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Frances Colvin

SISTER VERITY AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL DENTIST

From time to time Sister Verity's vocation sent her out into the world, alone and unassisted, to cope with whatever problem lay at hand as best she could. She did not even have the protective dignity of a habit; her order, in recent years having made a transition from medieval and sublime to contemporary but dowdy. Drab, unexceptionable clothing, low-heeled shoes, the cross never openly displayed but worn beneath a shapeless blouse—the uniforms of Salvation Army lassies were far more appealing. Sister Verity's features, as undistinguished as her dress, made her as one among thousands—nevertheless, matters odd, fey, illogical, inexplicable, crazy, strange, found their way into her experience too often for mere coincidence.

Today, however, she emerged from the cozy ambience of St. Cuthberta's Retreat House solely on account of a bad tooth.

It had taken persistence and patience to locate a dentist willing to see a stranger on such short notice. Most were booked at least a month in advance. Sister Verity's fingers had walked up and down the yellow pages for what seemed like hours before they discovered the telephone of Dr. Ashley Byron, whose practice was limited to his friends, Miss Muriel, his receptionist, disclosed.

"That's a queer way of doing business," Sister Verity said, nettled and at her wit's end. "What am I supposed to do? No one, positively no one, will see me and my tooth is giving me--" she broke off.
"Hell?" Miss Muriel supplied.
"You said it," Sister Verity conceded gratefully.
"Well, in that case... how about two this afternoon? That's when the doctor meditates."

"Meditates?" Sister Verity repeated, feeling stupid. Had dentists changed that much in the years since she had been to one?
"That's right. But in an emergency--"
"Does he take the lotus position, kneel, or just sit comfortably?" One of Sister Verity's greatest faults was going down a mountain path when it was obvious that sticking to the boulevard would get her there more quickly.

"I'm sure I don't know," Miss Muriel said frostily. "He goes into his office and shuts the door. I'm not allowed to disturb him, and I've worked for him for twenty years."

"I suppose he looks at at ashram," said Sister Verity.
"Mandala," Miss Muriel corrected.
"I use the Eucharistic candle on the gospel side, myself," said Sister Verity. "Two o'clock will be fine."

From the position in which she lay, outstretched in the dentist's chair, Sister Verity could just see the stubby toe of one shoe and a length of black cotton stocking. She couldn't tell how long a length, but that leg felt indecently cold. Since her head was clamped into a padded leather vise and her mouth was stretched over a combination of metal and pink goo and the nurse had told her not to move, the most Sister Verity could do was tug futilely at her skirt, part of which was twisted beneath her body. She hoped Dr. Byron, whom she had not seen, was unworldly as well as meditative. Looking up into the round,
brilliant light suspended over her, she reflected that dentists, surgeon and God cast no shadows, at least while they were at work.

A faint rustle behind her announced Dr. Byron's arrival. He was tall, angular, beaky-nosed, with a shock of red hair thickly sown with white. Later, Sister Verity could not recall what color his eyes had been. A cube of crystal flashed from a chain at his neck. "Aha, you've spotted my mustard seed!" Dr. Byron exclaimed, noticing Sister Verity's glance. "Ye that have faith', you know." He pulled up a stool and, seating himself, leaned cozily into Sister Verity's face, without, however, doing anything to relieve the tension in her jaw, which was beginning to quiver. She fixed her eyes on the piece of crystal and tried to relax.

"Well, Sister Verity-- that means truth, doesn't it-- interesting-- hmm. I like that name, yes, I like it," the dentist mused. "Did you choose it yourself?"

Sister Verity gurgled.

Dr. Byron nodded as if he understood every gurgle. "I see, I see. I myself have been born again, you know. Yes, I mean it: born again, born again. Through the power of THAT--". With upraised arm he pointed a finger heavenward. "But enough, Sister Verity." He touched a finger lightly to her chin. "Only a moment more and we can rest that poor jaw. Now about your X-Rays," he continued in a business-like voice, "let's have a look. See, that's the guilty party. But unfortunately, there are two teeth involved. The one you feel, and the one you don't. Heh-heh."

Sister Verity managed a moan.

"I know I can help you," Dr. Byron continued, "but first we must get acquainted. I don't work with strangers. I
Colvin/Sister Verity and the Transcendental Dentist

work with friends. Can you and I be friends, Sister Verity?"

"Gah," said Sister Verity.

"Good, good," Dr. Byron said. From beneath the bib tied around her neck he extracted one of her hands and clasped it in both of his. "We understand each other completely, don't we? And you know why? Because we've known each other before, Sister Truth." Releasing Sister Verity's hand, he reached for a syringe and squirted something into her mouth.

"Hmmm. Just as I thought." Dr. Byron cranked the chair confining Sister Verity so that her feet were higher than her head and sat down again. "That's better."

"Now, the situation is this," he resumed. "I'm not God, you know, I'm not Jesus Christ. I don't walk on water..." Sister Verity, who had never for one moment thought that Dr. Byron was, or did, tried to nod. "And your teeth present a difficult problem. We must face that problem together, Sister Truth, as-- shall we say, Good Companions of the Healthy Mouth?"

Deftly he removed the contraption from Sister Verity's mouth and offered her a Dixie cup. "Rinse."

Sister Verity rinsed vigorously, wondering, if, perhaps, as soon as her mouth was empty, she shouldn't say something like "I have to attend the Bishop's funeral (which Bishop?-- it didn't matter) and I'll call you in a year or two," and make her getaway, when, before she could say anything, a buzzer sounded.

"I'm going to leave you for a little while," Dr. Byron said, returning Sister Verity to her heels-above-head position. "I don't usually tell patients this, because the poor lost souls wouldn't understand, but you're different. I'm going to pray for you,
and for the healing in these two hands", he raised them, "to be transferred to you. And you might say a little prayer for me. When I come back, I'll put in a temporary filling."

Sister Verity was almost too embarrassed to pray but she managed a few words of supplication as she listened to the dentist's voice rise and fall in a distant chant.

When Dr. Byron returned he worked quickly, precisely, silently. There was no pain, Sister Verity noted thankfully; the rogue tooth seemed to have settled down. Perhaps she wasn't as badly off as she had thought—the dentist hadn't used a needle—or perhaps he had—Sister Verity really couldn't remember.

"There!" Dr. Byron said. "That's it for today! Praise the Lord!" He handed Sister Verity another Dixie cup and stood back, beaming, as she rinsed and spat.

"Thank you, Doctor. I-- I really feel much better," said Sister Verity, getting to her feet. "You didn't even have to use a nerve-block, did you?"

"You still don't know, do you, Sister Truth? Dear Sister Truth!" Taking Sister Verity by the shoulders, he kissed her on the cheek.

Sister Verity thought she did know, but wasn't about to embark on what might develop into a lengthy theological discussion. "About my next appointment," she began.

"Oh yes, next appointment," Dr. Byron said vaguely. He turned away and began to fiddle with instruments laid out on a small table. "Speak to Miss Muriel."

"Well, feeling better?" Miss Muriel asked as Sister Verity paused by her desk in the empty waiting room.

"Much, thank you. He put in a temporary filling. I'll need another appointment."

"I know." Miss Muriel scribbled on a
card and handed it to Sister Verity. "I've made an appointment for you with Dr. Canfield. He's a fine dentist and he'll have all Dr. Byron's x-rays and impressions. He usually takes over at this point. Dr. Byron shouldn't be in practice at all, you know. Oh, not because he's not competent. But a year ago he was so ill-- the doctors had given up all hope. They disconnected the machine and pulled out all the plugs. A week later he was up and walking around. There was an article in the AMA Journal. It was a miracle-- a miracle of modern medicine, though Dr. Byron doesn't like me to put it that way."

"I don't understand-- doesn't Dr. Byron ever see his patients a second time?" asked Sister Verity. "Couldn't I see him?"

"Yes, of course, if you really want to," Miss Muriel said with a strained smile. "But most people don't come back, and you're having a root canal, aren't you? That means a lot of drilling. A lot of... pain."

"I see," said Sister Verity, seeing. "He doesn't use anaesthetics at all, does he?"

