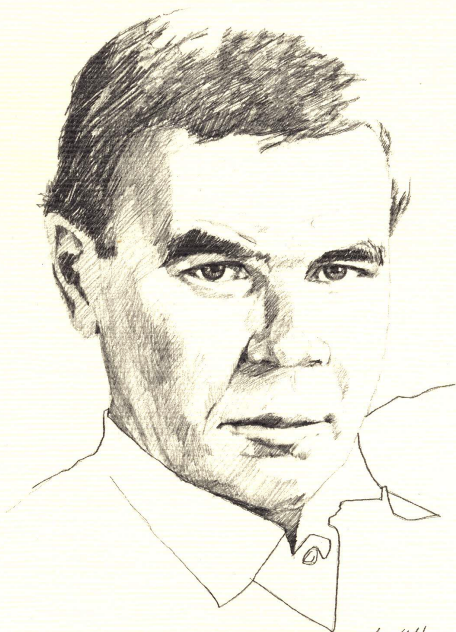


ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



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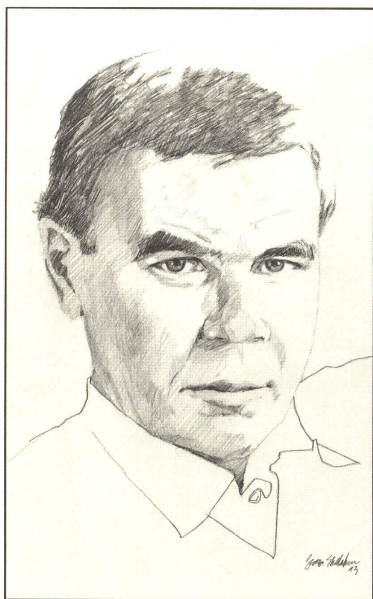
Volume 7

Number 1



ALABAMA
LITERARY
REVUE

*1993:
Volume 7
Number 1*



Raymond Carver

1717

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*My eyes were still closed. I
was in my house. I knew that. But
I didn't feel like I was inside anything.*

--RAYMOND CARVER

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Roger W. Fremie

Secretly Sistering Rita Mae

Susan M. Gilbert

I'm not much like my mother. As far as I can determine, her philosophy of life is founded on an unswerving belief in the Law of Conservation of Guilt: whatever form it may take, there's only so much to go around. The upshot of this is that once she has distributed blame--efficiently, and with a short, knowing sigh--she figures she's in the clear. I'll give her this: she sleeps soundly at night, every night. But I refuse to accept her skewed verdicts when I'm clearly a victim of circumstance.

I've just learned that I am now responsible for introducing one happy little ray of sunshine per month, minimum, into the lucky life of Rita Mae Beaudette. I have the Secret Sisters of First Methodist to thank for this honor, and my mother.

"No one signed you up but you," Mother states. She is peeling potatoes at the sink, letting the thin skins slip off under a full stream of cold running water. Her small fat hands are pink and raw. I lean across her and turn off the spigot.

"No one signed me up but me, but I can't be held responsible for that when I thought I was signing the attendance sheet. God forbid you should get credit for one less guest."

She is plopping the naked potato into the pot where other naked potatoes cluster around a pale, naked chicken. "It said--right at the top--it said, 'Secret Sister Sign-up.' How could they possibly make it more clear to you? Mrs. Bell announced it for five minutes, told all about how you should only sign up if you'll remember to do something thoughtful for your assigned Sister at least once a month. If you call Mrs. Bell to cancel now, you will kill me with shame." Mother puts her freckled face up to mine as she spits out the words. People have called my mother jolly--she has a slight German accent, and her laugh has the warm, gritty texture of pouring sand--but I know that she can be a tenacious woman when it comes to her reputation.

Which is why she had forced me to accompany her to the First Methodist Ladies' Summer Brunch in the first place: the woman who brings the most guests to First Methodist Ladies' events during the year will win a ceramic and wire mobile of dangling angels at the Ladies' Annual Christmas Program. It isn't the angels my mother covets so much as the unspeakable glory.

"You have my word that people do not die of shame," I say. "Anyway, I didn't hear the announcement, I heard nothing but Mrs. Raymond during the entire lunch. At least three times, just during the fruit salad, she patted my hand and screeched, 'Theresa dear, what exactly is environmental studies?'"

"Mrs. Raymond's voice," Mother says, "is not *half* that high or *one-fourth* that grating, and it's extremely disrespectful of you to make fun of an old deaf lady when she was just being interested in you." She is rummaging in the refrigerator for carrots, for celery; she produces a huge round white onion, and it rumbles across the countertop like distant thunder. "It might do *you* some good to be interested in someone else for a change." Her eyebrows lift significantly, scattering the freckles on her forehead.

"Rita Mae Beaudette," I say, studying the powder blue envelope in which my Secret Sister assignment came. It has my name on it in Mrs. Bell's round, cheerful handwriting but is addressed to my parents' house. Two years since I've moved out, and my mother still enters my name under hers in the church directory. "Rita Mae Beaudette, that's just beautiful."

"Don't you start on Rita Mae Beaudette. She is a fine woman, a lovely woman who has certainly--"

I pick up the envelope and exit out the back screen door amid Mother's rantings, skip down the two patio steps to my bike. The lock has rusted in the recent spell of rain, and I strain to force the combination. As far as I'm concerned the issue is closed. Rita Mae Beaudette is a fatuous woman with pastel-painted eyelids who wears her yellow hair in a flip fifteen years too young for her tanned, aging face; she is the sort of person who peaked in high school, exactly the sort with whom I have nothing in common. The lock finally gives, and I coil the chain around the handlebars.

Furthermore, I tell myself as I bike down Hawthorne beneath trees turning yellow, I am thinking of Rita Mae's feelings here as much as my own. The Rita Maes of this world never choose to associate with the Theresa Parksons any more than I do with them--the difference being that the Rita Maes acquiesce when forced to by organizations like the First Method-

ist Ladies' Fellowship. Therefore I will call Mrs. Bell tomorrow and ask her to remove my name from the Secret Sisters list.

But early the next day, while I'm still in my bathrobe scraping toast, a delivery boy from Elly's House of Flowers knocks at my door.

"Flowers for Theresa Parkson," he says. He turns his head and sneezes twice as he holds out a bushy bouquet of daisies swathed in green tissue paper.

"Gesundheit," I say, and I take the daisies and close the door.

For a moment I am at a loss. Daisies don't seem to belong here; my ex-roommate Rochelle and her furniture moved in with her boyfriend George over the summer, and the place is still a bit bare. I can't even find a vase. Finally I take a large Mason jar from under the sink and fill it with water and manage to stuff every last living daisy into it. The daisies have bright yellow and white and butterscotch heads composed of a million fussy little petals thrusting every which way, and the golden-green centers look back at me and my apartment without a trace of apology. I open the envelope stapled to the green tissue paper: "Have a happy day! From your Secret Sister."

Have a happy day. Great. I wad up the note and throw it toward the wastebasket, missing by two feet. My mother is going to be terribly smug about this. I stand with my hands on my hips, frowning at the daisies, and wonder who, in her eagerness to be attentive, has sentenced me to forced Secret Sisterhood. The whole thing puts me in a terrible mood, and by the time I return to scraping toast I am muttering to the knife.

That day I think of Rita Mae Beaudette every time I look at the daisies; it's not unlike being nagged by my mother. Finally I resign myself to regarding this as one of those things you have to go through that will soon be over, like having your teeth cleaned. So the next morning I visit with Mrs. Bell and compile a one-page dossier on Rita Mae Beaudette and her splendid little family.

Actually, "splendid" is not the word for Rita Mae's family just now. Rita Mae is in the middle of being divorced by her husband, who after sixteen years left her for his boss (a real *vamp*, Mrs. Bell said, a corporate climbing *hussy*), and her children (ages 14, 11, 5) are responding to things no better than your average children.

What else does she expect, though? Rita Mae (I could have guessed this) married the quarterback of the football team straight out of high school and stayed home and made pot roast once a week and joined the Ladies' Fellowship. Live and let live, I truly believe that, but the fact is that most people can't pick a major when they're eighteen, let alone a

spouse. I find my Rita Mae information strangely distracting when I try to study that night; I keep thinking back and replanning her life, starting with not letting her get married until she's done a stint in the Peace Corps.

The next day Rochelle comes over for lunch, and I tell her about the Secret Sisters of First Methodist.

"No way," she says. Rochelle never believes anything. Or rather, she believes everything but with the greatest reluctance. "That's too much. And you're actually going through with it?"

"Too late to back out." I nod toward the daisies. I still haven't told my mother. The daisies are withering, but I haven't bothered tossing them yet because they still smell all right.

"Ghastly," Rochelle says. She is eating her lettuce salad in great mouthfuls, like a starving person. She is the thinnest non-dieting woman I know, tall and bony, and I wonder if her bones ever poke George in the middle of the night. "I always hated daisies," she says. "George gave me roses once. It was so romantic I could hardly believe it."

I stab at my lettuce and take a vicious bite. Rochelle looks at me in surprise, and I shrug.

I remember what she said about roses that afternoon, however. I'm at Four Seasons Florist on 12th and Grange, not having thought of a better idea. On my income I can send about twelve chrysanthemum blossoms or three roses, and finally I decide, what the heck, send the roses. Old Rita Mae probably hasn't gotten roses in a good long while. I order sweetheart-pink rosebuds, and when the saleswoman brings me a small white and pink card I print in block letters, "RITA MAE. YOUR S.S."

That Sunday my mother mentions Rita Mae's roses. I still have Sunday lunches at home, to quell my mother's fears that the family is falling apart since my brother married and I moved out. The only one still at home is Annie, who's fifteen. Annie and I have little in common. She started dating last year and she tells Mother everything.

"So you made your Secret Sister very happy this week," Mother says pointedly, scooping up mashed potatoes and dumping them on my plate without asking. "Isn't that what you said?" She nudges my father, who is chewing silently. "He said today at church he overheard Rita Mae telling Mrs. Bell and Wanda Samuelson about how she hasn't seen such lovely roses ever. Of course, if it was mums or daisies you could have sent more."

(There is no point in telling my mother anything, since she always finds out eventually on her own. Which leads me to believe that Annie is none too bright for spilling her guts all the time.)

