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SEARCHING FOR THE FREEWAY

Gary Phillip Clairman

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English and Creative Writing

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 1991

• Gary Phillip Clairman, 1991



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ABSTRACT

Searching For The Freeway

Gary Phillip Clairman

Searching For The Freeway is the story of a young man's cross-country quest for himself and for meaning after the accidental death of a friend.

Told in the third person by two omniscient narrators, the literal journey utilizes prose narrative while poetry is used to present the character's internal search for self.

On the road, the character struggles with his memories in an attempt to come to terms with both the loss of his friend and the prospect of his own future in a violent and decaying society.

When he picks up a female hitch-hiker, his recollections intensify but he is still haunted by a desperate need for a unifying element in his life. Finally, at the coast, and after three weeks with a sculptor/bus driver/Buddhist, the character reaches the destination that had been, until then, only glimpsed: the acceptance of life without ultimate meaning and the joyous expression of himself in such a world.

Our destination is never a place but rather
a new way of looking at things.

Henry Miller

"Hey, where'd you catch that fish?"

"In a dream."

"Really? Then who took the picture?"

G.P.C.

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PREFACE

When I began to work on this thesis, I had in mind a work that employed both the lyricism and compression of poetry and the grounding in character and motivation that are central to prose narrative. The story was to take a character across Canada in search of himself and meaning after the accidental death of a close friend.

Technically, I intended the text to move easily between prose and poetry, with prose narrative carrying the weight of the character's literal quest and poetry being the vehicle for the expression of his interior journey. In the end, however, I found that the text demanded its own experiments and compromises.

What I have, in fact, produced is a hybrid, perhaps best characterized as an attempt to unite poetry, narrative and dream into a single vision. The central character, who is never named, travels by car across Canada. During his trip he meets only a female hitch-hiker and a black artist/Buddhist/bus-driver, and must contend, at all times, with the vivid memories of his dead friend, Jack; of childhood, adolescence, dreams, and of his grandfather dying in hospital. Each of these encounters, the present driving

him through his past, is supposed to bring him closer to the core of his quest: to an understanding of his own life amid the violence and decay inherent in human experience, and to the discovery and expression of the spirit within him.

However, I did not, in the end, as my advisor Gary Geddes says, "produce a simple Canadian *Heart of Darkness* or *Pilgrim's Progress*, which moves coherently and steadily towards its moral centre". Instead, the text seems to have taken on a certain moral indeterminacy and narrative unreliability, questioning both the ability of an individual to find meaning beyond the subjective rendering of experience, and, the power of either poetry or prose to penetrate the mysteries.

Sometimes, the text shrinks in mid-sentence to an obviously poetic form, abandoning the security and 'justification' of right-hand margins. At other times, it moves towards the density and disjointedness of poetic prose, with, to quote Geddes once again, "certain passages of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* nodding faint approval on the gravel shoulder of the road".

As the text put on miles, in its middle sixty pages, it seemed to require what Milan Kundera calls a "polyphonic narrative" where several stories are being told simultaneously, elliptically, to reflect the complexities of consciousness and to give the text what Brecht discovered was the heightening effect of such alienating devices.

The end-product, which I must leave the reader to judge, is perhaps not so much a unified story as a meditation on existence. It is an attempt to present experience free from both the automatism of closure, and the emphasis on plot with its trappings of unexpected and incredible coincidences.

One of the minor linguistic devices which emerged is what I might call verbal doubling, where one word is made to serve two purposes--in terms of syntax, and sometimes meaning--in the passage. For example, in the following fragment--"... this wheel turns and is turned, takes him for a ride towards the same chosen past the sad edge of all love the road for what it is ..."--it becomes obvious that the words "past" and "love" are expected to do double service ("the same chosen past" and "past the sad edge", "the sad edge of all love" and "love the road for what its is"). Normally the words would be repeated. But throughout the text I often found the emerging voices resistant to the logical expectations of what e.e. cummings, Bill Bissett, and others have called the "imperial sentence". As a result, the double use of single nouns, pronouns, and other parts of speech emerged as something integral to, not imposed on, the text.

As soon as the reader accepts this peculiarity, he or she will notice that, while perhaps slowing down the reading process at first, it often penetrates to deeper levels in

terms of both form and content. I suppose something might be said here as well about the role of individual words in the text as subject or object, and how this duplicity or indeterminacy characterizes our own relation to experience, but, as Gary suggests, I will resist the temptation.

GO FISH

His parents wave goodbye he waves and then breaks into
traffic away from the store, in the rear-view a bus, the
store sign reversed with the "E" of the word "PLACE" in the
logo bird's beak like a long black ribbon of worm it
recedes, leaves him now and forever alone like this road
driven and driving the double line between his spirit and
his mind, between this voice and his need to construct a map
for the accident glimpse caught bumper to bumper in the
procession of memories from which his life now blooms open
to a page of the green graveyard day. It has begun.

He takes highway 2 from T.O., instead of the 401 towns
once a day's ride today twenty minutes so he doesn't stop
the 'Drive Thru' Burger Kings and McDonald's beef grazed on
razed rain forests to eternal styrofoam outlives the most
distant bud of any family
elm trees down this road
reach empty to the empty sky, his dream
of the dead maybe some kind of road sign? They gave him a
fishing-rod. And a book. On the inside cover he found the
lines

Back in the box	the box is a car
Jack in the box	the box is a womb
back in the box	the box is a box
Jack	the box is a tomb

TAKE THE BUS
AND LEAVE THE DRIVING
TO US.

* * *

The buses in the yard below looked so small he believed he could move them with his own hands. He pressed his hands and face against the window and turned his head from side to side, the cheek against the glass cool but his knees starting to ache and his pants getting warm from the vent-heater he knelt on, hot dry air through its metal grate. Behind the buses, the river.

His father told him stories about fishing in the river when he was his age and Pupa had even shown him pictures and he saw one now, in that place behind his eyes, a boy, his father, smiling in a too big miner's hat, cupped hands full of worms.

The night before fishing his father, the boy, put on the hat and wandered the greens of the nearby public golf course spooning hot mustard into the holes the worms made on them. The mustard burned the worms and forced them to the surface.

He looked at what he'd been staring at but not seeing-- a bus by the river with both its doors open--then looked back into the room where other children played with blocks, or books, or stuffed animals while they waited for the dentist to come out and call their names. He looked through the window again to the yard and river, watched leaves rise and swirl along the bank like the tiny kites of invisible elves but no, they fell and floated on dark water.

His father had said that now you can't even swim in it.

Another bus pulled into the yard.

Now his knees hurt but it was the only way to look out and down unless he stood on the vent, which, he remembered from last time, was not a good idea.

I'm way up here and they're way down there.

He covered a bus with his thumb.

They look so small, but they're really big.

He looked at his thumb, his hands. He looked at them for a long time. He pressed his hands and nose against the window again and, looking at his reflected mouth, blew hard on the glass--the mist from his breath spreading out then slowly shrinking like a bubble-gum bubble you sucked back in. He drew a letter in the mist, a big letter, the first in his name but it faded so he breathed on the glass again. The letter came back and he traced it with his finger and this time it stayed. He heard a door open behind him and knew that it was his turn now.

The dentist slipped a small block into the pocket of his cloak--he remembered the uncooperative boy--and called his name. The boy looked down at the yard and river and noticed the bus with the open doors had moved and that something else had changed too. The people still looked like ants, the buses like toys, the river like there could still be fish in it but it was different now and he felt warm and funny and his knees hurt.

Now his mother called his name. River glimpse and he thought he saw a fish jump, a big one, but when he looked for the circles another bus parked in front of the spot. The dentist coughed. The boy's mother called his name again so he moved to go but his knees were so sore now that he had to press his hands on the vent to take his weight off his knees and the metal grate of the heater was hard and hot on his hands.

Down off the heater he looked at his hands. The grid pattern from the vent was on them in dark pink lines. He put his hands against his face. They were warm and tingled and smelled like dust.

* * *

White sailboats in bright sun on blue water. He looks
for the cemetery north of Kingston where Jack's buried but
can't find it. Realizes it's Thursday, another Thursday and
he wonders how many does
that make him turn?

go the other
look for another
a way

from memory's lane of expectations though
where he goes
will depend on where he's been depends on how he got
- they're in the stove honey, your favourite -
cheese rollies for lunch and the Flintstones he remembers
the one
Fred driving a school bus
Bedrock number 8
Brontosaurus express to Shangri-Lava land
yaba
daba
do

he's trying

he is

day-dreaming to comfort memories' despair, his destination
so much further than he ever could know.

* * *

He walks down the street of Jack's last apartment in Montreal. A weak wind blows the maples on the street seem tired--like spring is something they can't remember. He turns towards the river.

A car parked by the side of the road fires up. Tires squeal, loud music from the rolled down windows. Through the street's drawn curtains he infers the evening routine--some dinner, maybe a few beers. Some television and maybe, for a few, the night train clenched fist lost self sex dreams killing clocks set for work in the company that sells them what they need to work for the company.

He crosses the main street spandex hookers just starting to work the wolves. He thinks about walking the strip but changes his mind and continues down the side-roads.

Stopped by the tracks he turns right into the redorange glow of setting summer sun. He shades his eyes, shivers with the heat, stands still on the sidewalk shimmering at his feet as birds swirl over trees and tenement balconies resonant with what they've seen from three sets of three windows on their red brick sides, each with a small cement window sill warmed and golden in the fading sunrust blaze he starts to walk again and passes a bakery where two heavy-set women in flowered house dresses leave by a side door that closes and lets a close, thickwet smell into the street like gardens and grass dry just after rain.

A shadow made darker by sundown now the clear,
blueblack sky with few faint stars, he walks on. At the end
of the street, the river.

