

POINT OF VIEW



Point of View

1992-1993

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"Lost within the Grey Area
Somewhere Between Right
and Wrong"

Nick Page

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Aimee Lange

KNOCK WITH NO ANSWER

A collision of two pairs of lips
reunited lost giraffes
with purple tongues.
You stick to my mind
with a Krazy Glue bond;
and when it rains,
you tighten up
like a child's lips before Brussels sprouts.
I will wait with the dog,
under the table, until you decide
to pass a little my way.
Only because you are my chosen:
 the manager of my McDonald's,
 the cuticle of my nailbed,
 the ardvark of my ant community.
Fear of being lost and not being found escalates
as does the hidden desire to be sucked in.
I neglect eye contact with decision in order to be
one step closer to you.
Procrastination is my key
 until the day when you will recite my lines
without looking at the paper.

Aimee Lange

MY STALKING EXPERIENCE

I look down,
my toes curl in fear.
He takes a step,
one closer to me,
and pain climbs the walls of my interior.
The corner house-owner can hear, but
anticipation produces beaded upper lip sweat
without cure.
I look down,
his toes curl with immeasurable pleasure.
His squinted eyes show struggle
and then turn to eyes opened with amazement.
I perform and he applauds,
but my effort, I know, is one egg short of a dozen.
He says he was never good with numbers.
I understand, my cat is the same way,
but I am not here to teach algebra.
It is time to move on
so I reach for a smoke.
Stubbornness gives him internal satisfaction.

Scott Lumbard

PLATTE RIVER DOGS

I found him in the corner
of a dark and cold room,
small, shaven, wet paws
and all shivering done.
As I moved closer
the one ear he lifted
was from nothing
but the flea-itch of sound.

Soon, I was worn to my knees.
I warmed my hands
within the sparse steam
bubbling from his nostrils.
And when I could look no more,
I found his frosted paw-prints
and followed them round

and round
and down

to the banks of the Platte river,
where green sunken waters hang
from sallow dunes, as a long
tooth, knocked with age, hangs
from its pendulous nerve.

Then in that cold thirst
of room, I cradled
the dog into my arms,
and slowly chewed
on his well-chewed warts,
and slowly lapped
at his red, leaking sores.

And from the taste of sores
I tasted the salt of hands
that had been stolen from him.

Scott Lumbard

"AND THEN I KNOW I'M NOT HAPPY ENOUGH TO SET THE BOTTLE AFLOAT"

This breath blowing on the back of my neck will
never end.
I lie in bed and close my eyes to the window
sagging with darkness.
I fold my knees to my chest and strain to keep my thumb
from my mouth.
I am waiting for this breath to end and I never sleep.

Sometimes I think this breath will diminish.
It is when the sun is being lowered into the purple earth
and all the people
stand above with their flowers and handfulls of dirt—
the fathers bent and winded,
the mothers clutching the milken bodies of their sons.
Only then this humid
breath, thick as honey, blows harder over the back
of my neck, growling
down sweet over the chipped teeth of my spine.
Night falls like a truncheon
across my collarbones and knees and I am forced to the chair.
The full green moon
burns away the fog of my lids and the questions!
the questions!
Where were you that night? Who do you work for? From whom
are you hiding?
And when I say nothing and pretend to sleep, this breath
gathers those musty words
and kisses them into my ear: It was you...It was you... .

With this breath I am never alone.
When lastly I arise,
Cold from the clammy afterbirth of sheets,
and mince around
the puddles of fish flopping about the floor-
all I hear
are the gills of the walls shuddering and huffing away,
my bed leans
like a sand-barred scow, shed from the river's
fallen gold back,
I stuff the message into the bottle:

Hurry!
these walls are the prey of breath.
Hurry!
this breath will never end.

Scott Lumbard

THE DOWSER

The dowsing branch
broken
the dowser
stands on that gritty floor
of desert-
throat ragged from thirst
skin blind from sun-
and is lost
and is bothered-
dreaming
of cool blue waters
and pretty good woman person.
The wind lifts him-
lifts him
under desert-
under
dry cracked tongue and grinning snake
to that under river-
waters never frozen
waters never dry-
and banks thick with long moans
smoldering scents of fruit cores
and gray wildflowers bent and dripping
with torn fingernails
of rain.
The wind asks him:
Do you want to walk
into these waters?
or do you want to fall
into these waters?
And the dowser-
noting the waters-
black and thin and groggy-
says: Neither.
And the black
hand of waters
pulls
the dowser
down
from the wind

Audrey Marie Sheffield

CLOSE THE CHAPTER

Moving day arrives
defiant to close the chapter
determined destination
Jim beam boxes sealed memories sit silent
how do roaring waves of oceans reside
inside and not spill out on unsuspecting
u-haul ushers seating hushed boxes
in the darkened theater
The ghost of the first wedding
anniversary gift groans
words written across my chest
Fragile Breakable Move Carefully
rooms of remembrance
empty the tide moves
 in
and
 out
life is boxed so neatly
like a 30 minute tv show
everything fits
in the simple minded space
of the thoughtless trailer truck
the china box
bottom falls out glass drops like bombs
to a concrete
end one survivor in the sparkling
sea a gift from a friend
standing next to me
picking up the jagged diamond pieces
broken and beautiful
Last look the key is left to lay
alone
the door marked enter
is the door marked exit
it closes
Walking out to sun showered streets
azure skies startle
my eyes covered with dark glasses
another key turns
to move the truck forward

Audrey Marie Sheffield

YOU WATER WALK YOU WIND TALK

I do not wear drab doubt about you
Though briefly doubt lay as my lover
Mostly I was the companion in concord
With cold, cool, freezing. More than darkly doubt.
No. No. I said no 'til she cried. I didn't know.
I just said no. No, he's not. And you said,
"I wish you were cold or hot" Cold I was. No doubt.
"Or I'll spit you out." I was cold but changed
Like icicles melt because that crying wouldn't
Go away, like her death wouldn't. Truth I shouted.
Nobody heard at the grave that first winter snow
That melted. Now here's doubt
Wearing it's garish, grey shadow. It's me in the
Silver, silhouette reflection. Me.
You water walk. I don't. I drown, deep, dark
Sink a female, flesh rock overboard down.
You wind talk. It stops. It laughs when I start
Slurry speech. Knocks me over. Ha, ha, ha. You touch
Blind sockets to see. Frenzied fevers
Flee. Do gnarled, crippled limbs respond
To me? In stinking grave clothes Lazarus lay. You
Cried. Shouted "come forth". He did. I cried
When she died. I soul-shouted, shoved, pushed
"Come back." She didn't. If black robed sneak-up-on-you
Death puts his hard, heavy hand on my shoulder,
Would I say "Three days. Destroy this temple
And in three days, I'll"...No,
I'll be packing my goodbye suitcase. No shouting.
Shouting. Shouting. No. Doubt me. Like I doubted me
When I saw your face in the space of my heart that said
I heard and shock soft whisper said
Truth. Me. Why me? Isn't there someone more
Crisper, cleaner around the edges. Tide washed. Me?
Why care about—Physician for the sorrowful sick,
Shepherd for the lame lost. I didn't doubt you. I love
You. Doubt stared that stare at me.

