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Number Two Son

Suddenly that summer, we upped and moved into our own house, in a new neighborhood (for us), in old Galway, Massachusetts. I guess it had been in the works for some time, but when you're five, you're not always advised about what's going on, and even less often is your advice sought. As it was, I was still trying to get a grasp on things as the new kid in the family, never mind on the block. Now that may sound strange after five, almost six years, but I was still constantly being reminded of my newness. Brother Spike reminded me most often, as he had the greatest cause.

"Things were a lot better around here before you had to show up," or so he'd been telling me for years. He delivered this sometimes in a low-down murmur, other times with a certain vehemence, depending on the circumstances and the amount of privacy we had at the moment. But always with the greatest sincerity.

Without me, Spike would have been the youngest. With me around, he was stuck plumb in the middle, and grievous wound it was. Above was Connie, a year-and-a-half older, his immediate superior; and below was me, five-and-a-half years younger, his Oedipal booby prize - and bedmate to boot. And boot he would, among other things. He'd let me know on a daily and sometimes hourly basis how he felt about this whole situation, and I in turn would run to my sometime protectress, Mom, which only served to further strain his and my already tenuous relationship.
Kleber

For Mom, of course, I was her "miracle baby". I wasn't sure exactly what that meant except that it put my newness in a more positive light. But then she'd laugh and spoil it all by telling me the way Dad used to say grace at dinner before I came along:

One, two, three, four
Thank God we've got no more.

In the here and now, Dad himself had taken to referring to me as "number two son". There was nothing miraculous in being called that. Instead, it was like getting something you already have and may not have much use for the second time around, and I was the second-time-something. Dad, in his defense, seemed to have taken the idea from some old Charlie Chan movies, and perhaps I was a bit of a mystery to him. But not as much as I and everything around me were to myself.

The new house and its immediate surroundings were the newest clues in this mystery called life, and they had been forced upon me, not discovered. There simply was too much to figure out all at once. Heck, even sleep was more of a question in the new place. It had never been anything calmly entered into from practically the beginning since Spike and I would argue over who had most of the blankets, who was encroaching on the other's side of the bed, and who was going to consume special sandwiches and drinks made from the other's bodily eliminations. I put up a valiant effort in these skirmishes and even enjoyed them in a way since I rather worshipped Spike - none of
which I understood in any way whatsoever. I had some sense, though, that punches and kicks were painful inversions of love, a sign that Spike definitely and concretely cared about me in some way, or at least recognized my existence, which was far better than Connie's utter disdain for me. Gradually of course he and I would subside into a truce and so into sleep, but in the new place that sleep was often shattered by Connie's nighttime distress.

I cared even less for her distress than for her disdain, but there was no escaping this latest development; it even became contagious in a way. Spike and I had the front upstairs bedroom and she had the back one, connected by a short hall, and on either side of our bedrooms stretched the attic, in which Connie could hear "someone walking". Pooh-pahs didn't settle the matter, nor did Dad and Spike's discovery that bats got into the attic and flapped around. Dad and Spike would take care of the bats in a sporting way with flashlights and badminton rackets, stunning and disposing of the little monsters. Dad also tried to plug whatever accesses the bats found under the eaves of our roof, and for the most part he succeeded, although there were still occasional "walkings". Through it all, Connie couldn't be convinced that these "walkers" in the night were actually bats, or that she was bats for that matter. She knew, and she let it be known to me, that the old woman who had owned the house before us had died there, resulting in the place being sold to us, and at a good price. But dying and leaving were two different things. The old gal was still in residence as far as Connie was concerned.
Kleber

Then, too, even if the "walking" really was bats batting about, what consolation was that, Connie said. Didn't they get tangled up in your hair and chomp away at you? Couldn't they get into our bedrooms from either of the two attic doors? Connie's near hysteria was near enough to put me on edge. On one side lay a creepy old lady ghost and probably the lady's friends, and on the other side lay a bunch of vampire bats. Something more to be unsure about, something to lie awake straining eye and ear over. And it led to more bruises from Spike as I found myself creeping more and more onto his side of the bed for protection, strange as that may seem.

Come daytime in the new place, things were no more restful. It was summer; Dad went to work, Spike and Connie went off with friends their own age, and Mom sent me out to explore the new world around the house. Norman, the next-door neighbor to the left, was definitely new. It was he who told me that bats could be vampire bats or just plain vampires and that Count Dracula was the Big Daddy as far as vampires were concerned. Norman himself didn't have a father, and his mother worked nights as a nurse and slept days. He wasn't really interested in any of the games that Dad and Spike had taught me, and in fact he was most interested in Count Dracula, Frankenstein, the Werewolf, the Mummy, Godzilla, Alfred Hitchcock, Bette Davis, and all kinds of monsters, but mostly he was interested in the Count. He wanted me to play Count Dracula with him and two of his friends. They were all older than me, eight to
Kleber

ten years old, so I thought they knew what they were talking about. Norman explained it to me.

"I'm Count Dracula, and I try to catch you."

"Yeah, but what happens if you catch me?"

"I change you into a vampire and you have to help me catch the other kids."

"What if I don't want to be a vampire?"

"Then you run away. If you touch the apple tree before I can get you, then you're safe - that's the safety zone. Also, you can kill me if we make believe it's daytime and I'm sleeping and you drive a stake through my heart. But you have to be careful because as soon as the sun goes down, I can wake up and get you."

"What do you mean, a stake?"

"Just any pointy stick you pick up - you pretend to drive it through my heart, like this." He demonstrated, squirming around and groaning a lot.

The other kids knew the game and were really excited, in a nervous sort of way. They shivered and laughed a little at Norman's squirming. They even made Norman show me the two new teeth he was getting that were coming down like fangs, just like Count Dracula's.

So we started to play. I stayed close to the apple tree and kind of took things in at first. Norman stalked around pretty slowly with one arm and three fingers waving out and in, and then in and out, over and over again in front of his face, like he was trying to get
Kleber

your attention or something. His other arm was raised up, hiding most of his nose and mouth, and his eyes frowned above in a sharp, angry stare, a little cross-eyed. We pretended it was night, and then we switched to day and he had to go to sleep on his back porch in a make-believe coffin. The three of us tried to sneak up and drive a stake into him, but he woke up suddenly, grabbed the stake, and hissed that the sun had just gone down. He got Billy that way. Then he and Billy almost got David, but David put together two sticks from the apple tree and said it was Jesus' cross and they couldn't touch him. In fact, they even shrank up and hissed away in front of the cross.

We kept playing, and David and I (mostly David) enjoyed taking chances and getting back to the tree just before they could catch us. But then Billy came between us and the tree, and they ended up catching David, who didn't have a chance to find two more sticks and put them together. Norman got him in a kind of slurpy hug, like what he had got Billy in.