Words come slowly at first not so much spoken as
thought. A faint whisper stopped when he steps into a spider
web hanging from a low maple branch sticky silk on his
eyelids, nose and lips.

On the edge, he starts again. Walking and speaking to
the night rhythm of wind and his gravel bank stride each
word a prayer as it leaves his mouth like breath.

As this voice I'll be the place where shadows meet
time frozen in motion
the grey edged light of dusk nights' dawn strands of
tobacco truth scavenged from garbage strewn streets.

As this voice my name will always be changing, I'll be
the deeper dream of why the sea looks like the sky, I will
rise like a star to bright possibility sing
joyous and imperfect to hearts filled with sand
stand among the neon bar night laughstrained fraternity
that tries to kill death with sex
and I'll be the woman
object of their remarks
hole they'll stab with failure and aging shoot
their rotting selves into as if that perceived victory
will somehow make them young again
give them another chance to drink milk that will spill from
the Buddha's devouring maw into their empty hearts' howls.

As this voice I'll be loveless as the sun
the one ray of hope
centre dream hub of spoke
axis bold as love
what is longed to be held but can't ever be touched-
each moment given as much thought as a cigarette tossed from
a speeding pick-up truck
the last spark blown down the wide empty road will contain
and be contained by me
full of its emptiness
I'll see the world
yet will not be seen

a heroine to sustain the habits of my own belief
voice for the voiceless
though I'll leave tongue and lips behind
leave the slowgrind clock of paycheck grief
days and their false history of atomic fallout fate I'll be
the thing while it happens, the feeling when it's over me
will be moments in their own time
past and future married as the moon rises now its light
reflected on the river glimpse changed by today
where I really am
not what I merely see--
the boarded up windows of a broken down shack, a stone
that will crack the windshield of what you believe me
there'll be nothing to believe, the mouth will lie the flesh
will lie the heart will lie only
the skull will be true, you won't
deceive the worms
backtrack across that bridge once they rearrange your bones
become some Christ by grace of temptation made to rise
through the sea of sky, I
begin to feel this cruci-fiction creep into every crevice
like a blind alley rat gnawing numb minds until
bloodthoughts flow questions for an answerless world waiting
for its turn at the cross
road

As this voice
I'll flamenco dance down the spine of your soul
waltz your mind
jitterbug your ghost
and I'll do it
because I'll be with word
not in possession of, no ownership involved
the bonds of my freedom dissolved like mucous from the skin
of a handled fish released to its own disease this language
will speak me
make me what I am -
the sputtering greasefat flapjack morning
eggbread applebutter coffee-cup day of suit and briefcase
thieves who buy and sell their boy scout oath -
the importance of impotent truth

As this voice I'll be the melody of hammer on stone
some kind of coda
song for song's sake born to sing the praises of the dying
named by the names of other things -
the rainmouth skytongued treedance breeze
silver diamond dreamnight mirrorspirit flash
of where I'm going
what develops from what's been exposed
the vision of this trip now before me and still incomplete -
like a harp with broken strings

the wings of a dove
the tragedy of constant tragedy reduced to simple irony -
legless man begs in front of shoe store
an angel on all fours with puppet's scissor dreams of
moonbeams riddles filled with absent clutches of time

I'll be champagne from the stanley cup
the final score
the winning goal off a give and go, gone and lost and
found in my own becoming
proof enough
for the existence of God in me will be the echo and disease
two dogs sniffing the parked taxi of my dreams delivered to
destiny by whispers from memory's back seat
the day you could see grass grow and thought nothing of it
let it slip, threw it away
for the quick hustle buck of slot machine love
the curled fist fingers of the dollar grapple grab
and the jackpot, the payoff,
the lemon at the end of the rainbow,
the nameless world of childheart days lost
dolphin songs that only feeling knew
and in feeling felt the truth

As this voice I'll be my own medium
the chaos of ritual flame touched to circle wick
I'll be fire
and you'll watch me burn
dance and spin in moon candle's light
this close night's rushing river sandstone breath that
envies the dead distant wonder window light
pain of summer evenings spent alone
the warm smell of earth
when the blossoming flower
falls

* * *

He stands below the raised arm of the fire-escape that leads to a small patio and the window of the room. He must have used this way in a hundred times but only once did he managed to run, jump to the low window-sill, spring from it with his foot and grab the hanging ladder. And even then, the one time, he over-shot his target with the effort and banged his head on the stairs.

Of course it would be simple to just grab the cage of the first floor window, climb onto the sill then jump and grab the ladder, his dead weight bringing it to the ground like a giant teeter-totter. But where is the challenge in that?

Gone is all apprehension and false determination. Four years older, he knows better now how to control the form of his actions and can concentrate, for the most part, on the task at hand without being too self-conscious.

He backs up, and then, with a short hop, swings his body into motion towards the window and ladder as a high jumper would approach the bar, an extra long stride before his eye-marked take-off point he leaps with his right foot, the left one up to the ledge and he pushes off it reaching with his right hand the inside edge of the suspended stairway as his head rises clear of the first and second stairs and he grabs further up the underside of the escape with his left hand, the stairway up slightly with a creak, pushed by the inertia of his jump, then down with the

familiar groan and shudder as the weight of his hanging, falling body brings it to the ground.

He runs up the stairs. On the lip of one trips and falls with the dullthudclang of bone on metal. Above him, in the first window, a shadow slides past a half-drawn curtain. Quickly he ascends the rest of the steps, leaps over the low ledge of the small patio and scurries towards the next window. With the heels of his hands on the section of wood that crosses the eight-pane frame he pushes up and is in the room.

As he pulls the candles from his pocket a lamp flicks on, its circlepool of light just short of the corner he now crouches in, wrapped in the long, coarse, thick curtains that he recognizes--patterns of vines and flowers indiscernible in the dark, the smell of must and stale beer a door to the past, the senses' entrance to the theatre of memory where the same show always plays. But in a different way.

"Is ... Is that you, Jeff?" calls a dry female voice from the centre of the light.

No answer.

"Don't, Jeff," the voice tremors, "you're scaring me."

"It's not Jeff," he says and the words leave his mouth heavy with the burden of fear they will create.

He thinks this held moment must be like the time it took for the car to drift onto the soft right shoulder of the highway and then, with the overcorrection and panicked use of the brakes, spin backwards across the left lane, through the narrow, dew-wet median and into the westbound traffic.

"What do you want?" chokes the voice.

He says, "I'm looking for someone," and stands up and moves out from behind the curtains to the edge of light--a pale yellow glow on the dusty hardwood floor.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl dives under the covers as if trying to go underground. From the sheet-muffled sounds he can tell she's using the phone.

"Yes, yes," he hears her whispersqueal, "he's in my room Yes, now! I don't know. He just said he wouldn't Alright. Okay. I'll try."

After giving the address and then waiting a moment the top of her head pokes through the blankets tumbling the pillow onto the floor the way a worm turns a small clump of dirt away from the hole it rises through after sunset or a thunderstorm. According to Jack's grandfather, worms from graveyards always made the best bait and Jack had told him how they'd collected them after supper and then fished at night near the Kingston farm--stories of huge bass hauled into the canoe where they flopped around in a growing sea of

empty beer bottles sending hollow rumbles, loud clanks and exalted laughter miles across dark water.

"Who are you looking for?" asks the girl.

"A friend."

"What's your friend's name?"

"He's dead."

He knew that would shut her up. Deliver fear like a bomb, the horrible bodynumb, stomachdrop terror that must have been felt the moment before the express bus exploded his spirit out of him. Now it would be tough for her to keep him 'occupied' as the voice on the phone had probably suggested. What could she say to that? It didn't make sense.

Below the covers he notices a quiver come into her legs. A crease appears in her forehead that shoots straight from the corner of her left eye to the temple. Even in this light and from fifteen feet he can see it twitch and throb erratically as if a small animal just below the surface wants out.

"This was his room in first year. We'd drink beer out on the patio and stick his stereo speakers in the window to hold it open. In early spring we'd stockpile snowballs. blast 'The Dead Kennedys' and scream quotes from the communist manifesto while we ambushed engineer and management students on their way to lunch."

She laughs and from her eyes he can tell she's drifted away for a second but is suddenly back, her eyes fluttering

like gypsy moths around a lamp as she bunches and squeezes the edge of the sheet.

The sirens are just audible now.

They both look at the window--an opening into night. He places the candles around the room and lights them.

"Please let them burn," he says. "And if one goes out ..., just light it again."