Winter Wonderland



Black and white photograph

1940's Schoolgirl



Pen and ink/wash

Little Eric In A Chair



Movement No. 2



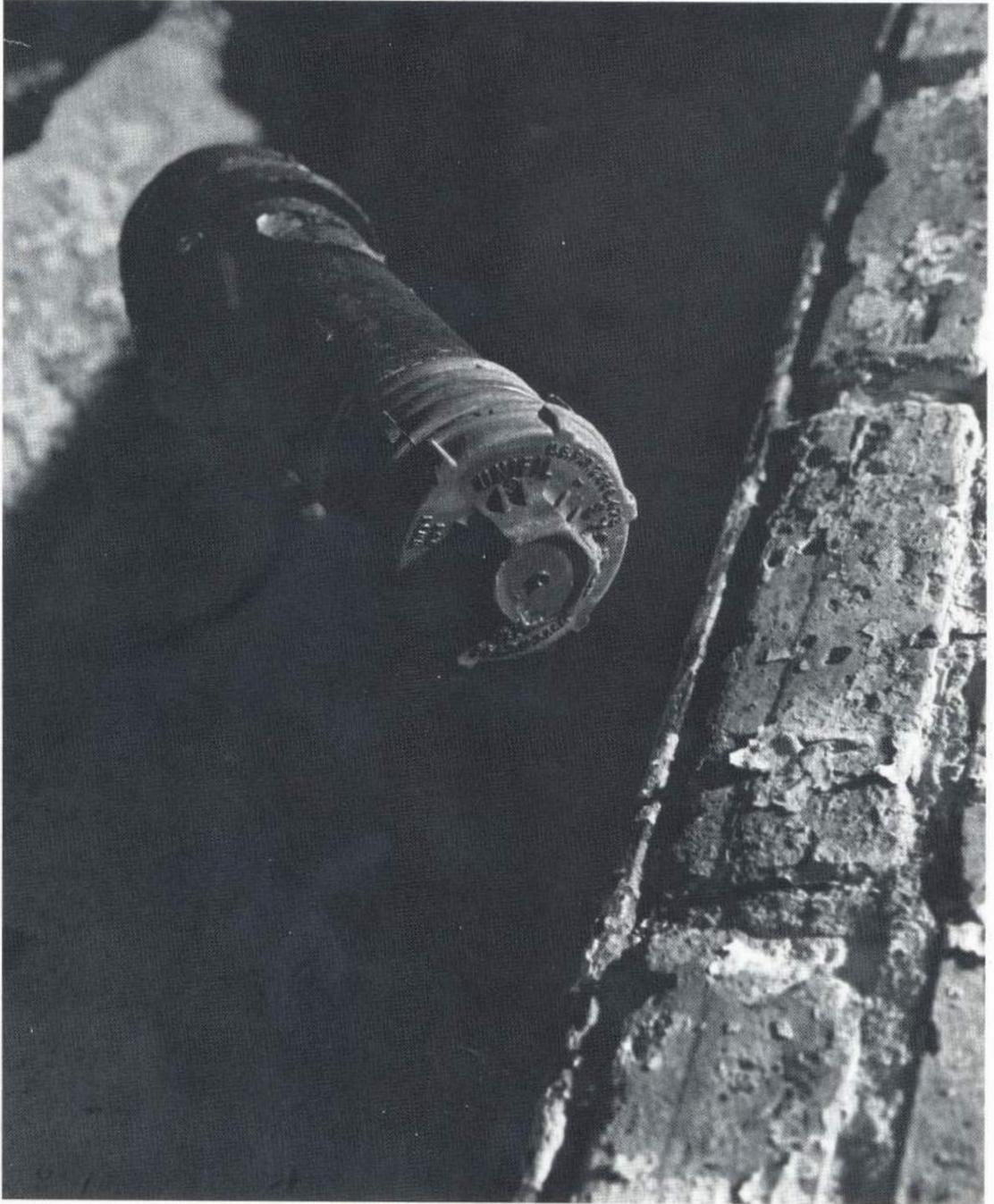
Black and white photograph

Industrial No. 6



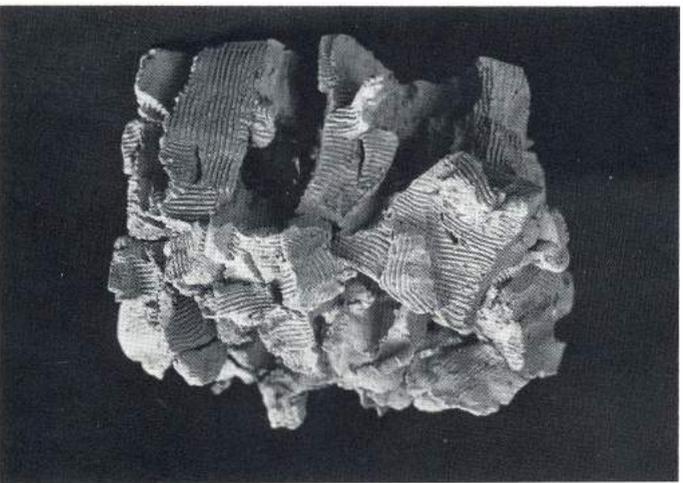
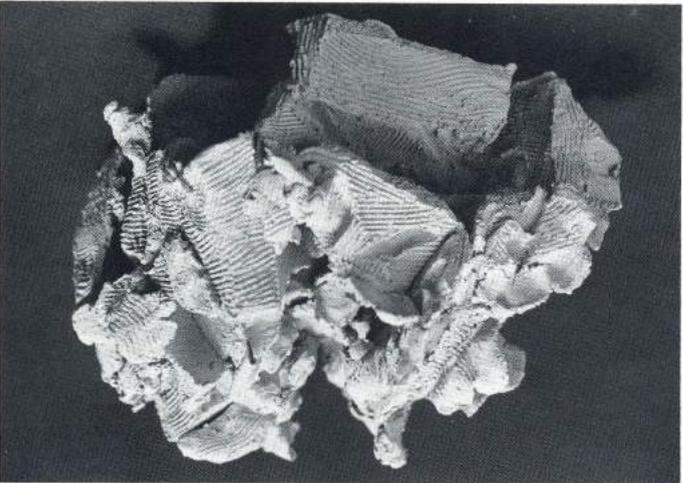
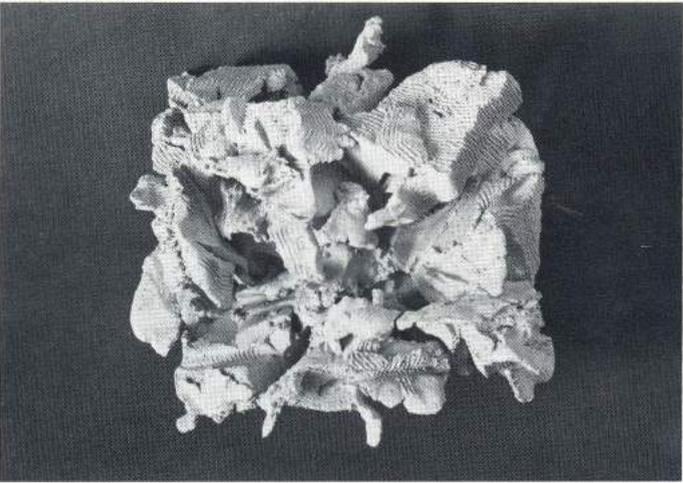
Black and white photograph