"No, not any more. Not since his illness," Miss Muriel said, looking down at her desk. "He says he doesn't believe in them."

"He believes in God," said Sister Verity.

"I suppose," said Miss Muriel. She picked up a pencil. "Shall I make another appointment?"

"Sister Verity looked down at the card in her hand. Always before she had known when she was being tested. This time she wasn't sure.

"Let me think about it," she said. Slowly she walked across the waiting room, opened the door to the hall, and let it swing behind her.
Laura Dennison

Buried in eocene times my heart's blood
once coursed through the veins
of some primordial beast. I stop,
look at the moon, and shudder
for my blood will never pass on
to future beast.

My womb is dry.
I am the end of a line. I dress
and stare in the mirror
for my own amusement.
In the moon a cow smiles risen to
the neolithic creature of the future.
I am wed to myself.

Negation creeps like slow caterpillars
nibbling into my ears.
I burnt my fingers on the wire.
I shoved the telephone up my mouth.

Through the tunnel
they peer at each other,
soul sisters, their eyes meet in ice,
plot how to do the world in.

In the tunnel of secrecy nobody hears.
I pare my nails for no one.
By night I want to hold
my dream of you forever.
I freeze. We freeze. We are taught to be cold.
We are born not young like others, but old.
ANOTHER SEASON

I have run four hard miles
over the cycles we ran, still worn

the sparest time of year
each intake fills my lungs with pins
as jets excrete white braids in blue

a hundred yards more, thinking
I've gone the second mile
Passing Eckerd's I see shock waves
rippling up my leg's reflection
I sprint the brown grass
a driveway your unraked yard
leap Orlavski's garbage can
(Polish hurdle you said)
Harbison's dog bitches and pretends
to bite ... no break in rhythm

I greet my house with knee-clutching halt
Suburban flatness recalls
Mt. Sequoia paths you hauled me through
Inspecting sidewalk faults I remember
"Keep your head up, air goes in easier"
Jesus, you could break Sisyphus

I look up, wishing to see this for what it is
But pins pain my feet, branches tangle braids
And the bright days of another season slay me
Norman German

THE ONE I CLAIM
(after D.H. Lawrence)

Three men
are working in a stubble field
gleaning from it what they can.
The middle one I claim
once and for all.

He has my legs my arms
my hair like wheat
from which he looks up
at the bloody hands of him on his left
at the leather hands of him on his right.

He bends his head again to calfskin gloves.
OLD COMMUNION

When every word mutates in my mouth
when the syntax won't hold
and each turn of humor bleeds on the page
how am I to bring your focus back?

Even if you mark your return
by a letter sprinkled
with the classy abbreviations
by our old communion
I doubt my ears would match
the proper tenor of your words:
you who had formulated
a publishable ambiguity.
But the trick vision was commercial.
You never saw a businessman
"fold like a letter into his car."

Now I wonder
if I could trust my new mouth
to fit the old compliments
or my new eyes
to squint your opposing selves
into a single image
I could live with.
Karla M. Hammond

THE TREE MASTECTOMY

I was cutquick for weeks
after that first slash

hearing it was a biopsy
by those who thought I

had no way of hearing
their prognosis

their furrowed brows as dark
as creased overalls smelling

of sawdust, redolent of loam
pressing their callouses,

a stethoscope
over the blistering nodes

their indifference
struck me dumb

afterwards limbs
shivered with hurt

back gored in place of hackles
rose in clumps like fur

I faced the wind with caution
& heard tumorous chants: rage

in the cells where fission
was happening, legion by lesion

knowing it was zylium

doubting how much it could kill.
William Hart

CONVALESCENT

Beyond the flu
a day or so is needed to reknit the joints
another to restore the nose
and yet a further for the appetite
to reconcile with meat.
Next the vanished cheek rehues
and resurrection is complete.
One bright morning all is well,
life is sweet. The bitless steed
that rode roughshod across the bones
recedes in hearing, the brain clears
the lungs christen with winter air
and out breathes sickness' ghost.

ON BEING RANK

When I was a wee smoke-peeping teen
and the greenest cowpoke
ever seen, and meanest
most cynic and obscene
daydream wooer of fair Christine,
I ruled my peers with ridicule
sported half-cocked attitudes
was boring, rude, obnoxious, cruel
over-oiled my reeking hair,
but still felt insufficient flair
to speak to fair Christine.
Steve Martovich

APOLOGY

I thought of you tonight
in mid conversation,
and happy as I were, I'm sorry
that I mentioned your name

As much as I abhor
the sensational world,
You rose to my tongue
spitshined and sunburnt

This ocean of a country
between your beach and mine,
How you linger in stories--
the center, indispensable

What else could I say
to fill the pause, nothing
Remington Murphy

WINTER CONCEIVED

It's August and the locusts, summer's priests, rasping gag on their own foul juices.

In this, Summer's impotence, Nature tells us plainly what throes it plans for winter: hard and early frost, deceptive in it virulence, portends a second summer; but rank and bristling spring, sharp lightnings, heavy rain, worms rich in silks, fat squirrels, then rainless August such as this bode surely long and bitter winter.

Thank God, dissembling man, who makes such inner dearth a matter for the public record; thank His celibate Hand.
Sheila E. Murphy

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

These corporate negotiations feel like insomnia,
unreal yellow light harsh around my eyerims.
I wheel details away from children to protect a former self.

Say a prayer that it is not too late
to go back to a world
where truth performs the backstroke silently across an inland lake.

When I look up, sky still welcomes me.

PACING (HAIBUN 53)

I have learned at last to read poems slowly. For there is no insurance policy that covers missing beauty. Foam rubber turns concrete beneath the parachuting soul. Days spent in meetings where roadblocks lodge near feelings. Voice used to win small battles that simmer in potential failure. Flying low, seeking a runway, landing on cartop. Taking life. Walk away in a straight line, having seen the face of God a stretcher, blank and pale, the only choice.

Fate magnet filings, helpless pile of bloodied steel
Sheila E. Murphy

MY LAST STEPS

Poison is subtle, 
takes us in. We take it in.

At the time it seems 
a small decision, smaller

than the will to live. 
Only then we slowly die.

Mornings, I walk past 
the oleander branches,

blossoms lovely, cream- 
colored, some of them fallen

to the sidewalk where 
my last steps decide to go.
Sheryl L. Nelms

idiot savant

a single
strand

of pubic hair

curls

between

your front
teeth
resuscitation

Hill's broiled flounder
and frog legs

beachfront

TJ's Mellow Nights
and Coors Light

rolled together
between

clean sheets

has wrapped me
so close
to you

I don't want
to breathe

alone
Sheryl L. Nelms

salting down

it was Grandma
dipping wash rags
in salted
water

one after
another
after another

on through the magnoliad night
before the funeral

that kept Grandpa
from turning

kept him decent
for the burying
she said
Adelle was born on Lincoln's birthday in 1900 and insists they are the same edge. She brags about her hand-cranked Victrola and her 1888 dining room set handed down from grandmother to mother as a wedding present—but has forgotten the name of the old black and white cat she's had since a kitten.

When she remembers, she calls her sister in the city, the one that looked like Queen Elizabeth when she was younger. Her sister has been dead for years.

Sometimes she sings along with the theme song to "The Beverly Hillbillies," wishes granny would buy a new hat— or recites the books of the bible forwards' backwards— and would never name a child of hers Habukkuk or Zephaniah.

Once she discovered in the silverware drawer, the small bundle of decomposed bird.

When she eats, every mouthful of food is tumbled in saliva. What isn't swallowed is picked from between teeth and lined on the rim of her plate, a miniature Stonehenge.

Most of the time she resembles a giant sea turtle, red-rimmed eyes and sharp beak. She moves as slow as her blood. Her skin gathers at the bone's edge.
FIREWORKS

Heat clings
to the night.
Magnolia fills
the sultry air,
fireflies nod.
Spanish broom
pops its pods
streaking the sky
like watercolor snowmen
weeping.

WATERCOLOR

It's winter now. Crisp
greenery cracks, spilling
red, yellow, violet
on snow packed ground.
Ice carved bushes
and trees pop out,
three dimensional
like frozen jump rabbits shattering
in a shooting gallery.
Outside the plate grass window,
morning pulls down gray.
I sit at the table crocheting
a blanket for my bed. The electricity
has been out eight hours. Ice cream melts
in the freezer. A door bangs.

