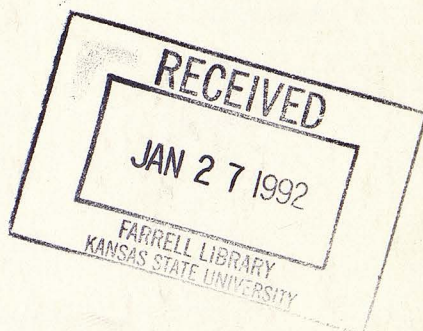


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# TOUCHSTONE

Spring/Summer 1984  
Vol. 20, No. 2

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**TOUCHSTONE**

Vol. 20, no. 2

Spring/Summer 1984

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**TOUCHSTONE** publishes stories, poems, short plays, and artwork. Submissions should be sent to The Editors, **TOUCHSTONE**, Department of English, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506. Please include SASE.





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## Editor's Note

The editors of **TOUCHSTONE** wish to acknowledge the following groups for their support of the magazine. The Kansas State Student Government Association has provided grant money which has not only helped cover publishing costs, but also allowed free distribution of the magazine to student living groups on campus. We would also like to thank the Student Association of Graduate Students in English, the English Department and the College of Arts and Sciences for sizeable contributions. A special thanks is extended to the editors of Literary Magazine Review and Kansas Quarterly for their generosity in letting us use their Olivetti word processor for production.

## Planting

Ramon Lucius

(for B.W. Simms, Udell, IA, 1972)

From the wheelchair he follows me  
My feet his, heavy with loam.  
The spade bites and rings,  
shaking his memory free of the chair.  
He knows the feel of the handle  
worn smooth by the palms of four generations;  
the odor of their sweat lingers in the wood.

In his veins, in mine,  
pounds the pulse of this land:  
produce  
produce...  
When I pause he'll pick the dirt from his nails,  
well pleased with his crop.



## **Irradiancies**

Karen Neuberg

"We are perfectly capable  
of forming and mentally  
manipulating concepts for  
which no word is available."

Ronald Langacker, LANGUAGE  
AND ITS STRUCTURE

The Indians undoubtedly assigned it a word.  
Perhaps it meant "peaceful light," or  
"light that circles a spot and catches the eye."  
They witnessed it on quiet lakes, against  
stone inclines, or dripping into forests.

The Eskimos, too, with nomenclatures  
for seals, for snows, might have named it.  
Coming home across ice,  
a day's hunting strapped to their sleds,  
they might have paused,  
called it by angle, by degree.  
Perhaps it leapt up inside them.

Not so here, amid the buildings.  
Skies are washed pale and forms  
rise into them without illumination.

Against a window backdropped by sky,  
individual plants reach out of pots.  
Some bent, some spiked, or curled, or smooth.  
Each its own shape.  
The Indians might have had a name for it.

## Survivors

Susan Bright

Silent, stiffling like cotton or hurricane mist, the air is full to bursting of death and we continue to fend it off, cutting out wedges of life and health, will not wear the tubes and wires of a hospital bed, will not let body fluids drain into the mortuary box, will not lie down in the coffin. Survivors, we insist on simply, our own lives--the green brilliance of November light, after rain, love, passion, hardwood floors, windows and doors. Nor can we entirely forget there is no difference, no distance between sisters, brothers, lovers, parents. This unity is a fact we balance like justice in our hearts as we stand here on the edge, awake at dawn--fear, helplessness gnawing at our strength. We line up heads held back, hands joined, feet spread to the light, breathing in, breathing out, we meet dawn, not the dawn of the planet, but a flat linear dawn of mortality. We line up to fend off the inevitable, hang on each sign, temperature up, infection down, blood count neutral, life signs waver, the patient smiled yesterday, forgot my name, flicker of fear--no wisdom can intervene. Like insanity, death has its own dialectic, its own cadence and laws. We take on animal sense, abandon the weak, see how the mother cat hisses at the small one, how crows band together to cast the weak ones down, as their souls fall into darkness, as swiftly fly ours and we stand together, these flat mornings, hands spread wide, feet planted like tree roots in the sea. While dawn spreads out its color and the green brilliance of daylight filters up from under, in spite of all we can possibly know we join in timeless litany of "There must be some thing something there must be something we can do--"

## Lightless Houses

Robert Boswell

Sweetwater Junction, population thirty-three (counting Mrs. Berger's daughter who should be back anytime according to her mother), is located where Route 16 and Interstate 12 cross deep in the heart of the Lone Star State, (Texas I mean). The Mobil gas station that sits on the intersection has been run for years by Shorty Dunn. I only work for him on weekends so he can go into Dallas to see the Rangers play or at least go across the county line to Parker and stock up on beer for the week. Sweetwater is dry, the whole county actually.

It was Saturday that I was working and didn't want to be. Brady and Junior, these two friends of mine, had come to me Friday to see if I wanted to go with them to Fort Worth to do some drinking and such. Brady's sister lived there and was gone for the weekend, so we could have the run of the place. But Shorty said he had tickets for the ballgame and wouldn't be back till Sunday. It was hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk that day, which I tried one time and discovered is just a saying. My clothes was clinging stiff tight to myself, and it was near noon that I figured out the fan wasn't working because the electricity was out.

Buddy Smith, a one-armed nigger friend of mine, came over for an ice cream about then, but they was all melted over each other, and he spit and left. All the fuses found to be good, so I thought I'd just sit for the whole weekend because the pumps wouldn't work, but I was supposed to be there, and Brady and Junior had already left, and Shorty wouldn't be back till late Sunday, so I guessed I might as well get paid for sweating.

Long about six, after telling everybody who came I didn't have no gas on account of no electricity, I noticed that nobody else in town had any either, and the whole place was getting dark as all get out. It was about then I started getting this edgy feeling. I didn't know what brought it on, maybe the heat, maybe it was something I ate. I got this all bunched up feeling in my stomach, and I started thinking about things I didn't want to think about. Things I was hoping I'd forgot. The same kind of feeling I get at the movies when I see the hero about to do something he shouldn't, only I can't do nothing because it's up on a screen I got no control over. It don't do no good to yell, because he's going to do it no matter what.

A car pulled off the interstate and stopped at the

pumps, a shiny blue sedan with white walls all around. The woman in it was a pretty city woman. She rolled her window down a crack. "Could I have ten dollars of your premium?"

"Yes ma'm you could, but the electricity is out so you can't."

"Is there another place down the road?"

"Parker's down the road a piece, thirty seven miles."

"I don't have enough for that. Couldn't you siphon some gas from your car? I'll pay you double for it."

"Yes ma'am I could, but I don't have a car. Sold the last car I had to Billy Franks for two-hundred-fifty dollars, a '59 Chevy. But he don't live here. Up and left the whole state."

"Doesn't anyone here have a car?"

"Mrs. Berger has a car, but her daughter Rowena has it right now. She should be back any day though, Mrs. Berger says. Course, she's been gone nearly six months."

"Isn't there someone who could help me?"

"Junior has a Malibu, but he's gone to Fort Worth with Brady."

"Surely someone here has a car."

"If they had a car, they wouldn't be here. Not on a Saturday night. We're dry, you know. If Shorty'd left his truck I could help you, but he took it with him to Dallas."

"Christ."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"Is there a motel nearby then?"

"Parker had one, only they closed it down on account of old Widow Morgan complained about the rats in the place overrunning into her house. Course, closing it didn't get rid of the rats. I thought they might open it back up when she died, but they didn't."

"What about a phone?"

"We got one only it won't work, what with it being out." At the time I told her this, I thought it was the gospel truth, but Shorty told me the phone has a different electricity and so it might not have been out. At this point, she decided to try to make it to Parker anyway and would shut off her stereo and use only the air conditioner and drive real slow and try to make it. I watched her drive off and I got this ticking feeling in my chest that I get sometimes watching people drive away, especially people headed for a long ways off who I won't see again. But she went less than a quarter of a mile before the car died. I pushed her car off to the side and walked back to the station with her.

"Looks like you was pretty dry."

"I guess so."



"Dry as an eighty year old woman's--uh, whistle." I had started to say something as a joke, but I remembered in time she was a city woman. Buddy was there when we got back, and she looked at him shocked like and then avoided looking again. I guess for a city woman such sights as him are strange and unpleasant. I have to admit he wasn't no beauty anyway. What with the heat and the ice cream melted, he was tolerably hot and had taked off his shirt and that black stub arm not more than five inches long was twitching about like the blade of a fan and his skinny chest full of ribs sticking out with them funny black nipples niggers have. I guess she upset him too because he said something about still no ice cream and got embarrassed looking and left. Maybe he just had the same queer feeling I had.