Industrial No. 3



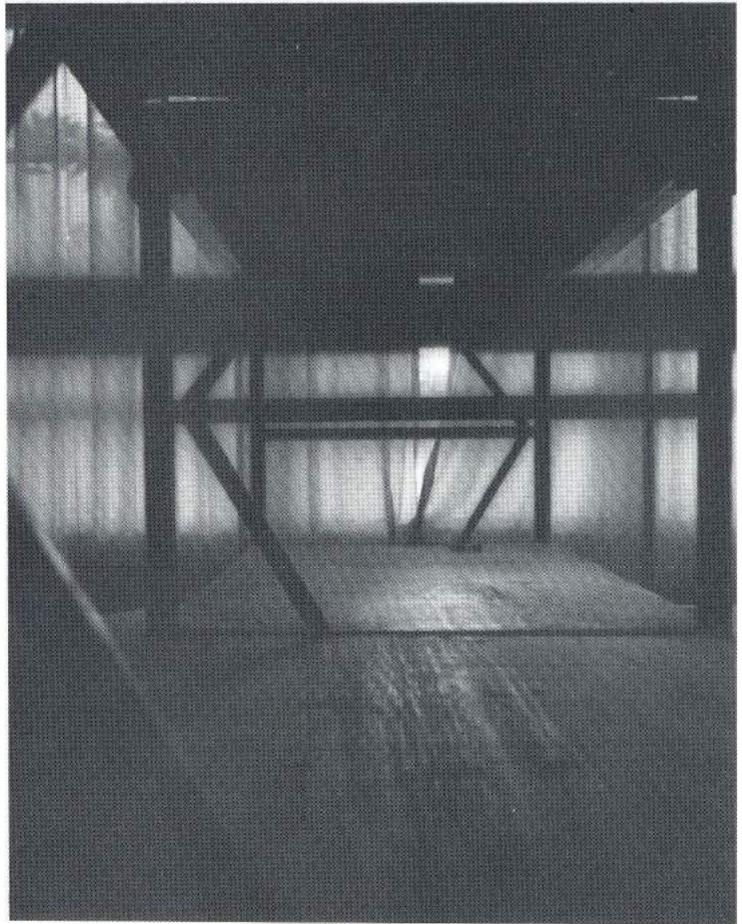
Black and white photograph

Pile of Parc



clay

Untitled



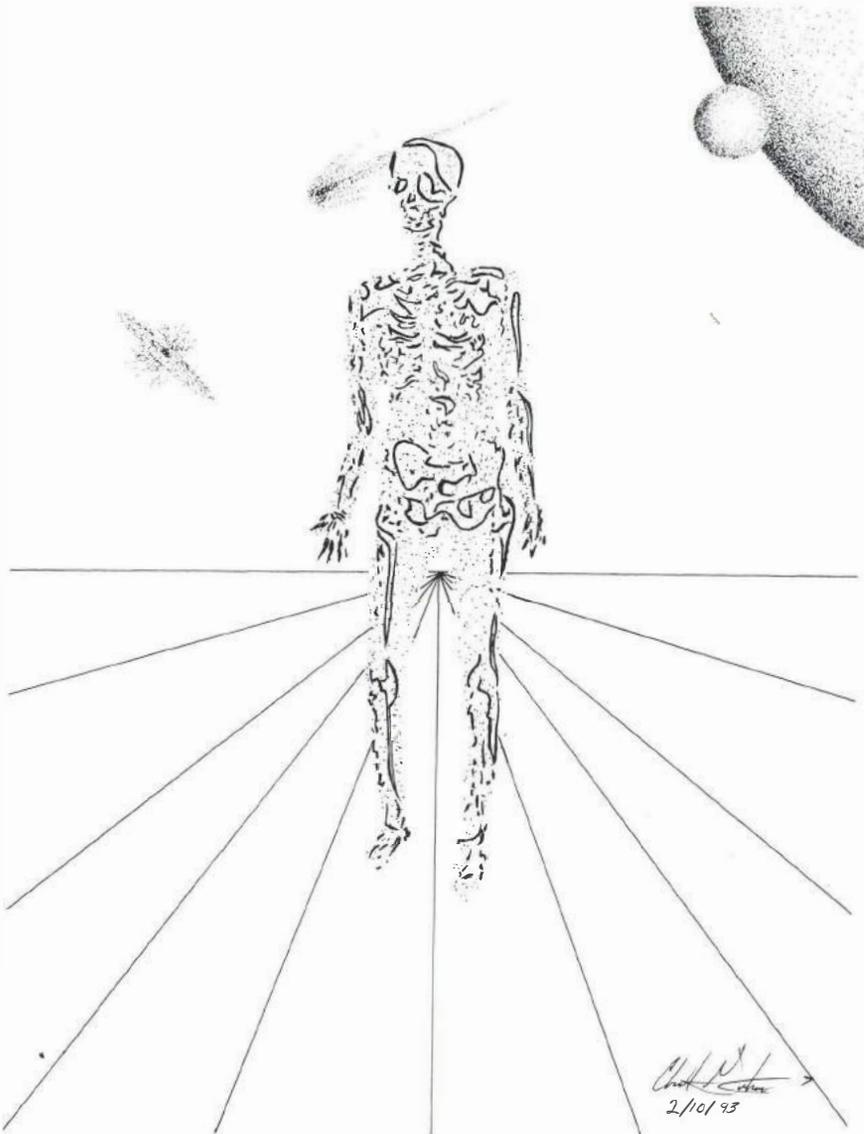
Black and white photograph

Untitled



Black and white photograph

I Mortal



Pen and ink

Aurora of the Earth



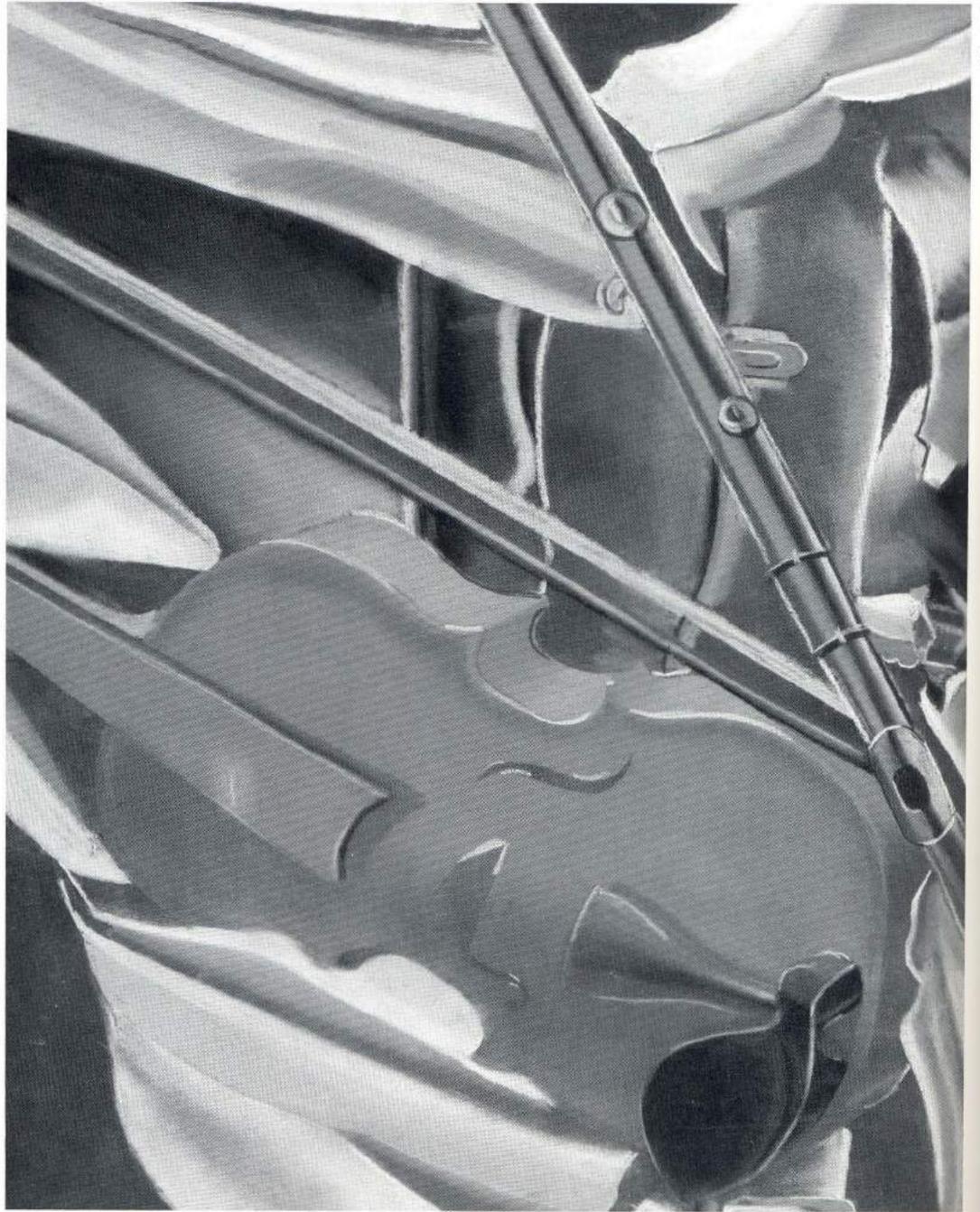
Pen and ink

Untitled



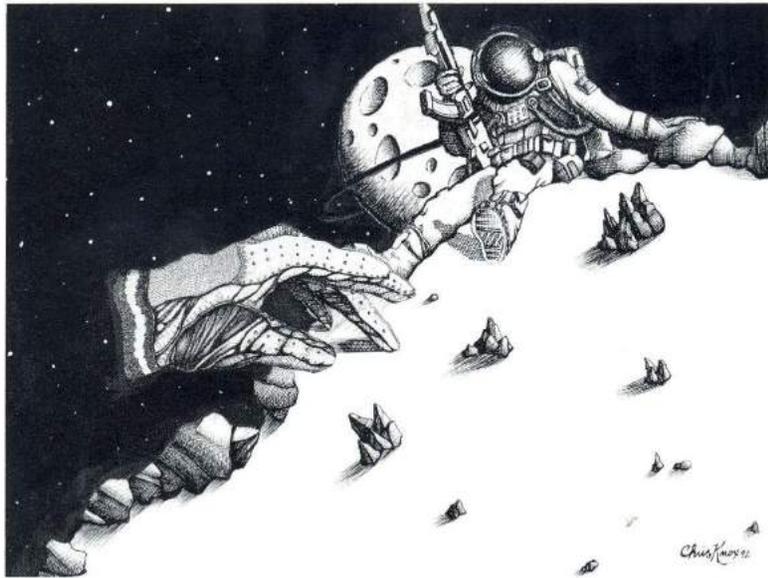
Pen and ink

I Do



Pastel

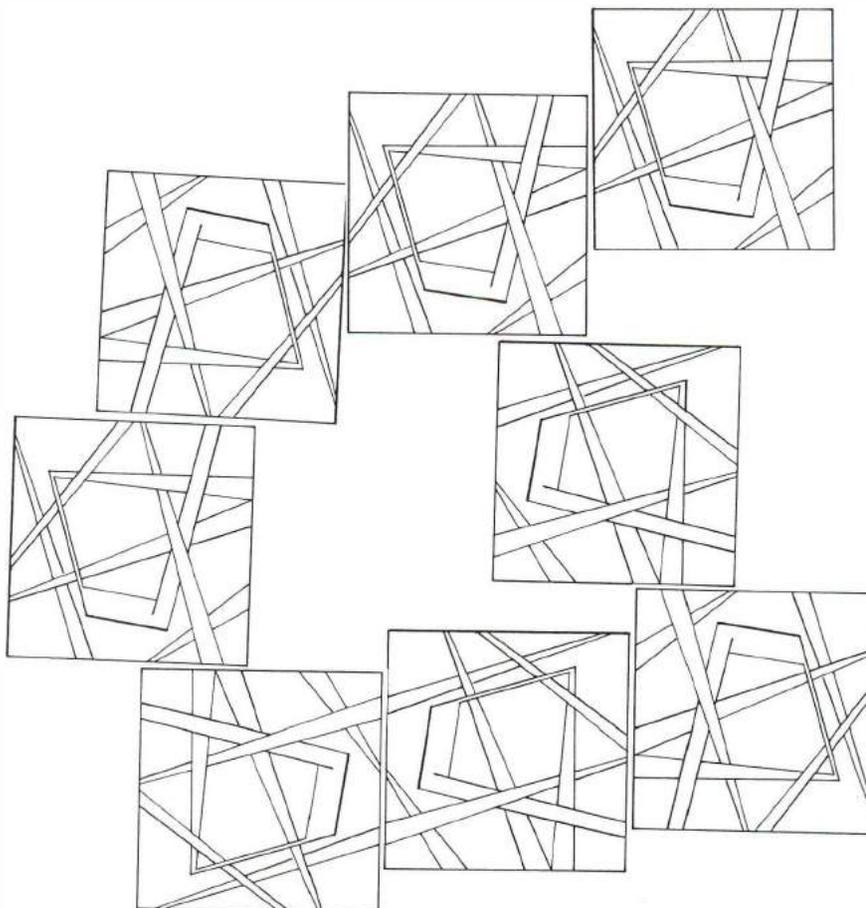
Untitled



Pen and ink

Katharine Lamb

Sticks





photograph

Mist

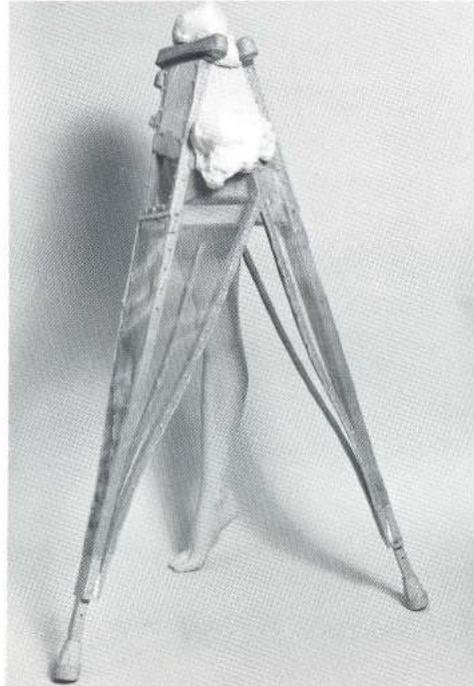


Pen and ink

Ken Reker

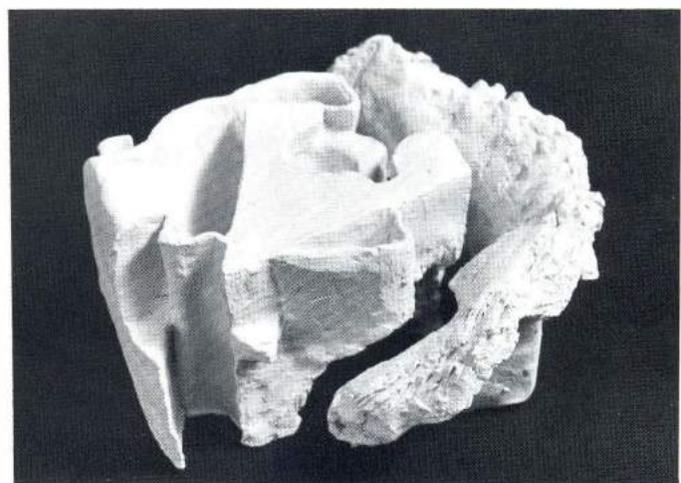
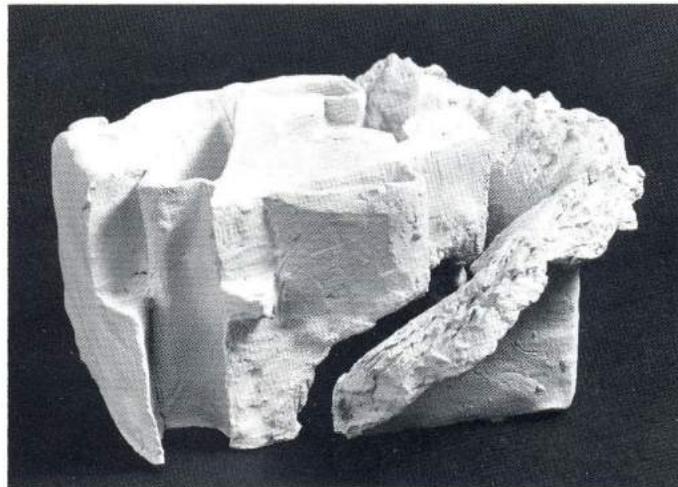
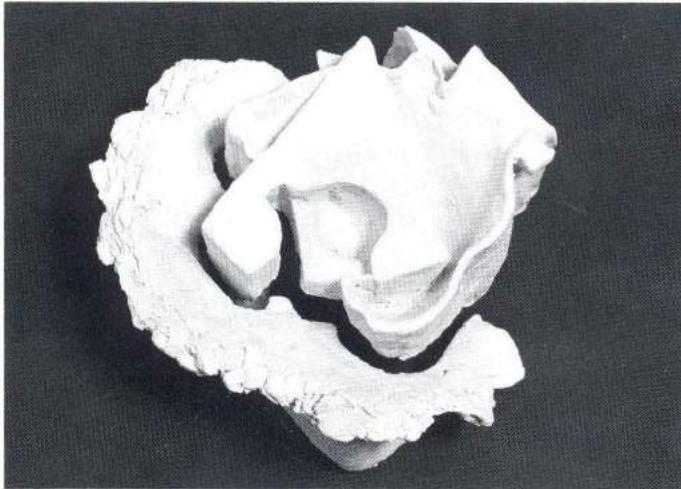
This year's edition of Point of View has been fortunate enough to be able to feature art work by Ken Reker, a member of the Harper College faculty. His "assembled sculpture consists of discarded objects and cast-away materials found in streets, alleys and on the shoreline." We are honored to include his art work in this year's Point of View.