Branches snap, bark twists.
Front stairs are strewn
with eucalyptus leaves and acorn caps.
On the patio,
purple and white pansies shiver
in redwood boxes.

A tennis ball bounces in the roof's gutter.
The afternoon brightens.
Through dark clouds, a rainbow appears,
fades and scatters in the wind.
Glass chimes break, sprinkling
against the window.
The camera sharpened, "Move!"
to place the barn
behind me. Nothing
should be wasted, its boards

stripped
roped to my car, the side
that faced the weather
beaten, tormented, dry

sheltered now :paneling
nailed at the falling slant
camera ready, "Move!" a wall
again in back my heart

behind my storms, my hammers
--in back my arms
the wall aches
the nails ache.
Frederick A. Raborg, Jr.

HAIKU

nearby the roofline
lightens in the morning sun—
poems by the bed

si douce me fut cette maison:
je voyais la ville,
decroître sous la pluie

this house was pleasant
for me: I could see the town,
smaller in the rain

un vieux chien
qui s'en va avec son maitre,
la pluie les embroussaille

an old dog
walks with his master,
tousled by rain
PEBBLES SHARPEN THE KNIFE

Luke hears them as he walks along Alger Street.
"Good for nothing drunk. What use are people like that?"
I've been in this town too damn long, Luke thinks.
"They should throw him into an institution," a woman with two children says to a pharmacist outside his store. "He's like a disease on the town." She looks at her daughter and son. "And I'm afraid it will spread."
I should be back in New York. It's been almost a year. The relationships always fade. And with the others it gets even worse.
"We're keeping an eye on him," a policeman says to a mother with a young daughter fresh from her first high school year. The girl turns toward Luke and he sees her face blossom radiantly as the sun emerges from behind a cloud.
"I hear he lives in the woods in a shack without windows or doors," the mother says.
Luke carries a notebook filled with his poems and an open pint of Southern Comfort covered with a bag in the other. He isn't wearing a shirt and his pants are ripped. He is almost sober. The policeman, who looks like a clone of Robert Redford, approaches him.
Luke puts the bottle to his mouth and drinks it all.

"You pig," the policeman says. He pokes Luke's chest with the club. "Now throw that bottle out."

Luke tosses the bottle into a trash can in front of the Olde Town Hall, which has been an historic landmark since 1969, and walks in front of McDonald's. Several high school students wave to him while biting into fries and burgers and drinking soda and shakes. McDonald's has been giving out a free hamburger for each two dollar ticket purchased to tour the Olde Town Hall since McDonald's opened in this Maine coastal town in 1969. Just clip off the stub and bring it next door under the Golden Arches. When tourists visit after lobster lunches, Luke picks up the stubs they throw away and eats a hamburger.

A young woman, dressed more like a Great Neck 20's flapper than a '79 summer resident of a small Maine community, screeches her Excalibur to a stop in front of McDonald's. Her car, a remarkable imitation of a Mercedes made in an era which people once viewed as comparatively decadent, has been recently waxed and brightly reflects the sun. Smiling broadly, she skips out of her dramatically chic car and bubbles over to Luke.

"Might you have any stuff?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"Let's go," she says, taking his hand.

They are silent as she drives toward the beach. The sea along the rocky coast of Maine is swelling today as the wind swirls in from the north. Luke leads Daphne to a rock under which his stash is stored, near a boulder at the ocean's edge where the undercurrent of a high tide wave swirled the Chairman of Bowdoin's History Department into the sea during the fourth of July.
celebration in 1976.

Luke digs in the sand under his rock, which is about twenty yards from the high tide's edge. His arms move gracefully as he digs. "Still here," he says. "It's Jamaican." He holds the marijuana high in the air and pirouettes toward the sea.

"Must be over a kilo," she says. Her voice resonates with a hint of the clipped consonants of the British aristocracy, a legacy of many summers spent in England.

"This is a good place to put it," Luke says. "I like this rock."

"You've had better luck here than that history prof."

"I learned how to swim."

Daphne drives to her family's summer mansion. Her father, whose occupation is inheriting money, bought it two years ago after he brought his family back from England. He attended Cambridge University during the '30's in a manner that did not condescend to recognize the existence of the Depression and ignored the approach of WW II. His name is Jackson Hill III. The second and third profited from the first, who amassed ten million dollars by patenting a rubber band which wouldn't snap. But of course, since "everything is relative," as the First often said, he meant it wouldn't snap with normal use. If someone pulled at it with "intention of snapping it," of course it would break. Mr. Hill inherited an extraordinary gift for hope from his forbears, a belief in the infinite capacity transcend any problem. If a rubber band could produce ten million dollars, then what in the eternal universe could not be accomplished? He also inherited remarkably pristine attitudes.

Mr. Hill's summer home is a rambling shingled mansion, built in the spirit of a roaring decade by people ignorant of
rationing and indifferent to inflation, modeled and named after the Grand Hotel on Michigan's Mackinac Island, and dedicated to the proposition that all ruling classes are created equal. The Third often praised the liberal breadth of his grandfather’s vision in naming the mansion after a midwestern hotel.

Thirty thick wooden columns supported a long roof over a porch large enough to serve as a dance floor for over a hundred guests dressed in their finest. Since the northern New England Atlantic is too cold for bathing, Mr. Hill ordered an Olympic size swimming pool for his back yard. Mrs. Hill calls it "our outdoor bathtub". Bojangles, the family's black standard French Poodle, frequents it more than any other member of the family.

The butler, a former salesman with Brooks Brothers, greets Daphne at the door. Luke notices a Steinway piano in the back parlor.

"Your mother is in the main parlor," the butler says. He cranes his neck as if he's polishing silver while he scrutinizes Luke, who scowls as he spills some whiskey from his half empty bottle of Southern Comfort.

"Want some?" he asks after gargling down a mouthful.

"Certainly not," the butler says. He turns to Daphne. "Luckily for all of us your father is not here."

The butler announces Daphne and Luke to Mrs. Hill. She is sitting near a large window, as big as the glass front of a suburban shopping center grocery store, sipping a cup of tea. It is about seven o'clock and the Grand is casting a long shadow into the Atlantic.

"I'm so happy you brought your friend," Mrs. Hill says. She is a shadowy woman once
acquired in her youth as an appurtenance to her husband's version of the American Dream. She was once beautiful and she is noted for her sympathetic generosity for the downtrodden. Her misfortune is her failure to carry her years well. Her previously radiant face has been over exposed by indolent summers under the sun. She now greets visitors with a maze of lines furrowing a leathery face. Three decades of gourmet dinners prepared by a Parisian chef have bulged her once trim figure with forty extra pounds. Some sort of nervous condition makes her hands tremor slightly, while a peculiar form of hypochondria frightens her from the services of a plastic surgeon or a neurologist.

To Daphne, illness is a problem for other people. Her mind never reflects upon sickness or suffering or death. This is not to imply that she is superficial. She had the dual intelligence to amass an A average at an ivy school while simultaneously perceiving the need to drop out a year and a half before graduation. Her decision was particularly bold because it was resisted by her family and ridiculed by her friends. And Daphne was well liked at college by students and faculty. She won the poetry prize and was elected to class office. Mr. Hill was particularly impressed by her popularity among female classmates. "When women have nothing but good things to say about another woman," Mr. Hill often points out, "then she must be something special."

Mrs. Hill smiles at Luke while Daphne says something to the butler, who quickly disappears. Her mother has often said that Luke seems younger than Daphne though he is chronologically about twenty years older. But she doesn't object to their relationship now that decadence is in vogue.

"Have you eaten yet?" Mrs. Hill asks.
"Yes," Luke says, "this morning at McDonald's."

The butler's muffled laughter is heard from the hall. "Then here is your dinner, sir," he says as he returns with a tray supporting a fifth of Jack Daniel's and three glasses filled with ice.