In the meantime, she had gone into the station and was sitting on Shorty's chair. I didn't figure he'd mind.

"By the by, my name's Evert Adams."

She was sitting with her head in her hands and didn't seem to hear what I had said. Her hair was getting wet and straight and some of the city smell was wearing off. "It's nice to meet you, Evert." She straightened up and let out a big sigh, then leaned back in the chair. "My name's Sylvia Warden. I guess I'm stuck here for the night."

"Warden? There's some Wardens in Parker."

"No relation, I'm sure."

"Bunch of 'em. Big family. Can't recall any Sylvias though." She was quiet. "Yeah, well, I guess you are. Stuck I mean. Here."

"I suppose I am. What do you do here?"

"Well, Saturdays and Sundays I run the station here for Shorty while he...."

"No, I mean what is there to do? Is there some place I can stay?"

"Well, there's Mrs. Berger's. She's got Rowena's room empty. I wouldn't stay there, though. She's been known to do strange things since Rowena up and left."

"Could I just sleep here?" She looked over at the couch Shorty sleeps on every night waiting for the ding-ding of a customer driving up to wake him.

"Well, yes ma'am, seeing as how there won't be no customers tonight anyways, I don't need to sleep there."

"Thank you."

"It's no trouble at all. Just make yourself at home."

I carried her luggage from the car and offered to wait outside if she wanted to change, which she didn't. The sun was clean down, but the heat hadn't let up a bit. I always felt that night heat was worse than day heat anyway because in the day you can at least tell where it's coming from, but

at night it just sort of wraps around you like gnats, and nothing feels worse than that. I sat in the chair next to the window and watched the light circles come and go as cars flew by on the interstate. I walked out and looked down the street at all the lightless houses. Even the moon was dark that night and I couldn't shake that quakey feeling in my gut.

I gave the interstate one last look, then went back inside. Sylvia was sitting up on the couch. She had unbuttoned her blouse a little bit and was fanning herself with last month's issue of "Field and Stream." "God it's hot," she said.

"Yes ma'am, it sure is."

"What do you do nights like these? You must do something."

"Usually we have lights and there's more to do." Each time a car went by outside I could see her clearly. Her hair was all sweated up and laid stiff on her neck. Her face was a runny red from her make-up sliding down.

"Like what?"

"Well, there's T.V."

"God."

"The Rangers on the radio. Sometimes me and Junior bring some beer back from Parker and play spades and drink. Other nights we just talk."

"About what?"

"Oh, the Rangers mostly, or the Bible, Jesus and stuff, you know. One time about the Apostles, but just once. Then sometimes about things we'd like to do, or what we're going to do once we get a little ahead."

She lit a cigarette. "Care for one?"

"Thank you just the same. I don't smoke." I looked up at the clock, but the hands was froze still in the darkness. "I know, I'll get the flashlight, and we can play some cards." I went over to the desk and found the flashlight, but it took me a few moments to locate the cards. When I returned, I shined the light over at her. She had taken off her blouse and only her bra covered her breasts. "Excuse me," I said and turned my head quickly.

"Jesus, don't worry about it. It's just too hot with that on. Really, Evert, I'm not naked."

"No, ma'am, I never said that." So I turned around and went ahead and looked at her bra while I shuffled the cards. I tried to just think about the cards, but by now my stomach was churning up a storm.

"How old are you, Evert?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Lived here all your life?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why?"

"Why, ma'am?"

"Why?"

"I don't rightly know why." I took a big breath. "I guess I was just born here to stay."

"But you could leave if you wanted, couldn't you?"

"Well, yes, I guess I could."

"Why don't you?"

"Well, things, you know, hold you here." I stared hard at the cards and hoped that would be enough for her. I didn't want to go no farther, but I could feel it slipping away already.

"Like what?"

I looked up at her and I could tell she wasn't going to let up. "Oh, I don't know...well...." Then I felt it come on real strong to tell her. I don't know what it was making me feel so strange, making me remember things. Must've been the dark. I'd felt it before, nearly told Buddy Smith one night, but this time it was stronger, real strong, and I just started talking, and I'd promised myself I wouldn't never tell no one, but somehow I couldn't help telling her just then. I opened my mouth and the words started pouring out.

"A few years back I had this girlfriend, name was Thelma May Jennings. She lived with her pa, Old Man Jennings, what everyone at the time called Mack on account his real name was Cyril and he didn't like being called such a damn sissy name, he used to say. Anyways, I don't know exactly how we got started, screwing that is. Excuse me for saying it, but I don't know a pretty word for it. Like I said, I don't know, we just was together one night in the barn and started rubbing about and stuff, and then we were on top of each other. Before we knew it there we was screwing. And I knew we ought to stop, but I just couldn't, that's all, I just couldn't."

She'd looked away at first a little embarrassed, but she looked hard at me now, almost smiling and said, "Go on, I'm listening."

I almost didn't tell her no more. I thought she might be laughing at me, but for just that reason I went on. I knew she wouldn't understand unless I finished. "Well, we went on like that, meeting in her daddy's barn and things for a few months. Come to find out she was pregnant. God, Mack was mad. He was going to kill me, only he didn't. He just told me to stay away from his farm, and he hit me one time on the jaw, knocked me clean down. He was a hell of a man, I tell you. And if I'd 've had any sense, I would've

stayed clean away from there. But he took Thelma May out of school, and I felt I had to see her, I just had to. You know what I mean?"

She just nodded her head and then rested it on her hand. I could tell she was interested. I'd left the flashlight on the table and it shined not quite on her, but I could see her pretty good. She was listening all right. So I started talking again, only my voice was getting a little shaky and I could feel all the sweat on my body.

"One night I come round late and real gentle like I knock on her window and she sees me. I motioned for her to meet me in the barn. Wasn't that I was in love with her so much as I just had to see her. I mean, the damage was done anyway. I got her over on a haystack next to a window so I could look for Mack all the while, and we started screwing. I'd just straighten my arms up every now and then to look out the window for old Mack and just keep screwing her all the time.

"Well, I raised my head up and there was Mack with his shotgun. When he seen my head he took a shot but he wasn't really trying to kill me because he had it pointed down. Hell, he missed the whole window and splintered up part of his barn. When I ducked my head down, he just went inside thinking I would run off. And I watched him go in, still pumping all the time on old Thelma. I look down at her face and it's all pale. I go to tell her that it's all right, he's gone, when I see the backside of her head is blowed clean off." I stopped, I was getting too shaky feeling to go on. She was staring at me, not moving, waiting for me to go on. "And I...." I stopped again. I looked at her hard. She edged up to the end of the couch, all the time looking back at me. Her face didn't look real in the dark.

"What?" she asked. "What?"

I looked away from her. I tried to focus my eyes out the window, somewhere in the black, then I went on. "And I knew I should stop screwing her. But I couldn't quit. I just couldn't. I went on and finished and run out of there." Her eyes are wide at me now like I'm some devil, only I'm not through. "Old Mack, he found her that night, I reckon. Because they found him next to her in the barn. Seems he stuck that shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. And Doc swears he must have shot one barrel and then the other. Shows you just what kind of a man he was. Anyway, they found them a couple of days later, lying there both of them with the backs of their heads blowed off."

When I stopped, there wasn't nothing but that empty quiet, like when you go see an old friend and neither one of you can remember what you used to talk about or why you even



liked each other. Can't nobody stand a quiet like that. So I went on. "Everybody blamed Buddy Smith because he used to work for Mack, and they figured that he'd been screwing Thelma and Mack had caught them and tried to kill them both. Didn't make too much sense, but something like that makes people crazy and they got to take that craziness out on somebody so they did on Buddy. Only I couldn't let them kill him, so I lied and told them I had been with Buddy that night and he hadn't screwed nobody. They believed me, only Brady's brother, Billy, and some of his friends, they still went to beat on Buddy and fix him so he couldn't screw no more white girls. He got cut up so bad he finally lost his arm and his dick was whittled so it never worked right again. He was always pissing in his pants till he finally took to using plastic bags." When she figured I was done for good, she just looked away. We sat that way for awhile--me with my shirt sticking to my back, still shaking a little, and her, in her bra and skirt, on the couch looking away.

