THE CAULDRON
Kalamazoo College's Literary and Arts Magazine

1995-1996 Edition

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This issue of The Cauldron is dedicated to...

!!!GOZO and his Flying Monkeys!!!

The Cauldron Copy Gremlins
(we'll get you yet)

and lastly,

All of the Wonderful Writers and Artists
Who Took a Risk and Threw Their Work Into the Pot.
BOLA SPIDER
Rob Dunn

I know too much
about you, your trickery,
your tools, and your games.
I've seen enough of your
eight eyed pleasures.

I've watched you swing
your sticky ball of silk
on its tender thread,
catching flies like clouds
and drawing them deep
toward your belly,
better than
any vaquero.

watched you release
chemicals from your
behind that must be
pheromones, and I know
which ones.

I've seen their effects,
drawing female flies from
miles around.

You've got them fooled.
They think that you are
a delicious male,
and they flock to you
like you're their one
way ticket to immortality.

I've seen your kind,
know it all to well,
the way you grow up,
and the sustenance you get
from your deception
is never enough.

I know long before you,
that you will change,
that as you grow
your appetite will grow
and no puny fly will suffice.
You’ll need something bigger, something with wings, and flight and places to go—A moth, or a butterfly.

As you age, you’ll change your smell, your color, even the way you swing your awful tool, all in the name of mimicry. As long as there is desire you will never be well enough fed.
Birds, bats and bugs
have all forfeited
the land for the sky,
but there are many
more that are caught
in between, the flying
squirrel, the flying fish,
the gliding snake and you.

Your past is a tale of
the absence of boundaries
between the sky and the land.

At five you thought you
could fly and jumped
from a second story
window.

And now as you
rest beside me asleep.
At twenty you still insist
on jumping,
stretching the shadows
of your shoulder bones
out like wings.

Perhaps you are fated
to glide between lives,
to fly and walk,
to flutter instead of choose.

Content in your
wandering, walking
in your sleep and dreaming
in your wake.

There is never a time
that is certain, and even
now, while you sit silent,
you are thinking of the other side.
I remember that day very clearly. I was fourteen years old, almost fifteen. It was winter and cold, but I was a newly converted nicotine addict, and smokin' wasn't allowed inside of the gas station where I worked. So I was sittin' on the bench just outside, suckin' on a cigarette, trying to pass the time, jus' thinkin'. I was the only one there. Rex, the tow truck driver, called in sick, and Bill, the manager, was out driving the tow truck, trusting me with the register. I was kinda worried about him, Bill I mean; the roads were icy from the the storm the night before, and the salt trucks hadn't gotten to the more secluded places, like the road in front of that God Damned gas station.

I remember the whole thing. I heard cars coming and looked up. Coming from the left is this BMW, fancy, new, black; real pretty car. Then from the right comes one of them little Le Cars. I still ain't sure how it happened, but I think the BMW drifted into the wrong lane, right into Le Car. The Le Car hit the brakes and skidded.

I remember watching the two cars collide. There wasn't any loud screeching, or loud crash or anything when they hit. I don't remember any sound at all really, just everything slowin' down. The Le Car crumbled around the BMW, until they both went flyin' off to the sides. Then I remember runnin', first to the BMW, 'cause it was closer. The man inside was leanin' back in his seat, his mouth gapin' open like a fish. He had a dazed look on his face. A deflated air bag drooped in front of him. I ran over to the other car. I was halfway across the street when the driver side door fell off, and a woman fell out of the car. She was sprawled out, layin' on her back, lookin' up at the sky. I remember seein' that she wasn't wearin' a jacket. I knelt down besides her and took off my jacket. She gave a noise like she was chokin', then this blackish blood kinda popped out of her mouth and onto her cheek. I put my jacket over her. She was still tryin' to breathe and chokin', only now she was lookin' at me. She tried to say somethin', her mouth moved. I looked back into her eyes; I don't know why, but I wish I hadn't. I could tell exactly when she died. Her eyes weren't starin' at me anymore, they were jus' pointed at me. I sat next to her for a while. I wasn't sure what to do, so I did the only thing I could think of: I closed her eyes.

I used to love the Discovery Channel, especially the shows on snakes. The day Milisa died, Lara and I were watching this show on snakes and lizards. They featured this kind of snake that, when it's attacked by a predator, its back half automatically breaks off and begins jumpin' around, while the front half lies still. The predator goes after the part that's jumpin' around, and while it's busy eating the back half, the front half sneaks off.

I had nightmares about that for years. I'd dream that I'd get attacked by some monster or something and the only way any of me would be able to survive would be to leave half of me behind. Then I'd split, and I'd watch half of me go runnin' off, free, while I waited for the monster to eat me, and I didn't even have the comfort of dying whole.

Gregg and David walked slowly down the sidewalk, hands in their pockets, looking at the concrete in front of them.

"How is Lara doing?" David asked.
"She's not," Gregg said.
"Has she said anything yet?"
"No, she just keeps staring blankly at nothing, like she's still seeing that guy. They've had to start feeding her through a tube."
David sighed, trying to keep the water in his eyes from spilling onto his cheek. “She’s gone, isn’t she?”
“A large part of her is.”
“I wanna see her,” David said.
“Me and John are going back tomorrow afternoon,” Gregg said. “You can come with us if you want to.”
“Yeah”

I know it sounds stupid, but I’ve got a dream girl. I dream about her five or six times a month. It’s the same dream. I meet this beautiful girl, and I fall in love with her, and I’m happy. Happier than I’ve ever been in real life. At the end of the dream I’m lookin’ down into her face and she’s lookin’ back up at me.

That’s usually when I wake up. She looks so familiar, but I don’t know where I’ve seen her before. She’s got the most beautiful eyes.

It was a hot day, in the mid-afternoon. The sun was shining hard. A young woman sat in the shadow of a tree, a diary on her lap. She vaguely watched the eight high school kids playing basketball as she chewed on her pen. She didn’t notice the three older men walking up the path toward the court from the other side of the park. She didn’t notice that they wore jackets in the summer. She didn’t notice them until she heard them speak.

“Yo, Ty!” the middle one yelled. The game suddenly stopped, and one of the older kids came out of the crowd of players.

“What’s up G?” he said, holding the basketball in one hand. He stood casually, head drooped to one side.

She wondered why these guys were so important that they could stop the game.

“Your time’s up, motherfucker!” the man said, reaching into his jacket. Suddenly, everyone was running. She remembered the look of fear in his eyes as he ran. Everything slowed down. There was a bang, and Ty’s head exploded into a red mist. The body ran five more steps before it tumbled to the ground, right in front of her. She stared down at it.

Her mind was screaming at her, but she couldn’t move. She felt something inside her snap off as the blood began to seep toward her.

These kids were too young to have to deal with this shit. They weren’t but fifteen, and already one of their friends was gone. She wasn’t dead, but part of her was. And all her family and friends were comin’ by to see her and mourn that part of her that was dead.

I watched as they walked into the room where Lara was staying. I was visitin’ her as well. I’d also come to see her and mourn that dead part. I said hello to John, her twin brother.