Reconstructing Myth



multi-media

Pieced



clay

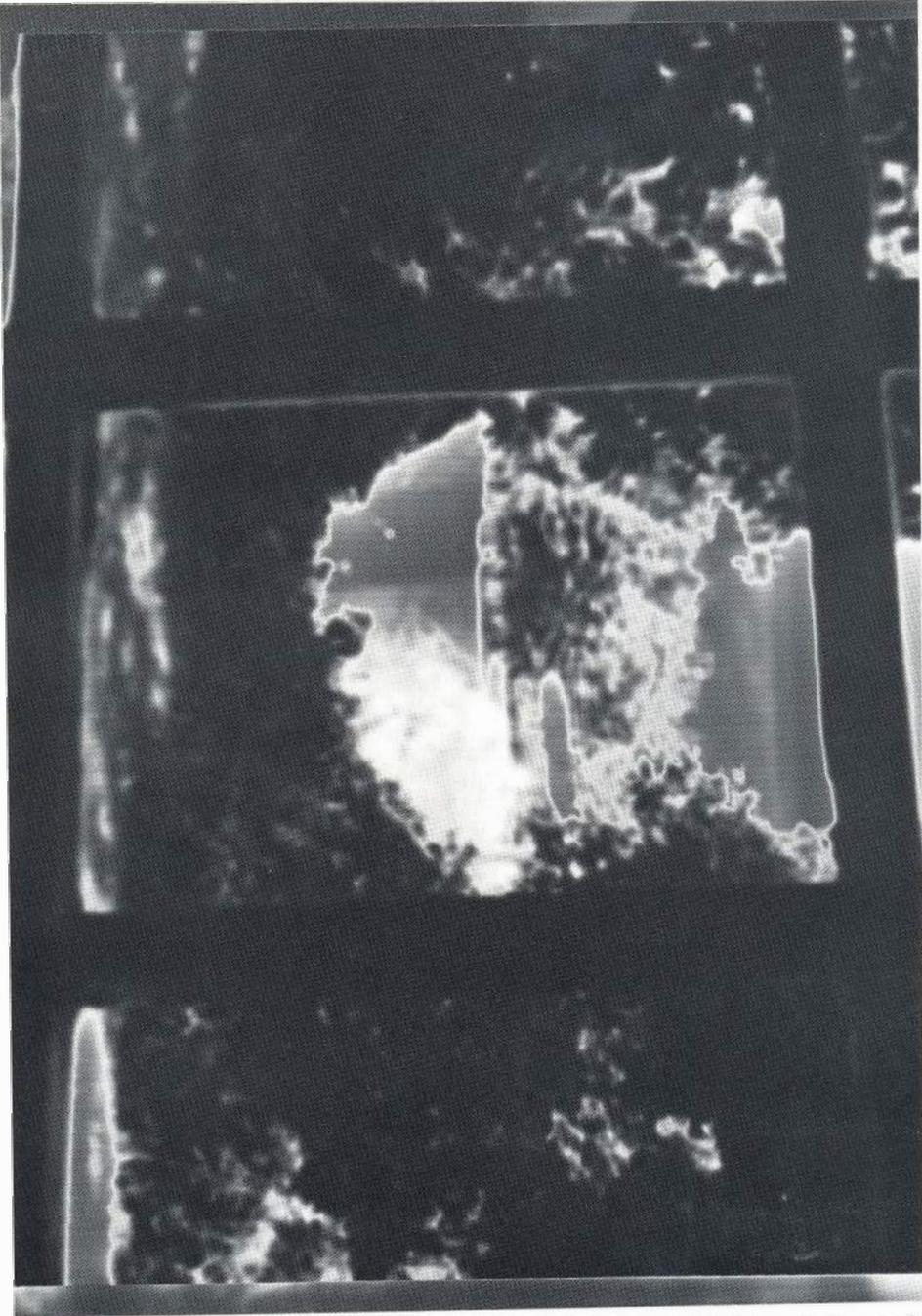
Katharine Lamb

And with His Touch the Eclipse



Black and white photograph

In Thru the Out Door



Black and white photograph

TACO NIGHT

I CUT the tomatoes. I always cut the tomatoes. I was the only one who did it right, he said. So it became my job. I didn't mind.

Mother fried the meat. She had to do it early in the afternoon, so the grease smell would be gone by the time he came home. If he smelled the grease—he wouldn't eat. He said the grease smelled like rotting flesh. It made him nauseous. So, Mother fried the hamburger about two o'clock. Then, she drained the grease into a coffee can she kept in the garage and spread the meat over several layers of paper towels laid out on the counter.