Finally I said, "I guess that's why Buddy Smith and me been good friends, because he figures I saved his life." She jerked her head back around to look at me. "So you see, I can't leave here, not with all that holding me here, not with Buddy and all still here. I can't just up and leave. You see? I couldn't just do that."

She started shaking her head. "Why not? Jesus Christ, I'd think you'd want to get the hell away from here."

I just looked at her. I should've known she was a city woman and what has she got to hold her there? Not a damn thing but buses and hard sidewalks and radio stations clean up and down the dial. I got this at least. There's Buddy Smith and all the rest that I remember holding me here. But she wouldn't never understand that. So I just stood up and walked outside and sat against the wall and watched the car lights on the interstate come and go.

I watched them a pretty good spell, not saying a thing and trying to think the same. But the cars just quit coming. So I sat there and looked at nothing, like looking at a movie screen between pictures. Finally I spotted flickering specks a long ways off, and I watched them grow. About then I heard her walk over to the window. She scratched her hand on the screen like a cat does.

"I'm sorry, Evert. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"It's all right," I said. "I just thought I'd look at the cars for awhile." I heard her turn and walk back to the couch. Something in the sound of her skirt swishing between her legs seemed exciting. The lights was getting closer and I could see others behind them. I stood up and looked in the

window. I could barely make her out, but as the car on the interstate got nearer, I could see her pretty good. Then it was that something come over her face, like she just remembered a secret, while she was standing there staring at me staring at her. Right as the car lit up the room, she unzipped her skirt and let it slide down her legs.

A diesel was not far behind the car, smoking down the interstate, its cab bouncing on bad springs. The bouncing made its lights flicker and watching her in that light through the window seemed like watching an old movie, where people moved too fast and too jerky. We stood there in the shaky light without twitching till the room got bright and she undone her bra and let it fall.

With the diesel gone by, I could just see where her body was darker than the dark around it. For a long time, I couldn't pull my eyes away from that. Finally, I turned and looked off down the interstate, but there was nothing. I looked back in and she was moving, feeling her way to the desk. She found the flashlight and turned it on, letting it shine up to the ceiling.

I opened the door and stared at her. She looked pretty, everything rounded by the dark. I walked in but I stayed back against the wall. I thought for a moment I heard another diesel and looked out the window, but it was me making sounds inside that I got no control over. She walked up close to me.

"Have you made love with anyone since then?"

"Well, ma'am, I...." My throat starched up and I couldn't get no answer out.

"Have you screwed anyone since Thelma?"

"No, ma'am."

"Would you like to screw me?" Her hands touched me at the sides of my stomach and I could've sworn they were moving right through me.

I felt the shakiness build hard again. "Yes, ma'am, only I couldn't do that. I mean it wouldn't be right."

"Why? What's wrong? Are you scared?"

"No, ma'am, but it doesn't seem.... You think we're right for each other? It would be the same thing over again because you're a city woman for good, and it's the same, you see?"

She dropped her arms from my sides. "No, I don't see." She looked down, kind of sad and hurt, and it was just too much. She being pretty and naked and all, I felt it starting to slip away again, out of control, and I wasn't really able to stop it. She could have understood, only she couldn't help it either. It's too hard to sometimes--understand, I mean. So I did again what I done before, and I screwed her

on Shorty's couch. Course she didn't get her head blown off and Buddy Smith didn't get hurt none, but if I could've held out, maybe I could've evened things up some, and maybe then I could've got the hell out of old Sweetwater Junction once and for all. But some things you got no control over and they're too hard to change, and them things hold you down.

Right as I was screwing her the lights came on, and even though she was just as pretty lit up, something about it all seemed silly, the two of us grunting away. Maybe I should've stopped, but I just ducked my head into her shoulder and closed my eyes and finished in a dark I made myself.

## Choices Apprehend You

Anne Cherner

I.

Choices apprehend you as  
in the question "what-to-wear":  
the clutch of dresses that rustle  
on their clothes store rack,  
would they fade in your closet--  
tags still fastened by gold safety pins,  
unworn, already out-moded?

Thinking of how you drag yourself upright  
each morning, all the betrayals  
that stick in you like knives--  
Saint Sebastian, pierced with arrows  
presented himself to the emperor  
as living proof of the power  
of God. Later pin-makers prayed  
to him, archers invoked his name  
to make their aim more true.

Who is your patron, you who want  
a little remembrance  
in another's mind? Not only  
for your appearance although  
in the right dress you're not bad,  
the dress you won't wear  
though if you found it and tried it,  
there's a good chance you'd buy it.

It's not an issue, after all,  
of what you can afford,  
not a question, finally,  
of the right occasion,  
the handsome escort in black tie,  
tux and tails. It's yourself,  
afraid to appear  
at your improbable best.  
That it wouldn't suffice.

A saint wouldn't surround herself  
with pictures of her beauty  
to recall their subject  
after it had gone.



It's a different motive  
that summons you stripped  
to the mirror.  
What will you take as cover  
against the room's full attention?

The cloth of a feathered cloak  
dragging in a loose train?  
Is it camouflage you want?  
You have felt lines  
gathering in the design  
of his mute desire  
but you've only the reflected glance  
of your regard returning.

Yet, as bricks are laid  
over mortar and stones  
chastened by hand,  
the very vaults of this ballroom  
are alive. The radiance.  
Sheer falls of a supple fabric.  
Your armor is this tender silk.  
Take it on trust, though it rends.

Take it to bear you across  
the expanse of their gaping eyes.  
Under the skirt, your thighs part  
in the first gesture.  
The music is sonorous,  
you are serene.  
Any minute it may happen.

The martyred saint  
is only a mist in your mind  
as it moves forward  
on the swell of your step  
to the matching moment.  
Don't think of that stifling  
room under the stairs,  
the wrench that lingers  
in severed flesh as when Irene  
nursed the sunken shafts  
from Sebastian's skin.

He did not curse,  
he thought his agony blest.  
Eternity's magic lived in his future  
like an empty room that, louvered

in a continuous light  
is not fixed to the family house  
which silently endures  
the scarf of rain in straight  
windless fall spanning the empire  
and beyond to the blind sea.

The water falls into itself,  
the water returns.  
It does not need to announce itself  
to what it swells.  
You shouldn't let yourself  
go limp like this  
in your partner's arms.  
Even if it were the accepted ritual  
for the evening,  
it wouldn't bring you the bliss  
you believe you desire.

The feeling was always at stake;  
you wanted pleasure to submerge you  
in its silken water.  
Did you go without your clothes  
into a medium where  
you'd float weightlessly  
despite the white web  
of uncertainty over your brain  
or circumstance  
the net about you?

## II.

A man had a major cause to defend,  
a woman nursed the man.  
He died anyway, he wouldn't keep quiet.  
Paintings depicting him  
naked and tortured  
peer from the world's altars,  
documents of agony  
for the devout to ponder  
while lozenges of colored light  
briefly stain mortified flesh.

Cruelty wasn't meant as the message;  
and who knows if afterward  
the saint endured as he'd hoped?  
The point--it comes back to you now  
pausing before your garments

which, though motionless, appear  
to ripple--the point was his faith;  
and the life he had was dross  
compared to the golden nimbus  
he dreamed as his end.

Does a saint secretly crave  
compromising acts of love?  
The virtue of the true believer  
may assume various forms.  
Without conviction  
you will always resist  
the command to dress for dinner,  
the swaying weeds of your closet,  
empty and mournful,  
as you resist the love that divided you,  
its possibility of birth.  
In a swoon you watched the spreading  
lip of a wave open  
to the black sea behind it.  
The damp that seeped through your skin,  
like nitre on a tomb,  
was the touch of loss.

A love with little leeway  
forced open your arms.  
Averting your eyes  
you attempted to hide,  
but alas! your body gave you away.  
So easy it was.  
The blackness in your glance  
narrowed like a cat's eye in light--  
thus to the arrow, its mark:  
you were paralyzed  
because you were pierced.

As the fluting of glass  
is water frozen  
in falling, so this,  
your epilogue, remains:  
a woman waiting for a dress  
to slip over her arms,  
the rustle of a petticoat,  
for the rough feel of the net,  
a satin waterfall  
from the waist  
and space enough  
in the hem for safety.

## Searches

Abby Howell

To Mike

### I

In Brooklyn, at the end of some long blocks  
there is water.  
The cars all try for perfect turns,  
but they could drive on,  
straight as cables.

### II

When we crossed the blue bridge,  
hanging over our city,  
we looked for answers over the gray expanse.  
As if the wider the view, the more we would find.  
As if the narrow streets were not enough.