“Hi Dan,” he said. He introduced me to his friends with that strained politeness people have when they don’t feel like being polite. “Dan, this is Gregg and David. Dan is the guy who helped Milisa after the accident.” They nodded at me, rememberin’ the story John told them about the stranger who put his jacket on his older sister just before she died. I shook their hands. We all stood there for a few seconds looking down on Lara. Someone had closed her eyes. I decided I should leave, and let them alone with her. I was just a friend of the family.

I guess they were too good for this world. Why else would God take them away? They were too perfect for the Earth; they belong in heaven. Milisa’s there anyway. I’m sure Lara will join her soon. Nobody can live long like that. I used to think that she would wake up.
Sometimes hope seeps in, and I think she will come back to us. Hope is a wonderful thing, but it is dangerous. It would be easy to fall into false hope. To spend every day sitting next to that bed, like I spent the first three weeks after it happened. I sat there until I couldn’t stand it. She just lay there, twitching, like she was about to wake up, like she was having a bad dream. I guess she kinda is.

You know, it would have been easier if she had died.

I was sittin’ in my apartment on my day off, watchin’ TV and this beautiful woman with these beautiful eyes came on. I was sittin’ there, all relaxed, but when I saw this woman, my heart started poundin’. I started breathin’ hard, and I couldn’t sit still anymore. I don’t know why, I jus’ had to start movin’. So I got up, turned off the TV, and started walkin’ around my apartment. There ain’t much room to walk in there, so I went outside, and I started walkin’ around as fast as I could. I started thinkin’ about the woman on the TV. Why did one look at her get me goin’ like this? So I thought. I let my mind wonder, go wherever it wanted. Let it figure this one out.

First it went to my dream girl, and I noticed that her eyes were jus’ like that woman’s. For a second, I though that was it. The woman on the TV looked like my dream girl. But that wasn’t it, those eyes were still naggin’ at me. I got the urge to drive. I had to go somewhere. So I walked back to my apartment where my car was parked. I saw my car, reached into my pocket, to get my keys, and stopped. Parked right next to mine was one of those little Le Cars.

That’s when I knew. Those eyes, the ones that the woman on TV had, the ones my dream girl had, were the ones that belonged to Milisa, and her sister. I stood there, jus’ kinda gapin’ at that little Le Car. Suddenly, I needed to see those eyes. I jumped in my car and peeled out towards the hospital. The drive was only twenty minutes long, but it seemed like forever. Every light turned red in front of me, and there was always a cop at the intersection so I couldn’t run it. I kept gettin’ stuck behind every driver intent on goin’ twenty-five.

When I got to the hospital I parked right on the front curb and ran in. I had to slow to a walk when I got in, but I walked as fast as I could. I walked into the room where Lara was still stayin’. There was only ten minutes on visitin’ hours left, but it didn’t matter. I jus’ needed a look.

As I walked up to her bed, I started feeling cold, like it was winter inside that hospital. She lay sprawled across the bed lookin’ at the ceiling. I knelt down beside her and looked into those eyes. She looked so much like her sister. I noticed that she wasn’t covered with a blanket or anythin’. I remember wonderin’ what were those nurses thinkin’, it being so cold in there and not covering her up with a blanket or somethin’. I took off my jacket, and looked into those eyes. Now they were pointed at me, reflecting the light from the ceiling. I put my jacket over her and stared into the beautiful eyes. Suddenly, those eyes weren’t just pointed at me anymore, they were staring at me. She tried to say something, her lips moved.

“Dan?”
MOTHER’S SHADOW
Nicole Quackenbush

mother’s shadow
moves darkly along the wall
i mark it
from the hidden room with the white
...white-
remembrances first

cunning eyes and pinched lips
and “there little girl mother’s sorry”
and the first shove and stair after stair

until landing
in the kitchen amidst the swarms of
buzzing flies
and “after all I’ve done for you you little bitch”
and the typical shove and stair after stair

in
...white--white--white: hush now little girl
remembrances first
gentle hands and sorry mouths
and a baby picture of me
impossibly tiny and drooling
white white white--this Time
landing

mother’s shadow moves darkly along the wall
i mark it
and creep everso softly in the white
impossibly tiny and drooling.
BOBBY AND THE SHOES
Jen Mrozowski

five years old and he’d shit all over the place,
would wiggle out of his pants and just shit,
old blue carpet was stained with it.
Why do you do it Bobby?
it was only after he’s spent some time with his daddy.
Why do we let him go there?
shit right on the floor of the dollhouse-
didn’t know whether to laugh or yell,
but he’d been yelled at enough.
he’d been yelled at enough,
he shit all over the blocks once,
than pulled over his pants and sauntered away,
after, he was okay for a couple of weeks-
still didn’t talk much, but he was okay.
we played with the toy trucks that night
before he left to see Daddy.
when I came in the next day
there was shit all over the toy trucks.
Your turn, they said.
Bobby was perched on an old pair of shoes,
wild eyes fixed upon a lone clown on the shelf,
he was rocking back and forth,
little hands intertwined, clutching his knees.
“I wish I was a tree. I wish I was a tree.”
It was slick shiny black with gold trim, and Trevor had developed a liking for sitting underneath it and looking at the people's shoes who passed by. His mother, obviously distraught and aggrieved, and who was currently serving pimento cheese sandwiches in cute little triangles, had told him that it was disrespectful to sit underneath caskets, but this did nothing to prevent him from doing so. The visitors came pouring in to show their respects and to see if they could get a good look at him, but it was a closed-coffin affair. It was rumored that afterwards she had to be sedated from so much screaming.

Rylee sat in the back of the room and watched Trevor pulling people's laces and putting puffy stickers on their shoes. She had bought him those puffy stickers. They came with a sticker book, and Grandpa had caught Trevor doing this about two hours ago and had brought the book to him. Sticker World. He had ripped out all of the pages and handed them out like programs in the doorway. Uncle Jackson had filed in and taken one, not realizing that it was a picture of Little Miss Muffit eating her curds and whey. After distributing all the pages, Trevor had crawled back underneath the casket and resumed his business of decorating shoes. Rylee had noticed Aunt Catherine running around with Humpty Dumpty on one of her green snakeskin heels, serving coffee and teacakes.

Most of all the men were in military attire - this being a military ceremony. Shiny gold buttons on navy blue uniforms. Seven flags could be counted in the room. One was placed atop the casket itself. Rylee wondered why the casket was even there. It served no real purpose except to make everyone a little more solemn. Rylee noticed her mother arranging one of the hundreds of rose bouquets. Earlier she had tried to count all of the bouquets, but had lost interest around number ninety-four. Popular guy. She thought that he probably had no idea that he would have well over ninety-four bouquets at his funeral. She wondered about what he was thinking of when he died. Was he thinking about his mother? Herself perhaps? Rylee and Evan had been close. He had written to her every week for the past three months. Were they love letters? Not really. Maybe he was thinking about God. About Heaven. About how many bouquets there were going to be at his funeral.

"Rylee," her mother began in a whisper, "Maybe you should have Grandpa drive you back to the house, and you could change into something more appropriate, honey. More and more guests seem to be coming in." She gave Rylee a pleading smile.

