

Genesis Spring '90

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Untitled

Lori A. Frame

Mom

by John Herrin

“You can’t live life

looking through
rose-colored glasses.”

My eyes twinkle.

“I like cherry glasses,
can I look through
cherry glasses—
I don’t like roses.”

Her wrinkled mouth

bends down in huge
tight frowns, pulling her
chins into her head.

“No,” she says as her eyes
roll back into her tight
curled black hair,

“The saying is about rose coloreds,
but you can’t even live it
through any color.”

Another thought.

“How’s about strawberry
glasses——”

I see her hand raise

My face aches in an arch
though my temple.

I sit down on the cold grey porch,
sobbing spasms
trembling through
my chest.

I can’t make my eyes focus on the
shadow of my friends,
staring at me from across
the street.

I feel embarrassed,
I feel anger for——

My mother’s 16-year-old
climbing roses
clinging to the
rotting white trellis,
shining with
morning dew.

I reach out, crushing one,
still ignoring the
thorns.



"Madame Rieset" after Ingres

Tracey A. Harner

"Curses"

by Shar

Annie had never felt so gross in her life, or was she dreaming? She couldn't decide. Her face was buried in her pillow, the drool dried around her mouth. An unusual warm sensation between her legs had slowly been waking her up. But another part of her was saying, "Go back to sleep. You have on a Kotex."

Suddenly her face came out of the pillow. She realized the Kotex pad was up on the small of her back. Annie raised up on her elbows but didn't dare move from the waist down. "Oh, no! So now what do I do?" She looked down between her elbows. That didn't help so she looked over at her older sister, Margaret, sleeping on the twin bed next to hers.

"Margaret," she whispered. "Margaret." Margaret just mumbled and rolled further away from Annie.

Annie looked down in between her elbows again. She slowly raised her pelvis off the bed. She could see the dark spot on the sheet. And the mess in between her legs made her face scrunch up. "Oh gross!" She moaned. She inched her legs forward, straddling the dark spot, until she was on all fours. She slowly crawled out from under the covers. "Gross! Bluck! This is awful. How come I never heard about this part?" She moaned and yucked aloud as she made her way to the bathroom, glancing once at Margaret who didn't even stir.

In the bathroom, Annie took off the soiled underwear. She held them at arms length as she ran water into the sink then dropped them in. As the blood hit the water, tiny columns of red swirled around the basin. Annie watched them quietly until she realized she'd better get a washcloth and clean up. She liked the feel of the hot wet washcloth against her thighs as she tried to moisten the dried blood on her skin.

Clean and back in bed, Annie waited for the sun to finish rising so she could wake up Margaret. As she drifted back to sleep, she thought about how great the day was going to be now that she and Margaret would finally be getting Baby . . . Baby was a gun.

Annie re-awoke with a glint in her eye and a knowing smile on her face. She jumped out of bed and with all the ceremony of a magician she ripped off the covers. "Ta-Daa!" she sang whipping her arm down to her side, sending the quilt and sheet whirling about her feet.

As she had hoped, the crack of the whipping covers woke up Margaret. Margaret jerked her head up for a brief second, opening her eyes wide. Then, realizing she'd been awakened too soon, she rolled away from Annie muttering, "Go back to sleep."

Annie smiled proudly and with a broad sweep of her hand presented her bed. "Ka-hum," she cleared her throat loudly for attention.

When Margaret didn't stir, Annie reached down and shook the corner of Margaret's bed. She resumed her pose of presentation and said even louder, "KAA-HUMM!"

Margaret lifted up on her elbows and pounded her pillow. She shoved her face into it, "What do you want?"

Annie renewed her smile and with a little bend in her lanky legs she repeated, "Ta-daa!"

Margaret regretfully opened her one eye that wasn't in the pillow and looked at Annie. Then, she looked to the bare bed. Seeing nothing, she looked back to her sister who stood there, barefoot, grinning silly, and holding up the covers by their corners like Lady Liberty holds her torch. "Annie, it's Saturday. Why are you being so weird? I don't think I care. Good night." She flopped onto her back, pouted, and quickly pulled the blue scarf hiding her rollers down over her eyes.

Annie lifted the fake satin scarf up and said proudly into her sister's face, "Margaret! I started my period last night, remember?" Annie smiled smugly, "I'm sure to have blood stains to wash out while you'll have to help Mama can tomatoes." Then she smartly pulled the scarf back down.

Margaret sat straight up and pulled the scarf off her head. "Oh goodness, Annie. I forgot. How did your night go?"

Annie shrugged, "OK, I guess. Not like I expected, I suppose."

Margaret nodded. Annie had started late the night before and that being her first period, Margaret had given her a few pointers. Margaret looked down Annie's whole body, taking in the worn yellow flannel nightgown that was way too short (it stopped just below her knobby knees). The sleeves hung loose below her elbows. Margaret had cut the elastic out of them since Annie hated anything tight around her wrists or neck. At the bottom Annie's tiny bare feet stuck out. They didn't seem to go with the rest of her. Last summer she had had a big growth spurt but her feet didn't grow at all.

"Well," Margaret thought, "she doesn't look any different." She said, "You look like you feel OK. Hey, look," she pointed to Annie's bed, "there's no blood."

"What?" Annie exclaimed and wheeled around. She bent over the bed to examine it. "There is too! It's right—" but it was too late. Margaret whacked Annie smartly across the butt with her fiercest pillow blow.

Margaret danced around Annie's bed as Annie grabbed a pillow. "Can you pillow fight on the rag? Huh? Huh? How's your strength holding up, little sis?"

*

*

*

Annie was just about fifteen years old and she was the last of her friends (and cousins) to start her period. She was beginning to think she would never get it. It made her so mad when Margaret and their mom and their Aunt Elwanda and whoever else might be around would sit and talk about their periods. Annie would try to nod her head and

"uhum" enough to blend in, but sure enough Margaret would catch her and say, "Why are you nodding? YOU don't understand."

The worst thing was when they would treat her like she was little again and not even in the room, saying things like, "Oh Annie must be bored to death with this woman's talk . . . wonder if she'll ever start her period?"

Their mom would lean over, give her hand a squeeze, and whisper, "Don't worry, honey, you'll get it one day then you'll wish you hadn't. You know how I feel sometimes." Annie would nod and wish she did know. All that she could see was that having periods got respect. When their mom would have backaches or cramps and not feel like doing something she would pat their dad on the knee and say in a low voice, "honey, you know it's that time and I just don't feel up to it." Then their father, who just ruled the roost, would grasp her hand and with all kinds of wondering sympathy in his voice say, "Oh darling you just take it easy. I'll have one of the girls get you a lemonade."

* * *

The sisters ended up on the floor in wads of sheets, quilts, and pillows. They settled into their nest; Annie reached for the big silver brush on their dresser and Margaret began to undo her rollers. Annie pushed the wild strands of her own hair behind her ears so she could brush Margaret's deep auburn hair as it tumbled down from Margaret's hands.

Margaret said, "Well, I suppose you're still an all-right pillow fighter. So, what did Mama say after I went to bed? Did she give you a talk or anything?"

Annie stroked Margaret's hair in long hard strokes. "Yea, a little one . . . but she knows that after being around the rest of the whole entire world having periods I am pretty much an expert," she said matter of factly.

"Oh," Margaret grinned but tried to sound serious, "I would say so. I'm sure she told you about the hot water bottle?"

"First thing! I may even get my own. She got worried thinking that we might get cramps at the same time."

Margaret nodded. "Well, go on. What else did she say?"

Annie sat up on her knees, pulling the brush straight out behind Margaret's head, so she could watch Margaret's hair fan down. She would catch it in her fingers every now and then as she talked. "She called Aunt Elwanda late last night just to tell her. Elwanda was so thrilled she wanted to run right over but she was in her night clothes and her toenails was wet—Mabeline has a new color, Ruby Sunrise—Mama told her I needed to sleep, anyhow. Aunt Elwanda got all excited and said of course, we have to have dinner tonight . . . just we women! Isn't that exciting?" Annie nudged Margaret's back and beamed proudly, saying "we women" a few times in her head.

Pulling the blue scarf out from under a bed, Margaret piled the rollers into it and neatly tied up the four corners. She turned around and motioned for Annie to do the same so she could brush Annie's hair.

She stared at Annie's extremely tangled mess of reddy-blonde hair. "Oh darlin, how do we ever get these tangles out?" She said as she took the brush from Annie. "Well . . . what do you want to do? Do you want to have dinner?"

"What?!" Annie exclaimed. "Do I ever! This is great!" She sang, "A dinner for me, dinner for we, a dinner for weeeee women!" She smiled proudly, "we women. Yes, yes, yes!" Annie clapped and squirmed so much that the brush kept flying from Margaret's hands. "I can't wait! What should we wear? Can I say a toast? Aunt Elwanda is bringing Cold Duck!"

Normally, Margaret might bop Annie on the head to make her sit still while she got her hair brushed, (which never affected Annie's mouth too much). But this time Margaret just let Annie squirm and she stopped trying to brush. She ran her finger over the lily engraved into the back of the brush. It wasn't real silver. Aunt Elwanda had bought it but Annie had picked it out explaining that Margaret would love the little detail.

Margaret looked beyond the lily at her own reflection and said quietly, "Annie, I don't know . . . maybe we shouldn't do the dinner."

Suddenly, reaching behind her head, Annie grabbed the big end of the brush. Her hand slammed down over Margaret's reflection. "You're forgetting something, Margaret." She twisted around and said with a big grin, "Tonight holds something for both of us."

Margaret's pale eyes widened. She said softly, "the gun."

Annie smacked a big kiss on Margaret's face, whipped the brush out of her hands, and jumped up exclaiming, "Yes!! The gun!" She made the brush into one six-shooter as her finger became another. "The gun, the gun, the gun, THE GUUUUUNN!" She sang and danced all about the room shooting a glass of water beside the bed, Margaret's bottle of cologne, and anything else she could find. "The gun we get because we're women! Fa la la la la, the gun!" She jumped on top of the bed, aimed carefully at the chandelier (the light), and holding a high note that no cowboy ever would, she sang "THE GUUUUUN!!" And sent the chandelier crashing.

Annie jumped off the bed. She first blew smoke off the brush, then off her finger and put them into their (imaginary, of course) holsters. "How was that for fine shooting, hombre?" She drawled.

Margaret laughed, "I imagine you got them all, pardner."

Annie winked and said, "I sure, I . . ." Her voice wavered. She felt like she was sinking so she reached out for something to grab on to. Everything went black but she could faintly hear Margaret's voice.

"Annie, Annie." Margaret eased Annie down onto the bed. "Annie, are you OK? Here, put your head between your knees."

"No, no. I'm OK now." Annie felt Margaret's arm and let that soothe her until she could focus on Margaret's face.

"Darlin' you blacked out. You are white as a ghost! You gotta be more careful about jumping around."

"I," Annie squinted trying to think of the words. She shook her

head. "I always jump around," she said slowly.

Margaret patted her on the back, "Well, maybe you're going to have to stop all this tomboy stuff. Mama will give you an iron tablet when we go down for breakfast," Margaret said matter-of-factly. She went to the dresser and pulled out a blue jumper. "We better get dressed and get down there."

Annie just sat on the bed trying to understand what Margaret was saying. She didn't see what she had done wrong to make her feel so weird.

"Annie?"

Annie looked up. Margaret stood at the door dressed.

"C'mon honey." Margaret winked. "Get dressed and let's get some breakfast in you. You wanna feel good when we get Baby, don't you?"

Annie grinned. "I sure do. Let me get dressed. Tell Mama I'll be down there in a minute."

"All right. Tell me if you need anything," Margaret said as she left.

"Baby," Annie said to herself as she went over to her closet. "It's OK to be a tomboy," she thought, "I'll probably be a better shot than Margaret." Annie pulled out a straight yellow skirt. It was a little bit too big and, she had always thought, a little bit too serious. But, she decided, it seemed the kind of skirt a gun toting woman ought to wear. As she pulled out the rest of her clothes, she daydreamed about ways that she could use the gun. She hoped that she and Margaret would have good stories about Baby one day, just like their Mama and Aunt Elwanda did.

When their mother and aunt had been in their dating years, before they had gotten married, they had shared this gun they called "Baby." It wasn't a big gun. They had just used it for themselves. And the girls weren't sure whether or not any of the men in the family even knew about it. Fran, their mother, and Elwanda had promised each other a long time ago that they would give Baby to their daughters. Since Elwanda never had any girls, that meant it would go to Margaret and Annie. Fran and Elwanda had told them stories about Baby for as long as Annie could remember. Fran and Elwanda would also tell them that when they both became young women they would get Baby to share plus they would get to hear the story telling where Baby had come from.

Annie decided she would have to get a diary so she wouldn't forget any escapades she and Margaret might have. After putting on her blouse and skirt, she sat down on the bed to pull on her socks. She wiggled. She wiggled. She lifted up, smoothed down her skirt, and sat down again. "Jesus!" She sprung up. "I feel like I'm sitting on a rolled up newspaper! This is awful, I'm telling Mama," she said, shoving her feet into her shoes. She slammed the door as she went downstairs.

