dollars for the surgery itself. Add to that the fees for the anesthesiologist, his assistant, a seven day mandatory recovery period in the hospital, and the cost will be at least eight thousand dollars."

The world rushed in upon Mary.

Jennifer came home at about six-thirty that evening. She had been down by the river with her friends for most of the afternoon and had accidentally stepped in a very mucky area just slightly riverside of the path. The fact that she virtually had to dig her right shoe out of the thick mud, combined with the raw beginnings of a nasty sunburn, put her in a somewhat foul mood. She didn't want to snap at her parents when she walked in the door, so she thought of the one thing that couldn't fail to lift her spirits: in a few short weeks, she would be at college and on her way to a life far better than pinning skirts and sewing jackets and fixing all the clothing that people had not cared enough about to be careful of in the first place.

She fairly bounced over the threshold and into the kitchen, where her father and mother were sitting at the kitchen table, holding tightly to one another's hands as if to let go would mean sinking into a quicksand trap. Jennifer stopped and stared at the sight of her usually reserved

parents immersed in emotion. She let her bag slide off her shoulder and placed it carefully on the floor next to the wall because Shawna, her best friend, had lent her a very expensive leather-bound copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

"Mom? Dad?"

"Jennifer." Come here, dear," her mother said, gesturing with her free hand. "We have something very...important to discuss with you."

Robert spoke up at this point, saying, "Now, you know that we love you very much and only want the best for you, but well, the fact is that your mother hasn't been feeling very well lately so she went to the doctor a week ago to have some tests done. He recommended further testing, and we just received the results today."

Mary dropped Robert's hand and reached out to take her daughter's. "Jennifer, the doctor says that I have a malignant cancer on the lining of my uterus."

Both parents waited tensely for their daughter's response, and as they saw her face relax and the tension melt, she said, "When have you scheduled the surgery?"

Silence.

"You have scheduled surgery, haven't you?"

Hesitation, and then Mary spoke. "Yes, I have, for two weeks from tomorrow, but, well, there's the matter of money. We're six thousand dollars short and our insurance policy refuses to cover more than one thousand dollars of an illness of this magnitude."

"What your mother is trying to say is that, well, times ahead are going to be very rough and in order to take out a loan of this size, we'll have to mortgage the house again."

Jennifer considered, hesitated, then spoke before she lost the will to. "I have a little over seven thousand dollars in my savings account. We can't afford to mortgage the house again. The payments are too large as it is." She took a deep breath and rushed towards her future. "I want you to take my money."

The relief evident on Robert and Mary's faces almost made Jennifer retract her offer. It was as if they had been hoping for her money instead of a loan in the first place, and although this hurt Jennifer's feeling greatly, she loved her mother very much and what was done was done. Besides, the surgery was far more important than Jennifer's need to get out. She could start to save again. It wouldn't be all that bad to spend another two or three years here. After all, it's not as though she wouldn't be able to leave just as easily two years from now...

Coffeemug

At a garage sale in a not-so-nice part of town
Michael bought a chipped mug, glazed with light blue lines,
stained dark inside. It cost him 20 cents.

While other mugs in his dorm room filled up with pennies,
this one greeted him with coffee in the morning,
and welcomed his friends to the room with steaming tea.
Friday nights, it even held Michael's Heineken.

When he and Katherine toasted each other,
it also held the wine. Their first night, she was thirsty,
lying in bed, and he brought it to her, with water inside.

Once, leaning back in his chair, drinking lemonade,
he wanted his life to stay this full forever,
with the faces of friends, his lover's mouth and hands.

Katherine graduated, celebrations and promises
made over mugfuls of champagne. From Boston came letters
and gourmet cocoa mix—"for the mug," she wrote.
Every morning he drank some, watching the sun rise.

Some friends graduated—some still came reliably by—
some friends he lost his taste for, some friends he just lost.
He drank more and more—beer, tea, cocoa, juice—
but his throat was so dry, his taste disappeared.

Looking into the empty mug, Michael imagined
an endless dark hole, inviting him in.
He wanted to smash the mug against the wall
but knew he'd be stupid enough to mourn it.

On the Pennsylvania Turnpike, 3 A.M.

He tried to fill it with leftover change.
he kept pencils and paper clips there for a while.
When clouds came, he tried to catch the rainwater in it—
but for three days straight, the clouds refused to rain.