### III

Too many times, just before summer,  
I looked down the rows of houses and rows of cars  
for some kind of mountains  
and thick evergreen trees.  
I stared too long at the red brick fronts.

### IV

There is a woman with a daughter,  
two weeks dead.  
In dreams, she doesn't know if she wants to forget,  
or if she wants to remember.  
She is surrounded by friends, but her eyes  
follow white birds to the water.

## **The Bruise**

Eric Douglas

Peter's arm thrashed frantically, pushing him under the surface. His legs churned the green water. Every muscle in his body was tense. All he could see were the thousands of bubbles that boiled around him. His breath was leaving him in his panic. Peter was no longer boating with his cabinmates; Peter was drowning.

Finally, he let himself relax, suspended in the warm, murky water. He seemed to float there forever, somewhere beneath the surface, neither sinking, nor rising like the air bubbles that escaped his nostrils. He arched his back and looked up. The bright summer sun filtered through the turbid water. Peter's face and arms were bathed in an eerie warmth. Above him, the surface was a rippling window he knew he had to break.

Peter extended his left leg into the cool darkness below him. His foot sank into the mire at the bottom of the shallow pond. I'm not going to die, Peter decided simply. With one strong kick he pushed himself from the bottom of the pond, broke the surface with a bubbly splash and grabbed the life vest that had been floating directly over his head. Gasping for air, Peter looked around the pond. His friends bobbed, wide-eyed, all focusing on him. His bunkmate, Kenny, was only about ten feet away.

"Pete, you okay?" Peter just coughed, clutching his life preserver. Kenny continued, his voice shaky, "We thought you were just kidding."

Water trickled into Peter's eyes. He responded when he had the air. "No, I wasn't kidding." Holding the preserver for support, he began to kick toward shore, the same way he had done with the styrofoam kickboard at swimming lessons in the pool. Still spluttering a little, he reached the shore where the lifeguard sat, calmly reading his Red Cross lifesaving manual.

Kenny's urgent voice called from the pond, "Hey, we almost had a guy drown out here!"

The lifeguard looked up startled, like a man rudely awakened from a nap. He glanced at Peter as the dripping ten-year-old tossed the orange life-vest into an empty canoe. "Nobody almost drowned," returned the annoyed

lifeguard.

The heat was suffocating, but Peter was shivering as he trudged up the slope away from the little green pond that had nearly swallowed him moments before. Standing on the ridge of the hill in front of Peter was a group of guys from the oldest cabin waiting for their turn in the boating pond. They were just cresting the hill as Kenny had called out to the lifeguard. They had heard Peter coughing as he kicked his way toward shore. Peter knew these boys from the last time he was at camp. They were pretty nice guys, except for Todd. Peter hoped he wouldn't have to face Todd right now.

As Peter neared the teenagers he could hear their boyish yelps and gooselike honks. That sound was particularly annoying coming from Todd. He was not one to leave anything unsaid, and he really had something on Peter now. "Learn to swim, baby!" was all Todd said before he was overcome with cruel laughter.

Peter felt the heat climb up his neck as his face turned red. Something was whirring in the center of his head. He couldn't think of anything to reply and that hurt. He glared at Todd and his smirking companions and stalked on along the trail. Physically, Peter was calm, yet anger scraped at his consciousness just as the grit in his soggy tennis shoes scraped at his heels. "I should have yelled at him," he thought. "I should have kicked him so hard his shinbone would have snapped. I should have--"

"Hi, Peter."

Peter looked up absently. He stammered, "Oh, hi, Beth. What are you doing?"

Peter's cheery twelve-year-old friend replied, "Oh, we're just going back to the cabin." Beth nodded toward her pudgy friend, Shelly. Shelly grinned.

Peter noticed the freckled crimson of Beth's nose and cheeks. "Does that hurt?" he asked, pointing to her sunburnt face.

"Only when I laugh," she giggled and then winced as her nose crinkled from her smile.

Peter laughed aloud at Beth's mixed reactions. Only for a moment had he forgotten what was gnawing at his conscience. He could not swim. Now he didn't ever want to swim. He would have been happy never to come near the water again....

"Peter, Peter."

Peter returned his attention to Beth. "Oh, sorry 'bout that." He half smiled.

Looking at Peter's feet, Beth asked, "Have you been boating?"

Peter stared at his mud-filled tennis shoes and

replied, "Yeah, I was boating."

A silent moment passed and Beth said, "Well, we have to go now. See ya." Beth and Shelly walked away. Peter turned back down the gravel road toward his cabin.

He plopped down on his bunk in the deserted cabin. His feet were sore; his sunburned back was sore; and he was still shaking. He pictured himself beaming an ignorant smile as his life vest rested loosely on his red shoulders. He laughed as he and his buddy rocked the canoe. He caught his breath as the canoe capsized. He could feel the water cover his face as his life vest slipped over his head.

Peter blinked, and bent over to untie his shoes. He pulled on the lace and it slipped into a damp knot. He fumbled with the knotted shoestring, only pulling it tighter until it was hopeless. Then he cried. He buried his face in the cool softness of his pillow. He buried his fear in the breezy shade of sleep.

Set back in the trees, the cabin was usually comfortable. With the rain flaps up, the screen walls let even the slightest breeze pass through. Peter was truly relaxed. His breathing was calm, and, behind his closed eyelids his eyes darted and twitched. He was riding Brandit, his favorite horse, in the corral. They were trotting across the lower pasture--not going anywhere in particular, just going. He was at ease. He was watching TV in the air-conditioned darkness of his basement. He was laughing. Something was so very funny. He wasn't the only one laughing. His friends were laughing too. Peter rolled over onto a cold damp spot on his bunk. He opened his eyes. His friends were still laughing.

"Hey, Pete, why didn't you come to archery? Kenny didn't even hit the target." The voice disappeared in laughter. Peter blinked hard. His bed was damp, and his shoes were still on. His head ached. His stomach tightened, and any hint of a smile vanished from his face. He was awake. Sandpaper was eating his heels as he pried off his tied shoes. Why can't I just forget? he screamed in silence.

His noisy cabinmates had stopped laughing and were getting ready for dinner. Kenny, still red-faced from his performance in archery class, tossed a T-shirt at Peter.

"You okay, Pete?" he asked, flicking a tick off his knee.

Peter was not feeling okay. "Yeah," he replied. "I missed crafts too, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Kenny answered carelessly. "All we did was string beads. Oh, Mike was wondering where you were. I told him you went in sick. Okay?"

Peter didn't answer right away. Mike was their cabin

counselor and he didn't like his campers skipping class. "Yeah, okay," replied Peter finally.

Mike arrived in his usual fashion. "Hey, troops!" he always talked so loud. "Get washed up for dinner, and while you're at it get psyched up for the float trip tomorrow!" Peter's heart sank.

Kenny eagerly leaned down to Peter who was still on his bunk. "You wanna be my canoemate?"

Peter sighed. How can he be so excited about a float trip? It's just a bunch of guys floating down a stupid river all day. Stupid river full of water. Stupid water. "Uh, yeah, I guess so," he finally answered.

"Cool!" Kenny said before Mike sternly reminded him to wash up.

Everyone was down at the bath house except Peter and Mike. Peter was moving slowly.

"Kenny said you weren't feeling well this afternoon. Are you okay?"

Peter answered silently, I almost drowned that's all. He bit his lip and said, "Yeah, I'm feeling better now." It was getting really warm all of a sudden.

"Well, if you ever get sick again during the day, tell me, so I know where you are. Now go ahead and get cleaned up for dinner."

Peter sat dumbly on his bunk, feeling invisible. He looked up at Mike's steady gray eyes and said, "Uh, I need to go get cleaned up."

Peter finally felt clean. The chalky film that had covered his body was washed away in the shower. His blond hair was drying in the breeze as he and his buddies walked toward the lodge for dinner. He smiled distantly at their careless conversations.

As soon as he stepped through the door at the lodge, he spotted Beth across the room. She was sitting with Shelly and some other friends. Kenny cornered a table by the window for his cabinmates and they all sat.

"That's gonna be a blast tomorrow!" Kenny said, scooping mashed potatoes into his mouth. "I just hope it doesn't get rained out like it did last session."

Peter's eyebrows raised. He sat up straight, eager with hope. His back felt the sunlight pouring through the window behind him--the warm sunlight that reminded him not to stop worrying.

