



TOUCHSTONE

Editor's Note

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TOUCHSTONE
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Staff

Editor

Jim Stein

Poetry

Gordon Locke
Mary Martin
Greg German

Fiction

Jennifer Brantley
Gary Johnson

Drama

Lincoln Konkle
Gary Leffler

Art

Lisa Schwarzenholz

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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Catherine Parke

ALWAYS ABOUT TO GO TO MOROCCO

Each indecision has its own peculiar ways.
Morocco is never a plain question
of time or money or reading up
or putting myself in an Eastern frame of mind.
The right companion, even second best,
will never come along.
In the way Morocco hovers on the tongue
and refuses to press for funds
lies the promise of something else.

Jeff Boyer

TEACHING FRESHMEN

My students are amazed.
I know their every move.
They're confused that my perception
is a direct trunk line
plugged into their postered rooms--
Snoopy dogs and genitalia.
They can't decode my stance,
poised between youth and age,
nor do they notice me
on Lookout Hill--
the Nash Rambler
with the seats let down,
steadily grinding away what was left
of virginity
those years ago.
They wince at crassness,
and roll their eyes at eloquence.
They think I've something to teach them,
but doubt it's worth
three hours a week.
they'd take an easy "A"
and a day off,
for the weather.

Jeff Boyer

STRINGING THE GUITAR

Uncoil the serpentine rails.
Begin with the thinnest
and crank it to pitch.
Crank til it whines,
then go to the next;
and again til the whine
turns to a hum
then to a growl.
Adjust each in turn
and sight down the track,
crossties and steel,
then give it a strum
and sing of a train.

Walter Bargaen

MEETINGS FAR AWAY

We shiver in the cold
that clasps us hard
and still harder
against its bare chest.

Wind strip searches the trees.
Leaves fly like mad hornets
or wings released from the body
at the chopping block.

Shaggy gray clouds rush past
the fabled flock of wolf frantic sheep
running for the barn
and dying at the crowded blue door.

The murky water
folds into small white tipped waves
like campaign leaflets
that elect the shore and are gone.

We sit around clinging
to the gentle ghost of our togetherness
this trip once a year from Seattle
to this late fall afternoon pond.

Our tossed hair
like the strumming cattails
that wade into cold reflections
of themselves

our faces broken by the water
the waves
a thousand eyelids closing
on the banks of evening.

Walter Borgen

THE HARVEST

All night he walks back and forth
between the living room and kitchen
as if arguing with the house
against the opinions of dark corners
the conclusions of walls
a floor certain only of its cracks
and ceiling that predicts its fall.

Between this life and another
his nerves draw contours
of something larger.
He is welded to his jaw,
the pain outdistanced
only by more pain.

Between clocks growing frantic
arms wave
but it is hard to know
what they mean
standing at the gates of the body
gasping surrender
with each second's jab.

Night struts,
an iridescent starling,
devouring the grain
that spills
from the torn sack
of his life.

Possums rummage under his eyelids.
Owl's talons rake each step.
Under his skin snakes coil in despair.
His hands hold together
in a knot
that would drown Houdini.

Oh teeth, little enamelled headstones
that sing flesh and blood
in the cemeteries of the world--
his own plot too clearly marked.

Undergraduate Poetry Award

Chris Ellis

PASTURE WALK

Knee deep in sun bleached grass
cicadas chant at me from trees
splashed with a day's aging light.
Peaking, receding, the sound
fills spaces, but cannot drown
the sudden, dry
keening cry.
I pause to look.
Up past the lightning-torn tree
a red tail hawk swings lazy
ellipses round and down.
I catch the sidelong dip of a russet tail
and the pale flash of his belly
as he slices north
then fades,
as the light fades,
leaving me grounded
with the dusty sound
of cicadas.

Anne C. Bromley

THE SCREAM OF WATER ENTERS HER BODY
(Tsegi Canyon, The Navajo Nation)

I dream that an old woman and I
sit together in tears, watching the Green Corn Moon,
now a bitten moon,
one sheep fallen on the glass ridge of Tsegi Canyon.

The moon is already
sixteen days old
and yet I linger with her
where lupine and desert paintbrush garnish the red hills,
where buffalo clouds form and disappear
like a sandpainting whose life
lasts but the journey of one sun.

The old woman looks at me
as if she had something to say,
electing silence
as the cactus wren bobs on a single pine needle,
something like a candle flickering
in a thunderstorm. Power gone,
or so we think. And the canyon walls
take a beating as the wren hops to a sturdy limb,
pushing her head into her minute body,
no shelter but her own down.

No one can match the moon,
the old woman tells me
as she lifts the broken sheep
from the mesquite and stones.

Not the moon,
not the white Pine Butterflies
that rise to great summits, then float down
like bits of torn paper.
The world is a cockeyed miracle, she says,
the sheep's head dangling from her arms.
Below us the Betatakin Ruins remain
as if left only yesterday, the corn still
in bowls, ready to be eaten.
No one knows why the people left.

"Greed. The good life got too good. They were ready
for the Wind Spirit to blow them away," she tells me
as if the deserted pueblo were a moral lesson.
There are no bones in the canyon.
"They are everywhere else," she says.
I cannot disagree.

Kristine Chalifoux

THE TASTE OF BLACK

Bedouins bring hearts of palm,
 saffron rice and silver.
 Our men and the nine horsemen
 meet under striped tents.
 My black _ _ is covered with dust.
 I crouch, my back to the other women
 and press my eye to a cracked wall.

The men burn incense over coals:
 cardamon, cinnamon and fox hair,
 before unwrapping bundles tied with coarse twine
 they spread in shadows.
 Heat ripples the smoke, blurs.
 A barefoot boy pours water from a clay jug
 washes desert from blistered feet
 soaks long strips of white cotton,
 the turbans wrapped tight
 to cool burnt flesh.

The women behind me slap rough ovals,
 sprinkle water on the flour
 they bake over burning camel dung in stone kilns.
 Alone I watch the horses' leather bridles
 sting sweat-flecked thighs.
 Indigo silk tassles stream black
 against a blinding white horizon.

I return to my place at the wooden handle
 to crank a mint-stuffed lamb
 slow over a deep pit.
 When the men have finished their sweet tea,
 we will gather the half-empty bowls
 and we will eat.

Alison Reed

THE CAMERA NO HUMAN EYE

a bob and wheel

Finding the lake's
Erratic edge, bright geese
Extend the shore and drakes
Float loosely out, increase
In number where the stakes

Lie deep.
In late December, air
Is cold enough to keep
The shadow of the square
Dark bridge's fixed slow creep

Across the stream
Still shown by frost that lies
In ladder-shape and dream.
A sycamore enskies
Itself, a milky scream

Of bones.
The yellow-orange pods
Of catbriar hang like stones
Of value, goldenrods,
Or stops of saxophones.

No lens will
Be true to sudden sand,
The depth of chrysophyll.
Whatever will, no land,
No water bird stands still.

Thomas M. Davis

UNTOUCHABLE

A porcelain rose bud,
white like a shell
of feeling,
does not wither,
but holds tightly
the frozen moment
of birth,
and waits
for time
to shatter.

R. Bartkovech

REPORT FROM THE DRIVER OF A FAST CAR

He borrowed the hopped-up machine
last year
and hasn't returned since.

Every week we receive
dozens of complaints
from him
asking us to please do something
a ticket
a stay in jail
a mandatory retreat
to the silence of his choice.

We send him warnings
over the radio
but his engine noise so loud
we hear him screaming in the race
he always wins
he loses.

As a correspondent for his concern
I pulled up alongside him a stop sign
shouting, "Are you the driver
of a very fast car?"
"Passenger," he reported
and smoked off down the street
following an endless row of artificial lights.

Judy Mills

THE ACCEPTANCE

Leaving him in crumpled sheets,
my arms lost in his oversized robe.
I feel my way to the bathroom,
eyes unwilling to accept morning.
Fingers flow the wooden panels,
but not without my attention.
I pause at the top of the stairs,
my eyes, opening slowly, flow over
green hills, stretching trees.
How many times has he watched this scene
as I'm watching it now, I wonder.
I open the bathroom door,
slide open the mirror,
and there it lies,
in a shiny new wrapper,
just as he said it would be,
my new toothbrush.

Anita Bond

The Greybull River is breaking loose!

and the whole town can feel it
 in the shrill grate of Rebecca Horton
 trilling her children home,
 in the new-found fervor of Reverend Cox
 who stands palming his well-worn pulpit,
 the way the track team runs
 those extra laps and sucks up air
 as if their lungs were filling with sand,
 and the prom-princesses-to-be
 practice their struts to the cadence
 of cracking ice. Brittle. Faltering.
 Unable to keep the rhythm.
 The spring is giving way!
 You can hear the weight shifting,
 abrading the dike, icy bastions
 drowning out the collusion
 of boxcars in the freight yard.

The whole river is breaking loose!
 And not an iceberg will sublimate.
 The townspeople leave their vacuums,
 their consoles to stand on the bluff
 and gaze down on the town,
 on the ice building block after block.
 The volunteer firemen blow their whistle,
 slip into slickers, put on their rubbers;
 they're ready for anything.
 And the track team volunteers to help.

They can fill gunny sacks; they're determined
 to conquer. The prom princesses feel proud.
 The whole town is transfixed,
 of one mind, one eye targeted
 on how to bring down the Greybull.
 The river is breaking loose!
 It heaves, belches, bullies its way toward Main,
 and Reverend Cox prays for the strength
 to subdue it till the veins in his neck
 would seem to burst.

Barbara Baker

SOUR CHERRIES

I climb the ladder
to pick the plump cherries
from the long, limber branches.
The sun tingles
as my hands move under and over
the branches.
You taught me to grasp the stems,
careful not to bruise their shining
red skins.
I swirl the cherries in spring water,
Sprinkling them with your recipe of
salt.
As the sour nectar stings my lips,
I contemplate your death.

Dixie Lane

THIMBLE

In 1953 at the Five and Dime
you could buy the universe.
It was for sale
gleaming in chrome
and shiny plastic.
There were boxes of sticky stars,
Dr. Scholl's corn pads,
rows of Noxema, Witch Hazel,
and Evening in Paris,
mouse traps, and sequined hair nets.
There were garters
for seizing socks,
Henna for blazed hair,
and lipstick named Alluring Lady.
Eye-level dreams came true
for 29¢ plus tax.
Beside sleek skeins of embroidery floss
you might find a thimble,
small and carved like a fairy's water glass,
and if you knew you were meant to have it,
you might palm it,
watching the clerk sneaking smokes
behind the blue wax roses.
And when it fell out in the wash,
your Mother would make you return it,
saying you were sorry,
even if you weren't
and say a prayer
to the plastic Madonna of the Five and Dime.

Debra L. Farmer

CONFESSION

Last night, when you served me
your special desert dinner of dried bumble bees
with spiny cacti drinks in decorative clay pots,
I considered not eating.
I was expecting maybe
honey cakes and cream
a side of ambrosia
a little wine
something bubbly, not heavy.
You would pop the cork.
I would cover it with my mouth as it fizzed
and suck the foam until you got the glasses.
Giddy after a few drinks,
I would kick off my silver slippers at the bedroom door
and we would leave a trail
of clothing
so we could find our way back.

Instead,
I got mummified bees on a tin plate.
A thousand black, hairy legs
and multifaceted staring eyes.
Black and yellow, pollen dusted.
I sampled one juiceless carcass.
Its tight, desiccated body crunches,
its cellophane wings catch
between my teeth like popcorn hulls,
its stinger embeds in my tongue.
After the first time, it was easy.
I stuffed my mouth full of bees,
pulverized them
then washed them down
with cactus spines,
smilingly.

Susan Luttman

PRIVATE BEACH

Sand scars the soles of my feet as Steve grabs my hand and
 runs toward the ocean
 we fight over the rubber raft and
 give up to drift down shore for miles
 A cluster of clouds overhead breaks up and
 fades completely
 "Alright class--who can tell me what effect Shakespeare
 achieves by using blank verse statements?"
 A seagull squawks.
 We pause to help a child build a sandcastle and
 Steve winds at me over the top of a tower
 an unexpected wave washes in and
 melts our kingdom
 "And what can you tell me about Shakespeare's
 versification in this particular speech?"
 Steve and I dodge waves
 He holds me up each time a wave hits and
 I don't get flounced
 Steve gets flounced and drops me and
 we both go underwater
 "Okaaaay--why does Hamlet leap into the grave
 with Laertes? What is the effect on the audience?"
 The confetti abandons the beach to stream chaotically along
 the boardwalk
 We watch the sun dip into the bay and
 soon the darkness rolls in and
 hazes everything--including my memories
 as someone asks me the significance of the nunnery scene

Stephanie Cox

MATING DANCE OF THE MONARCHS

Like orange and brown leaves
caught in the scuttle
of an evening breeze,
the nectar drunk couple
flirts through the air
in desperate spirals,
revolving within antennae reach.
Their satin wings,
touching and teasing
beat like winking eyes
as they blink behind a bush.