Rylee was wearing faded blue Levis and an army tee-shirt. It had been his shirt, and she had slept in it every day for the past three months. It had a hole in the right shoulder. She was barefoot, and sat with her legs curled up against her chest, hugging her knees. Her hair hadn't been brushed for two days, but Grandpa kept calling her beautiful and kissing her on the forehead.

She watched as her grandma got up from her chair and walked over to meet a friend who had walked in the door. "Oh, Ruth, it looks lovely in here." Her grandma nodded with a smile and led her over to the juice bar. Across the room, Trevor's mother discreetly pulled up her pantyhose and wiped a tear from her right eye, careful not to smear mascara. Outside, a few of his old friends sat on backs of pick-up trucks with their ties loosened and smoked Camels. How many of them would be pallbearers, she wondered.

Rylee slowly lowered her legs down to the floor and stretched her arms above her head. She stood up and walked, slowly but assuredly toward the slick, shiny black casket. Once there, she ran her fingers over the white and red stripes. Tears filled her eyes and threatened to run down her cheek. She sniffed and blinked several times, then looked down. Trevor had decorated her right foot with a puffy Cinderella, wearing a beautiful yellow dress with lace and glass slippers.
Rylee smiled and squatted down so she was face-to-face with Trevor. “Hey, kid-o.” Trevor curled one side of his mouth into a half-smile, but it turned out more like a frown. Rylee bent down further, slipped her legs beside his, and crawled underneath the casket. Trevor put one hand in hers, leaned up against her side and closed his eyes.
I walked home as fast as I could, I had to fight to keep from running. Yesterday wasn’t supposed to be my last day of work, but it was going to be. I just couldn’t go back. I wasn’t really sure why, I’m still not. I mean, I’d been working there ever since I was sixteen. Yeah, it’d been rough the last couple of weeks, but, well, I don’t know.

The company I worked at supplied ice machines to almost every meat packing plant in Chicago’s meat packing district, and fixed all those machine when they broke down. My job was to supply those plants with ice until their machines were working again. As you can imagine this happened a lot in the summer, which is why they hired extra summer workers like me. It’s also why they underpaid us so much.

The stench in those plants is enough to make anyone throw up. It’s so bad inside that it makes your eyes water. I can’t even get myself into the front offices to get the invoices signed. I always have to ask one of the dock workers to go and get it signed for me. It wouldn’t be so bad if it only smelled inside, but the smell outside is almost as bad as the smell inside. All the meat packing plants are right next to each other, creating an area with a three mile diameter that reeks of the decomposition of animal flesh. They dump the refuse that the plants couldn’t use outside. Indistinguishable body parts, half rotten, or contaminated in some other god awful way, are piled along the streets, left rotting for garbage trucks to pick up. All of it’s covered in a thick blue dye that’s supposed to deter the homeless from eating that shit.

So that’s the district where this company is located. Every day I walked two miles to the company, walked around the back, across the small parking lot in back, climbed up the short ladder, entered through the loading dock, past the freezer and into the manager’s office to pick up the truck I was to drive, and whatever ice I needed. The parking lot was old and beat up. If it had been a living thing, someone would have put it out of its misery a long time ago. Pot holes and indentations riddled the old, graying, oily, dust-ridden cement, making all the vehicles wobble horribly as they drove through it.

It was the last summer I was going to have to work there. June and July were pretty normal that year. A little hotter than usual, but not by a lot. The beginning of August is when the hell started. The first six days of the month brought with them some of the worst rain storms I’d ever seen. It didn’t stop raining the entire time. Water, coming down in heavy, pounding sheets, or drizzly mists, assaulted the city for all six days, even making the air wet. Lightning and thunder storms kept the city up nights, booming awake Chicago’s sleeping inhabitants or turning the night sky bright blue or purple for long seconds at a time, shining the bright light in their faces. It was one of the worst weeks of my life. I had to work through that shit.

The storms finally wore themselves out late Saturday night. Though it was still heavily overcast for all of Sunday, the temperature was nice. By Monday all the clouds were gone, leaving bright blue sky, and an angry sun. Frustrated by six days of lost time, it beat down on the city with a vengeance, keeping the midday temperature over ninety, even breaking the one hundred mark for several straight days. The heat wave lasted for almost three weeks, killing fifty two people in the time before it was over.

When I came back to work huge puddles lay sprawled over the cement, saturated with the oil and dust that had covered it before. I jumped over the puddles and went to work as normal, not really thinking of them, I was more concerned with the oppressive heat that made my days that much harder to deal with.

The next morning, jumping over the puddles I noticed they weren’t drying up. The smoking ban in the employee lounge was lifted that day by popular demand. I hate the smell of
cigarette smoke and I started taking my breaks sitting on the loading dock, letting my legs dangle over the edge, staring at the ground, and the puddles.

I'd been doing this for about two days when I noticed a difference between the puddle just to the right of the loading dock and the rest. This particular puddle didn’t have the brown, rainbow tint of oil and dust that the others did. It had a green-yellowish tint. This seemed incredibly odd.

The next day the tint had turned into a lime green. I figured it must be some kind of algae, or bacteria that was growing in the water. The thought fascinated me. The idea that some kind of life could grow in this place seemed so incredible, and algae that could live in oily, dusty water.

But where had it come from? Had it been deposited there by some bird, stopping at this puddle to drink? Had some airborne bacteria landed on the surface of the water and mutated into a water-based organism? I dismissed those possibilities. If they were true, how come none of the other puddles in the lot had something living in them? Surely the birds had drunk from them, too. Surely the bacteria had landed in the other puddles; why hadn’t it mutated them as well?

I kept wondering until an awesome thought hit me. What if this algae was a completely new form of life? What if the components in the water had come together to form a completely new and original form of life? A life form that could live in oily, dusty water, and could feed on the oil and dust, with the sun’s help. That was the answer! A completely new form of life had been created in this place of death. Isn’t that the way it’s supposed to be? New life rising out of old death?

From that day on I took all my breaks sitting on the edge of the loading dock, studying the pool, watching it mature until the algae had formed a green cloud of life in the middle of the water. I sat there, day after day, staring at the green cloud, wondering what microscopic creatures lived in the tiny ecosystem. I imagined what they looked like, what they could do.

Spending my breaks there calmed me down, and made the meat packing plants and slaughter houses which I delivered ice to more bearable.

Almost two weeks passed like this before I noticed that the air had been dried up by the heat, and was now sucking up the water. The temperature was reaching record highs and the water was starting to evaporate at a faster and faster rate.

Almost two weeks had passed before I realized it. This pool dying seemed like it would be the end of the world. I had to save it. I began bringing bottles of water, pouring them into the pool, trying to replace what was evaporating.

This actually worked for a while. And I felt good about it. I was saving this life. I felt, in some kind of childish way as I infused life into this tiny world, like a god.

But I’m not a god, and God quickly reminded me of this. The water was still evaporating fast, and despite my infusions, the algae was dying. The once lime green cloud was beginning to turn brown, and no matter how much water I poured in, it kept turning more and more brown. I tried everything I could think of to keep it alive. I ground up plant food and placed the pieces into the pool. I poured in pure bottled water. I put in pieces of good soil. Anything I could think of to keep the algae alive. But I couldn’t keep it from dying. it just kept turning more and more brown.