Annie didn't make it to the kitchen. She got side tracked in the bathroom.

"Annie, you OK?" Her mother asked, knocking on the door.

Annie opened the door, "It feels like I have a rolled up newspaper in my pants."

Fran blinked and cocked her head just a little, "Well, yeah . . . I suppose it does. I'll have to remember that." She motioned for Annie to move out of her way, "Here, honey. Let me in." Fran shut the door. Her faded red hair was pulled back in the bandana she wore every Saturday while cleaning the house. She tied the knot in it a little tighter then reached out and touched Annie's cheek. "You need to eat something."

Annie pulled away from Fran, exasperated. "Mama!" she exclaimed, "It waddles!"

Fran bit the corner of her lip so she wouldn't laugh. She said quickly, "Waddles?"

Annie let out a big breath. "Yes, Mama, it waddles! You know, waddles. The back end of the pad. It waddles back and forth when I walk and that moves the rest of it from where its supposed to be." Annie turned away from her mother and faced the mirror over the sink, "Why didn't you warn me?"

Fran came up behind Annie and rested her head on Annie's shoulder. "Darlin'," she started softly but seriously, "whether I told you these things or not doesn't matter. You're still gonna have your menstrual period. All of us women get the curse."

"I still wish I would have known."

Annie took her mother's hands in her own and pulled them tight around her waist. She looked down for a moment and fiddled with her mother's fingers. "I was so excited," she looked into the mirror at Fran's reflection, "you know, since I started so late."

Fran squeezed Annie's waist, "Yeah, I know."

Annie looked at their faces side by side in the mirror. Annie's face was slimmer, more angular but their green eyes were the same. Looking into the mirror, Annie thought, "we women." She stared at Fran and saw things she hadn't seen before. She saw the freckled, tan skin that looked soft in a different way than her own. She saw the crow's feet creased around her mother's eyes from laughing so much, so many years. But she also noticed a couple of creases between her mother's eyebrows that she didn't think came from laughing. And, Annie saw the cracks in the full, soft lips that had kissed her so many times.

She pressed her cheek against her mother's, "Mama, I hope I'm like you when I'm old."

Frannie laughed. Then she slapped Annie on the bottom and said, "You're gonna get 'old' if you don't get yourself into that kitchen and get something to eat. As far as the waddling goes, put on some slacks. That might help."

Annie went back to the bedroom and put on some slacks. She looked in the mirror. She could see that thing a mile away! She tried to watch her butt in the mirror as she took a few steps. It was hideous. She would be the laughing stock of her family and friends. How could

she go anywhere? She couldn't accept any gun or enjoy any fancy dinner with some lump sticking out the back of her pants!

Tears come to her eyes as Annie stomped and kicked her way out of the slacks. She put on her robe and stomped downstairs to the kitchen. She whipped out a chair and plopped down in it, folding her arms across her chest.

Margaret and Fran, both with aprons on and each with a knife and tomato in hand, turned at Annie's arrival.

Margaret looked to Fran.

Fran said patiently, "Annie, honey, why are you in your robe?"

"Because." Annie's bottom lip stuck out.

Margaret asked, "Did you have an accident?"

Annie glared at them both for a moment before answering. "No. I did not have an accident."

Fran put her hand on her hip, "Tell us what it is, Annie."

"I can't wear anything, OK?! I just can't wear anything," she shouted and threw up her arms. She quickly turned the chair away from her mother and sister and folded her arms again.

"The slacks didn't work out?"

"No, so just forget about it. I'm just going to wear this all day, OK? I didn't want that stupid ol' dinner anyway!" Annie pouted and Margaret had to turn back to her chopping to hide her smile.

Fran wiped her hands on a dishrag and walked over to the table. "Don't you worry about that dinner!" She patted Annie on the back, "We'll let you come in your robe. Why, we'll even have Elwanda take a picture."

"Oh, Mama." Annie said and ran back upstairs. She was half annoyed at her mother's joke but half of her thought it was funny, too.

* * *

Most of the day Annie's new situation affected everyone's thoughts. Her mother ran around the kitchen cooking and telling Annie where the hot water bottle was. Her father did father things but occasionally would look at her out of the corner of his eye and scratch his ear with a frown on his face. Margaret did have to help Fran with canning tomatoes. Aunt Elwanda called, asked Annie at least 35 questions, wouldn't let her answer any of them, then got off the phone because she had to catch the mailman (she's started getting her "Psychology Today" but not her "True Stories" and she'd ordered them at the same time.)

Annie, of course, washed out her sheets and went to the bathroom quite a bit. She didn't do a lot of technical stuff in there . . . she mostly read and re-read the Kotex box. Or she looked in the mirror and wondered if there weren't something more she ought to be doing. When she wasn't in the bathroom, Annie practiced shooting with her fingers. By the end of the day she could pick a tomato off the counter at forty paces.

* * *

That evening, after their father got shooed out of the house, the

festivities began. Margaret put on her latest Elvis album. Aunt Elwanda brought over finger sandwiches (from a recipe she'd found in "McCall's") and the very important Cold Duck for the toast. Annie borrowed one of Margaret's nicer full skirts and two pairs of tight underwear to guard against waddling. And Fran ran the story of Baby through her head as she made dinner, making sure she remembered the important parts.

During dinner, the four women talked as they usually did about various notions and feelings and events but Annie felt exceptionally involved with the conversation. All of her "uhums" were noticed and when she nodded, she felt that they knew she understood. As the meal went along, though, Annie slowly got quieter. With her right hand, she stirred and her green bean casserole around but didn't look at it. With her left hand, she rubbed down below her belly with the rhythm of the women's words.

"Annie, aren't you going to finish your casserole?" Fran asked.

Annie looked up to see they were all staring at her. "Its real good, Mama, but I'm full."

"You're full? You practically ate the whole dish last week and this week you just want one helping?"

Annie didn't know what to say. She usually ate a lot and last week she ate a whole lot but now, well, now those green beans tasted like rubber. And besides she felt like someone had kicked her in the gut.

Margaret said, "Annie. Annie? You're not going to black out again are you?"

Annie wrinkled her eyebrows and looked at Margaret, "No, I'm fine. I just didn't know what to say."

Elwanda reached across the table, her many bangles sliding back to her elbow, and patted Annie's hand. "Oh Annie, now I am worried about you." She paused then pointed a painted nail toward Annie's food, "I know you don't have an appetite but you gotta keep up your strength during this time. I bet you're craving a chocolate soda, aren't you?"

Annie pushed her plate away, "So from now on is everything going to be 'during this time' advice? Yeah, Annie finally gets her period, so now that's going to be all we talk about?! I'm sorry I didn't wolf everything down like I usually do! When Margaret doesn't eat like a pig nobody bothers her."

Elwanda said, "We're happy there's leftovers."

Annie got up to go to the bathroom when she felt a sharp stab in her abdomen. She leaned on the table and pressed her hand over the muscles between her hip bones. "Oh fudge, why's this happening now?"

Margaret got up and put her arm around Annie while Fran went to get the hot water bottle. Margaret whispered in Annie's ear, "I bet Mama's excited now!"

Annie grinned and started to sit down but stopped with Margaret's: "Oh no, Annie. This is a good skirt."

"What!" Annie instantly burst into tears and ran out of the room sobbing.

Inside the bathroom Annie didn't bother to pull off the skirt. She sank down the wall and let herself cry with no restraints. Her skinny chest shook with each sob and her cries would get caught in her chest. She saw the Kotex box sitting under the sink. "Goddamn you!" she screamed and kicked it and kicked it and kicked it. She felt fierce and important because she cursed. She grabbed some toilet paper, blew her nose, then threw the wadded tissue at the box. She gave it one more kick. "Stupid box, stupid cramps, stupid, stupid, stupid! I'm stupid!" She spat at the box and her face scrunched up into a scowl. She grabbed more tissue, wiped her eyes then tore it into little bits saying "stupid" with each tear.

She scowled at the door when she heard a knock. "What?!" she yelled.

"Honey, we're all ready and so is the Cold Duck. How about you?" It was Elwanda but she could hear all three of them whispering.

"No. Do it without me." That would serve her right, she thought, for being so stupid and wanting to start her stupid period.

"Don't worry about my skirt, Annie."

"That stain will come out with just a little bit of milk. I'll get it out for you," Fran offered. "Now let's get out here and get going with our plans."

"I just feel stupid."

"Don't darlin'. This stuff happens to every woman," Fran said.

"Mama, this stuff is awful. I don't see how you stand it. Why don't you walk around the house saying, 'gross, gross, gross' all the time?"

Fran laughed, "Believe it or not, you get used to it." Then, in her Mama-knows-what's-good-for-you voice, she said, "We all have to go through these lessons, it makes you strong."

Annie frowned, "I don't believe you, and I'm already strong." Even as she said it, she knew she was pushing it—talking to her mother that way.

Fran said, "Well, that's fine for the time being, but you need to stop pouting and get out here."

"Yes, Mama."

Elwanda said, "I know you still want Baby, don't you Annie?"

Annie sighed, "Yea, I still want Baby, I suppose." She mumbled, "I will probably goof that up, too."

Annie came out of the bathroom and changed her clothes. They all went outside with their iced teas so they could watch the colors of dusk while they talked. They saved the Cold Duck until later. Aunt Elwanda lit a cigarette and sat on the porch swing. Annie took the spot next to her and began swinging them too high which made Elwanda choke and laugh at the same time. Fran sat in the metal lawn chair that rocked. Margaret sat at the top of the porch stairs, and leaned against the stone ledge.

Elwanda patted Annie's knee and smiled, "It's a great story."

Fran took in a deep breath as she gently rocked in the lawn chair. "It's a nice night for a story."

Annie said, "Yes, we've waited so long."

Elwanda winked at Fran, "I guess we can. Do you want to start Frannie, while I finish my cigarette?"

Fran took a sip of her iced tea and said, "I'll start. You two have heard stories about the times Baby has helped us out some . . ."

Elwanda squeezed Annie's hand, "You remember the one where me and Marie Bythum went to Kentucky . . ."

Fran went on, "Well, as hard as its been not to tell this one, for your aunt especially, we have saved it until we passed on the gun because we thought that it might make this day special."

Fran set her tea down beside her and started in, "It was the summertime. I was about six which would make Elwanda about four."

Annie interjected, "Was Grampa home then?"

Fran continued, "Yes, this was a time that he and Mama were doing alright. But, you see, in the summers he would work in Union City during the week and only come home on weekends."

"So Mama was home alone with us kids," Elwanda said.

"Teddy wasn't born yet, so it was us two and your Uncle Jimmy, who would have been around nine at the time.

"Well, first of all you have to remember that Mama fed hobos, 'transits' she called them. And I don't know how they know it but these 'transits' would pass the word from one to another about where they could clean up and get a meal."

Elwanda leaned forward, "They'd know places in every town that the trains stopped in."

Fran continued, "They would knock on the door and ask politely for a meal."

"They never hurt anyone. Real polite," Elwanda said.

"And Mama would tell them to go in the backyard, that she'd bring it out for them. She would bring them out a basin of hot water, soap, and a towel and let them wash up while she put together a meal. But she never let them come into the house." Fran took a sip of her tea.

Elwanda tapped the arm of the swing with her finger, "Now, remember Mama was alone with her kids during the week so she wasn't about to let any hobo into the house." She pulled her legs up onto the swing. Satisfied that she held everyone's attention, Elwanda went on with the story. "This one particular summer day a man knocked on the door and Mama answered it. Let's see, your Uncle Jimmy would have been . . ."

"He was helping out at the corner filling station," Fran helped.

"Right. He was helping out at the corner filling station, so he wasn't home. Anyway, this man knocked at the door. Tell them what he looked like Frannie," Elwanda nodded toward her sister.

"He was a hobo but he looked a little different than most of them. His clothes were nicer than most hobo's; they matched in a way. So we

imagined what he might be," Fran looked straight at Annie, "I thought he was a secret agent."

Elwanda continued. "Mama told him the usual about going around the back and she'd put together a plate for him. She brought him out a basin of water. She had coffee on the stove and was frying up some potatoes when her hair stands up on the back of her neck. She wheels around and he's standing there." Elwanda paused to take a drink of iced tea.

Fran continued the story, "Me and Elwanda were in the kitchen helping her and she looks at me and told me to take Elwanda and go out to the front yard and to stay there till she hollered for us. Then she told the man that if he wanted any supper he would wait in back liked she'd told him."

Elwanda put down her feet stopping the swing. Lowering her voice, she said, "Mama still had the spatula in her hand with hot grease dripping down. He said to her, 'Ma'am, I need more than supper this time.'" Mama put her hand on her hip and said, 'You're gonna get "more than supper" if you don't get out of my kitchen.' Then she turned so she could still see him in the corner of her eye but he didn't know it. She turned up the heat on the stove and turned over the potatoes, shoving the spatula deep into the grease."