Bradford Settle

WHAT A GOOD SOLDIER

The man with the bayonet
Lay peacefully waiting
for the worms to call,
for he was dead.

"What a good soldier," they said,
but the good always die young.

Everyone knew that letters
from Uncle Sam during war
were bad news but

Mrs. Fitzgerald! What
a good soldier your husband
was!

Died for . . . Fought like a . . . In the name of . . .
Patriotic fellow indeed . . . good die young . . .
Offer our deepest . . . If only . . . What a
good soldier your husband
was!

Don't think can't
look back

might
lose (my mind?)
NOW. You children must be proud of

your father.
What a good soldier
he
was.

John Dufresne

AS A FINAL TRIBUTE

Dolan Brothers Funeral Home
Would like to arrange
An affordably dignified and elegant service
For your dearly departed,
The beloved husband and devoted father,
Walter Emmet Kirwin.
Representatives from the Pope John XXIII Council,
Knights of Columbus,
will bear the coffin
And lead the mourners through
The Seven Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary.
The Right Reverend Martin F. X. Powers,
Assistant Pastor at Our Lady of the Angels,
Will deliver his touching and solemn eulogy
At the conclusion of the wake.
Brian and Kevin Dolan, lifetime members of the
New England Association of Funeral Directors,
Are proud to continue the tradition
Of grace and compassion
Established by their late father,
Arthur Patrick Dolan.
Dolan Brothers has been in business
At the same convenient location for sixty-four years.
Brian, Kevin, and the staff wish to assure you that
At Dolan Brothers
We are large enough to fit your every need,
Yet small enough to know you personally.

Richard E. Lee

SENTENCE

he enters
wanders through her
clothes
before he knows
for sure
or cares

construes her
no
as maybe so
and yes before her
mouth can safely say
hello

a phrase, a touch
diminish belt
and smile

disprove, remove
the rule of arm
and leg

a window opens

the sentence flares

syntax of heart
from far away come near

hands become words
in the swollen rhetoric
of syllables
naked and sad
again and again

Ann Cashin

FOR WANT OF BETTER WORDS

For want of better words,
(believe me, I want them,)
Screw Pepsi-Cola.
Pepsi is being a thirsty freshman and that's all there
is in the building.
Coke is buying soda for your family.
Pepsi, you disgust me.
Your alliance with Burger King reminds me
of Rosemary's Baby
and I am of the opinion that you are all
going to hell.
Your ads are, in a word,
Pushy.
I feel the same way about Reagan,
(I don't like him, either)
and I think you suck.
God was punishing Michael Jackson and his hair
and it's all your fault.
Got it?
Lionel Ritchie sings you love songs,
but I,
the consumer,
know.
My money goes better with Coke.

Mary Seneker Kissel

FAMILY TREE

"As the Seneker girls married, I reckon
they sort of lost out in the shuffle."

--Eleanore Seneker

Cleaning a drawer I come across the records
of my father's ancestors.
I smooth the creases of old paper, tracing
the German name as it changes:
Schoneckher, Schonecker, Schoeneker,
Shonnaker, Shannaker, Seneker. The history
says it means "beautiful corner." Elias Gottlieb
lived there, in Alsace, a tailor with three
brothers: Johannes, George, Zacharias.
I try to imagine Elias
coming off the ship in Virginia in 1785,
and Katherine, the French girl he married,
daughter of a Revolutionary soldier, the farm
they bought, their eleven children,
and how eagerly the next generation
with their optimistic names branched out:
Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, LaFayette Charles,
and John Samuel Ulysses, my grandfather--
ministers, teachers, farmers. Their names
stare at me from a great distance, thin shadows,
not even ghosts. But it's about the women
I wonder most: Mary Elizabeth, Martha Louisiana,
Katherine Lucinda, Margaret Angeline, girls
born into families of twelve and thirteen children,
baptised, and lost. They have disappeared
into their husbands' names and their children's
children; and I am lost, two hundred years
after Elias, still trying to claim
some beautiful corner, still coming into the country,
trying to trust these unsubstantial pages.

Jeff Chaltas

THE SPRINGTIME IN MY HEART

Never have the winds been so cold
 Outside my bedroom window.
Nor has the moonlight told
 Such an icy picture with its chilly glow.
And while nature fills some lives with gloom
 Here's one man with a heart about to bloom.
For every man should feel such a blessing,
 One that feels so good, so right, so worth investing.
My blessing has come in you,
 A feeling like I never knew.
Inside me this feeling burns bright
 That no amount of chill or frost can fright.
And no matter how much cold the sky may bring
 It will never freeze this part.
A part of me where you will always be--
 That's in the springtime of my heart.

S. Shaun Perkins

SILENTLY

The lake--late summer--jabbing
 at my legs under the picnic
 table are the weeks--a fly
 on my hot
 dog, don't want to eat
 it--the fly, hopping on
 hopping off, almost dipping
 into the mustard, yet swooping
 away just in time--the weenie--
 infected now--gross--
 Mom says shut up and eat
 the damn thing--crying,
 sobbing, I'm getting the dog
 soggy--flies and tears mixed
 with mustard--you're not
 getting another one--hungry--
 in between sobs I take
 bites--salty spots, fly
 feces, dust particles and my brothers
 eat clean ones--laugh at me--
 humiliated--forcing it down
 my throat in short lustless
 thrusts.

It is a windy day and the dry
 weeds are rubbing patterns
 across my thighs.

Sharon Fleming

SONDAGE--REMINISCING

Out in the deadland
the cactus flung
its splintered tongue
to a burning sun

Out in this deadland
the earth cracks branch-like
the bush snaps bone-like

sand and sun and rock

scattered webs of petroglyphs and pictographs
battered shards of black on white and black on red

in Kin Bineola a snake darts

no tourist ware or plastic shrouds
for archaeologists' pits

only the wind to stir the chindi up

into this desert then we slowly creep
drained and dry and dust-covered
we grope and slowly reach our way
to rebuild broken houses
in these broken rooms
uncover again the child's toy, become
the house which in the wind whirls
we dig those graves to reconstruct--
in that deep borrowing of time
still, ourselves, to nothing.

Walter McDonald

COMBINATIONS

Hot hands make gimbals
steady in rough seas,
feel tumblers fall
in combination locks.

Hot hands stack any deck.
Lucky in love, we learn
which foreplay works,
how tongue and teeth

make tight nipples beg.
Down to our last dime,
we find where to kick a juke box,
how to twist a tightwad

vending machine to its knees.
We know how far
on the pedal to push for choke,
how far to push for a raise,

a fight, a divorce date.
We code our computers
and poker faces so none
can crash our secret hearts.

Denise Low

STAYING ALL NIGHT

Under the covers
we become children

I find whiskers you missed
and count freckles on your back.
I touch each stiff yellow scar.

We trace hair patterns,
maps of skin and fur
left behind by Ice Age ghosts.

Your eyes deepen into black agates
and you cradle me.
I am weightless,
a child breathless on a swing.

We are lovers
safe in the dark.

J. D. Gillespi

YESTERDAY

I awoke from industrial dreams,
combed my hair in a duck's ass
and hid in Elvis Presley's shadow.

By mid-morning I had learned to slouch,
drink Coca-Cola,
and dream of being the Marlboro Man.

But afternoon brought troubled visions.
Things were always what they never seemed to be,
and as I watched reruns of "My Three Sons,"
Albert Einstein played with a hula hoop.

Evening came swiftly.
Palms swayed in the acid breeze,
the sun went down over Vietnam,
and Dick Tracy used the bomb.

Deb Plummer

THE RING OF SINGLE SOLUTIONS

I listen to you this morning, your voice warm with memory,
 Tell me how you still wander the Catholic graveyard
 Of your Pennsylvania home
 Looking for the grandmother you missed as a child,
 You miss now as a woman.
 With only an old man to sift through piles of paper for a
 name,
 A caretaker to count out the mounds of dirt until he finds
 hers,
 You continue to hunt in that place
 For the solution of family.
 When you find her you say that you and your sisters
 Will place a headstone on the grave so long denied
 A name because, perhaps, she died in the poor, nameless time
 of Depression
 Perhaps because she died in sins you no longer believe in.
 You will give a name to the small piece of ground
 And the woman a part of it,
 A part always of your thoughts.
 I see you look at your daughter and know that she too is
 part of
 The same thought, the same need to be whole
 In the only way you feel sure of wholeness, family.
 From mother to daughter and back again,
 You circle them all and I can believe
 We are, as you say, single rings of flesh and faith.

Warren C. Miller

GRANDFATHER

Not drink, nor dream, nor fantasy,
Nor reverie, nor fever, nor known desire,
Not hope, certainly not faith--

We walked, not together, Grandfather,
But I, as always, with you
Down a blue Lone Star street--
I grown up, adolescent, old as you,
A kid. You were still bigger,
Where it counts, but I no longer
Held that against you, you
No longer smelled of old age,
As I do.

Evening, and we advanced
Towards a refinery worker's shotgun-shack,
Newly painted. Through a glassed-in porch,
I saw into a white-walled living room
Cluttered with orange, red, and yellow
Canna-like plastic, pale people nudging.
You did not look in.

A blue-green
Evening, green-almost-black to the East,
A flickering of fuzzy rays through westward pines,
Like detumescence coming out of sleep,
Mother running down the street
Searching which way had we come?
Not by Berniece's? "No one
Can trust Berniece, anymore."

"I never have," you said.

Mother said, "Charlie dropped
by to say the sky went black
Around Berniece's and a high wind
Blew through shoving over trees,
But that electric lantern she has
On a chain out front swung
With the gale, giving off amber light."

You said, "Better get in
With the damp night coming on."

And I said, "You who were
Illiterate and instructed by sight
And sound while alive, and I deaf
And blind, what are you trying
To teach me, now?"
You shook your head
In sorrowful disgust, as always.

Now that I'm old as you were

When I was born, maybe a grandfather
 Myself, perhaps, all is just
 A scrim of nerves,
 Grandfather?

Jean Hwang

CORNFLAKES WITH MEANING

In a library of social debutantes
 a neon sign shouts
 The beauties in a smile
 Are one hundred flowers
 Nailed to the earth

A toast to society
 It's cornflakes with meaning
 The rites of spring
 Are scattered like plastic toys

Square pegs will always fit square holes
 If you let them
 Scared pigs will always fart whole squares
 If you let them

Mike Leuker

CRYING WOLF

The air in my room
suffocates me;
The walls creep closer.
I escape for a quick walk
in the dark
to smell the evergreens.
But tonight there's panic
among the trees:
I can't see ahead
and what's behind
makes no sense.

I'm not much of a wolf,
and I long for security.
Save me, God, help me, hide me,
drape me in the darkness
--anything but the girl in the red wool.
I hate that cape!

Her sweet, shy smile,
eyes smouldering, brown
and full breasts
only partly concealed
by the folds of that damn cape.

She grins sheepishly
as she leads me
into her grandmother's cottage
whispering, "She won't be back all weekend."

I know she'll come back
with the woodsman,
you little bitch;
but I'm driven by forces
beyond my control.

Then I crawl back into the woods,
tail dragging and spirit crushed.
I hate that cape!

But in the pond
in the clearing,
I see the reflection
of the forest
and of my face.

Marsha Caddell Mathews

LEAVING HOME

They come in the night,
these lapses
when the stars shrivel
their way into the black
slab most people call sky
and the chug of the train
seven miles away pushes
its way into your room.

Leaving your wife and child
sleeping, you take a drive
that lasts six months, find
yourself in Woodville.
At a convenience store,
you park, look around.
The absence of anything human
crawls up your arms, turns
your attention to the stench
of old food, the bustle of rats.
The store casts light
on the haunches of cows
huddled in the pasture next door.

You want to call home.
You head for the pay phone
but find the receiver severed,
the silver cord stretching
for the wholeness every amputee craves.

Grace Bauer

SOMEWHERE IN SOUTH DAKOTA
SOMETHING DAWNS ON ME

We were smoking in an alley
behind the Greyhound station.
Sunday morning. Seven a.m.
There was me and this fat girl
from Wisconsin and a couple of Indians
we'd met in the coffee shop.

I didn't think the fat girl
really liked me, but I was the one
with the pipe. And I knew
she didn't like the Indians
because she had told me
when they went to the men's room
that all Indians were crazy
and would risk anything:
vanilla extract, Listerine . . .

But these Indians sat silently
leaning against a trash can,
contemplating the smoke.
Not far off, a church bell rang.
A dog barked. A siren whined.
And wherever it was I was at that moment,
it was exactly where I wanted to be.