It was starting to get dark for real by now, and I didn't like the idea of the three of them being after me, so I started looking around close by for some more sticks of my own. In the driveway next to the tree, I found what looked like two tongue depressors from the doctor's office—thanks to Norman's mother, who I guessed had dropped them while getting in or out of her Rambler. I stuck them in my shirt pocket, just above my trembling heart, ready to whip out as a cross if I had to in order to gain safe passage home. As luck would
Kleber

have it, Norman, Billy and David weren't paying much attention to me since, as far as I could tell, they had some kind of vampires' meeting going on. Taking all the advantage I could get from the situation, I sneaked on past the driveway and headed across Norman's back yard, figuring to get out while the getting was good. But the meeting was just a trick because they suddenly broke apart and Norman, being bigger and faster, cut me off from home. As they started to close in on me, eyes glaring and mouths snickering, I whipped out my expected means to salvation - the tongue depressors.

"Keep back, get away from me, this is the cross!"

But they kept on coming. I tried again, but nothing doing. I even threw a blessing at them, but they seemed to be Protestant or something and not the least bit daunted. Then I gave it one last shot, mustering all I had, rasping out as loud as I could -

"Jesus' cross!"

"What're you talking about?" harrumphed Norman. "All you got there is a coupl'a fudgicle sticks!"

The next thing I knew, six arms were dragging me down and Norman was trying to sink his fangs into my neck. I screamed so loud that my father, just home from work, had to come out and rescue me. Thank God for that much at least.

But that didn't put an end to the affair. That same night, Norman popped out of our attic with bat wings spread to try an aerial approach, and my father had to save me all
Kleber

over again. It was then that he urged me in no uncertain fatherly terms to refrain from playing any more Count Dracula, and he suggested that I seek out other new friends. He wasn't too keen on Norman after that.

I wasn't seeking much beyond the front porch the next day when a delegation found me out. Mrs. Plant and her two daughters, Cassandra and Samantha, from across the street, had formed their own informal welcome wagon, and they came rolling up our front walk. Mrs. Plant was wagon-size all by herself, and she seemed to have two rolling parts in front and another two sticking out in back. I noticed that Cazzie and Sammie, as I came to call them, made sure to stay on either side of her and not venture out in front where they might get run over. Mrs. Plant was rumbling and swaying up our steps when my mother came out to meet her, probably feeling the vibrations from inside. Catching sight of us, Mrs. Plant slowed to a stop in front of my mother, where she might have kept going over me, and she and mother exchanged pleasantries. Then my mother admired Cazzie and Sammie in their lacy lavender doodahs. And then it was my turn.

"And is this your little boy?" gushed Mrs. Plant.

"Yes, this is Leo. Say hello to Mrs. Plant."

"H'lo."

"But he's pretty enough to be a girl! Look at those rosy-red cheeks and that dimple! How darling!"

Whereupon she latched hold of my cheek with thumb and forefinger and gave it such a
Kleber

squeeze that you'd have thought I was a cactus or something and she'd been stuck in the desert for a couple of weeks. At the same time, she had me lifted up on my toes and was swinging my head from side to side like a fish caught under the gills. She took me so much by surprise this way that I didn't have time to yell or swat her hand away, which I would have done if I could have. Norman's bite had been far less worse than this.

I think my mother's urging her to go inside and see the house is what finally caused her to let me drop. I struggled to catch my balance, and with one good eye and one blurred and watery one, I also caught a glimpse of Mrs. Plant rolling after my mother into the house while Cazzie and Sammie swept back across the street and then back again with an elaborate, pint-size tea set. Instead of launching into my complaint on the spot, I was dumbfounded by their layout and by the way they had made it back before their mother had gotten through our front hall, all of five feet. They neatly filled the gap created by my silence.

"Leo - that's a charming name - we would like to serve you tea and biscuits as our way of welcoming you to the neighborhood," Cazzie tinkled.

"Yes, we're delighted to make your acquaintance," chimed in Sammie.

"Sure." I had to say something.

So we ate and drank - real tea, cold, but still real - and got to know each other. Cazzie and Sammie even went so far as to let me call them by their nicknames, but they maintained
their air of refinement and proceeded with their express purpose of informing and advising me all about the neighborhood and especially about the school. The Middlesex Valley School, after all, was just on the other side of the house to the right of ours. There was no missing it and no escaping the fact that that was where I was to begin my education in a few short weeks. It was already August.

Cazzie and Sammie seemed to have all the facts and know all the secrets. What they were offering, or so it amounted to, was a kind of pre-education. I was both eager and thankful for that. As I've already pointed out, I was lacking in information about the world. Things had been happening pretty fast, and I wasn't sure about my place in the scheme of things. Here was my chance to get a jump on what might come up next and thus avoid any more untoward surprises. And Cazzie and Sammie were just the right people to help. They were close to my own age, yet they had valuable firsthand and recent experience. Cazzie was about to go into the third grade and Sammie into the second. They could tell me all about the school and about the first-grade teacher, Miss Beggott.

"Speaking quite confidentially, mind you, some people think she's a witch. She does wear black, witch's shoes..."

"Wait 'til you see her. She's really old and ugly and big and fat and..."

"And she has a terrible temper. She screams and yells at you until you're almost deaf..."
Kleber

"And if you don't believe us, wait 'til you see the whip she has behind her bookcase. She takes it out and whips anyone who's bad or stupid..."

"Or she'll make you get on your knees and beg for mercy. That's why her name's Beggott..."

"And if you're really bad, she'll take you to Miss Garrett, the big fat carrot, who's the principal. She's got the worst temper of all, and she'll throw you down into the cold, dark dungeon!"

Truly there was cause for concern here. Cazzie and Sammie delivered this information with relatively calm voices, but with a certain breathless intensity that could only be called authentic. Plus there was plenty of corroboration. They certainly confirmed each other's account. Sammie even gave me a quick peek at her back where she said she'd been struck with the whip. All I could see was a lot of sunburned skin peeling (she let me peel some), but there must have been something more there if I could have looked around or felt around a little longer. But what was more, in my own family, there was no denying that my own brother and sister had only awful things to say about school in general. And as for myself, my own eyes could see the Middlesex monstrosity looming up a scant sixty yards from our back yard. It looked the sort of place for a Biggy Beggott to be cracking her whip across the backs and buttocks of little kids like me.

To begin with, the whole place was surrounded with a blood red picket fence, the kind you could impale yourself on or use on a
thousand sleeping vampires. Inside the fence was a mass of black cinders that not only would scrape and cut you if you fell on them, but also stick in your wounds. The school building itself rose up from a rough granite foundation with barred windows at ground level - yes, like a dungeon! Above were two stories of gray slate punctured with black, gaping windows and capped by a black roof, sloped on the sides and slanting precipitously front and back. Stuck in the roof were hooded dormers left and right, and crowning all was a central chimney at least thirty feet high and wide enough to drop whole bodies down for turning into ashes and smoke. Maybe that's where the cinders came from - charred bones. All in all, it was not a friendly-looking place.

"Leo, whatever you do, don't do anything wrong," was Cazzie's final piece of advice.