Elwanda nodded her head, like someone was saying what was going to happen next but no one was, so she gestured for Fran to go ahead. "Go right ahead, Frannie, tell them what happened next."

Fran leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "Mama knew not to let him see she was scared."

Elwanda gasped and laid a hand on her chest, "What are you saying Fran? Mama wasn't scared. I've never seen Mama scared. You're telling it wrong." Annie and Margaret frowned at their mother. Fran let Elwanda dismiss her version with a wave of a hand. Elwanda went on. "So anyway, the stranger says 'I need more than supper this time,' again, just like Mama didn't hear him. Mama nonchalantly told him they (acting like Daddy would be home soon) don't have much money around the house or she'd hire him for an odd job."

Fran leaned forward, "And she turned up the burner a little more, stirring faster so he won't see she's burning the potatoes. In the corner of her eye she sees him take a step closer."

"Oh my, Mama! What happened?" Annie exclaimed.

Margaret looked to her mother, "Mama? I can't believe you haven't told us this before. Were you two still on the porch?"

Fran looked to her sister for a moment then looked down at Margaret, "Don't get any ideas, but no, we didn't stay on the porch. We sneaked back in and were sitting outside the kitchen door."

"We were scared but we know for sure Mama would whip him. Didn't we, Frannie?" Elwanda waited for a nod before continuing. "So when Mama saw him step closer she suddenly turns around, with him just a step away, and pointing that red hot spatula at his face and says with this low, fierce voice, 'Get out. Now.'"

"That man slowly raises his arm and in his hand, just about the size of his hand, is the gun. He points it right at Mama's chest." Elwanda stopped.

Margaret moved her hand from her chest to push her fingers through her hair. "Oh my Lord, Aunt Elwanda. Mama? What did Gramma do?" Margaret looked to Annie to see if all this was registering. Annie was hugging her legs and her resting her head on her knees. Her eyes were as wide as they could be.

Annie added, "And you two . . . What about you two? Did you scream?"

Fran answered, her eyes locking with Elwanda's, "We didn't scream. I put my hand over Elwanda's mouth as she started to cry and I pulled her back so that she couldn't see anymore. I don't think either one of us understood what was going on but we both knew Mama was in trouble and I knew that we shouldn't be seeing it." She paused.

Annie looked around at all the somber faces and stamped her foot, "So what did Gramma do?!" She asked, exasperated.

Fran went on, "Mama didn't bat an eye. The man told her he was the one who'd say what they were going to do and for her to shut up. He told her he wasn't getting out of anywhere.

"It seemed like those two stared at each other forever. When I looked at the gun I could see Mam's chest rising and falling with every breath she took. Her knuckles were white from squeezing the handle of that spatula so hard. He was the first to speak, saying that we wanted to go into the other room. Just then a huge glob of grease dropped off Mama's spatula and splattered in between their feet. It startled him and he looked down." Fran's voice raised as she scooted to the edge of her chair, "Spatula and all, Mama slammed her fist straight down on top of his arm knocking the gun out of his hand. He shoved her into the stove and scrambled after the gun which was by her feet. She grabbed the skillet and, turning it over, hit him across the back. Hot grease and potatoes flew everywhere. I shoved Elwanda away from me and ran into the room screaming."

Elwanda interrupted, speaking fast and excited, "I got up and took off after Fran. Mama was kicking the man in the face and he was grabbing at her legs and skirt. She fell onto the floor."

Fran went on, "He was half on top of her and trying to pin down her arms. She grabbed his hair with her left hand and whipped his head back and then grabbed the gun with her right hand and shoved it hard into his face!"

Elwanda smacked her hands together, "Wham! Right into his cheek! I swear she broke his teeth right through his skin. The whole side of his face was smashed into his nose. And she held that gun steady. We all got quiet. Frannie and I stopping dead in our tracks. Mama jerked his head with that handful of hair she had and looked deep into his eyes and through gritted teeth she said, 'I'll blow it off. He went whiter than white! His eyeballs jerked from her to the gun to her again. He didn't move a muscle but this whine eeked out of him. I

don't think he's the type to get scared by a woman, gun or no gun, but I think he knew that she meant business.

Annie asked slowly, "Did Gramma kill him?"

Margaret blinked when Annie asked that and a breath caught in her chest as she waited for the answer.

Fran smiled and shook her head, "No she didn't kill him. She tied him up and had the sheriff come get him. Right before the sheriff got there, Mama started to hand me the gun but I stepped back scared. She called me 'Darlin' ' and told me not to be scared that it was just a baby gun."

Elwanda interjected, "That's why we started calling it "Baby" when we needed a code word. But that was later.

"So with Elwanda and I holding hands, I stepped forward and took the gun," Fran started to continue but Elwanda interrupted again.

"That's not when she gave it to us for keeps."

"No, that's not when she gave it to us for keeps. I took the gun and she told us not to tell anyone until she said it was OK. Then when the sheriff came nobody ever knew that we had the gun. Matter-of-fact Mama got the reputation as being the fastest spatula in the south!" Fran and Elwanda laughed at the end of the story Fran leaned back in her chair and took a big drink of tea. Elwanda lit up a cigarette.

Annie jumped up from the swing, "And that's the end, right? We all lived happily ever after?"

Elwanda and Fran laughed. Elwanda said, "Well, I don't know about that, but yes, that's the end of the story."

Annie exclaimed, "That's great! Boy am I ever going to take after Gramma! Anybody tries to mess with us and they are going to get it." Annie turned her backside to Margaret, "Do I have anything on me?"

Margaret held up her hand so Annie would help her up. "No, you're clear. Are you excited again?"

Annie pulled Margaret to her feet. "Yeah, I'm excited again but I don't think I'm going to dance just yet."

Elwanda stood up and motioned for Annie and Margaret to sit on the swing. She sat on the arm of Fran's chair, putting her arm across Fran's back. "I'm ready, Frannie."

Fran slipped her hand into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out a worn burgundy velvet pouch. "Here it is."

Margaret squeezed Annie's hand. Annie took in a deep breath. "Oh goodness," she murmured. Then she clapped and bounced on the swing, saying, "Open it, open it, open it!"

Fran slowly pulled the small old back gun out of the pouch and laid it in the palm of her hand. Then she held out her hand for them all to see.

Annie immediately started singing, "the gun, the gun, the gun, the gunnnnn!"

Margaret hugged Elwanda and Fran, "Thank you. This had been a great night. And the story and the gun, thanks." To Annie she said, "Aren't you glad you finally got the curse so we could have this little

celebration?"

Annie gave Margaret a little squeeze. "Yea," she said, "I guess I really am. This was important for," she paused, waiting for Margaret to get the cue, "weee women!" They sang it together then Margaret started tickling Annie, telling her she was silly, and teasing, "Can you take it? Huh? Huh? Say 'Uncle.'"

"Whoa, here we go!" Elwanda yelled as she popped the Cold Duck. Fran held the glasses while Elwanda filled them up.

They held their glasses high in the air. Elwanda grabbed Fran's free hand and said, "Baby is from both of us to both of you. And as much as I've got to say about womanhood and it's highs and lows I think its only appropriate that my dearest sister—whom I feel is half of myself—gives the toast . . . besides we all know you'll hear my feeling on the matter soon enough. Go ahead, Frannie."

Fran laughed at Elwanda but her eyes were watering as she said, "To my baby girls, that I say with my heart breaking but my breasts swelling with pride, you're not my babies anymore. May you use this knowledge well."

"Cheers!" They chinked their glasses high in the air and then Elwanda mumbled, "I was beginning to think she'd need her social security to buy Kotex."



Easter Sunday

Virginia Szabo

She taught Him

by Diane Abel

She taught him the meaning of life

lastnight

not a difficult task

allowing for indiscretions

it was only necessary for him

to move three inches to the right

On Being Late For Work

Anonymous

I watched
you,

through curtains—

from behind
french doors,

yawn

all over

your breasts, and
pick

the skin
from my back

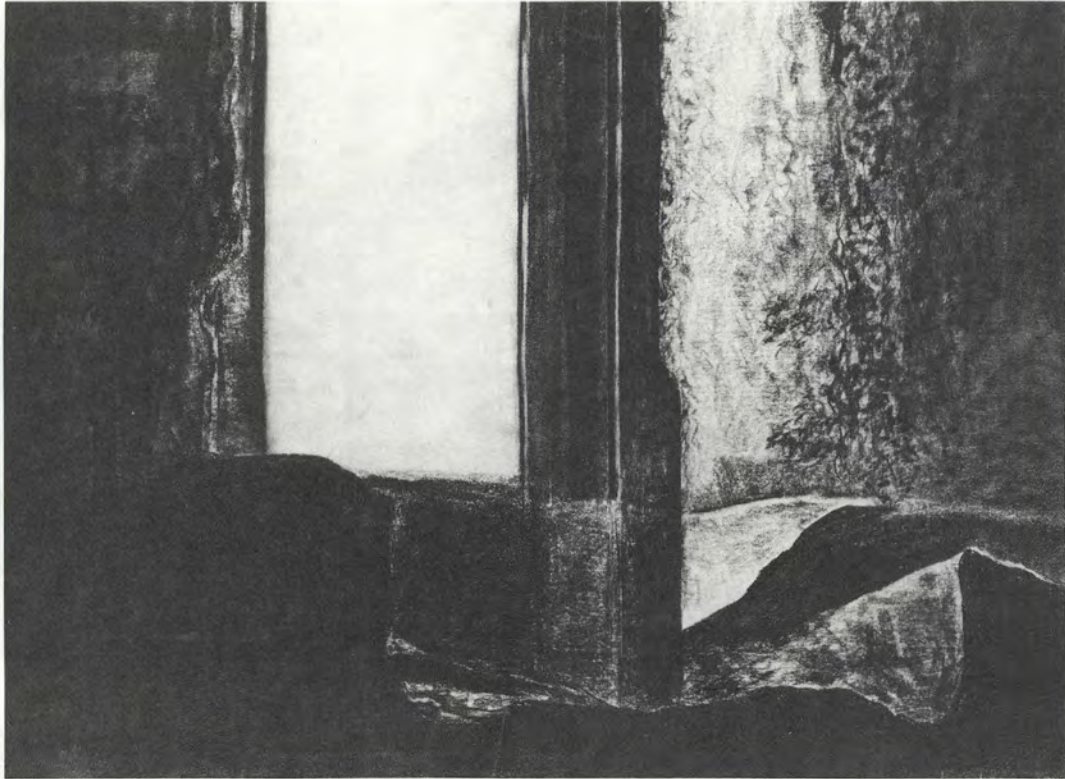
out of
your

fingernails.



Untitled

Lori A. Frame



Window of Light (Man made religion "Series")

Angela Balser

The Assurance Salesman

by R. J. Sullivan

The shadows flicker across the walls of the train, visiting spirits that peek in on the doings of the living. All is silent except for the steady churning of the train wheels, the grinding rhythm echoing in the ears of the five travelers seated in the car.

The five insomniacs stare at each other indifferently, comfortable in their own space. The newlyweds, Janet and Kevin McConnell. He stares at some fixed point on the wall while cradling her in his arms. She is the only one who has found comfort enough to actually doze, her young blond-haired head nestled against his shoulder.

The other couple, seated on the same side, sit farther apart. Sir Stewart Collins and his wife, Lucy. He's dressed in black formal wear, even on the train, she with her smock on, the bow tucked oh-so-perfectly under her chin. They sit with their backs straightened in perfect upper-class grace.

The fifth passenger sits across from them, alone, his young face stares out the window even though it's too dark to see anything. Gary Finn clinches a heavy jacket in his arms, but long ago found it an inadequate pillow to assist in sleeping.

Or perhaps it's simply impossible for some people to sleep on a train.

He looks over at Kevin, acknowledging him with a slight nod. HE certainly has the perfect opportunity for comfort with Janet. He sees that she has no qualms about making herself comfortable, her chest moving slowly with her even breathing, in, out, in . . .

He catches himself staring and glances back over to Kevin. He doesn't seem to notice.

A stirring, and Sir Stewart reaches for his pocket watch, solid gold, as Gary remembers hearing him brag back when it was still daylight and they were still talking.

A click, the lid opens, a groan, and a snap as Stewart closes the watch, rubs his tired eyes and shakes his head. Gary dares a whisper. "What time is it?"

"Three. We should be in London in another two hours."

Two hours, Gary thinks. Two hours of shadows, of being lulled by the chugging of the train, of small dozes, but never really falling asleep, as the train calls out the steady rhythm of a false lullaby.

A wince, and Janet's head jerks, her eyes snap open, fully awake.

Gary smiles. "I hate it when that happens. I can never really sleep on these damn things, either." Gary's voice seems a hollow,

distant whisper. Kevin's arm tightens on her shoulder. She grips his other hand, her eyes close in ecstasy.

Gary's hand pulls out the picture again. He can't really see the image anymore, the soft brunette curls, pouting lips, the pink chiffon dress she wore especially for the picture. His fingers trace the edge, anyway. His own wife, April, waiting for him in London.