We all had our appointed roles in the rituals that moved us through the relentless click of minutes into hours into days. He subdivided time and assigned the units to a purpose. Since it was Friday, that meant tacos for dinner. Friday was always taco night unless it was a holiday or someone's birthday. It wasn't tradition, it was law; like thermodynamics, it was the way the world worked. He said we needed the discipline of a fixed routine; without it, we would fall apart. So, on Friday's we ate tacos, Saturdays—roast beef, Sundays—vegetable soup, and so on throughout the week. Sometimes, Mother and I would get sick of the monotonous meals and fix something else to eat before he came home. There was a delicious sense of conspiracy and rebellion to those days. We would decide on the specifics of our clandestine meal, prepare it in an air of intrigue and eat it with the relish of a child munching a cookie sneaked before dinner. By the time he walked through the door, all traces of our secret were erased,

and the prescribed meal simmered on the stove. I knew families who lived without the fixed rigidity that colored mine; it was just that they were wrong; undisciplined, he would say.

We never varied from the prescribed routine, unless it was completely unavoidable. Neither pleasure nor pain interfered with the petrified structure of the day. Once, on a summer day (when I could still taste the green season), Mother sliced deep into her palm at the base of her thumb as she carved off chunks of onion into a pot of potato soup that bubbled on the stove. A red rivulet of blood trickled down her arm. I watched a drop fall into the soup; no one else seemed to notice. For a moment, when the second hand ceased to sweep the present into past, everyone stared motionless at the flow of scarlet, as though we were bound in place by that trailing ribbon of red.

The soup simmered placidly with a liquid pop. Unperturbed by blood.

Each of us broke from the imposed paralysis simultaneously: Mother wailed, long and high; the knife clattered to the floor, and the onion (it's roundness mutilated by the chunks she had cut from it) limped across the tile, trailing a watery red stain behind its meandering path. He jumped from his chair, the wood ladderback thudding dully on the ceramic floor as it teetered and fell on its side; he grabbed the terry cloth towel that hung from the oven door and wrapped it around her hand in one deft motion; I ran to my mother's side and, in the frantic uncertainty of youth, could do no more than clasp her red-stained arm between my pudgy fingers and

mutter "ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod".

"Anita, run some warm water and go get some clean towels," he said, as he bound the old terry still tighter around her hand.

Mother moaned low in shaky exhalations and tears started from the corner of her eyes. I had never seen Mother cry before. It hadn't occurred to me that parents could. I watched in disbelief.

"Anita,—the water, the towels!" he said. Frustration edged his voice.

I jerked into action, flicked up the lever on the sink and dashed down the hall to the linen closet, where the towels were filed in neat, orderly rows according to their function. I grabbed the top two and, in my hurried clumsiness, pulled the rest of the stack from the shelf; they cascaded to the floor, unfurling in their fall like pristine, white sails to the wind. I didn't bother to pick them up.

When I returned with the towels, he was holding her hand under the stream of water. Mother's moans had dwindled to an occasional guttural cry from the back of her throat, that escaped between her tightly gritted teeth. The soup plopped and gurgled. Unaware.

The honed edge of the knife had sliced cleanly, the lips of the cut were straight and even. The water's changing face, now covex—now concave, bent and twisted the appearance of the wound, like the distorted image seen through warped and bubbled glass. The tissue below the skin puffed out in a smooth curve between the deepest cleft and the ruptured surface. The blood oozed from the wound, its flow stemmed only by forcing the lips of the cut together, but as soon as the pressure that closed the wound was released, the edges sprang open and the bleeding resumed.

The soup simmered; each bubble that burst the surface exploding into the air the butter-rich, oniony smell, that was then carried up from the pot in gentle wafts of flame shaped steam.

"I think you may need stitches," he said, as he wrapped a fresh towel around her hand. Mother's face was gray, as though she were dusted with a light coat of fine ash. I stood quietly before my place at the table.

"As soon as we've finished lunch, I'll drive you over to the hospital so they can take a look at it," he continued. "Now you sit down; I'll take up the soup. It's done, isn't it?"

"It's done, but I don't think I want any; couldn't we just go and eat when we get back? The soup will keep." Mother's voice was willow thin.

He grasped Mother by the shoulders and gently pressed her into a chair. I remembered the drop of blood that fell into the pot. My stomach rolled.

"No, you know you'll want to eat before we get back. Your body's used to lunch at 12:15; you'll just be more miserable if you don't eat. You just eat a little; you'll see; you'll feel better if you do," he said and ladled steaming soup into three brown bowls. He set the bowls on the placemats that designated each of our defined spots at the table.

"Alright." She breathed the word, as much as spoke it. "I'll eat a little." I spooned a taste into my mouth. I could not erase from my vision the sight of the drop of blood falling, in slow-motion into the soup. Its flavor was altered. A pink and foreign sweetness seemed to cling to the thick white liquid. I ate three spoonfuls and left the rest untouched. When he finished his bowl of soup, he unwrapped the blood splotted towel from Mother's hand and wound a fresh one over the cut.

It took eighteen stitches to close the wound.

Friday night. Taco night. And I cut the tomatoes. Tomatoes were better to cut than other things. I used a large knife. Not his knife. Not the old soft steel one with the bone handle—that was his exclusively. I used a large black-handled chef's knife that I kept meticulously sharp. I drew the blade across the tomato. The skin separated and pulled away from the cut. That was the reason I didn't mind the tomatoes being my job—I liked to watch the wound form under my direction.

Mother dumped the cold, drained meat back into the skillet. "Be sure to get those cut up real fine or there'll be hell to pay," she said, as she sprinkled the meat with chilli powder, cumin and garlic, and poured a dollop of water over it from the tea kettle.

"I will," I said. She didn't need to tell me. I always cut them the way he liked. Very, very fine. I slid the knife into the flesh, cutting off thin slices. The juice bled into the grooves that ran the length of the cutting board and pooled in the trough hollowed out on one side.

A pungent odor of spice settled over the kitchen from the simmering heat.

He would be home soon. Mother speeded up. She seemed to fill the room with restless movement. She grabbed the cheese from the refrigerator and let the door slam into the cabinet. She banged three plates down on the table. "Anita, when you're through with that, would you set the table?" Her voice was tight.

"Sure," I answered. I could hear a tremor in my voice. I focused on the flash of the steel blade sinking through the red meat of the tomato. From each slice, I cut away the core. He couldn't stand the seeds or the soft-mushy-juicy center. I pushed them off to the side of the board. I watched the metal and the rosy flesh and ignored the tightness in my chest.

The meat on the stove bubbled and hissed. I heard the fast rhythmic grate as Mother shredded the cheese.

I chopped the tomato into tiny bites. The blade bit into the wood of the board with each stroke. Through soft flesh, then hard wood. Soft flesh. Hard wood. Over and over again. I didn't mind cutting the tomatoes. He said I cut them better than anyone else. When the blade ruptured the skin, the flesh and juice burst forth as if the cut freed them from some great and terrible pressure that constricted them within that skin. I rejected blemished tomatoes, with their ugly green-black slashes that looked like scars. I chose only fruit of unbroken red that was firm to my touch, otherwise, they turned to mush when I cut them. I understood he had to have things "just so." Mother said it was because of his artistic nature that he was so sensitive to everything. She said he felt things more intensely than other people, that was why he like them very, very fine.

He was an extraordinary man. Mother said so often. She regarded him, it seemed to me, with greedy awe, like a cold, dark room in space that gulped the glory of the nearby sun and shimmered faintly with the dead, pale glow of stolen light. She shown with reflected glory. His accomplishments became hers. He was a successful commercial artist—sometimes entire advertisements, sometimes logos—his handiwork was inescapable, it covered billboards, adorned magazine and newspaper pages; graced bottles of soap, cans of soup, frozen peas, laxatives, douche. You name it. The day was saturated with him.

She kept fastidious scrap books of his work. Each entry was carefully labeled and dated in self-conscious, blocky script. JERGEN'S CAMPAIGN—SPRING 1969. SCHUMACHER—AUTUMN 1988. She kept a pair of Gingher shears dedicated only cutting examples of his work from magazines and newspapers or trimming excess from salvaged treasures she culled from the waste basket beside the work table in his office. She used only spray adhesive; it would not pucker, as glue did. Each entry was carefully framed by a band of complimentary color she precisely laid out beforehand, with the aid of a ruler and a number four drafting pencil, applying the chosen color only after she was satisfied the border was the appropriate width for the item and the distance from the piece was perfect and enhanced the artwork it framed.

When I was eight years old, she came to me, with the studied gravity she wore to church, as I was playing with a Barbie doll in the middle of the family room floor and said, "Anita, you can help me with this now; I think you're old enough." Her voice was hushed and solemn, as though she were a supplicant in a sacred rite and I-an initiate.

My heart leapt at her offer. I had watched her for years, longing to participate, but my question "Can I do that, too?" was always met by "No, you're too young." or "No, you'll get it dirty." or "No, you're too little; you'll mess it up." My heart thudded against my ribs, like an imprisoned animal that seeks to burst through the bars of its confinement; my palms were chill and damp as I, with imperceptibly trembling hands, carefully filled the outlined bar with vivid carmine. The artist's marker smelled like gasoline and fumes stung my eye, and high up in my nose, my sinuses tingled.