Deep down, I decided to go one step further. I would avoid even the possibility of doing anything wrong by avoiding school in the first place. Why take any chances? My own parents and brother and sister would yell at me for just breathing too loud, like when I blew some bubbles in my milk. What might strangers in school do to me? Now I didn't have this resolution worked out inside me in any formal way; it just seemed to grow on its own, like any other part of me, as the few remaining weeks sped by.

In fact, time became so much a blur it was as if Mrs. Plant's pinch had permanently damaged my eyesight. I couldn't see anything straight. Then, in the middle of it all, Mrs. Plant, Cazzie and Sammie were up and gone.
You knew time had to be moving fast to sweep away someone as big as Mrs. Plant that suddenly. Of course, everyone else knew about their move in advance, so it came as sudden only to me, just another surprise that was all mine - but a distressing one for just that reason. Fact was that I had wanted to learn more from Cazzie and Sammie, and now it was too late. I took some consolation in figuring that Cazzie and Sammie had been behind the move, getting out while the getting was good. After all, Cazzie would have had Miss Garrett, the big fat carrot, for her third-grade teacher, and Cazzie was no fool.

After that, I spent a lot of time by myself. Well, not exactly. Since Cazzie and Sammie had each other to talk to and were so close, I imagined that I had someone close too, a twin brother, a second me. He had my nickname, Lockie, and I had my real name, Leo, and we got along just great together. We never had any fights or arguments, and no surprises we couldn't handle either. And we had good, short conversations, action-packed, like...

"OK, let's get those guys!"
"Ok!"
"Bah-dah-dahda-dah, bah-dah-dahda-dah!"
That's the way we'd get those guys - with machine gun fire.

But as close as we were, we weren't at all the same. Lockie was a much freer spirit than I and capable of great derring-do - often gravely wounded, but always recovering. I couldn't help admiring him and wishing that I were more like him. As it was, I seemed much more
Kleber

more methodical and meditative, but I did join him in his exploits as best as I could. He was my best and only friend, and we fought all the bad guys together, leading our little army men against the bad army men, the ones that were stuck in non-fighting positions. We suffered some terrible losses, but we never lost a fight, at least not until the end.

The end came when my mother sneaked up on us suddenly while we were playing.

"Leo, who're you talking to back there?"

This was like a sniper attack. It was as if my own mother had entered on the bad army's side and tilted the odds in their favor. She kept firing away.

"Leo, I asked you, who're you talking to back there? Answer mother."

"No one," was all I could say. After all, she was my mother even if she had entered the wrong side, and she did have us overmatched. Suddenly, though, the sofa was just a sofa and not a cliff, and Lockie was gone. My mother started vacuuming, but I couldn't bring him back. I sensed that he had left like the Plants, as fast and as good.

That afternoon, I walked down to the school yard and stood up on tiptoe and reached up to one of the pickets. It felt as sharp as it looked, although not in a point. I pressed down hard to see if it would puncture me, but all it did was make a dented line in a white circle with red all around. I watched the dent go away slowly as I walked back home.

The last days of summer were now funneling to the day when I was supposed to begin school. What fun times remained didn't
Kleber

last long as they were always quickly dispelled by the thought of school, Miss Beggott, and especially her whip. Even my sixth birthday came and went with little joy. During the family party, Spike blew into one of those party favors that shoot out with your breath, and poked me in the eye with it; my good eye at that, the one undamaged by Mrs. Plant. But what hurt more was the immediate comparison in my mind of Miss Beggott's snapping whip and the kind of damage that would do. It was left to my father to conclude everything for me with his birthday toast.

"To Leo, who at age six is about to leave the warmth and familiarity of the family hearthstone and venture into the great unknown, namely the Middlesex Valley School. May you proceed with courage, young man. We're behind you all the way, pushing as hard as we can." At this, everyone laughed, excepting me.

The final night came before the first day of school, and I was paid a special visit by Miss Beggott. She came out of the attic with little screaming bats rolled up in her hair as curlers and a long, black whip in her right hand. Flashing me a particularly malignant smile, more of a leer, she whispered that she was going to turn me into a "middlesex". I tried to tell her as abjectly as I could that I wasn't interested just yet and that I wasn't much to bother with anyway, but before I could finish, she let me have it with the whip, catching me on the left cheek as I tried to turn away. With that, I made a grab for Spike, who was either asleep or not paying much attention,
but all he did was elbow me back to my side of the bed. By this time the old witch had gone, but I was still pretty shaken. I was afraid this meeting would figure in any future contact we might have.

Next day was the usual first-day bustle, but this time I wasn't allowed to stand aside and watch. No one would listen to me or believe that I wasn't feeling so hot. They just seemed to drag me through all of the preparation of eating breakfast, getting dressed up, and running around looking for pencils, milk money and whatnot. There was no resisting any of this, but I went along as slowly as I could. I considered going totally immobile, like our cat that had died, but I knew that would be going too far. The plan that I just barely grabbed hold of, if it could be called a plan, was this one of slowing time down as much as possible, hoping to delay the inevitable to the point where it might reconsider and skip me after all.

Next thing I knew, Spike and Connie ran out the door to catch a bus to their new school, the Enfield. But Dad stayed late from work to help mother with me. They were going to use the tag team approach and take me to school together. I countered with the only move I had left, but one that could not easily be reversed.

"I have to go to the bathroom."
"You've already gone."
"Yeah, I know, but I have to go again."
"OK, but hurry up, it's getting late."

Now, truth to tell, I had no intention of hurrying. I intended to sit on the throne with my pants to my ankles as long as it took for
Kleber

dis this whole thing to go away. Actually, I figured that if I delayed long enough, they would say forget it. It was like the start of a movie - either you got there on time or close to the beginning, or you skipped it. Also, Dad had to get to work sometime. We needed the money. With him out of the way, I figured I could handle Mom.

"Leo, what're you doing in there?" Dad demanded, with more than a little exasperation. He always told me not to get "so exasperated".

"I'm trying to get it out. It's stuck."

"What do you mean, 'it's stuck'? Maybe you don't have to go now."

"No, I have to go, I can feel it!"

"The only place you have to go is school. Now c'mon, let's get going."

We went on like that for a while. We covered all the ground, whether I only had to go "number one" and not "number two", whether patience was necessary (I quoted my father that, "Sometimes you have to be patient because it doesn't always come out right away"), and whether or not I was faking it. I could tell they were catching on to me, but I was doing pretty well just the same. A good twenty minutes went by, but then the 8:30 bell rang for the start of school. That was one of the many disadvantages of living so close to school - you could hear the bells tolling for you.

"Leo, that's it, let's go."

"I'll be out in just a minute." I gave the roller a spin and moved around a bit.

"Minute's up."

"I'm coming..." I spun the roller some more and did some more shifting around.
"Leo, for God's sake..." His voice was rising, and he didn't sound so good. "I'm coming, I'm coming." I spun the roller for dear life, over and over, the paper cascading out of my hand and all over the floor. "LEO!"

"Dad, you'd better get to work. I'll be out in just a few minutes."