Kiva Ryan

Somebody to Talk To

The old woman and her walker were barely visible through the tall weeds alongside the path leading from the spring to the front porch of the farmhouse. Amanda Robinson was inching along with her daily supply of water in a bucket attached to the walker rail with an "S" hook. During the months since her fall in the garden last May, she'd learned to use the walker to help her do what was needed. A cane worked well inside the house, but the walker with the pail attached worked better outdoors for carrying not only the water, but also eggs, berries, bundles of herbs, and apples. She had established a rhythm for these trips from the springhouse--two small steps backwards, drag the walker and bucket after her, rest for a moment, then again, step back, drag, and rest, and again, and again.

During one of the rests, Amanda watched a flock of starlings heading to the south until her eye was caught by a figure coming up the road by the apple orchard. Who was coming to pester her about getting off the mountain now? Since she'd hurt her hip, it seemed like practically every relative in Preston County had traveled up the mountain to bother her about leaving the home place. Last week, her daughter Violet had even brought the preacher from the St. George Baptist Church up to pray her off the mountain. He had, at least, been good entertainment since she missed having somebody to talk to. Lester, the guide from the hunting lodge on the next ridge had been better company until a sportsman had mistaken the old man for a deer and blindly fired his 30-06 rifle into a bank of mountain laurel. Lester had recovered from the mishap but had decided to retire and move into Beverly Lantz's boarding house down in St. George. Amanda wished it was Lester on the road, stopping by for a glass of elderberry wine. Well, whoever it was coming now was only wasting their time and hers. She and Harve had married and moved onto this farm when she was fifteen years old and she had no intention of going anywhere else now. All she needed was some wood chopped and stacked on the porch and she'd make it through the winter on her own.

As the figure drew closer and broke into a run, Amanda recognized her granddaughter, Becky Sue, and a grin replaced her frown of concentration. Becky Sue was the only one of the family to forsake the West Virginia mountains for the outside world; she'd moved clear to California which the girl's mother Orpha said was just one big nudist colony where movie stars lived and oranges grew all year round.

"Gran!" the young woman called. "It's good to see you!" And Amanda was wrapped into her sunwarmed arms.

"My-my, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" the old woman said. "Did you walk all the way from California?"

The girl laughed. "No, I flew. One of Aunt Violet's boys picked me up at the airport in Morgantown and then brought me as far up the road as his Volkswagen could make it. I just have this backpack and a dufflebag. I still believe in traveling light."

"Well, now, that backpack is one clever contraption. Never seen nothing like it," the grandmother said, peering upward at the tall young woman. "You look happy," she continued. "Things must be going all right for you out in California."

"Couldn't be better. I'll tell you all about it later." Becky Sue reached for the bucket. "Here, let me help you with that. Then we can get you turned around and into the house so we can catch up."

"No," the old woman said firmly, "I can get the water to the house just fine, thank you. After coming all the way from the other side of the world, it's you who needs the rest."

Becky Sue checked her tongue, but Amanda saw that her nurse's eye had taken in the labored breaths and the tight hold on the walker rail. The once tall, straight-spined woman knew that she was now birdlike--gaunt and bowed. But her eyes still glimmered sharply from their deepened sockets when Becky Sue lifted the pail from the hook. Amanda then maneuvered the walker until she faced the house and the pair moved slowly and quietly past the broken farm equipment and ramshackle outbuildings encircled by weeds to the gray, dilapidated farmhouse. When they reached the porch, Amanda slowly lowered herself into a rocker while Becky Sue took the water into the house. When the younger woman returned, she tested the rickety porch swing to be certain that it could support her weight and then sat back.

"Well," said Amanda in her direct fashion, "I guess I know why you're here."

"Oh?" Becky Sue bounced back. "Why am I?"

"You're here to get me to move in with one of the girls. To leave my home." The bony chin thrust upward as her right hand fumbled in an apron pocket for her snuff can. "I ain't even considering that course of action." Amanda opened the small metal can and removed a pinch of the dark brown powder.

Becky Sue waited until the snuff was deposited between her grandmother's lower lip and toothless gum, and then said, "Things don't look too good around here. The weeds and blackberry brambles have almost taken over. It's going to be hard to get wood and water inside this winter." The swing creaked loudly as she stood up. She crossed her arms tightly and half turned from her grandmother. "If you'd have let the family put in electricity and plumbing after Gramps died, it might be different. And now that Lester's not around to bring food and keep you company, I don't see how you could possibly get by on your own."

Amanda responded by spitting a brown stream of tobacco juice into the Maxwell House coffee can at her feet. Her eyes remained on Becky Sue's profile.

Becky Sue took in a deep breath and faced her grandmother again. "You know, you could choose where you want to stay this winter. For instance, Aunt Violet has that big house all to herself and she's been after you to move in for years." She

returned to the swing and began unlacing her hiking boots before adding weakly, "You could even go along with her on the Senior Citizen outings."

Amanda snorted and moved her eyes to the morning glories shading the porch. What does she know? I can make it here. There were plenty of dried and canned goods left in the pantry and she didn't eat that much anyway. She looked back at the young woman sitting crosslegged in the swing. "Well, I just might think on that. But if I do decide to leave, I want to go with good remembrances of this place. Can you stay around long enough to help me clear out some weeds, especially around the house? And from Harve's grave and the space next to it? I'd want the house tidied up a bit, too."

Becky Sue's eyes widened. "Sure, Gran, I took two weeks off from work and since some friends and I are planning a hike into the Sierras this fall, the exercise would help me get into shape."

Amanda chuckled softly and reached for another pinch of snuff.

The next few days flowed smoothly, Amanda watching from the porch or helping out as she could while Becky Sue worked. By the third day, a yard had been reestablished around the porch, the family cemetery mowed, a small stack of wood cut for the cooking stove and the house scrubbed clean of several months' layers of grime and dust. The two women sat on the porch watching a hawk circle over the green hills rolling away toward the west. Becky Sue slowly stretched and got to her feet, saying, "Things are pretty much in order here. Your memories of the place should be pleasant enough now. Think we can head down to Aunt Violet's this weekend? I can help you pack over the next few days."

"We'll see," said Amanda as she began rocking rapidly. "I don't know just when I'll be ready."

Becky Sue muttered something under her breath. Her own chin jutted forward as she seemed ready to reply in kind. Then, as if relenting, she said, "Well, I feel like getting cleaned up, Gran. I'm going down to the waterfall. I won't be gone long." She turned and stalked off the porch.

Amanda rocked more slowly, watching Becky Sue's back until it disappeared down the path. She hadn't seen the waterfall since spring thaw when the water had roared over the limestone face of the small cliff and on down the mountain. This time of year, though, she knew it was just a gentle cascade of water, the flow divided by the large rocks at the top of the cliff. She'd spent a lot of time down there on summer days in the past, but this summer she had needed all her energy for necessities.

Amanda sat perfectly still for a few minutes, then reached for the four-legged contraption that helped her get around and pulled it close to the rocking chair. Focusing all her strength into her arms, she pulled hard and almost made it upright. "Dang it to hell," she exhaled as she sank back into the rocker. She sat there for awhile, staring out at the sky over the irregular ridge of Backbone Mountain. Then she tried again and made it to her feet, holding tight to the metal bar of the walker until her

breathing got regular again.

A few minutes later, she'd maneuvered off the porch and was on her way. It was hard getting down the path to the creek. The weeds were close on both sides and kept grabbing at the legs of the walker. And along one stretch the blackberry brambles were so close they clawed into the sleeve of her dress. Amanda tried to go easy and breathe slowly so she'd make it all the way.

When Amanda got as far as the old hickory nut tree she stopped to catch her breath. Shading her eyes with one hand, she could see her granddaughter's pale body, arms raised, stretching upwards against the flow of the waterfall. She saw Becky Sue turn from the column of water, a look of irritation tightening the relaxed features. "I'll be right there, Gran. Stop!" Then she shook the water off her and started up the path, saying, "What's the matter, Gran? I said I'd be back soon."

It took Amanda a moment to catch her breath. Now my own granddaughter thinks I can't do nothing but sit rocking on the porch. Thinks I can't do for myself. Don't want nobody feeling they have to do for me! As Becky Sue approached, she finally felt the air full in her chest again. "Take me with you," she said.

Becky Sue just looked at her as if she was addled on top of everything else. Well, and did she think she looked like a normal somebody standing there naked as a jaybird with the water dripping off her long hair onto my arm? "Well, It's really kind of cool," Becky Sue said, pulling the wet hair back from her face. "Remember, I helped you bathe last evening. You're clean enough."

Enough of this, Amanda thought. Her strength was fading fast. Pulling herself up tall, she looked directly at her granddaughter's face. "Becky Sue," she commanded, "Help me get in the water." Amanda hoped that the young woman had enough of her upbringing left to listen to her elder.

But, no, she had to play nurse, saying, real smartlike to Amanda's ears, "Yeah, sure. And you catch a cold and pneumonia. Just what all ninety-two year old women need. come on, I'll help you back to the house." She extended a hand and coaxed, "I'll fix you a bowl of peaches and milk. You can sit eating and enjoy the sunset while I finish bathing."

That made Amanda mad. I might be old, but I'm not to be treated like a feeble-minded child. She was right partial to peaches and milk, but this wasn't no time for eating. She raised her shoulders higher and shouted, "Bullshit! Help me down this bank."

Becky Sue blinked rapidly as a slight flush began spreading upward over her cheeks before a "No!" shot back through tight lips. "I'm not going to be an accomplice to your suicide plans."

Now, who needs any suicide plans, Amanda wondered? Her legs were weakening and she could feel her grip loosening on the walker. Her hawklike eyes pierced into blue eyes like her own, seeing the wariness there. Knowing her legs might buckle at any minute, she cackled and said hurriedly, "Then I ain't going nowhere," and collapsed into the weeds by the side of the path. It wasn't as restful as she'd hoped with the knobby hickory nut digging into her right elbow and the tops of the squirrel grass

tickling at her face, but it sure was a relief to be sitting down.

The pink on Becky Sue's cheeks darkened to red, but she said calmly, over crossed arms, "It's no big deal, Gran. You must weigh about the same as a big sack of chickenfeed. You know, the ones I could carry to the henhouse when I was just ten or so?" She studied her foot for awhile, recrossed her arms, and said, "Come on. You don't need the waterfall. Let me help you back to the house. That would be the wise thing to do."

Amanda didn't answer. She just turned her head away, remembering that Becky Sue was about as strong as a mule. Like she herself used to be. And now she might have to be carried back to the house. She didn't like that patronizing tone one bit, neither. She looked up at Becky Sue who stood quite still, the light breeze lifting the wet strands of hair around her confused and exasperated face. Then Amanda turned toward the waterfall and she didn't know why, but her whole body was drawn there in yearning for the feel of the water falling around and over her. There wasn't much time. The sun was near to setting. She'd give it one more try. Maybe Becky Sue could understand. "Please. Harve and I used to go in the waterfall. When the work was done for the day and the kids all settled up in the loft, we'd head down here just about every summer night. I swear your Aunt Violet and Aunt Lulubelle was both started in that cave behind the falls. I just want to feel the water washing over me again. I have such nice remembrances. . . ." The tightness in her throat stopped the words, and the insistence changed to pleading as she squinted up at the younger woman.

Becky Sue groaned and squatted on the path, her eyes searching Amanda's face as if the lines etched there held an answer to her dilemma. "I can understand that you want to get under the falls." She swatted impatiently at the horsefly trying to land on her knee. And the water doesn't come down any harder than in my shower at home. "It's the coolness of the water that I worry about; it would be a shock to your system."

Raising herself onto one elbow, Amanda responded, "There's nothing delicate about my system. I'm just slowed down a little, that's all. Either you help me or I'm going in on my own."

Becky Sue stood up quickly and braced her clenched hands on her hips as she sputtered, "This beats anything I've seen so far. It can't be that important, Gran. . . ." But, after a moment she extended her hand. "Oh, all right, Gran. Let's do it."

After Amanda was lifted to her feet, she braced herself unsteadily against the walker, holding on tightly with both hands. Becky Sue got her own robe from a branch near the creek, looped it once over the walker rail and then loosened the large buttons of the old woman's dress. When the layers of clothing were removed, the granddaughter wrapped the thick terry robe around the spare, wrinkled body. Amanda stood very still while Becky Sue worked, trying to remember just how cold the creek water was.

"Now, hang on. I'm going to help you down to that big rock there while I get things ready."

Amanda nodded in return and grasped the younger woman's shoulders firmly. "Now, you be careful and don't lose your footing on that bank. Hear?"

"I hear, Gran," Becky Sue responded as she stepped sideways down the slope. "Now, stay here," she continued when Amanda was situated on the broad, flat rock. "I'm going to move the walker out under the falls and brace it with some stones. Then I'll come get you. Understand, this is only for a few minutes."

Amanda disregarded the last comment and sat motionless on the rock, wishing she had her can of snuff, and watched the minnows dart along the edge of the water. She had noticed a crawdad moving in a jerking backward motion on the pebbled bottom of the stream when Becky Sue's shadow fell over her. "Are you still sure you want to go through with this?"