One thirsty night, he saw something gently in a
stranger's eyes. he brought her home—but couldn't feel her hands.
The next morning, groggy in the sun's glare,
he left her lying there, asleep, and made himself coffee.

When he poured it, the mug burst. The liquid seared his foot.
He looked at the shape of clay left in his hand—
the insides coffee brown, the outside light blue—
the obscene edge white, exposed by loss.

On the Pennsylvania Turnpike, 3 A.M.

We are a river—
in motion even as we stay in place.
It's stasis that's important in travel—
the destination, New York City, hardly matters.
What's important is the taste
of your cigarette smoke
as it slowly coils past me—
and the mandolins and guitars
on my R.E.M. tape—
the words to this song a mantra,
bringing emotion instead of calm,
cresting like a disturbed river—
as you sip the last throttling drops
from the Wendy's drive-thru cup,
and fall asleep to the sound
of the music, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike
rumbling below you.

Solitary pairs
of headlights drift raggedly by—
unslept dreams stranded in a dark world.
Caroline, I know we'd be damned-up rivers
without this freedom to travel, to change.
But as you snore softly
in the folded-back seat,
I'm thinking of how tomorrow
we'll move you in to start your new life,
and sleep together in the single bed
in your new apartment,
and the next morning
I'll be driving back on this road,
the same tape playing,
crossing over the same rivers,
the smell of your cigarettes
still in the car.

when he spoke candidly to her
"you are very beautiful, my dear, but i fear the rain is
far more lovely"
her emptiness and eyes held disbelief
and just the pale bleak beginnings of despair

she laughed and tossed her head
the hurt disguised itself as scorn as she replied
"mind? why i'd be delighted"
and tripped triumphantly off into infamy and wealth

sorrowfully shaking his wisened head he watched her go
muttering the old spiteful relics of their love
like a litany forgotten since disused and corrupt sundays
promising "she'll be back, my friend, don't you worry"
while in his mind he was beginning to be quite confused,
asking who the hell was that tart, anyway?

receiving no answer,
he shrugged philosophically and walked on.

Dandelion Crowns a Turnpike, 3 A.M.

running naked with the angels
the wooden bridge is rotting with desertion
we fly over the river
flesh, water, and tears
quench our thirst
dancing together among
the branches of a willow
watching fire flies paint pictures
in the corn fields
the sun eating the clothes
off our backs
the angels crown us with
dandelions

Solitary paths

of headlights and cigarette

smoke

in the dark

of the night

But as you move away

in the faded back seat

I'm thinking of how

we'll move you to a new place

and sleep together in the single bed

in your new apartment

and the next morning

I'll be driving back on the road

the same old way

crossing over the same trees

the smell of your cigarettes

still in the car

Celebration

I don't ignore the way the breeze feels on my back
like dry kisses leaving sticky imprints on my skin.

I welcome the breeze from the open window.

I invite the moonlight that slowly creeps in
(the moon is always so shy)

and I relish the clatter of the crickets.

Listen to the bark of the dogs at my breasts,
begging for a gnawed off piece of me
thrown from the windowsill.

I'm not shocked that my painted fingers
can make my skin glow.

I like the way I feel, with the wind at my back
and my own hands
on my thighs.

So I don't ignore the way my body makes me feel.

BITCH

don't

CRY

don't

CRY

I'll break your arm

I'll put you in your place

Who do you think you are

you are wrong ALWAYS WRONG

I am better than you

bra

burner

BRA

BURNER

Why are you getting so excited

you are making a big deal out of nothing

you think you are so strong

WHAT A JOKE

Typical

Woman

that is what you are

how can you look at yourself in the mirror

I don't know why I even bother

you are NOTHING

but a pain in the ass

sit down

Sit Down

BITCH

SIT DOWN

At +109°F

Somber and suspect sun above me creeps
walking to a harbor questionable
heat, oppressive melts my basis
i stand answerable
truly

washboard sandbox at my feet
drifting crystal bites shotguning my neck
biting stares blister my thighs exposed
scorpion motherladies and rattlesnake stagss curry
black gutpickers circlesoar the stark desertopolis desolate
pigbastards hoof from scrubweeds sloughing nitrosloberin upon
virginfirma
uterin pools miragically appear in sanded fortraces
and i collapse at the paws of a wolfadillo in winter shell
fire! drips down my brow upon dungshrooms resplendent

the sun knows i'mhere i'msure
it has halted at a quarter and a third just a third
mother at my feets sweats up through me but two measures against
gravity
my furs thinning curl at tips split
the end is near near

as ivybriar and daisyvine swelter and hydrofail
as lizardphiles roll their tails detachable to shaded glaciers
of granitepile
as popinfooks fly from cacti deeply tapped
as greedskinned rangers watch on
the sands offer up their wisdoms telling
so i run to the sun setting
never setting as long as i run
and endlessly i'm running