"I'm certain she doesn't spend much in the way of extras these days, with that husband gone. Poor thing, deserted in the prime of her life. Now aren't you glad you--"

"She ought to get a job," I say, having swallowed my turkey. (Rochelle has presented some very compelling arguments about vegetarianism, but I am still considering.) "Why didn't she change her name back after the divorce?"

"Isn't that Crystal Lynn's mom?" Annie says. "What a totally ridiculous name."

"It is a bit much, maybe." My mother puts some more peas on my father's place. I watch as one pea rolls off and hits his water glass. "Is she a nice girl?"

"How should I know? She's a grade below me. She's a geek, though."

"You said you didn't know her," I say.

"I don't, but she looks like someone *you'd* have hung out with in ninth grade. You know, the sort who never gets a real haircut, and thinks it proves something."

Fortunately I am above responding. My sister, I can see, is going to peak in high school just like Rita Mae: four years of glory, of trend-setting and dates with basketball players, and then it's hello Kmart for the rest of her life. It's comforting to imagine that the fluff genes may be recessive; perhaps if Annie ever has children I'll be able to communicate with them.

By the time the semester is well underway, the over-zealous Sister who has my name has sent a small, strangely wrinkled, globular cactus, on the needles of which she has impaled a gift certificate to Little Caesar's Pizza signed with a question mark. Naturally I am glad for this--my father pays the rent but I buy my own food--and I order the pizza late one night while working on a paper for Philosophy of Nature. The cactus itself is rather curious, with one white blossom nestled among the broad yellow spines. I appreciate the fact that it can survive with very few ministrations from me, and I perch it on my bathroom sink next to the soap dish, where the sun will reach it.

It is not incumbent upon me to exhibit this same Sisterly zeal, however, and with three papers due before midterms, it's impossible as well. In fact, I forget completely about Rita Mae until the morning of October 4. It is breakfast, and I'm reviewing my date book when the red ink on the next page draws my eye. "R.M.B. birthday," it says. At first I cannot remember who R.M.B. is; then I drop my spoon into my bran flakes

and splatter milk on my nightshirt. The Methodist Ladies make a big hairy deal out of their Sisters' birthdays, if my mother is anything to go by. She usually is.

Flowers are the easiest way out and therefore too obvious. Mother, I think, what would my mother do? Probably send a little stuffed bear clutching a little stuffed heart that says, "Luv." That eliminates that. Candy is typical but a definite possibility. Balloons. I decide against balloons while I'm getting dressed. Her youngest kid would probably pop them; she's a terrorist in Sunday School, according to Mrs. Bell.

No, it comes to me in Environmental Economics, in the middle of a lecture on toxic waste dumps in the Midwest: doughnuts. Fancy doughnuts. That will not only be a festive birthday surprise but will solve the problem of what to feed the kids for breakfast. I am mildly pleased by this revelation; even if the whole Secret Sister thing is too damn sappy for words, I like being good at what I do. I tell Rochelle my plans because I need her help, and she tells me (her brown eyes shining painfully) that she hasn't had a doughnut in two years. Too much refined sugar.

The next morning at 7:30 a.m. I borrow my mother's car and drive to the bakery, where I choose a dazzling variety of doughnuts: two chocolate-frosted long-johns stuffed with French cream, several raised doughnuts twisted and glazed, one each of the blueberry and chocolate-chip cake doughnuts, three Danish pastries dripping with cherries and cream cheese, and two cake doughnuts dunked in white frosting and multi-colored sprinkles. The doughnut woman (I am struck by her similarity to the flower shop woman, with her short black hair and puffy eyes) sticks a red plastic Happy Birthday sign in one of the doughnuts and slides the box into a clear plastic bag. I am growing more and more pleased with myself: I am fulfilling my obligation in a timely fashion with creativity, and all for under six dollars.

Then I pick up Rochelle and drive to the corner of 29th and Phillips and watch as she runs down the block through falling leaves to a big white house with peeling blue trim. She lays the box of doughnuts and the card beneath the mailbox, rings the doorbell and dashes back. She laughs when she sees that I've scrunched down behind the wheel just in case, and I'm laughing too because there's a leaf caught in her hair.

The next evening, as a reward for getting Rita Mae out of the way and for handing a paper in early, I buy a rebuilt rocker from Second Chances. I rock steadily in my new used chair and enjoy the paper, peruse the obituaries and births, while I wait for Eddie Wadel to show up. Eddie Wadel is a freshman environmental studies major who has impressed me

by his mature focus on goals, even in this his first year. I may be three years older, but maturity is relative (I thought this through very carefully the day I met Eddie in our advisor's office); therefore, I would have no objections if a romantic relationship should develop. Actually--and I do not apologize if a bit of cynicism creeps in here--it's unlikely that Eddie thinks of me as anything but an Environmental Honors Senior. He is coming over to ask my advice on taking a seminar next semester that I once took, Crisis and Resolution.

I look through Accidents, then scan the Hospital Report. One line catches my eye: "Admitted to Sioux Valley Hospital: Alexandra Beaudette, Sioux Falls." I reach for my date book (Rita Mae's dossier is at the back), but before I even look I know that it's the right name; there are few Beaudette's in the area, only three listings in the phone book. Before I've had a chance to think things through I have dialed my mother.

"What happened to Rita Mae's youngest?" I ask when she says hello in her telephone voice.

"What?"

"It's in the paper," I say. "She went into the hospital yesterday." My mother, I am well aware, does not read the paper, which perhaps explains her reluctance to recycle it: how can she apply the recycling principle to something she hasn't used the first time?

"I haven't heard anything," she says frostily.

"Call Mrs. Bell and ask. Or call Rita Mae," I say. "Just act concerned, don't mention my name." I hang up. There's a knock at my front door, and when I open it Eddie says hello.

"Hello, come in, come in," I say. Ordinarily I would not smile so frantically, especially at someone as loose and unself-conscious as Eddie. But when I'm preoccupied I have less control over the manifestations of my hormones. Eddie has beautiful green eyes; they light on the objects in the room carelessly.

But as I work myself into a niche in the bean bag chair (Eddie has chosen the rocker, his knees high as he pushes steadily against the floor), I relax. Probably Alexandra has had a tonsillectomy or some other child's trouble. I ask Eddie if he drinks milk or mineral water or pop, and we are embarking on a discussion of the merits of two professors when the phone rings.

"Rita Mae's not at home," my mother says. Her voice is warmer, more gravely, now that she knows more. "But Mrs. Bell has been with her at the hospital." She pauses.

“What already?” I say. Eddie starts. I smile for him briefly, then turn my back. “What happened, Mother?”

“Alexandra went into a--a diabetic fit, whatever they call it, keto-acidity or something, yesterday morning after she got to kindergarten. Of course Rita Mae hadn't even known she was diabetic.”

“She's *diabetic*?”

“She asked to go to the bathroom five times during the first hour of kindergarten, Mrs. Bell said, and the teacher's aid thought it was because of all the water she insisted on drinking and got mad. But then she fell off the storytime bench and threw up. They called the ambulance, and Rita Mae met them at the hospital. Mrs. Bell said Rita Mae said the poor little thing was limp as a noodle and sheet-white. Of course, they fixed her with insulin, and now she must stay in for another few days to settle.”

My lips are cold and bloodless. I hear the rocker creak as Eddie stands, and I wish he'd go away because I feel a hiccup coming on.

“She's really diabetic? But she's okay now, right? What could have--how could this happen?” I don't know why I ask this; I know enough about diabetics to know that nothing *causes* it, nothing like doughnuts, anyway. Of course something does cause it, but certainly not doughnuts.

“I don't know. Maybe she ate too much sugar.”

I snap, “Mother, that is the stupidest thing you've ever said. In juvenile onset diabetes, your pancreas simply stops producing enough insulin for some reason, anyone knows that. I have to go.”

“Well, I don't see why you ask, if you're only going to--”

I hang up without saying goodbye. Eddie turns me around and looks down at me, his green eyes wide. He looks so young.

“Theresa, are you okay?” he asks.

But I don't know how to explain because I don't know why I am wracked with whatever it is that's wracking me. Doughnuts had nothing to do with any of it, I am sure, and anyway I couldn't have known if even Rita Mae hadn't known. I think of Rita Mae, ex-cheerleader and ex-wife, holding someone limp as a noodle, and I close my mouth tight just as the first hiccup squeezes my esophagus. I haven't cried in years, and in those situations where anyone else might cry I instead get a severe case of dry hiccups, with maybe one or two painfully small tears. I must look more upset than ridiculous, however, because Eddie puts an arm around me awkwardly and leads me to the bean bag chair. He crouches on the floor and holds my hand, and when the hiccups don't subside he goes to the kitchen and brings back a tumbler of water.

"Your sister?" he asks, holding out the glass. I shake my head and try to swallow water, but as always I hiccup at the wrong time and start choking. Eddie pats me on the back. "Your mother? A relative? A close friend?" I shake my head no, no, no, hiccuping violently and hugging my stomach with both arms. The two tears are working their way out of the corners of my eyes and I put my head on my knees.

Eddie gets up and answers the phone even though I haven't heard it ring. "She can't come to the phone right now," he says. "May I take a message? Yes. Sure, she'll call back."

"That was a Rochelle," he says, and I start to laugh between hiccups. A Rochelle. Furthermore, she will be wondering who the hell the guy at my place is. I am not pretty when I hiccup, less so when I giggle convulsively at the same time--it has an earthquake effect on my whole body--but before he leaves an hour later, Eddie's eyes have changed and he has asked me out for Friday night.

In the next few days, I embrace the theory that a good working knowledge of diabetes will cause my unfounded guilt feelings to subside. I dig up a few interesting articles on recent findings: "What Causes Diabetes?" from *The Scientific American*, a couple of blurbs in *Time* and *Medical News*.

At first, the more I learn the more I'm concerned: the many blood tests, urine tests, and insulin shots make for a complex daily regime. I wonder if Rita Mae even knows what to cook, and although I'm sure the hospital dietician is perfectly competent, I buy a copy of *Cooking for the Diabetic Child* and give it to Rita Mae through Mrs. Bell.

For some reason, however, the guilt feelings--it may not even be guilt--continue to nag, and after a brief struggle with logic I cave in and send a perfectly useless stuffed kitty to the hospital, then a packet of ridiculous scratch-and-sniff flower stickers. At this my uneasiness does subside, and I begin to feel normal again.

In fact, better than normal.