Amanda nodded and turned toward the twin columns of water that fell gently over the cliff and then rippled away between the willows and ferns growing lushly on the creek banks. Becky Sue's voice blended with the sound of the water, "Okay, hang on. I'm going to lift you out there." And Amanda was above the water with the fresh creek smell surrounding her and the breeze cooling her bare skin. Even though the younger woman moved slowly and deliberately through the water, it seemed they were at the falls in an instant. Amanda turned her face toward the mist, enjoying the dampness on her skin that took her back fifty years. Becky Sue was saying, "I'm putting you under the falls now. Hold tight to the walker. I'll hold on to you. And don't move your feet." Amanda gasped and tensed with the first feel of the water, but then relaxed all but her viselike grip on the walker rail. As she watched rainbows from the low sun through the mist and felt the cool water flow over her back and shoulders, she tried to remember the feel of the moonlit nights she and Harve had spent here. But that expectation was abruptly overwhelmed by another memory--that of rage.

She remembered being forty-two years old, standing under the water this very time of day in hopes of washing away her desire to push Minnie Hartsell Robinson Noce off the nearest cliff after seeing her crack Amanda's youngest daughter, Lulubelle, across the knees with her cane for dropping and breaking an egg on her way back from the hen house. And she had other memories of her mother-in-law's final years that were spent on this farm--the days begun by pulling the several layers of traditional Dunkard clothing past the sour square jaws and down over the stout body while Minnie nagged at the kids to carry out her chamber pot. Then there was the constant preaching on the duties of Christian wives and tirades about Amanda's disgraceful modern attitudes. God! Those were awful years, waiting on that harridan hand and foot. She'd been real grateful for this waterfall that had often smoothed out the aches from a day of hauling Minnie's heavy body up and down. She'd often felt sympathy for the thrice widowed woman's plight, but still, how she'd hated . . . and the world turned gray before Amanda slid into the quiet darkness.

When she awoke, she was in her bed, wrapped in the robe with a warm towel around her hair, several quilts over her, and a warm

brick at her feet. Turning her head, she could see Becky Sue fiddling with the damper on the wood stove and then moving toward her with another warm brick. "Well, hello, Gran. How're you feeling? Warm enough?"

"I feel fine, just fine. Did you carry me back here?"

Becky Sue's eyes twinkled. "No, you're more solid than you look. I had to bring you back to the house in the wheelbarrow." Laughing with Amanda, she exchanged the warm brick for the cooler one before sitting down beside the bed.

"Now," stated Amanda, "I'm ready for some peaches and milk." She fingered a border of the top quilt for a moment and then reached for Becky Sue's hand. "Also, if you don't mind finding a ride for me, I'd like to go down to St. George this weekend and just look in at that boardinghouse where Lester's staying. It would be mighty nice to have somebody to talk to this winter."

Bruce Michael Gans

The Fall of the House of Czernik

It was Al Czernik's considered judgment, distilled from 29 years of aggravation and defeat, that it was impossible to find capable and reliable receptionists and periodontal assistants. All the guys, the endodontists, the orthodontists, his brother-in-law, they all said the same thing; and after years of pestering them about it, Al at last grew sick of the whole subject, and reluctantly began to view the problem as a part of the natural order.

During that winter he finally renounced his lifelong quest for Ideal Staff, a disillusionment that was nearly as difficult and painful, for a guy like Al Czernik, as his previous renunciations of his quests for Perfect Mate, Professional Preeminence, and Tax Exempt Capital Gains. Then miraculously, shortly thereafter, two coincidences and one cunning stratagem, involving the transfer of an ace receptionist from his suburban office to his other one in the Loop, all combined to produce just about the ablest bunch ever to join forces in a professional suite.

Al suddenly found himself a King Arthur with his very own Round Table. He had always been obsessive and exacting about preoperative preparations, general office procedures, financial matters, and his ancillary services; and now, overnight, with only occasional fine tuning on his part, these girls were finally enabling him to give patients ideal care. Never before had Al Czernik been able to lay down the law and have it followed the first time around. Now, to his astonishment, Al very rarely had to dismember a girl for goofing up his instructions or just missing his point. Girls in the past had told him that he was tyrannical, intolerant, and unapproachable. These girls accepted Al's "style" without complaint. Instead, they handled him with good-natured insouciance--something it never occurred to his partners, his colleagues, his periodontal residents, or his family to do.

Making a bundle at the stock market was nothing compared to this state of affairs for a guy like Al Czernik, whose money worries had disappeared in his early thirties, and who genuinely believed other things in life mattered more than ye olde radix ominum malorum. Since starting out in practice, Al had paid his girls much more than the niggardly going wage. It was a pleasure at last.

Al had always had attacks of insomnia when something went wrong with a patient. He had them almost every other night too, when, as far as he was concerned, there was nothing the matter. Now they stopped altogether. His frequent periods of depression, which he never admitted suffering from, and which had cost him things like harmonious relations with his children, now evaporated. He even quit scourging and hating himself for all the dough he generated year after year that wound up in the govern-

ment's pocket, depriving him of a secure, let alone an early retirement.

Unfortunately, as King Arthur would be the first to tell us, those pitifully few times in your life you fall into something you've always hoped for, never last anywhere near as long as you assume they will. One Monday afternoon in May, the girl whom Al had not spoken to since she'd flubbed an order for stationery last winter, and whose responsibilities he'd basically reassigned to one of the new employees, gave him two weeks' notice. One week later, the petite redhead assistant, who'd been with Al longer than all the others combined, and who made the office go, announced that she was moving to Muncie to live with an allergist with whom she'd been enjoying a long-distance relationship for the last two years.

How often Al had told her she could've made a top notch periodontist had she not dropped out of high school. Now she was deserting him! Concealing his feelings of rejections and panic, Al told her she'd always have a place in his office, anytime, no matter what. That Friday the ace receptionist announced that she was pregnant. Al came into the office on the following Tuesday, having hardly recovered from the blow, and found that the other assistant had also caught a dose of morning sickness. He sat down, stunned, at his round marble table in his private office. Looking down, he saw a copy of the current bestseller, *How To turn Into An Acceptable Person*, bearing a blunt inscription from a recently departed employee, staring him in the kisser.

Al placed ads in all the papers. He did not bother to hope for the best. In this atmosphere, near five o'clock, with one last girl behind her, a physically undistinguished woman in a neat, nondescript outfit entered to interview for the receptionist post.

Three minutes into the interview Al knew Eileen would barely be able to handle the job. She had difficulty getting a thought out. She was twenty-nine and the work experience on her resume was that of a housewife and a mother of two girls, devised to sound like that of a tricky corporate vice-president on the fast track. But, she described her vocational strengths and gaps and her eagerness to make good with guileless honesty that meant a lot to Al. It wasn't a substitute for competence, he thought, but was he going to be able to do any better? He gave her the job.

The last applicant, upon sitting down, confirmed Al Czernik's secret belief that the most beautiful women in the world were either the rich or the proles. Marcia, a six-foot blonde, was the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. He asked her to tell him something about herself and she politely asked if he minded if she chewed gum. She folded a stick of sugary stuff into her mouth which Al had long considered the periodontal equivalent of rat poison, and told him she'd always dreamed of breaking into the periodontal business. It'd be aggravating, Al mused, working with a woman so preposterously gorgeous. His mind would go blank every time he was about to give her an order. But wouldn't it be more aggravating wasting more time interviewing?

Al hired Marcia. He held the door for her on their way out,

reminding himself that if it didn't work out he could always fire her.

For all her smouldering, lifelong fascination with gums (people's not flavored chews) Marcia almost immediately was visited by specious little emergencies that required her to leave work half an hour early. Al spoke to her about it but knew their professional association would be abbreviated.

Eileen was just the opposite. Whenever Al was obliged to go to the office early to catch up he always found Eileen already there, immersed in the sub-mediocre, plodding performance of her duties. She also routinely lingered after the other girls went home. At first, Al found it irksome, her edging shyly into his private office, bashfully stammering questions about the scope of his substantial practice, about his activities in national and international professional associations, about his memories of being in the army during World War II.

After a few weeks, though, he was no longer squirming at her wild overestimation of his surgical gifts, his stature in the field, or the Elysian material and metaphysical region she presumed he inhabited. Eileen's boundless ignorance of periodontics began to beguile him.

It soon became clear that Eileen admired Al unconditionally. She exuded a trust in him that was as tender and as irresistible as that of a very young child. He began to comprehend that Eileen saw something in him that no one ever had, including himself, and soon something new and strange had germinated in him. He found himself wanting to tell her poetic things which he was accustomed to keeping to himself because most periodontists he knew took their life's inspiration instead from their latest investments, their tennis games, or their upcoming exotic vacations. He wanted to make her feel as he did about being a healer, about the miracle of the human body, about periodontics, which he regarded as astronomers do the cosmos and as composers regard music.

Eileen, somehow, intuitively understood. She gradually became more confident. Soon she was regularly posing periodontal puzzles her friends had begun bringing her. She insisted Al explain, with a connoisseur's relish, the nuances and minutiae of daily periodontal work. Eventually she began making sense of the X-rays he reviewed for her at her insistence and she would now and then venture a diagnosis that was always grossly wrong.

When he listened to Eileen, though, her intellectual incompetence did not provoke his usual violent intolerance. He would instead gaze at her as she spoke, aware only of the faun-hearted earnestness in her voice, and in the workings of her eyes and her smile. He secretly marveled at how she was again stirring a region of innocence and tenderness in him whose existence he had never before suspected. The elemental loveliness of her plain features and sturdy figure now shone so palpably that he could not understand how he had not noticed it from the very first.

One day Marcia called in sick and Eileen had to double as an assistant. During a difficult procedure a patient retched violently over himself and the floor. Eileen rushed to the back and

returned with two fistfuls of paper towels. Al quickly grabbed a scad from her.

"That's okay Dr. Czernik," Eileen said as they stooped together to the floor.

"Eileen," he said. "You don't think I consider myself above this, do you?"

From the moment Al saw the indescribable look she gave him he knew that her unintentional conquest of him was now complete. Up until Eileen had entered his life, Al Czernik now realized, it had never occurred to him that anyone would ever see him without any of the ambivalence, the mistrust, the hidden indifference or petty contempt which characterized his relationships with others. Or within himself. In Eileen's company, he knew, he was in a zone in which those things simply had no existence.

Subsequently, he'd become elated when the practice required he get to work early. He'd become impatient for the day to end, for the other staff to scam while he sat tensely in his private office, uncertain whether Eileen would enter. But it was on those rare occasions when Eileen did leave properly at five, and Al closed up the darkening office (it now being autumn) feeling spurned and appalled with his surroundings that he fully understood how precious she was.

Al began to linger now and then around her desk. As usual, one afternoon, he was tuning her in and out, when he discovered a sectioned, brass, apple paperweight containing snapshots of her two daughters. Eileen coincidentally was explaining how her twelve-year-old had developed her first crush on a boy with a harelip. Eileen proudly attributed this to her daughter being born and raised at a naval base overseas. With a throb, though, Al privately decided the girl had inherited her blindness to a person's deformities from her mother.

Eileen then cut adrift into her normal dreary bibble babble and Al heard no more. He got caught up instead wondering about the two of them together. Boredom with him, nagging, leaving him for another man, would never occur to her. Pretending to check the appointment book at Eileen's elbow, he realized that for some time being in her company had filled him with a profound acceptance of himself and the world around him which he had long since stopped even dreaming about. How was it that he had never found this, and never would, with people on his intellectual plane?

What depths of devotion she inspired, depths of which he'd never known he could possibly feel. True, he reflected, he would be alone with his day-to-day perplexities. Well, if he then wanted intellectual stimulation he'd be perfectly content to have lunch with a colleague or pick up a medical journal. His own twenty-nine-year-old marriage, he reminded himself, was a success. But that was beside the point.

A few days later Eileen stopped coming in early. She began to go home at five. She didn't talk about her daughters. She expressed no interest in periodontics. She did her job, she was cordially correct, and she went home.

Al did not dare to inquire. But he was crushed and tortured by the humiliating figure he must've cut in acting a buffoon for

her. Soon he was fully reciprocating her correctness. But he thought about her compulsively and dreamt it was she he was possessing when he made love to his wife.

Eventually, though, he became bitter. One grim November afternoon he had to go to the office at lunch-time when he was not scheduled to appear. The petite redhead, whose Muncie love had crumbled, had gone to get soda and potato chips for the others. Hearing the door open they mistook Al for the assistant. From Al's private office a chorus of crude razzing arose and Marcia shouted above it all, "Hey, brown-nose! What took you so long!"

Al entered. The girls and their sack lunch garbage were spread throughout the room. Al asked Marcia, quite softly, to remain while everyone else stepped outside. He fired her. Then he asked to see the other girls and told them that upon the next infraction they'd be "terminated." He excused them, retrieved the envelope he'd come for, dashed off some correspondence amidst the orange rinds, the cheese crumbs, and the crumpled wax paper, and then he left.