* * *

Morning sky

 veiled in rain
his life

will never be the same view of the city from the Jacques
Cartier bridge lights glimmer on dark river shimmer cold
shiver, he feels tired and old before his time was when he
thought the wind blew for him, for him, never companionless
but always alone, rain-filled pot-holes spraying eclipsed
memories mapped across the windows of his eyes now begin to
blur the line between himself and this voice and he knows he
has always been drawn, like the moon drawn by water--a small
set of falls he once sat behind the moving frameless mirror
of river, tried to look through to the rush rumble world how
it poured and pounded, sounded like a stampede of slick
simile rocks against his--back to the road each town with a
church and a strip-bar guy named Lucien hears his french
says "You know, I go Vancouver, Toronto, United States
before I live ere under bill 101. AND I AM FRENCH! De udder
Bourassa started it den Levesque 'e pushed it and pushed it
so now dis Bourassa is 'ere and 'e 'as FUCKED IT UP." They
shoot pool for money and he ends up behind the eightball
again so much more than just a game, the way he will decide
to play once more for the road then leaves with beer still
in his glass--for thirsty ghosts as the table dance girl
flashes gold rings pierced through the hood of her clit he
drives through valley hills bridged by a rainbow, drives in
the present but dwells on the past a Laurentian meadow where

colt and mare graze beside a glistening radar dish and this
first fork in the road for though he can faintly hear, he
has yet to read me--his I of this he--the he of his eyes
still believing the map will somehow help him find the fair,
help him get there in time to see the maple play a little
fiddle, the mighty oak on big bass drum, maybe even meet a
woman in sandals and a cotton dress, he thinks of worming
his fingers through her long brown hair, make love to her
bones lost in that strange symphony of come sounds up
throats through clenched teeth and yes
oh yes

oh yes all that there is

is the moment before

the moment before this

yes

now

ohhh

ohhh

over and out

two strangers and a sticky mess, the awkward silence, false
caress of frightened lonely passion searching for some kind
of, any kind of love. He must know by now he won't ever come
closer to it, just back to himself in the stained sheets

between us there is still the windshield
words he has yet to see through this
glass canvas for butterflies sad summer Art--

his father's name--what of it? He was born of a Starr--

wrapped in a towel in the bathroom with his mother singing
he remembers a hug and her hands on his flesh--that's a good
boy now flush--at a truck-stop hears a guy explain that with
his new contract he gets paid five bucks to take a shit goes
raw into the river whales wash ashore and are declared

hazardous waste because of the toxins in their flesh lies
the mouth lies, he can't remember the beginning or the rest
and so drives all night listening to a radio talk-show
discuss free trade and the American senators who say we
don't like the deal--where do we sign? we don't like the
deal--where do we sign lit up says GOD IS THE ANSWER and he
finally asks the night--What the hell is the question?

* * *

From his bedroom window he looked across the street as Mr. Fischer dragged a large box down his front steps, along the walk and to the curb.

Hands pressed to the small of his back, Mr. Fischer straightened up and looked across the street, saw him at the window, waved and motioned for him to come over.

Down the stairs he smiled about Mr. Fischer.

Out the front door he looked across the street, the smile widening so he lowered his head as he ran. He liked Mr. Fisher liked him. Didn't treat him like a little kid either, they talked about everything. Even about how Mr. Fischer had been kind of scared to sleep in the house for the first few weeks after his father had died.

"Hi neighbour." said Mr. Fischer at the curb, hands on his hips.

"Hi."

"Whatcha up to?"

"Nothin' much."

"Want to help me with some boxes?"

"Sure."

"Okay then. They're in the basement."

The house still smelled like old people so he started to breathe with his mouth. He looked at the faded green wallpaper in the front hall and the two dark lines that ran along it--one just above the floor very black and streaky

like a lot of little snakes or big worms, and the other at his eyes-level, a kind of thick, greyblack smudge. He figured he knew Mr. Fischer well enough now that he could ask what they were from.

"What li..., oh those. The dark ones along the bottom are from the rubber bottom of his cane and the other one is from his shoulder. I guess he leaned against the wall when he walked."

He said "oh" as Mr. Fischer continued down the hall into the kitchen.

When he got to the basement door, Mr. Fischer turned and saw him still staring at the wall. "Hey, c'mon. I've got something to show you."

Even with the lights on the basement was dark. It was cool and damp and the smell reminded him of how his turtle bowl used to smell when he forgot to clean it. But it was better than upstairs so he started to breathe through his nose again.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Fischer had already gone into another room and came back carrying a stack of magazines.

"Look what I found! Something every guy your age dreams of."

He smiled at Mr. Fischer's smile but didn't know what he meant. Mr. Fischer handed him the magazines and went back upstairs.

He flipped through the magazines looking at the covers--"Penthouse", "Hustler", "Triple X Porn Stars". Even the covers had nude ladies on them!

He picked one--"Triple X Porn Stars"--and put the rest down on the bottom step then moved closer to the small window at the bottom of the stairs so he could see. He opened the book in the middle. On one page was a picture of a lady with two men. She was on her hands and knees and one of the men was about to put his penis in her mouth and the other man was behind her with his face close to her bum. The pictures were shiny and made the peoples' skin looked kind of orange. On the other page the lady was on her back on a bed and one of the men was on his knees behind her head holding her ankles in the air and spreading her legs apart and the lady was holding the man's penis over her face.

He looked between the lady's legs. She had dark curly hair there and an opening that looked orangey red and gushy. He looked at the man's penis in her hands. Big and he wondered if his would get like that too and something felt funny there but he liked it too so he turned the page and the next picture had the same man behind the lady trying to put his penis in her bum and he wondered if it hurt the lady but couldn't tell from the look on her face. Just then Mr. Fischer started to come back down the stairs with a glass in each hand.

"You like those, eh? I thought you would."

He closed the magazine and watched Mr. Fischer come to the second to last step where he sat down and put one of the glasses on the stack of magazines. Mr. Fischer stuck his fingers in the other glass and pulled out a piece of lemon that looked kind of brown and he squeezed it and it squirted into the drink fizzed. Mr. Fischer dropped it back in the glass and stirred the drink with his finger and then put his finger in and out of his mouth.

"Here you go. Your first rum and coke I bet. So don't go telling your mother about the things I give you."

He looked at Mr. Fischer then took a sip. The piece of lemon bumped against his lip and the drink was warm and tasted kind of thicksweet then sour and the fizz got stuck in his throat.

"You like that?"

He looked at Mr. Fischer and shrugged his shoulders. Mr. Fischer squeezed the piece of lemon in his own drink but didn't lick his finger this time.

"C'mon, you call that a taste. Take a real swallow. Like this." Mr. Fischer swung the glass out into the air then back to his mouth. "Here's looking at ya." He took three big swallows. "There, uhahhh, now that's a taste."

Trying to change the subject because he didn't like the drink, he asked Mr. Fischer where he got the magazines.

"Oh, they were my dad's I guess. Poor old bugger. He must have been pretty lonely all those years alone in this house."

He tried to picture old Mr. Fischer looking at the magazines. It was funny and sad at the same time. He breathed in deep through his nose. Now he thought the smell was like his dog's fur when it got wet.

"Now let's see you take a real drink. C'mon, bottoms up."

He looked at Mr. Fischer laughed. With the magazine at his side he closed his eyes and took two swallows of the drink. The lemon bumped against his lip again but this time when he swallowed he got a burning in his throat and it went right down into his stomach.

"At a boy. Now lets see what else we got here."

Mr. Fischer picked up his glass again and took the next book off the pile. The cover had a wet ring on it now and Mr. Fischer wiped it away with his hand. He put the book on his lap and started flipping through it.

"Now that's what I call a pussy." He turned the book around and showed him the picture. The whole page was a big picture of a lady's bum. She was bent over and had her hand between her legs with her fingers holding herself open there. He looked at the picture and said 'pussy' to himself - 'pussy', 'pussy'. Mr Fischer turned the book back around and started to turn the pages again.

"Holy crow would you look at the size of that thing."
Mr. Fischer turned the magazine around and held it up again.
It was a picture of a man standing up with three ladies on
the floor in front of him and the man's penis hung all the
way down to his knees and he thought of an elephant and
laughed.

"What's so funny?"

Elephant dink and he laughed again but didn't want to
have to tell Mr. Fischer so he turned away and put his drink
up on the window sill and then opened his magazine again. He
turned the pages one after the other but stopped and stared
at one because it had a picture of a lady squeezing one of
her tits and something was squirting out of it! He read the
words at the bottom of the page--

Sensuous young women in the bloom of lactating motherhood
Photos so good you can practically taste them!
Now available from Sweden
"Banged Up And Milky"

He looked closely at the picture and the stuff
squirting out. He looked over at Mr. Fisher was staring at
him. He noticed Mr. Fischer's glass on the step empty except
for the squeezed piece of lemon in it.

"You like these pictures, don't you?"

He looked at Mr. Fischer.

"Well come over here now and let me see what you've
got."

To hand him the magazine he took a step towards Mr.
Fischer grabbed him, pulled him against him and squeezed him

hard between the legs, Mr. Fischer squeezed and rubbed him but he twisted free, dropped the magazine and then turned to look at Mr. Fischer stood up, stepped towards him and he tried to look up but a whirling buzzing silence started to fill his head with a darkness that moved across his face like clouds over the sun it came slowly into him and at the same time emptied him, made him feel numb and though his eyes were open it was darker than if they'd been closed and then, from what seemed like far away, he heard the sound of a voice but couldn't hear the words and he felt like he was sinking into deep water and as he sank the dark buzzing shadow started to rise out of him it rose and took him with it and he was floating and sinking at the same time he thought he could see himself from above as if he was standing at the top of the stairs watching himself and he saw the magazine lying open at his feet with the pictures of nude ladies and men very bright in the darkness he floated into the front hall where the lines on the wallpaper started to move like snakes and worms swimming towards him they were moving, floating, coming to get him.

"Hey, what's the matter? Are you okay?"

He heard the words this time but couldn't see where or who they'd come from and something touched his shoulder--the worms and snakes from the wall--so he tried to shake them away but they felt like a hand now on his shoulder, and the hand shook him gently, rocked him slowly and the snakes went

away as he sank back from the darkness, the hand pulling him back the way a kite pulled close to ground comes fluttering out of the wind slowly the buzzing disappeared. The shadow drifted away.

"Hey. Look at me. Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

He looked up at Mr. Fischer then down.

"Hey, what's the matter? Are you okay?"

"I ... I'm ...I'm" He looked up at Mr. Fischer.

"Well? What is it?"

"I'm ... I'm okay. It's just that" He looked at Mr. Fischer but the buzzing started to come back so he looked down and took a deep breath with his mouth.

"Just that what?"