Now, unfortunately, our bathroom door did not have a lock. I had had a tendency to lock myself into bathrooms when on the road with the family and then, in a panic, was not able to get myself out. It was one of my shortcomings and one of the reasons for my nickname, "Lockie". Dad had taken the precaution of removing the lock from this door as soon as we had moved in. It was the first thing he had done. Now he was glad of it.

It all happened pretty fast; without another word really. The door swung open, I was pulled to my feet, and my pants were yanked up under my chin. Then I floated down our front steps. By the time we reached the school yard, I was shedding quite a few tears. In desperation I even told them about the whip. "Nonsense", they echoed each other. But they softened.

"We'll stay with you to make sure that everything's all right", Mom said. "Can we just see how it is and then go home?" That was a standard approach in the family. "You won't leave me, will you?"

"No, we won't."

Up the cold, granite steps of the side portico we went and on into the keep. Then
there were more stairs, this time wooden, on the left leading down into darkness and on the right up into a great hall, dimly lit with dark wood everywhere. Up we went again and then across long, narrow, slightly rounded floorboards that seemed to creak and groan with every step.

"Leo, stop groaning," hissed Dad.
"I wasn't!" I snuffled back.

But there was no time to discuss it for there was Miss Beggott, standing just outside her classroom. I heard the greetings and introductions, but all I really noticed was that she was bigger than my father, bigger than last night, and "uglier than sin" (something Dad said about some people). She had on the black witch's shoes, too. But she did smile at me, and differently from the leer of last night. She said the other children were downstairs "going to the basement" (the bathroom), and she gave me a green watering can from the room and asked me to water the plants there while she talked things over with my mother and father in the office. Everyone thought this was a great idea, including me since I thought Mom and Dad were coming around and would try to negotiate my release.

Alone, I stood just inside the doorway and looked around the room. It was bright and warm from all the sunlight that slanted in from the windows on the left. A softer, redder glow entered from the windows in back, and fluorescent lights gleamed pinkly high up on the airy ceiling. The kid-sized desks and chairs straight ahead were lined up like soldiers, waiting at attention before the big desk in
command on the left front, positioned between the front blackboard and the nearest window. On the right wall were book shelves with books, another blackboard, and a sink, and they were balanced on the left by a wide shelf below the windows, where the plants rested. I stood in front of it all for just a minute and felt my breath going in and out, in and out, and then I reached for a soggy-deep breath. The chalky blackboards, the scarred wooden floors and shiny wooden paneling, and the sunny dust floating in the bright sunlight started my nose itching all at once, and I gave out with a full-chested sneeze. The hush quickly fled the room, but quickly rushed back in again. I walked softly to the sink and filled the watering can.

As I lifted and turned, I found that I had filled the can too high and had trouble balancing it. I tried holding it with both hands and made sure to place each foot down carefully, one in front of the other, as I passed between Miss Beggott's desk and the front row, but the water still ran up the spout and caught my right foot in a little shower. That lowered the level in the can, and I edged my way to the long, wide window shelf without another spill.

The plants held themselves alertly and patiently in the dusty sunlight. They just sat and took in the light and some of the dust that went with it, and they looked ready for any water that I might give also. Since I had never watered any plants before, I was extra slow and careful about it. But they weren't. As soon as the water hit, they sucked it right down and

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Kleber

in. I began touching the coarse, warm soil before watering it, and then feeling the cool dampness afterward. I moved down the shelf this way, feeling the hot sun on my face, the coolness of the can held in both hands, and then the just-cooled plants.

All at once a rumbling started up below and reached my feet. Other feet began clomping and scuffling on stairs, and high-pitched voices piped upward from outside the door. I knew instantly that my mother and father were gone. My chest collapsed on its own and there were tears without my crying them, one falling into the watering can before I could catch it. Then the other kids were streaming in the door and clamoring at the desks. I took a quick swipe at my eyes with a free arm and turned to water the last plant. Then I sat down, and waited for what was to come next.
Mark A. Stewart

Incident at Tyler Creek Park

A car started up and pulled away from the curb, its tires crushing a misplaced bag of potato chips. A pair of swings still rocked and the monkey bars, once fat with life, now looked like a steel skeleton.

Set back a few yards from the road in a shrouded clearing amongst a thick cavalcade of trees, sat two massive columns of mortar and flagstones. Long, orange fingers of age blanketed them; a pitted, flaking wrought-iron banner arched above, still bleeding.

Atop the decaying structure sat two stout crows poised in idle expectation, eyes riveted on a dozen sparrows tugging and scratching at the bag in the road.

Just then a sightly automobile stretched around the corner and came to a bobbing stop at the curbside sending the birds airborne in every direction.

After shoving the shifting lever into park, a smartly-dressed, middle-aged man emerged. His face displayed a vague expression as he looked about him and to the west at the waning sky. Void of speech, he pulled his vest taut and shook his head slowly in annoyance. He walked slowly to the other side of the car to join his wife and teen-aged son, both of whom were as well-dressed as he. Together, the three reached over to assist an elderly man from the back seat and onto the sidewalk.

Unlike the others, the old man was casually dressed. He wore a green flannel shirt, a baggy pair of gray pants, and around his neck a plaid scarf. A paltry mop of silver
Stewart

hair was neatly draped over the tops of two small, leathery ears. His eyes were set deep in their sockets and protected by thick, protruding eyebrows. He moved in slow motion, it seemed, almost as if he were purposely taking his time; his anxious, poignant attitude, however, quickly erased the latter observation.

"C'mon, help me up!" His attempt to accent his request with authority ended, as usual, in vain. Instead he sounded more like an angry child with a throat malady.

"I ought to emblazon your ass with my handprint," he said. "You managed to seek out and find every God-damned pothole in the city!"

Speechless, the man called to the boy, now looking away, arms folded, as if to detach himself from the conversation.

"Tommy, get Dad's cane from the back seat, then go around and cut the engine." Without hesitation, the boy did exactly as he was told.

The old man took the cane, nodded his thanks, and patted the boy's head. Then he turned to the woman, her head lowering, and he went to her. His hug was long and tight. He burrowed his face into the scratchy folds of her thick, woolen shawl and savored its cool and airy freshness. Underneath he could sense a tremor in the young, petite figure.

"I apologize for him," she whispered, choking. He drew back, kissed her cheek, then winked.

"Are you sure you'll be warm enough?" asked the man. "There's a chill in the air and the wind's picking up." The old man didn't
answer him. Instead his attention was focused on the clearing in the trees. Noticing his father's gaze, the man turned his head to follow it. "This is ridiculous," he said. "You still haven't given me a good reason for doing this."

"You don't need a reason," mumbled the old man. "Besides, you wouldn't understand anyway."

"Well, I still think we should walk with you, regardless of your reason."

"No."

"I think we should."

"No!"

"As a matter of fact, we're going to. End of discussion."

"No! You promised! You and I agreed I could go alone. It means too much to me. I won't be long, just a few ..."

Suddenly the old man heaved, then staggered. Casually, callously, the man walked over to his wife to get a small bottle of pills. He dumped a couple out and offered them to his father.