Finally, on the second day of my last week of work, I crossed the lot, to where the small puddle lay. It was the only one that hadn’t dried up completely. I was going to pour more water in, and I knew it was a futile gesture, but I couldn’t give up on that pool.

But when I got there it was already gone. The once lime green cloud of life that had floated in a pool of living water now lay in the bottom of the pothole, a brown stain on the gray concrete, already decomposing, already beginning to stink.

When I smelled it, I lost it. I couldn’t face work. I couldn’t handle that smell any more, not that day, not ever. So I turned around and walked home as fast as I could, I had to fight to keep from running.
Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the son of God", he said, "throw yourself down.

For it is written:

He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Matthew 4:5-7

It made the Kalamazoo Gazette even though it happened in Costa Mesa, California. You had to believe it was big news,

"Baby falls 80 feet from cliff and survives­ without a broken bone!"

The facts are simple.

Eight­month old baby boy left unsupervised (the beginning of all sad stories) found a hole in the fence, climbed through and accidentally fell over the edge of a cliff. He landed in the surf and was miraculously deposited by the waves on the sandy shore 1/2 mile from where he fell without a single broken bone. Now, accidents happen everyday, it’s a part of the human condition, but something about this one made people talk of angels. And about our fall from grace and ultimate redemption, about Matthew 4:5-7 and about children, how every one believes himself a little god.

14
Fifty years ago my grandfather shoveled his family’s bones in one of the Holocaust’s burning pits. Now I watch his coffin slowly lower into Baltimore’s dirt. Auschwitz’ sun burned through his skin, but he moved on. Morris, Joseph, Jacob, Mama, and Papa were all there. In his shovel. Helen escaped. She stands by me now. Her eyes stare at the twisting ropes that slip as her brother’s body pulls to the ground. Her wrinkles dig deeper into her face every time she pushes out a tear. I reach my arm around her. The rabbi sings:


I see my father and his brother exchange teary glares from opposite sides of the grave— the bitterness of brotherhood begins to subside— at least for now. I turn back to Helen. She doesn’t look at me. Her hair is still as red as mine. I hold her hand. My fingers press against every line of her palm. I trace what she now forgets.

A shovel passes around the grave. It’s my turn. I mark the wooden handle with my sweat. The dirt spreads across the coffin’s rounded top and seeps around the grave’s edges. I pass the shovel to Helen. She takes it and scrapes up the last of the dirt pile. She hangs the shovel over her brother. Her shoulders hunch forward and her legs tremble. The shovel falls to the ground. So does she.

I put my hand behind her back when she raises her head off the ground. My father stands next to me and watches. Helen looks at me and says, “You’re a good boy, Jacob.”

“Aunt Helen, my name is Daniel.” My father turns his head. There is too much death for one day.

The limousine takes us to my grandfather’s house. I reach for Helen’s hand when I get out of the car. She refuses. She stands alone. Our feet pound against the steps. Old paint crumbles in all directions when I open the door. We walk in. Black sheets cover the mirrors, and wood in the fireplace covers any ashes. “Where is Isaac?” Helen says.

“Grandpa Isaac isn’t here anymore,” I tell her.

“I have to start dinner for him.”

“Aunt Helen, he’s not here.” Her mouth starts to open.

“He promised that he’d tell me where he goes,” her voice rises.

“Aunt Helen, we were just at his burial. He’s not here.” She’s quiet now. She doesn’t look at me. She walks towards the kitchen.

“It was Isaac’s wish . . .” the lawyer begins to read. My father and his brother sit next to each other. They say nothing. Their eyes grip the lawyer’s face. They fight over my grandfather’s testimony, but no one is touched.

The sun goes down. Mirrors are uncovered and light is reflected. I see Helen walking up the stairs. I follow her. She turns when she reaches the top. She walks quietly past my grandfather’s room. I open the door to her bedroom. She crawls into her bed. Her clothes are still on. I pull the blanket up to her chin. “You’re a good boy, Jacob,” she whispers. She then closes her eyes and searches for what is familiar.
I don’t suppose I’ve ever been perfect. Even close, really. I never seem to do things at the right time. Everyone else I know seems to live their lives in a straight line. One action leads to another leads to another, culminating in some big whole. A life. Something where you can look back and say, “This is where it all began.” There was this guy who used to come into the coffee shop where I worked. He made this big speech to me once while I was frothing his cappuccino about how we have no way of knowing whether we really are moving forward in time, or whether once we finish things they continue on anyway, at the same time that we are all supposedly going forward, away from them. I think he took a lot of drugs. It kind of described my life, though.

When I was fourteen I rammed my friend Sam’s Volkswagen into the back of a red pickup. Sam was just this friend of mine since I was in grade school. She was a couple years older than me, but we both had a lot of people we didn’t like in common. We hung around each other a lot back then, so when she got her license she began driving me places, and she finally just taught me how to drive, and let me use the car while she was in school. It was one of those foggy morning mornings, and I had just dropped Sam off at school, and was heading out to So Cruel, which was this vintage store one of my friends Matt worked at. I was thinking about whether I was going to get some good Brazilian coffee from Netcho’s across the street, or whether I ought to stop at a 7-Eleven and get the cheap shitty kind, and I was driving with both feet on the pedals, which I know was stupid, and the intersection at Weaver and Dragon came up and I was thinking, wouldn’t it be cool to live on Dragon Street, and sign all your postcards that way and instead of hitting the brake I hit the gas and it just sort of happened. So I got points on a driver’s license I didn’t even have yet, and Sam was kind of pissed off at me even though the car hadn’t gotten dinged up all that bad. I got scared and quit driving. I never took driver’s ed or anything. Everyone tells me I should go in and take the test, but now all my friends have cars and they can drive, so I really don’t need to.

Christ, that was a long time ago. That was right about when my mom found out that I hadn’t been to school in three months. She yelled at me a lot and asked me where all the lunch money she’d been giving me had been going and I said “Lunch” and she yelled at me some more and then she called my dad in Montana and he yelled at me for a while. I tried going back to school and doing my homework and stuff, but it was just really weird. I was hanging out with all these kids I hadn’t seen in a long time, and they all thought I was so cool for having gotten in a car accident and not having gone to school for three months. The homework was really boring and nobody did it anyway, just hung around and talked about dumb stuff. They all thought my name was so cool because it used to be Lauren, but then I changed it to Loren and Matt at So Cruel started calling me En so I got used to answering to it. Everybody passed each other notes all the time, too. I’d open my bookbag and find five or six of them stuffed in there every day. They all said weird stuff like, “Enny enny ho ha!!!!!! I’ve fallen towards the center of the sun!!!!!!!” Real dumb. So I started skipping classes, and then days, until I wasn’t going at all again. I got into some more trouble, but finally my mom just let me test for my G.E.D and I passed, so that got her off my back.