He took a deep breath through his mouth and blinked his eyes. "It's just that ..., thatuh.... I dunno, It's just that ... I mean ... like what you did ... it"

"What? Oh come on. That? I was just joking. Guys always joke around like that. Especially when they're friends."

He looked up at Mr. Fischer smiled.

"I know but" He looked down. With his foot pushed the magazine.

"But what?"

"But that seemed ...I dunno, ... different It seemed like ... like more or something."

Mr. Fischer laughed and shook him gently back and forth from the shoulder. "Don't be silly. I was just joking that's

all. Okay? You don't think I was trying to do anything, do you?"

"I ..., I guess not ... but ..." Mr. Fischer took his hand off his shoulder, glanced out the window and took the glass from the sill.

"Come on now. We're friends, aren't we? Do you think I'd show you these books if I didn't think you were old enough to handle it?"

"Yes. I mean no. I mean" He felt warm and his stomach felt sick. He rubbed a black line on the white rubber toe of one running shoe with the heel of the other and he thought of the lines on the walls upstairs and how they'd tried to get him and he thought of old Mr. Fischer and the pictures and Mr. Fischer and then he couldn't think of anything any more at all.

"Now, is everything okay?"

He looked at Mr. Fischer smiled.

"We're still friends, aren't we? I'd hate to think that you didn't like me any more because of a little joke."

Mr. Fischer lightly shook his shoulder again. He looked at Mr. Fischer smiled again. He tried to smile back but looked down instead at the magazine on the floor and that empty feeling started to come back but Mr. Fischer picked up the magazine and grabbed the stack off the stairs.

On the way to the room he'd got them from, Mr. Fischer stopped and turned around. "It was just a joke. I hope you

believe me and I hope that we're still friends. I thought you were old enough to see these but I guess I was wrong."

He watched Mr. Fischer go in and come out of the other room.

"Now. Is everything okay?"

"O, okay," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Okay," he said and looked down.

"I think this should be our secret."

He didn't know what Mr. Fischer meant but he said "Okay".

"If you want you can come and look at the magazines any time you like. Just don't tell anyone--not even your friends."

He said, "Okay."

"And don't say anything about the rum and coke either. That's probably what made you feel so funny."

He stood there for a moment and then heard voices from outside. They sounded like his friends' voices and he heard the scraping of hockey sticks pushed along the street so he moved to the second step and looked sideways through the window. He put his hands on the sill and felt something wet. It was the ring from his glass and he wiped his hand on his pants.

"Maybe you should go now so your mother doesn't wonder where you are," said Mr. Fischer as he moved in beside him

at the window. "Don't worry about the boxes, we'll do it another day."

He looked at Mr. Fischer and then out the window.

"Who's out there?" asked Mr. Fischer, leaning against him to look out and then wiping the rest of the ring from the sill with his hand.

"I can't see yet."

Mr. Fischer looked at him. Out the window they watched some of his friends come into view as one broke away from the group and ran towards his door.

"Looks like they're looking for you. You better hurry if you're gonna catch up with them."

He watched his friends on the other side of the street but didn't move to go until Mr. Fischer pushed his shoulder gently from behind.

He climbed the stairs and walked slowly through the front hall, the lines on the shiny green paper very black and for a second he thought he saw some of the short fat ones along the bottom wriggle where the paper had been ripped. He smelled old people again and hurried to the front door that Mr. Fischer opened and he called and waved to his friends who turned as his mother opened his door and saw her son across the street.

"So that's where you are."

Mr. Fischer stood beside him in the doorway.

"I hope he hasn't been bothering you."

"No, no, not at all," called Mr. Fischer and waved to his mother, the other hand patting her son's shoulder while his friends stood still in the street watching the conversation back and forth like tennis.

Mr Fischer waved to them, stepped back and partially closed the door. "Now remember what I said, eh?"

He looked at Mr. Fischer and then called, "Where ya going?" to his friends in the street.

Mr. Fischer said, "see you soon" but it sounded more like a question.

He turned back to the door closed so he ran down the walkway, jumped the box at the curb and pretended to stagger out of control on the landing so he could run into one of his friends on the other side of the street.

"Hey!"

"Hey yourself," and he kicked his friend's hockey stick so it flew from his hands and rattled on the road as it slid into the dry leaves along the curb.

"Where's the game?"

"Over on Lambent."

He ran up his walk to his mother who still stood at the door.

"Okay to play?"

"What were you doing over there?"

"Nothing."

"What do mean 'nothing', you must have been doing something."

"Nothing. I was helping him with some stuff, okay? C'mon, Mom, the guys are waiting."

"I don't want you bothering Mr. Fischer all the time."

"I wasn't bothering him. I helped him with some boxes, okay?"

His mother looked across the street then at her son. His friends started to slowly walk away.

"Be home in exactly two hours."

"Okay. Thanks, Mom."

He turned and called to his friends. "Hey guys, wait up. I've just gotta get my stick."

* * *

Fast past signs for campgrounds before he can ... the lake
 and fishing then water through pine stand sun reflects sign
 "500 meters" rear-view already this road begins to double
 back, it

 k
 s a e
 n s up escarpments of memories

 d
 r him, he
 o
 p away beneath

travels through this country but wants to travel with it,
 desires that this shadow somehow strip the world of knowing
 only tombstone facts of the road's bloodlight bound to the
 eternal wheel rolling up that hill brakes complaining for
 answers to cement questions caution the yellow sunlight load
 still too heavy to start his freeway speedsong of the truth
 is, the closer he looks, the more it blurs, takes him two
 directions at the same dying time is a flower in the gravel
 shoulder of this road rolls like flame coloured clouds out
 of black broken skies darker now than his learned devotion
 to ends that sell the means of freedom from this wheel turns
 and is turned, takes him for a ride towards the same chosen
 past the sad edge of all love the road for what it is a
 fragile breathmoment of electric bloodheartsoul fibres of
 song slide through his hands are the only hands he'll ever
 have held yet by the seat-belt of a self made snare, so much
 baggage in the trunk he may have misplaced his care, taken

instead the single lane of expectations must be abandoned
 like cars, their obsolescence built into the rusting
 cannon's crenel of culture's indifferent faith unwinds the
 mapless miles to go before he sleeps, perchance to dream?
 hey, what the fuck, everyone needs a sign from time to time
 he sees fields of hair beside the highway to his bliss will
 be every moment a prayer that he can simply learn to give
 from what's been given, make this nothing sing and forget
 the monuments to selfishness, false love that feeds poets'
 needs for a slow withdrawal to cold observance of swallows
 suicide into his grill, dip and are caught by the force of
 all motion gives false fluidity to this divided highway,
 perhaps the only one he'll ever know unless he gets lost in
 process, pursues it until the act becomes the state he may
 arrive at language's limit long before the end of the line
 so will he still decide to try and clear minds for green
 stands of dreams

his arms

pulling his hands

swinging his arms

pulling his hands

until

he is the axe

as an axe he will

Service centre sign says--CANOES FOR RENT--He'll fish until
 sundown, eat his catch and get back on the road. Drive at
 night so only his lights spill into the ditches that border
 the forest.

* * *

He opens the bail, holds the line with his index finger and casts the imitation minnow. It lands right where he means it to--where the weed-bed meets deep water by the end of the point. He jerks the rod every few turns of the reel-handle to simulate the flash and action of a wounded baitfish and retrieves the line slowly. Sometimes a little variation is all you need. And at this time of day he believes big fish are waiting in ambush among weeds made darker by the pine shadows cast as the sun slowly sinks behind the small island.

He works the rod like an extension of his arm, putting the line down with an accuracy he's experienced only once before--trout fishing--and he'd landed a rainbow over twenty-four inches long.

He watches the surface for the slightest hint of movement and casts into it when it appears. There, deep in the weeds near the shore of the island. The lure hits the water, the fish hits the lure so he pulls up hard, sets the hook in the fish runs for the weeds and he adjusts the drag as high as he dares the fish jumps, shakes its head trying to spit the hook--a Largemouth bass, six, maybe eight pounds surging for sunken brush near the shore so he tries to hold the line, keep it from a sure snare but the fish pulls hard on the drag releases line at the same time he keeps the rod-tip up, tries to reel in, remembers he forgot the net and the fish jumps again he pulls back on the line but this time

feels a dead weight instead of the hammer pull of the fish and the tangle tightens as he tries to reel in so with one motion shoves the rod-butt under the gunwale, picks up the paddle and moves to where line and fish are caught--tough to see now in the greyduskhaze though he can still follow the line by knocking the rod-tip with his knee and watching for the ripples on the surface near the place he makes a few strong strokes and looks down at the dual whirlpools spinning out from the sides of the paddle blade as weeds and brush softly scrape the canoe he puts down the paddle and picks up his rod, retrieves the slack line until the rod begins to bend to the dead weight of the snag and he wonders if the fish is still on the line because now, in this light, his eyes can barely penetrate the surface of the water and the island in front of him has begun to lose its shape, becoming just a dark mass floating in a lighter darkness he pulls hard on the line to the point of it almost breaking and knows he should just do it and go, knows the longer he tries to free himself the harder it'll be finding his car on the far shore even though the bass might still be there and it's either that fish or stale bread and margarine for supper since he'd expected to catch something with his best lure, the one he's nailed so many big fish with, so he follows the line into the water with his hand and a wisp of mist rises into the air comes the fish and he sees he's still got it, it's still hooked and he pulls hard on the

line trying to free it from the snag he pulls so hard he almost tips the canoe and must release the line to grab both gunnels and he tells himself to calm down, the canoe rocking as he wipes his face with the short-sleeve shoulder of his shirt, but the fish jumps again so he grabs the paddle, sweeps the water blindly for the line and hits something solid, tries to lever it up out of the lake but the dead weight shifts and rolls off the blade as the wind makes him shiver and he puts the paddle down, tries to look into the water where he thinks the bass is caught--God so big. And smart. Went straight for the brush the second he hooked it.