Now Al too did his work and went home. But he also began to inadvertently overhear snatches of Eileen's furtive phone conversations. They took on mounting frequency and intensity. Initially, they were simply terse ("Yes, right." "I don't know." "I didn't say that."). By the following Thursday the snatches were darker: ("no, don't." "I can't, please!" "It just . . . Oh God!").

Al had about had it up to here. Friday, toward quitting time, he approached Eileen unawares with a package he wanted to send Federal Express. Eileen was on the telephone hastily telling a caller that there were no available openings on Saturday. Knowing that this was an age old gambit girls use to get off work early on Saturdays, Al looked down at the appointment book. It was blank. After Eileen hung up she sensed his presence. She whirled around and a moment later had fled into his office.

Al looked out at the waiting room. Thank god, it was empty. The other girls were grouped self-consciously behind him. He told them they could go home. He strode in to confront Eileen.

She was standing stiffly a few feet inside the doorway, her head bowed on her thumb and index finger, her eyes squeezed shut as though she was trying to disappear into a void. Al shut the door and Eileen wept hysterically. She tried to speak but was pulled down under by her outpouring.

Al gazed confusedly at her, his being pounding passionately, caring nothing for Eileen now, looking avidly for a sign from her that would tell him that her blubbing was really a way of encouraging him to consummate the hard carnality he did feel. Eileen lifted her head and snuffled. Al studied her sopping face, fighting with what felt like a molester's shudder his impulse to tenderly brush a soaking strand of hair off her forehead.

Haltingly, Eileen apologized for acting like such a complete idiot. She sat down and wiped her face with the back of her hand. She assured him that she'd done what she did so that she would be able to talk to him alone on Saturday. She desperately needed his

advice.

Her husband, she now explained, had just finished his over-seas tour and returned to the States. But the reason she and the children had come back much earlier was that he, Courtney, beat her and abused the girls. Why, he'd probably break her nose if he knew she was telling this. She had told him not to come back, but she couldn't support herself and her children on what she made here. She wasn't even living in her own house, but at his mother's, and she had just told her to move out.

Al imagined himself trapped at a receptionist's desk, while a foul-tempered thug slowly drew near to resume control of his life. He realized he had never been trapped by life but that Eileen, the very soul of a holy gift, was. What should he do, he who had so often told her how ardent a healer he was? How much at that instant did the white nursing uniform she wore for him make Al feel she belonged wholly to the hermetic kingdom he ruled. . . .

There was a knock on the door. Al called out, "Just a minute." Eileen straightened herself up and they entered the outer office together. At the front desk stood a lean muscular man in a three piece navy blue suit. His face was pitted and his black moustache, though neatly trimmed, stuck out like an animal's bristles. His smooth and menacing air frightened Czernik and reminded him of a motorcycle gang member dressed up for sentencing.

"Dr. Czernik," Eileen said. "I'd like you to meet my husband, Courtney Wilkins. Courtney, Dr. Czernik."

"A pleasure, Doc." Courtney firmly shook his hand. "Eileen says lots of wonderful things about you. Eileen, honey, if you're through here why don't you get your things. Mom has made reservations for us and we're going to be late if we don't get a move on."

"I can't stand being late, keeping other people waiting," Courtney said with a controlled smile to Czernik. "It's worse'n rudeness. It shows lack of character. And lack of respect. It says to someone: You don't count for nuthun to me."

Eileen returned fully swathed and the three of them headed out to the elevator. "Sooooo," Courtney said, stepping between Eileen and Czernik in order to press the Down button, "How long you been in practice, Doc?"

Czernik searched Eileen's face. It was expressionless. She looked through him as though he were an anonymous commuter on her evening rush hour El train. "Twenty-nine years," Czernik replied. The elevator opened. Czernik watched Courtney grip Eileen's arm and lead her inside. "You coming, Doc?"

"No, I, uh, left something behind in my office."

"Take it easy, Doc," Courtney said with an artificial, somehow contemptuous smile. "But take it." The doors closed and the lift plunged downward. Czernik looked out the lobby window and into the office in the skyscraper adjacent to his building. The fluorescent lights were blazing but whoever it was who was staying late was nowhere to be seen. Czernik thought of something. It occurred to him the way things sometimes do, after the

fact, like some pivotal and irreversible event that has taken place a long time ago and that you are only learning about now.

It occurred to Czernik that his life had passed him by, his life had passed him by a long time ago, his life had passed him by a long time ago and he knew now that it was just as well.

William E. Crane

Merion Blue

My sprinkler makes two sounds. First, it spits; it articulates, rim-tapping like a marching band's entry cadence. (I need to be careful before my exuberance carries me high-stepping down the block, frightening my neighbors.) Then it sprays; it clicks, fast, faster than the triple tonguing I practiced on the way home from high school. **Ta-da-ga, Ta-da-ga, Ta-da-ga.** I can't keep up with my sprinkler. (I can't remember my trombone teacher's name now either.) My sprinkler rim-taps and triple tongues.

I look at the yard which has been the scene of an early summer battle for supremacy. First it was the pre-emergence weed killer which my florist told me to spread last fall. The weeds weren't supposed to germinate in the spring. Wrong. I had weeds everywhere. It took my neighbor to tell me I had to put pre-emergence down in the fall **and** the spring. I couldn't figure that one out. If nothing germinates during the winter, shouldn't the first dose do the trick? No. Weeds do germinate in the winter, like winter wheat, he told me. I forget that I live in a warm climate now. The winters really are puny--can't even kill weeds (or insects either for that matter). I can't believe it; I blew thirty bucks so that winter weeds wouldn't spoil a lawn that was dormant--dormant until March anyway, then I had healthy weeds.

My neighbor's lawn looked great, right away in March. I've been slugging it out for two months and I'm just now in the ballpark. Did you know that 2-4-D kills broadleaf weeds but won't hurt a tuft of quack grass? I still don't know how to kill it but at least it's invisible after a good mowing. I mow a lot. I move the sprinkler. **Ta-da-ga, Ta-da-ga,** but I don't let any water touch the pavement. It's wasteful and I feel guilty enough merely watering the grass. I'm not even sure why I do it. I never thought I would.

I can hear Dad laugh. Whenever I (and my brother too) made our "intelligent" remarks about how we'd never have a lawn, he'd laugh. He didn't scold or lecture or say, "You wait, you just wait." He'd let time take care of us and have the last giggle. It's strange though; I don't think he works as hard on his lawn as he did then and he probably thought **that** would never happen. I'd never say "I told you so" to him because he was several steps ahead of me, that's for sure.

Today, when I try to remember, the remembering is all in the point of view. I have to get on my knees, so to speak, think about how the world looks nearer the ground. Pictures don't help. My childhood was on the cusp of instant color photography and the black and white photo albums distort the distinct colorings of my more perfect visions. So, if I get down and roll around in the dirt a little, I notice it's after five o'clock

because the light's getting yellow. And, I can see my opinions forming, even at this early date, learning I won't ever be able to play in any other grass once I've played in a merion blue lawn. It grows too thickly, too greenly, too comfortably for comparison. The bluegrass blade is hinged in the middle. I use it like a shovel, fold it down the middle, and move little pieces of dirt around with it, or put it in my mouth (bitter as it is) and whistle with it, even. Healthy merion blue sort of snaps when it's folded against its crease. Dad liked his merion blue and at three, stood me on a weather-beaten two-by-twelve, dragging me around the yard, grading it for his grass, but my swingsets and sand boxes.

The base paths worn between the driveway and first base (the ash tree by the curb), the ash and the neighbor's lot line, the lot line and the firethorn (nobody slid into third unless the throw was really going to be close), and the firethorn to home, were cause for some embarrassment. Base paths were an insult to a real merion blue lawnkeeper. Yet, it took Gary's line shot through the front picture window to signal a move to the playgrounds.

An age passed--the merion blue healed, even though when I go home I think I can still see baselines. Maybe they're burned into my retina and not into the lawn at all. I look into the blue of the sky and check for streaks and specks in my vision. Croquet is played on a lawn; we played it to kill, cut-throat croquet, on merion blue too. **Ta-da-ga.**

I have not stopped to appreciate grass in a long time. It represented five dollars a week per lawn in junior high and after that, little brother, Tom, took over. Later, it was a "bourgeois" waste of time. I imagined the thousands of man-hours spent on one-hundred foot plots of merion blue; thousands of pounds of fertilizer washing into the Clinton and St. Clair Rivers, Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River, then the lakes, Erie, Ontario, St. Lawrence's Seaway, and finally the Atlantic Ocean; all of this nitrogen growing great green gobs of seaweed and algae, only to deoxygenate the seas and poison the fish. I'd end up eating synthetic, green, kelp-crackers, poisoned ones, for food. Some day.

If anything seemed decadent to me, it was spending so much time with a thousand square feet of sod. No worthwhile animal grazed it, except our dog when his stomach was upset. Worse, I felt like an industrial polluter by using plastic garbage bags to weatherproof and insulate lawn clippings; felt like a victim of television advertising, sealing and preserving grass clippings in a giant baggie. Really, grass will decompose; it doesn't have to be stored. I move the sprinkler.

"You never know," I say, standing over my Rainbird, evaluating the wind, the coarseness of the spray, and the area of coverage (not to mention the imagined water bill). I adjust. My wristwatch has condensation inside the crystal; eventually the moisture will lead to the watch's premature demise.

It's a matter of point of view. Mom used to say, "Go **put** the sprinkler on the back yard." I didn't ask where. I **put** it in the middle of the merion blue and turned the faucet on full blast. The sprinkler hissed and cracked as the air rushed out of it and then I probably half-paid-attention as my handiwork doused the white Delta 88, the other neighbor's driveway, and the back picket fence. Before I could adjust the sprinkler, the Good Humor truck started its summer pied-piperling. The Good Humor man (never a woman when I was a kid) jungled down the block, ringing a set of chrome-plated bells; I could tell his sound apart from Mr. Misty or from any other popsicle truck. Sprinting to the street, I was careful not to run on anybody's merion blue. I had been taught by experience to be careful of merion blue, since you could never know exactly where the truck would stop, and merion blue lawnkeepers would yell at me if I forgot to check. While I ate a strawberry creamsicle, Dad would readjust the sprinkler that I had left on full blast--a simple deduction, not made at the time, but, now, as I imagine the look on his face.

If I went to eat my ice cream (you scream, I scream, we all scream, for ice cream!) at Richard's, or Doug's, where their dad's merion blue wasn't doing too well, I was always careful not to lay in it. Nobody needed to lay in grass that wasn't fun to lay in and wind up with an itchy back. Summer nights made cement walks equally fun--cool and dry. Grass has to be just so. There are competitors for merion blue grass, they just aren't other grasses. Tops of picnic tables are good or just about anywhere you aren't **supposed** to sit. Inferior merion blue is where I might have tossed my creamsicle stick. Funny, I never really worried about this kind of yard (notice the difference between a **yard** and a **lawn**, even then). I probably wouldn't get in trouble for littering a yard.

The ants would rally to any popsicle stick left over night even if I cleaned it with my tongue as well as I thought I could. Next morning, all of us kidded little David Billings--snot that he ate ant food, just like the ants did, and his mother yelled at me later because what if David had eaten ant poison because of my remark. I apologized and admitted not having thought about that. (Mrs. Billings--snot thought I was a juvenile delinquent.) Anyhow, this problem never would have happened in a real merion blue household. The popsicle stick would have been retrieved; scoldings weren't any fun. Now, my own kids tend to get into the same kind of trouble and I write it off--to genetics.

Here I stand, today, watering the grass. Now understand, it's bermuda grass. Where I live now, well, the heat would destroy merion blue. Frankly, it's an awful compromise. Bermuda is more like a weed. In the spring it's O.K., but there's enough rain. In the summer it will poke holes right through your feet. It lives though, despite the heat and drought, but it exacts a price too. It's like rye grass to me.

Grandma had rye grass. Mom called it a weed patch. I sure never laid in it. The reason was that the sunlight went through it. Thin-growing and coarse when it was hot, I could see the brown dead stuff underneath the living grass and this made it feel hotter and drier. More brown, less green, the dead grass reflected the sun, the grass looked worse and I felt hotter--simple equation. No way could I run barefoot through this grass. Now Linden did, but he was always barefoot. Mom didn't like me going barefoot because my feet were always filthy--I didn't mind Mom's minding. I hated rye grass too. Linden visited his aunt, not his grandmother, and was the first person I ever saw lose a toenail. It figured. He always went around barefoot. Mom said there was justice in Linden's accident.

He came over in the morning and called me and my brother outside. He says he has **got** to go to town. Downtown was nice. Where we lived, with the merion blue, there was no real downtown, just lots of stores, but no **main** street. At Grandma's, we could go **downtown**. It sounded right. Everything was close by and if they didn't have something downtown, you really couldn't look anywhere else. Choosing was easier.