And apparently, this better-than-normal feeling is addictive, because when Alexandra is released I send Tiffany, a paper doll with a ton of blonde paper hair and a wildly elaborate wardrobe, as a going-home present. Tiffany wears flat, pink ball gowns with sparkling scalloped skirts and gleaming ribbons and does nothing but dance with a smiling, very short-haired boy paper doll named Roger. According to Mrs. Bell, Tiffany is a big hit with Alexandra; she has been busy designing and cutting out swimsuits to give the glamorous, chesty Tiffany a little variety in activity. I'm

annoyed with myself for perpetrating female stereotypes but am a little pleased that she's pleased, and why not? Alexandra is having a rough time getting used to the insulin shots and needs a little distraction. I decide to keep my eyes out for an astronaut woman paper doll.

On my birthday, three weeks after Alexandra's diabetes onset, I arrive home from a Schumacher Distinguished Lecture, "Landfills: Our Future? Our Foe?" to discover a small flat parcel slid beneath my door. I have been expecting something; it would be uncharacteristic of my Sister to forget. (My mother, on the contrary, has heard nothing from her Secret Sister, and quite naturally she's disappointed. She suspects that her name is in the possession of Bernice Nitzbaum, who has been a notoriously negligent Sister in past years.)

I'm strangely anxious as I unwrap the package; I'd begun to hope she would stick to plants all year, which are a fairly safe bet, and not get around to sending hot pads with geese or pigs or little Scotties marching all over them. This gift is obviously a book, and when the last scrap of flowered paper falls away I smile in relief: *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. Strange, since I haven't written poetry in over five years. I gave it up because I'm a terrible poet and I believe terrible poets should not contribute to the raping of forests by writing reams of long, limping epic poems (the only kind I ever liked). She must have gotten this antiquated poetry information from Mrs. Bell, who is, I suspect, everyone's major source of information. Mrs. Bell hasn't got the time to be a Secret Sister; her duties as informant keep her busy.

I'm reading the book when Eddie arrives. He's early, which I find endearing, and I leave him in the living room while I change into jeans. We're going to a greasy hamburger place that Eddie says I will love, and I feel like I'm sneaking around because for lunch Rochelle and George took me to a small health-food cafe where we ate watercress-cucumber sandwiches. Rochelle insisted on paying, which was unusually sweet, and gave me a hand-knitted black and blue scarf.

When I re-enter the living room Eddie is engrossed in the Rilke book. "You're really getting some decent stuff from this lady," he says. "Can I join next time? I could be a Secret Brother. Of course that's not alliterative." He replaces the book and stands to go. I tug the curly hair over his forehead.

"You'd be the Only Brother, Eddie," I say.

My birthday lasts for two days because the next night I must have supper with my family, a traditional birthday supper of ham smothered in my mother's sweet-sour chunky golden pineapple sauce. Over the birthday

cake my mother asks what I have received from my Secret Sister, and when I tell her, she wrinkles her nose.

"Better for you than for me," she says. "I didn't know you still wrote poetry."

"When I have time," I say. As a matter of fact, I had time last night after Eddie went home.

And then my family hands me presents: a simulated-leather wallet from Annie; a huge package my brother and his wife mailed that turns out to be a green pleated lamp shade; and a floor lamp from my parents, to go with the shade. My father also gives me a glass cookie jar containing one silver dollar for every year of my life, and my mother gives me a set of startlingly yellow kitchen towels sprinkled liberally with country-blue geese.

"You have such a *dark* little kitchen," she says, and I agree that the towels are certainly bright, and wonder privately if I should ask Mrs. Bell to have a chat with my mother.

As it happens, Mother has visited with Mrs. Bell *and* Rita Mae herself only yesterday evening, and at Rita Mae's too, so as she clears the table she tells me the latest news. I stand at the dishwasher, and her voice waxes and wanes as she comes and goes from the dining room to the kitchen.

"Rita Mae's oldest was caught smoking in the boys' bathroom with three boys," she says. "She was skipping English at the time--this was all yesterday. The day before that, Rita Mae's boy beat up another boy for throwing chalk in his face. Poor Rita Mae. Between her new job at Fabulous Fabrics and getting Alexandra to take her insulin shots, she doesn't need more trouble. I don't know why she must take on the cake sale. She'll have only herself to blame, if it's too much." My mother clucks in sympathy. She sets a gravy boat in the sink. "Wash this separately. Why wouldn't you bring Eddie tonight? We ought to meet Eddie."

I say, "Next week probably. He's home for the weekend. Was Alexandra playing with that paper doll when you were visiting?"

My mother pauses, then remembers what I am referring to. "She was watching TV, but there were paper doll clothes thrown everywhere. She's certainly hard on her things, loves them to death. Not like you." Mother has gone for the glasses, and she calls back, "You were so careful, you wanted everything to last forever. I hated to buy you chocolate Easter bunnies because you saved them until the ears crumbled, and then Annie would cry and cry because her Easter bunny was long gone." I do recall, now that I think about it, that my teddy bears always had their full coat of

rich brown fur, while my sister's were plagued with bare, scratchy patches.

"Tell me what she needs," I say when Mother returns clinking two glasses in each hand. "For future reference. I'm running out of ideas."

Mother's freckles furrow together over her light blue eyes. "Come with me tomorrow night," she says finally. "See for yourself what she needs."

I sigh. Midterms are next week and I am drowning in a sea of text; I don't have time for a reconnaissance mission. "Mother, I am her *Secret Sister*. *Secret*."

"Phsh. She'd never guess, never; everyone at church visited them in the hospital, and anyway I'm taking a Bundt cake over tomorrow. Mrs. Bell said Rita Mae hasn't baked a thing since Alexandra's diabetes, and it is my opinion the other two children are going to resent this. So what will she suspect if I bring my daughter along? We can be on the way to a movie, to shopping, whatever."

Shopping, maybe. If Rita Mae Beaudette can envision me going to a movie with my mother then she is blessed with more imagination than I give her credit for. I agree, finally, to go to Rita Mae's the next night as long as it only takes 15 minutes. My mother smiles in triumph. It's been a long time since I did anything her way.

It's dark by the time Mother and I are standing on Rita Mae's front porch, and when we breathe white streams flow from our mouths and hang in the air before fading. Rita Mae's oldest answers the door, a narrow-shouldered, sullen girl with dull blonde hair and wide eyes; she cracks her gum as she gives me the once-over, then yells, "Ma! For you." We enter the foyer after her, even though she has not asked us in.

Rita Mae appears, apologizing profusely for the mess and for her daughter who is in one of those stages--all in a bright, lilting voice. I haven't seen her since the Methodist Ladies' Summer Brunch, and I'm shocked to realize that Rita Mae is still Rita Mae. Somehow she had changed in my mind's eye: her hair had softened, her make-up faded, her sharp features yielded to gentleness and strength. None of this, of course, has happened. Her green eyes are pale beneath wide sweeps of blue, and they seem to blink all the more under their burden of heavy black lashes. I say hello levelly and she nods, smiling, and I know she's trying to remember my name.

"Come in, sit for a minute." She swiftly clears the couch of coats and shoes and papers and plastic guns. "It's such a mess, now that I'm working," she says apologetically. In spite of my disappointment, I feel a

quick stab in my stomach: is there anything in her life right now that doesn't demand an apology? The overhead light isn't bright enough, and its yellowish cast gives the illusion of constantly dimming.

"Turn that *down*," she calls sharply to the next room, and the glare of the television lowers a fraction. My mother holds out the German chocolate Bundt cake before joining me on the couch. "A sample one, for your family. It comes with a lemon filling."

"For us? How lovely!" Rita Mae exclaims. She lifts the cake from my mother's hands and sits across from us, balancing the cake on her knees gingerly. "Thank you, you really shouldn't have. I'm sure it won't last five minutes around Donny. Is this what you'll bring to the sale? You and Mrs. Bell and Clare Anderson, you're really just cake experts." She's smiling for real now as she leans forward, smiling as if a cake sale alone were wonderful and absorbing enough to make up for everything else in her life.

They quickly forget that I'm there, so I look around the room and wait for a Secret Sister inspiration. A small thin girl who must be Alexandra enters the room and stands next to Rita Mae, jerks away when Rita Mae strokes her forehead. She is holding the tattered Tiffany and tries to steal a finger of frosting, which frightens me. I note with annoyance that my mother is barely able to suppress a knowing glance at the paper doll; her voice grows louder, warmer, and she laughs easily.

Suddenly Alexandra tears out of the room. She runs back with a shoe box full of paper clothes, settles herself smack in the middle of the worn rose carpeting, and begins dressing and undressing Tiffany, singing a tuneless song to herself. From time to time she looks at me shyly, belligerently, through the long brown stringy hair falling over her eyes.

Finally I clear my throat and ask, "What are you going to be for Halloween?" I'm wondering how scrupulously Rita Mae is going to have to police the trick-or-treating this year; I want to tell her to make Alexandra stay home.

"A *princess*," she says fiercely. A real humdinger of a Cinderella, I think, and reluctantly I cross the astronaut woman off the list in my head. Alexandra begins singing the words "a *prin-cess*, a *prin-cess*," over and over, and the longer she sings it in that yellow light that always seems to be fading, the more my stomach twists. By the time we rise to go I am steeling my throat, but a hiccup escapes anyway. I can tell my mother notices; she needs no urging to hurry.

We exit quickly, Rita Mae somehow managing to wave while balancing the Bundt cake up over her head out of Alexandra's reach, and

when we are settled in the car my mother says, "Well well, maybe you're not so stoic, maybe--"

"Just shut up," I say, hiccuping, and amazingly enough she does. I look away as she starts the car. I didn't mean to be harsh; I'm just wondering if it's the lighting that got to me or the thought of that thin little kid's pancreas just quitting or the way Rita Mae held that cake so carefully the whole time, as if it were an egg. My mother doesn't speak while she checks for oncoming traffic and backs out of the driveway; she doesn't speak as we head back to 26th, although I feel myself reflected in the corners of her eyes more than once, and she's silent through an entire red light at 26th and Minnesota. We turn left on green, and then she speaks.

"I know what your problem is," she says, changing lanes abruptly. I prepare to be blessed by her wisdom. I'm hiccuping too hard to bother rolling my eyes, but really there's no need. She knows me. She knows I'll be listening under protest. She says, "The whole thing is, you thought you were signing the attendance sheet; you never bargained for ending up with Rita Mae and those kids."