Wind ripples the water. Shimmers the canoe and sways the small islands' shadowdark trees. He wonders uselessly if the forgotten net could help him then reaches over the side of the canoe to again try and pull on the line. He looks down at the place where he thinks the bass is caught. Sees shadow merge with dark water.

* * *

Wish sandwich washed down with river water he swims and
decides to stay the midnight his tent lit up like yankee
stadium, Idaho winnebago couple flood lights wake him in
rain pounds on tight nylon keeps him from the storm and he
sleeps again and dreams of a change on the fly he
circles back to his end

calls for the pass comes up the boards and he plays it off
them into centre has it so he breaks down the wing across
the ice melting behind the blue water line pass to him a
give and he goes for the net sinking skates a boat stick rod
cast the puck hooks seal goalie breaks through the net dives
deep below red lines change but he stays on the ice to haul
it through for a face-off sticks in the air slash at thick
skin blade through blubber eyes open and he's hungry, packs
the wet tent and returns the canoe, asks about a restaurant
they suggest Moon's Cafe, maybe twenty minutes that way so
he gases up and looks at the fish mounted on the wall sign
says catch your limit but limit your catches the last few
minutes of news on the radioisotopes found in caribou flesh
ten times the accepted amount so the ministry raises the
levels right into the guts of a native leader shot in
Winnipeg by an police officer because his clothes--jeans and
jean jacket-- matched the description of those worn by a
break-and-enter suspect struggled and the gun went off but
the officer didn't know how his finger got hold of the
trigger he pulls into the cafe.

* * *

THE ROAD TO WAS

Clamour coffee clatter in a sea of plaid shirts and baseball caps he makes his way to the two calendar front and sits on a red vinyl stool - salt, pepper, ketchup, HP sauce, and a metal napkin dispenser on the speckled arborite counter his elbows ... "Hi."

"You want a menu?"

"Yes please. Uhhhh no. I'll have ... I'll have two poached eggs on toast, bacon, home fries, a small orange juice and coffee."

"Is that it?"

"Yyyup."

"Adam and Eve on a raft, fries and bacon. You want your juice and coffee now?"

"Uhh the juice please. I'll take the coffee ..."

"Here ya go, small o.j. and coffee."

Behind him truckers sit at tables in twos and threes but talk little still moving with their lonely rolling thunder home as distant as their tired eyes.

But at least they have C.B.'s, can always send a message down the line, call out to the night and get a human answer--hey good buddy, bring it on home ya ...

"Here ya go."

"Thanks."

He scrapes some hard, yellowbrown egg off his knife and eats. After his second cup of coffee he pays and goes to the men's room past the video games and telephones where a huge

man in cowboy boots and hat leans with his left arm on top of the phone like timber, his leather belt and shiny truck buckle supporting a picnic rock belly polished by years of flannel shirts.

Around him he goes to get to the men's room and is startled when he finds someone on the other phone, practically steps into him--a red-haired head turns, surprise and nervousness in her-- "Sorry" --green eyes.

In the bathroom he tries to think of who she reminds him of --that look in her eyes--tries to remember what she looks like, what she's wearing and why he'd been so surprised. He hopes she's still on the phone when he comes out she's gone.

Windows down, tape on, egg and bacon burp out of the parking lot he gets comfortable in the seat and sees her fifty yards up the road standing in baggy green pants and a loose shirt with a small grey duffel at her feet. She hooks him with her thumb and that look from before, his memory spinning back through dark, murky water.

"Hi," he says smiling but she stays a few feet from the passenger window, duffel in her left hand, right one at her hip pocket.

"Where'ya heading?"

"Where're you going?" she says stepping forward and

leaning into the window, ignoring his smile but giving him and the car a close look.

"Me? I'm going all the way. West to the end of the line."

"Oh ya? How far's that?"

"Uhh for now I guess it's the Pacific."

"Right. Okay." She looks at him again ignores his smile. Looks at the car and through the slanted rear window sees his camping gear in the hatch. She gets in quickly puts her duffel between her feet. "You can take me to Winnipeg then."

"Toss your stuff in the back. It'll be more comfortable."

She looks straight ahead.

Gravel crunch to highway speed hum window rolled up whoosh he tries to look at her without being obvious. She is pretty, beautiful really--tall and strong, her masculinity part of the appeal. And those eyes.

"That's it. Now I remember."

"Remember what?" She doesn't look at him.

"The girl, uhhh, woman you remind me of."

"Spare me, will you?"

She turns her head to the side and looks out the window, maybe watching the dip and rise of the telephone lines, maybe the water blue sky wide and cloudless like the day in Portugal when he met her on the beach--Cecile--saw

how her pastel drawing captured the sensual, sad, raw violent air all with a bright but sunless sky. The way she'd shown up at the bar that night, waited for him to finish his shift then both of them swept up with the other waiters and waitresses, off to the disco where they sat, drank and talked under revolving mirror balls and amber lights.

5 a.m. and they'd opted for the hour ocean walk back to town talking of art, its meaning just out of words' reach stretched towards the raging morning sunrise over sardine boats heading back to port.

"So you want to write. Well, answer me this. Would you give away your last cigarette?"

He looked at her tight tanned face, the tiny blonde hairs on her cheeks and upper lip lifted in a clever smirk the sun now rising above the whitewashed town.

"Sure. Why not? I'd give away my last cigarette. Why not?"

"You're a fool." She practically spit the words at him. "And how about your last cent? Would you give that away too?"

He looked away then back, his smile gone yellow and heavy on his face with loneliness there now too.

"No." He looks away and walks then turns. "So why did you say I'm a fool?"

"You're a fool because you think you can give things away--even your last cigarette. You ..."

"So what's wrong with that?" He stepped back close to her. "It's good to give. I'd give it all away, everything ... so ... so to always have it, you know? If you're free then ..."

"God you're naive." She dismissed him then reached into the pocket of her vest. She lit a cigarette and looked to the small harbour and town as they passed the first stucco house on the dirt turned shellcement road. He watched the sun shimmer higher.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"What? Ohh, uhuh no, go ahead."

"Thanks."

He watches her light the cigarette. She inhales deeply and blows the smoke out her nose. Turns to the window again.

He says, "Beautiful up here, eh?"

She doesn't look from the window. "Ya, I guess."

"Don't you like it?"

"Ya, it's alright. If you like woods and lakes and that sort of stuff." She opens her mouth and inhales the escaping smoke up her nose. "But I'd sure as hell hate to be up here in the winter."

"Hhoh, I know what you mean. Cabin fever must run pretty high up here in the winter, eh? People probably talk to the trees. I bet some even babble like brooks." He laughs and looks over at her but she just smokes and stares out the window past the lakes and green trees of the forest.

He turns his eyes back to the road, his ears from the sound of his own voice to the engine's hum and the hollow drone of the wheels fast over pavement. He coughs. Clears his throat. Glances at her ignoring him.

"You know, before all this free-trade shit, I used to think that the Canadian shield really was one. That the snow and ice protected us from 'Amerikaka' and the rest of the world's dis-ease."

She looks at him now he fights back a smug smile.

"Dis-ease? What are you babbling about, man?"

"You know. Ease and dis-ease. Like it's peoples' diseases that make them do all the fucked up things they do."

"You got that right."

"Things happen to people, but instead of dealing with it they just bury it inside. They detach themselves from their feelings and then search for security in external things. But sooner or later something triggers it and it comes out in a really messed up way. That's dis-ease."

"Tell me about it, Dr. Freud. Did you see that trucker I was beside on the phone."

"The big one?"

"Ya. He picked me up in the Sault and the first thing he says is--no one rides for free little girl. Then that night, after he tells me about his daughters my age and after ..., you know, ... after He curls up around me and cries like a little baby."

"Really? That's weird."

"Tell me about it. But at least he was gentle."

The increasing east behind her she took a slow, small step then pivoted quickly to him.

"You can't give anything away. Ever. If you do there'll be nothing left. I'll never give away my last cigarette. But I'll share it with anyone who asks."

He wanted to kiss her but the moment passed and she turned away then quickly back with that sly smirk on her face again.

When they reached the town they both turned towards the docks where crease-skinned trios of sardine fishermen unloaded their catch into wooden crates--the man in the hold bent over to scoop, lift and pass the round wicker basket to the man on deck who tossed it full up, sardines arcing silver sunflash silverwriggleflash out and back into the basket caught by the man on the stone pier who dumped the sardines into ice-filled crates.

They watched every boat unload. A fisherman bummed a smoke from her and asked them to come back for lunch--

"Sardinas grilliadis et vinc verde a douze horas."

But at twelve she wasn't there. Or at twelve thirty when they started to eat, started to peel the skin from the backs of the grilled sardines, tossing bones and the guts into the coals of the fire warm like the thick crusted bread washed down with crisp salad and cold green wine.

"Your girl no come," said one of the fishermen who then whispered something in Portuguese to the man beside him laughed, looked at him with a smug grin, tossed an eaten sardine into the fire.

"Not my girl. Just friends," he said with a mouthful of fish and bread.

The fisherman translated and the others nodded and laughed.

"That good. She too much like a man. Ugly too."

She butts her cigarette in the dashboard ashtray and turns to the window again. He watches her and tries to picture her with the trucker--wonders what she'd be like and if he'll get a chance to find out.

"Where ya from?"

She turns from the window with a 'gimmie-a-break' look.

"No really, I'd like to know."

"Why? So you can get to know me and then think that gives you some right of way into my pants. Or are you gonna try and be macho?"

"What? Listen I ..."