They had wood floors downtown. Walking on wood floors was different. I couldn't steal anything because the floors were so noisy I got scared. I tried. I got scared. Linden told me I should have been barefoot.

But Linden wants to go to town and buy some toenail. I say he can't buy toenail, he has to **grow** it. Now he's got me. He says the hardware store will pay him ten cents a pound for toenail. I don't calculate how much toenail it would take to make a pound, or a penny's worth for that matter. (And, I figure he's dumb because I can't convince him, never mind he was originally trying to buy toenail, not **sell** it!) Linden has a gravelly voice. It sounds nice, so distinctive and forceful, like a Tonka Toy's plastic gears; he almost does convince me. Linden knows things; he doesn't just think things. I wrote reports on him when teachers wanted to know what I did over summer vacation.

My shoes are wet because the hose needs a new washer. I check it, but it doesn't look worn; it bothers me that there is no consistent cause and effect anymore. It should be a washer, but it is **not** a washer. I tighten the connection and wish I had done it sooner (the leak stops) even though the shoes are old and worthless except as shoes to work in the yard in, and then I guess they're worth enough. Actually, I'm trying to wear them out and they won't. I've never really totally worn out a pair of shoes; I'd like to, just once.

Linden taught me about persuasion. I never asked Linden if he wanted to do something that I really wanted to do. He always said no. So I asked him the first question, something I didn't want to do. Do you want to play in the leaves? (I didn't want to.) No, he'd say. Then he'd ask the questions. I couldn't say no

or he would try to force it on me. I needed to wait him out; he'd keep right on asking. Let's crawl under the house. What about the park? Want to play at the park? I'd pick a piece of wood out of the picnic table. What about catch? (Bingo, that's the one. Make him ask twice.) Do you want to play catch? I'd O.K. the suggestion; I had him. He wasn't any good actually, but I thought I was going to be Al Kaline some day and so I needed all the practice I could get. He threw the ball into a pile of leaves. I couldn't find it--he probably did it on purpose. He helped for awhile, but then started throwing the leaves around and both of us jumped and tackled, dived, hid, and scattered the pile.

Even though Mom knew how I got the rash and I told this to the teacher, she sent me straight to the principal. I had to explain about Linden's bad arm and the leaves, and Linden always getting justice--but not a rash. He sent me back to my classroom and all the kids sat and stared at me all day; but I would do it again. Leaves were like merion blue; they felt good and smelled like fall. Not like Grandma's rye grass.

It didn't get enough water, even in a town where merion blue would grow. It smelled dusty. Her clothesline supports were rotting in the back--so was the picnic table. When we sat on it, we were sure not to slide off; I picked myself up and off, unless I wanted Dad to hold me, and Mom to sterilize a sewing needle with a match, right in front of me, and then come after me with it! So, I didn't play much on rye grass. Linden did, but always a game we didn't want to play, barefoot.

He had his lunch out there once. He opened a can of cold pork and beans. This was the first time I smelled cold pork and beans; I was surprised to find that cold could be smelled. This was also the first time I saw someone eat cold pork and beans. The pork was yellow and floated in the beans like little blobs of fat; that's what I told Mom, yellow floating fat. Linden didn't have the lid all the way off either. He used a jack-knife can opener; that was also a first. He didn't finish the job though. He only pried open the lid and propped it up like in the cowboy movies. Then he ate the beans out of the can. Mom thought I had sense because I didn't want to do it too and cut my lip right off.

By now, of course, Linden was ready for the afternoon; he was ready to go fishing for a mess of bluegill. Dad said that a mess could be a different number depending on who was talking. I knew that, but I figured a mess was a lot, about fifty, since Linden was talking; I also felt like Linden never caught a mess of fish.

I went with him to the dam. The dam was dangerous even without Mom or Dad warning me. The water spilled from way up by the road to below where you fished in the pools; it could split your head open like a squash, Linden said. We fished where the grass was long down by the calmest pools, right on the bank; the grass wasn't merion blue though. I didn't know what it was.

It crushed down nice when we sat there an hour or so. Linden wouldn't crush the grass on shore. He said bluegill could see fishermen. So we hid behind the shore grass and were real careful

not to move too much. Linden showed me how to use a branch for a stringer. I would rather have a metal stringer because Dad always had one; I didn't have to lay the fish on the bank; they could be left in the water. They would be fresher, Dad told me. Linden didn't agree; there was no difference between dead-a-day and dead-an-hour, fresh was anything caught that day. Linden figured fresh fish in a grocery store was older than an hour, so his fish were as fresh as they needed to be. We laid our fish on the bank even though they had grass and leaves stuck all over their scales, and especially on their eyes.

The birds in my yard like my sprinkler as much as the bermuda grass does. The birds make my retrievers, two of them, black ones, crazy. The birds can't enjoy the water for very long--the dogs flush them off. The bermuda's sort of brown. I haven't laid in bermuda grass ever, I don't think, maybe only sat in some for a little while. I call the male and make him sit. I make him lay down. He whistles a slow, pitiful, almost translatable whine. I look at him the right way, and he shuts up. If I had a pellet gun I could make him retrieve the right way. But I'd have to shoot a meadowlark and it might make me sick.

Linden knew pellet guns were better than B.B. guns. He didn't have either. Tom and me had B.B. guns. We never shot robins, they were the state bird. I watched my cousin shoot a robin once; he was from Illinois. It fell twenty feet and hit a narrow sidewalk like a wet sponge. I wished it had fallen in the grass; the sound made me a little bit sick to my stomach. You can't make robins better after you're done looking at their feathers, their feet, and their eyes. I liked shooting starlings. Grandpa said they were **scavengers** and it made it seem alright. I wanted to shoot a crow some day, when I was older and a better shot, but you almost needed a pellet gun and crows are pretty smart.

The best shot I ever made was between the blades of merion blue. I took one of the basement windows out of its frame, went downstairs and stood on a bench. The backyard was baited with bread crumbs and sparrows like bread crumbs. I shot a sparrow right in the beak, not by aiming at him, but by aiming at where he should have been, and shooting through the merion blue. The beak was broken--the bird wasn't quite dead. It was the last one I shot with a B.B. gun. I never did get a pellet gun.

I shot my brother with a B.B. gun once. It was winter, he had to pee; I really was an idiot; I shot him in the bare butt. I could only imagine many years later how much I bullied him, in little ways. In fact, I still get a lot of guilt attack in the middle of sleepless nights. I hope he's forgiven me long ago.

Tomorrow I will have to mow the lawn. Water, mow; water, mow. I never thought I'd care to do this. I probably still don't,

but there's not much to do downtown and the late evenings are the coolest hours to be outside. The property value will go up I guess. The sprinkler's sound I like. **Ta-da-ga, ta-da-ga.** The dogs know how to play in water the way I used to. They make me laugh and laugh, skidding on the smooth cement patio when their pads are wet from the bermuda, losing their usual coordination. They don't pull muscles; it's fun to see them recover from a spill and act like nothing happened. Dogs are conscious of their behavior; they don't like to look awkward. Grass is so dogs can have napkins: E.E. Milne, I think. My Labradors dry off in it. They snort like pigs.

The only funeral I ever went to was one that Mom did in the back. The parakeet, I can't remember its name, fell off the perch, even though the whiskey Mom put in his water was supposed to fix him up. So she put tissue paper in a green-and-white P-F Flyer shoe box, and put the green-and-yellow bird in it. My sister was three; that explains the funeral. All five of us met by the back fence and my brother's spruce tree. Dad strained to get the shovel through the thick merion blue. Mom said a few words, got to "We're gathered here today," and I looked at her. I smirked; she started to laugh and could only say a few more sentences; "rest in peace," and "amen" are all I can remember, I was laughing so hard. My sister was satisfied so the bird was laid six inches under.

Dad filled in the grave; it was never marked. Mom didn't want to make a cross after I laughed and my sister was too little. Mom told her that it was more **natural** for a bird anyway not to have a marker. Nobody ever dug it up, not even for science class. I'm sure it's probably still there. The family never bought another bird, and I still can't remember its name when we joke about the family's shoe box funeral.

I finish coiling the hose on its hanger, something I never did as a kid. I suppose the only reason I do it now is because the previous owner of my house attached it to the wall. Dad's laughing, I can hear it.

I feel better. The bermuda will live another day. The dogs are really chasing the swallows, night birds, now. Believe it or not, I think the swallows are leading my two on. They're circling too regularly not to think this. The dogs would know surely. I would love to get an answer. My kids don't want an answer. They don't like my dogs when they're rambunctious like this. The dogs knock them over and I laugh; then the dogs keep it up, and my children get mad at me. To be honest, I think it's funny.

My wife calls me in to eat dinner. It's dark. She asks if I'm O.K. I don't know exactly what to tell her. More often than not I really don't know the answer to that one particular question. It's not supposed to be a trick question though, and there's no reason to worry her--she doesn't need a manic response. After all, if I asked her the same question, she'd say,

"Fine," even though she was probably sweeping the kitchen floor while I watered the bermuda. That's no reason to say fine either. I say, "Fine." I tell her I'm O.K.

I once spent ten dollars when I was twelve or thirteen at a carnival and didn't win a thing. I was really scared. I started thinking about all the things I could have done with that money, and I listed them to myself walking home with Tom. To this day, I don't have fun gambling, and won't make anything but gentlemen's bets. But it wasn't the missed opportunities that scared me most; it was the idea of simply wasting ten dollars, throwing ten bucks down a bottomless pit. It felt like a disease. Would I know when to stop? I could think of no good which would come of it. These days, I blow a few dollars and think how they cycle through the economy for the good of all. I don't worry about wasting a few dollars.

I tell my wife I'm fine; I'm having fun with the dogs. I wash my hands and I eat and I wish there was a carnival in town. I want to knock down the milk bottles and win a stuffed animal even though I know the odds; I know the bottles have lead in the bottoms.

The best I can come up with is the home video game. My Pac-Man gets eaten twice, early, and I reset the game as if I hadn't really done that poorly--like the way I used to play solitaire.

She asks how the yard looks. "You know, about the same," I say. "Like bermuda grass."

THE SOUND SCREEN

a play in one act
William Moseley

The Characters

The two characters of this play have no names. They're designated simply A and B.

A and B may be both male, both female, or one of each. A is relatively older than B, with a deeper, more mature voice and (much of the time) a rather world-weary attitude. B is younger without being juvenile, is more optimistic than A, and is somewhat excitable.

I visualize A as taller and heavier than B; while B's appearance suggests the intellectual, scholarly, or even ascetic.

Their costumes should be alike, rather loose and formless, in the same subdued hues as the set.

The Set

The set should suggest a fairly small confined area, with rounded rather than flat surfaces. If we are on a proscenium stage, the three walls are concave and completely blank. The entire set and furnishings are painted in tones of soft white and neutral gray. The overall effect is deliberately indefinite and ambiguous.

At extreme right and left of the playing area are two narrow bunks; and at center, two short, low benches, perpendicular to the curtain line and about a foot apart. These four pieces are the only furnishings.

It should be noted that each character remains on his side of the set throughout the play.

At Rise: We are in absolute darkness. After 15 or 20 seconds, the starting Bell rings, loud and permeating. We hear a body stirring on each bunk, followed by voices.

A: (**yawning**) Yessss . . . yes . . .

B: (**also yawning**) It must be time. . . .

A: It's time--I guess. I think it's time.

B: Such a deep sleep. . . .

A: If "I think it's time" and "I guess it's time" mean the same, then thinking must be the same as guessing.

B: (**yawns**) Such a vivid dream. . . .

A: I think, I guess . . . therefore I guess I think I am. As the poet says. Oof!--what (**yawning**) nonsense.

B: I mean, speaking logically, a dream I remember as being vivid.

A: Huh? Oh--still there, eh? And still talking . . .

B: In this dream, I--

A: Not now.

B: In this dream, I seem always to stand poised, just this side of the narrow gulf between--

A: not now! Save it.

B: Ah. Still there.

A: Save it. Your . . . dream. Your memory of this dream. This interrupted dream in which you stand poised on one foot, just this side of that oh-so-narrow gulf . . . but you hesitate. And then the bell--

B: --and then the bell rings. How did you--

A: And the light switch sounds--

(Sound of Light Switch, very loud: and suddenly the set is flooded with a diffused and glaring white "institutional" light that has no discernible source. We see A and B lying on their bunks.)

B: --the light switch sounds, and we have light. **(Slowly sits up on edge of his bunk and stretches.)** How did you know--know my dream?

A: **(Sits up and stretches)** It's not likely to win any My-Most-Original-Dream contests.

(Until later, A and B make deliberate efforts to avoid eye contact.)

B: But how could you know--unless you yourself--

A: I said save it! For later.

B: Later, later; it's not necessarily logical that there'll be a--oh. Something to look forward to? Like--like what? Like . . . dessert?