Ice and candlewax

to see the dripping wax as it dries upon the floor
a hard shell

snowmelt and summerfelt left to build and build

It is a change to walk out onto the lake
on the first ice of the fall

with all its cracks and ridges they don't allow
you to reach the big blue
but only let you break through

to a morning of breakfast and eggs
new reasons to discuss over orange juice and
puffy fresh evening air

two head lights flush on my doorstep
melting the candlewax into a swiftly freezing pile of snow while
each minute

lays

to rest

one by one

you fall asleep on my shoulder

Porcelain

"Come back to bed, Michelle."

But she couldn't. Standing in his window and watching the rain in the darkness, it seemed as though the glass was melting down in long, clear streaks. She held herself and wished everything would melt and she could be alone.

His hands were cold on her arms as he found her in the shadows, standing still, standing with her arms around herself, standing with her legs tight together as if it could keep the life inside her from coming out the way they said it would.

"Michelle?" His voice was warm, and she could smell him near her in the dark. Then he was holding her, standing with her in the window, listening to the unending rain.

"Come on back to bed. Let me hold you awhile."

But instead, she walked to the living room, and found her favorite quilt. The pictures on the walls seemed to be watching her, and she avoided their glares as she wrapped up in the soft folds and heavy colors, draping them over her shoulders.

Now, her little girl would never get to be wrapped up in the quilt's warmth. At the thought of that, the tears stopped again and she pictured a tiny porcelain casket. Finally, she turned again toward the sound of the rain on the glass and listened to it splash uselessly against the pane before falling down and dying on the ground.*

When she was 14, her aunt Sarah had a baby and asked Michelle to be there with her. Sarah was only 16, and she and Michelle had been best friends since they were small enough to play dolls and color on the floor.

Sarah had screamed when it hurt so bad, and Michelle was frightened at the blood and the pain and the way the doctors moved around like they were afraid to touch her. Sarah's father had been there a while, but had left when the delivery started. The baby's father had been gone since Sarah had told him seven months ago, and no one had seen him since.

When it was over, all Michelle could think of was how awful and alien everything was when the baby was coming out, and how inadequate Sarah looked holding the tiny thing in her arms.

She knew she shouldn't be out walking, it would only make the delivery sooner, but she wasn't asking herself questions anymore. The rain ran down her face and made her wipe her eyes and push her wet hair

away from where it drooped down in flat brown curls, now black in the night's darkness.

The names of the diners and stores melted past her, then returned as she walked back, alone on the black-paved streets and wrapped in the comforter. But even the deep colors of the quilt she often stared into on long afternoons did not help her. Now they were dark and heavy, soaked with cold rain. Nothing could help her now, now that her only hope had died with her after only three months.

It had been cold at the hospital, and she had shivered in the paper gown they made her wear. She couldn't remember the smell, only the way the paper felt against her naked skin, and how scared Mark looked.

Mark never even flinched as the doctors told her it was over. He only held her as she slumped down on the table and listened as they told him what would happen and what to do.

When she got dressed again, her clothes felt bigger to her, and they seemed so heavy when she walked that she let Mark help her into the car.

As she waited for him to get in, she heard the doctor's soft voice. "I'm so sorry," he had said. "Sometimes these things happen."

"Michelle?" he asked. She only nodded.

"Remember how when you found out you were pregnant, I promised I wouldn't leave you?"

Another nod. She was tired. She didn't want to talk about this.

"You know I'm not going to leave you now, don't you?"

He was trying so hard. Another time, she may have been able to respond. But not now. She let him hold her for a long time then, and they listened to the rain start slowly, the tiny droplets like mist against the hood and the windshield that slowly grew to fat streaks that slid and ran down the glass the way she knew her baby would run out of her and onto the porcelain in Mark's tiny bathroom.