He heard a burst of laughter from two tables away. Todd had an audience of hysterical guys seated around his table. His face was red with laughter; it seemed like it hurt him.

Peter took a bite of fried chicken. He probably hasn't stopped laughing since this afternoon, Peter decided, as



nauseous anxiety grabbed his stomach and wrung it like a rag. His mouth was full of chickeny paste that seemed content to remain in his mouth, to be juggled by his tongue and ground repeatedly by his molars. He finally choked it down. That annoying bite was his last of the dinner.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up and Beth was walking away. She turned mid-stride and smiled at Peter. "See you at free swim," she said and turned back toward the door. He saw Todd waiting just inside the door with his curly sun-bleached hair framing his ever-smiling face. He put his arm around Beth. She cringed and wriggled away as his heavy hand brushed across her sunburned shoulder. Todd never stopped smiling as he followed Beth out the door.

"Stupid jerk!" The words sifted through Peter's clenched teeth. He turned back to the table and his friends were still eagerly discussing the float trip and its damp details. Peter rearranged the food on his plate. His stomach was a brick.

He had not missed a free swim all session. He liked to go cool off and relax in the pool. He always had fun splash-fights with Beth and Kenny. He always managed to enjoy himself on the shallow side of the buoyed rope.

An hour later he was pulling up his swimming trunks. I would if I could, but I can't, so I won't! Peter rehearsed in his head. He just knew that Beth would ask him to dive off the board at free swim. She never had asked him that before, but he was sure she would today.

The number four was painted on the pavement beside the pool. Peter jumped over the all-weather digit and splashed into the clear blue water. He stood up. The warm water lapped at his chest as he waded toward the pool's edge. Happy children splashed all around him. He pulled himself up onto the edge and sat with his legs in the water.

The pool was crowded with campers. Peter spotted Todd who was stalking the deck at the deep end, searching for unwary kids that he could knock into the pool. He better not try to push me in, Peter threatened to himself.

Peter felt goosebumps sprouting all over his body as the early evening breeze dried him off. The late sun was shaded by white clouds gathering on the horizon. He stared through the water at his feet, wondering where he would be now if he hadn't saved himself at the boating pond. He pictured himself stuck in the muddy darkness at the bottom of the pond--the water pressing the air from his aching lungs. He shivered at the thought.

"Hi, Peter!"

He looked up. Beth was laughing as she launched a sheet of water with her cupped hands. It struck Peter's drying

body with an icy splash. He gasped. He wasn't ready for that.

"Hop in, silly," Beth beckoned playfully.

Peter knew he couldn't be angry with Beth. He slipped into the pool and was warm again.

He asked, "Are you going on the float trip tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Uh huh. Shelly's my partner. It's going to be fun. Are you going?"

"Yeah," Peter replied slowly. "Kenny's my partner."

Beth was making waves with her outstretched arms. She always seemed to be moving.

"How's your sunburn?" Peter asked, noticing it was as red as ever.

Beth rolled her blue eyes. "I was okay 'til Todd touched it. I almost screamed. It kind of stings." She threw a glance in the direction of Todd who was still patrolling the deck with a threatening grin. "He really bothers me sometimes," she said.

"Me too," Peter agreed. He leaned back against the side of the pool and watched the campers splash about. Finally he said, "I can't wait until winter."

Beth stopped making waves and looked at him puzzled. "You silly. Summer is so fun...." Her attention was diverted to directly above Peter. There stood Todd on the pool's edge with a white Kik-Rite styrofoam board in his hand.

"Hey, winner," taunted Todd, "I hear you're in the hundred meter kickboard race Saturday." He snickered and dropped the board as he walked away. It bounced off Peter's shoulder and splashed in the water in front of him.

Peter turned red. He looked at a confused Beth.

"Are you really in the swim meet Saturday?" she asked.

Peter shook his head. "Nope. I can't swim too well."

"Oh." She paused and started patting the surface of the water with her palms, then continued, "I was thinking of entering the underwater race."

Peter was silent.

She said, "Well, maybe I'll see you tomorrow." She took a breath and disappeared under the surface.

Peter was frustrated. He would never be able to get back at Todd. He would never be able to swim. He didn't want to go on any float trip.

Kenny and Peter were headed back to the cabin after free swim. Walking along the gravel road, Peter sidestepped a pile of horse dung. He thought for a moment and his heart leapt in his chest. He smiled and quickened his pace.

"Where ya headed, speedy?" asked Kenny.

"Huh? Oh, I just wanna get back, that's all," replied

Peter. He knew Mike was friends with Charlie at the corral. He could only hope.

Mike was hanging up his swimming trunks outside the cabin. Kenny continued on toward the bath house. Peter stopped beside his cabin counselor.

"Mike, uh, do you think it would be okay if I went on the pack trip instead of the float trip?"

Mike faced Peter and replied, "Well, Pete, sign-ups for the pack trip were a couple days ago. Charlie said it's all filled up. You need to plan ahead for that kind of stuff."

Peter looked at his feet. He felt deflated. He would have even been content sitting in the cabin all day. His distress was a beached canoe in his dry throat. He coughed.

"Mike, I don't want to go tomorrow," he said quietly.

Mike put a hand on Peter's shoulder. "Buddy, I heard about what happened at the pond today."

Peter blinked hard at Mike.

Mike continued, "Things like that shouldn't happen, but they do. And they hurt. If we're careful those things won't happen." Mike paused. "Peter, we can be in control all the time."

Peter desperately wanted to be in control. He coughed again. He didn't want to cry, but he couldn't stop shaking. His mind was bitterly trying to place blame on someone--someone besides himself. The preserver shouldn't have slipped off, but it did.

"I want you to go tomorrow," Mike concluded with big-brotherly confidence. Peter wished he could feel that confidence. He only felt hollow disappointment.

A distant rumble of thunder offered the only comfort Peter could feel. Somehow he managed to smile.

Mike tossed his hair and said, "If it starts to rain, remind me to bring all this stuff inside." He pointed to the hanging towels and swim trunks.

"Okay," replied Peter.

Mike went inside the cabin. Peter sat on the ground, leaned back against a tree, and prayed for rain. He wanted to relax, but was plagued by the nagging thought that had taken seed only hours before at the boating pond.

Thunder sounded again. It seemed closer. Peter closed his eyes and tried to relax. Moments later he heard a few drops falling through the leaves above him. He smiled to himself as a raindrop skipped off his nose. He hopped up and cleared the clothesline, then went inside the cabin. Heavy rain clouds brought a premature end to daylight.

Peter's stomach reminded him that he should have eaten his dinner, but he still felt cozy in his warm dry sleeping

bag. The rain flaps were down. It had been pouring outside for two hours. He had never enjoyed the rain so much. The thunder was a quaint lullaby that let Peter sleep in peace. In his sleep he pictured his dad's red Chevy Impala sitting in the clearing in front of his cabin--its doors open and trunk lid up, just waiting for Peter to load up and leave.

Birds were singing and Mike was raising the rain flaps when Peter awoke. It was hot and stuffy in the cabin. The morning sun had burned off the early haze and was beating down on a shiny white van that sat out in front of the cabin. Peter's empty stomach ached, although he didn't feel at all hungry. He felt cheated by the rain. It had tricked him. He knew the float trip was still on.

He was hot and sticky. He couldn't stay in his sleeping bag. He fought his way out of the sweaty cocoon and lay on top of it, trying to get comfortable. He couldn't.

Hoping maybe to sleep all day, Peter shut his eyes. He heard his cabinmates stirring. This was one day that Mike wouldn't have to crank the guys out of bed. Above Peter, Kenny's mattress creaked. The thud of Kenny's heels on the plywood floor translated his excitement into sound. Peter dreaded the day ahead.

He ate a much needed breakfast, but the pancakes wadded up in his stomach. The white van was full of eleven eager campers and Peter. He spotted the orange life preservers stacked in the back of the van beside the coolers packed with pop and sandwiches for lunch.

The tree-covered hills of the Ozark scenery rolled by, and every dip in the rural road was an annoying jolt to Peter. The other guys in the van were noisy and excited. Peter stared out the window and waited for the day to end.

He could see the canoes lined up on the river bank as the van pulled to a stop. The campers piled out into the sticky summer heat. Peter filed in line behind Kenny and grabbed a life vest from the van. Three vanloads of campers raced down to the river to argue claims over fifteen identical canoes.

"C'mon, Pete!" Kenny tugged Peter behind him. Peter didn't see any reason to run, but followed at an uncomfortable jog.