A: Dessert? What's that?

B: You remember dessert. Strawberry-ripple ice cream, smothered under gooey chocolate syrup, and crowned with a halo of chopped nuts--

A: Oh yes! Or a simple dish of sliced peaches, glazed with brandy and set aflame--

B: Yes, and chunky banana pudding, cooling its heels of vanilla wafers beneath a snowdrift of white-capped meringue--

A: Or lightly-browned pastry shells nestling a clutch of pitted red cherries, sheltered by a cloud of angel-hair whipped cream and a fairy flickering of confectioner's sugar--

B: Mom's deep-dish apple pie with a slice of sharp cheddar--

A: Wait . . .

B: Grandma's oatmeal-raisin cookies--

A: **(rising)** Wait!

B: Great-Grandma's hickory nut fudge--

A: Wait!

B: Great-Great--Hmm?

A: Wait. We're doing it. Again.

B: Aren't we usually? doing it? again? **(Pause. B rises.)** Uh--what, precisely, this time?

A: What we agreed we wouldn't do.

B: Ummm . . .

A: **(Takes a few steps toward center, though A and B continue to shy from eye contact.)** Stop and think! Or guess. What were we just doing?

B: If memory serves: talking.

A: Of course talking--what else! But talking about **what?**

B: Oh. What we . . . don't have.

A: What we can't have. And we agreed before not to admit that particular category of abstractions into our discussion.

B: Because . . . because . . .

A: Because we have no referents! No objects for the words to refer to! After all, wasn't it your idea to--

B: --to ban such topics, because they're illogical. Yes, I do seem to recall . . . **(Takes two or three steps toward center.)** But in the dream, I felt--or dreamed I felt--or remember I dreamed I felt--

A: **(Turns away.)** Ye gods!

B: --on the verge of a, a breakthrough, a bold new step into--

A: Into?

B: Whatever.

A: **(droops)** How enlightening . . . **(Both begin moving slowly to benches at center.)** Let's save our dreams for later.

B: Like dessert?

A: **(warning)** Ah-ah-ahhhh!

B: So. Not about what we don't--

A: Can't--

B: --have.

(During a moment of silence, each sits on one of the benches, backs to each other--but not touching--facing left and right. B begins humming, looks around the set and overhead, then clears throat.)

And--uh--what do we have?

A: **(patiently)** We have our minds. We have our voices.

B: And our memories?

A: Perhaps we'd best forget our memories

B: Yes--that's logical. Forget our memories. **(Short pause.)** So. Our minds. Our voices. Our--voices! That reminds me! **(Glances above the audience.)** I think I've figured it out!

A: **(hopefully)** Really? Figured it out? You mean--understand it? Why haven't you told me sooner!

B: I've started to--more than once--but the second bell always rings. Remember?

A: All I remember is that we were going to forget.

B: This I can't forget--there's a referent for it!

A: Ah well . . . if it's only a memory. . . .

B: But the referent is still with us!

A: **(yawning)** Do tell.

B: It's there--on the wall. **(B gestures at a spot high on the fourth wall, toward the audience.)** You do want to hear about it, don't you?

A: Yah . . . yah . . . I'm absolutely consumed **(stifling a yawn)** with curiosity. . . .

B: I've figured out what it is!

A: A shadow of a memory of an idea

B: **(gesturing to the same spot)** That circular screen--there, high on the wall. . . . What do you think--

A: Guess--

B: --guess that screen is?

A: Hmm? **(glances at it, still without interest)** Ohh . . . I've

always assumed it had something to do with the ventilation.
 B: Ventilation? Do you consider this place well-ventilated?
 A: (**sniffs the air**) Now that you raise the question . . . no.
 B: My theory is, it's a one-way sound screen!
 A: Really? A one-way . . .
 B: Sound screen. Like one-way glass--though there's no glass in this place. But you know: from one side, you can see through it clearly; while from the other side--
 A: From the other side, it's opaque--you can't see through it.
 B: Right! One-way. Now: listen carefully for a sec.
 A: Don't I always--
 B: Just listen! (**pause**) What'd you hear?
 A: Is this a trick question?
 B: No! What'd you hear?
 A: What'd **you** hear?
 B: Just answer me! What--did--you--hear?
 A: Uh . . . nothing.
 B: Exactly! What have we ever heard?
 A: Besides nothing?
 B: Besides nothing!
 A: Umm . . . voices. My own. Yours, since you arrived--
 B: I don't remember that.
 A: --and the bell--
 B: --and a switch as the light goes on and off. But what else?
 A: Once, long ago, I thought I--no. Nothing else.
 B: (**rising slowly**) We've never heard them--have we.
 A: Why no . . . no, we've never heard--did you say "them"?
 B: But does that mean they can't hear us?
 A: Following your logic, no. It doesn't mean they can't hear--
 B: Therefore--(**turning to stare at the "screen"**) A one-way sound screen! They're out there--
 A: They!
 B: --always have been--listening to everything we do or say. While we never hear anything they do or say. This leads us to the logical conclusion that they've made the screen one-way.
 A: Wait, wait--not so fast. . . . Give me (**rising**) . . . me a chance to-- (**As B turns away, A looks up at the screen.**) One . . . way . . . one-way their way . . . But why?
 B: Excuse me?
 A: Why? Why would they want such a screen? and why here?
 B: Why. Yes. Well . . . uh . . . I hadn't got that far in my theorizing yet.
 A: Oh, you hadn't!
 B: No, uh--maybe you can help. With the why.
 A: Oh-ho! You admit you need me, then? You confess you were rash with your "figured it out"? That this hastily conceived theory you're so proud of was ripped untimely from your mind--and needs me to nurse it to maturity?
 B: Yes . . . yes. (**Sits as before with back to A.**) Why?
 A: (**turning upstage**) I'm not sure I want to tell you.
 B: Please!
 A: You must continually be starting things--which I must continually be finishing for you.

B: Agreed, yes--

A: You arrive on the scene late--

B: I don't--

A: --you and your "logic," cooking up half-baked "theories" from the raw dough of your meager experience--

B: Oh you're so right! Now please tell me why.

A: (**short pause**) It's for their entertainment.

B: Entertainment?

A: Have you a better explanation?

B: well--no . . . but yours isn't exactly what I--

A: (**overlapping**) I thought not. The bell rings, the light glares forth, we talk . . . for their entertainment. Eventually--one might even say inevitably--they suffer the ennui such uninspired fare no doubt inspires. The bell rings, the light vanishes, and we return to our dark intermission of voiceless sleep.

B: Wait, you're--you're taking over my unpretentious little theory of the sound screen--

A: (**pacing by now--but always on the same side of the set**) Soon their tedium builds; their options wane--they crave diversion, so they hopefully sound the bell.

B: --and you're developing it into a total philosophy!

A: How we must constantly disappoint them! How eternally optimistic they must be, to always ring the bell again, turn on the light.

B: Lord. My tender embryo theory, and you hatch a full-grown doctrine from it!

A: Can you even begin to comprehend the desperation with which they turn once more to us? (**laughs**) Ye gods--how little else they must have to occupy, distract, fulfill them! Don't you pity them?

B: Them . . . well, if--

A: Right! And before you came--

B: I don't remember--

A: --they had only me to listen to! Oh what drivel I spouted alone--almost as insipid as the drivel we spout together! When I reflect back on that solitary season, with only my droning monotonous gibber-jabber, my introverted soliloquizing, my plaintive complaints--

B: Snatching up my orphan theory and running off in all directions--

A: --in shame I bow my empty rattling prattling head--

B: --feeling sorry for my conjecture "they"--

A: --grateful they didn't just zap me! Zap my yap. Instead . . . they sent you.

B: I don't remember that.

A: Yet together, have we given them the variety they no doubt anticipated, had every right to expect, with your advent? with two minds to create, two voices express?

B: Inferring motives--

A: Oh no, hi-ho, it's off we go, inanely chattering away, time after time--until by now they must be twice as bored! No, no: we must meet our obligation; give them the variety they long for, the variety we've failed so miserably to provide.

B: Shackling us with guilt, when we have no logical proof of--

A: As the poet says, "Provide, provide!"
 B: --of what they expect or even if--What?
 A: That's all.
 B: Excuse me?
 A: (**moving to the bench**) That's all I had to say. Rather nicely put, don't you think?
 B: But--
 A: I fancy I have a gift of sorts for declamation.
 B: But--
 A: (**sighing and sitting with back to B**) Though the exertion is tiring--energating--drawing upon one's inner resources like that.
 B: But--wasn't all that--all your "declamation"--wasn't it, after all, more talking? Not the variety you were declaiming for?
 A: Listen, you pimple of logic on the backside of discourse: that was a rather diverting bit we just went through. Occupied a respectable portion of time. Don't spoil it by taking it seriously.
 B: Seriously? (**rises**) You--didn't you--
 A: That chimeric one-way sound screen of yours? Ye gods! Next you'll be telling me you really believe there's a "them" out there.
 B: . . . Perhaps . . .
 A: Ye gods . . .
 B: Because--(**takes a couple steps toward the screen**) I was already thinking how we could provide--if they're tired of voices, I mean. Like, we could do something else to entertain them.
 A: Ye saints and sinners . . .
 B: Sound effects!
 A: Ye--er . . . Sound effects?
 B: You can do sound effects, can't you?
 A: Since I've never attempted them, it's never been established that I can't.
 B: Therefore--
 A: Ergo, I must be able to do them!
 B: Isn't logic wonderful?
 A: This could be the start of something . . . (**rises**)
 B: A beginning calls for basics. I'll kick things off by--
 A: Wait. You'll--?
 B: It was my idea. Surely logic dictates that I go first.
 A: Oh. Logic. (**shrugs**) Yes . . .
 (**During the following sound effects sequence, A and B sit for the first few effects and then use free-form movements.**)
 B: I'll kick things off by doing a void. (**Pause**) Well-how was that?
 A: What was that?
 B: That was me, doing a void! It really wasn't as difficult as it sounded--shall I do it again for you?
 A: Ah--no; no, that won't be necessary--
 B: Okay, into my void I'll introduce--(**Sound: Ocean, waves breaking softly.**)
 A: Hey . . . that's not bad . . . most creative. . . .
 B: And add--(**Sound: Wind blowing; then wind and ocean together.**)

Think they'll like that?

A: Very moving! How do you do it?

B: Oh, I dunno . . . seems to come naturally. Now--turn to the sky--O remember the sky? (**Sound: Rain, fading in and growing louder.**)

A: What fertile gifts you have!

B: Then raise up some land in my void--my former void--thereby channeling a--(**Sound: Running stream.**)

A: You just keep rolling along!

B: And if I want to stir things up, just for the hell of it--(**Sound: Rainstorm, with wind; then a blast or two of thunder.**)

A: That should get us going!

B: Whew . . . yeah, but it seems to get--increasingly complicated . . .

A: May--shall--I'll try!

B: (**nods**) We could use more--uh--more--

A: More variety! "How infinite in faculty," as the poet says. So . . . I'll take your land and add--mmm--something in the way of life, shall I?

B: "Life" . . . What's that?

A: You remember! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me life or give me death!

B: Oh. That.

A: Nothing too ambitious at first . . . (**Takes a deep breath. Sound: A cricket chirping.**) Oh my. I did it, didn't I?

B: Alive and kicking. But aim higher.

A: (**Sound: A bird call.**) Do I pass?

B: With flying colors!

A: I'm getting the hang of it. I'll bet if I really throw myself into it--(**Sound: Jungle noises--monkeys, tropical birds, and so on--build to a crescendo and then break off.**) Oof! Tiring--but it does grow on one, doesn't it?

B: That seems to be its nature.

A: Perhaps I'd better . . . well, "Simplify, simplify!" as the poet says. Tame my wild impulses . . . (**Sound: A dog barks, then a horse neighs, then a rooster crows.**)

B: How far we've come from my void!

A: And always room for one more. (**Sound: Baby crying.**) Well . . . maybe that's overdoing it . . .

B: Stuff and nonsense! Sound and fury! We're just picking up steam! My turn now--moving right along--(**Sound: A wagon rolling over a wooden bridge.**)--which quickly becomes--(**Sound: A train rushing past, with whistle and clicking of rails.**)

A: Oh, we're making progress, all right! Could I? (**Sound: Early automobile chugs by.**)

B: Don't forget the sky? Off we go--(**Sound: Jet plane rapidly approaches, passes, fades off.**)

A: Yes! And by dawn's early light--(**Sound: Rocket lifting from launch pad.**)

B: What if we--

A: --joined forces--

B: --together! (**Sound: A growing cacophony of modern city and industrial noises: traffic, auto horns, jack-hammers and other**

machinery.) The question is--

A: --which is to be master, that's all! (City noises become Sounds of modern warfare--rifle and machine gun fire, artillery, diving planes and bursting bombs--which build to an ear splitting crescendo.)