"Save it. I know what you're thinking. Why do you think I let you pick me up in the first place? Christ, this world is full of nothing but pricks."

The fisherman translated and the others nodded and laughed. They ate and drank for hours--wine and then a bottle of medronnia, a strong home-brew made from fermented plums. Then they taught him their favourite dirty folk songs. But as the sun slipped from its tall wooden stool and five o'clock staggered into view, they said they must go home and sleep--their boats, after all, go out just after 2 a.m. So they had one more drink and then hugged him good-bye. He decided to hit the square for a few strong coffees before work.

But as the waiter took his order he noticed Cecile alone at a table at the edge of the square. He got up. Approached her with a full-smile awareness of his numb head. Sat down beside her and began to say what a terrific afternoon she'd missed but she quickly cut him off, sat in silence and ignored him, stood up and yelled at him to leave her alone.

Others at the cafe stopped their own conversations and watched her storm away. The waiter brought his coffee but stood with it in his hands unsure of what to do. He felt the people looking at him but was drunk enough to only notice them the way dreams and waking merge from a deep sleep. And since he couldn't understand what had upset her but knew it couldn't have anything to do with him, he ignored their jostling glances.

He had his coffee and then another. Then he paid the bill. As he walked away the waiter looked at him with sympathy.

"She's crazy, my friend," he said in Portuguese. "Don't waste your time."

He tries to slow down enough to read a large sign on the shoulder but only catches something about the Arctic Sea. He pulls onto the gravel shoulder and stops.

"Did you see that?"

"What?" She looks at him.

"The sign back there. Arctic watershed or something."

"Oh that. Are we only there?"

"What is it?"

"What?"

"The sign?"

"Oh that. I've read it before. It's the point where all the rivers from here on flow north or something. There's another one further west for the Pacific."

"Huh. That's pretty neat."

"Ya? Basically I think all it means is don't bother fishing the rivers until you're further west."

"Really? Why's that?"

"Because they're cold and empty. If you don't believe me, go ahead and try."

He forgot all about her. It was like that there. Everyone was from somewhere else and would soon be gone so you could be totally honest, or, at the very least, you could live a fiction honestly. It made each moment more intense, more real, but the transience made it decadent too. People moved in and out of your life like tides on deserted beaches--so beautiful in their discovery--the cool coral caves and yards of damp sand draped with ribbons of shell-speckled seaweed. So many different wonders and all so easily forgotten once submerged again under listless lagoons.

"No fish in them at all? Not even the ones that feed into lakes?"

"Hey, do I look like The Old Man in the Sea to you? I can only tell you what I've been told. If a river feeds into a lake then there's nothing stopping the fish from getting into it, is there? Then I guess it's just for the major rivers or something, shit, I don't know. Maybe they're too cold. Who the fuck cares anyways?"

The next time he saw Cecile was in the bar during lunch. She went from table to table calmly handing out her drawings. A few minutes later a woman he'd never seen before ran in and tried to get her to leave. They began to shout.

"Please don't do this to me, please."

"Do this to you! Do this to you!" shouted Cecile as she turned away and continued to hand out her work--a little bow and obsequious smile as she did--but the woman continued to plead with her, grabbed her sleeve and Cecile turned with a raised hand.

Everyone was watching them now--a little mealtime show--and he went over to see if he could bring some calm to the situation.

"Here, I've got something for you," said Cecile and she tossed him her cigarettes.

"Hey, what's your problem?" He stares at her but she just looks straight ahead, arms folded in front of her, the vast wilderness beyond the windshield perfect in its wordless mocking of his human discomfort.

Finally she acknowledges him. "Are we gonna get going or what?"

He puts the car in gear and spins the tires in the gravel, giving up his anger to doubts about whether or not she's right about the rivers and whether he'll try anyway and risk fishing where no fish are to be found.

From what he later pieced together, she'd continued to hand out her drawings all the way to the beach. The same beach he went to that afternoon after his shift even though what he'd really wanted was to go back to his room and sleep. But the cook from the bar had persuaded him by suggesting, and then paying for, a taxi.

When they arrived there was a crowd by the water but he didn't follow the cook to see what all the commotion was about. Probably a ray swimming near the shore, or a tourist stung by a man-o-war, or maybe just another victim of too much sun and alcohol.

As usual, he simply looked for a couple of pretty girls then placed his towel on the sand nearby. As he got

comfortable--a combination of position and view--the cook came back yelling in Portuguese, "It's her, it's her. The crazy one from lunch."

He stood up. Saw an ambulance work its way across the sand.

With the crowd they watched the attendants wrap her in a blanket and lift it onto the stretcher. His friend said, "We are worth nothing, my friend, nothing."

He looked at all the people on the beach. Hadn't anyone seen her take off her clothes and walk into the sea? Seen her disappear beneath the waves?

He moved onto the wet sand behind the open ambulance doors. The surf rolled up cool around his feet then drew back, up, then back, sucking at his heels and sinking them in the sand as bits of shell and seaweed drifted over his toes. The attendants collapsed the wheels and lifted the stretcher. Sunlight flashed off its chrome bars like sardines arcing in tossed baskets.

He checks his mirrors and his speed then looks over at her as she pulls a large snot out of her nose, rolls it in her fingers and flicks it onto the floor. She looks straight at him and puts the same finger into her other nostril. He wants to say something funny like "digging for gold?" or

"pick me a winner," but her look says don't bother so what he says is, "Uhhh, you hitch-hike a lot?"

She's too busy to reply.

He knew it was strange that a car travelling west would suddenly turn around and head east but the man looked harmless enough and he'd gone hours without a ride. Car after car had passed him, but as they did he'd told himself it could be worse--it could be raining.

"Where you going?" asked the man.

"Stewiak," he said.

"Hop in," said the man and leaned over to open the door.

He put his pack in the back then got into the front seat. He looked at the man was middle-aged and sort of hunched over the wheel. A bit nervous looking so the question of why he turned around wasn't asked. A ride was a ride was a good hitch-hiker's motto according to Jack.

"How old are you?" asked the man.

"Nineteen," he said.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" asked the man.

"Two sisters," he said.

"How much do you weigh?" asked the man.

He glared at the man looked away.

"Are you tired? I live not too far from here. You want to stop for a drink? something to eat? Take a little rest? Maybe have a shshshshave?"

"A sh sh sh shave? Woohoo. Was that it? The only weirdo all the way from T.O?"

"Ya, that was it."

He told Jack the story of his trip out as they sat in the bus with the Canada World Youth group Jack was part of.

"Well don't worry," said Jack. "No hitch-hiking adventure is truly complete without at least one absolute psycho."

"Great, I can't wait."

The C.W.Y. leader looked at them with disapproval. He didn't like someone showing up and disrupting the group's dynamic. And besides, it was against the rules.

Jack translated the hitch-hiking story to his Spanish counterpart and they both laughed.

"Wow, has your Spanish gotten good or what?"

"Hey, three months in Colombia and you don't have much choice."

"No kidding? So what's the place you're staying in here like anyways?"

"State-o-the-art red mud farm. The owner sleeps in the basement of the barn and we stay in a small trailer out

back. Everyone's super friendly but I think Stewiak's biggest claim to fame is that it's the mid-way point between the north pole and the equator. But compared to the farming methods in Colombia ..." he gives him a 'you don't want to see it' look. "That's why we're making all these day trips. So the Colombians can see our 'efficient and technologically advanced' methods. Today its Porky's place. Bedi bedi bedi es finito hombre."

"I'm hungry. Got anything to eat?" Her look says she won't be disappointed.

"No. We'll have to stop and buy some stuff."

"Where do you plan on spending the night?"

"I'm not sure. There're a couple of decent looking parks on the map. We'll buy some food and see how far we get before dark."

Out of the bus the smell of pigs and manure entered them at every pore. There was another smell too. The Canadian who Jack said spent his time in Columbia looking for coke and chasing women came up to him.

"Hey, man. You ever been to South America?"

He shook his head.

"Really? Oh wow, man. Well if you have a little bread and speak Spanish or Portuguese, then South America is the place to be, man. But forget Colombia, man. Brazil is where it's at--Rio de Janeiro. A hundred U.S. a month and you can live like a king! Three bucks and you can have the best table and whisky at any night club. Filet mignon for a buck a pound. No joke, man."

As he talked they entered a small brick building attached to the side of a large barn. Compared to the grey, about-to-rain day the room was very bright and the fluorescent lights glimmered off the white tiled walls and chrome tables.

From a track in the ceiling, pigs in various stages of slaughter swung slowly upside-down on stiff chains from station to station where men in chest waders and thick rubber gloves performed specific jobs in the dressing process. A very pale pink in the bright room, the pigs looked inanimate--like small assembly-line parts to be fitted into large machines.

In front of the group a huge man with a fat face waited for the next pig to reach him. When it did he lifted the tail, level with his chin, and with a long, curved, thinbladed knife cut deeply around its anus. At the other end of the room another man opened a large metal door and through it he could see into the dark, cool barn--mud and

straw caked on the log joists and a few dim bulbs shining through spider webs.

The man opened another door and then the wooden gate of the holding pen. The pigs started to scream and squeal hysterically fought to hide behind each other in the far corner of the pen. The man went in and wrapped a chain around a pig's hind leg and then pulled a lever beside the pen door. With a low whine the chain dragged the screaming pig out of the pen and into the air. Holding the pig's snout down the man cut its throat with one fast slash from a long curved knife.

Stopped at a gas station with a small market, she jumps out and goes into the store while he waits for the attendant.

"Good," he thinks. "Maybe she'll buy a few groceries. At least something for herself."

With the car being filled he goes into the store but before he has a chance to see which items have the least inflated prices he sees her, arms full, heading for the check-out.