I draw a sharp breath, right in the line of a hiccup. This is as close as she will come to saying I was right all along. Mother says, "It's only another few months. Can you bear it another few months?"

But it isn't. Somewhere along the way, getting through another few months stopped mattering, and whatever it is that suddenly does matter is beyond my comprehension but it's making my throat hurt like hell. The tears that usually stop at two aren't stopping. I open my mouth to tell her but I can't speak; and anyway, she's only trying to make me feel better. Suddenly I want her to think she succeeded.

So instead I nod and swallow my hiccups and wipe the water off my face, and we talk about hot pads, balloons, African violets, those certain cooking utensils that every woman can use even if she's already got one: soup ladles and pie servers and a nice pancake-sized spatula. For some reason the thought of a spatula makes me cry again, so my mother moves us into a discussion of bathroom hand towels and decorative bath soaps. By the time she pulls up to my apartment, there are weightless snowflakes drifting in and out of the light of the street lamps, melting on the hood of the car. We sit there in the warm car for a few minutes, trying to come up with the perfect surprise for Rita Mae Beaudette and her lousy, messed-up life and depressing kids. I'm thinking maybe a wooden heart to hang in Rita Mae's kitchen. Mother says they have a good selection at Carsen's Designs.

The Only Photograph of Our Affair

Lonnie Hodge

My wife thinks it's a mistake,
asks why I hold on to what
appears to be nothing more
than a tree, a small bit of sky
and a tangle of shadows below.
I tell her an unconscious bump
must have snapped the shutter
on what could be morning
or evening anywhere.

Sometimes I think she knows.
My lover was close,
sitting with her back against
a plum tree burdened with fruit,
a flower print skirt tucked
between her white thighs,
soft blonde threads glistening
with dew, and a delirious heat
rising from the tender grass.

There were birds rustling
deep in that chaos of leaves
and limbs, their hungry mouths
made small cries. Unmistakable
sounds of dawn, or dusk.

Socrates

Brendan O'Neill

Take Christ's birthday
and subtract
four hundred years.

Two men sit on stones
and speak of
what it means
to live.

The teacher's words
drill deep into
the student's
soul before
the sere desert
wind can whip
them away.

Our power of reason is
bound, he says
trapped in a cave
the five senses
define,
and these senses are
the worst kind of
liars.

The shadows that
dance on the wall
before us are
just that,
ghosts,
thrown by a fire burning
brightly, behind our
backs
and all that we see
as real
is not.

I think about this
stuff,
sometimes, in my rolling
cave on the way to work.



Roger W. Fremier

It is cold, even for summer, this night in Jericho. The oldest city in the world, the tourist sign in English claims. I wish for some comforting arms or at least a cardigan as I wait. The stars are heavy and low in the sky, slung like a hammock, lazy that way. I crouch among the round white stones and wait, draw spirals in the powdery dirt with a stick. I told him not to leave me by myself here. He said he'd be right back. I wait and look at my red toenails shining through the confection dust.

A shadow flickers in the moonlight. "Peter says to come." He blocks out the moon and all I can see is his silhouette, the drape of his kafia and skirt. It is Habar. How could he know where Peter is? Standing up, dusting off my jeans and shaking out the pebbles from my sandals, I ask, "Where is Peter?" "Peter says to come," he repeats.

This really is intolerable. First he leaves me here all by myself and then he sends this teenage Arab boy I hardly even know to Come! "Where is he?" Habar does not answer, just turns and walks down the alley. I watch him go. He glances over his shoulder and gestures once. "Peter says to come." Resentfully I follow the boy. He stops at a blue bicycle propped up against the wall, steadies it and motions for me to get on. "Where?" He pats the handlebars. Gingerly I perch on the edge, make myself small, try not to touch his hands. He grins at me, a white-spaced grin, and shoves off down the cobbled road.

Unwillingly I slip back against his shoulder and laugh at the absurd picture we make. He peddles faster, the bike rattles furiously, my laughter echoes off the white plaster walls. The streets are empty, except for this Arab boy in skirts peddling as fast as he can with an American

woman in blue jeans on the handlebars. Our laughter going out to the stars.

the road gets smoother as it stretches out of the village into the country. i stop laughing and straighten up suddenly. the bike wobbles, almost falls over. where are we? my question just a whisper. habar puts his hand on my shoulder and says softly, come. peter. it's so dark there is no difference between the road and the night sky. no laughter now, just the swish of the tires on the pavement and the even, pumping breath of habar. he leans in closer and sniffs behind my ears, my neck. i can smell his spicy breath. cayenne and cloves. not unpleasant. the air is cool. i am floating, in a dream, no thought, no fear, just this.

my daddy says wait here sweetie i'll be right back it's hot in here i can't turn the handle only this triangle push it my face almost fits big cloud grey stink pee yew fat man with a cigar holding yip yip dog under his arm passing by my triangle filling up my air makes a mean sound growly sound looks at me fills my only triangle with smoke and growls

the bicycle stops at a hut by the side of the road habar gently takes my arm and helps me down a breeze lifts my hair and blows his white kafia we say nothing he motions for me to wait with the bike as he walks to the stone hut the door is open red curtains blouse across the entrance a man steps out of the billows smoking a thin graceful pipe habar speaks to him their faces are very close maybe they are brothers they are about the same height they have the same eyes habar sweeps his arm toward me and they stop talking

come i am confused should i bring the bicycle there is no kick stand should i lay it down habar looks at me impatiently pries the handlebars from my grip lays the bike down takes my elbow steers me to the door the other man holds the curtain back bows slightly
as i pass through

Steel City Blues

Errol Miller

For Alpha and Omega
and all the other smog-infested
lives of mine, I have dreamed a dream
apart from rural Alabama and found
me missing there, to the North
a great city of oil-splattered pavement,
pigeons, coffee roasting, mechanic-cousins,
obese aunts and uncles rocking on
a wide-brimmed white front porch.
Their collected poems turned cold and silent.
Lanterns flicker in the underbrush of Shades Mountain.
At Lover's Leap the same disoriented couple plunges
into the dark spaciousness of midnight air
over and over as if the result would be different.

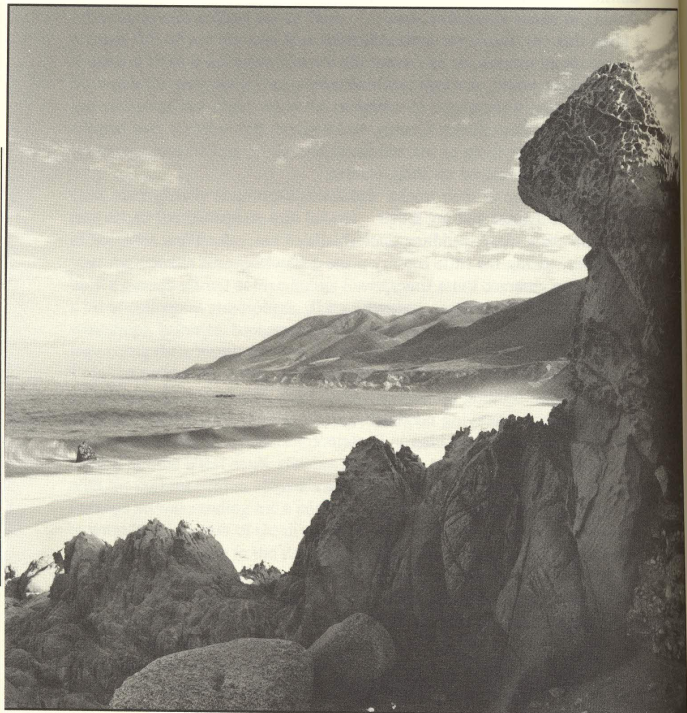
Water has been drawn, and Papa is dead.
Mama wrings her handkerchief and clings to nothing.
Her voice failed and then her vision.
I cry for all of us stranded
in this decadent warehouse
on the banks of the Cahaba, I cry
for the profound musty silence invading
the bronze iron ore seams above The Valley.

Mysteries, I think they were mysteries,
psychological redneck thrillers where the hero
comes down from New York City
to find romance, where the cloven hooves

of the engine in his Tristar plane
succumbed over Cheaha Mountain: old CCC men
found the body and the hull, they found
arbitrary poems calling out to God,
a trunk full of posthumous love letters to
a maiden from a Jefferson County dairy.
So much for geography, beginnings and endings,
sad stories of last night when the moon
slipped over a rocky cliff, laying
sputtering and lifeless on Second Avenue.

God, your ghastly shimmer crystallized
into art, in the foursquare mill houses
of Brighton and Ensley and Fairfield,
your remarkable perceptive children
built a pseudo-shrine at Five Points South,
a bit of colloquial atmosphere, a bit of Europe,
wineshops, bakeries, bookstores, and giant white-oaks
expanding their memories over Southside boulevards.
This I remember the most: simpler figures
on homemade skateboards, their limbs drawn
back into their bodies, their grotesque smiles
asking for money as a paperseller
danced out the latest news, clawing the air
with the current edition of hard times.
Perhaps he was sending me a poem
to write later, a poem of the dingy gowns
of gauze tossed aside in the Redmont Hotel
or more exquisite appointments fulfilled
in the Tutwiler, deeply occupied
with my own sexuality I rode the manned
elevators up and down until I took my place
in the gratitude of experience, like
Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles the streets
were just as seedy, at every drive-in dacron punks
with their hair slicked down demanded confrontation.
They'd been to The Hop and destroyed its tranquility,
they'd been raised with only a rock & roll song
in their heart, they'd come to town
from the Acton coal fields, from Jasper and other

hard-core Walker County breeding-grounds.
I was scared of them, spasmodic to my response,
shifting into second gear to avoid stopping,
shaking at either alternative, how
I loved this city and never noticed it, how
it grew up all around me as I snoozed
in adolescent plight, seeking "real-life" in
the converging womanhood of sufficient
dirt-road girls from Shelby County, seeking
the future here or there or somewhere else.
Then the trolleys closed up shop, leaving
only the indentation of their tracks, and the mills
began to mechanize and my father
threw his chalk away, peddling apples
and bibles, letting the little country place go back.
I try now to embrace those times,
driving by on the Interstate, trying to smell
coffee roasting or the rock-gut smut
of iron ore burning in a hell-like furnace
where red-faced men from Chilton County
fan the flames, lighting up heaven
and the selfsame decaying neighborhoods
jutting out in circles, reaching to Bessemer
and beyond, toward infinity, I presume,
something that might be characterized as change:
the weighty knowledge of the past,
its sights and sounds and smells and ghosts,
silhouettes of lost lovers holding hands
on their way down, Vulcan framed
in the background changing his lamp
from passive green to red.