He was waiting in the living room when she finally made the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing up?" She didn't want him to worry. She just wanted this to be over.

"Michelle, are you all right?" His warm arms encircled her wet shoulders, and she buried her face in his shirt. Looking up, the men in his posters seemed older, as if they had waited a long time for her to return.

"Let's go to bed," she mumbled into his shoulder, but he didn't move.

"Are you okay?"

"I want to go to bed now," she said, and let her arms drop from his waist. Silently, he followed.

When she was small, she would often hide under the covers in her bed, and pretend she hadn't been born yet. The soft colors would wrap around her and keep her warm. She like the way the light came through the blankets, all diffused and soft, the way she felt in her parents' arms when she was frightened.

She hated it when she eventually had to come out from under the covers, the way everything looked so harsh and real. She wished she could stay inside where it was safe forever.

She lay in his arms for a long time before she fell asleep. The room was too dark, the shadows too cold and the rain too long and sustained, like the pain way-down deep inside her. The sheets and blankets Mark wrapped her in were heavy on top of her, pulling her down into the bed, pulling her down to where her own body could kill the little life inside of her, pulling her down into darkness and fitful, exhausting sleep.

Even her dreams were full of faceless blackness that was killing her baby. The round warmth she normally experienced when she dreamt was gone, replaced by shadows and cold. She was inside herself, just three months old and still waiting to be born. But it was dark, and the shadows kept chasing her, and no matter how hard she tried to swim away, they kept finding her. She tugged uselessly at the chain that tied her down and kept her inside where the shadows could get her.

Finally, the shadows came to life, and they found her. They were cold, and she felt herself disappearing into them, then screamed as the chain fell away and she knew she was alone in a battle she could not possibly win.

When she awoke, it was to the devastating silence after the rain, and a warm wetness spreading slowly where there should be none.

The fluorescent light over the sink was harsh and hurt her eyes, but the toilet seat was warm against the back of legs, still covered in a cold sweat from the nightmares that had haunted her few hours of sleep.

She had thought that she would cry, that she would feel something, that she would be broken afterwards. Instead, she felt nothing but the emptiness in the darkness outside the windows, not even filled with the long, grey rains anymore. When she was done, she stood up, and held the white pad between her legs for a long time, not thinking about what had happened, not thinking about what she would have to face when she woke up tomorrow and remembered she was no longer pregnant.

Without turning around, she reached behind her and lowered the lid, the flushed the toilet once and turned out the light.

Mark held her for a long time, then. As she lay in his arms, the sound started slowly, like the soft sigh of the wind in the Fall. But gradually it built, until again the rain was drumming against the windows and roof in a long, unending noise that never faded or increased, but continued through the night.

All I Asked, All

has it ever occurred to her
ever occurred i ask?
might it be might and force
driving the driven hard to it?
tradition dug in deep and full
since young young since then or know?

habits breaths taken deep
its in the air older onessay
in the air "they breathe it in the airs"

the curse i hold heartsick hold is in my airs
all round it occurs im told occurs
"hold her down down below under the stars
and walk away from me?" i ask occurred to me
the might the force the fear occurs
in the airs

"hold her down down below under the stars
and walk away from me."

Vigil

The world sped by as he sat in the window, alone. The neon flashed its plethora of colors, like a surreal rainbow, creating and killing shadows instantly. As he himself had been created; immediately, on the spur of the moment. Other, deeper shadows danced, dodging the flickering light, moving forward in the brief black-outs. He could hear the cars go by in the street below, traffic still considerable at one hundred thirty-five minutes past midnight, their horns blaring, curses in at least a half dozen tongues wafting up the fire escape on the moist, pollution-laden air. An ancient metal fan rattled at one end of the room, doing a poor job of keeping out the heavy summer heat. In another corner, a tall grandfather clock, twice again as old as both the fan and the boy, ticked away the hours, the pendulum swinging slowly back and forth in perfect time with the seconds behind the broken glass face. He could hear the ticking under the sounds of the city, the relentless *tick-tock* that would become near-unbearable in the quiet hours just before dawn and the morning rush. Periodically, a truck would growl by, shaking the metal grating over the window, the empty bottles stacked carefully into a pyramid against the far wall rattling anxiously, daring them to tumble to the dust-covered floor.