"Leave me alone!" he bellowed, shooting a sideways glance at his son.

All drew back in astonishment at his quick recovery, the man less so than the others. He put his hands to his hips and yielded.

"All right. But I'm giving you only twenty minutes. That's all. That's plenty of time to relive your past, conjure up spirits, or do whatever it is you intend on doing in there," he said, snickering brazenly to himself. He glanced over his shoulder to the
Stewart

others for approval, but was met instead by deprecating expressions. "Here's your jacket. Be careful. Don't fall and break your hip again. I can't afford your persistent clumsiness anymore."

The old man was already walking toward the clearing. His gait was short and choppy and he had a pronounced limp which sort of gave him the appearance of skipping, rather than walking.

"Remember, we have dinner reservations for six-thirty, so don't dawdle. You've only got twenty minutes. He watched his father continue on, not bothering to turn around to listen to him. "You're welcome, you know!" he said sarcastically.

Finally, the man exhaled a lengthy sigh, then leaned back against the car, lit a cigarette, and threw his arm around his wife. "Crazy old bastard," he mumbled, watching his father disappear from his sight among the trees.

Already winded after a few short minutes, the old man stopped, straightened up and looked about him. He was taken aback by how much the place had changed since he had frequented it as a youngster.

The same rippling, meandering creek was there, although it had grown a few extra turns and bends. He inched closer to the edge of the grassy bank and peered into the surprisingly clear water. Darting images of tiny minnows moving about caught his eye. His thoughts were tracing back to the small collection of fish that he kept in a mason jar
Stewart

in his room as a boy. Those fish, he recalled, should have stayed there; for one evening, when his parents weren't in the best of moods, he brought the jar down from his room and placed it on the dinner table to examine while he ate. He remembered accidentally knocking it over, sending the wiggling, slimy fish everywhere - including everyone's plates. The image of his father's heavy hand and the lingering sting that followed made him wince all over again.

He shut his eyes tightly to savor the memory, then he listened. Sounds were few, though discernable. The raucous croak of a distant bullfrog wavered through the trees. Playful leaves crackled about his feet and a curious squirrel scratched his way down the bark of an oak and inched over. It reared back, shoved something in its mouth, then scampered away.

Just before he turned to walk further down the path, his eye caught the shape of a flat stone, half-buried in the dirt at his feet.

"How 'bout that," he noted with delight. "A genuine eight-hopper."

He totally ignored stabbing pain as he bent over to pry loose the stone from the earth, his jaw muscles bravely holding back the spasms of agony swelling in his throat. With stone in hand, he rose patiently, expelling air in an endless flow.

"Let's see now," he mused as he hooked his cane on a nearby tree limb. "As I recall, this must be done smooth - real smooth."

With almost meticulous scrutiny, like that of a major-league pitcher, he inspected the
ground below him as well as the proposed trajectory of his stone. What used to be an effortless task now proved a trying one as he bent and contorted his frail, arthritic body in an attempt to throw the stone. Surprisingly, it traveled quite a fair distance downstream. But instead of bounding across the shimmering surface, it hit the water with a pronounced "plunk" and floated to the bed to join its innumerable counterparts in watery silence.

Bewildered, the old man stood motionless, his chest rising and falling in short, rhythmic bursts. He was about to cuss at himself for his poor performance but shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "Defective rock," he growled.

He grabbed for his cane and continued his journey down the foot-worn path until it led him to a sturdy, but weathered bridge built entirely of de-barked tree trunks and limbs with oak planking serving as a stalwart flooring. When he saw it his first reaction was of complete astonishment: he never dreamed it would still be there. He wiped a leaking eye as an intense feeling of gripping sentiment overcame him. He began to approach it anxiously but slowed just as quickly as he realized that his once initial reaction of joy had suddenly tarnished.

He was devastated. The decades of neglect and exposure to the annual climate extremes of the midwest, as well as the permanence of vandalism, had all left an irreversible impression on it. And had it not been for the samaritan acts of a few anonymous individuals, surely the structure would have fallen away long ago.
Treatting it as though it were a wounded animal, he touched it, stroked it, trying, it seemed, to bring life back into it. Then, using the railing to guide him, he moved to the center of the span and sat down, allowing his feet to dangle precariously over the side. Realizing that he would be ankle-deep in water if he let them down all the way, he proceeded to remove his socks and shoes. With coldness now numbing his toes, he leaned back on his hands and looked around him. Lengthy shadows oozed about in varied patterns, vanguards of a silent, nocturnal army moving in to begin its territorial invasion. It was getting late; soon he'd have to go back. He blinked away the thought and returned his attention to the bridge. Upon inspection, he noticed a faint etching by his hand. A few frantic wipes revealed a carving of a heart dated 1914 with the names Theo and Anna inside. A tear fell, followed by another until a steady trickle commenced. He tried holding it back, except time had robbed him of his ability to do that years ago.

It was on that day in 1914 that they, as third graders, exchanged mock wedding vows on the very spot where he was now sitting. Little then did they both realize, that fourteen years later it would happen again, this time for real and, again, while sitting on that bridge. The old man recalled that day well. Just as he was ready to propose, he had become so nervous that he dropped the ring into the water below them.

Their marriage, a dyad of infectious happiness, lasted nearly fifty years until her
Stewart

dead - a death that left him empty, dazed, and vulnerable to the frightening thought of a life and world to live and see without her. Always a man proud of his independence and enormous strength in the face of adversity, he suddenly found himself absent of spirit, deteriorating. For the first time in his life, he was being conquered.

After Anna's death, his son reluctantly agreed to provide care for him in their spacious home. But continued disagreements on subjects ranging from child-rearing to politics increased the already lifelong distance between the two men.

Then, on a wet, gray day two months ago, after a vicious argument with his son, the old man suddenly found himself a resident of Longfellow Glade Convalescent Center. There, among a multitude of suffering bodies and depleted souls, his grief deepened, spreading through him like a cancer.

Because of his daughter-in-law's persuasive manner and tender heart, weekend excursions away from Longfellow Glade were possible, even if they were, for the most part, uneventful. But, though few, there were some pleasant moments.

For instance, over the years his grandson had managed to develop a passion for history, specifically the period between the turn of the century and the Second World War. And, because his grandson was weaned on a steady diet of television since birth, the old man would often put aside his somber moods and enlighten the youngster on the facts of those times long ago. Both enjoyed the time spent together.
Once in a while, when the conversation would spark a personal remembrance, the old man would begin to daydream, eyes lifting to scan the walls of their home. Adorning them were the various paintings, tapestries, and other forms of art his wife had created over the years. Her expressionist works, always a puzzlement to him, still gave him countless hours of pleasure trying to discover something new in them.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing for Christ's sake?" came a voice from far away.

The sudden verbal intrusion on the old man's thoughts made him look up in anger at his son, who was standing, arms folded, in the clearing beyond the realm of a normal conversation. For that one fleeting moment their eyes locked in a loathsome gaze. They shared nothing except mutual bitterness which, over time, had grown into alienation.