Luke squints his eyes around the room as the butler pours the drinks. He sees the Chippendale furniture, Oriental carpets, and the Rosenthal cup from which Mrs. Hill was sipping as they entered. It amuses Luke to think that Mrs. Hill considers him decadent.

The doorbell rings. The butler ushers in Mr. Jackson Hill III. He is tall and lean, and wears a three piece suit despite the heat. The butler pours him a glass of Chateau Rothschild wine. Mrs. Hill suggests he take off his jacket. Her husband ignores her. He stares at Luke, at the patched jeans and torn sneakers and graying beard.

Mr. Hill doesn't share his wife's liberal views. He rejected the puritan persuasion of his ancestors in favor of the more intensely God-fearing obsessions of Connecticut Valley Calvinism. And it is perfectly clear to Mr. Hill that the spirit of the puritans was too democratic. The brilliance of his spiritual mentor, Connecticut's magnificent Rev. Jonathan Edwards is for Mr. Hill especially evident in that cosmic explorer's recognition of the elect. Surely only an elite few can expect eternal salvation, and for the rest there will be only emptiness or maybe worse. And of course it follows that material success should be an indication of divine selection. Why should the elect be deprived in this world? Mr. Hill, what with the contemporary world being as it is, feels his beliefs are almost unique.

Since he not only inherited a large fortune but also expanded it by speculating
in stocks, land and commodities, and his moral life is perceived by everyone who matters as above reproach, he has never seriously doubted his own membership in the elect. And his daughter, by extension, is also of the elect. From Mr. Hill's perspective her grades at Barnard and his confidence in her virginity despite extraordinary beauty assures her election. Although she has countless boyfriends, he is convinced she is not tainted—Mr. Hill perceives that she has almost told him so on many occasions. He is as convinced of her infusion by supernatural grace as he is of his own. Here we see an instance where the great Reverend would have objected to Mr. Hill's theology. Since he was more cautious than the heir to the unsnappable rubber band fortune, Jonathan Edwards believed that people may not be sure of election but must continually yearn with a heart laid open to supernatural grace.

"This is Luke, Daddy. Remember, I told you about him. He dropped out of Harvard over twenty years ago. Now he lives in the forest and mostly eats what he grows."


"Ray what?" Mr. Hill asks.

"You know," Mrs. Hill says, "the Board Chairman of McDonald's."

"Oh, that gauche nouveau riche," Mr. Hill says.

"He steals from the workers," Daphne says. "Part-time high school kids. Pays them less than the minimum wage."

"Listen," Luke says, "it's cheap food. When I'm hungry and there's a dollar in my pocket I can eat enough to fill me. The church near where I live used to give out free food but it closed down a couple of years ago."

"What's your politics?" Mr. Hill asks.
"I'm an anti-Stalinist," Luke says.
"What does that mean?"
"I admire Karl Marx more than Richard Nixon."
"Do you work?"
"Sure, all the time."
"What is your job?"
"I have many jobs."

Mr. Hill takes a pipe from a mahogany cabinet near the Steinway. He lights a pinch of Amphora tobacco. He adjusts his silver tie clasp and returns to staring at Luke.
"What sort of things do you do?"
"I'm a killer."

The ice in Mrs. Hill's drink rattles as she puts the glass on a marble table in front of the huge window. "Luke!"

Mr. Hill appears calm as he sips from his glass, though he rings the butler somewhat too loudly. "Please show this gentleman to the door," Mr. Hill says.
"Certainly, sir. Come with me, my friend."

Daphne follows them toward the door. "Come here Daphne," Mr. Hill says. "I must speak with you."
"Let her go, Jackson."
"Wait Luke," Daphne says as she approaches the door which the butler is opening at the end of the hall.
"I absolutely forbid you to see that animal!" Mr. Hill screams, spilling wine on the jacket, vest, and pants of his suit.

The door slams. Mr. Hill trots down the hall. Only the butler, carefully securing the lock, remains.
"Do you wish me to do anything, sir?"
"Yes," says Mr. Hill as he straightens his tie. "Pour me another glass of wine."

Through the large window he sees them
walking down the beach.

Daphne and Luke pass the jetty in front of neighbor's mansion. They keep walking even though Daphne knows they're out of sight.

Mr. Hill sits alone in front of the window for two hours. He has finished the bottle of wine and the butler has opened another. He rings the butler.

"I'm going for a walk on the beach. If Daphne returns before I do, tell her to wait in the main parlor. If she calls, tell her to come back immediately. From now on I'll have to lay down some ground rules."

The moon is almost full. The sea was at high tide a while ago and the waves are unusually high in the brisk wind. The grating roar of pebbles which the waves draw back frightens Mr. Hill. He trudges through the sand close to his neighbor's sea walls, as far away from the sea as possible.

After passing neighbor's houses for about a quarter of a mile, he reaches the town public beach and sees a half dozen cars silently facing the moonlit sea. Although he passes within ten yards of the cars, he can barely make out the figures inside. The couples in a Buick and a Lincoln have disappeared, as if these two cars have been abandoned.

A shrill giggle from the Lincoln terrifies Mr. Hill. He wipes the sweat from his hands and doggedly continues his journey.

He approaches an uninhabited area which has been set aside by the state as a bird sanctuary. A creek marks the parcel of land owned by the state. He stands on a rock at the edge of the creek and scans the beach. The creek flows inland through marsh and circles around to the sea again about half a mile from where he is standing. A moan startles Mr. Hill. It sounds to him like an
animal or person in pain.

He hears another moan. It is much louder and to Mr. Hill's ears less likely human than the first. He hears water splashing, sounding like Bojangles swashing in the bathtub. He turns to his right and sees a four-legged figure convulsing and moaning on the muddy bank, its feet in the creek. It seems to Mr. Hill that this atavistic creature is trying to get back into the water, a fish dying in the air.

"Daddy!" the beast says.

Mr. Hill thrusts his hands high above his head as if someone has pointed a gun and steps back to the edge of the rock farthest away from the beast. He slams his hands to the top of his head and screams like a shot man who faces the possibility of the ultimate boredom, unequivocal mortality, as the animal unravels and he sees Luke pull the prick out of his daughter.

Daphne cries uncontrollably. Mr. Hill tries to condemn and damn but he can only grunt and scream. Luke pulls up his pants.

Mr. Hill stumbles to the sand as he lurches off the rock. Luke grasps in the mud for his bottle of Southern Comfort. "I should have stayed at Harvard," he says.

Daphne is still naked as she steps hysterically into the creek. Luke follows her in and puts his arms around her, holding her for a long time until she calms down.

Mr. Hill's movement back toward his house is erratic. He runs for a while. He walks to the edge of the water, looks out into the dark ocean, then peers up as he raises his hands toward the sky. He opens his arms, standing motionless for what seems a long time, almost a minute. He gesticulates and tries to talk to the silent sky and dark sea but he is incoherent. He stands motionless again, saying, thinking nothing.
He trots back to his house, sloshing his Gucci loafers in the wet sand where the waves of the ebbing tide have recently splattered. Through the window of the main parlor, he sees the butler drinking wine. He climbs the stairs rising over the wall protecting the house. He notices that the flag hasn't been taken down for the night.

Inside his thirty room summer mansion he relaxes a little. The butler has lit a fire. Two revolutionary war muskets are crossed above the fireplace. A pre-Alamo bowie knife is on the mantel.

"Did I give you permission to drink my wine?"

"No, sir."

"Why have you failed to take down the flag?"

"I forgot, sir."

"You forgot, did you, you blithering idiot. The problem is you are inebriated. You show disrespect for both me and our nation's flag."

"I'll attend to the flag immediately, sir."

Mr. Hill stares at the fire. He snatches a piece of paper of a table. It is a poem by Daphne about frustrated passion. He crumples it and throws it into the fire. He picks up some novels and books of poetry Daphne has been reading and tosses them into the flames. Mr. Hill takes her photograph out of his wallet and burns it, too.

"I should have realized she is too bold," he says to the fire.