The sounds rose up to him through the open window, the light reflecting strangely through the cracks in the glass. Vehicles sped by, horns blaring, and he caught an occasional glimpse of a hand, a face, a lock of hair as a stray wind caught it and pulled it through the window. When he saw these things, he wondered about the people who drove by: where did they go? What did they do? What did they call home? All the cars, all the people passing on the sidewalk below him, they were all signs of a city on its way, on its way to bigger and brighter things. Things in which he would have no part.

He looked around the dilapidated room; his autobiography, he thought bitterly. Every detail was visible through his dulled eyes: the peeling paint, the cockroaches scurrying in and out of moving shadows, rock 'n roll posters yellowing on the soggy plaster, their corners bending in the humidity. His vision told him it was futile to continue in this manner, dried remains of old dinners scattered over the floor among cracked and broken CDs and tapes. Tiny fragments of the discs reflected the light of the city back into his eyes as he turned from his vigil, silhouette black against the crumbling brick wall that stared him down from across the street, mocking his tenacity, his desire to go on.

A shudder shook his spare frame, and he coughed, spitting a wad of

phlegm onto the dirty floor. The next flash of neon, the figure of a nude woman from the marquee of a porn theater two doors down, made his lungs' aborted child glow an exotic, deep pink. He shifted again, turning back to the street, back to the city and what his imagination told him lay beyond. Flashes of things came to him, like dreams, or visions, flashes of his life: an old man with a hard, unshaven chin grunting as he knelt in the mud and ankle-deep garbage of an alley that was dim even at high noon, of another man, younger than the other, coming at him with his hand raised, a cop stepping towards him through a shattered plate-glass window, his parents dead on the carpet in a spreading pool of blood, shotgun at his feet, cop telling him to get in the car as he worked at the belt of his trousers—*Why don't you tell me what really happened?* as he rips off the pajama bottoms, the thin cloth, manufactured in Taiwan, ripping easily under the cop's fat, porcine fingers. The white tag that tells how to care for the garment turns red, then white, then blue, then white, then red again, reflected in the moist eyes of the child and the tears streaming down his face as he screams for help to a deaf world and the cop starts grunting just like the man in the alley three years later, and the kid feels his bowels start to burn...

In his mind, he keeps hearing voices—his mother, his teacher, even his father. And they keep telling him, over and over again as the cop thrusts and grunts, thrusts and grunts, then tenses for a moment, only after to fall back against the faux-leather seat of his cruiser, that policemen are good, policemen are good, policemen are god, now eat your pork boy, and quit crying before I give you something to cry about...

He opened his eyes and felt tears moistening his cheeks. He wiped them away with some little bit of annoyance, turning his attention back to the street, listening for the sounds of a gunshot, sirens, feet on the stairs, screams, a key in the lock, broken boots shuffling outside, taxis roaring around the corner, speeding down the straightaway, the creak of hinges, the shredding sound as metal welds to metal at the site of a high-speed collision he could read about tomorrow in a stolen paper, the dusty boots shuffling through the clutter on the floor, kicking at the pyramid of glass in the corner...

Sounds drew his profile on the gridded frame as he turned back to the room, staring at the crack beneath the door, alert for any sign of movement. A door slammed two floors up, releasing a tiny bit of plaster from the worn ceiling. He heard roaches scuttling to get out of the light as the shadows mutated to fit their moods. Rats wandered through the walls, scratching distractedly at the baseboards, looking for a way into the room. Water ran through the pipes, sounding a lot like those nature tapes he'd bought once of a babbling brook. He wondered which apartments

were getting water, where other people were lying, listening to the constant *drip-drip* in their sink, their clean shelves lined with food, refrigerator motor kicking in every half hour or so, stove all ready to be lit and dinner prepared, family of five sitting down for a meal...

Tires squealed in the street below and he could smell burning rubber as the curses of the hookers and drug-pushers wandering the streets, doing some business with outsiders, but mostly between themselves and with the cops. He watched the heads pass below, white hats with black bands, hair teased to the sky, fuck-me heels clicking on the dusty concrete. A man in a white robe was walking down the street, head shaved but for a single knot that rose from the rear, handing out books and flowers. Some toughs, maybe a street gang, he really couldn't tell at this distance and with this much shit in his system, took hold of the religious zealot and shoved him into an alley. He could hear a few screams, that was it, and less than a minute later, the toughs walked from the mouth of the alley alone, straightening their leather jackets and moving on down the street in search of other prey. No one turned their head.