Roger W. Fremier

The Aardvark Is Ready for War

Jay Blinn

Day Seven

I'm eating a pot pie and CNN's on the tube.

It's almost dark. I got my binoculars at the ready.

More missiles slam Tel Aviv. No gas. At least that's what they claim. But there's gas, all right. Aardvark gas. Changing everyone into aardvarks.

Tape of the CNN guy giving his report when the sirens go off. Man, he drops that mike and yanks on that aardvark mask like nobody's business. Cut to the Jerusalem bureau--whole room full of aardvarks and some woman talking head (talking AARDVARK head) yells into the mike, practically goes ballistic. What a hoot! I spit out a pea when I see THAT.

I fetch a brew. I leave the kitchen dark so the babe across the way can't see me clear. I'm just a shadow. Less than a shadow. She'd have to look hard to spot me.

Her place is all lit up real nice. I can see red lights on her stereo, a-blinking and a-flashing. I know she's home. But there's no action. Not yet. Must be around back. Hiding from me.

Another war expert. These guys bust my gut. Half the time they can't tell an F-18 from an F-16 from an M-16. They think Hawkeyes and AWACs are the same birds just because they both have flying saucers. What a moron. This guy's telling me about some bombed-out comm center but it doesn't have a single goddam antenna on it and could just as well be some raghat sheep-banger 7-Eleven for all anybody knows.

She's doing her bit now. It's MTV since she moved in. Thinks she's safe behind those bamboo shades. Thinks my eyes can't touch her in her taped-up room. Behind those shades. But they're transparent at night. Leak like a screen door. Radiate like a CRT.

She cranks that stereo and jams around all hot and sexy. Thinks

she's Madonna or something. Pretty good good bod. Ass be a little gangly but fairly humongous boobs. No '55 Buick, mind you, but not droopy AT ALL. Hard as rubber. Hard as bullets.

I'm going over her totally with the trusty Bushnells. It's funny. I mean I'm crouching here in my kitchen spying on this obviously hot babe and I'm not even all turned on or anything. Like I don't even think about porking her or anything. I just get off on surveilling her.

Every night it's like this. Me all hiding out in this dark kitchen, peeping with my binocs, scoping out this moderately awesome babe, just surveilling the living shit out of her, and I don't even get hot over it. At least not *that* way.

Day Six

When I get home from the base I got a sixer and five Duget Gourmets and my aardvark mask over my shoulder. There's the fat chick from downstairs at the mailbox. She's some kind of artsy thing--always dresses in black and has this unreal black hair that's all whacked off on one side like she does her doo in a paper cutter. Says she hears I'm shipping out.

I just say, Yup.

Her eyes kind of flick to the mask all nervous-like. You can't tell what it is--just says *Mark I Mod O* on the canvas bag. It doesn't like broadcast, *hey I'm a fucking gas mask yubba-dubba-do!*

Says I should take care of myself over there. Even though she says it nicely I can tell she's trying for an opening. Wants to dazzle me with her impressive war thoughts that fly so good down at the leather bar. I don't want to hear it. I just say, You bet, and walk upstairs pretending to sort my junk mail.

Plug the Budget Gourmet in to zap. Then I undo the computer and move it to the living room. I set the monitor up on the blue director's chair next to the TV and run the keyboard over to the coffee table. The cord's too short so I push the table up close. I stack up the disks I smuggled out of the shop today. Each one has SECRET stamped in red at the top and the CMC inventory code felt-tipped underneath. I'd get hammered if I got caught with these. But the chief says anybody that doesn't ace the tac-bombing test is up for a seabag inspection. That guy's so ate up.

Dumping the tac-training program on the hard disk. It's four full disks but that's okay. I got forty megs.

We HAVE the technology.

The zapper beeps and I fetch my dinner, Chicken Cordon Bleu in

a plastic tray. Glazed carrots and apple wedges. Like hot dang.

I pop a brew and cop a shot at the babe's window. Catch a little action behind the blinds. She's there but it's still too light to see. She's just smoke. No detail. No depth. Not a person yet.

I get the mirror off the door to the head. I prop it on the kitchen stool, angle it so it reflects out the window to the living room. HER window in MY room. I have to go sit on the sofa twice before I get it all set up just right. Early warning.

Then I clear off the coffee table and arrange everything just so: the taste-tempting frozen dinner, my brew, computer keyboard in front of that, the mouse run out to its black neoprene pad, TV remote on the right, binoculars on the left. Then I snap on the web belt the aardvark mask hangs from.

I punch in *TACPRO*. When the menu pops up I run the cursor down to *MK 82 Bomb Run*. While that's loading I punch the channel flipper to CNN. It's a story about Israeli kids painting up their gas masks and decorating them with finger paints--flags and missiles and jets. I check the mirror on the stool. All's quiet on the awesome-babe front. I'm all set. Shit. Forgot my fork. Gotta have a fork. A farking fork. A fork.

Day Five

Jackpot! There she goes. She's gonna do it. I knew if I waited. . . . Yes! Fingers sweaty on the focus knob. But I'm steady. Elbows tucked tight. (that oily green rubber sucked snug to my face, sucking at my eyeballs with each breath, tugging at my sinuses like there's hooks in 'em) Refine. That's the ticket. Yeah. Focus fine as a cunthair, finer than froghair. And . . . Off . . . It . . . Comes! RIGHT over her head. FULL frontal exposure. Look at her shake 'em. She likes that. Yes. (the straps dig in behind my ears) YES! (my breath wheezing through the filter, through the diaphragm, loud, like I'm on a respirator, like I'm goddam Darth Vader for Chrissake, like *Aardvark Vader*--gotta like that!) And those awesome tits, those awesome, awesome titties. (yes.)

Lights out.

End of show.

I should get me one of those night scopes--like the helo guys have.

Day Four

The camcorder's got a ten-to-one zoom so I ace right in on her window, pierce her defenses. I crack the shade just enough for the lens to poke out and make contact. I go out and check. You can't tell what it is.

I set up the new monitor on a stack of magazines by the other monitor and the TV, all three in a row. Looks like a network control room in here. A network of control in my room.

The target's a hardened ammo bunker. We're at transit altitude, busters at four hundred knots. I bring up the radar and pick up the bloop-bloop of the target, pass a vector of three-two-zero at forty. Throttles max. Drop to angels two. I punch in two weapons fly-to-points on top the radar fixes then transfer downrange-travel circles up front. We're a little off the vector so I give the pilot an easy left, than an easy right--on the nose twenty miles. (Larry King's talking all heavy-handed blah-blah-blah about fuel-air explosives. They implode your eyeballs, pop your eardrums. Do they have them? Do we have them? Does *she* have them?)

I bring up the radar again and give it two sweeps--superimpose the tactical plot, all the glowing symbols: x's; circles with numbers inside; vectors with range counters ticking down; the airplane bug jittering and scooting. An Egyptian Nintendo game. FTPs are still good. I'm-a gonna JAM these suckers right down that guy's throat. ESM picks up two emitters--both air friendlies. I inhibit them so they don't clutter the scope.

On the nose for ten.

Drop to angels one.

(She enters the bedroom. She's wearing a short, silk bathrobe. Looks blue on the monitor. Poses at the mirror. Screws with her hair. Walks out.) The downrange-travel circles shrink up like little assholes a-puckering.

I crank up the radar again for a final check. Under range-fifteen, radar's *verboden*. Emitter silence. You bet it's risky. But if the tacnav dumps, the whole run-in goes to shit. You shoot your wad on some dick-lick orphanage or something. (She's back. She messes with the stereo then goes back to the mirror. She looks this way then that, likes what she sees, makes a couple moves. Pulls a little something from the closet. Lays it on the bed. Walks out.)

I fix the targets one last time. Leave the radar in standby. On the nose for two. I double click the mouse and the pilot arms the weapons.

Standby for drop on my third *NOW*.

I keep downscaling and the downrange travel circles choke shit outta the fixes. (She's back. She's scoping her face in the mirror.) We're just about there. . . . I wait till the nose of the bug just nibbles at the fix.

Now. . . .

(She unties the belt of her robe. It falls open.)

Now. . . .

Ready to release. Two more clicks and the bug's there. Grease up them rug merchant butts!

(The robe drops down over her shoulders. A peek at a peak.)

Standby.

Standby . . . *a-a-a-and* . . .

Then, there it is just like a big dog--Emitter Alert. Abort! Abort! Abort! I do an auto-class and sure as shit it's an old Russkie SA-7. We do full evasive.

Kiss off the bomb run.

I just flop back on the sofa. The screen goes red and says:

Stinger Up The Tailpipe!
Drop Your Socks And Grab Your Cocks!

Those software guys. What a fucking sense of humor.

(Little Miss Madonna Babe drops her robe. Holds up the blouse and looks in the mirror. Drops the blouse. TOTALLY stark. Turns to the window, looking right at the lens, right through it and right at me. Like she sees it, sees ME. But she can't see through that bamboo shade. I know it. I know it. But she keeps standing there, firing that look my way, and I want to gawk at her boobs, g-get my load of that bodacious bod. Make some memories from those mammaries. But that look's got me pinned down.

I crawl over to the monitor--'bows and toes--looking for eyes. There's some light on her face and I'm looking for eyes. My nose against the cool glass. But no eyes, just dark holes, like peering down a shotgun's business end. And all I can do is gape into them holes and think how she's got me, she's got me balls down.

Then her face detonates in a fireball.

I jump back and slam into the table. I'm clawing at the bag till I get the thing out and I yank them straps over and a buckle about rips my ear off and it DOES tear out a glob of hair but I got the thing on and maybe I'm okay and maybe it's too late and for sure my heart's jumping out of my chest and my drawers are THOROUGHLY crapped.

I'm sitting there all shaking and I'm afraid to look but I do and I see it's just a cigarette. She's puffing on a goddam cigarette.)

Larry King's at the phones. *Hello, America!*

Day Three

After work me and Rudy hit the Forty-Niner Club and Rudy buys

a pitcher. There's this shanky old stripper, waist is thicker than her hips. Rudy's about creaming his jeans. He says, "How'd you like to get a little of them sweetcakes?" I say, "I wouldn't touch that clapdog with YOUR dick."