"Nothing like returning to the woman you love," the older voice, Stewart, smiling at him from across the room. He places his hand on his wife's knee.

"I remember when I'd have to be gone, sometimes two months at a time, there'd be my Lucy, standing in the doorway with a martini and a smile, and that was all."

"Stewart!" She tries to sound shocked, but she's too tired. His laughter lightens up the dreary mood of the train.

Gary, embarrassed, slides the picture back into his pocket.

"It's not the going home I mind, it's the wait. I almost wish—"

To everyone's shock, the outside door opens, and the passengers are all treated to a wild gust of wind. Lucy starts, grabs at her hat.

Janet sits upright. All wonder who dares intrude on them.

The mass of blackness jumps into the room, turns, struggles with the door behind him. Gary grabs his coat, indignant. Gloved hands grip the handle and pull.

A protest of metal, the door slams shut. The mass of black clothes stands in the middle of the room, looking around, realizing for the first time he is an intruder.

His breathing is harsh, and every feature of his face is covered by the shadow of a large hat. All is still once again, and the others wait expectantly.

"Excuse me." When he speaks, it is with a deep rumble, a sound that bounces off the walls. The shadow spirits seem to flee for an instant, returning only reluctantly to eye this newcomer.

His hand reaches up, removes the hat. His hair is also dark, as are his eyes, but they seem to stare about the room piercingly, at each passenger in turn. Janet even jumps a little as he eyes her.

"My apologies. I hope I did not wake anyone. I tried to sleep on the cots, but . . ." he trails off.

A quick toss and the hat is in the upper compartments. Slowly, he turns and takes the empty space next to Gary. He smiles at each in turn, but they are all grudgingly silent.

It is an unwritten law that cliques formed at the beginning of long trips are sacred for the duration. This group has formed such a comradeship and this man is an intruder.

For a long time, nothing is said, and the shadows dominate the room, flickering, gliding from corner to corner, across the weary faces of the travelers. To Gary, the pulse of the train is louder now, weighing him down, pounding in his head.

Or maybe it's the way the stranger keeps looking at him, a queer half-smile on his face, the gaze traveling from one, to the other, to

the other—

“Yes, Mister Stewart—” Gary’s voice is shaky, a weak imitation of the mere drowsed stupor he felt moments before. Now there is a whiny hint of anxiety in it, desperation to clear the chill. “I-I’m sure April will be waiting for me when I get home, though at—” his voice fails entirely, then starts back up again, “a-at six, I doubt she’ll have any ideas like that.”

Stewart seems confused, he has forgotten the previous conversation. Then it all comes back to him and he smiles again. “Yep, I suspect you’ll have to wait ‘til this evening for the REAL welcome home.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Gary cradles the jacket in his arms, the trembling already gone, the intrusion forgotten with the silence of the intruder. “Right now, the best welcome home I could get would be her arms around me in bed, body next to mine, whispering ‘I love you’s’ till we drift off to sleep together. That’s what I want right now.”

“Those are always nice, too,” Stewart says. “Gets the strength back up for the next time we can—”

“Stewart!” Lucy elbows her husband, which seems to be about the only thing she’s done the entire trip, Gary notices.

“You like the tender moments, too?” Janet’s voice speaks timidly from her corner of the room. Her eyes are half open, her head once again nestled against the warmth of her husband. “Have you ever noticed, people don’t talk about tenderness anymore.” She grips Kevin’s hand as she says this. “It doesn’t even seem to be a part of love anymore. Even in the so-called ‘Romances’—” She stops, giggles, and her mind wanders, then seems to come back again. “You know those books. You get detail after detail of all the romping and heavy breathing parts, but the other moments. . .”

Her hand strokes Kevin’s fingers and his face seems to come to life. He pulls back, attentive to her expression, her words, everything about her, now.

“Moments like this, him, and me, just being with him, and I’m in heaven.”

Gary feels himself flush at this public proclamation of love. Kevin seems just as stunned, and leans down towards her. Gary averts his eyes and lets them have their moment.

His gaze meets that of the stranger’s, and he feels anger. What right did he have to be here, to witness this display with the others, those who had talked with Kevin and Janet and developed a respect for their relationship he did not share? And yet he continues to watch, unmoving, with no regard for the invasion he is responsible for.

“Still,” Janet’s voice starts up once again, “no book I’ve ever read really tries to describe it. Or movie or tellie show. And yet, they’ll go to great lengths to show the sex, something just as private. Do you wonder if some people just don’t know what real love is?”

"Sex does seem to be all some people have, doesn't it?" Gary sits up in his seat, intrigued with the conversation. It makes the shadows go away, both the ethereal ones and the solid one still seated next to him.

"I've often wondered why there seems to be such an emphasis on it, with the manuals, the portrayals, has simple sharing become that boring for some?"

He poses the question as a statement into the air, not really expecting an answer. He tries to tell himself that this is why he jumps when the deep voice speaks from his corner.

"Perhaps you are the one deluded."

Nobody moves. The moment lingers. Gary shifts uneasily and turns to the stranger, looking back at him, the same smirk on his face. "I-I beg your pardon?"

"I said, perhaps you are the deluded one. I mean no offense, merely a speculation."

Gary could feel himself blinking rapidly in the dark, floundering.

"Your speculation confuses me. You have me at a disadvantage."

"I merely suggest that perhaps the portrayals you see around you ARE true love. You simply have never experienced it."

"What?!" He feels a sudden, intense anger at this stranger. He had some nerve!

The smile remains on his face as he leans forward on the bench. All eyes are on him, and he places his elbows on his knees and folds his gloved hands together. He is relaxed, comfortable in the spotlight.

"I don't think that you—"

"I'm merely trying to come up with an answer to your confusion. You were wondering why you've never seen love portrayed the way you experience it. I'm suggesting that its possible you've never experienced love. True love."

"I think you'd better leave." This is Janet's voice, harsh, cutting, the words hang in the air, trapped in the confines of the car. The man does not move, so she continues. "Your suggestion that love is nothing but hot sex and paying the electric bill is insulting."

"And maybe you spend so much time doing nothing because you can't get excited enough in bed to know what I'm talking about."

"You bastard!"

Kevin is on his feet, and Gary is on his, throwing his body in front of Kevin's.

"He has no right to say that to my wife. He's just talked himself into a free trip right out the door." His eyes glare. "Out of my way, Gary."

"Hold it, hold it!" Gary feels a lumpy bag pushed against his head and realizes he has been pushed all the way back, into the overhead luggage compartments. Kevin's breath is harsh in his ears, and his heart is beating wildly in his chest.

“Let’s not have any trouble here. There’s no need for that.” Gary turns, looking down on the stranger. He feels that he has the strength of everybody in the car behind him, and this makes the black-dressed man seem small, indeed.

“You’re not wanted here. I suggest you leave.”

“Now, hold on a second. Let me explain myself before you get a posse out on me.” He settles back in his chair, not quite as confident as he was before.

“Like I said before, I was only speculating, and I wasn’t trying to insult anybody. Not only that, but I was wrong, but can you hear me out? I have an important point in all this. And you should all find it very interesting.” Gary freezes in his stance, caught between two very intense and conflicting actions. He wants to throw this man off the train, and yet his words are so intriguing. . . .

“Please, sit down and hear me out.” Reluctantly, Gary retreats to his corner and re-seats himself, waiting.

“Yes, that was a stupid thing to say, and you’re quite right in being insulted, Janet.” Her eyes widen at the use of her familiar name.

“I happen to agree with you. Only a very foolish man would say that there is nothing more to love than sex. A very foolish, and unloved man. Without those tender moments, love would be nothing more than. . .” he struggles to find a word, “stress-relieving.”

There is a chuckle from Stewart’s corner, and a giggle from Janet.

“It is that too, my good man.” Stewart calls out.

The smile reappears on the stranger’s face, pleased to have gotten back on their good side, or at least to be considered tolerable, again.

“Quite right, so it is. My point, then, in debating you, good sir, was to make another point entirely. If you were walking down the street and everybody was pointing at a spot on an alley wall, and laughing his bloody fool head off, what would you do?”

The question is aimed directly at Gary, who starts at the sudden attention. “Why, er, I’d look at the wall.”

“Quite right, you would. And what would you do if you saw nothing there?”

“Um, you mean if it was just a blank wall?”

“The dulllest shade of gray you’d ever seen. What would you do?”

“I, uh, guess I’d ask them what was so interesting.”

“Yes, but it’s more basic than that. Why would you ask?”

“Uh, I don’t—”

Janet speaks. “I’d assume I was missing something. Obviously, I was missing the joke and would want to know. That’s what I’d ask. Is that what you mean?”

“Exactly. You’d assume that it was your fault you weren’t laughing. You’d think that you were missing something.”

“Okay,” says Stewart, “We’re with you so far. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Why, that was it.” His eyes flash to everyone, they are glued to his every word, baited, waiting.

He turns toward Janet, facing her fully now, a question shoots across the room at the speed of light.

“Janet, do you love Kevin?”

She jumps, startled. “Uh, what? Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely!” Kevin’s arm tightens around her.

“Does he love you?”

“I know he does.”

“Do you? You know this for a fact?”

“Yes. This is ridiculous.”

“I see. So you’ve felt true love before, and obviously you were loved just as strongly back before.”

Janet’s eyes are wide with shock. The stranger is now on his knees in front of her seat, their gazes lock together.

“Oh, but that can’t be, can it, or you wouldn’t be here with Kevin now.”

“I . . . know he loves me. He doesn’t need to convince me of that.” Both of her hands grip her husband’s tightly, the knuckles turning white from the strain.

“How? Have you developed some way to get inside his head?”

“I feel . . .” She stops, groping for the words. “Different with him, than with anyone else. Unlike I’ve ever felt before.”

“Ah, so that automatically makes it true love.”

“Well . . . yes. I know my feelings.”

“Perhaps you only THINK its true love, because it feels different. Perhaps it is only a more intense infatuation than with anybody else.”

“No, I know what it is.”

He pauses, the air becomes thick, stifling, everybody in the car is hanging on his every word. He says a single sentence.

“How do you REALLY know?”

Janet trembles, stumbles over a couple of syllables, and stops, eyes tearing up. Kevin glares at the stranger, tenses up. Gary is afraid that he’s going to jump again, but he doesn’t.

He pulls her close to him. “I think you’ve said more than enough.”

“Why?” Are you afraid of what I’m proposing? Think about it for just a second. Maybe Janet only thinks she loves you.”

“I think her reaction here proves herself to me. Not that she ever had to. And if it weren’t for her interest, I’d’ve thrown you out of here.”

“Yes, she is awfully upset. Maybe because she realizes I could be right. Maybe she knows that—” he turns to Gary now, who had been clutching his jacket for the last couple minutes. “There is

absolutely no way of ever knowing how you REALLY feel about her. She can never get so close to you that she'll know beyond the tiniest fraction of a doubt that you love her as much as she loves you. Or that she really loves you in the first place."

"I know I love her!"

"A lot of divorced couples started out that way. Do you ever wonder what happened to their love? Did they feel the same way you did? Maybe they never shared the same tenderness." He sits back up, pauses for many seconds, letting them hang on every word. "Maybe they shared more."

The train pounds out its rhythm in the dead silence, and the shadows seem to sneak back timidly, wondering what happened to the drowsy existence that overtook the room minutes earlier.

The stranger speaks again, turning to the young man next to him, "and you, Gary, what about the young woman waiting for you?"

"Don't start on April. I know she loves me."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

The stranger smiles again. "So sure of yourself?"

"Yes, I am. Damned sure. And I don't need you or your word games to try to confuse the issue. Okay, so love is no guarantee. Love is based on faith and trust alone. You know when you have it, you simply know. What more do you want?"

"And yet, weren't you the one who seemed confused earlier?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why, the conversation that started it all. You and Janet said that you were confused by the way you've seen love portrayed. Maybe you can't see the section of the wall that's so obvious to everyone else. Maybe you're missing the whole picture, that's why you can't join in."

"All right, damn you, I get your point. No, I'm not April, I can't get into her head. I don't know with absolute, one hundred percent certainty that she's as madly in love with me as I am with her. But she shows all the signs to me, she tells me she loves me, she acts as if she loves me, I have faith in that."

"Ah. Well, that may be good enough for you, but I'd rather put my faith in something more certain."

He reaches into his coat pocket, and withdraws a small object. Janet and Gary are particularly anxious, their eyes following his every move, locking onto the glittering object in his hand.

It is a blue-colored rose, sculptured of transparent crystal. The petals are arranged to surround a glowing blue sphere that inexplicably glimmers. The rose itself would be enough to capture anyone's attention, but the sphere within glows with an inner beauty that makes the entire car bright, the shadows dissolve in favor of the overpowering light.

"Wh-what's that?" Janet's voice whispers, awestruck, as the stranger's hand extends the crystal in front of her pale face. The

object dominates with its radiance. Lucy Collins also turns her head.

"Ah, it glitters," says the stranger. "You see how we suddenly have the girls' attention? 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend,' as the saying goes, and this object does seem to bring out the best in them."