B: Wait--wait--wait! (Sounds diminish.) Hold . . . it! (All Sounds abruptly stop.)

A: What's up?

B: It's--not as much fun anymore.

A: Was becoming rather unpleasant, wasn't it? Though something familiar about all that, too . . .

B: Something?

A: (Shrugs) Nothing. (After a moment, A moves to bench, sits as before and glances toward the screen.) I suppose it's possible they might have--

B: No. Not even they could've enjoyed that last outburst of ours. (Moves to bench and sits.) It's a wonder they hadn't cut off the light to stop us.

A: Might wake 'em up, anyway. . . . assuming.

B: . . . Assuming?

A: Assuming there is a "they," which I certainly don't for one minute believe.

B: But--but you--you said we entertain them!

A: Did I? I wash my hands of all belief. The one-way sound screen was your brain child, not mine--

B: My theory.

A: Your theory, ripped untimely et cetera . . . and a pretty damned feeble theory, if you ask my opinion.

B: Which I didn't.

A: Wishful thinking of the basest sort: fantasizing someone listening to us! Hope, fathered by fear, born of ignorance, nurtured by egotism.

B: Is that so? I haven't forgotten how quickly you adopted my poor little--

A: Hush--wait!

B: I am waiting. What choice do we--

A: Just wait! (Pause) Ah well . . .

B: What was it?

A: Nothing. Of course.

B: Then why'd you--

A: Nothing, I said! You've got me as muddle-brained as you are, with your fanciful sound screen castle-in-the-air. (sitting) A long shot, at best . . . an outside chance that we might've finally provoked them to some response.

B: By?

A: By not believing in them. But . . . apparently that doesn't work, either.

B: No. (Pause) I suspect it's not logical, anyway. If we provoked them to a response by not believing in them, we couldn't very well acknowledge their response without contradicting our non-belief--

A: Ye gods!

B: --and therefore, it wasn't truly non-belief, so they wouldn't

be provoked to start with.

A: You think too much.

B: You said our minds are all we have--and our voices.

A: You talk too much.

B: But there's nothing else! **(A long pause. Then A rises, an idea forming.)**

A: There's listening. **(Looks up at the screen.)** Let's not forget we can also listen. In view of which . . . it now occurs to me your theory could be correct--in a reverse sort of way. I.e., the circular grid we both believe we observe high on that wall actually is a one-way sound screen--

B: Back to that!

A: Don't interrupt. However, the screen is opposite to your prematurely-hatched conclusion. That is, rather than being one-way from inside out, it is one-way from outside--

B: --from outside in. Oh lord. In which case--

A: In which case, they can't hear us at all. Regardless of what we say, or what sound effects we create. We can only hear them.

B: Which we haven't. Meaning--

A: Meaning one of three alternatives. A: they don't exist.

B: Lord. An alternative that, despite its logical neatness, is too dreadful to contemplate.

A: All right, B: they exist, but have nothing to say to us.

B: That alternative, too--unthinkable. . . .

A: Hence, C: they exist, and they have something to say to us, but the proper moment hasn't yet arrived.

(A and B move about uneasily, avoiding eye contact still.)

B: Ah. So we must--

A: We must bide our time.

B: That's what we're doing! What you did before I came! And still--nothing for them.

A: Not in itself proof, is it, that something won't yet come?

B: Lord. At any minute.

A: At any minute.

B: Even when the light is out?

A: Hmmm . . . I hadn't considered that. But yes, why not? Even when the light is out.

B: In that event--

A: In that event, it might have already come, and we missed it.

B: Missed it because we were asleep!

A: Or--mistook it for a dream.

B: O let's tell our dreams!

A: We're saving them for later.

B: It is later!

A: Not late enough.

B: Then we mustn't sleep again! We must stay awake, even in the dark time, so if they--

A: Ye gods--once again I have to finish what you've begun! We can't stay awake just because we want to! You know the light never goes out until we're exhausted--worn weary with thinking, with talking, with each other--so done in we've begun to long for the darkness, almost welcome it.

B: **(whilting)** They've thought of everything.

A: Insofar as we've thought what they've thought of. If we even have. However: have we thought of everything?

B: Ummm?

A: For example--suppose we try to fool them.

B: Oh be careful. . . . They'll hear!

A: No, the screen is one-way this way, remember?

B: I can't remember. It keeps changing.

A: We can hear them--should they choose to make themselves known--but they can't hear us . . . hear us, say, discussing (**raises voice and moves toward the screen**) any little plot we might come up with against them!

B: Aha . . . I'm beginning to follow you again. If it should turn out the other way, and they can hear us plotting against them--

A: --they'll be forced to respond, thereby revealing themselves after all--

B: And we'll find out at last! Even at the risk off--

A: Even at the risk. Shall we?

B: (**hesitantly**) Yes. What's our plot?

A: (**moves to the bench**) A master stroke of ingenuity and duplicity: we'll make the sounds of the bell and the light switch!

B: Like--like our sound effects?

A: (**sitting**) Yes! The one commendable contribution you've made since your arrival--provoking me into the discovery of our new capabilities.

B: But--but--the sound effects were only a kind of--of game. For their entertainment, maybe. While this--this goes beyond--

A: Yes?

B: Just--(**thinks, shrugs**) goes beyond.

A: That's the beauty of it! It's beyond what they believe we can do yet. By re-creating the bell and the light, we'll trick them into thinking we're asleep, so that--

B: So that if they are active during the dark times, and do or say anything--

A: --we'll hear them!

B: Yesss . . . but . . .

A: But, but, but! I suppose your absurd logic is butting in again.

B: But--if the screen is one-way this way, so we can hear them--how can they hear us making the light and bell?

A: Your powers of observation rank somewhere below those of a blind, deaf, and senile dormouse. Haven't you noticed that those two sounds are different? They don't come through the sound screen--in fact, they don't really seem to come from anywhere at all. They simply--simply are.

B: Yes . . . now that you--I don't so much hear them as--feel--or sense them, is it?

A: Exactly. Who knows how the bell and the light work, anyway? Perhaps by imitating them, reproducing them ourselves--

B: --we'll gain control!

A: Or something. Besides, it's a plot, remember . . . it's enough if they're deluded into suspecting we have something up our sleeve, so to speak. Anyway--what do we have to lose?

B: I wish you hadn't asked that.
A: Once more unto the breach, as the poet says!
B: Excuse me--I'm afraid I've lost track: do we believe in them now, or not?
A: (**irked**) Ye gods . . .
B: And is the sound screen working from in out? or out in? or--
A: Saints preserve us . . .
B: It--it keeps changing . . .
A: Then let's make haste before it changes again!
B: And I--I'm getting tired . . .
A: Another reason to hurry!
B: Well--what can you expect from a . . . a "dormouse"?
A: Is that what you're pouting about. (**sighs**) I-apologize-for-calling-you-a-dormouse. Now can we get on with it?
B: Apology accepted. (**sitting**) Who--who leads off?
A: The sounds were louder when we went together. Ready? The bell is always first. All together now: go!
(In contrast to the earlier sound effects, we now see and hear the character trying to reproduce the sounds phonetically.)
A and B: (**separately but overlapping**) Ringgg! Brringgg! Ding-dong! Ting-a-ling! Jingle-jangle! Tinkle, tinkle! Clang . . . chime . . .
A: No--no--
B: Clink--clank . . . clunk . . . Nothing . . .
A: (**listens intently for a moment**) Nothing. The light switch, then--it should be easier. Go!
A and B: Click! Snap! Flick! Tick! Crack . . . clack . . . smack!
(Both snap their fingers and make clicking noises with their mouths, but again soon wind down.)
B: (**breathing hard**) It's . . . no go . . .
A: (**breathing hard as well**) They didn't react . . . to our plot . . .
B: And we can't--
A: --can't make the bell . . . or the light. Proving something.
B: Yes. But what?
A: That there're limitations.
B: (**jumping from the bench**) We already knew there're limitations! The limitations of our being here! The limitations of our sleeping and waking, of our thinking and talking--
A: Sit. Sit down. (**B sits reluctantly.**) Look on it as a learning experience. We've found another limitation: that the times of light and dark--the times of our being on and off, so to speak--are outside our influence. Not controllable, perhaps unknowable.
B: You don't suppose--that's all there is?
A: All?
B: You don't suppose that all there is . . . is learning limitations . . .
A: Surely not. That can't be all there is--learning limitations. And yet the alternative--that all there is, is learning freedom--
B: --is too frightening to contemplate. Because . . . because . . .
A: Because we've agreed not to talk about--
B: --what we don't have.

A: What we can't have!

B: Freedom is--dessert.

A: Ah-ah-ahhhh . . .

B: No! One memory I won't forget: dessert reminded me of . . . dreams. We were going to tell our dreams!

A: Yes. (**sighs**) It has come down to that. We have come down to that. The thinking, the guessing, the theorizing, have shot their bolts, lowered their flag. Our weary minds retire from the field, acknowledging defect--or perhaps no more than an equally shameful stalemate. Only our voices remain on duty. And so we gather around the campfire, and tell each other our dreams. . . .

B: Campfire?

A: A figure of speech.

B: A part of declaiming?

A: Declaiming, proclaiming, exclaiming, acclaiming--all the posturing of the voice after the mind has forfeited.

B: We gather around a figure of speech--

A: --and tell our dream. (**Pause. B slowly rises. Lighting takes on a reddish hue.**)

B: The Dream. (**Takes a breath, then begins.**) In the dream, I seem always to stand with one foot raised, poised just this side of the narrow gulf separating unknowing from knowing.

A: I don't have to ask which side this side is.

B: The gulf is surely narrow--as thin as a breath--yet it also seems incomparably vast: light years wide and galaxies deep. I stare into the gulf, beguiled by its infinite sway--there where light and dark meet and cancel each other out; where heat and cold are the same and neither; where time and space play Ping-Pong with matter and energy.

A: And I hesitate--

B: And I hesitate, one foot planted firmly in unknowing--

A: (**rising slowly**)--and the raised foot trembling over the brink at the edge of knowing--

(A and B face opposite directions. They are very close together but do not touch.)

B: It isn't that I lack the strength to take the step.

A: Nor do I lack the will.

B: I'm not afraid.

A: No one pushes me forward or holds me back.

B: I do not regret the loss of unknowing.

A: I do not dread the gaining of knowing.

B: I simply . . . hesitate.

A: Gazing into the gulf that separates the two.

B: Or does it join them?

A: Gazing into the gulf that separates and joins.

B: Entranced by the purity of its unendingness--

A: Fascinated by its unfathomable beauty--

B: Enchanted by its compelled symmetry--

A: Charmed by its cosmic indifference--

B: Intrigued by its silence.

A: I want--

B: I want to sing it--

A: To make a poem--

B: Paint its picture--
 A: Act out its drama.
 B: Because--
 A: Because it has no voice--
 B: No words--
 A: No eye--
 B: No body. And so, possessed, I hesitate . . .
 A: And the bell rings.
 B: And the light comes on.
 A and B: And I am awake.
 B: **(pause, then B turns to A)** How did you know?
 A: **(A turns to B. They have eye contact for the first time.)** It's my dream too. **(Pause. Both A and B are tiring.)**
 B: Do you think they know?
 A: Do you think it matters?
 B: Do you think?
 A: I guess.
 B: I'm tired . . . **(pause)** Gathered around the campfire, that flickering figure of speech, kept alive by our voices--
 A: Yammering away.
 B: Stammering away.
 A: A-B-C-ing--
 B: X-Y-Z-ing.
 A: Yip-yapping--
 B: Vowel-snapping--
 A: Consonant-humming--
 B: Syllable-strumming--
 A: Question-popping--
 B: Answer-hopping--
 A: **(lifts one hand toward B)** Groping--
 B: **(lifting hand)** Hoping.
(For a moment, they touch fingertips--the only time they touch--then slowly lower their hands.)
 A: Hoping for--
 B: **(Looks up at the screen)** For their voices.
 A: **(Looks up at the screen)** Through the sound screen?
 B: The round screen--
 A: The one-way screen?
 B: **(A and B turn to face each other.)** The won't-say screen--
 A: Which may well be a no-way screen.
 B: And while we wait--
 A: While we . . . hesitate--**(Sound of Bell, as at beginning. Lights return to bright white.)**
 B: **(distressed)** The bell calls--
 A: **(yawning)** Soon-darkness falls . . .
(A and B are drawn back to their bunks, as though by some invisible force. A goes willingly, B reluctantly. Their voices become progressively weaker.)
 B: We must keep talking--talking!
 A: **(losing interest)** Sentence-stalking?
 B: Phrase-making!
 A: Work-faking?
 B: Letter-finding!

A: Sound . . . grinding . . .

(They sink onto their bunks. Sound of Light Switch as at beginning, and the set is plunged into sudden and complete darkness. We hear B's voice, echoed and amplified, a single syllable drawn-out and receding.)

B: No . . . oo . . . ooo . . .

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