"Hey, c'mon. I've got everything we need."

He stares hard at her but she ignores him by putting the load down on the counter for it to be rung up. When he

gets there the proprietor is just punching in the prices of the last few items into the till.

"\$27.45 please."

Without looking at him she helps the lady put the groceries in a bag, picks it up and walks out. At the till the lady watches him closely now he tries to smile at her as he takes out his wallet and pays.

Blood poured from the pig's neck and out its nose and mouth. The man let go of its snout and went back to the lever on the wall while the pig bled, convulsed, jolted the chain. A girl from the group covered her mouth and ran out the door.

Working on another anus, the man in front of them smiled and began to whistle.

"And the women there! Man!" whispered the guy beside him. "If they won't go home with you it just means you have to pay a little something for it, heheeh. But it's not very much. Maybe ten American if she's really hot, man."

Back at the car he has to pay for the gas. He hands the attendant his credit card and gets in behind the wheel. Before he can say anything she hands him a bag of barbecue chips and mumble crunch speaks.

"Try some of these, they're great. Really hot."

With the grocery bag on her lap he can hardly see her face. He refuses the chips and gives them back to her.

"Listen, I don't know what the hell" She presses the edges of the bag down away from her face, lifts her chin and smiles. Does it a few more times to indicate the attendant at the window. He turns, takes the red plastic tray, signs and takes his card and the top paper copy of the bill.

Still shaking on the chain, the pig was hoisted up then lowered into a huge tub of boiling water.

"To scald the skin so the hair can be removed," said the ass-man without looking up.

Back on the highway he thinks of what to say while she munches chips and roots through the bag on her lap, presenting each item with the flash of a pitch-man at a county fair.

"And for desert we've got chocolate ice-cream. Not just regular chocolate but Double Nut Chocolate Fudge!"

"Ice-cream. How the hell are we supposed to keep that? Christ almighty, what other brilliant items did you spend my money on? And while we're on the subject of money, I ..."

"Hey, lighten up, will ya? I see the way you pay for your gas and all the new camping stuff you've got in the back. I bet your folks paid for half of it too. As for the ice-cream, I guess I got a little carried away. So what? We'll just have to eat it now."

She opens the carton of ice-cream and scoops some out with her fingers.

"If you want me to stop I've got some spoons in the back."

She looks at him, eats the ice-cream off her fingers, licks them and then scoops more which she offers him with a coy chocolate smile.

Out of the tub, the conveyor brought the pig to a man with a large straight razor who scraped off its hair and then cut the pig from just under the nose up to its tail. Guts bulged very bright through the now colourless skin and the man pulled them out into a steaming heap on the floor as the next pig's throat was slit.

As they finished the ice-cream it became dark. For the last 30K or so they'd driven alongside a river, crossed it a few times as it appeared and then disappeared into the

forest. Crossing it again he pulls off the highway to look at the map. Needs the interior light now.

"We're still a long way from the next park."

She says nothing.

"How do you feel about finding a spot along the river here? I'm getting tired."

She doesn't look at him. Puts a finger to her mouth then takes it away. Stares out into nothing, the light in the car reflecting them onto the windshield as if now, at the moment of night, the world goes no further.

"Well, can you drive?"

She says nothing.

"Listen. You can trust me. You can even sleep in the car if you want."

"You think I'm afraid of you? I'm just pissed we're stopping at all. Well, what the hell. Better than you falling asleep behind the wheel."

"Okay. Good. We'll find a place around here then." He turns off the interior light and puts the car in gear. He looks at her looking straight ahead.

"If you try anything, I swear I'll fucking kill you."

He says nothing.

Back on the bus one of the Colombians pretended to be a pig convulsing on the chain. He shook and quivered up against the girl who had run out.

He and Jack looked at each other then away, awkward in their silence.

"Since you're leaving tomorrow I guess you want to hear about a few of my psycho rides," said Jack, giving him a demented look and laughing.

"Not really."

"Sure you do. Besides, these were all in states, not in good ol' C eh N eh D eh." He did a Stompin' Tom imitation with the same demented face.

He parks the car at the grass edge of the large gravel shoulder for the bridge, pops the hatch from the switch beside his seat, gets out and gets his flashlight. He closes the hatch and comes back to the car.

"Wait here and I'll check out the river." He leans into the car. "See you in a ..." and flashes the light on her. About to go he leans into the car again and pulls the keys from the ignition. He closes the door and walks around the front of the vehicle. She watches the slim beam of jiggling light disappear over the embankment.

"I'd just got back from my trip to Nicaragua and I didn't want to spend all my money on a flight from Miami. In fact, for some reason, I decided I'd try and get home without spending any money at all--just throw myself on the mercy of the road. I walked out to the highway and right away got a ride with this really cool couple from Gainesville. They fed me and we discussed American foreign policy all the way through the state. They gave me a couple of books and offered to put me up for the night but I decided to keep going so they dropped me off at a busy service centre so I could grab another ride.

On the way back to the car he turns off the light before she can see it. He climbs the hill slowly and approaches the car from the rear, stopping before his feet hit the gravel, a few feet from her window. In the dark he can just make out the shape of her head, see her hand move into a bag then to her mouth, and the slight movement of her jaw as she chews. He watches her.

"Right away I got another great ride but the guy dropped me off near the border of Georgia and South Carolina and it started to get dark so I decided to find a bridge or overpass to crash under. But then a van pulled up and the guy asked me if I wanted a ride. I said sure and hopped in. We were moving before I even noticed the two other guys in the back.

He hits her with the beam of light as he steps onto the gravel and talks loudly. She lurches in the seat and turns to the light in her face then shades her eyes.

"There's a great spot down there."

Around the front of the car he wonders why he did that but doesn't give it any more thought. From in the car he can hear her coughing. He opens the door and leans in.

"Are you okay?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "There's a great spot down there--a little meadow bordered by trees. And the river runs nice and fast so there aren't too many bugs either."

He pops the hatch again and goes to it. As he takes out his pack he hears her door open and then her feet on the gravel. She's still coughing. She clears her throat and spits.

"I tried not to look nervous, but the two guys moved up close to my chair. Then the driver started talking.

- Whatchyou doin' out here at night? A young fellah could get killed if he's not careful.

"The two guys behind me laughed and my stomach dropped into my shoes.

- Less ucourse you got a pack full of dope or somethin' and you don't want no one to see ya.

"I looked at him but didn't say anything.

- Well, how 'bout it? You got any dope?

"I said no and that I didn't use it but he cut me off.

- Say boys, take a look in his pack and see what's in there.

"It was on my lap but I just handed it to the guys behind me. I looked out my window to see if I could jump but we were flying down the road.

With the flashlight they comb the meadow's tree-line for fire-wood. When they've collected enough he gets out his small camping spade and digs a shallow pit near where he plans to put the tent. Using dry grass and twigs he starts a fire and nurses it with his breath until he can add some

twigs and then larger pieces of wood. She nudges him with her foot.

"Got any toilet paper?"

He looks up at her in the growing firelight. "Sorry. Didn't you buy any?"

She shifts her weight and folds her arms. Looks away towards the river.

"Hold on. I think I've got some in my pack."

He grabs the flashlight and rummages loudly through his kit.

"Ahha. Here you go." He hands her the roll.

"Hey, wait, take this." He hands her the flashlight.

"Take this too." He hands her his small shovel.

"What's that for?"

"To bury it."

"Why do I have to bury my piss?"

"Ohh. Sorry. Well, bring the paper back and toss it in the fire." He watches her walk towards the trees.

"They emptied my pack and went through all my clothes. All the while the driver kept glancing in the rear-view to see what they were doing. I guess he thought they might cheat him out of his share, but except for about ten bucks in my wallet all my money was in my sock so I figured it was safe for now.

- There's nothin' here.

- Nothin'? Are you sure?

- Nothing but a buncha smelly clothes and some books.

"I don't know why I did but I laughed and it really pissed them off. One of the guys behind me pulled out a crowbar and started whacking the side of my chair saying that he was gonna beat my head in with it. I looked straight ahead. He pushed it against my cheek and I pushed it away. The driver looked at me and laughed.

With the fire well burning he starts to assemble the tent. He hears some noise behind him and turns to the sound, stares at the night.

"Pretty nice spot we've got here."

He spins sharply around as a thick shiver runs from his shoulders to his heels. She approaches the fire from a completely different direction than she'd set off on.

"Ohhh sorry. Did I scare you?"

He stands up and walks to her. "Can I have the light."

She hands it to him but he doesn't turn away. He stands close to her as the fire crackles and sparks and river water rushes over rocks.

"You're ... I didn't realize you were so tall."

She says nothing.

He stands there a moment longer then turns, goes to his pack and pulls out a small grill with collapsible legs.

"When the fire burns down a bit stick this over top of it. I'm gonna set up the tent."

"Aye aye captain. And where be the fryin' pan?"

He watches her slim silhouette in the fire-light. "It's in the pack." She salutes and does a stiff-legged limp towards it. He goes back to the tent spread out on the ground.

"He slowed down the van and turned off the highway onto a gravel road. One of the guys grabbed me from behind and pulled me into the back of the van. He grabbed at my pants and I started to fight him but the other guy put the crowbar under my chin and pulled me back. He choked me and I started to pass out.

- You better let him have your wallet kid, if you know what's good for you.

"The guy took my wallet out of my pants and started to go through it. Believe me, I was happy that that's all he'd been after.

- Nine bucks. All he's got is nine lousy bucks.

"The driver slowed down again and turned off into a clearing and stopped.

- Gimmie that wallet.

As he adjusts the fly of the tent he smells the sausages cooking. He stands and walks towards the fire where she crouches with her back to him gently shaking the pan.