He was relieved to see that the counselors required everyone to wear a life preserver. He pulled his vest over his head and carefully tied it around him. Peter had pictured a wide torrent of water. What he saw was a calm little river, maybe forty feet across at the widest point.

Mike instructed simply, "Guys, be careful and we'll all have a good time."

Kenny hopped into a canoe and yelled, "Shove off, sailor."

Peter grunted as he pushed the canoe off the beach. The water was warm on his ankles. He climbed into the rocking craft. The aluminum sides were hot, as was his seat. They grabbed their paddles and started off, just like at the boating pond.

"We're off, matie," announced Kenny as they paddled ahead of the group.

Peter tried to remember back to when he felt comfortable in a canoe. Only three days earlier he had actually enjoyed boating.

"This isn't so bad," Peter said in a self-convincing manner.

"Hey, this is great!" corrected Kenny.

Peter's stomach loosened up. This isn't so bad, he repeated to himself. He relaxed and watched the shore glide by. The water was smooth and it glistened where the paddle blade sliced through the surface. Peter felt his tenseness slowly dissolving. The sun warmed his head and made him feel at ease. If the day keeps up like this, I've got it made, he assured himself.

After an hour or so, Peter had become a pretty accurate paddle splasher. The river became the battleground for brief but furious water fights between canoe crews. Peter was glad that everyone was a victor in the refreshing battles.

Peter found himself smiling a number of times, though a quick glance at the water would temper his pleasure with a wariness he couldn't escape.

He hadn't seen Beth all day. He hadn't seen Todd either. He guessed that they were both in the other group that had left half an hour before his group.

"How's it goin', troops?"

Peter knew Mike's voice. He looked over and saw Mike in a canoe with a couple of younger campers.

"Just great," yelled Kenny. He turned around and signaled to Peter, "One, two, three...." Kenny and Peter grabbed their paddles and proceeded to douse Mike and the two kids in a spray of water and laughter.

Dripping and grinning, Peter finally answered Mike's question, "I'm getting hungry. When's lunch?"

Mike replied, "We'll eat in about an hour, after we meet the other group at the cliffs."

Peter cocked his head, his grin disappeared. "Cliffs? Huh?"

Kenny explained, "Yeah, there's these cliffs and ya jump off 'em into the water. It's a blast. You'll love it."

Peter didn't move. He felt his insides twist.

"Oh," Peter replied simply. He wanted desperately to be at home, to be at school--anywhere but on a river, headed to the cliffs. The heat that helped him relax earlier was broiling him now. He didn't feel like eating, he didn't feel like talking, and he definitely didn't feel like jumping off a cliff.

So they floated in silence--Kenny, soaking up the sunlight, and Peter, remembering "Wide World of Sports" and the divers, plummeting a hundred feet from jagged cliffs. Fear nibbled at his stomach.

Sweat was streaming from underneath Peter's life vest as they rounded the final bend before the cliffs. Peter could hear girls screaming. He frowned and kept paddling. From behind the trees the cliffs came into view. They weren't a hundred feet high--only about thirty. But for Peter, that was thirty feet too high.

Kenny turned around with a smile and asked, "What do ya think, Peter?"

Peter tried to sound cool. "I don't know about that." He sounded scared.

They beached the canoe and Kenny hopped out in a hurry. He pulled off his life vest and dropped it in the boat.

"Aren't you taking that?" Peter asked nervously.

"Nah, those are for chickens," he replied, and ran off toward the cliff.

Mike beached his canoe next to Peter's. Peter hopped out and waded away before Mike could say anything to him. Mike was telling his two-boy crew to leave their preservers on and be careful. Peter was briefly relieved as he watched Mike disappear on the trail to the cliff.

Peter waded out to where he thought it would look like he was swimming. The water reached over his shoulders and the preserver popped up awkwardly under his chin. It lifted his toes off the muddy river floor and made him feel weightless. He felt clumsy and out of control, but he decided to stay in the water. He didn't want to look like a complete chicken and just stand on the shore. It seemed like everyone was jumping off the cliff--everyone but him. He kept his distance and observed.

Atop the cliff, the youngest campers were contemplating their fates with wide eyes. Peter saw Kenny getting ready to dive. He was standing on the edge, looking down, when off he tumbled. His arms flailed gracelessly. That doesn't look like a Kenny dive, Peter thought. Kenny hit the water feet first.

Up on the cliff, Todd was bent over laughing, his face as red as his swim trunks. Less than a minute later, he was muscling with some guy from his cabin, and once again he laughed as his victim splashed into the deep green water.

Creep, Peter thought, as Todd effortlessly pushed in

two kids at once.

"He never gets in trouble either," Kenny's voice was bitter. Surprised, Peter turned to see Kenny swim up beside him. He continued, "See? Mike's talking to him now. He's still grinning."

Kenny was effortlessly treading water beside Peter. "When are you going to jump?" Kenny asked.

"I really don't feel like it," Peter replied. He hated that answer. "I want to see your famous double swan dive."

Kenny grinned modestly and swam away. Peter looked up and noticed Beth heading up the trail to the cliff. She had on a blue swim suit with a white T-shirt covering her sunburn. Mike had jumped and was swimming toward Peter. Peter tried to think of an excuse not to jump.

"How come you haven't jumped yet?" Mike asked, wiping water out of his eyes.

"I haven't?" Peter attempted to smile.

"Your hair is still dry--"

Peter saw Beth on the cliff looking over the edge.

"Pete, I think you should jump at least once."

Peter's eyes widened as he watched Todd grab Beth's arms. He flung her over the edge. She screamed helplessly as she flipped in the air.

Mike continued, "Pete, I want you to jump."

Peter didn't hear Mike.

Beth smacked the water on her sunburned back. Peter felt the slap all the way across the river.

Puzzled, Mike watched Peter splash furiously away. He clumsily paddled through the water, cursing through his clenched teeth. He reached Beth at the shore. She was coughing and crying. Her small voice was broken and shaking. "Todd threw me in. My back, it hurts so bad." She sat on the beach weeping.

Peter stood beside her, his insides quivering with an electric rage. He saw Todd on the cliff, smirking to his buck-toothed friend.

Kenny ran up and asked, "Hey, what's wrong?"

Beth was sobbing. Her back looked like a swollen blister beneath her T-shirt.

Peter started to answer and then raced up the trail. His ears were pounding. The life vest scraped on his sunbaked neck. He reached the cliff. Children were laughing and scurrying about. Peter's eyes locked on Todd's freckled back. Peter was shaking with fury he had never felt before as he stalked toward Todd.

"Todd," Peter spoke with a vibration in his voice that he couldn't control.

Todd spun around, a curious gaze on his face.

Peter cocked his arms, elbows out, and without breaking his stride, slapped his palms on Todd's dry red chest and shoved. Todd wheeled backward, his legs struggling to catch up with his falling torso.

Peter caught his own balance and watched Todd step off the cliff with his eyes bulging and screaming in a terrified tone, "Nooooo!" His arms flapped like a hopeless bird. His fingers clawed at the air. Todd's scream disappeared in a violent splash.

His buck-toothed friend gaped at the bubbling spot where Todd hit. He muttered in disbelief, "Todd can't swim."

Peter just stared, his heart in his throat, at the foamy area where Todd went under. Todd broke the surface yelling, gurgling helplessly.

Peter was stunned. He looked around. All he saw were the blank faces of six-year-olds and Todd's dumbfounded buddy. Peter grabbed a life vest off the chicken pile. He went back to the edge and saw Mike swimming out to help Todd. Peter tossed the vest over the edge. It splashed a few feet out of Todd's reach.

Todd's turmoil ended as he grabbed the vest from Mike. The two paddled slowly through the green water, leaving a bubbly wake that slowly disappeared.

Peter was relieved. He saw Kenny and Beth looking up at him, smiling. Kenny yelled, "C'mon down, Pete--the fast way!"

Peter felt a wave of excitement welling up inside him--not a threatening fear, but a confident enthusiasm. Two little boys were standing timidly on the cliff beside Peter, each trying to talk the other into jumping first. Peter looked at them, and then back down at Kenny and Beth. Beth nodded eagerly. Kenny's smile beamed encouragement.

"Let's all go together," Peter suggested to the two small boys. They stopped talking, looked at each other and then up at Peter. In unison they said, "Yeah."

"On four," Peter instructed. He felt calm and under control and he seemed to sing the numbers. On the count of four, the three boys stepped into the air.



## White Cross of Yucatan

Richard Solly

1.