Those little varying bands of motley hues and assorted widths became exclusively my province. I was the master of the color strips that encircled the offerings on those treasured manila pages. With each addition to the scrap books, I would wait in short-winded anxiety for the guttural roar of his car in the driveway, and with limbs infected by anticipation, stumble to him bearing my prize. Each little strip of color was the best he'd ever seen, each one better executed, finer than the last. I drew the best borders ever.

Over time, the gilding of drawing that little border of color wore away, its charm diminished by the contempt of age and familiarity. I continued with it, sullen and bored, long after it had become an exercise in tedium; I did not want to see Mother's face stricken with disappointment. With the onset of puberty, a seething resentment of those color strips blossomed into virile maturity. They seemed to me, a thick cord of blood that bound me, chained and fettered, to impotent infancy. I wanted to burst into lavish adulthood, but I was securely leashed by the expectation that I would continue to participate in the rites of the color bands. To stop would be heresy. So, I did not stop, not exactly. Rather than risk the condemnation that would have manifested in Mother's every glance, I began a slow and steady withdrawal from the scrapbooks. When she opened the chinese lacquer cabinet where she stored her supplies, humming softly to herself—I flung open a school book, any school book, and dived into homework, or at least the appearance of homework. That was the only acceptable excuse for my absence from the scrapbook work session. Of course, I did not do this every time at first, but only occasionally. I increased the

frequency very gradually until I freed myself from those colored bars by a process of natural attrition, as more and more of those days of manila leaves and solvent markers were displaced by textbooks and spirals and pencils and pens. This shift in focus did not exact a toll from the lavish praise of my father: I simply became the best student ever.

Mother was furiously grating the cheese. It rasped against the teeth of the metal grater. "Shit!", she cried.

"What's the matter?", I asked, as I turned to face her.

She stuck her index finger in her mouth and sucked. "I grated my finger. Shit, that stings."

"I'll finish the cheese. You go get a band-aid."

"No, it's alright. I think I have enough cheese here, anyway. What do you think?", she asked, holding out the bowl of cheese.

"I think that's enough," I said and returned to the tomato. I tried to ignore the pain that was seeping into my head, like cotton wadding was being shoved into my brain from the back, by my spine. It slowly inched forward filling all the crevasses with a fibrous fog. I squinted to look through the pain and focus on the knife and the fruit. My chest ached with a heaviness, as if the air I breathed had turned to gel in my lungs and I could not expel it. I fixed my concentration on the knife and the red flesh, bored through the fuzz of pain in my head and the strange thickness in my chest.

Mother had wrapped a Kleenex around her finger and was frantically shredding lettuce. Pale green tendrils dropped to the floor as she feverishly cut the lettuce into match-size shreds.

I jumped, startled, as I heard from below the metallic grind of the garage door opener. The knife blade slid across, the skin separated and pulled away from the cut. The tightness of my chest began to fade. The miasmic fog in my head began to clear. That was why I did not mind the tomatoes being my job. It was a relief to watch the wound form under my direction.

WITH YOUR BODY

HE'S BEEN gone for twenty-one minutes now; the falling backward has begun.

In an effort to brace myself, I try to hold a picture of him in my head; I try to hold onto the sharpness of features, the contrast of hair against so much skin. Minutes pass and I begin to lose the center of his face, then the ears, the chin. Every feature washes away, every feature swallowed.

Twenty-eight minutes pass and Levon begins to cry; she wails, tinny rhythms from her room. After a while, he swallows this small thing too.

Thinking back to when I was eight, maybe nine. Locking myself in my room. Spreading white paste—no, not white paste, but glue—on the inside of my palm. Thinking back to the room and how I'd sit, rubbing away at the musky chill, end to end, until it was flat and smooth as jelly. Waiting as it dried slowly, first all about the edges, drying more slowly still, through the thickest middle too. Fighting off the itch and the urge to want to wash it all away...

Thirty minutes pass. I consider bathing—but the sound might alarm the girls—the noise that's too much like thunder. I run fingers over the flattest bones of my shoulders, over the small hump of stomach, back up to my neck. Smoothly now is how my fingers dance, never skidding or tripping against the skin. My skin is even now, dirty-smooth, in one connected piece.

I Consider bathing but the stairs leading down to the water are so steep—so yellow-white and steep—that I know I would fall. Soon I will fall, and I will

crack his perfect coating.

My body is level and long and hard. A door with another door, small and square, carved within. My necklace is a lion. Broad-faced and wise, he knocks it just once, for fun, and I let him in. Always, I let him in and suddenly, I am a worm digging into the flat, black tweed of his chest until my hair pokes all into my eyebrows and it doesn't matter that I'm uglier now, he says he'll always bother with me. It never matters that I'm uglier then—my eyes all closing up tight.

"Make me dirty with your body," I say. I glance back at the playwright's parenthetical direction and it says: "Expressed with a certain longing and a meaningful stare to the left."

He comes for me; he says he's filthy inside. I say his name—over and over—I say his name, the lion wild against my breast, my voice breaking out of my stomach spitting breath and wetness into his ear.

He laughs, rubbing his hand against my mouth. And I am always proud, at first, to be the one he comes to.

Forty minutes away from me and half the way home. Empty streets at this hour, he'll ignore the stop lights. Faster still, he'll drive, shifting his body, chasing away at the ache. Faster still, I know, he's nearly home.

Last year, he told me he was missing a vertebrae. Naked, he stood there pointing to a small place on his back; I didn't see anything, nothing but his hair, falling like so much black water against his spine. Naked, he turned to me—suddenly the lion inside his mouth and then he'd let it fall... "My back is shit," he'd say.

Last December, he left me, and the neighbors made me clean

my footprints off their welcome mat twice, then they just got bored and took the mat away from their door. I bought me a real Christmas tree that year, but the needles kept falling off every time the phone rang so I moved it out onto the balcony—presents and all—and I guess I just forgot it was there.

Last December, I quit him. I quit him for a whole month at a time. And even if I couldn't count on the neighbors, there was always the cigarettes, always the TV. Marcia busted up her nose with a football and Peter's god damned voice kept cracking when ever he'd try to sing. Last December I quit him for good and Marcia kept grabbing at her face crying out, "my nose, my nose."

He came back though, he always does. My body is level and long and hard.

Come January and we're looking outside; he tells me he can't even tell it was once a tree. I keep pointing and saying to him: "Don't you see? Look right here, and here and here." But this is all he sees: A pile of thin wooden bones, a nest for the birds, and tiny shards of bulb broken up all red, green and blue against the milky-gray concrete.

Fifty-three minutes away from me. I consider the bath again. I could pull the phone into the bathroom and run the water real low so as not to wake Katey or Levon. With my body, I could make the water sound less like thunder and they'd never have to know.

"His boy," loves the water. "His boy." Shit, he's called him this so many times, I started forgetting the kid really has a name. "His boy," is everything our girls could never be. "His boy," loves the water. "His boy," don't do no sissy dancing.

The falling backward...and all I see are the steep stairs, all

carpeted in yellow-white.

Levon begins again to wail, the sound always polite, and I'm thinking that if only I could, I would go to her and I would hold her now—mold her smallness into the shape of mine. The falling always reminds me of December again.

Those nights when he didn't come, we'd dance. Way past midnight, me and my girls would dance. We'd dance to bring him back; we'd dance to keep him gone. In furious, tight circles all around the kitchen, we'd dance holding hands, laughing at the tremendous shadows we could make against the kitchen's hard wood floor.

We'd dance to bring him back. We'd dance silly by the oven light while we waited for the Christmas bread to rise and the cranberry cakes to burn. We'd dance to keep him gone.

He's home. I can feel it in my shoulders, my back, my bones. It's something I always know. I am certain he is home now, waking her selfishly just so he can tell her all about his shit back and his hard day and then he'll make her begin to massage that area I could never find, that small empty space where his vertebrae so long ago dissolved. He's home and that thought alone gets me wanting to quit him again.

It's in my shoulders, my back, my bones. I can feel him moving about his own kitchen, hungry for another thin letter from "His boy." I can feel him moving toward the top shelf in the pantry where he tells me they save them all, every last one, in a tall white box. I can feel him, my fingers running over the flattest bones of my shoulders, over the small hump of stomach, back up to my neck. Smoothly now, I can feel him touching this newest letter, smiling all about "his boy," and soon, he will call, just to tell

me what I already know—that he's home—and just to ask me if I've bathed; he'll call soon if only to magnify the splendor of "his boy."

*

When it comes to "his boy," I don't believe half of what he tells me. I don't doubt that the kid exists, but I don't think he's the genius that he'd like to make me believe. "His boy don't sissy dance. His boy knows how to spell." So what if he can spell? This is what I always remind myself. So what if he's only one year past my girls and already he knows the big words? No matter. This is what I think when he forces me to see the photos of this strange muddy-faced someone. This is what I remember when he hands me the latest letter, always written in red on the thinnest of paper.

Last month "His boy" wrote:
Dear Dad and Mom,

I just wanted to drop you a line and let you know what your generosity has brought me this month. Thanks to you—Dad and Mom—our village was able to build a school house out of very heavy cardboard. As a matter of fact, I am writing this letter to you from my very own desk. Please excuse my penmanship as the words may all smear and jumble together due to the fact that we haven't got such a thing as ink pens here in Malaysia and are consequently forced to write in berry juice. Until next month, I will be thinking of you and looking forward to writing to you again!