His rage building by the moment, he reached above him for the uppermost rail and began to pull himself to his feet. He had prepared to deliver a vehement verbal onslaught, but the only audible sound to escape his lips was a tiny squeak of panic as he grabbed his chest and collapsed to his knees. His son, realizing what was happening, was now running at breakneck speed down the trail toward his stricken father.

Without thinking, the old man grabbed instinctively for the plastic bottle of pills in his jacket pocket and yanked it out. He fumbled nervously for the cap, which he finally managed to twist off - but it was too
late; this attack was a severe one. He slumped to his side in a heap and then, to his son's amazement, stretched out his arm and emptied the bottle's contents into the creek.

"Pop!" The old man didn't hear him. He remained still on the bridge in a semi-fetal position, his one hand drooped over the side, still clutching the empty bottle. Then, as he breathed his last, the hand relaxed and released its grip. The man caught the tiny splash of its entry and watched as it floated under the bridge and lazily downstream.

When he finally reached the bridge he froze, just short of his father's feet. Totally spent, his chest heaved rhythmically, causing small squeaks to escape with each exhalation, his heart banging loudly in his ears. Then, just for a moment, he held his breath and listened, eyeing the stillness of his father's body. He bent down to start CPR, but when he noticed the final expression etched on his father's face, it instantly frosted his spine. He immediately turned and retreated down the trail.

He had to be dead, he thought. It was the first time he'd seen him smile in over a year.
Dirk van Nouhuys

Mac & Alf

Once upon a time two men lived in a drab, homey room in a large building. One was Mac. Mac was a big man; he wore old, dark, double-breasted suits that fit loosely over gray or brown sports shirts. He had long, perfectly straight gray-black hair, which he combed so it lay flat sideways on his head. His shoulders seemed narrower than his hips and he hunched a little as he walked.

Alf was smaller than Mac. He wore old, tweed sport coats and brown or slate gabardine slacks very baggy at the ass and kness. His shirts were older and lighter than Mac's, more marked with egg and wine. Alf was lighter than Mac in every way; he stood straight, his hair was almost flaxen, his skin was gray-white whereas Mac's was splotched with ruddiness. Mac's voice was rough whereas Alf almost piped.

The room was full of things that had once been luxurious with elaborate design, but now were faded, water-stained, bleached with many years beside the window. They had an Oriental rug that had been worn down to the hemp warp and ground gray with dust. Their bed was a four-poster long ago painted first green, then cream, and now mottled from peeling and exposure to light. Their bedside lamp was mushroom-shaped green glass with brass beads hanging from the edges like lace; the stand was a brass satyr. All the brass had a dusty green film. They had two over-stuffed chairs, one straight-backed chair, a small writing desk and a worm-shot armoire. The
van Nouhuys

room had one large window that looked over the concrete courtyard of their building. A faded curtain hid an alcove which had a small window and which contained a sink with only cold water, a small gas range and a chamber pot.

It was Mac who went out. He went out every day half an hour after dawn. Alf got up with him. He came back in the late afternoon with bread and fresh eggs, canned meat and vegetables, tea, wine and cigarettes. During the day Alf slept, or made thick, black tea or smoked or watched out the window.

For the last year and a half, a building like their own had been rising across the courtyard. At their level it was still a skeleton of iron beams. Alf could see the small figures of workers walking the beams, black against the light sky. At four in the afternoon, he put out the chamber pot and found it empty again at five. Mac loved Alf very much and Alf loved him.

One stormy night, someone knocked on the door. They looked at one another and then Alf went and opened it to a man with the gay, attractive face of a devil. He had a sharp-toothed smile and heavy arms and wore blue denim overalls and a beaked gray hat with the word, "OPERATOR" in red. He walked to the window and pointed through the night, where wind swirled rain and fog against the glow of the window, to a light that shone steadily in the construction.

When he was gone, Alf grew restless. He wanted to go to the light. Mac was worried for him and objected that it was dark, stormy and
van Nouhuys

unknown. Alf reassured Mac that he would be back by midnight.

When midnight came and Alf had not returned Mac grew ever more frightened and uncertain. He could still see the light hanging opposite and distant in the dark. He was afraid of the stranger and the night and the storm, but he wanted to make himself sure about Alf. So he went down the elevator and crossed the concrete courtyard in the rain, which leaked through his old suit, and the wind, which wrestled itself in the air with diffuse moans and grunts like huge, half-substantial animals. In the courtyard, he looked up and could still see the light in the construction at the level of their room. He doubted if he could climb among the unfinished stairs and girders, but he decided to attempt it. When, wet and numb-fingered from holding iron railings, he reached the level of the light, he could see that a room had been enclosed and lodged among the unfinished girders and piping like a white box among black in a crossword puzzle. He could creep along a girder and peek in the window. The hollow-voiced wind beasts buffeted him with searching paws. In the room the man with the sharp teeth and the gay smile sat at a desk on bare floor underneath an unshaded light. There was blood on his mouth and on the floor. Mac was afraid but he loved Alf more than he feared the room.

He crawled around on the girders to reach the door; then he stood and knocked. The stranger called to come in. When he opened the door he could see Alf lying
van Nouhuys

half-eaten below the window. The stranger jumped Mac in a flash, grappled him with his long, heavy forearms and bit off his head.
Michael Andrews

MARBLES

The sun sticks its fingers in my eyes.

I walk along
with marbles in my pocket
where money used to be.

If we do not do our dreams we die.

That is why we do not dream our death.

There is a universe
hidden in my pocket -

one marble in a bunch.
MAYAN GRAFFITI: AN OLD MAN SMOKING HIS PIPE, PALENQUE, MEXICO

The rain is beating the tent into the ground
it sags under the wind and the flood and
    drips a little
but the river rushing under the tent floor
    makes it like a water bed
and we lay on our mats, bobbing and naked
    and sweating
and the lightning is so close it burns out
    our eyes with
slashes of magenta, even when our eyes are closed
and sometime in the night
we sleep.

In the morning we sponge out.
The humidity is off the scale and I am sweating.
I sweat into the levis plastered to my leg.
I soak the sweat into my shirt.
I steam my glasses and the view finder
while we saddle up and head for the ruins.

Sweat and heat and steam
and monkeys and parrots and Brad chasing
the toucans from tree to tree with the 300 mm
and I am sweating through the palace and
    the tower and the temples
and the tomb under the Temple of the Inscriptions
    and the tourists.
It is dripping off my hair on to the guidebook and
onto the lens and into my eyes
and before it drips to the ground
it turns to steam.
Andrews

I sweat my way back to the eastern group of temples
sitting up in a tiny jungle valley
quiet and hidden and not nearly so grandiose
as the main temples.
I gasp my way to the Temple of the Cross.
There on the porch are two panels that the
museum pirates didn't cart off to Mexico City.
One is a youth dressed like Quetzal himself,
weariing a snakeskin just for style.