The stranger leans back, allowing the fist-sized object to remain exposed in his hand, gripping it by its curved off stem so that all in the car can see it. The center, Gary thinks, at first seemed completely transparent, but he can see now that it is quite clouded.

"This little beauty," he shrugs, "diamond, pendant, crystal, charm, I don't really know what, is very special. It took away all my doubts in love." His eyes harden as he speaks next. "It is also why I'm currently without companionship."

They are all waiting, knowing he will explain himself sooner or later. But he is delighting in the moment, and he lets it linger before continuing.

"You see, this rose is magical. I don't know how it works, I only know that it does. I found it on a train very similar to this one, under a seat, and I was ready to give it to the stationmaster, when I quite accidentally discovered its powers."

"A charlatan." Stewart speaks. "You're a con artist. I should've known better."

"Oh, no, no gimmick here. Although, I'm sure you'll think so at first. You see, the crystal center can, somehow, tap into the mind's eye of another person. I don't pretend to understand magic. Imagine, though, an object that can read your mind, find out who you love, and present you with an image of yourself. . . from that person's frame of mind."

He holds the glowing blue rose out, tantalizingly, in front of Janet's widened eyes. She bites her lips as it inches nearer.

There is a loud chuckle from Stewart's corner. "Of course. And how much do you ask for this miracle?"

"Fifty pounds for one gaze."

"That's ridiculous," Gary says, not quite convincingly. "For a silly parlor trick?"

"I'm sure it makes you feel better to keep insisting that, and I can even see where you're coming from, which is why," he spaces his words carefully, aiming them directly at the transfixed woman, "Janet can have the free look, and once you've taken her word for it, I'll take your fifty pounds each in turn."

"Really?" Gary keeps saying, feebly, "and what makes you think it's really worth fifty pounds?"

"Fifty pounds to know the unknowable? To make faith fact? Isn't that worth fifty pounds to you?" As they speak, Janet's hands are already clasped around the curled stem, the folded petals directing the light to make her face an eerie blue. She looks at the stranger uncertainly.

"What do I do?"

"Close one eye, and peek directly into the center of it. Don't

worry about light, it works even in total darkness. The image will be perfect.”

Janet holds the rose close. It seems to burn in her trembling fingers, and she needs both hands to steady herself. The center, she can see, is not simply clouded, but filled with smoky, animated, swirling, mist. The blue is caused by an actual glowing light within.

She hardly has time to reflect on this when the mist suddenly clears completely, and she finds herself staring at an image . . . of herself.

She is seated in the train, as she was, moments earlier, leaning against her husband’s shoulder. Only Kevin is not in the picture, at least not his face.

Her breath leaves her body as she realizes that she is seeing through Kevin’s eyes, looking down on his new bride. She can see her own face from his viewpoint.

She remembers the daily routine of seeing her own face in a mirror, angry at the extra chubbiness in her cheeks, at the way her hair would never settle just right.

In the rose, it is all there, but it ISN’T there. She sees herself, all the features are the same, but there is, superimposed, an image, a glow over her face and body that is almost angelic. A finger caresses her cheek, and it feels to her the softest, smoothest, most beautiful silk she has ever touched.

Images superimpose themselves rapidly over her body. She can see herself in her nightgown on their wedding night, a sense of pleasure mixed perfectly with tenderness. Purity and passion somehow become one and the same, and she is the source of it. She tries to force the flaws she sees in herself, the hair, the weight, the temper tantrums. They don’t exist in this image. She sees herself, but now she is the perfect woman, sexy, funny, beautiful, giving, Perfect.
Everything.

The rose drops from her hands, into the stranger’s, and she buries herself in Kevin’s arms, the joy in her sobs tearing from her.

“iloveyouiloveyouohgodhowiloveyou . . .” She continues in a blissful monotone. Her arms squeeze her husband’s shoulders as she continues to cry. There’s no shame left, nothing to hold back, not now and not ever again.

Her cries eventually reduce themselves to gentle sobs. The rest wait in an uneasy silence. Gary feels himself choke up, both over her own delirious happiness, and at the degradation that is paired with it.

“I’m sorry,” Janet’s voice is barely a whisper in Kevin’s shoulder.

“I should never, ever have doubted you. I just got so confused, I knew you loved me, I did, and I love you so much—”

“Shh!” Kevin hushes her softly. “It’s okay. I know, honey, it’s okay.” He continues to mumble to her until she quiets down.

“Well,” says the stranger, his fingers stroking the petals like a pet, “I trust there’s no doubt as to the authenticity of the view.” He looks over at Stewart, whose face is still pale from Janet’s display.

“Do you still doubt the powers of this crystal, Sir Stewart?”

“It’s a-a trick, it has to be.” His eyes are still on Janet, her shaken frame, cradled in Kevin’s arms.

“Perhaps you would suggest that the young lady and myself planned this ahead of time to sucker you. Do you believe her capable of that?”

“No, I didn’t!” Janet explodes then. “I’ve never seen this man before in my life, I swear.”

“It’s okay,” Stewart says. He feels very much the comforting grandfather then, wishing he could be stable and strong, not shocked and unsure of himself as he is now.

“It’s a trick. Maybe with mirrors.” His hand reaches out, but the stranger pulls the object away.

“Cost you fifty pounds to find out.” The stranger’s eyes light up, as dark as they are, they seem to reflect more light than Janet’s own blue. Glowing with greed.

This is not a charity, Mister Stewart. I give out one free demonstration, and I sure won’t make an exception to somebody I know damn well can afford it.”

Grudgingly, Stewart reaches into his pocket and begins shuffling through some bills. Lucy watches his actions, wide-eyed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” It’s little more than a whisper, but more powerful than the loudest scream.

“You get this conditionally,” Stewart says, his mouth curls up in a scowl. “Only if I am unable to find a sign of deception.”

The stranger nods. “You are an educated man. Your word should have more than a little power on the others.” He glares at Gary, then back.

“Perhaps Mister Finn can hold the money. He can be trusted.”

“Agreed.” He extends the bills in Gary’s direction. Lucy continues staring. She speaks frantically.

“Stewart, wait. This is silly.”

The rose is already in his hands, glowing brightly. When he turns to look at her, his face is a blue sheen of light.

“What’s silly about it, my dear?”

“I’m just saying, it’s a stunt. I didn’t want you spending your money foolishly.”

Stewart shrugs. “It’s already done, dearest one. A gentleman’s word is his honor.”

“Stewart, don’t!”

He focuses his eye on the blue-glowing center.

“Stewart, Stewart, stop!”

The mist parts, and Stewart faces an old man, slightly resembling himself, but stooped, with sad brown eyes. He hobbles across a

large, roomy living room, money is hanging out of his pocket. As he watches, a ravaging young woman dances across the floor, brown hair flailing. A hand snatches a fifty as she waltzes by. The old man keeps walking, he doesn't seem to notice.

The image dissolves to another room. Stewart recognizes their bedroom. The old man is adjusting his tie in the mirror, the startlingly-beautiful woman that bears little resemblance to Lucy is in the bed, talking about Tupperware parties. A ghost image is superimposed over his face as the scene continues.

Now the tie becomes a blindfold, completely covers the old man's eyes. Stewart can see the young woman in bed. Somebody else is with her. He had red hair, dark eyes. They are under the covers, kissing, laughing. She pulls him on top of her, and the laughter stops. There are other sounds, of a more primitive nature.

The figures are locked in an embrace, she rolls on top of him, but he now has a different face, blond hair, blue eyes. She points at the blind old fool and laughs, a hoarse, cackling sound of mockery. The man fingers a string of beads around the woman's neck, a birthday gift from the old man, she says, and worth a lot of money, too.

He throws her against the mattress, ready to finish the job, but now he has a beard and a tattoo on his left shoulder—

“Mister Stewart?”

He jumps. The stranger is directly in front of him, the dark eyes register concern, compassion. Stewart realizes that everyone is staring at him, the sound of the train beats through the walls as the seconds tick by. A hand is gripping his arm on the other side, nails cutting.

“You've been staring into space for nearly thirty seconds,” the stranger whispers, his face glows from the rose, now back in his hand.

What did you see, darling?” Stewart hears the voice of the woman who talked of a Tupperware party.

“Stewart? D-darling, what's wrong? What did you—”

His arm jerks, pulls away from her. He stabs a finger at her. She shrinks back. “Shut up!” She tries to speak, but with a look, he stops her. He swallows, stands.

The stranger steps back, anxious, waiting. Stewart rises to his full height, straight and tall. Blinks away tears. He has never stooped, he is not old yet, but he WAS blind.

He takes a couple of steps toward the door. He will not stoop now, either.

“Mister Stewart—” Gary is also on his feet, arm on his shoulder, concern registers on his face as he watches the life drain out of this admirable gentleman.

“I thought—I could help you to the cot—”

“No.” Stewart's voice is soft, but still powerful. “No, I have to do this myself. For awhile at least, I AM going to be alone.” His

hand clasps Gary's arm. "But only for a little while."

"Stewart!" Lucy, from the corner. "I-it was a trick, remember? You were going to prove it was wrong." Tears are welling up in her eyes. "It was wrong, it had to be."

Stewart releases Gary's arm, twists the handle of the door loose. His eyes travel the room one last time, and linger for a few moments on the stranger.

"Gary, pay the man."

The wind is cold and harsh, cutting to the soul. Stewart hardly notices.

A woman cries, standing against the now-closed door as the shadows take inventory, unnoticed. The missing person is noticed by all, and no one dares to look at the sniffing figure standing by the window.

No one, save the stranger.

Lucy feels his gaze drilling into her back. She turns to him in fury.

"Damn you! Damn you and your magic! You had no right to come here, and ruin my life like you have! How dare you!"

She screams, her clawed hand cuts the air, toward his face.

He catches her wrist in mid-swing, holds in there. His gaze never wavers as he speaks, the words fly at her venomously like daggers.

"No, how dare you! You wanted any rich man who's looking for a sick woman just like you to bury in diamonds and furs for the rest of his life, as long as you share your bed with him. Why did you have to pick one that actually loved you?"

Her mouth is open in outrage. "He. . . I. . ."

"I only hope after this is over, that your husband Stewart doesn't give up on love—as those men have."

She pulls her hand free, adjusts her hat and pretends to gather up her imagined dignity. "I have to go talk to him."

"Yes, you do." The stranger turns, crosses the room to his space next to Gary. "Perhaps you can convince him to let you keep the Mercedes."

She opens the door in a huff. The wind cuts in. Nobody bothers to move. Nobody looks in her direction.

When it stops, each person gathers their own thoughts, and even the stranger is at a loss for words. Gary pulls at a loose string on his jacket, waiting. A hand come down on the pile of bills in his lap. He lets the stranger take it without comment. Well-earned blood money. When Gary looks up, he sees that Janet and Kevin are staring at him. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

There is movement, and he knows the stranger is near. He does not turn to face him.

"Mister Finn—"

"No." Gary is shaking his head, trembling. He looks back towards the closed door. He draws his knees up, and continues to shake his head.

"I-I don't want to know. I don't. Just leave me alone." He waits. The light is in his face, pulsing.

Gary is shivering, but it is not from the cold. Janet sits up straight, Kevin's hand weaves through her hair. He sees a tear trickling down her face.

It's even brighter now. The stranger says nothing. Why won't he say something? Why won't he agree? Or disagree? Or talk about something else—

Gary's hand is already in his pocket. He withdraws the money with trembling fingers. The picture is accidentally pulled out with it. He realizes with both anger and relief that he is short on the needed money.

He puts the money in his lap, and strokes the picture timidly.

"April." He speaks out loud. "You love me. I know you do." He can see the outline of her smiling face, pink chiffon—

His eyes lock with the stranger's defiantly. "Well, she does!"

Defensively. "She does."

Desperately. "Doesn't she?"

He HAS to know now, but—

"I-I only have thirty pounds," he says. The Stranger's eyes harden at the news, his gaze falls back upon the rose in his hand, and Gary wonders if he will in fact slip it back into his pocket.

Making his decision, the stranger takes the money from Gary's lap.

"Thirty pounds will suffice, Mister Finn. Even for a prize such as this, I cannot take what you cannot give."

He extends the rose, and one bill. "The bargain is sealed . . . at twenty pounds, should you decide you would rather eat alone this morning after you've seen the truth."

Gary feels mixed emotions at this action. Is it a gift, but he thought behind it is a pessimistic one. The Stranger already feels sorry for him.

The money is in the stranger's hand and the rose is in Gary's. His breath comes in sharp jerks. He licks his lips, looks around the room.

Janet averts her eyes, buries her face in Kevin's shoulder. Kevin shrugs helplessly. The stranger nods. The shadows wait.

The petals surround a center that now burns brightly in his eyes, the mist parts.

There is nothing, only solid blue, for many seconds. Then the light dims to complete darkness, almost. . . except. . .

The room is lit by a single candle only. The flames flicker from a slight wind. There is a woman. Sitting, no, lying across cushions.

Pillows. It is a bed, their bedroom.