Two humble pieces of wood  
shape a cross  
above the cemetery entrance.  
*Silencio* is lettered  
in white, orders us  
quietly in among the graves.  
Inside, a sentry of angels  
raises stone fingers  
to their lips and hush  
the air. They point  
up to the blue  
splashing the sky  
colored with the white wings  
of gulls. We read  
the names of the dead,  
disturb the dust  
with our feet. I taste  
salt in the ocean air,  
crook my neck to spy  
a lizard under the rough  
edge of a stone.

We leave, forget the dead,  
the silence and resume  
talking like children.

Later, our toes  
in sand find each other  
under a table of food.  
We are struck with sunlight.  
Everywhere we walk we hear  
the waves.

2.

We approach a bar named  
Calypso; along its side  
a wall appears. Pieces  
of jagged glass  
shattered from beer bottles  
are cemented into the stone.

The edges are sharp knives  
that will cut whatever  
comes near. To hoist  
oneself, like a child,  
on top of the wall  
just to peek  
would tear one's flesh  
into bits edible for fish.  
We pass just as quietly  
as we entered  
the graveyard.

Palm branches dip  
in sunlight, chickens  
peck among conches strewn  
in yards. Pink and red blooms  
in January trees.

3.

On Sunday Iglesia Church  
throws open its doors  
like Mother's arms.  
Inside, stations  
of the cross hang  
along the south wall.  
The plastered hands  
of Jesus reach out  
from the wall  
to touch us. The dark  
ropes that tie the bleeding  
hands are not painted  
but made from hemp.  
Christmas lights  
are draped like a shawl  
around the altar's crucifix.  
The air is red  
and agitated.

Outside in the courtyard  
children straddle  
horses, lions and chickens  
on the merry-go-round.  
We suck oranges  
and talk of Easter coming.

4.

As we ferry across the turquoise  
water back to the mainland  
I watch a pelican  
sleep in the air,  
its wings pillowed  
on the wind until  
a fish awakes  
in its eyes.  
The palm trees fan  
goodbye into the air  
and gulls escort us  
across the immense sea.

### **The Gilded Nimbus**

Louie Crew

You did not grow a gradual halo  
beatifically frusted with arthritic calcium  
and your belief that all works together  
for the good of the elect.

Instead, a coiled plastic catheter,  
bedsores, perpetual soap operas,  
and fluids on your chest presage  
your approach to the dignified silence.

## The Blondie and Buffalo Hour

Bill Macomber

Friday night, Blondie in the next apartment decides to kill herself again over Buffalo, her married boyfriend. Blondie, whose name comes from her dark-rooted, platinum blonde hair, has already attempted suicide twice before this because of Buffalo; once by eating a bottle of Bayer aspirin, and once by jumping off her balcony, drunk both times. In the aspirin episode, Blondie turned pink but she didn't die. The balcony jump didn't work because we only live on the second floor of the Linda Paloma Apartments and the drop wasn't far enough. Any previous psuedo-fatal episodes I wouldn't know about, since I only moved into the Linda Paloma six months ago when Vicky, now my ex-wife, ran off to California with her boss Phillip. Phillip is in insurance and had to relocate.

The action Friday night really gets going next door at about ten o'clock. I'm alone in my living room building a new model airplane--a boyhood hobby I've returned to since moving into the Linda Paloma. Next door, Blondie and Buffalo have been arguing back and forth most of the evening, like always, and then it gets quiet. The hot water pipes in the paper-thin wall between our apartments begin to bang. This means Blondie is taking a shower. The pipes quit banging, and in a couple of minutes I hear Buffalo laughing loudly. Buffalo works in a meat packing plant on the north side of town, which is where he tells his wife he's going when he comes to visit Blondie. His name comes from his enormous shoulders and bad temper.

"God Almighty," he says, and laughs again. "Look at you."

"I don't know how else to get through to you," Blondie says, her words slurred. "I can't go on like this." Over in my apartment I move the T.V. tray I'm using to build the model airplane, as well as my easy chair, closer to the wall. I sip hot chamomile tea and listen.

"I mean it this time," Blondie says.

"You always mean it," Buffalo says.

"Never mind the other times. This time I'm going to end it all. I'm desperate."

"You're always desperate," Buffalo says.

"I'm giving you fair warning, since this will be on your head," she says dramatically. Booze makes her theatrical.

"You're dripping on me," Buffalo says. "There's nothing

on my head and there never will be."

"I'll haunt your dreams."

"You're pathetic. Do what you want; I'm not going to stay all night. Just don't drip on me."

"I'm tired of waking up alone," she says.

"Get a dog," he says.

"You don't believe I'll do it, do you?"

"What's your plan this time?"

"Hypothermia," Blondie says.

Buffalo laughs again. "What the hell is that? Explain it to me so I'll know what to tell the undertaker when he comes for the body."

"It means you freeze to death," Blondie says, and Buffalo gives a loud snort, at which point Blondie adds, "You goddam dope you," so Buffalo knocks her down.

Blondie is about forty years old, big-boned. From a distance she's not bad to look at. Up close her face is pasty from the diet of gin and Lays ruffled potato chips, which are all I ever see her coming home with at five o'clock after she gets off from the nursing home. Friday night when Buffalo knocks her down, she lands on the wooden floor of her living room and the model airplane parts rattle against my T.V. tray. I hear what sounds like a bottle rolling across her floor.

Stay down, Blondie, I'm thinking to myself.

She gets back up, though. "You can't shut me up," she says bravely, "you big dumb son of a bitch," and Buffalo knocks her down again. Lately, Buffalo seems to hit Blondie on impulse, the way some people reach for cigarettes. He hears the words, he moves the fist.

I hear Blondie talking again, this time too low for me to make out the words. Then there's a crash like a lamp coming down. The airplane parts rattle for a third time on my T.V. tray.

"Wise up, Blondie," I say out loud to myself. By now I'm pretty involved in the action next door, and I'm also getting a little frustrated with Blondie. Why doesn't she throw the bum out on his ear?

I take a break and go into the kitchen for a glass of cold water, which I drink down standing at the sink. After a couple of deep breaths, I put on some water for tea. Listening to Blondie and Buffalo makes my adrenaline flow. There are times I'd like to give Blondie a good talking to. Turn loose of the jerk, I would say. I would tell her about how I went through the same thing with Vicky, my Ex; how when she told me about Phillip I sulked; how when that didn't do any good I yelled; how, in the end, I just held on and waited for Vicky to change; how she never did. I would

tell Blondie that I could have nailed myself to an upside down cross in the dining room, and it wouldn't have made any difference to Vicky.

Let go, is what I'd tell Blondie. Face it.

When the water is ready I dip the chamomile leaves, then take my seat in the living room. I look at the model airplane's instruction sheet and start gluing cockpit pieces together with the orange and white tube of Testor's airplane glue--the best on the market, in my experience. Next door, bootsteps sound on Blondie's living room floor.

"I guess you're serious about this," Buffalo says.

"What does it look like to you?"

"You're really going outside in the cold like that?"

"You leave me little choice in the matter. If my love means so little to you that you can't even spend one night with me then...." I hear scuffling sounds, feet shuffling on her floor like in a noisy barroom scene.

"Give me that bottle back," Blondie says when the scraping stops.

"You scratched me," Buffalo says. "I ought to...."

"Give it here," she says.

"If you're really going to freeze yourself you don't want booze with you. Booze will just keep you going," Buffalo says.

Blondie considers this. "I guess you're right."

"Look here where you scratched me," he says. "It's bleeding."

"Do you honestly expect a woman who is about to die to be bothered by a little blood?"

"I guess not."

"Damn right."

"This is goodbye forever then?"

"Will you stay with tonight?"

"Forget it," says Buffalo.

"Goodbye then. Let it be on your head."

I hear steps leading away from Blondie's apartment door, moving past my door, down the hallway towards Linda Paloma's front entrance. Up out of my easy chair, I crack my door in time to see Blondie walking away from me in a purple velour house robe and a pair of thick-soled hiking boots. The robe is dripping wet. Her platinum hair hangs in wet strings to her shoulders. The boots slosh a little as she steps down the hall; she must have worn them into the shower with the rest of her outfit. Buffalo sticks his head out into the hall. "Don't stiffen up too much out there," he says, but Blondie doesn't turn around. She leaves a small trail of water along the hall carpet, turns right at the front vestibule, and walks out of the Linda Paloma into the

frozen February air.