"His boy" signs every letter
"with love, Ti-Chi."

If only I could have gotten to them before the falling began, I might have slept with my girls tucked in real close. If only I could quit him, just as I did last December...

And then this small, familiar thought becomes an unstoppable and ugly giant once more:

I'm going to quit him. I'm going to get me a real fine job and a big house with an elevator. Me and the girls will move to the suburbs and we'll fill the lawn with pink flowers and spearmint. I'm going to quit him, just so that I'll be more interesting and I'll even take on hobbies if I have to. After I quit him, I'll get us out of this place. And when summertime comes, me and the girls will run under sprinklers and we'll laugh, god, how we will laugh then, our hair and bodies all wet...I won't have to make excuses for this huge necklace I wear and I won't keep remembering stupid little things like how I used to rub glue on my hand just so that I could peel off the dryness in one connected and savable piece. I will forget, finally, how for years I always smelled faintly of glue, and I will not remember how the others in the seventh grade used to call out to me, "flypaper, flypaper." After I quit him he's going to be real sorry, and no one will be able to help him with this new sort of pain: not neighbors, not her and certainly not "his boy."

This kind of giant is always unstoppable:

Once the money starts coming in from my new, fancy job I'm going to sign Levon and Katey up with one of those fancy non-secular schools where they'll learn how to talk and spell real fine—at least as good as any kid in Malaysia ever could. And maybe around Christmas time we'll start feeling soft and then we'll send him a picture or two of us, looking all happy and changed. The bath water running won't remind us of thunder and we'll never have to worry about getting up and down the fucking yellow-white stairs again. I am going to quit him, just like I did last December...

*

Levon begins crying again—louder this time. Sooner or later she always gets to me, after he leaves. She comes to me, her body sinking like a weight into mine. I stroke her hair, petting it soft and flat into the back of her nightshirt. I ask her what's wrong and she says nothing but with the tips of her fingers she begins to make frantic little circles against my upper arm. I hold her this way for a long time past the falling—I hold her this way until I feel her body jerk itself back to sleep.

*

He calls for me—one hundred and twenty minutes away from me—he calls for me, the thin letter in his hand.

He tells me "sorry for calling so late," but he wants to know if I've showered yet. I tell him no and he laughs, "thought not." He tells me they got another letter from Malaysia today and I don't want to listen.

"His boy" is fine he says. "His boy" got himself three new ink pens this week. He says these things to me and I feel the phone start to slide from my shoulder. "His boy" says he's planning to visit soon—"His boy" says he just can't wait.

I tell him I have to go now. He laughs, "you're pissed," he says. "The boy always gets to you," he says and I just say no. "Well if you won't admit it, then tell me that one little thing before you go," he says, "tell me what you always want," he says—and again I tell him no. Silence, and then he's telling me that he's got all night; he's telling me that he can wait forever for me to say that one little thing; he's telling me that neither of us are going anywhere. I just say no.

*

I tell him once more that I have to go. I tell him to just leave me alone. He reminds me that I've got no place to go, nothing

important to do at this hour.

I look down at Levon, all curled up and sleeping on top of the faded sheets and I suppose that my saying it just once more won't hurt anything. I'm so tired now, it won't matter what I say—I won't remember it after while. "Make me dirty with your body," I say, my voice as flat and thin as a line.

"Again," he says and I'm too tired to argue anymore. I start to think about Levon once again; I think of Katey too, and how we love to dance. God, if there is one thing we can do well, it's got to be the way we dance.

And then I say it once more, just to delight him, "Make me dirty...always make me dirty." And then he laughs—he laughs because he enjoys being the only one who can make me talk this way, and he laughs because he truly believes, with all his heart, that we're always going to be here just as we are now—me and Katey and Levon—he truly believes we're always going to be here, dancing while we wait on him, dancing hand in hand, spinning, spinning most gracefully now, in front of our big, old, slow stove.

THE SILK SCARF

WITH BOTH of her hands carefully balancing a tray laden with empty glasses and a freshly made pitcher of Tom Collins, Elaine Russo threw open the back screen door by executing a perfect bump and grind with her hips. She placed the tray on the patio table before her neighbors, Mrs. Harvel and Mrs. Beletti, both of whom had complained of dire thirst on account of the July midday sun. Elaine placed three ice cubes apiece in each of the three glasses, and after assuring Mrs. Beletti that only a *touch* of gin had been used in mixing the drinks, she poured each of the glasses full.

"My God! It's absolutely *scorching*" said Elaine, reclaiming her empty seat. "What I wouldn't give to be having a *real* drink or two, somewhere uptown. *Somewhere* where it's nice and cool. I feel absolutely stranded."

"You mean, they haven't fixed your car *yet*?" inquired Mrs. Harvel. "I mean, it's been *almost* a week."

"Yeah, I *know*," answered Elaine. "They keep saying it will be any day now. If I had a car, I'd be on Michigan Avenue right this instant. I mean it. *Right* this instant. *Oh*, that reminds me. Guess who I bumped into the other day?"

"Who?" asked Mrs. Beletti.

"Sara Jenkins. And guess what she was wearing? Do you remember that outfit we saw last week at Lord and Tay---"

"You mean the one with the huge---"

"That's the one."

"I didn't think she could fill it out," said Mrs. Beletti giggling.

"Neither did I," answered Elaine. "And guess what she was wearing with it? She was wearing this ugly *green* necklace. I mean, she was *actually* wearing green."

"You're *kidding*," answered Mrs. Harvel. "I don't know why someone doesn't say anything to her. I mean, if I wore something like that, I'd *kill* myself."

"I *know*," confirmed Elaine. "I know exactly what you mean. Can you pass me that ashtray, *please*? Thank you." Elaine bent down and picked up her purse which was lying alongside her chair. She took out a single Virginia Slim, placed it between her lips, and lit the end of it. Elaine then let out a deep sigh, which was accompanied by a steady stream of smoke exiting her nostrils. Mrs. Harvel took a rather generous sip from her glass and looked over at Elaine. "So, where's Margaret?" she asked.

"Oh *God*," answered Elaine. "She's still mad at me. Didn't I tell you what happened?"

"You told me some of the story," replied Mrs. Harvel, "but you never finished. Remember? You had to take care of someone at the door. You said you'd call right back, but you never did."

"Oh! Where did I leave off then?"

"You were about to tell me about how Margaret got all angry with you when she came over last Sunday."

"Oh, yes. That's right." Elaine flicked her tail of ashes into the ashtray and readjusted herself in her seat. "So, like I was saying. She holds this silk scarf up right in front of my face and says: 'isn't this just *darling*? She acted like it was the most wonderful scarf she'd ever seen. And then guess what she says? She says: 'and isn't this just one of the most *original* scarves you've ever seen?' So, I tell her '*yeah Margaret*, it sure is gorgeous.' So then, about a week later, we were shopping at Marshall Fields, and we came across about five bins filled with tons of these scarves, and I had completely forgotten about how

Margaret had bought one of them, and I said: 'will you look at *these* scarves, they're practically giving these things away.' And then I said: 'well you *certainly* won't see *me* buying any of *these* flimsy things.' And after I said it, I wished I hadn't, because Margaret got all bent out of shape. She said that I had lied when I said that I loved her scarf, and I haven't heard from her since."

"She always gets so touchy about things," said Mrs. Harvel. "I mean, when you're around her, you really have to watch what you say. You remember a couple of months ago, when I made that comment about her kid? I mean, I was just being *truthful*. She acted like I had no right to say what I did."

"Well, that's just like *her*," said Mrs. Beletti.

"Yes," agreed Elaine. "That *definitely* is just like her. Why, just a couple of weeks ago, the phone rang, and I went to pick it --- Elizabeth! ... *Elizabeth Ann Russo!* You get away from there right this instant. Do you hear me?"

Some twenty yards away from where the three women were drinking and talking, little three year old Elizabeth Russo was busy waging war against an anthill. While exploring her own backyard, Elizabeth had accidentally stepped right on the anthill and was both delighted and surprised by what she saw. Armies of ants poured forth, attacking Elizabeth from all sides. Elizabeth then started stomping the troops, crushing hundreds with each crashing foot as her cries echoed across the lawn. They were cries of pleasure. It was in the heat of battle, when Elizabeth heard her mother's voice reach the frontlines. Upon hearing her name, Elizabeth stopped her assault and looked puzzledly towards her mother, and then looked puzzledly down

at the ants, and then looked puzzledly back at her mother again, and then promptly resumed stomping the little soldiers flanking both of her sides. "I'm *serious!*" came the familiar voice from across the lawn. "Don't make me get up to come and get you. *Elizabeth!* Do you hear me? I'm going to count to three and you better be by my side. *One ... Two...*" At this point, Elizabeth looked up at her mother, and with one final *this-war-ain't-over* stomp, ran towards the patio table.

"Just look at you," said Elaine, when Elizabeth reached her side. "Your hair is all knotted. Right after I spent twenty minutes brushing it out this morning. I wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Harvel and Mrs. Beletti went home to report that we had a filthy vagabond living among us."

Elizabeth heard what her mother said, but didn't understand most of it. With her back pressing against her mother's chest, Elizabeth craned her neck back and a little to the side so she could see her mother's face. "I want a puppy," she said. Mrs. Harvel and Mrs. Beletti both laughed.