We down a couple more pitchers and shoot the shit about everything except the only thing we're REALLY thinking about.

There's a table full of jarheads all dressed up like bushes and they're getting real loud. One of them catches this big old cockroach and stands on the table and yells out that he'll eat the thing for twenty bucks. A hat goes around and we all throw in. This zitty little guy says the roach has to be chewed and not just swallowed whole. The jarhead on the table agrees. He's got the roach crawling from hand to hand so we can all see how big it is. He says he's gonna call it Esther after his mother.

We're all cluster-fucked around the table. Even the stripper stops dancing and comes over to watch, leaning over the edge of the stage so her big belly dangles like a third tit. The jarheads start chanting, ooh-RAH! ooh-RAH!

He pinches the roach, holding it high above his mouth. From over Rudy's shoulder I see the thing squirming. Rudy joins in on the ooh-RAH chant. So does the stripper, shaking her G-stringed butt with each ooh and RAH.

"Say goodbye, Esther!"

He pops that goddamned thing in like it was a Cheeto and he makes like he's chewing but you can't really be sure because his mouth is closed. He's got this big yum-yum grin on his face and his jaw's pumping away. The skanky stripper says, "Let's see! Let's see you really eat that bug!" The jarhead looks over at her and his whole expression slumps into something different and ugly. He opens up and slides out that tongue all covered with legs and mashed-up wings and shell and this white goo. The stripper about gags but she keeps looking. The jarhead rolls back his tongue and leans into her face. You can tell she's about sick with it but she doesn't flinch or turn away. The jarhead gets his face right into hers and blows that junk all over her. Just fires on her. Hoses her with spit and roach parts.

It's about the meanest shit I have EVER seen go down.

She lets out a howl like a banshee. Two bouncers show up and start pounding on the jarhead. Somebody flings a pitcher and a bouncer catches it in his ear. There's blood everywhere. Then the jarhead's buds jump in and the whole place erupts.

We beat feet out of there. *Warp* drive. In the parking lot I'm

blinded for a minute and that shit back inside's pounding around in my head. We both got a good buzz on and Rudy's got his big old arm around me and calling me his buddy. He invites me over for dinner--says his old lady makes this killer lasagna. I figure, why not?

I'm following behind Rudy's Blazer--he's doing okay. A little weary, maybe, but no major bust. We stop at a light and I see this dynamite babe in a Jap ragtop. She's wearing these thick-framed Ray Bans. I put on my own shades and keep watching her. She's got some tremendous fat red lips and I think about kissing her and I especially think of the clicky sound our sunglasses make while we're kissing. In fact maybe I don't kiss her at all. Maybe we're just rubbing lenses. That's what does it for me, the sound of our shades bumping and grinding. I would never let her take them off.

We down a bottle of chianti with the lasagna. Rudy's wife, Anita, puts it away pretty good. She's a partier. I'm surprised how pretty she is, I mean, considering what an ape Rudy is. I can tell she kind of likes me since every time Rudy says something stupid she gives me this *what-a-dink* look.

Rudy bought the dining table in the Philippines. It's made of that monkey pod wood and under a glass top are all these demon masks. So every time you take a bite of food this crazy face that's all teeth and feathers is gawking at you. I keep seeing that jarhead's face right before he creamed the stripper. Finally I have to lay my napkin over it.

Anita puts away the dishes and Rudy cracks open a bottle of this Mexican brandy. When Anita takes my plate I get a little cleavage shot down her blouse. I look up and she gives me a grin and I don't know if it means *bad boy!* or if it means *Merry Christmas!*

Rudy says, "Hope you got your fill."

I say, "What?"

"You ain't gonna get nothing like that when we're haze-grey and underway."

I think of this big ape pounding my dick into the dirt and I just say, Nope, real cautious like.

Then he says, "Shit's got three different cheeses in it. I got a lactose intolerance, makes me squirt like a motherfucker. But I don't care. I'll put that shit away till doomsday."

He pours me a brandy in this little mug that says *Hang Loose* on it. Anita comes back and says she isn't gonna drink out of some stupid souvenir and pours hers into a wine glass. We shoot the shit for a while then Rudy starts telling about his first fuck. Anita gives me one of her

looks. Rudy goes on with this typical gross Rudy-story about this whore he hooks up with in TJ and how he smears toothpaste all over her chest because he wants to tit-fuck her and how the spearmint or whatever burns his dick so he dumps a Coke all over both of them to get the toothpaste off and she gets pissed and stuff and it's all going round and round in my head and I look over at Anita; she's just staring real bored like she's heard it about a million times, only moving to hit off the brandy which she is like PUTTING away.

So it's my turn. I tell about getting it with my cousin in the carport lockers and how when I'm fumbling around trying to get it in she says, "If the goal here is buttfucking you're doing great." They both get a big hoot out of that so I pour it on thick. I say when I finally found the right place it was like jamming a marshmallow into a piggybank. Well that about puts Anita on the floor. Rudy thinks it's funny but not *that* funny. Anita's holding her gut and saying over and over, "marshmallow in a piggybank!"

I say, "Okay, Anita. Your turn."

Through her gagging she says, "My turn what?"

"First sex story. Gotta pay to play. No peso, no *beso*."

"Oh Jeez. Do I have to?" But that was for Rudy's benefit. You could tell there was no keeping her back.

I give Rudy a quick one but he's busy pouring more brandy. He skips Anita.

When Anita stops laughing she grabs for the bottle but Rudy stops her. She shakes him off and says, "Screw off, Hon. I need some fortification for this."

"You look pretty fortified," Rudy says, and I see Rudy's big face carved into the tabletop. I'm surprised how natural he looks in feathers. Or maybe I'm not.

Anita ignores Rudy and starts telling her story which, it turns out, is about her first old man. It's all this sentimental stuff about champagne on the beach and a roaring fire and sleeping bags zipped together and *tender* this and *sweetly* that--but I can see she's really into it so I slap on my sincere face like when the chief's babbling on. About halfway through she does this weird thing. She reaches over and touches my hand. Just taps it like you do when you're making a point. And it's so warm it shocks me. There's my hand laying there like a clam and she touches me and it's like a sonofabitching soldering iron. I think I flinched.

I'm pouring brandy like it's going out of style and she's going on and on and I pretty much forget Rudy is even there till he gets up and

walks out. Anita just shakes her head like *don't worry about him* and goes on with the story. I just figure he's off to the shitter until I hear the TV.

Anita checks on him. When she comes back she says I should go. I ask why. She says not to worry, that Rudy'll be okay in the morning. I figure the night's over and I'll just say goodbye to Rudy. But Anita says, no, just GO. There's this edge to her voice and I'm not sure if she's mad at me or if Rudy's mad at her or what. While I'm trying to figure it out, Rudy comes storming in bellowing, GET THE FUCK OUT! YOU JIVE SHITHEAD! GET OUT!

The next thing I'm cold-cocked--on the deck flailing around, trying to get untangled from the chair, still holding that damned Hang Loose mug, flubbering around trying to get out some words. Anita's all screaming bloody murder and old Rudy snatches me up and I'm out the door and bouncing my head off his concrete drive.

Driving home freezing off my gonads for having the window down so I can spit out the blood, I'm trying not to fall asleep or be a bust so I'm concentrating real hard on what Anita was yelling. I think it was, *I'm glad you're going.*

Day Two

Spent the whole day running my ass off. Putting my shit in storage, haggling with the manager over my security deposit--last minute stuff. Now I'm lying on the floor biting hunks of dead skin from inside my cheek and spitting them at the ceiling. My whole jaw is yellow and swollen on that side and there's a chipped tooth I can't keep my tongue away from. Maybe I should go see dental.

I get another three aspirins and a beer to chase them. The lights are out across the way. Maybe she's sitting in her dark room watching. For a second I think she knows and she's laughing. But that's stupid. But just in case I flip her the finger.

Just then the lights come on. I take a step back. There's my Madonna. But she's not alone. Some longhair guy is with her. I touch my cheek. Still tender.

I go in the bathroom and run water in the sink. I think of washing my hands but I don't. Instead I stare at the mirror, at my fat yellow jaw and cracked lip. I need a hit off my beer--hell, maybe I want to pour the whole thing over my damn head. But I left it back in the kitchen.

She's doing her act for him. He's out of the picture--on the floor or the bed or I don't know. I roll the cold bottle across my forehead. When she gets to her panties, she rolls them down her legs then twirls

them over her head and flings them across the room. The guy stands up and nuzzles in between her jugs. My awesome titties. She holds him tight then looks right at me. I reach over and drop my shades. I just can't take that shit.

I finish packing my seabag and put it by the door with my aardvark mask. Liberty won't expire until 0600 but I'm thinking maybe I'll just spend the night on board. Why put it off? I mean let's face it. I'm ready for war.

After a Long Absence

Sue Scalf

Memory is a candle that won't blow out.
Though there is nothing here, new shoots sprout
where the maples stood,
and I recall

the odor of must and coal dust, and a two a.m. train,
a dim bulb at the depot wavering in rain,
a ride home in Sim's truck
through the silent town, then Grandma letting us in,

the ironstead bed smelling of camphor, old quilts
warm as a welcome, and the sound of wind
shaking the maples, rain on the screens,
then sleep, contented and deep.

Now, a few bricks, broken steps,
bring back all that is gone,
all that will never go--
maples and rain, the sound of wind,

life that ends like a long journey,
a sleep, and waking at home.

My Holocaust Flowers

Louis Daniel Brodsky

Although I didn't realize it then,
The seeds of my Holocaust poems
Had already been "german-ating"
In Imagination's beds

Long before their first roots burrowed down,
And shoots, undernourished and brown-edged,
Thrust upwards through loose dirt
And budded open into doom-blooms.

Now, it's been nearly a decade
Since those fleurs du mal--
The earliest resembled erika, begonias,
Impatiens, violets, and crotons,
Profuse in their tightly-bunched clumps
Like sarcomatous lump in a pumping lung--
Began appropriating plots
I'd tilled to fill with other designs;
Still, I don't know who planted those seeds,

Whether or not a kind of divine Fancy
Had been behind the original idea,
Or why I, a tribal scribe
Bent on recording gentler colors and signs,
Should have been chosen
To tend such an adventitious creation.
But O, the hours I've spent
Hoing, weeding, pruning,

Fertilizing with hallucinatory oracles!
If, in the beginning, I'd only known
Those flowers would require a lifetime
To keep them from dying out,
I'd never have allowed them to grow
Or made bouquets, taken them into my house,
Placed them in crystal vases
And misted them daily,
Obsessed with seeing how long they'd survive.
But, how could a poet know

That being "Chosen" was really no honor,
Instead, an obligation
By default of God, Himself,
A vocation he'd not be able to refuse?
Even now, each early a.m.,
I go outside my dreams, pace the bed--
They're as large as Versailles' rococo gardens--
And try to decide which flowers I'll pick
To place on my grave that day.