My mom said, though, that since I didn’t have to go to school any more, I’d better get a job, which is when I got that job at the coffee shop. I worked there for almost a year, and I really liked it. All different kinds of people would come in there. Early in the morning and around five o’clock it would be like yuppies, and other people getting coffee on their way to work. On weekday afternoons we’d get like, retired people, usually old men, and people who really didn’t have homes, and some people from the community college nearby. Nighttimes we’d get all sorts of people, really trendy types, and full-blown punks and couples all dressed up coming from a
play or a movie. I had friends that stopped in too, and they'd sit behind the counter with me. The manager quit though, and the new one was a real asshole, so I quit too, and got this job at this science center through this friend of my mom's. At first I thought it was kind of boring, but Mavis, my manager, let me read the books in the gift shop when no one was there, and taught me how to do tours, which I really liked. We'd get these huge groups of third graders, and preschoolers even, tromping through the halls, and they'd say the weirdest things. They all treated me like an adult too. It was really funny.

This little kid came up to me last night after one of the planetarium shows and started asking me all these questions, like do I run the lasers, has anyone gotten killed by the lasers, stuff like that. So I started telling her stuff like no I don't run the lasers, did you know that the lasers are soundless, and that they tape sounds to make it sound like they do because people expect lasers to make noise and they're disappointed when they don't. Then I started to tell her about the constellations, because I've been reading a whole bunch of books about them in the gift shop. She was one of those carefully maintained little kids, with a tidy pixie haircut and a coordinated kiddie ensemble, and she listened intently, breaking in with another stream of questions every thirty seconds or so. We moved over to the glossy hardwood bench by the entryway, and this woman with the same heavy brown hair as the little girl ran up and said, "Oh there you are, Julia, I've been looking all over for you." She smiled at me and said, "Thank you for being so patient."

I told her it was no trouble at all, and she took the little girl by the hand and said, "Come on Julia, let's go and get some milkshakes." Julia said "yeah" in this tough growly little voice and we both laughed. The mom looked over me and grinned. "I swear, I eat so much more now." I realized her stomach was bulging outward slightly beneath her long flowered dress. Oh. "Yeah," I said, without even thinking. "It's really weird. I ate, like, all the time, even though I threw up most of it."

"Oh," she said. "You have children? For some reason, I thought you were younger."

I felt really stupid. "I was only pregnant for a while."

She got this really funny look on her face, then gave this weird smile and turned to help Julia, who was struggling to put on her windbreaker and had only managed the hood so far. They both walked out the door and Julia waved goodbye to me and I waved back, thinking *dumb En, real dumb. Pregnant ladies don't like to hear about other people's abortions.* I looked over at Mavis, who was thankfully out of earshot, shelving books over in the children's reading corner. She looked really strange there, crouched on her knees in her long blue dress and eyeglasses-on-a-cord among all those little tables and chairs. I walked over to her. "Mavis, it's pretty much thinned out, is it okay if I take my break now?"

She looked up distractedly. "Sure, I don't see why not. It's hard for us smokers, isn't it?"

I grinned. "Yeah."

It was already a deep dark blue outside, and the stars were beginning to come out. I was glad I'd put on my coat. Winter was coming, even though I could still smell the dry leaves in the air. The science museum was all lit up behind me, yellow floodlights illuminating the choppy pool in front of the wide stone steps. As I watched, someone shut off the fountain from inside, and the sprays of water sputtered, then fell and sank into the pool. Far off, past the edge of the museum, I could see the orange lights in the parking lot, and a steady stream of headlights merging onto the highway like a river. I lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, then breathed the smoke out into the still night. I could hear the water sloshing gently in the pool.

Steve was the only boy I ever got pregnant with. He asked me to marry him when I told him. He was a senior, and was planning on going into the Navy anyhow, so I think he liked the idea of taking someone along with him. I told him no, because I didn't really like him all that much, and because I thought it might have been Jeff who had gotten me pregnant. Now that I
know more about that kind of thing, though, dates and all that - I'm pretty sure it was Steve. He went with me to the clinic and waited for me and then drove me back to his house when it was over and we watched movies on his sofa. It was kind of weird. But see, that's just like my life, though. Some guy proposes marriage to me when I'm sixteen, and the way my life works out probably no one will ever propose to me again.

I threw my head back and looked at the stars my life is so fucked up my life is so fucked up my life but I know every fucking constellation in this huge black empty sky.
A TOAST TO ABSENT FRIENDS
Heather Smith

Nothing darker than the black sky at three a.m.
The traffic light swinging noiselessly in the pale snow.
The world is never more ours than at three a.m.
Existing only for those who are awake to claim it,
*If I can see it, it's there*
Who stand on the concrete steps, looking out at the city, shadowed and contained.
At three a.m. our voices echo off the buildings, the pavement,
the street light.
They sing in the wires above.
At three a.m.
When all time seems to run together.

If I could just drive far enough.
Turn onto the right street.
Houses that don’t exist any more
Would swim forward out of the darkness.
*Houses that don’t exist yet.*
*Houses that never existed.*
And they would be sitting patiently in the warm yellow light of inside,
Waiting for the crunch of tires on concrete.
*Hello hello,*
*It’s been so long,*
*Come sit with us awhile.*
The snow moves around us: loose white waves in the slow wind.

Life moves unevenly,
Sprouts strange bulges and growths,
Becomes clotted and unwieldy,
An unruly, sticky child.

It is good to be here now.
When all things converge,
On one quiet point.
A globe of air and snow and darkness.
SNACK BREAK OF THE GODS
Heather Smith

Sitting on a green vinyl stool
At the lunch counter at Kresge's
With the looming saint in black rimmed sunglasses,
An impeccably dressed woman in a camel coat.
Stegosaurus cropping weeds by our feet
Plated head huge and heavy as an anvil
Lumbering gracefully through the thick
Steaming vegetation
The rows of brightly colored polyester clothing.
HOT BLUE IMAGES OF A HOPEFULLY REMEMBERED NIGHT
Lizzie Kostielney

Manna-tongued, savory sweetness.
Smoky interior, sweltering heat...
    blistering sweaty bubbles on my back,
Bath water running with the silent TV flickering an outdated and overrated
movie.
Window’s open   Curtain’s still
I slowly feel the scratch of the sheets, intertwined between my legs they rustle
And the water stops
The sound of silence buzzes like the neon sign and I can hear breathing in
my head
A half-emptied, warm soda on the shaggy floor.
The parade passes by in glorious, silent color
An interlude of splashing water, maybe puddling the floor
Rumbled shirt strewn on the dresser mingling with the key and wallet
The heat continues to blanket me and I can feel the sheets clinging to my bare
skin
A solitary fly crawls across the mirror
The water drains
And the brilliant blue light washes over me as you open the door.
NO MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN
Christopher Wells

So Tim, what have you been doing lately? I mean, as far as your painting goes.
Nothing. Nothing at all, unfortunately. Haven’t had the time.
Studying?
Oh yeah.
Studying like hell, huh?
Constantly.
No shit, man. I know what you mean. I had this psych exam, studied all day and all night
for it. I got about five hours of sleep or something like that. Not good. My body can’t handle
that.

Yeah. Painting is definitely something you can’t do during exam week, you know?
Oh, I couldn’t imagine it. It’s the same with poetry. I mean, occasionally you get
someone like Doc Williams who can pull off being a pediatrician and a poet at the same time, but
that’s pretty amazing.