He saw someone pause on the other side of the street and look up at the window. He shrank back into the shadows, hoping he hadn't been seen, but the dark man walked to the curb and crossed the street, disappearing into this building, a little to the right. Sighing again, he looked at the street once more and turned from the neon that was burning his eyes. He tried to shut out the sounds that were deafening him, but didn't quite succeed. He lit a joint and inhaled deeply, swallowing the smoke and holding it in until he felt his face must be turning blue. Then he slowly let out the breath, noting numbly that the sounds were a little quieter and the light a little less harsh...

He heard heavy boots on the stairs and went to sit on the only chair in the room, taking a warm beer from the floor and guzzling, swishing the last of the dull liquid in his blistered mouth, delighting in the pain. As he sat, he felt four broken springs poke his ass and glanced over the stained mattress that lay in the corner. More visions came to him: of him kneeling on the mattress as a man dressed all in blue, red-faced and fat, like a pig, he thought ironically, stepped through the window and into the room. A shotgun hovered in the air, turning from side to side, scanning, searching. Outside, the boots were coming up the stairs.

He popped two red pills into his mouth, swallowing them dry, when he heard the key rattle in the rusted lock. The handle began to turn, sliding easily on its worn track and the door slid open, hinges screeching like a fairy-tale ghost. He stared at the dusty, cracked boots, ignoring the navy pantlegs, the fat hand, gold band on the left finger, Police Academy

insignia on the right, that set a shotgun, once familiar, against the wall, next to the door. He mumbled something to himself and heard the hand leave the shiny black belt before it struck the side of his head and sent him reeling. Rough hands grabbed him and threw him against the wall, punching at his genitals. He lay on the mattress, now wet with his blood and urine, weeping and looking up at the gigantic figure through faded eyes. He saw nothing other than the large hands struggling with the belt buckle and the dusty feet stepping closer... Again he heard his mother's voice in his head, drowning the *clink-clink-clink* of handcuffs, over and over again:

Policemen are good, policemen are good, policemen are god...

...in eternity's footsteps

The crystal-clear water, split by the bow of the long canoe, washed away from the narrow wooden craft in small, slowly diminishing waves. In the distance a loon called and another soon answered. Insects buzzed the surface of the lake, a series of ridiculously perfect concentric circles remaining in their wake. Periodically, a fish jumped somewhere, the small sound echoing from the surrounding mountains, reverberating through the trees. Everything could be heard, everything was heard. The sun was just setting, its blazing reds and golds mixing with shades of purple and scarlet with a touch of rose, igniting the lake to fire. The paddle continued to move silently, cutting its slow progress across the lake. The mountains stared down without seeing.

The paddle rose and fell continuously, its movement constant and never-changing. The chipped and faded wooden blade sliced the water, only to rise a moment later, dripping with liquid, propelling the canoe slowly onward. Then it would fall into the water again, the motion repeating itself over and over. It never ended. First one side, then the other. First one side, then the other. And still the mountains stared blindly at the world.

Deep in the night a small point of light shone. It was a beacon; a calling of sorts. Maybe it was something good, maybe something evil; it was surely something desirable. After an eternity anything, anywhere he could stop, would have been a paradise. Heaven was where he could lay down the paddle and rest.

The sky never changed; not really. Day after day it was the same thing. The sun tore its way over the mountaintops, flashing its vigorous fires. It coursed through the sky, its terrible light beating down on anything and everything exposed, without discrimination. After just so long the god tired and slumped back over the mountains, the last of its fire glowing with an iridescent splendor.

The sky was always blue, the clouds were always white, distributed across the blue bosom of heaven like so many applied freckles. But it never changed. And the mountains were always watching; staring at something only they could see, something deep inside every living thing that remained a mystery forever, an enigma to all but the mountains, the colossal monoliths who would hold their secrets forever.

The light had come and gone; the blackness that was night had returned and the paddle still rose and fell. Slicing through the black water, he pushed ahead through the endless darkness, the endless lake. The minute point of light still rested in the distance, giving up nothing.