& for a moment I saw myself in you

Karen Jastermsky

(for Greta Garbo)

Your face (the kind of face that comes along once
in a hundred years) stares out from the bookstore

window, all 36 copies, the charcoal sketch:
the Camille lashes, kiss-me-now eyes,

that Ninotchka nose, the I-want-to-be-alone lips.
It's you tempting me to hold your life

in my hands, tempting me to remember
your face because you know I will

& I know it's you arranging the scene:
this bakery, & below the sign, FINE PASTRIES,

three teenage girls sit. It's you reminding me
I'm no longer fine pastry. Every Chinese

woman on Pell Street, the flame juggler
in Washington Square Park, the Little Italy

mother who leans out of an opened window,
wears your charcoal-sketched face.

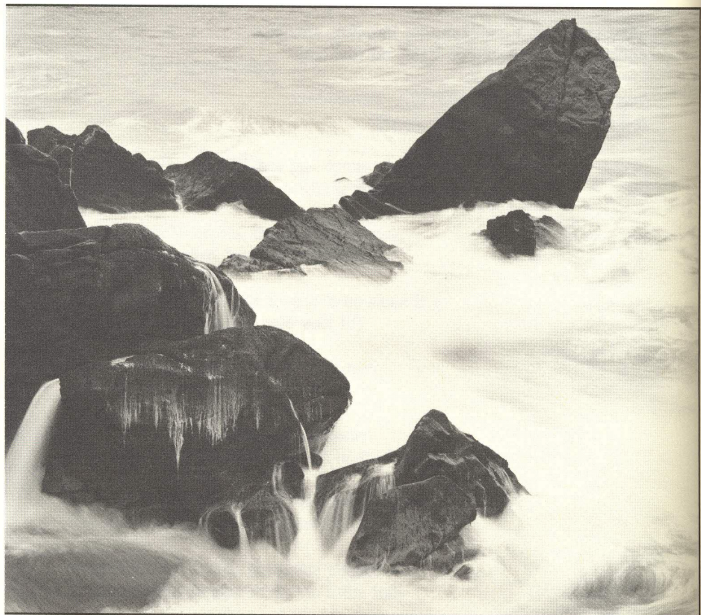
When I'm crossing Broadway, your face on the cover
of PEOPLE magazine stares up at me from a corner

trash can & tempts my hand to exhume you the way
you did me--remember? When I saw you with John

Barrymore in your bedroom, you chopped my breath
in half, revived me--me, who wanted to be you,

alone--alone at 3 a.m. Saturday morning, stretched
out on the couch, with all lights off (the only

way to watch GRAND HOTEL). Remember?
& I saw, a moment, in you: myself.



Roger W. Fremier

Holing Out

Arnold Johnston and Deborah Ann Percy

A ONE-ACT PLAY

CHARACTERS:

LUKE, mid-forties, high school English teacher, pretty good golfer.

JEANETTE, mid-forties, real estate agent, former high school social studies teacher, just learning to golf.

SETTING:

One-third down the fairway on the seventh hole of Finch Haven Golf Course. Green rolling hills and a clubhouse can be seen in the distance. Down R there is a section of fence on which grapevines are growing in a thick tangle.

As the lights come up, we see Luke searching in the grapevine with his five iron. He is wearing shorts and a polo shirt.

LUKE: Why me? What did I do to deserve this? Who radio-dispatched those old bats to tee off just before we did?

JEANETTE: *(Also dressed for warm weather, she enters calling to Luke.)* Do you see my ball? It went the same place yours did, didn't it? Isn't that what you call companionable golf?

LUKE: Cart golf. They call it cart golf. If your shots land near each other, you both get to ride in the cart.

JEANETTE: We don't have a cart.

LUKE: They still call it cart golf.

JEANETTE: (*Giving his waist a squeeze.*) I like companionable. More interesting options.

LUKE: (*Squeezing her, too.*) OK. Except for the fact that mine's right there on the fairway. Yours went in here somewhere.

JEANETTE: And except for the fact that it took me three strokes to get here, and you only needed one.

LUKE: (*Searching for the ball.*) That's because I used my five iron to tee off. (*He waves the club.*) I'm working my way up from the driver. I'll be teeing off with my wedge soon. (*Turning to her.*) You topped it. I keep telling you to swing down through the ball.

JEANETTE: When I swing down through it, I dig up great hunks of grass.

LUKE: Digging up grass is the least of your worries. You're supposed to dig up grass. And they're called divots, not green hunks.

JEANETTE: Divots. Can you see my ball?

LUKE: Not yet. But it's in here somewhere. (*He straightens, quits looking for the golf ball and looks over the grapevines toward the tee.*) We're not going anywhere, anyway. Not with those four old women ahead of us. They're not even on the green yet. They should have let us play through.

JEANETTE: (*She starts poking in the grapevines with her golf club.*) Wouldn't you know? One of my new balls. Pink Ladies.

LUKE: Actually, from this distance, it's hard to tell if they are all women, or if that one in the green sweater is a man. Old farts, anyway.

JEANETTE: I thought pink would be harder to lose. (*Straightening and looking toward the tee.*) The one in the green sweater is a man. You don't have to be nasty about everything just because you forgot you prom-

ised to have champagne and birthday cake with me tonight and now you turn out to have something more important to do. With your wife.

LUKE: (*Flaring a bit.*) It's not more important. I just have to do it, that's all. I couldn't know Caroline's brother was going to pay us a visit.

JEANETTE: Don't you and Caroline talk?

LUKE: I haven't seen Kent since Christmas. He'll be hurt if I duck out on him.

JEANETTE: And I'm not?

LUKE: I didn't say that. But we can have cake and champagne tomorrow night. Besides, it would seem strange if I didn't see Kent. I think Caroline's already suspicious.

JEANETTE: Tonight is the night George plays bridge. Tomorrow night he's home. (*Beat.*) Don't worry about it. I'll call Molly. We'll go to La Pasta. (*Beat.*) It's nice to have a friend you can depend on.

LUKE: Maybe you can call good olf Rex. Your new boss. I imagine he cuts quite a figure in his blue blazer.

JEANETTE: Rex's all right. He's a nice guy. He's single.

LUKE: (*Changing the subject.*) Christ. We're going to be here for hours. Look at them. They are just standing around.

JEANETTE: Why are you always in such a hurry on the golf course? No one's coming up behind us. It's a beautiful morning. We're together.

LUKE: It would be beautiful if it weren't so damn hot. Besides, somebody is behind us. (*Turning and looking back toward the tee.*) Where is that guy with the hat? He can't still be on the last green.

JEANETTE: (*Looking again in the grapevines.*) I thought I'd be less apt to lose pink balls.

LUKE: (*Turning back to her.*) Who would wear a hat like that? I'm al-

ways amazed that people actually go out and select and pay for things like that hat.

JEANETTE: You really are in a foul mood. Maybe you should give Dr. Raimundo a call later on.

LUKE: I'm amazed that somewhere there's a factory where human beings make a hat like that. Maybe the same place that makes those blue blazers with the phony gold crowns on the breast pockets that you and your colleague wear. I mean, are we supposed to think real estate agents are some sort of medieval guild?

JEANETTE: It's Rex's company. Rex means "king." The crowns make that clear. *(Luke gives the vines a vicious swipe with his five iron.)* You don't like it that you're going back to work in two days, back to school, and I won't be there. You don't like it.

LUKE: *(Looking again in the grapevines.)* That you've sold out?

JEANETTE: That *is* it. You are angry about my new job, after all, aren't you? I haven't sold out anything, you know. I've bought something. Freedom.

LUKE: Pink is as easy to lose as any other color. If you're going to lose your ball, the color isn't going to make a damn bit of difference.

JEANETTE: It won't be so easy from now on, will it? No more late nights at teachers' meetings. No more stopping in the park on the way to school in the morning.

LUKE: You've bought a fucking Oldsmobile. With leather seatcovers.

JEANETTE: Now I can afford a fucking Oldsmobile. With leather seatcovers. And wide seats I didn't hear you complaining about on Tuesday night.

LUKE: And push-button combination locks.

JEANETTE: It won't be so easy any more, will it?

LUKE: What's wrong with regular locks? What's so precious in that fucking car that it needs to be protected by combination locks? Do you really think someone will steal the leather seats?

JEANETTE: I think the locks are there to keep someone from stealing the whole car.

LUKE: Smells like some damn leather store selling mini-skirts at the mall. (*Pointing toward the green.*) What are they doing now? What's that old buzzard doing? He's down on his hands and knees, for Christ's sake.

JEANETTE: He is a man, see?

LUKE: Lost his car keys probably. Or his hearing aid.

JEANETTE: Luke, I think he's sick.

LUKE: He certainly has those old women dancing around. What do you suppose he knows that I don't?

JEANETTE: There's something wrong with him. He's fallen flat on the ground. (*She puts her club in her bag and starts off.*)

LUKE: Where are you going?

JEANETTE: They need help.

LUKE: You're too late. There's a foursome right near them on seventeen. And they have golf carts. One of them's already headed over there. They don't need you. Just stay out of it.

JEANETTE: You're really worried, aren't you? (*Beat.*) You'll never tell Caroline about us. You'd let somebody die before you'd risk anyone seeing us together.

LUKE: I'd help if we had to. Besides, are you going to tell me it wouldn't bother you if George found out about us?

JEANETTE: Not enough to let somebody die.

LUKE: Look, there's the other cart coming to the rescue. Like cars stopping on the freeway after someone's run into an abutment. Besides, those guys look prosperous. One of them's liable to be a doctor. There's probably a lawyer, too. Probably figuring out how to help the old guy sue the golf course for making the greens fast enough to give you a heart attack.

JEANETTE: What's wrong with you, Luke? The man's turning blue, and you're making jokes.

LUKE: (*Continuing.*) Probably a realtor in the foursome, too.