The image closes in, and he sees her, his wife, April, lying on the bed, eyes wide awake and staring at the flame. The clock on the night-desk reads 4:00.

Gary knows his bedroom is well-lit during the day. This is the early-morning.

She reaches under the pillow and pulls out a framed picture, looks at it. Gary can make out a white wedding dress, another tall figure with his face.

Her arms fold around the surface and she embraces it close to her chest, lying back on the pillows. A sigh lingers in the air as she holds the picture close, stroking his image.

Suddenly, his view wavers, blinking out in a swirl of kaleidoscopic colors and images. Gary, in a tuxedo, April, a white dress, somewhere, an orchestra is playing and he's grabbed her around the waist, swinging her around the dance floor in mad passion. He drops her to her feet, kissing her. Her arms wrap around his waist, pulling him tightly to her. He can see her head resting on his shoulder, eyes closed, a smile of joy crosses her face. April, as her name, is filled with new life.

The colors fade, and the image re-forms to the bed. The woman gets up, crosses the room, looks at herself in the mirror.

Gary watches in stunned fascination as she combs her hair, poses in her negligee, her hand rests on her hip, she smiles at the image, runs the brush back through her hair. She picks the clock up. He'll be coming home soon. . .

The rose drops in his lap. He senses that the others, his companions, are on the edge of their seats. He blinks away tears (realizes for the first time that he is crying). Janet is watching, biting her lip. Gary tries to smile, laugh, but he is drained. The best he accomplishes is a slight upward curling of his lip.

It is enough. Janet squeals with joy, Kevin laughs, and the stranger's hand clasps against his shoulder in congratulations.

"I am happy for you," he says, slips the rose into his breast jacket pocket as he speaks. Gary nods, says nothing, so the stranger prompts him. "Please speak. I am curious to know what is going through your mind."

Gary shakes his head rapidly, as if waking from a dream. He rubs his eyes and blinks. He looks at the stranger.

"I know what love is," he says. "I always did."

The stranger nods. "Yes, I suppose you did."

Gary chuckles, thinks back to when it all started. It seems years ago.

"And I can support what I said earlier. Love is based on faith. I didn't need that rose. Without it, I'd still be in love, I'd still be happy."

The stranger says nothing for a moment. Then, his head flings

back and he laughs, loudly, madly. Gary shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

The stranger stands, still shaking his head. "Faith? You think what you're feeling now is based on faith?"

"Before you ever stepped in here, I had faith in April." Gary yells. "If I had never met you, it would still be just as strong with or without the rose."

"Of course you had faith." The stranger's head nods in agreement, and then his finger raises with the word "but!"

"You had faith because that was all you COULD have. When I entered, it was the first time you were aware that love could be proven."

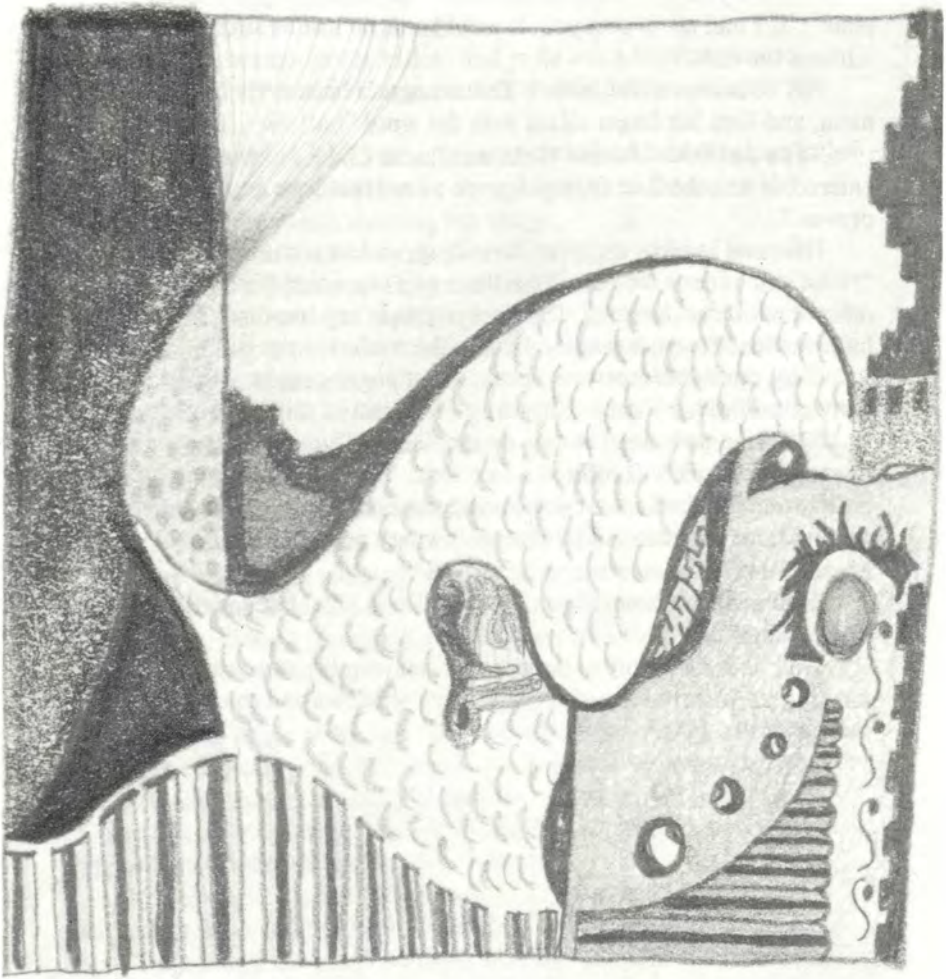
His hand reaches up, over the railing, and he retrieves his hat. "Now, you answer me this. Was there any one couple here that refused a look at the rose? Did anybody here say 'no thank you, sir, I have no need for your magic. I know the truth without it'?"

Gary opens his mouth to speak, the stranger cuts in. "With conviction, Mister Finn." Gary stops, his train of thought broken off.

The stranger's hand is now on the door. "I've seen this over and over again. Janet was offered a free look. She took it without hesitation. Mister Stewart discovered firsthand the negative side of trading faith for fact. And I even got twenty pounds from YOU, Mister Finn."

The latch clicks noisily as it comes loose. "Is that your definition of faith?"

And he is gone, off to the next car, leaving the three remaining passengers to the mercy of the flickering shadows and the privacy of their own thoughts.



Notebook Drawing #5 Gary M. Kendall

Poet, Modern

by Frank P. Baukert

MODERN poetry sprays on papyrus

Like M D U Flung at a White—Washed WALL.

SON of JACK POLLOCK reincarnated as a POET, MODERN.

ABstRacT EPESO-ism as poetic clunker (with warranty expired)
XRSIN

going to p eC^{es} so Fast, MEANING is KIA'ed by the SHRAPnel.
i

Look at me !!!!!

IAM }})MODERN{{{ POETRY—

ICAN CUSS, and be YOUNG and ANGRY

ICAN take BEAUTY and drag it
d
own to the sewer and IAM SO FREE— ICAN REDUCE

ALL relationships to ANIMAL functions.

IAM GREAT

Tell me, up and Ever Enthusiastically Cumming poet—

Do all your Typerwriters have broken shift keys?



Untitled

Selina Heck

Books & Mirrors

by Keith Banner

(A poem about Nathan F. Leopold, Jr. & Richard A. Loeb, two young men who, in 1924, killed a boy named Bobby Franks to see if they could get away with it. This poem is written in Nathan Leopold's voice.)

I

I loved him in the car—
All smug with his fedora
On his lap, hissing
About Nietzsche,
Smacking the window
When flies entered.

Intelligence leaked in his sentences;
Crime formed in the corners of his eyes.
My dreams
Blended into his theories; love
Is often like burglary,

The teeth-grinding pleasure, trying to remain
Quiet.
Often we would cheat at bridge,
The cards dimly lit,
Our feet finding each other
Beneath the table.
The Shadowy windows of the family parlour
Reflected us: two young geniuses
In tweed coats and black neck-ties,
One smiling
The other grinning.

Together,
We learned how to exist—how to turn
Life into an abstraction. We learned
How to make deals with each other,
The secret pleasure of a private bureaucracy,
The romance of a clean sentence,
A legal message—
A spiky sexual spark
In the blank money-rich museum
Of new cars, green marble
And family.

In the gangster Chicago
Of a faggot's dreams
(industrial rhythms, sleeping machines),
His girlish eyes darted when I mentioned
"Love";
His eyes curved when he made the connection
Between "that"
And suffocation.

II

One night,
We watched boys
Play baseball, the green
Gleaming
Velvet of a field, rolling arms,
Blonde-wood bats, crisp white uniforms.

The black sky trailed smoke;
There was something sinister in the pipes.

One boy, one boy—

III

The crime
He concocted
With my help: Kidnap
A boy, kill him with an ice-pick, throw
Hydrochloric acid on his face
To smear his identity.

What a beautiful idea.
Gag the child with a white shirt in the back-seat
Of a new red car.
The clarity. Such purity made me quiver.

I gripped the steering wheel, turning the
Gray corner, while he strangled and stabbed
The boy; I caught glimpses of it in the rear-
View mirror; arms covered in blood-rivulets,
A shaking face like an animal, the fingers
Flying eventually like insects.

Then it was over.
I thought:
It's over.

IV

The body filled the car
 Like a fog—his memory stank
 Like something unsanitary.

All I wanted was privacy,
 Crisp finality,
 A steel door closing;

We carried the body to a small river.
 Its face was a red-black organ,
 Seeping—but the eyes stared out,
 Peeled of their lids,
 And its hands floated
 In the dank water like lillies,
 And I saw the sky lit
 With a cold dawn,
 Ice melting in the trees,
 The turquoise clouds
 Tarnished like jewelry.

V

One last time,
 I said
 In the small room, shaking: I wanted him
 Quiet and drunk.

The image of the dead boy
 Left nothing but an unclean residue
 In my thoughts,
 Like litter after a party.

I lit a candle.
 I took hold of his hand, delicately
 Taking off his wrist-watch.
 He moaned.
 But I continued—the window trying to gleam

Through pulled curtains,
 And I put him in bed,
 And I undressed.

We slept the dead day
 Into a finely constructed dream.
 I fingered him

Until I was asleep.



Totems

Selina Heck

Truman Baker's Acquittal

by Troy Riser

Huddled deep in his winter coat, looking neither left nor right, Truman Baker walked from the county courthouse to the parking lot. Behind him he could hear the bustle and shoe clatter of people pouring from the doorway onto the limestone steps. Ahead, his wife and his mother waited in the car.

Sheila revved the old engine impatiently. Foam dice dangled from the rearview mirror, swaying slightly as the car rumbled and coughed. Dirty gray smoke spewed from the rusted exhaust.

When he opened the door, Sheila slid across the worn vinyl seat until her shoulder was pressed against the passenger-side window. He settled behind the wheel and adjusted the seat to make room for his legs, ample stomach indented by the wheel, and glanced at his wife and thought the space between them on the seat seemed like the longest distance in the world. He slammed the door and shifted into Drive and turned onto the street and headed home.

It was cold in the car. The heater was broken again and one rear window was gone, shattered by a rock thrown in ambush, replaced with a black plastic garbage bag fastened tautly over the gap with electrical tape. Truman Baker looked up and saw a few stubborn leaves remaining in the trees. The sky was a low gray ceiling, spitting snow. Large, wet flakes struck the unfrozen ground and disappeared. Sheila blew warm breath on her cupped hands. His mother shifted her weight, leaning forward to speak, looming over his shoulder. Her voice was strident and loud.

Hazel Baker said, "I knew some a them people in that courtroom all my life. You'da thought at least some a them'd be happy you went free. You'da thought at least someone in there'd be big enough to come up and say they was wrong."

Truman Baker grunted and slapped the pockets of his coat with his free hand, searching for a pack of cigarettes. He found the pack and slid one out and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. The lighter on the dashboard was broken, so he reached across Sheila's lap and fumbled in the glove compartment for matches, the car swerving slightly as he took his eyes from the road.

"I swore no way on God's earth could you ever have done such a thing, no matter what anybody said, and they'd just look at me sideways like I was some old crazy woman without the sense God gave me where my son was concerned."

The glove compartment was cluttered with old bills and yellowed receipts and spare fuses. He straightened and looked at Sheila and made a striker-on-flint motion with his thumb, remembering too

late she no longer smoked or drank or swore when she was angry. Three times a week she slipped away to be with Jesus, returning home spent and disheveled and filled with The Spirit. She prayed on her knees. She spoke in tongues. She was Born Again. She was Saved. Truman Baker thought maybe she had wanted to be saved for a long time. He spit the unlit cigarette from his mouth and let it fall unheeded to the floorboard.

"I felt like a voice in the wilderness," his mother said.

The car fish-tailed slightly on the slick surface of the road as he pulled onto the short, gravel lane leading to the ramshackle garage. The first thing he noticed was the bright, bold red letters spraypainted across the sides and windows of his home. Streamers of toilet paper festooned the barren, skeletal oak in front of the porch. The lawn was rutted and plowed in shallow, tire-wide trenches. The trashcans behind the lean-to addition he had built had been overturned, the contents scattered like confetti over the yard.