Moving to my window, I look across the front yard of the Linda Paloma until Blondie comes into view. She walks over to the curb of Wornall Road, now quiet, where she stands looking up and down the street. She looks across at the row of apartments facing us. Steam seems to be coming off her wet robe in the cold night air.

Fog steams up the inside of my window. I rub at the fog with my sweater sleeve, but it has already hardened to ice on the inside of the window. I bend and look out the bottom half of the window. Blondie moves up Wornall Road and seats herself on the curb beneath a streetlamp. Looking closer, I can see now that steam is rising from Blondie, floating up from her wet hair into the light of the streetlamp. She hitches the collar of her wet robe around her neck and rubs her hands together. I hear a knock on my apartment door. By the time I turn from the window, the door is swinging open. Buffalo is standing out in the hall, dressed in a white T-shirt under a red, V-neck sweater with the sleeves shoved back up on his forearms, the fabric stretched tight around his upper arms. Holding his left wrist in his right hand, he steps into my apartment with his head down, inspecting his wrist.

"Do you have any band-aids?" he asks, not bothering to look up and check if anyone is even in the room with him. "She scratched me," he says, then sucks the wound and inspects it more closely.

In my bathroom, I take the band-aids down from the medicine cabinet, start to remove one, but decide instead to take them all to Buffalo. When I return, Buffalo is standing in the corner of my living room, studying the model airplane mobile hanging from my ceiling on fishing line tied to balsa wood crossbars. He has forgotten about his wrist, which now hangs limp at his side. "What's this?" he asks without turning around, again seeming to know when I'm in the room without him having to look.

"Just model airplanes," I say. Actually there are eight airplanes, each hanging in mid-air on the clear fishing line. They revolve slowly, only a few inches from the tip of Buffalo's nose. He isn't touching yet, but I can see he wants to.

"You do this?" he asks, and I nod.

Buffalo blows on the propeller of a Spitfire MK 1A, which starts to spin. His finger starts to rise.

"Don't touch that," I say.

Buffalo turns his head and looks at me for the first time. He has brown eyes which, like everything else about him, are big.

"Sorry," he says.

Then he spots the T.V. tray with the new model airplane parts scattered across it.

He crosses the living room and reaches for the box the airplane comes in, but stops himself and asks, "Can I look at the picture?" He holds the picture of the assembled model to the light.

"It must take a lot of patience. I wouldn't have the time for it," he says, and drops the box on the T.V. tray, rattling the parts. He checks his wrist. "The bleeding's stopped," he says. "Would you put the band-aid on?"

"Are you married or what?" he asks as I peel off the protective paper skin from a band-aid.

"Not any more," I say.

"You keep it pretty neat in here," he says. He looks over my shoulder towards the bedroom. "You got a girlfriend?"

I center the band-aid on his wrist.

"Be careful," he says.

"Hold still," I say.

"I've got a wife," he says. "She's not much. She'd kill me if she knew about this." He nods at Blondie's apartment.

"That's no good," I say.

Buffalo slowly rotates his big head, looking around my living room. He blinks. "It sure is clean in here," he says. "You need to get yourself another one," he says.

"What?"

"Wife. I couldn't stand being by myself on Friday. Thanks for the band-aid."

As he lumbers toward my apartment door, I say, "I couldn't help noticing your lady friend going out."

Buffalo turns at the door. "Don't worry about her. She might've hurt herself, but I took her booze away from her. She'll be back in when she wants a drink. I know her pretty good," he says. As Buffalo leaves he closes the door of my apartment so gently I can hear the latch click into place.

Out on Wornall Road, Blondie is still on the curb, craning her neck every once and awhile to look behind her at the Linda Paloma Apartments. Steam has stopped rising from her hair.

Come on, Blondie, I'm thinking as I sit in my easy chair behind the T.V. tray. Get thirsty.

Blondie holds out for another fifteen minutes. I'm gluing airplane wings when I hear her hiking boots in the hall, clumping past my door and down to her apartment. Her door opens and closes softly. So much for hypothermia, I think--more dangerous than eating Bayer aspirin or jumping



off balconies, perhaps, but also more tedious, as Blondie seems to have discovered. Next door, Buffalo laughs.

"Where's the bottle?" Blondie asks.

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Where's it at?"

"You're getting warmer, warmer. Now you're getting colder."

"Give me the damn bottle," shouts Blondie.

"Oakly doaky," Buffalo says.

Next door there is a long silence. I drain the last of the tea from my teacup. I think about boiling more water but decide against it. Instead I squeeze a drop of glue onto the seat of the plastic fighter pilot's pants, then lower him into the cockpit. I set the model airplane aside to dry.

"It was cold out there," says Blondie.

"Come over by me," says Buffalo.

Before long I hear them moving back to Blondie's bedroom, which is on the other side of the wall from mine. I can't hear what they are saying, only the low rumble of Buffalo's voice and then the creaking of bedsprings as first one, then the other, reclines on her bed.

I get up and go into the bathroom. I shut the door, undress, and, running tub water until the temperature is right, step under the warm water.

When I step out of the shower it is quiet next door. Dried and half-dressed, I move into the living room, where my fighter pilot has dried nicely in his plastic model cockpit. After painting, the model airplane will be ready to hang on the mobile. Tomorrow.

In the kitchen I rinse my teacup and turn it upside down on the counter. I tap the screen of the tea strainer against the trash container. Front door locked. Lights off. In my bedroom, only the soft sound of Blondie crying filters through the wall. The bedsprings creak.

"Please," Blondie says.

"Forget it." Blondie's bedroom floor thumps--Buffalo stuffing his feet back into his shoes. "You know the rules," he says.

"I don't care about the rules. One night is not going to kill the bitch."

"Don't call her a bitch. Norma's not a bitch. We just don't get along all the time," says Buffalo. He finishes dressing. "Don't get up. I'll lock up on the way out."

I hear Buffalo stomp around Blondie's apartment, turning off lights, drawing curtains. He calls goodnight. Blondie's apartment door bangs shut.

"The bitch," says Blondie in her empty bedroom.

I drape my pants over my dresser and hang my sweater

over the radiator to smooth out the wrinkles. I turn off the overhead light. In the dim glow of the bedside lamp, I crawl under the covers. From where I lie in my bed I could almost reach and tap the bedroom wall. In the silence I could almost whisper to Blondie: "Let him go." I could not speak loudly, for that would sound to Blondie as if it were coming across a great distance she cannot travel. Only a whisper might reach her, so soft she would think it came from within.

Next door, Blondie stops sniffing. She fumbles with her bedside lamp, then clicks it off. The Linda Paloma Apartments are still. I reach across my chest and turn off my bedside lamp. The filament in the light bulb glows orange, then blue, then fades to black. On either side of the thin wall between us, Blondie and I stretch out on our beds and wait for sleep.

## Soliloquy

Iris Gomez

Days out here blow west all around me.  
Sun, river, orchards  
lean toward the western sky,  
as if the whole world  
were arching, plieing,  
bending its arms over and across me.

My land is an acre  
or so of well-chewed pasture.  
When the temperature falls, the mountains move  
closer,  
skin folding and becoming strokable  
like the flannel sheets of winter lovers.

At dark, stars open their eyes.  
They fall in love, brighten, sit up all night long talking,  
their words, chips of melted diamond,  
human beings gulp down and call inspiration,  
like poor dumb horses rediscovering  
the same quirky wildflowers out of the blue.

I creep alone  
toward the lower end of the pasture,  
where it meets the river. Pines, leaning forward  
to nuzzle the air, graze me.  
And the spinster wind, following me,  
tries to play with my hair.

I suspect the pasture too  
will betray this propensity: everything, all around me  
is reaching for others,  
some peculiar affinity  
things seem to have for one another.

Undergraduate Poetry Winner

**We Prayed for Snow Days, Dad**

John Clayton

In the Chevy  
sipping Stroh six-packs,  
smoking dope,  
we dug for China  
parked beside the tree  
in a farmer's field--  
we called it our spot...

I was always rubbing her raw  
right there  
all strenuous sweatin'  
till I couldn't cream no more  
3-four in the morning  
your under  
wear stare waiting  
while Rosie was shrieking  
screeching Calloo!  
Callay!

Then of course later,  
there was the baby  
that never was a baby--  
a Clayton baby  
that never was  
for \$Bucks200\$  
(but that's another story).

So you see, Pa--  
You hear what I'm sayin', man?  
All that time you was waitin'--  
we wasn't  
doin' nothin'.

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