The door on the street side of the house opens and Mr. Hill hears Daphne's quick steps on the stairs. He walks down the hall and peeps out a window in the back parlor overlooking the driveway and sees Luke in the Excalibur. Luke is sitting in the driver's seat. Mr. Hill hears Daphne coming down the stairs. He gets down on his
hands and knees and crawls under the Steinway so she won't know. Mr. Hill is motionless on all fours, like a cat poised ready to spring. He sees her carrying her Gucci suitcase to the door. He springs as soon as she steps outside and he scurries back to the main parlor. He snares the bowie knife and scampers out the door. He sees Daphne unlocking the trunk, then Luke stuffing the suitcase in. He growls and pounces upon them with the knife.
"Perhaps the only true dignity
Of man is his capacity to despise himself."

-George Santyana

Tommy.

That was the name on his field jacket, stitched over the awkward Ukrainian sound the stateside sergeants had made fun of. It had been his own idea actually, kind of a joke, a jab at the military, at the last minute, when he was short enough so that it didn't make any difference.

Now it was one of the few things he enjoyed remembering.

The rain had turned to snow, then back to rain. Slush covered ice, then melted away into mere slipperiness again; this weather, however, remained largely irrelevant. Trying to make his way over to the Dug Out Tavern, it had been his inability to wait, connected only incidentally with the chilling drizzle, which had caused him to dodge into the Fifth Avenue Grill. And now, twitching on top of a ripped and worn red vinyl stool, two of four metal rocking dully on the floor, he recognized with thanks the certainty of a soothing calm grudgingly returned. He ordered a shot and a beer followed by an additional shot and beer. And that, the last beer, slowly took the edge off some. This here and the Dug Out were the two closest places open at eight AM. All other
caverns were either closed or too remote. Luckily, he still had one large bill left. A week ago his veterans check had arrived and, celebrating ever since, he had nearly wasted all. But he still had the crumpled ten. This was just enough to forestall immediate panic . . . he hoped. He had another shot, washed down by a cooling beer. His stomach growled. Making it from here to the Dug Out could be accomplished without effort. The Dug Out, it was true, could become a little boring; some of the people there had never read a book (maybe didn't even read newspapers or magazines) but they liked him. He never mentioned anything about "reading" or "studying" before he got drafted and after a while he had learned to enjoy their company. Everything went along easily. Dismounting the unsteady stool, his eyes watering in the gray morning dampness, he scooped up his diminished change and floated carelessly through the swinging door.

The wind had come up hard, cutting a crease across his face, and sleet, licking relentlessly around his neck, melted on contact with his skin. It dribbled down under the olive drab of his field jacket collar. The thought of a cigarette was very appealing; it was a necessity almost, especially since the whiskey and beer were now having their immediate effect, so he decided to swerve into a doorway to see if he could get one lit. The wind in the alcove however was still swirling, numbing his fingers, and the first two matches went out abruptly. His knuckles ached. He decided to try the door (although his shoulder rested against it, it had detected no weakness) and instantly, as though some mysterious hand had yanked him inside and slammed the door protectively, he found himself removed from the wind, leaning
cockeyed against a concrete wall, startled by the warmth and brightness.

Blinking his eyes against the sudden glare he momentarily cowered: a row of very intense oblong blips, white florescent lights, actually, recessed in the ceiling, pressed down through eerie stillness. Their angle of attack made his sense of balance seem unstable. Like the landing lights down the center of some airport runway, these markers forcibly guided his vision into the distance. Only here, bizarrely, the supposed runway was towering above him. Being drunk at night in a helicopter over U-Ta-pao Airfield in Thailand; how many years ago had that been? He couldn't remember.

Helicopters.
There was a lot about helicopters that he had forgotten. But, like his childhood, there were many mental pictures he could never erase; good or bad, he just couldn't help but remember.

"Gotta get outta here, boys," the crew chief had hollered. "Get outta here now or you'll all be dead men."

The UH-1D (Huey) hovered above the tall elephant grass and the troops started pouring out the doors, stumbling all over themselves, falling down, tripping, half scared, half excited. When they hit the ground they seemed lost, not knowing whether to run and hide or start firing. Mortar shells were coming down all over the place in a saturation pattern. Charlie knew they were there but he hadn't zeroed them in yet. The number of blasts and the area covered excluded everything else. It was as if they had touched down in Hell for a moment, and this was what it was like there, when it was raining.

"Dear Jesus, I'm hit," the crew chief
moaned, "Dear Jesus I'm dying."

Tommy dropped the M-60 machine gun, left it dangling from its canvas sling in the doorway, and turned around to see if he could help him. The crew chief was hit pretty bad. His eyes had rolled back up in his head and there was blood all over everything.

"We're going up," Tommy told him. He whispered in his ear. "Everybody's out and we're going home... we're leaving."

The Huey moved away obliquely, under full power, constantly rising. Tommy held the crew chief's head in his lap, smoothing back his hair with his hand and praying. Just let the next minute go by, he thought. Just let it be over.

But before they got to three hundred feet, they were hit several more times, and then, following a sickening thud, a rattling moan changed to a grinding whine, and ended with metallic scraping. The engine had blown and everyone knew it; they could feel the copter floating. Please let the rotors stay on, Tommy begged. If they'll just stay on we can get down. If the rotors hold we can make it.

At fifty feet though, something big (an RPG maybe) went off above them, and the top rotor was gone, blown away, and they fell like a stone, like the chunk of metal that this thing was, before someone had decided to make it into a helicopter.

The crew chief was dead before they hit the ground. Then the crash (a splash of metal and a ball of fire) killed everybody... everybody except Tommy. He crawled along in the elephant grass and then was picked up by another Huey.

"Here, sit on this," the new crew chief said, throwing him a flack jacket. But Tommy didn't move; he was in a trance, not
Revitt/Purge

scared, not even worried. They all figured he was in shock. An understatement, if possible. But that stupor was a blessing; he couldn't feel anything.

On the ground he discovered he had shit his pants. The others from the chopper saw medics, went to the bar, walked in circles, cried; Tommy just stood still, becoming reacquainted with his senses. Then he eased himself away to the bathroom.

*    *    *

The concrete wall was uncomfortable, but the white oblong blips, fluorescent lights he knew, still fascinated him. He was again reminded of an inverted airport runway. Cupping his hands now against the clearly non-existant wind, he lit his cigarette and continued forward. A water cooler rattled off to one side and doors every twenty or thirty feet segmented both sides. Up closer now, he saw clearly one of the immediate, more accessible doors was slightly ajar. Ahhh . . . with a smirk he realized he had volunteered for a lot of things. Why not now? . . . could he resist this temptation? Behind the crack of light, slightly muffled, a hum followed by a high-pitched whine sounded. Then the groan began to whistle. Warmth spread throughout his body. It buoyed him. He felt giddy all over. . . . Well, what was going on behind there, anyway? What are they doing? Inside, he closed the door, looked around, and smiled; he was pleased because he and been right; there was no apparent danger.

The room at once was large, much larger than he had expected, and a long row of tables pushed together with chairs fitted in behind spanned the length of it. In front of the tables a podium had been erected; must be there was going to be a speaker. A
microphone on a flexible stalk curled out in front of a lectern. A table beside the lectern, also on the podium, supported a water pitcher, several water glasses, and a notebook. A tape recorder and other curious equipment rested on the floor off to one side, and a man, suddenly apparent, bending over some device next to the tape recorder, blocked from view the knobs and switches that he obviously was adjusting. The piercing whine rose and fell again. Then the hum started. Electronic surveillance; that's what he had been thinking. His eyes, at first casually watching this man, flitted away after the impact of a sudden door slam, and began searching the recesses of the room.

Angled in his direction, two men were crossing the floor talking with a third companion who listened intently. Perhaps because it seemed doubtful they would spot him just then, he monitored their progress staring with a stuporous detachment. But now, when one of these intruders glanced up, and he realized he had been discovered, a constriction traced his stomach; the tightness flashed in waves over his intestine. This sensation had become a jack-in-the-box triggered in his soul. Somehow it had been put there, he thought maybe on purpose, a certain number of years ago, and so, he couldn't get rid of it. The two talkers had stopped moving and the third man was pointing him out. And . . . Oh Lord, all three were coming straight for him. Backing up unsteadily he turned and started walking. Then he half stumbled, moving to the left. His body heat had begun to rise; under his arms sweat was streaming, and as he looked fervently for a familiar exit, he lost his balance and almost tripped; a microphone cord under his feet lay curled and twisted.
"Hey, hey fella," the first one yelled. "Hey fella, come over here . . . please."