"Sonsabitches," he cried, thumping the wheel with the heel of his hand. This was not the coming home he had imagined. He had pictured Sheila smiling, arms spread wide like the movies, saying O Truman, O baby, thank God you're home! He had envisioned bright sunshine and green grass and a sky so blue it hurt.

"Kids," Hazel Baker said, "the little bastards."

Truman Baker got out of the car and stepped around and opened the door for his mother, grasping her by the crook of her dimpled elbow and leading her up the icy walk. When he reached the threshold, he touched the paint on the glass of the storm door and his blunt fingertip came away wet and smeared with red.

"We'll scrub it off," Hazel Baker said. Her eyes were wide and round as moons, and she was chuffing air like a bellows.

"Oil-based," Sheila said. "It don't just wash away."

"We'll paint over it, then," the old lady retorted.

Wisps of limp, dark brown hair fell in Sheila's eyes. She flicked them away absentmindedly and motioned him to go ahead, open the door.

Truman Baker shambled inside, welcoming the wave of warm air with a sigh. He shrugged off his coat and tossed it on the davenport. Sat down. Put up his feet. Closed his eyes.

"Leastways they dint break in," Hazel Baker said.

He half-opened his eyes and looked around. The sun was going down and the living room was growing dark and grainy as a cave. There were no muddy footprints on the rugs, no broken glass, no scrawled misspelled warnings on the walls. No slashed linen or ruptured pillows. The handblown glass and brass and ceramic dogs and pigs and chickens filling the shelves were undisturbed. GOD BLESS OUR HAPPY HOME in counted cross-stitching hung safely by the door.

"I'm goin'ta lay down for a while and get me some rest," his mother said, bending at the waist, presenting her cheek. The tickly

sweet perfume she wore caused the hair in his nose to prickle and itch. The pancake makeup she wore for special occasions tasted like chalk and dust. She straightened with an effort, bracing a hand on her hip for leverage.

"It's good to have you home and safe, Truman. I never doubted for a minute." She looked at the ceiling with reverence, and he unconsciously followed her gaze. "I knew we were bein' looked out for," she went on. "I knew things'd turn out right in the end."

When she had gone to her room, Truman Baker got up from the chair and padded to the kitchen, standing for a moment at the arched entrance to watch his wife as she bent down and took an iron skillet from the space beneath the sink, the waitress muscles of her arm flexing as she hefted its weight. She placed the skillet with a clang on the burner of the stove.

"You're awful quiet," he said, taking his place at the table.

She took down a package of macaroni and cheese from the cupboard, stretching, standing on her toes. Sheila Baker was a small woman, tiny bird bones, buttocks thin and tense as the haunches of a doe. He saw dark half-moons beneath her eyes he had never noticed before, and her skin was pale, sapped of color.

"Say something," he cried, slapping the table with the flat of his hand with a sound like a shot.

She froze for a moment, startled, and then turned and took a package of ground beef wrapped in white butcher paper from the refrigerator.

"I never touched that girl," he said. "You were there every day of the trial. You heard the evidence. There was no way in hell I coulda done all that girl said I did in just three minutes. No way." He badly wanted a cigarette. His cigarettes. His cigarettes were in his coat. His coat was in the living room. The hell with it.

Sheila opened a can of french-cut green beans and poured the contents into a pan and put the pan on the stove. She began to mold the ground beef into patties.

"They found me innocent," he said.

"They found you not guilty," she replied. "There's a difference between innocent and not guilty."

"Jesus," he said, rolling his eyes, "there's just no talking to you anymore. Its like trying to cut soup with a knife."

"I know you didn't touch that girl, Truman. That ain't the point. It never was, at least as far as you and me were concerned." She paused for a moment to wipe her shiny forehead with the back of her hand. "God don't just care what you do with your hands. He cares what you think in your head and what you feel in your heart. I know you, Tru. We've been together fifteen years. I think you wanted that girl, and as far as The Lord is concerned, the wanting is as bad as the having."

She put on water to boil and turned the dial of the burner on the stove. Gas hissed and then woofed into flame.

"I got meeting tonight," she said. "I got to go out here in a little while."

"You know something," he said, pushing away from the table, rising to his feet, hitching his trousers, "I think I liked you better when you was dancin' on the bar at The Bear River Inn, all drunk and laughin' and carryin' on. Leastways I knew you then."

"Tomorrow you going to help me clean up the yard?" she asked matter-of-factly.

He looked out the kitchen window, at the spraypaint emblazoned on the other side of the glass, and imagined the work it would take to remove it, the scraping and the scrubbing. It was too dark to see the damage done to the yard. He nodded his head.

"We had another one of those phone calls while you were out yesterday."

"What'd they say?"

"I guess whoever he was figured which way the jury was going to go today. He said he thought it would be best if we left."

Truman Baker blew air through his nose with a derisive gust.

"It'll blow over," he said. "Things'll calm down."

"I don't think so, Tru. Small towns got long memories."

"We leave they'll think I did it for sure."

"It don't matter what they think. We could pack what we can in the car and a U-Haul trailer and start fresh somewhere else. Lord knows we don't have much."

"I ain't running away. I ain't run from anything in all my life."

"Chicago," Sheila said. "We got family in Chicago."

"We ain't going anywhere."

She put the meat in the skillet. She poured dry macaroni into the boiling water. She stirred the beans.

Truman Baker leaned against the cabinet and thought of that night at Terry Abel's house. Unlike most whose life was a shambles, he was able to pinpoint the time and the place he had begun the downhill slide.

Euchre with the boys, much beer and talk. A bladder full to bursting Man, my teeth are floating. Down the hall, on the left. A half-opened door. An impulse.

She had been standing in front of the mirror, naked, twelve years old, holding herself, turning this way and that, curious at the changes. The sun had been going down, shining through the filmy curtains, capturing her profile like a cameo.

You shouldn't oughtta be doing that, he had said.

The girl had been frozen at first, like an animal caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, and then had burst into frantic motion, grabbing at the bed the blanket anything, saying Mister Baker my mom please don't tell my mom.

I won't tell nobody, he had said. Just you get your clothes on.

". . . and don't forget to wake your mother," Sheila was saying. Her coat was on and she was fishing in her purse for the keys. "You

need anything from town?"

"You know what I need?" He was going to say, *I need more than my family, I need to feel part of something greater than myself, I need to be more than not guilty*, but he was a man who worked solely with his hands, in a factory, working a lathe, shaping four by four by twelve inch blocks of wood into chair legs and bed posts, silent and daydreaming for hours at a stretch, and the words would not come.

"I need you home tonight," he said. "God won't mind."

"It's important to me," she said. "I need someplace to go and be away and not feel bad while I'm there."

The heavy ring of keys she was carrying jangled like a small length of chain as she turned and walked through the now dark living room by touch and memory to the door. The car started after a time, chugging lethargically in the cold. The wash of headlight beams spilled onto the walls of the living room and diminished as the car backed away and was gone.

Truman Baker felt lonely in the kitchen so he lumbered into the living room and took up his coat and found his cigarettes and sat down on the couch. The food smells wafting from the kitchen caused his stomach to roil and churn. He felt tight as a fist inside. The dark was comforting. He slid his hand across the slick veneer surface of the coffee table and found a lighter and lit a cigarette, the snap of the flame leaving an afterimage like the flare of a welding arc. It calmed his hands. He heard the squeak of old bedsprings down the hall as his mother turned and muttered something something something in her sleep. He lowered his head onto his chest and tried not to think about anything at all. The floorboards of the old farmhouse creaked as they settled further on the foundation. A strange truck pulled onto the driveway. He got up from the couch just as the motor died outside and he parted the curtains of the window beside the front door.

Truman Baker saw three men piling from the cab of a pickup truck, the dome light cutting off abruptly as the door slammed, before he could discern their features. He dropped the curtain and turned and hurried to the closet in the hall, stepping lightly for his size, rummaging in the corners by feel until his hand closed on the tapered neck of a softball bat. He took up the bat with both hands, choking high like a bunter and went back and put his ear briefly to the door. He heard the scrape of workboots on the concrete porch, low impatient mutters. He stepped back when one of them began to knock: short, hard-knuckled, insistent raps.

"Who is it, whaddaya want, I got a gun," he called, pulling on the door knob to test the strength of the lock.

The knocking stopped.

His mother was awake. Her shadowy bulk filled the entrance to the hallway. Her voice was confused, full of sleep and querulous.

"Truman? Truman honey?"

He motioned her quiet with a finger to his lips and nodded his

head in the direction of the telephone, thinking Call The Police so hard and loud in his head he thought she must certainly hear.

"My God," she exclaimed. "Who is it, baby? What's going on?"

"Baker? You hear me, Baker?" The voice was deep and big, barely muffled by the door.

He leaned against the wall beside the door and blinked away the sweat stinging his eyes. The bat had grown slick in his hands. He held the bat tighter until his fingers ached, sucked his belly into his chest, spread his legs uncertainly apart. He heard his mother fumble in the dark for the telephone, the distant, nasal hum of the receiver, her mumbled, breathless curses as her pudgy, nervous fingers missed the numbers of the dial.

"Baker? You come out or we come in."

Truman Baker thought about making a break for the back door and striking out for the woods beyond, slipping through the bramble and the scrub stealthily, invisibly, finding sanctuary with compassionate neighbors, but his paunch was like a bag of birdshot slung around his waist and there were no compassionate neighbors. His neighbors thought he was guilty. His neighbors hated his guts.

"You come out, we just talk."

Fuck the neighbors, he thought. Fuck running away.

He motioned Hazel Baker to the safety of her room with a jerk of his head, and she nodded yes, right, now, right away, and refused to move, swaying on her feet, hands covering her mouth like a Speak No Evil monkey figurine.

"I'm coming out," he said to the door. He flicked the switch of the single, yellow bulb, illuminating the porch and stepped outside. Cold November wind stung his face, causing him to grimace and squint.

They stood around him in a loose semi-circle: two wearing ski masks, the third hiding his face with an old pair of nylon pantyhose. Part of Truman Baker wondered how the man could see.

"We want you out, Baker. We want you gone," said the tallest of the three, the one who had spoken through the door. "Your kind is a disease," the man went on. "We don't want you near our kids, hanging around playgrounds or whatever the hell it is you do."

"We drew lots, Short Eyes," said the other ski mask, grinning, showing dull green, widely spaced, even teeth.

Pantyhose giggled nervously, a short, constantly moving, prancing man Truman Baker thought he recognized, but names matter little at such a time.

"I didn't do anything," Truman Baker said. "The fact I'm standin' here right now a free man is proof enough of that."

"Proof a nothin', you piece a shit," Tall Ski Mask said as he pistoned his long, bony arm forward from the waist in a snap of motion in a grab for the bat, and then they were all upon him, wrenching the bat from his grasp, pinning his arms behind his back

till his shoulders were pulled back with a bowstring tension. Two held him on either side. He was rabbit-punched in the kidneys and forced to his knees on the concrete.

"You like little girls, Baker? Here's your little girl."

The base of the tapered handle was driven like a bayonet thrust into the bundle of nerves just below the breast bone and Truman Baker grunted, folding inward, expelling breath in a rush. When he found his breath, he was ("Hold him, boys.") struck in the side of the face and his back teeth spilled from his mouth like pebbles from a cup. They released his arms, letting him drop like a bag of feed. He curled into a ball while they kicked and punched and struck him with the bat until time seemed measured by the interval between blows.

"Time to go," one of them, said, pausing to clear his throat, hawking phlegm, spitting. "I think the old lady called the police."

Truman Baker snuffled blood up his nose and gagged. They were a ring of contrasting voices overhead. It was hard to tell one from the other.

"Better turn asshole here on his side so he don't choke to death."

"I say let him choke. We might as well take this thing all the way. No big loss."

"Nah," another interjected. "We done enough. I didn't come out here to kill anybody."

A reluctant murmur of assent. Rough hands came down and pulled him by the shirt onto his side. The cold cement burned his cheek. He was facing the blackness of the yard and the driveway and the road. He saw the headlights of the car when it pulled onto the drive, and heard the familiar rumble and rattle of a car running on bald tires and rust.

Sheila was home. She honked the horn frantically and flickered the headlights bright-dim, bright-dim, and then threw herself from the car and ran toward the porch, steps crunching on the frozen grass.

Two of the men broke and ran, giving Sheila wide berth as they sprinted to the truck. Doors slammed and the big pickup roared into life.

"Consider this a warning, Baker," Tall Ski Mask said, grinding Truman Baker's hand under his heel. "Think long and hard about finding a new place to live." He stepped lightly to the ground as Sheila reached the porch and loped to the waiting truck. It lurched out of the drive onto the county road, spinning gravel.

Truman Baker forced himself onto his hands and knees and opened his mouth and tried to speak, but all that came out was a liquid gargle. A piece of tooth.