Facing him is an old man.
He is as cool as the limestone he is carved into,
smoking a pipe
and wearing a jaguar skin.

I like him right away.

I sit down in the shade of the temple porch
and lean against his panel
watching Brad down in the jungle scramble
from tree to tree to tree
while the toucans tease him with squawks
and lead him on to the next tree.
I don't like the youth in a snakeskin very much.
He has the look of a saviour
and the only sin I ever knew of
is sticking your nose into someone else's soul.

The old guy puffs on, smiling.
I know what he's got in that pipe.
In those days only the Turks had tobacco
so it could be the devil's own weed
or maybe even a few ground up cactus buttons
but my best guess is that he is stoking his bowl
with a few hits of magic mushrooms.
Andrews

After the rain and the lightning and
the steam
they grow like magic right out of the horse shit
and the cow shit and maybe even the tourist shit.
So while the tourists sweat and puff
around all this culture
and while the youth looks moral and stern
and no doubt right
I sit in the shade
drying out
waiting for the rain to leave a little magic
and while the temples all steam in the sun
and the palace boils out lava and obsidian
the old man just smiles on and on
adjusts his jaguar skin
offers me a hit of his pipe
and stokes up the bowl
cool as limestone
cool as a hit of mushroom
and mint.
Lee Ballentine

LAST NIGHT

Last night I ran things from the couch at half-past-ten the first of us arrived with the wind blowing ZOE parked the dodge.

Six of us sitting began to talk our fingers settle on warmer things an armrest at the edge worn smooth the shadows slide like bowling pins.

The invitations lied -- few enough are here before eleven to make our host uneasy -- by midnight the room is full.

I motion ZOE and by one-ten everyone will know that story of the time we were stuck in an airport somewhere in a big wind.
Frank L. Bettger

CASTAWAY

I draw the shades to my shuttered room,
and sleep away the day in lazy fantasy.

I close my eyes
and gilded skies appear
with you near bedside
some long, forgotten evening tide.

We set sail through the isthmus of my mind,
off to find uncharted waters
in the quarters of my past.

When we finally find that distant shore,
will I still awake to discover
I am a castaway underneath this cover?
Charles Bigelow

CRIB

dust covered; the gentle bars
connected by cobwebs.
innocence still beams
in the dusk as the once
proud keeper of four
suffers rickets and starvation.

haunting cries of despair
echo in the dreary attic.
soft indentations in the
faded mattress seem
to wink at me as do
the decades slipped past.
Charles Bigelow

SALUTING A FENCEPOST

driving along the highway, I caught
a winding fence leaning with the wind
combing long strands of field grass.
one worn post leaned the other way.
looking back, swallowing the rushing air,
I saluted that fencepost.
James P. Brady

samsara

downward slashing midnight rain,
drenching rooftop's fragile seal,
come; soak and rot the beams
that truss and bind
this house, till
all falls

imploded

englutting

cellar's dormant
hole as fertile mulch:
pungent, spongy womb for seeds
that swell to life and seek the sun:
supple, verdant shoots, striving upward
Taika Brand

IN BANGLADESH

The heat travels
in back-packs
used for carrying small children.
So heavy is it
that after a fourth of a mile
the ache is felt in the soul
and it is clear
that to rid oneself of the burden
would be impossible.
All of the orphanages
have death nailed to their doors
and mangos wrinkling
into the dark earth.
Farther along
rickshaws clamor
and men shout.
This is a city
where eyes speak
from dotter foreheads
in crimson markings
Down toward the holy river
brown with bathers
stands a man
black eyes watching
as his wife lies burning
before him --
ashes orange
floating into the busy road
the river
the man's grief.
Here death
so pure
is as common as the gold statues of God.

to Joshua Sunjib
D. Castleman

The melody of a staircase is visual.

One brown shadow hiding from a dying sun
behind an intermittently footing man:
this one brown shadow touched the street
and crossed
and halted on the future side to wait
for the slowpoke man.

So tentatively
this man of ours shuffled from the sidewalk
while he muttered to the bubbling gutter
which gurgled its reply, forcing the man
to jab the ground with his cane and to mumble,
to stop and exclaim, "That's it? Just, that's it."

This inward and this outward man reeled about,
stashed his cane under a trembling arm, and dashed
back the direction of his beginning.
Appalled, his shadow jerked, then scrambled after,
frantically crying an uncertain name
beneath a snickering and a mirthless moon.
Vernon Frazer

THE GEOMETRY OF INTIMACY

Not your simple
Euclidean straight, this line
that connects.

In the sweat
of my big-breasted beauty
thrashing wet

bellies with
me & your wildly pumping
biker, we

make it where
we share the touch
of our tangents.
Fritz Hamilton

A PASSING LOVE SONG!
(for Phoebe)

Feathered
love song from
the red crown sparrow out
my window

purring
love song from
Cato the cat at
my feet

sleepy
love song from
pretty Phoebe's breathing
in our bed

everywhere
love songs in &
from all
things

seeing
them in the fog

touching
them in Phoebe's hair

smelling
them in the lilacs

tasting
them in blackberries
Hamilton

hearing
them dance through trees in
every
place
thing
way

love songs that
I chronicle in
a poem on
a page before

they pass &
die these songs all
sucked into the void to be
refilled by

new bird love songs &
new cat love songs &
pretty Phoebe songs of
different names & places as
the fog passes for the sun &
the lilacs for the roses &
blackberries for strawberries
leaves replaced by other leaves
*Hamilton*

all love passing
songs of passing

loving

passing

loving
Erica Herd

LATE OCTOBER WIND

Green October leaves on trees
turn to brown--
chameleons on the branches,
curled like crippled hands.
The wind cracks
the wrist of a branch
and sends its leaf skipping
onto the pavement

Wind, 
breath of the earth, 
whets water. 
Crests of wave 
pucker--
lips trying to kiss 
the sky, 
but kissing the seagulls 
instead

The wind enters my mouth, 
makes me gasp. 
I suck it in, 
kissing back
Thomas Kretz

SAWING LOGS IN A PUB

Reading my poems in the yeasty pub,
Perhaps expecting my ego to rise;
They downed their pints, banged old tankards; too dark
To judge what faces might say; I took what I could as compliment and ventured more
Intense metaphors bound in straitjackets.

I thought some twisted pithy stuff would give them something salty to chew on; yell more;
Pewter tankards continued rise and fall,
Cornered lovers continued golden dreams,
I continued reading alloy verses.

Suddenly I saw, like an open fly,
The banging, that the empty tankard mine,
Slid off the dunce's stool into sawdust,
Crumpled my life's work into a pocket,
And scissored through smirking squares to Farm Street.
Walter McDonald

HARDSCRABBLE

Yucca spears freckle the plains, 
prickly pears not even armadillos eat, 
ragged mesquite trees 
trying to make shade.