Somehow these men had maneuvered themselves between himself and any exit; he was near the wall with the windows, they protected the doors with their backs. Damn. He should have begun walking the other way the instant he had noticed them. It was stupid to have come in here in the first place; now that seemed idiotic. The man who had spotted him originally was off to one side, and the other two were cautiously diverging. His heart, pulsing blood through his ears, pounded in his chest below him. The collective scowl of these men was decidedly hostile; yes it was even leering. And they were getting ready to chase him down . . . no kidding; get him back into a corner somewhere, like a gook he figured.

Gooks.

There had been plenty of gooks when he and Andy Valentine had gotten separated from their company down in the Mekong Delta.

"What the hell is that?" Andy had asked him. They were walking along a dirt road next to some rice patties. "Looks like a truck," Andy continued. "Looks like a burnt out truck, by Jesus."

Tommy motioned a slow down with his left hand. "Don't know what's up there," he cautioned. "Let's take it easy. We gotta be careful."

They moved down the side of the road slowly, their M-16s ready. Stooped over, they huddled about ten feet behind the truck for a conference.

"I'm goin' around the front," Andy told him. Tommy waited while Andy circled around the cab and then came back to him. "Nobody's in there," Andy said. "The
driver's door is open and there's papers all over the place. He paused for a minute thinking. "What about back here?" he asked doubtfully.

There was a big piece of canvas draped over the back of the truck so you couldn't see inside. For a moment Tommy toyed with the problem. "Well, I guess we better take a look," he said; his finger reassured his mind with the message trigger. "Could be anything," Tommy said; that certain edge in his voice, if he let himself hear it, might spark panic.

"You pull the canvas away," Andy whispered. "It's okay. I've got ya."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Yeah... you've got me."

The canvas came away with a swish; Andy's M-16 was poised on his shoulder, and bullets (according to his brain) were already spraying from the end of it. That was his edge; his mind was set fast forward; he was well past ready. Inside there was light from a kerosene lantern, and on the floor, an eleven or twelve-year-old Vietnamese boy was propped up in a corner.

"I'll be damned," Tommy said. "Look at that Andy."

"Yeah," Andy said. "See..." And then he stopped talking.

There was a dog in there too, a big black one, with a white patch on his back, and he was licking the boy's face. Movement came only from the dog though, because the boy's face was blank, like a doll's, and a long red gash down his bare chest, was crusted with blood and dirt. The dog snarled, weak and low, and kept licking. His snout was down on the boy's stomach then, and this time he was pulling and rooting. Tommy swayed back as if he was pushed physically; understanding came while watching: this dog wasn't licking, he was
eating.

Flesh, blood, fur and bone; papers, cloth and hair all started bouncing. Vibration and impact ripped the air. Andy kept firing until his magazine was empty; then he tried to get another one out but dropped it. Finally he just turned around and vomited. Inside all Tommy could see were shapes and colors. They looked burnt crisp and runny; with acrid smoke rising it reminded him of goulash, the sight of... cooking.

So he couldn't or wouldn't stop himself. By the tightness of the muscle in his shoulder he knew what was happening; the tendons, the cartilage, the living pulleys and levers in his forearm were being drawn and rotated. That's right. He was getting ready to shoot; he was gonna go ahead and fire.

And then he did.

And that was just one more thing he got stuck with remembering.

* * * * *

Here in this building, these office creatures, these men wearing suits, ties and wing-tipped shoes, were planning on how best to capture him. Blood still pounded in his ears; that deep seated fear welled up again, but for the moment anyway, it unaccountably subsided. God, how he hated to be frightened.

A group of women then, as if released on cue, like a flock of pigeons from under a bushel basket, secretaries or stenographers, must be, burst through one of the side doors. They were talking and gesturing, smiling and joking. Completely oblivious to everything except themselves, they seemed totally at ease. Their heels clicked officially on the tile floor, their smiles were smooth, their faces like transparent
plastic. They remained preoccupied, of course, only until they spotted him; then the consternation began. Perhaps if an animal from the woods, or a barnyard somewhere, had gotten into one of their homes, they might have reacted similarly. The foremost lady stooped and frowned; then she pointed at him and put her hand over her mouth. Fine, he shuddered; this was going to be just great, he realized. Now she was whispering to the others; then she gestured at something with her handbag. He had to get out of here, right now if he was choosing, so then he was off and running.

He had intended to sprint across the path of these women and squeeze between the man guarding that door and the wall. Several women made oohs and ahhs as he reeled past them; their eyes followed him intently, as if fixed on an ambulance with sirens wailing. Anticipating his exit though, the man behind these women had closed the gap easily; a few gauged movements eliminated any avenue of escape. The large hands were stretched out grasping, the heavy feet were braced apart waiting. Trying extra hard to stop he found he couldn't; the highly polished floor was incredibly slippery, almost like an ice skating rink, and as the approaching faces grinned distortedly, he closed his eyes, pitched to the ground, and skidded on his side, ended only a few feet from his pursuer. Before he had stopped sliding he was already scrambling to regain his feet. Once upright he sensed this presence now fearfully close behind him. Sprinting back past the women, his legs wobbling, he heard more oohs and ahhs and realized fully, in the pit of his stomach, the true extent of his trouble. Deep trouble. Dear Jesus, he mumbled, please don't let me get caught, please don't let me get arrested.
"Hey mister," someone yelled. "It's okay; hey mister, stop."

But he was frantic, almost incoherent; his senses only registered blurred colors and approaching voices under strain. A line of tables blocked any exit, the cords from the tape recorders and microphones running along underneath. He knew it was either over or under; and under appeared very crowded. Gathering himself together he shuddered; a roll of barbed wire might as well have confronted him. Up in the air, hurtling forward, a pain in his chest started building. The space around him hummed with energy and his mind took rapid snapshots, like haphazard stills from the window of a train plunging through a station. His vision stuttered, his focus faltered, as in a movie film suddenly broken, and he came crashing down on his back; a full somersault had turned him over completely. Apparently his foot had hooked under the table top, on the other side when he first left the ground, and . . . simple disaster. The floor, pressed against the palms of his hands, was cool beneath him.

There were shouts and scuffelings; chairs were turned upside-down and sideways. Somehow he had managed to get several electric cords twisted around his chest, and idiotically, his nose was running. Slithering sideways, desperately trying to find a place to stand, he became increasingly aware of distinct voices approaching. Threading his way out of this clinging maze without direction seemed impossible . . . if only he could stabilize and rebalance himself. But then, with that burning pain igniting freshly in his chest, and his vision blurring behind an uncontrolled dimming, he collapsed panting. All he could see were faces, hands and eyes.
Eyes.
On the unemployment line the eyes were all different; hopeful, discouraged, weary, confident, unapproachable. Tommy wondered about his own eyes.

He got a job though, several in fact, but there was always trouble. At the first place, a wholesale tire business, he had arguments with his boss. The second job was better, driving a truck (he liked being alone), but the company went out of business. Selling cars was good money—for pot and drinking—but soon the customers got on his nerves. One afternoon this guy wanted to see the spare but Tommy couldn't find the trunk key. After fifteen minutes of looking through cabinets and drawers the customer finally located it, right there on the chain with the other key, dangling from the ignition.

"You on drugs or something, buster?" the man said.

"Yeah," Tommy told him. "Sure, always." He grabbed him. "Because if I wasn't, I'd punch your God damn face in."

Still, he didn't remember exactly how the swinging started, or ended. What followed, however, demonstrated one simple lesson: you don't beat up the customers.

Jail was horrible. Dirty, smelly, crowded; Tommy believed he must have been sentenced to live in a subway station where lunatics fought for standing room. The other prisoners beat and raped him; then the guards took away his belt and shoelaces; soon they stuck him in a protective custody cell—punk city the others called it.