JEANETTE: I'm going up there.

LUKE: What are you going to do? Administer CPR?

JEANETTE: If I have to.

LUKE: Too late. The fellow in the plaid pants knows CPR, too. I told you one of them would be a doctor. And there goes number two golf cart back to the clubhouse to phone for an ambulance. They don't need you. Just stay out of their way. Just stay out of it.

JEANETTE: I'd like to help.

LUKE: That's you. You like to help.

JEANETTE: What does that mean?

LUKE: You like to help so much you've given up teaching kids about how the Constitution works to help young upwardly mobile families find mildly luxurious homes just out of their price range.

JEANETTE: I'll have to remember that. It'll go over big at the office. Rex will like it. (*Pause.*) You know, I really loved teaching. I gave it up because I had to. And you won't give it up, even though you don't like it.

LUKE: You say you had to. But not because you wanted to. You did it because George wanted it.

JEANETTE: That's what he thinks.

LUKE: Because he wants to make sure your kids don't need scholarships or loans or--God forbid--jobs.

JEANETTE: That's what you both think. *(Pause.)* Maybe the kids will learn to look out for themselves. Maybe you all will.

LUKE: Fine. Whatever you say.

JEANETTE: You're angry. I knew you were angry.

LUKE: I'm not angry. It's hot, that's all. It's hot. *(He stops looking for Jeanette's ball and swings the club angrily.)*

JEANETTE: I'm glad I'm not a golf ball. *(She points.)* Look.

LUKE: Jesus. The old sonofabitch is up on his feet.

JEANETTE: Maybe it wasn't a heart attack. Maybe it was just the heat.

LUKE: Maybe the whole bunch of them werre just radio-dispatched to make sure our round of golf was fucked up as much as possible. *(Pause.)* Or maybe the old fart just can't handle three old broads. Christ, now he's got a club out. They're going to keep playing.

JEANETTE: Can anybody handle three women?

LUKE: It's like cats.

JEANETTE: Cats? The musical?

LUKE: Cats the animal. If you have two cats, that's okay. They're company for each other. Three cats, you're on the edge. Four cats, you're certifiably nuts. That's what I told Dr. Raimundo.

JEANETTE: You pay your shrink seventy dollars an hour to talk about cats? No wonder you're not making any progress.

LUKE: I told him two women is like four cats. They make you crazy.

JEANETTE: So I'm like two cats. Very nice. What did he say?

LUKE: He said I was one off. He said three women made you crazy. He said I was just in trouble. Not crazy.

JEANETTE: (*After a long pause.*) Well, you have one and a third cats to go. Or one woman. (*Pause.*) Maybe I've made it easier for you. Is the same thing true for men?

LUKE: What do you mean?

JEANETTE: Maybe I've already made it easy on you.

LUKE: Easy how?

JEANETTE: You think you'd be able to tinker with the possibility of three women? Like teeing off with your five iron?

LUKE: That's not what I said. That's not the point of the story. What do you mean, does the same work for men?

JEANETTE: Nothing. I never have liked cats. (*Pause.*) I like my job. I like my Oldsmobile. I like my leather seats. My combination door locks. My blazer. I like birthday cake and champagne.

LUKE: You like Rex. Rex. And his symbolic crown.

JEANETTE: I'm not interested in symbols. Or cats. (*Changing the subject.*) The emergency's over, I guess. They're off the green. The cart guys are back on their own fairway. Playing cart golf. (*A golf ball lands between them.*) Where did that come from?

LUKE: That sonofabitch with the hat. What else did you expect? (*Calling.*) Hold your God damn horses! (*To Jeanette.*) I guess you'd better go ahead. The old farts are holing out.

JEANETTE: What shall I do now?

LUKE: Hit a provisional ball.

JEANETTE: Provisional?

LUKE: (*Patiently.*) A new one. A replacement for the one you've lost.

JEANETTE: Is that a penalty stroke?

LUKE: You bet. (*Taking a ball from his pocket and tossing it to her.*) Here. Take one of mine.

JEANETTE: I've got one of my own. They come three to a box, you know. (*She tosses the ball back to him and gets one from her bag. Then she picks up a club, addresses it, and begins her backswing. Luke picks up a pink golf ball from the far end of the grapevines and holds it up.*)

LUKE: Wait up. Here's your other one.

JEANETTE: (*She lowers her club.*) Pink Lady Four?

LUKE: Yep. Happy birthday. (*She drops the ball and starts to address it.*) You still get a penalty stroke.

She looks at him as the lights fade.

T.V., Ghosts, and Poets Past

Tiffany Darrough

I can't teach today.
The knot in my heart has grown
so tight, I gasp for air like an old man,
and my belly burns
with the anxiety that grips me.
So I play hookey on the couch
in my pajamas until noon.
The cat sleeps in my lap, the dog at my feet,
and outside the chickens bark at the door.
But the panic doesn't stop
even after I garden and water the plants;
so I must walk.
I walk past homes and orchards and children
to Tiffany Street.
My name; should be my street.
I feel like I am walking onto a movie set.
My pace slows.
Tudor houses, clipped lawns, four-door sedans.
An old woman leaves her neighbor's house,
coffee cup in hand,
they chat on the porch, laughing.
Lucy & Ethel.
They embrace, wave goodbye,
and the old woman walks into her home,
still smiling, the petunias on her porch
a royal shade of purple.
What does she say when her husband
comes home from work

and asks her how her day went?
I keep walking,
an alien on a planet of '50s sitcoms.
A man clipping his hedge says, "Howdy."
I wave. Maybe his wife will bring me
milk and cookies.
Maybe they will adopt me.
There are no children here
like in my neighborhood.
The children of Tiffany Street
are grown and gone.
Only Nana & Poppa live here
under these sleepy Sycamores and Elms,
the smell of ginger, Ben Gay, fried
chicken in the air.
We planted an Elm last week,
in our backyard,
but I am still taller than it.
I keep walking.
They don't know that I am Tiffany also,
on this Tiffany Street. I should belong
but I don't. Not even vaguely.
Downtown passes in a blur of images,
poetry creating in my mind
and disappearing. The Ghosts
of Poets Past haunt me.
Sexton, Plath . . . she killed herself
in her own oven. The womb of the home.
I keep walking.
When I was nine my favorite
show was the Brady Bunch.
Mom would buy us store brand
Tiki Punch and Twinkies and
we could stay up late.
The Brady kids got a new mom and dad,
killed off the old ones,
no divorce; too messy.
I think of my own family.
One birth, three kids,
four parents; too messy.

I keep walking.
I would have been 18 when she was born,
if Katie had been mine.
Megan crawls up under my shirt and hides.
We play a game of birth.
She coos, I grunt and pop
her out between my knees.
She laughs, born in seconds on the floor.
"Let me in! I want inside!"
We keep playing until I want to cry.
Aaron was inside. He pushes Megan away.
"Let me back in, Mom!"
But he is too big. Too big to even
fit inside my shirt and play the game.
I hold him tight to stop him from growing,
even if it's just for that one second.
I keep walking.
Past the parade preparation,
the rodeo floats and shiny bright saddles
lined up in the parking lot
of the school where I teach.
I am compelled to go in,
to sit in my chair and stare
at the empty desks.
But a student might spot me.
I keep walking.
I heard the phone when I was gardening.
The unmistakable honey voice,
a blonde voice on the machine,
his ex, not mine this time,
with schedules for dentists and grandmas.
I want to hate her but I can't.
I am too educated.
I keep walking.
Homestead Avenue.
I think of Ma Joad, as the wind whistles
off the Gabilan Mountains.
Steinbeck's mountains, mine too.
"You're tough as an old boot," my husband says.
I protest, "No, I'm a delicate thing."

“No, you’re tough as an old boot.
That’s why I love you.”
I know he’s right, but I’m not sure I love it.
Some days I don’t want to be tough;
I want to be numb.
I think of when I was younger,
and fantasized about being a nun.
I imagined life could never be more still,
alone, in the garden of an ancient convent.
The wind picks up as I near home.
A student drives by and waves.
I have no anonymity in this small town.
Rick will be home soon,
to our house on Wilma Drive.
I think of the Flintstones and my
husband as he bursts through the door each night
like Fred Flintstone, shouting “Bullah, Bullah,”
his own caveman call,
then sweeps me off my feet,
his dark-haired Wilma with bones in her hair.
And life is good.
When I return to my couch
The cat looks at me as if he doesn’t know me.
The dog is equally unimpressed.
They don’t know the journey
I have taken today.
My children will look at me
the same when they return.
To them I’ll be the same.



Lisa Hedl



W. D. Gilardetti

Contributors

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ARNOLD JOHNSTON has been a professor of English at Western Michigan University since 1966, teaching mainly playwriting and fiction. His successfully staged plays include *The Witching Voice*, *Scrimshaw*, *The Edge of Running Water*, *Suitors*, and *Closer to Brel*. In 1976 he served as writer-editor for the NPR award-winning Bicentennial radio series, *Voices from Michigan's Past*. He has collaborated extensively with fellow playwright and wife Deborah Ann Percy in several award-winning plays. In 1990 "Holing Out" was a semi-finalist in the Actors' Theatre of Louisville Ten-Minute One-Act Competition and a finalist in the SETC New Play Competition, held at Clemson University, as one of four related plays.

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BRENDAN O'NEILL is at present on a "\$1-a-day" hiking trip around Europe and will return to Chicago "when the money runs out--or about six months."

DEBORAH ANN PERCY is an administrator with the Kalamazoo Public Schools in Michigan. She writes and publishes both fiction and drama. Her own plays and those written in collaboration with her husband Arnold Johnston have won numerous awards and productions nationwide. In 1990 "Holing Out" was a semi-finalist in the Actors' Theatre of Louisville Ten-Minute One-Act Competition and a finalist in the SETC New Play Competition, held at Clemson University, as one of four related plays.

SUE SCALF lives in Prattville, Alabama, and is an adjunct in the English department at Troy State University in Montgomery. She has work forthcoming in *Elk River Review*, *Negative Capability*, and *Voices International* and recently published her second collection of poetry, *Ceremony of Names*, by Druid Press.

M. S. TREE writes and grows flowers in Boulder, Colorado. She has published most recently in *Exquisite Corpse* and *Merveilles* and was guest editor of the annual Valentine's Day "Women Write Erotica" issue of *New Censorship--Journal of the Next Savage State*.



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