Nothing gives timber for a roof, 
nothing runs or crawls in sunlight. 
They burrow deep in caliche caves 
and wait for darkness--

coyotes and rattlers, bobcats, 
rabbits with round eyes 
and rapidly beating hearts. Above, 
hawks dip and sidle,

gliding on thermals, 
and buzzards lean and formal 
wheel down a slow spiraling mobile 
and disappear.
Walter McDonald

NIGHT OWLS

This is the time of night
owls love: call
and no one's home. Dogs bark
with their backs to the wall

believing they defend it. Cats
with the flick of a tail
disappear, claws springing
and sheathing over cool lawns,

nothing they can't overtake,
tracking a scent
purring in a dark alley,
eyes like the smallest stars.
Elaine Mott

AFTER THE LAST SHOW AT THE MOVIES

The street slicked down by rain,
asphalt of the road
dark and sleek as a seal's back--
I opened the red umbrella,
caught the blush tinting my cheeks
in a mirrored florist shop,
bold letters of the neighboring movie marquee
reflected slant-wise in the window glass.
You were so mysterious
standing a short distance away,
your long eyes dark under the dark umbrella.

Our eyes met in the damp air,
in the mirror.
We were drawn into that lit-up florist shop,
closed for the night,
with its gleaming counters,
drowning as a bee drowns
in the perfume of flowers,
the colors thundering in our senses,
our hands shyly meeting over the roses.
MARCH

The night ice chips
the roofs are curled
with snow sparrows.
The yard fills
with an aviary of blackbirds.
Something of murmuring flesh
appears on the tree boughs.
March is ridiculous!
Squirrels hide as if in mourning.
I'm tossing a livery of coins
in the almond colored pond
pennies trickle
in this crippled water.
Joan Payne Kincaid

PICNIC PREPARATION

Picnics are fun
If you aren't a wife
If you don't have to make them
If you don't have to go to them
Today, I was making one
Growing shaky
From interruptions
And his cramming the picnic
In his stomach
Before I get it packed
So if you would like some deviled eggs
You will find them
Like snowballs children throw
On the wall.
Joan Payne Kincaid

SUBSTITUTES

On my bed
this being the only room
too small to write dis-
satisfied poems spread
over lovers drinking
decaf on the radio pitching
instead of music my fingers
reach for white letters on
the black horizon.
Simon Perchik

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Each morning the wet X-ray
the night still in my chest
pressed against a toilet mirror
where sweat and a dark breath
bends its bones around my heart

--all my ribs slipping on shadows
and slopes and streaks
and you each morning warm flowers
somehow show up in the raining part
as a fracture will splash
'til the lips that are ready
reach for my skull --a storm

has chipped my breath
and my ribs, as strangers
closer and closer around a bonfire
--every sunrise the new X-ray
can't move the rock fattening on the kiss
that juts from my chest, my jaws, the kiss

in the black half
where there is no air, nor river
except a small, black moon
flying into the rock --all my ribs

each morning as keels on distant ships
will anchor for raw water
for the deep breath found only over a well
only the rain over my bones
the part in this mirror
flowing into the sea.
Walt Phillips

PATHS

at the mission

they had the strangest experience

each

was briefly occupied

by the soul

of a 1700s

Spanish priest

so moved were they

that later

each

pinned a postcard

of the bells

just above

their VCR
Walt Phillips

SAGE

what would
a wise man do?
has there ever
been
a wise man?
there are lots of men-
and women-
but
none of them
seem wise
there are books
and statues
suggesting there has
been wisdom
but
right now
i'm the buddha
and i
don't know shit
Josephine Power

SPOONS

In the darkness
the lovers lie naked
on their sides.
His eyes, closed,
face the back of her head.
His arm, gently,
around her waist.
The curves of his body
perfectly imitate hers,
like two spoons
they adhere to each other
are the same shape--
they seem as one.
Richard Raleigh

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

My students idolize me
call my name and wave from across campus
seek my opinions on world affairs
laugh at my ironic comments
and tell me that I'm the best dresser on
the faculty.

After class they ask
if I'll be at the intramural game at three
(we'll have a keg out there)
and what about the hall party in Donnellon
Friday night?

And I in turn give them B's for their mediocre work
pretend to be intrigued when they are dull
and write glowing letters to prospective employers.

At graduation they introduce me to their
bubbling mothers
and then, the dogwoods in the quad in snarling
bloom,
they pack up their cars and are gone

Leaving me feeling like Al Pacino in
Dog Day Afternoon
after he surrendered the hostages
he thought had come to love him
and they run to embrace their families
and tell them of their ordeal
then speed home

And he alone and scared
sitting in the back seat of the squad car.
Tom Sheehan

FENC LINE

The white, gray, falling down pickets, sorry as infantry out of class, groundrot working through spinal columns, leans into winter one last time.

In a pale October moon, the white bones of this skeleton take no new chances and seize a moment of whiteness. An appearance of night fades where the grass ends itself.
Tom Sheehan

OH THE DARK JOURNEY

Oh the dark January of your journey.

You slipped away in a cement gray dawn,

the wheat stubbles talked through the still snow.

The geometry of earth welcomed you, flared

the lake's cold patchwork neat as a game board.

We drove half a day to find your last mark.

All the way the crows sang their plastic song

over drop-cloth fields, air full of barbs.

For ten years the taste is iron in my mouth.

January cannot relinquish the catch of the magnet,

how components failed you, a wing tumbling over Lake Erie.
Tom Sheehan

SHADOW

Children lounge in tree shade,
their slim legs like stripped
limbs overhead, their heads
soft as black buds or stars
somehow worth knowing.
William J. Vernon

BEFORE THE FIRST FROST

Frogs and crickets sang through the night of that brittle October, warmed by an Indian summer that might end tomorrow. People were charmed enough to think about nothing but play. Even in darkness I heard the rattling of metal, the rushing of rubber tires on roads, the absurd thumping of overage boys who kicked up my guilt by jogging on tar. Rustling leaves, dogs ran through my grass. I'd wait to rake my lawn until the trees were bare. Rake once and mow and be done for the year. I'd never give in to dumb chance. I was still planning, while the fear, though, ate through my beautiful schedules the way the cool wind cut through the screens. It chilled my soul, swirling dust where the door would shut.
William J. Vernon

WALKING ALONE AFTER THE BURIAL OF MY FATHER

The green banks reflected in water are thick-leaved and dense, and the river looks thick as resin oozing from pines. In the sense of connection it makes with surroundings, the current carries the image of life it supports like faith. Deep in its moving essence, the trees wave in my mind, color every thought, and I follow the fisherman's path both wanting to flee from the city and stay, knowing one's place is the natural channel the past has prepared. My strength lies just there, running fully, an all-out commitment, a posture that tries to bring out the best in myself. No loss dissuades me. No failure or death. From graves sweet flowers grow. Into oceans all liquids finally pour.
Sigmund Weiss

THOSE INTELLIGENT CHIMPANZEEES

Ever so often, ever so fast a
chimpanzee runs crazy around
turning up our faces his ass.

We can call this the art supreme
nature becoming the splicer of the obscene.

Ever so often, ever so sure a
chimpanzee and an artist will agree to
turn up their asses to what they see.