He tried to paddle harder, but the stronger he pulled, the thicker the water became. He gave up and went back to a leisurely established pace, the aged blade running along an instinctual course through infinity.

The sun rose. It sank. Time and again, the paddle rose and fell, rose and fell. The aging birch-skin barge angled through the water, all motions always the same, everything the same, nothing changing. The sun was rising again, the latent dragons' fires screaming to be released. There was something different; something varied in the official routine. The sun screamed over the horizon, its fires tearing into anything so hapless as to be found in the open, exposed to its naked fierceness. The paddle continued to rise and fall. He pulled harder; the water grew heavier. The sun beat down from the heavens, burning through his thick skin, exorcising the water from his cells, plastering his hair to his hard back. It ran through his veins, in search of something; he knew not what. He pulled again, sending the long canoe shooting through the jelly-like water, his thick muscles bulging with effort, his golden skin glistening with the salty ocean that spilled from his pores. His blade tore through the muck, the canoe came to a stand-still. He looked from side to side, a feeling of impending doom blooming in his heart. Confusion took over the hard lines of his face. He stopped and placed the wand across his thighs. Something was happening, something he couldn't place, but it had a name, and it was...change.

The mountains continued to stare, but something had moved in their eyes. No longer did they look into him; they looked into themselves. The sun continued along the sky on its rampage, cutting through the layers of heaven and tearing to the very soul of the being. He looked to the sky from the depths of his canoe and screamed.

There was no response, and as he looked to the sky for a sign, a cold breeze began to blow. The canoe frozen in place, he sat helplessly, the long, age-faded paddle now placed along the bottom of the water-craft. From his left there came the sound of slow thunder.

The water that surrounded the canoe on five sides ceased its seizure and became silent. He tapped the surface incredulously (*ice!*) and looked to the thunder. The sound grew, echoing from mountains, trees and clouds, folding in upon itself, bastardizing, growing, becoming a deafening roar. And then, almost as quickly as the water had become ice under the blazing sun, thunder emerged from the trees. It exploded from the forest in the form of a thousand white stallions, glistening hides burning white heat under the fiery sun. They raced across the ice, heads lowered, lips pulled back, long crystalline manes flowing in the wind. Their hooves pounded the frozen surface, chips of ice flying into the air, suspended in precious prisms as they fell back to earth. He could see the

whites of their eyes as they roared past and, before he could blink, they were gone.



The paddle rose and the paddle fell. Would it ever change? He believed so. The sun continued on its daily journey; blue sky, fade to black. It sank below the horizon, the sunset blazing more brightly than usual. The lake's fire slowly burned itself out, the flames reluctant to submit to the pool. Darkness had arrived; the time of emptiness. The paddle rose and the paddle fell and he realized it would never change.

The point of light glimmered in the darkness and he kept on course, the wooden pole in his bent, calloused hands rotating in a rhythm he'd known forever. He stroked at the same pace, his stride constant, gaze fixed on the light in the distance. In the darkness it grew impossibly larger, a change so miniscule that nothing but the darkness recognized it. He sighed and continued on his way, eternity lain out before him in all its deathly boring splendor.

The darkness began to clear and the sky began to lighten, as it had every day for eternity. Something was different. The heavens had become white in his passage; the distance of nothingness separated him from the darkness. The water seemed thin as air and the canoe had grown as weightless as his thoughts. He pushed forward relentlessly, muscles compressing and relaxing in a break-neck cycle of progression. The light grew brighter with every stroke and he pulled harder. For the first time in memory, there was something to look forward to. His destination lay not far ahead.

The light began to fade and he relaxed his grip on the paddle. He allowed the canoe to be carried by the current and before long found himself resting against an ancient shore tread by countless before him. The canoe pushed itself onto the beach and he looked into the light. A huge white stallion stood there, head high, black eyes burning twin holes through his head. Its mane fell across its neck, the ends dusting the earth. The horse reared up on its hind legs and let forth a wild scream. It returned to four legs and stood still, snorting impatiently, watching him as he remained seated in the canoe.

After a moment he understood. Standing carefully, he lay the paddle that had rested in his hands forever and been marked by everything he had witnessed upon the pale ground and stepped out of the canoe. His moccasined foot touched the light dust and a small cloud obscured his first steps.