"A *puppy!*" exclaimed Elaine. "Don't be *silly*. Now you go inside the house so Mommy can talk *important* things over with Mrs. Harvel and Mrs. Beletti. Go on. Run along now.

With joy, Elizabeth ran to the screen door and bolted into the kitchen. She then walked through the kitchen into the living room, and through the living room to the front door, and through the front door onto the front porch. There on the front porch, Elizabeth sat in the shade of a pine tree. She looked down by her feet and noticed a couple of ants dragging a leaf. Elizabeth contemplated crushing them, but thought otherwise. She was

simply no longer in the mood. As she watched the ants go about their business, Elizabeth thought about the puppy she wanted, which she had seen the weekend before while shopping with her parents along Michigan Avenue. Elizabeth watched the ants carrying the leaf and thought about the puppy. Her thoughts of the puppy were suddenly interrupted by a voice coming towards her.

"What's up Elizabeth? Whatcha doin'?"

Elizabeth looked up and recognized the friendly but strange face of Mrs. Peterson who lived across the street. Mrs. Peterson was wearing a light blue cotton dress and while running a hand through her tangled hair, she sat her slightly sagging, hip-filled body down alongside Elizabeth.

"Whatcha got to say?" asked Mrs. Peterson.

Elizabeth paused for a second and then said, "I *don't* know."

"Well, *who* does?" replied Mrs. Peterson, and with that, she let out a huge chuckle. "Well, don't you look *pretty*," continued Mrs. Peterson, while smoothing out the creases on the lap of her dress. "It just so happens that I saw you while I was cleaning my windows. That's right. I was cleaning my windows, and I just couldn't take my eyes off of you. You looked so *pretty* and *sweet*, just like a little *angel*."

Elizabeth said nothing, but started to pick at a scab on her knee.

"Oh *sweetheart*, don't pick at *that*. Just leave it alone." Mrs. Peterson stared at Elizabeth and started to giggle. Her giggle was not unlike the giggle of a young schoolgirl talking to a boy over the telephone for the first time. "You know, my Courtney was *exactly* the same way. It seems she always had some sort of bruise *somewhere* on her body."

Mrs. Peterson paused briefly to remove a small white thread from the sleeve of her dress and then continued. "You know *Courtney*, don't you, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth left her knee alone and looked up at Mrs. Peterson and nodded.

"She's coming home this weekend. They're all finished with the tests and they've given her leave for the weekend. Isn't that *wonderful*?"

Elizabeth nodded.

Mrs. Peterson took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Her focus seemed to be on a small plastic windmill in the shape of a flower, sticking out of the lawn, some ten feet in front of her. Without looking at Elizabeth, she began to speak again, not really addressing Elizabeth, but, rather, addressing the small plastic windmill. "It's such a shame really," said Mrs. Peterson. "I mean, what's going on with Courtney, that is. It's just that, I couldn't do anything anymore. I mean, the first few times, I was able to say that Courtney didn't know what she was doing on account of her age. Like when she destroyed that little ceramic duck, or chicken, or whatever that *thing* was. But after that incident with Mrs. Massur's little dog, well, I just couldn't say a single word. I had just plain run out of excuses."

Elizabeth leaned over to her left and picked up a rock. She looked at the rock, which was about the size of her palm, and began to scan the front lawn. Mrs. Peterson stood up, adjusted *something* along her hemline, and sat back down.

"I mean, I'll admit that Courtney's a little rambunctious," continued Mrs. Peterson, addressing the windmill, "but I don't think it's that big of a problem. I don't think she's *malicious*. That's the word *they* used. *Malicious*. Isn't that the

most absurd thing you've ever heard? I mean, who's ever heard of a malicious child. It doesn't even make any sense."

Mrs. Peterson paused for a second and looked over at Elizabeth. "Oh *honey!*" she gasped. "Put that rock down. *Please!* ... Go on ... Put it *down*. That little squirrel isn't hurting anyone. Now, put the rock down and just leave it there. Thank you! You let that squirrel worry about *himself*, and you just worry about your own self."

Mrs. Peterson placed her left hand inside her dress pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. After lighting one, she placed the pack on the step between Elizabeth and herself. "I mean, who's ever heard of a malicious child?" she muttered.

For some time, Mrs. Peterson fell silent. She simply sat staring at the windmill, watching the petals slowly turning. After finishing her cigarette, she turned towards Elizabeth. "So! Where's your *Mommy* anyways?"

Elizabeth spun herself around and pointed her little finger towards the back of her house. "*They're* in the back yard."

"I see," answered Mrs. Peterson. "I see." Mrs. Peterson looked down at her hands. Her face seemed sullen. Once again, she reached into her dress pocket and brought out a tissue, which she used to wipe the beads of perspiration from her forehead and upper lip. Mrs. Peterson then looked over at Elizabeth and smiled.

"Well, *who* cares?" she exclaimed rather loudly. "Who *really* cares? I *certainly* don't. I'm *perfectly* happy sitting right here with you. I'm *perfectly* happy. I mean, it's such a *beautiful* day, and you're such a *beautiful* girl. Why, there isn't a single cloud in the sky and the weatherman says that there won't be a single drop of r---"

"I want a *puppy*," interrupted Elizabeth.

"What's that sweetheart?"

"I want a puppy."

"Well, of course you do," said Mrs. Peterson, joyfully. "Of course you do! Puppies are just *wonderful*. When my Courtney was your age, she wanted a puppy too. As for me, I didn't have a puppy when I was little. I had a cat. Two of them actually. I don't like cats as much as I like puppies. Do you know why?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Well, I'll tell you. The reason I like puppies so much is because they always want to be around you. If you pet a puppy for ten weeks straight, then he'll sit there for ten weeks straight. Puppies think you're just the greatest thing on two feet. But *cats!* They're different! Cats will let you play with them, or pet them, but when they get tired of you, they just get up and leave. I always felt like my cats were *using* me. I mean, you'd pet them and pet them, and they wouldn't *even* let you know that they were grateful." Mrs. Peterson paused for a second. "I know that this may sound *crazy*, but when I was a little girl, I always thought that my cats were snickering about me behind my back, in another room or something. I really did."

Mrs. Peterson paused briefly. She then opened her mouth as if she were about to continue speaking, but changed her mind. She simply sat watching the petals on the white plastic windmill going around in circles. Elizabeth was silent as well. She sat with a plain face staring at Mrs. Peterson. Suddenly, Elizabeth's eyes gleamed with wonder. "What's that?" she asked, pointing a finger.

Mrs. Peterson turned her attention away from the windmill and looked at Elizabeth's outstretched finger. "Oh *this*?" she replied, looking

down at the white silk scarf tied loosely around her neck. "I bought this about a week ago." Mrs. Peterson looked down at her hands, and then biting her lower lip somewhat nervously, she looked at Elizabeth. "Do you like it?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Uh-huh. It's *pretty*."

A small sincere smile appeared on Mrs. Peterson's face. She patted Elizabeth lightly on the head and said softly: "You're *sweet*. You're so sweet. You're just about the sweetest, most darling little girl I've ever seen."

Mrs. Peterson sat staring at Elizabeth's soft face and seemed at peace. Then something *funny* happened. Mrs. Peterson's arms suddenly felt very heavy, her head felt quite light, and for a brief moment, Mrs. Peterson *actually* contemplated curling up on the grass and falling asleep. The only sound Mrs. Peterson could hear, as she sat on the front step, was that of her own breath moving slowly in and out, or rather, as it seemed to Mrs. Peterson, around and around. The rising and falling of her chest seemed to have a hypnotic effect.

In and out.

Around and round.

Suddenly, the calm rhythm of Mrs. Peterson's breathing was shattered by a loud stomping sound directly to her left. Mrs. Peterson looked over at Elizabeth and gasped. "Oh dear!!!" said Mrs. Peterson, getting to her feet rather awkwardly, but quickly, *very* quickly. "I have ... um ... to be running along now, sweetheart. Say 'hello' to your mother for me. Bye-bye." Without looking back at Elizabeth, Mrs. Peterson started to walk, run actually, towards her house, completely forgetting her pack of cigarettes on the front step.

Elizabeth watched Mrs. Peterson cross the street and continued watching until she saw

Mrs. Peterson's front door close. Elizabeth then got up and placed her right foot along the edge of her own front step. Then, with the skill that most little girls possess for removing gum from the soles of their shoes, Elizabeth scraped off the remainder of the crushed caterpillar, and then headed towards her back yard in the direction of the anthill.

* * *

Alone in her bedroom, Margaret Peterson fell upon her bed. Every day, in the early part of the afternoon, Margaret became dreadfully tired and would often lie down for a short nap. As she lay in bed, teetering on the borderline between sleep and consciousness, Margaret remembered an event that occurred when she was six years old. She hadn't thought about it for years. Margaret remembered how, when she was six, she and her mother went out shopping for a new pair of shoes for the first day of school. Margaret remembered how proud she was when she picked out a pair of shoes all by herself (a quite expensive pair, it should be noted). It was a pair of powder blue gym shoes with little yellow ducks sewn on the sides. The last thing Margaret remembered as she was falling asleep, was how she cried to her mother when she got home, lying about how her shoes were stolen during recess, when in fact, the pair of shoes lay at the bottom of the kitchen wastebasket, buried under the remainder of last night's supper.