You can hang yourself if you really want to, but it's not as clean as an execution; you strangle yourself slowly.
instead of having your neck neatly broken. You can tie your socks together, or, Tommy thought, even use your underwear, sticking your head through one leg and hooking the other leg and waistband onto something. You'd have to twirl yourself too—to increase the pressure—and you couldn't weigh too much. Still, that didn't seem as good as the socks and his underwear was ripped anyway. It takes a long time to strangle yourself—in jail that is—unless they want you to (and now they didn't) so Tommy got cut down early.

Later, he was in the hospital, and he couldn't remember which time was before parole and which time was after. The two or three hospital stays seemed like one to him anyway, and he had no interest in trying to separate them. There was too much advice and many people. One psychiatrist, several social workers, a VA counselor, and nurses; oh so many nurses.

Things were given to him: a monthly check, a card for his wallet, best wishes; he understood why but felt neither gratitude nor animosity. It was just easy. So he came to think of these offerings as impersonal gifts, as tokens; an attitude existed apparently, that someone or something perhaps, had been looking for him for a long time, and now they found him.

It was quite odd, he thought, even eerie; they were attempting to regiment him, to make him part of another system.

* * * * *

Slowly he began to regain his breath; his vision refocused on the men around him. The buttons on the vest of the man in front of him lost their hazy quality; then the herringbone, tweed, and navy blue of the others completed the picture.
"It's okay, I've got him," someone shouted. "It's okay... look, right here."

Hands began jerking him up from under the armpits, and he realized, as a physical fact, that three or four men were standing in a circle, close around him. Several of the twittering women had also gathered, at a table off to one side, and one of them was putting on lipstick, using a small mirror. The voices of the men near him echoed busily, their tone having changed from alarm to curious inspection. The underlying tenor of review, however, was confidence; confidence and perhaps a little amusement. He wondered if anyone had called the police yet—he sure would like to escape before their arrival—but the idea of breaking away now seemed impossible. His arms and legs trembled. Swallowing hard, he tried to push down over the gasping.

The grip under his arms relaxed; the circle of men had become slightly widened. "Jesus, this guy's heavy," someone said. "Must be liquid weight," someone else added.

There was an immediate guffaw from the rear of the crowd. "How'd he get in here in the first place?" There was no ready answer. "Look, he's even got a name tag." A soft undercurrent of giggling presided.

"Tommy," someone said. "That's what his name tag says. We're supposed to call him Tommy." The murmur continued unabated.

"Maybe he's the guest speaker," a woman's voice laced with mock innocence inquired. "Yeah," a third party added. "Maybe he's here to read the proposals, you know, so we can vote on them."

He sat up fully and tried to regain his feet; they had been entertained by him, he realized. He smiled, himself, tentatively. Good. Everything was going to be okay; they were laughing. He ran his hand through his
hair and grinned sheepishly. If he could just get out of here now. No one seemed inclined to stop him; a hand was even helping him forward. "Maybe he's the cateror," a voice boomed behind him. "Or the security patrol," someone else elaborated.

"Excuse me," he muttered and breathed deeply. Taking several unsteady steps forward, he planned his exit; his intention was to move away with dignity, no fuss, not showing an ounce of lost poise or worry.

"O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Tommy go away;"

But it's "Thank you Mr. Atkins," when the band begins to Play."*

But how easily his plans were spoiled. Erupting like a belching volcano, his stomach spurted a jet of warm vile liquid through his throat, over his taste buds. It's burning progress teared his eyes, coated his nostrils. Sprinting across the room, he clapped his hands over his face, but, inevitably, he couldn't seem to stop drooling from beneath his rigid fingers. His insides were boiling away now; everything appeared to be melting into nothingness inside him. Coming to the open door, unsure of how to negotiate, he stopped, but immediately restarted. Determined to overcome any obstacle, the front of his shirt covered with a sticky sheen, his eyes had become bleary and unseeing.

Not quite out of their field of view--the light from the hallway illuminating him exactly--he lurched and stumbled grossly, hit his head on the wall, and, before he could round the corner, slipped on a streak of his own retching.
"An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,  
an' anything you please;  
An Tommy ain't a blooming fool--you bet  
that Tommy sees."*

* From the poem "Tommy" by Rudyard Kipling
Tom Sheehan

BURIAL FOR SEAMEN

Tonight I think of
Jonathan Diggs and how
he salts the Atlantic,
how the horse of his voice
shakes the water from under­
neath, cracks the rocks
the small fist of Nahant
jabs in the ocean.

The
dory came riding in high
and free as crackerbox,
the oars gone, locks ripped
away as if he had broken
his muscles on them, the
anchor gone on Davy's gift,
not even a handful of line
left in the loop.

One incon­
spicuous mark gathered in the
final counting:  JD 9.  It was
Jonathan's ninth boat and it
was the first to outlive him,
the first to come back with­
out that oarsman.

Seventy year
old men do not swim all night,
do not ride on top like debris
caught on the incoming tide, do
not materialize on-shore once
they are that wet.

They go down
like Jonathan Diggs, shaking
their fists at the Atlantic,
shouting the final obscenity
they have wanted to use, know-
ing the exact time to employ
it.

They send a sound running
along water lines, burst it
into sea shells, sing it as
a tone of surf busting all Sept-
ember nights when ocean listen-
ers count for sailors.

They be-
come the watery magnet pulling
men from inland fields, in
turn are magnetized by moon's
deep clutch on the rich pas-
tures of the sea,

and sleep
only in tight caves, soundless
and dark in their wearing away.
The fabulous frost
on log ends of the pile
extends the mouth of winter,
a breath stolen
from midnight bellows,
or it is a frantic finger-printing of oak,
not yet fire dry,
toyed like a child's
frozen windowpane.

What I like about logs,
most pieces of wood
for all that matter,
is I never see two trees quite the same.

They shape, fit and form
to our giving in,
but, characteristically,
ever twice in a patch.
Their flames are either
red or blue or green
or mostly orange or yellow.

But they burn like dying
stars, a shimmer splitting
darkness in eyes search.

And the log ends of the pile?
..a rogue's gallery
of hard-cast faces
this side of fire,
still photos in the ember
of a fallen moon,
an audience of my lugging in.
NO DIMINISHING RETURNS

We walk thirty miles 
over wire, 
a mile for each year 
since our eyes 
touched. 
Legends still vibrate 
in your voice, 
fables, story 
of a stray star, 
Atlantis provoked, 
burst meadow beyond 
the hill, bedding down, 
a tree 
counting the darkness, 
flower in a field of rye.

I remember a winter 
clean as salt, 
memorialized snowbanks, 
foreign country 
of a couch thickly green 
and awkward 
as landed amphibian, 
a blue wool skirt 
of accordioned pleats 
I blew smoke into, 
my ear on 
its blue sky 
listening to stars inside, 
eyes closed, 
mouth open, 
stretching, reaching, 
turning corners.
One poem is not enough for the last man you remember walking down the street wearing scars for cosmetics, the backs of his hands gathered like hose joints, blue hoses running up under the faded, ragged sleeves,

What he wears is memory of the luster of nights under the frightful cavity of the new and full moon, what he wears is pain and disjointment and night's fear that morning will not find him the daylight.

Old men are particularly sorry as such messengers. They appear never to have been home and no way to get there. And outside subway stations, restaurants, doubled over in their mismatches of suit coats and pants, crow-handed,

eyes at thin lies about their most recent pains and ills, their mouths mouthing the last profanities of the day, their faces like the hard edges a map of Kentucky has or the Poconos of Pennsylvania or the Badlands bulging,

they are the acrylic and indelible endings of life, the empty shell cases, the unclaimed tickets, the garbage excess to junk, stuffed bags at roadside barrels. Old men this way fade into the impossible waysides.
SATURDAY AFTERNOON

She was standing there with a twelve gauge shotgun and a bad temper. When she pulled the trigger she had been seated with the kick. Then there was the mess to clean and next door banging on the wall because of the noise and her husband lying dead out there in the hallway and he had had the scrub bucket this morning and where was it now? The doorframe was beyond repair and the hallway rug beyond mention and the landlord—where'd he come from—looked angry but she was getting the police, so he would just have to wait.