No kidding? He was?
Yeah.
I didn’t know that.
Pretty fucking amazing, huh?
Oh yeah. Definitely. Maybe that’s their problem--too much on their minds, having to
worry about making a living. So they get pretentious.--He waved his hands at the walls, in a
gesture meaning that he was talking about those paintings.--I am so sickened by art today. All this
postmodernist trash.

Upon hearing that, Bill let out a half-moan, half-grunt. He was in the middle of sipping his
coffee.--It’s not all that bad, Tim. You just got to give it a chance.

Well, not all of it’s bad. Most of it, though.
Just takes time to understand. It’s designed to take a little thinking, maybe even some
explanation.

That’s just the problem. Art shouldn’t have to be explained.
Well, not all art should have to be explained. That would get old pretty fast, everybody
knows that. But some paintings, some poems . . . well, it can really add to it sometimes.
Obscurity can add.

No, no. Not that kind of obscurity.
Well, then, I guess we disagree.
It’s got to be felt, not necessarily understood with the mind.
Oh, on that we agree completely. Art for art’s sake, too--if that’s what you like.

Yeah, that is what I like. You said it in just four words. But that kind of talk isn’t
flourishing in the art world today. It’s always art for this or that cause. It isn’t made for itself, for
it’s own sake--not at all. It’s made to change people’s minds. To “enlighten” them about
everything they already read too much about in the papers. That kind of art won’t last, either. No
one wants to hear yesterday’s news.

I suppose that, to an extent, you’re right. Postmodernism is getting just as puritanical
about political art as modernism was about cutting that shit out completely.

Yeah. Absolutely.--Tim ate the last bit of his omelette.--Damn, the food is so good here.
We’re lucky our college is just a couple blocks down from here.--Then he was silent for awhile,
lost in thought. A dreamy look came over his face. He then opened up a religious tract which a
man in a suit handed him on the way here. New Testament Bible, sirs? he asked them. No
Bill threw his tract away as soon as the man was out of sight. Religion wasn’t his thing, as he said, but being a nice guy he didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

So what does it say?

Oh, you know, the usual fundamentalist spiel. Did you know that Jesus Christ was God’s Son sent as an atonement for your sin? Did you know that God loves you so much that HE would have sent His only begotten Son to earth if the only human on earth was you? The Bible says that God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to die a terrible death, that whoever would believe in Him would have everlasting life in the presence of God! (John 3:16) Pray this prayer now: ‘Dear Jesus, I believe that Your blood has the power to save me, and I accept Your gift to me so that I may spend eternity with You and Your Father. Please create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me through the power of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. In Your precious name Jesus I pray, Amen.’ If you prayed that prayer and meant it with your heart, you will spend eternity with God and the rest of the believers!

OK, OK, I’ve heard enough, said Bill. That’s some pretty wacky shit there.

Oooo, but here’s something interesting.

You might as well read it. As long as it’s interesting.

It’s a little Bible trivia question they put at the bottom. Is there marriage in Heaven?

Well, Bill, what would you say?

From what I know about Christianity, which isn’t a whole lot, I’d have to say yes. Nope. Then all it says here is to see Matthew 22:30.

No way! That’s just crazy! I mean, don’t angels have sex?

I don’t know. I don’t think so.

Well, in Paradise Lost?

I’m pretty sure it’s in there somewhere.

That’s interesting. That is what fornication means. And if there’s one thing I know about Christians, they’re against it.

Yep, that’s very true.

And Milton was very devout. He was a Puritan, for God’s sake, I think he knew what he was talking about.

The conversation abruptly ended there. Bill sipped his coffee and looked over to the side, as if he were looking at something specific. Tim looked in the same direction. He couldn’t see anything but the dull brown paneling of the wall—not even a painting hung there. Must be thinking. Tim wanted to continue talking, not about this, but about something else—anything else. He hated talking about religion, but more than that he hated awkward silence. Silence was good to have when you’re alone, but not when you have company.—I’m sort of nervous about going home, said Tim.

Yeah? Why’s that?

My parents are just so closed-minded. They’ve kept me in a shell all my life. After a year of college, I have a lot of ideas floating around up here—he tapped his head—and I don’t think they’d necessarily like to hear them. I mean, I’ve taken courses in ethics and modernist theology. Well, perhaps you could open their minds up, you know.

I sincerely doubt it.

In any case, said Bill looking at his watch, I have to leave. My parents might be here already, wondering where the hell I am. He stood up taking the check in his hand. Two omelettes, two coffees. I’ll pay, OK?

Oh, sure. Thanks a lot, man.

No problem. You can think of it as a little going away present. See you in the fall, Tim.
Hope you have some good paintings to show me by then.
So do I. I’m sure I will.
Take care.--Bill shook his hand, smiling at him.
Yeah, see ya.
You bet.

Tim continued drinking his coffee alone. That was really nice of him. The discussion was good today—a good, friendly way to temporarily end a relationship. Yet no matter how good it seemed, he still felt an oppressive feeling of loneliness as he nearly always did after talking with Bill. Their friendship wasn’t deep—just enough to make it painful that it could not go any deeper. Usually, he could divert his mind from it, and thus not feel it, but lately it had been getting harder.

Loneliness—a terrible emotion, a feeling that is very hard to get used to and also the feeling he was most acquainted with. A bad combination. Sure, he had friends—he wasn’t a complete outcast, not quite an outsider—but a strange ineffable sorrow gnawed at him and, as long as he could remember, always had, even when very young, too young to know what the word “loneliness” meant. He had a need for other human beings, people who would be willing to share secrets with him and with whom he could share his secrets. As it was, he was empty, or at least he felt that way. Only others could fill this hole inside of him.

He looked over the tract once more. No marriage in heaven. He laughed to himself. Oh, thanks a lot, God—that was my only hope. No marriage in heaven. What a stupid thing. Tim believed in God, and hoped that there was an afterlife because he had always had the feeling that he didn’t belong here. In heaven, yes. It was heaven—of course he’d have a place. If he didn’t it wouldn’t be heaven, would it? At least not a heaven worth believing in. But so far, marriage didn’t look like something he would get to do in this life. He had a hard enough time just making friends and much less luck in dating—how would he ever meet someone who’d love him for the rest of his life? Would she just fall out of the sky and land right in front of him? No—but in heaven, he had always thought that people could get the chance to do what they always wanted to do. Some people could finally have a life that wasn’t so fucked up and dull, like his was. Oh well. He wadded up the tract. Not that he believed in that shit anyway. Not really. Heaven was just a vain hope. It’s easy to see that if you’re honest with yourself. It’s better to believe in mortality—to believe that you just die and forget about everything, instead of eternal life. Anything but that.

These negative thoughts were always in the back of his mind; talking to Bill merely brought them into his consciousness. He was such a nice guy, a good friend insofar as it was possible for a friendship to develop between them. Tim really enjoyed his company, but every time their discussions were over he thought that they had said nothing, nothing real—just words that were empty and, a lot of the time, pretentious. That was what the academic life did to you—made you think you had to use big word and talk about abstract concepts. Dialectics. Modernism vs. postmodernism, etc. It was all so much bullshit. Nothing they said had any importance. How terrible. But it was to be expected. Talking for talking’s sake, bullshit for bullshit’s sake, right? Why not?