His wife knelt beside him, crying, saying his name over and over, and propped his head onto her lap. He buried his broken face into the thick, scratchy wool of her sweater. He felt purged and empty, hollow as a drum.

"I came back," Sheila said. "I was all the way in town and changed my mind. I was being selfish."

He heard his mother open the door and step outside, silent as a cow.

Sheila began to rock him gently, softly moaning. He wanted to tell her everything was all right, would be all right, but it hurt too much to speak. He turned onto his back and reached up and cupped her face in his hand. Touching her was real.



Notebook Drawing #3 Gary M. Kendall



Domesticated Animals

Cindy Mohr

Sarah with Strings

Anonymous

Alone in a
porch swing, she
bent over her
guitar and
strummed a song
of Bill being
gone,

"Baby's comin' home,"
she said. And mama yelled,
"Get him off your mind."

We stayed on
the porch
nights and
nights listening to
her moans, and we
found a cousin
to dance with; then
we'd lean to kiss—
till mama
said:
"Time for bed."

From the bed
room window
we heard Sarah
play a tune of
"Maybe Someday." And
Mama always said,
"You just gotta forget,"
as she sat knitting
in her rocking chair.

Sometimes
Sarah's music
got caught
in her throat, and
come morning
she'd be sleeping
in the swing
Next to her guitar,
with mama's
finished knitting
fallen off her lap.



Untitled

Kevin C. Gilbert



Grandpa Bob

Virginia Szabo

Remembrance

by John Herrin

More Grandpa, than Father.

His rough old hands chapped
red from years of hot lead
and backwards type,
slowly grip the Large Print
Edition of King James Bible.
The Thees and Thous of
salvation trace the muscles
of his mouth silently.

Slowly his eyes droop,
the bifocals sliding down
the bridge of his nose,
until finally the pages of
the Holy Book crinkle and
twist in a whispering way,
under the weight of its spine.

The Book lays across his
chest, protecting the scars
of Open Heart that almost took
him seven years ago.

I should be bitter that
he never played with me,
should be longing for those
rough hands to throw me a
football.

Should be angry that David
and Linda and Gerald
were young when he
was.

Then I check to see if
his chest is still rising
in regular cadence,
hoping it never stops—
I cover his legs with an
old patchwork quilt,
counting the days we
have left.

Coins on the Railroad Tracks

[to my Aunt Christy]

Anonymous

We went to bed with dirt
at the corners of our mouths,
and pressed our faces
to the second story window screen,
waiting for the 9 p.m. Pennsylvania.

It rolled and rumbled
through the blackness,
cutting the distant
stillness in two.

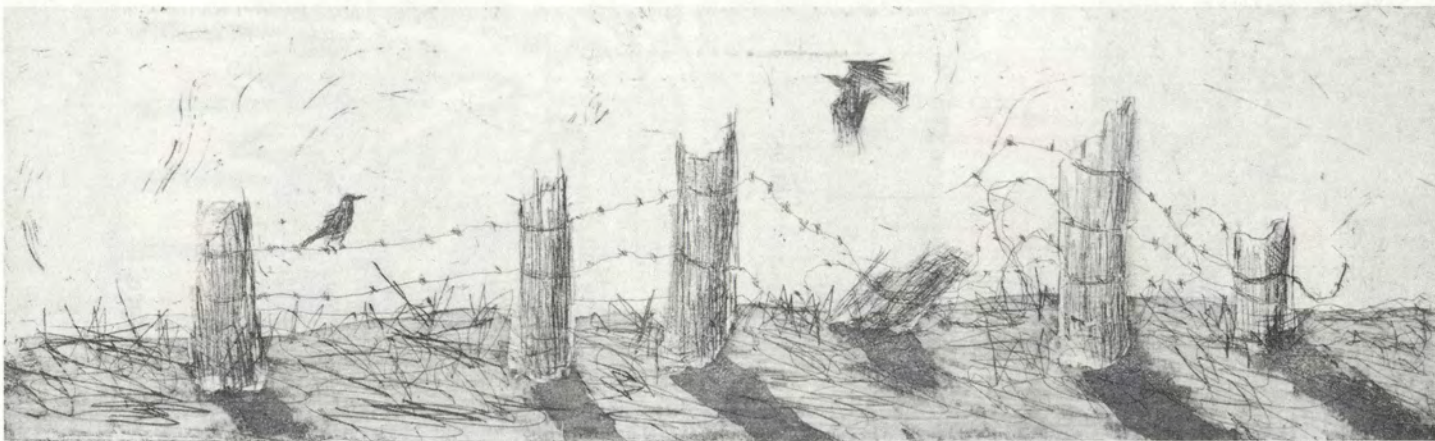
We pulled our blankets
from the bed, nailed our elbows
to the window sill, and held
the laughter in our throats.

It carved through our town,
barked louder than stray dogs,
pressed down on those rails,
its one eye blinked at us
while rest of Dustland slept.

The next morning we ran,
jumped the porch steps,
and flew
like spit
to haul in our prey.

Those copper pancakes
rattled in our pockets
the rest of the day; we rubbed
them for luck, and

that night
decided to
try rocks.



Corvus

Genesis Kimmell

The Green Woman

by Bill Ross

Like all my days,
she is lone and boneless.
She is my only water experience,
and she is all under.

Half-impulse, half-dead,
this green woman is in love.
Her thoughts taste like copper—
disks that slip.

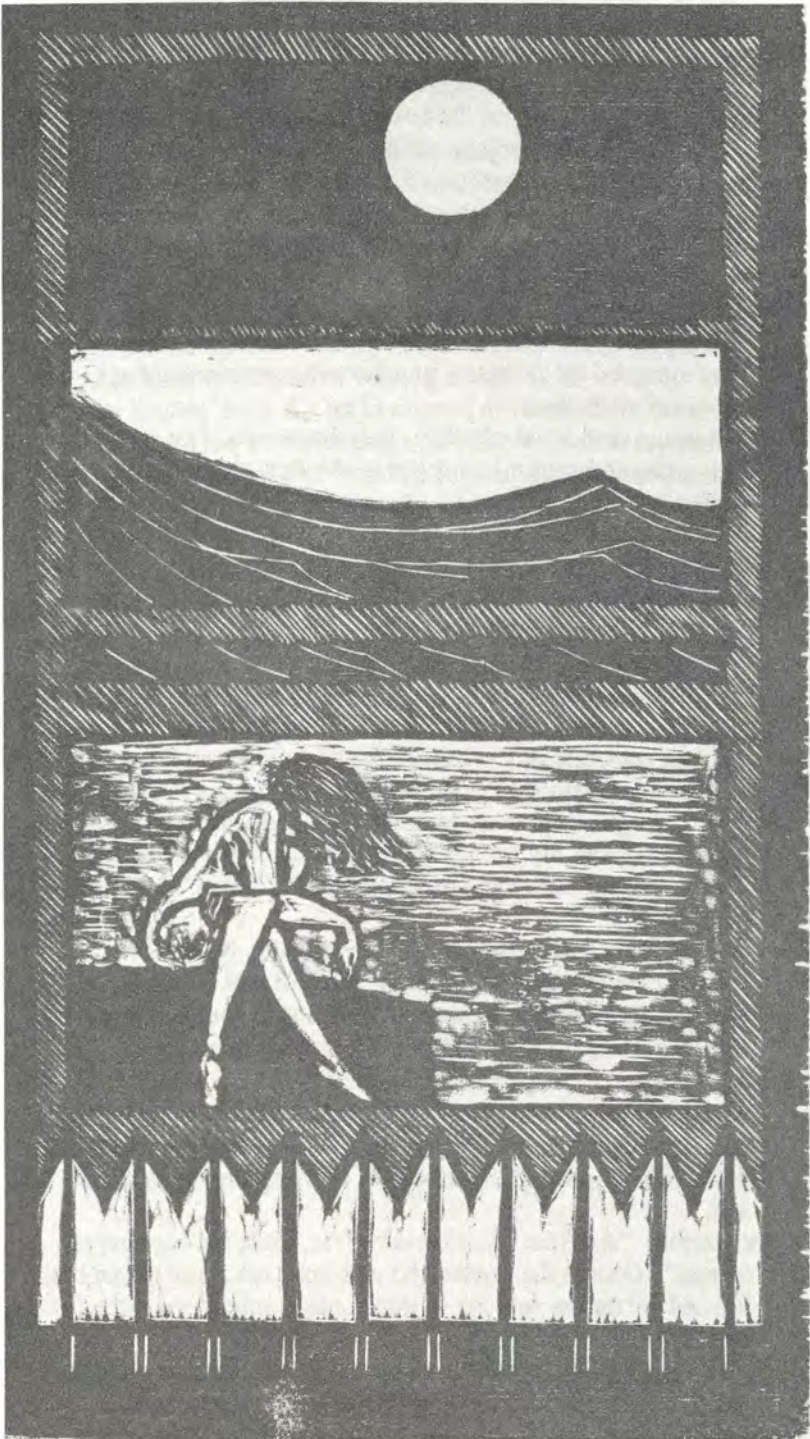
Her dreams are full of old-fashioned trains.
Rails guide her appetite.
The black smoke—such lust;
she wishes to be eaten this way.

To be tunneled out,
draining the thousands of tiny salt seas—
the experiences that have numbed her.

Love, hate: what's the difference?
If I could bring her out,
I could speed up the process.
Through her I can see

the train I walk toward,
moving hot and heavy
in my direction.
My green woman longs for this.

Pale before the whistle,
her color rushes to the surface,
arms out-stretched
all smiles.



Moon, Sea, Woman

John Ross

About the Authors and Artists

Diane Abel: So you want a short biography. I have attended IUPUI since May 1989. I am a history major, wishing to focus my studies on the history of the Soviet Union and our relationship with that country. I enjoy reading Russian/Soviet poetry and literature, which is some of the best in the world.

Anonymous: John Wayne advised actors in such a way as this—
“Talk low. Talk slow. And don’t say too much.” Was he a student at IUPUI?

Angela Balsler: I am a student at Herron and enjoy drawing industrial pipes, light shafts, bell towers, boiler rooms, and stairwells. I am intrigued by the many structures in our environment and how man made them.

Keith Banner is an artist who lives in Indianapolis. His art (performances and paintings mostly) is shown sometimes at 431 Gallery.

Frank P. Baukert: I am a senior at IUPUI majoring in the question of life, the universe, and everything and attempting to discover the meaning of citizenship. I hope to receive an education here and then get a real job when I grow up.

Lori A. Frame: I discovered an extreme amount of talent within myself at the tender age of 8 or so when I was required, through the cruel hierarchy of the Walkerton Elementary School System to create a picture of Christmas. I made a brilliant picture of the Nativity, in abstraction. I didn’t win, but this was the beginning of my own personal crusade against mindless art. To this day, I remain brilliant; my friends and colleagues will attest to that. “Live well, eat well, and create without inhibition,” that is my motto.

Kevin C. Gilbert: Born in Indianapolis in 1965. Now pursues artistic, creative expressions at the present role of student at Herron School of Art, Indianapolis. Plans to continue growing and expressing his own individual vision as time goes by.

Tracey A. Harner: Tracey has submitted to *genesis* before with other intensely drawn portraits of people. He plans to continue exploring these ideas and creating new images in photography.

Selena Heck: “My work is a release of energy from my spiritual self.”

John Herrin: “Art, like life, should be free, since both are experimental.” George Santayana. As a senior I am about to test both life and art for the veracity of this quote. I might even stop for a milkshake on the way.

Gary M. Kendall, Indianapolis, currently attends Herron—under the direction of J. Carr. Enjoys traveling; has escorted tours to Yugoslavia. A member of the Writers Center of Indianapolis. Collects 1st edition books. Has been known to be an autograph hound.

- Genesis Kimmell:** I am a sophomore at Herron majoring in print-making. My future goal is to one day write and illustrate Christian children's books. I feel there is a need for good wholesome literature for children that is not only fanciful, but teaches a good moral lesson.
- R. J. Sullivan:** "The Assurance Salesman" won the Rebecca Pitts award in Fiction. "Love is the irresistibile desire to be irresistibly desired." I don't remember the source of that thought, I'm sure it's not original, but I just thought you'd enjoy it.
- Cindy Mohr:** I am in my last semester at Herron School of Art. I want to keep studying and making art so I intend to go to graduate school.
- Shar:** Co-Winner: Creative Writing Award 1990
- Virginia Szabo:** I use my art to express my desires and feelings in response to the world around me. I like to look to my past for subject matter and find meaning in what may be mundane or everyday situations. Ultimately, I just want to be happy and enjoy life.
- Troy Riser** lives and works in Indianapolis. He doesn't care where he lives or works, so long as he is writing. Neither should you.
- Bill Ross** is an artist who lives in Indianapolis: he paints paintings and performs performances at 431 Gallery.
- John Ross:** I was born in the summer of '68 and raised in the woods of Parke County by a band of opossums. I always felt that I was different from the other opossums as I was spending my time sketching while everyone else played in the road. So I came to art school.