How long would all this take, she wondered. She had things to do. Her husband had been inconvenience enough, but if she'd'a known what killing him would bring she'd'a left him alive instead. And her arm socket hurt too, where the gun had jerked it so hard. Why'd they put so much kick into them things anyway, she wondered. Typical though, she thought, damn men.

And where was the babysitter? She'd seen her mother looking in through the shattered doorframe half an hour ago: Why hadn't she sent the kid? She had lately been secretly thinking that the kid might clean, seeing the television was broken and the baby was dead, which was what the whole thing was about to begin with.

First he'd been mad when she brought it home from shopping with her, then he'd been mad because it cried all the time, then he left her when he had found it in the freezer. But what was she to do, throw it into the dumpster like she had the canary?
She would think of something, if only he would give her some time. Oh yeah, she thought: he's dead now. Too bad.

Already she had picked out another one to shut up the crank upstairs who'd asked four times today: "Where's the baby?" The new one wore a brown thing where her's'd had a blue one, but other than that they were pretty much the same. Didn't matter much now, of course. But maybe she'd go and get the other one anyway, she thought. She liked holding them, and eventually she would figure out how to keep them from dying.

The telephone's ringing. Hey! Some cop picked up the receiver: It was for him. On a hunch she walked behind him and as he talked, slipped his revolver from its holster and then Bang, he sunk to the floor. This one made a smaller hole and didn't near as much hurt her arm. It was quieter, too, a little. Not quiet enough for anybody to think that the cop had tripped over the telephone wire like she was going to suggest, but a little quieter anyhow.

Her ankle was beginning to ache where the cop had fallen across it, and her foot was wet. A couple of other cops rolled him off of her: The shoe was finished. Two doors down's dog came in and began licking the dead cop cadaver until another cop kicked him, then he bit into the kicker, that being fresher meat still. Next door knocked a picture off of the wall while the kicking cop was screaming and the other cops were killing the dog, then the landlord called her a bad name, and not any of it was even her fault! One of the other cop's stray bullets had missed the dog seemed to have hit a waterpipe somewhere above: Now the landlord was really giving her hell.

Then suddenly something like burned eggs was coming from some of the wall
plugs. It was kind of white/grey/black/white and looked like smoke. That yellow/red/orange licking stuff looked like fire. She figured it was fire, everybody was saying it was fire, and there was getting to be a lot of it to look at to decide upon. Just like a fire, it was getting hard to breath, so she went outside. When she got back with the new one that wore the brown thing, everything had disappeared.
Old fool farmer went crazy. He decided that every straw we put on the pile was a straw of sorrow. Well, we was puttin' it on by the forkload all day long, six days the week, so we was sure stackin' a lot of sorrows. Old fool farmer, he took to takin' those sorrows off the pile one straw at a time. We seen him doin' it one mornin' we went to work.

"What'cha doin', old fool farmer," we says. And: "Hey, don't be messin' up our pile there." And: "What'cha lose somethin' old man?"

"They're sorrows, boys, and I'm gonna take them all away," he says back and keeps pickin' one straw at a time.

Well the boss scratches his head and spits and says to us: "What'd'ya think about that?", but to the old fool farmer he don't know what to say so he don't say nothin', but just stands there watchin' him for a couple of minutes. Then finally he says to us: "Well, you're gettin' paid to work, boys, so set to. Just be careful not to hurt the old fool with your forks." And we do what he says and we sets to work. We keep pitchin' and for the old man you can see it's hopeless. Us pitchin' by the pile, him pickin' by the piece; us bein' us, him just bein' the old fool farmer gone crazy. "Now get out of our way, old man," we tell him.

But he wouldn't move out of the way. Nope. Stayed right there pickin', not sayin' nothin', pickin', not answerin' back, pickin', standin' right there in our way.

Well, half of what we'd pitch would hit
him and fall at his feet away from the pile we was supposed to be buildin', which weren't no good at all. And we couldn't even stroke proper neither not with him standin' right there where the tips of our forks was aimin'.

After a while we says to the boss: "Let's rest a bit." And: "Let's do somethin' else." And: "Hell, he'll be tired or dead soon anyway." So that's what we did, somethin' else and the old fool farmer he just kept pickin' away at that pile that was taller than himself and as wide as it was tall.

And the next day we did somethin' else and the day after that and all the time tryin' our very best to ignore that old fool who silently picked at that pile of sorrows that for us was only straw. Why after a week of him pickin' and us not pitchin' it was beginnin' to look like he was gettin' somewhere!

Sure enough he got to the end of that pile before he dies, but die he did so we buried him and the old fool farmer out of the way we set in back to work. But it weren't the same, no, weren't the same at all. One day Sam up and quits, then the boss broke his back, then young Billy ran off and got married, then it started in to snowin' and we never did get that pile finished. Matter of fact, we never even got it stacked up as high as we had it when the old boy went crazy.
We were headed down route 195 on Mike's bike on a 35 degree November day. We were going seventy miles an hour. It was cold. We were going to see John Updike. We were hungover. The night before we had seen Updike read at the same local university we were headed for at the time. There had been a lot of people at the reading. We had to sit in the back.

As we leaned into a hard turn between traffic, Mike asked for a sip of my beer. I could see the pavement rushing past, near my face.

"Could ya go a little faster?" I screamed, pulling a beer from my jacket.

"No problem," he said, winding the engine high, passing a few more cars. I held the accelerator while he drained his beer. "Hey Bill," Mike yelled, "good thing they're having coffee at this Updike thing."

"Yeah, I'm pretty drunk."

"Yeah, but I meant that I'm pretty cold."

"Oh yeah, that too."

When we got there, though, no one was drinking coffee. It was in a "lounge". We were looking for a bar. No one was even drinking the coffee, though, and we were numb. We took off our layers of clothing, feeling embarrassed at the noise we were making. Coffee was out of the question. Everyone looked at us. We didn't start the tape for a half hour. We were too scared to make any more noise. We eventually managed to slip our tape recorder in behind a chair, hoping no one would be disturbed. This is what we managed.
WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK?

UPDIKE: I've always been somewhat interested in witchcraft. In college I read some theories on witchcraft and found some very interesting studies. The portrayal of the Medieval Witch is basically a lovely priestess of the underground pagan cults. They were driven underground by the Christian premise of the patriarchal (we would now say) Christendom of being anti-body, anti-nature, and anti-physical. They were driven underground and were kept alive by witches.

The more you read about witchcraft the more you realize that it's about whether there really is a group of women that call themselves witches and organize themselves in covens—it's still open to question. Some anthropologists take them very seriously, take the profession seriously, and go into some length about how covens are organized; whether they were like cub scout packs or...at the other extreme...as women being crazy and tortured.

So I have this historical knowledge and this interest. Then I have known some witchy women; women who talk about being witchy. I have observed a certain communion that can exist between young and middle-aged women who are between husbands and the reason why covens are something that happens. I'm experienced to believe that this was worth trying to dramatize.

It was a ticklish—obviously—subject which I circled around for a time before I touched it.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE IN MIND NOW FOR RABBIT, THE CHARACTER OF THREE OF YOUR PREVIOUS NOVELS?

UPDIKE: I don't quite know. I do think
that Nelson will have to move into Rabbit's life. Whatever goes up, must come down. Harry and his son will have to be resolved.

In a way I count on the decade to help me with these books. Rabbit is Rich is about inflation and the Carter malaise. I can't foresee the history of the Reagan Administration.

A lot of people asked Mr. Updike questions. Someone asked if he liked the Boston Red Sox. He said he did. When the question and answer period was over, we got our books signed. It took a long time to get him to sign our books. A lot of people were getting posters autographed, so there was a long line. Afterwards, Mike and I tried to get some coffee. What was left was cold. We settled for some stale doughnuts. Finally, we piled all of our clothes back on and got back on Mike's bike. "Hey Bill, how about a beer before we get going?" Mike asked.

"Sure," I said, pulling two out of the knapsack. "It'll help us keep warm on the highway."

"Think we should ask Updike if he wants one?"

"Naw. He probably wouldn't take it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. He probably wouldn't."
Colvin Nelms
Dennison Nicolls
German Perchik
Hammond Raborg
Hart Raffa
Martovich Revitt
Sheila E. Murphy Sheehan
Remington Murphy Weyant