He felt painfully separated from others and longed to fit in somewhere, but things always seemed to get in his way—a barrier always erected itself. God, how he wished things were different, how he wished he were different. He had always been shy—that was one thing he hated about himself, the one thing he could not accept. If he could only make the first move and initiate a conversation, perhaps he could form a relationship that would last and deepen with time—perhaps he wouldn’t be so damn lonely. He always told himself that. But he couldn’t do it. Ever. All through high school he refused to join any group, no sports team or club of any kind. He knew that if he did, he would only be dragging himself through the mud, that it would have been a futile
effort to make friends, the real kind of friends--people he could actually feel comfortable calling up and going out with and doing something and really talking to--connecting with. Joining a group would only be putting on a mask, being someone he wasn’t--deep within himself he knew he would be even worse. He wasn’t a jock or a brain or a band geek or an environmentalist or a vegetarian or nice and churchy and conservative like his family. If he was going to be someone, he had to be himself, not a pretender. That was something he believed in and stuck to as a matter of principle, his only principle. And what was he? An artist, someone in love with beauty itself and dedicated to its representation. And though he had a hard time doing without them, relationships had to come second if he was going to be true to himself. He did not think that being an artist was dropping out of society, as his father once told him. Not at all. Did the common people ever realize what a great service he was performing for them by painting? No. Not even his parents understood him, nor his sister. He had often wondered why people didn’t see and value beauty as much as he did. Where was their passion? And Jesus--where the fuck were their eyes, were they blind? The world treats artists like pesky little insects, and often crushes them accordingly. Look at Van Gogh—he painted out of love and died because his love was not returned. Drowned beneath the merciless waves of society. But Tim didn’t want to become accustomed to the idea that that would happen to him. No. After all, it didn’t happen to everyone—it doesn’t happen to everyone who endures the life of a painter. Some people out there actually cared. Some were even willing to take artists in and love them and provide a living for them. Patrons, they’re called—or matrons, he supposed. And he needed to find one. Fuck college—just let me be myself, goddamn it. There had to be someone out there who would love him enough, love his work enough to help him. There have to be people like me in the world. People who are passionate. They’ve gotta be out there somewhere.

I don’t think there’s any need to worry, Tim, his high school counselor told him, I’m sure-positive—that there are plenty of opportunities for people who have talents like yours. People like you are real assets to many corporations. It’s something employers really look for, and it’s quite hard to find. And, on another note, he said, smiling warmly, when you pursue your studies at college you’ll fall in with the right people. I know, I can tell, that at this school you’re socially out of step. When you go off to college you’ll find that there are people just like you out there.

It was a lie. After a year at college he hadn’t met one person who was like him, at least not to any significant degree. Sure, people liked him—some people, anyway—but big deal. That didn’t matter. Bill liked him—so what? Liking people doesn’t mean that you can connect with them. It just means that you like having them around once in awhile to shoot the shit. It meant nothing to him. It had no end other than to pass the time.

He got up from his booth to pour himself more coffee. Black coffee—his only solace was in its bitter taste. While drinking it he found some measure of peace, some means to bear his pain. So strong. Not quite espresso, but thick, really black, opaque. That’s the way he liked it. If you could see the bottom of your cup, it was much too weak.

A group of people entered the restaurant. Three people. Passed him. They were females. Alto and soprano voices. The faint smell of perfume. Amiably talking. But suddenly, he recognized a voice, and as soon as he did a slight excitement—more like a slight sense of instability—came over him. Was it deja vu? One of the voices came from a certain girl he had a class with last semester, Alicia—he didn’t know her last name. It didn’t really matter. Isn’t it funny that when you come to college, surnames become so unimportant?

No it wasn’t deja vu. But he dreamt something...yes, he had a dream the night before. Alicia was in it. He walked back to his booth, thinking all the time that perhaps he should sit somewhere else instead of taking up a whole booth to himself (next to the girls, perhaps)—some group of people might have a greater need of it than himself. But he loved that booth, and the cafe
wasn’t very crowded now anyway. The three girls seated themselves at a table on the opposite side of the restaurant, near the windows in the smoking section.

He now made it his challenge to remember the dream. The memory of it was very vague, but he thought that if he could just remember parts of it, other parts would come back to him and he could put it all together. It was a wonderful dream. That much he remembered. Waking up this morning, he recalled feeling disappointed and yet somewhat, somehow, good. In those few brief seconds after waking, it seemed as though new possibilities had opened up for him and his life. Yes, now he remembered that he wished it were real. But in reality, or what we in the West call reality, he couldn’t remember saying a word to Alicia except to acknowledge her thanks when once he held the door open for her. And it was out of pure civility—he had no ulterior motives. She wasn’t hot or anything, he wasn’t trying to woo her. No, she wasn’t very pretty at all. But something about her did catch his eye, did make him notice her—something made her stick out even in a class of fifty people: she had the grayest eyes he had ever seen. None of this blue-gray or green-gray color that often passes for gray; Alicia had eyes the color of a thunderhead. Having those eyes she would stand out in a crowd of any size. And so it seemed perfectly natural for him to notice her, to acknowledge her existence to the point of knowing her first name. And even if she didn’t stick out, knowing her name wouldn’t be that big of a deal, would it? Of course not. But to dream about her? Was that a big deal? Why would she enter his dreams? Think. Interpret the dream. He recalled reading in some science magazine years ago that everything you dream about tells you something about your inner self. Somewhere in his unconscious mind, Alicia registered and came to mean something to him. But in reality, though—in the real world of real sensations—she was just some girl who went to school with him and whom he never really conversed with, a girl who happened to have an oddly reptilian pair of gray eyes which, he conceded, were nonetheless beautiful in their own way. But was this reality? He knew that there were cultures in the world to which dreams were as real as, or more real than, the so-called reality of the West.

The dream. It was in a coffee house. Not one he had ever been in before. Dark and small and very crowded. Cozy, brown and relaxed and friendly. She wore a silk dress with flowery designs on it, one he had often seen her wear in real life—so long, classy, so feminine. He wanted to touch it... he imagined himself touching it... he imagined himself feeling the shape of her thighs and buttocks through its elegant thinness. Across the table she smiled at him in a way he had never seen her smile before; behind her cool gray eyes blazed a fire of passion, not purely sexual though sexuality was definitely a part of it. Alicia was in love with him. She spoke in her characteristically soft way (this was another thing he had noticed about her) like she was in love with him and moved her hand on the table nervously, near and around his hand as if she ached to hold it but could not yet work up the courage. He also wanted to, but being as shy as he was it was painfully difficult. As she spoke, he listened—he was there for her. My God, how he wanted to hold her hand! Such fair skin she has. Amazingly white, not even freckly like you might expect. And after so much chatting and laughing she said, You know, Tim, I feel like I could tell you anything, absolutely anything at all about me, and you’d still accept me for who I am. And she said it so innocently, in such a pure and sincere way, that he could only reply with what right then became the very truth: Yes, you’re right. You can tell me anything, and I can tell you anything. That’s what love is about right? And then he had done something he could never imagine doing again; he had the courage to put his hand on hers, to take hold of it, to affectionately move his thumb back and forth caressing her skin. It was so soft. Almost like a tissue. Wonderfully fragile. And right at that moment he felt like he would give up all earthly comfort, he would lay down his life, to protect that skin from the slightest blemish. Yes, he wanted to be her knight, manly, brave, and chivalrous—all the things he never was, never had a reason to be—and
she would be his lady, letting her beautiful soul shine through that fairest of skin and those most amazing of eyes forever, and just for him.

He looked over at her. She sat there, talking and laughing with her two friends, the two he always saw her hanging around campus with. And she really was beautiful . . . He wondered what they all talked about, since they were, or at least seemed to be, the best of friends. Maybe if he actually talked to them, if he could muster up the courage to go introduce himself, he would find that Alicia was all that she was in his dream. Of course, she wouldn’t be. That’s absurd, very unrealistic. Probably she’s not anything like the girl in his dream. But he at least wondered how she compared with that Alicia. It crossed his mind that maybe God was trying to tell him something, perhaps revealing who would forever be a true friend to him and perhaps, someday, even his wife. Yes, and God did speak through dreams, didn’t he? All the time. Dreams are very significant and important in the Bible. But then again, there’s no use in getting too optimistic about this. The possibility of divine revelation aside, why did he have this dream? What was its significance psychologically? Interpret it. Be my own psychologist. And he continued looking at Alicia intermittently, not wanting to draw attention to himself and make them wonder why he was staring. That would be embarrassing. He noticed what she was wearing—an outfit he had noticed on her before. Jesus, maybe all this time he was in love with her and didn’t know it! He had noticed so many things about her, never even realizing that he took mental note of them. Strange. Guess the mind really is complicated. She was wearing that beautiful red blouse with blue-jean shorts and sandals—an outfit he now found immensely attractive on her. Usually, he didn’t like red—it reminded him of blood and anger—but on her it was vibrant, exciting. And he wondered if the fact that she was wearing red told anything about her personality, or even her mood that day. Was there anything to that “preferred color” nonsense? No. Probably nothing. Probably a bunch of bullshit that doesn’t mean a thing. But maybe.

And they continued to chat warmly with one another, giggling once in awhile, smiling always. It reminded him a little of his dream, in which he and Alicia did indeed talk about life itself—beneath the surface, avoiding all small talk—like he always longed to do. He remembered another thing about his dream, that they talked about pain and its inevitability. So true. He rarely reflected on pain; though he felt it quite often, pain itself he rarely meditated over. In the dream, however, they did. Well, that’s sort of strange. Wonder why. But that conversation had insight, an insight so profound that in waking it still seemed to make sense to him and have relevance. This is what Alicia told him: The pain caused by alienation is unavoidable—everybody is alienated to some degree. So what can you do about it? Accept it, and share it. How incredibly profound! Was that written anywhere? Did he read that anywhere? He didn’t recall. It didn’t even sound familiar to him, not at all. She said in the dream that only in our alienation can we be completely connected with another—only by admitting that deep down we don’t know the other at all can we know the other completely. But most people can’t accept pain. There’s no reason for it. It’s made people feel so guilty throughout all of history that people had to make up original sin just to explain it. Back when he was interested in the occult, like so many alienated youth, he read extensively on the Kabbalah. In one of the books, he learned that the Hebrew word for “know” also meant “connect”—this was one of the things, perhaps the only thing, from his readings that permanently affected him. To “know” something in the Old Testament meant to fuck, thus connect. The tree of knowledge—the tree of connection of good and evil—had, upon the fruit-eating incident, disconnected humanity. We don’t know one another. We don’t know God—AinSof, as they call him. Alienation—a dilemma humanity has faced since the beginning of time, and here was Alicia telling him the solution: Connection was possible through alienation itself. Amazing! It rang very true to him. Yes. It must be true. And if he had it published, it would be fucking ground-breaking. The connection he longed for was really possible—all he needed was the opportunity.
Perhaps it would really happen someday. Perhaps it would really happen between Alicia and him. He rose from his seat to warm up his coffee, and decided that instead of sitting in his booth any longer, he would sit at a table closer to the girls so he could at least listen in on their conversation. That way he could reassure himself that Alicia was a person he could really talk to. And he really hoped she was. She had to be. Yes. This was the real thing. And he also wanted to get a close look at her and admire the singularity of her being— that was it! It suddenly came to him— this infatuation (or love as it most likely was or could turn out to be) was based on singularity, individuality, aloneness— those gray eyes and that white skin separated Alicia from every other human on the planet. And this is why he had dreamt of her. He ached for his soul and her soul to be alone together. Share their solitude, their alienation. Connect. He sat at a table right next to them.

So what did you do next?
Well, you know, we were dancing—
You started dancing?
Yeah, so what? That’s no big deal. And he let me have my arms around him. Of course, you know, I placed them pretty high at first and then slowly lowered them to the small of his back and finally grabbed his ass.
You did? What did he do then?
Nothing. He acted like nothing happened. And then . . .
What?
I took my right hand off his ass and—touched him. I came right around and touched his dick.
No way! Oh Alicia, you’re terrible!
Of course it wasn’t hard, you know— he isn’t ordinarily aroused by, you know—
You are so bad.
What? You wouldn’t have? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? Come on. I know you’ve done things like that before. You’re not a good girl.
No, but I wouldn’t have done that to Rick. I don’t think gay boys are that hot.
What? You don’t?
No, not at all.
How could you not? What’s wrong with you, Karen?
They don’t think I’m hot, so I can’t think they are. I just can’t.
But that’s just it—
How did he react to all this?
Well, he was surprised—
Well no shit!
—and embarrassed. Just a little embarrassed.
Was it big?
No, not very. Of course, like I told you, he wasn’t aroused right away, but then I got a little closer and put my hand down into his pants. Then he started to get a little hard.
So he liked it? The gay boy liked it?
Oh yeah, but not very much. Very rarely do they like it too much. I told him that I wanted him, told him that I would do absolutely anything for him that he wanted me to, but he told me that he was sorry because he was totally gay and not interested in being more than friends at all. You know what? I think there’s only one gay guy at our school whose dick I haven’t touched yet.
Oh Jesus, Alicia, you are terrible. Very, very bad.
Why? Don’t you ever like to have fun? Gay boys are a challenge. Once, though, one of them even let me suck him off.
Stop that! That’s so dirty! giggled Karen.--The other friend remained silent, just smiled.--I’ll bet there are a lot more gay boys in our school than you think.--She turned and made eye contact with Tim, then said, That guy over there has probably heard everything we’ve said. Now he knows how bad you are, Alicia. Have you been listening? She asked Tim.

He didn’t respond.

Isn’t she bad?

I don’t know, he said, his voice cracking with nervousness.

Are you gay? She asked him, out of the blue.

No.

Do you think lesbians are hot?

No.

See, said Karen to Alicia. I’m not that weird.

Tim, trembling, got up clumsily and pushed his chair in. I’ve got to go, he said aloud, half to them and half to himself.

Look, Alicia, said Karen, giggling. I think we scared him away.

THE END