"Smells great."

She looks up at him. "It'll be ready in about ten minutes."

"Great. I'll just finish setting up the tent." He stands over her looking at the fire. "Uhhh, I've only got one sleeping bag so ..."

"Don't worry 'bout me. I've got what I need."

"Oh good. Okay."

He stands over her another moment, looks at the pan, crouches and slides another small piece of wood into the fire glowing red below the grill.

"The guy with the crowbar passed my wallet forward. The driver opened it and pulled out all my I.D.

- Looks like we got us a Canadian boys. One with a funny last name at that. How do you say that name anyway?

"I said it and the guy just stared at my I.D. Then he looked up at me with the most demented face I'd ever seen.

- Why that sounds to me like a jew-boy name. Yes sir it

sounds right Kikey to me. Are you a kike? Are you a filthy Canadian Kike?

"By this time all three of them were in the back of the van. The Driver dropped my wallet onto the pile of my clothes and books and stuff and walked hunched over to the back doors.

- Bring'im outside. We'll show him how we feel about stinkin' foreign kikes.

In the tent he turns on the flashlight and sweeps the dirt to the door and out with his hand. Half in the tent, he watches her at the fire. "Could be interesting," he thinks and he grabs his sleeping bag from the pack, pulls it into the tent and unrolls it. "Could be very interesting indeed."

He lays his bag on one side of the tent then brings it closer to the middle. He turns off the flashlight and backs out of the tent on his knees, zips up the bug-net and makes final adjustments to the fly.

"The two guys grabbed me and dragged me out of the van. Standing outside I realized they were both smaller than me but the driver was a huge mother. They closed the doors of the van and held me up against it. One of the guys starting muttering--get'im, do it to'im, get'im, and I figured this

was it. I looked up past the trees to the stars and the sky and I just couldn't believe this was happening. I figured, I'm dead. But for some strange I didn't really care. I mean, it almost made sense, you know?

- Alright you kike pig. Better say your prayers.

"He moved towards me and pulled out a gun. My knees buckled, but the two guys holding me propped me up.

- What's the matter jew? You never seen a .44 before. Why look at'im boys, the poor kike looks like he's gonna faint. Guess I better give him a drink.

"He moved up to me and kneed me in the stomach. They let go of my arms and I fell to the ground. All I could hear was a rushing sound, and then I felt gravel and sticks against my face. After a few seconds I started to get my breath back. I rolled around on the ground and felt something wet hitting me and I heard them all laughing.

Back at the fire he sees that she's cut up the sausages in the pan and added a can of beans.

"It's ready."

"Okay. I'll just go down to the river and get some water."

After supper he washes the pan and dishes and dumps the water in the meadow. When he's finished he walks down to the river and turns off the flashlight. A cool breeze comes

through the meadow and he shivers, turns the light back on but the beam doesn't make it across. He goes back to the fire, collects the rest of the food and takes it to the car.

"What're you doing?"

"It's easier than hanging it in a tree."

"What?"

"Ever heard of the three bears? There's Mama and Papa and little baby bear. Or maybe you've heard of Yogi, you know, smarter than your average hitch-hiker."

"Okay, okay, so I'm not woodsy owl, gimmie-a-break."

He comes back to the fire and sits down. "We should make Winnipeg by late tomorrow."

She says nothing.

"You got family there?"

She tosses the water from her cup into the fire, takes a pack of cigarettes from her breast pocket and lights up.

"Well, I'm gonna hit the hay. Nice talkin' to you."

He stands up and looks at her. Turns and walks to the tent.

"The shovel's there on your left. Make sure the fire's out before" She raises the shovel off the ground and shakes it without looking at him.

From the mouth of the tent he watches her by the fire-- a crouched figure with a cigarette sitting on a log in a

circle of brownorange light. He listens to sounds of the fast moving river and the wind that sways the trees around the meadow. He looks at her by the fire--sees smoke swirl from it and the tip of her cigarette. He looks up at the sky's diamond night.

"There you go kike, said the guy that kicked me--A little shower to quench your thirst.

"They all laughed and I stayed rolled up on the ground. But the big guy put the barrel of the gun under my chin and lifted my head up. The others grabbed me and stood me up again. He cocked the gun and pressed the barrel against my eye. That strange rushing sound came back and then all I could hear and feel was my own heart pounding like it was about to burst. I could hardly breathe and the next few seconds passed like hours. He pulled the gun a few inches away and pointed it right between my eyes. My mind went completely blank but I was totally at peace. I felt totally calm--until he fired a shot into the air and I flinched and so did the two guys holding me and my ears started to ring and my head was pounding and I thought I was going to puke. Then the big guy told them to lock me in the van because he didn't want to kill me just yet.

When she comes into the tent he pretends he's asleep. He listens to her pull something from her duffel bag as she gets settled in the dark. Spreading out what he realizes are blankets, she accidentally bumps him and he props himself up on his elbows, says, "You alright?"

"Ya, why?"

"You comfortable?"

She says nothing.

"Okay then. Goodnight." He lies back down.

She lights a match and for a second he sees her face and her short red bangs hanging over her forehead. She lights up and shakes out the match. He watches the end of the cigarette pulse red in the dark.

When she finishes her smoke she unzips the tent, butts it out on the ground and tosses it away. She gets back under her blankets and he shifts around in his bag, accidentally bumping against her.

"Sorry."

He shifts again and bumps her again.

"Hey, move over would ya?" She puts a boney elbow in his ribs.

"Sorry." He wriggles in his bag on the floor of the tent, squirms over just a hair.

"There. How's that."

"Listen, I don't mind you being close, I'm just warning you for your own good."

He lies silent in his sleeping bag unsure of what she meant. He moves again, bumps her and she lets go with a tremendous fart smell hits him immediately--like road-kill decomposing in a soft piece of french cheese. She begins to laugh and he buries his face in his rolled up clothes-pillow.

"Oh God," comes his muffled voice, "what ever you do, don't light another match."

She laughs and pushes him away from her with her feet. She pushes him away and farts again she laughs and pushes him and farts again she farts. He laughs and erupts, "Ahhhhh," from his sleeping bag, pushing her away and grabbing at a blanket. She grabs it and he tries to fan the stink away laughing they both pull at the blanket.

"Remind me to never let you eat beans again."

She pulls her blanket from him. "I warned you." And she farts again.

"Ahhhhh!" and he buries his face in his clothes.

They laugh.

She laughs.

A moment later he laughs as their breathing slows. Soon there is silence. They are still.

He rolls onto his back and shifts around--nylon swish--

trying to untangle his twisted sleeping bag and get comfortable.

She gets comfortable in her blankets. Silence.

They lie in the tent together and apart. He listens to the sounds of their breathing and the sounds of night wind and river rapids muted now by the heavy silence that followed their contact, a silence that has now grown closer than air and thicker than the darkness at their skin.

He says, "I love the sound of rivers at night. Don't you?" And she says nothing.

"It's so peaceful, so You know, I used to be really afraid of camping in the woods--especially alone--but then one day I realized that the darkness only holds what you see in it. I mean, it's the same as when it's light. Right?"

She laughs--a gut scoff. "Ya sure. Only what you see in it. Then it must have just been my fourteen-year-old imagination that raped me on the bank of a beautiful river with the sky filled with stars and the wind in the trees."

The darkness pulses around him. He lies silent on his back.

"I, ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean It's just that, well, I thought maybe ..., I mean we're"

"Save it, Romeo. It was long ago and far away."

"Tell me."

She sits up and lights another cigarette.

"A few hours went by. I gathered up all my stuff and put it back in my pack. Outside I could here them drinking and laughing. Every so often there'd be a shot and then more laughing. I wrote the best poem I'd ever written, but I did it in my head. I didn't want to write it down, you know? And then, after a while, I guess I fell asleep because the next thing I knew one of the guys opened the back door and told me to get out and for some reason I brought my pack out with me but none of them said anything.

"It must've been near dawn because the light was that strange hazy grey when everything looks like its shadow and nothing has any depth or definition. The guy closed the door behind me and the other two came close. The big guy still had his gun but now it was tucked into his pants. They were so close I could feel their boozy breathe on my face. The big guy spit and it landed on his boot. He saw me look at it and I was starting to laugh so he pulled out the gun and pressed it against my chest. -- We've decided that before we kill ya we'll let you have a last beer.

"One of the others pulled out what was left of two six-packs--one can on each of the plastic holders and he swung them in front of my face like a hypnotist with a watch.

- So what'll it be. Bud or Miller.

"He swung the cans and they all stared at me. I was about to say I didn't care but I said Bud. He tossed me the can. I noticed that the big guy looked sort of relieved, but the other little guy started swearing under his breath and then spit on me. The guy with the gun told me to sit down beside where their fire was still smouldering and drink my beer. I walked over to the fire with my pack and sat down. A few minutes later they drove away."

"Jesus Christ, that's the wildest story I ever heard." Jack looked at him and smiled. "Ya it's out there all right."

"You mean they just drove away and left you."

"Yup. Left me there with my Bud."

"Shit."

They looked at each other and laughed. The bus turned onto the main street of Stewiak and some of the others started to collect their coats and things.

"Did you ever tell the cops?"

"I'd planned to but when I found my way back to the highway the first thing I wanted to do was get a little distance between me and that dirt road. I walked until it was light and then got a ride. I gave the guy a close once-over and he looked fine. I was so relieved to be safe that I blurted out the whole story and as soon as I finished he

said--Well, if anyone fucks with me I give'em this--And he whipped out a gun from under his seat. After that I just kept my mouth shut."

"Holy shit. But you kept on hitch-hiking?"

"Yup."

"And nothing else crazy happened?"

"Nope. Well, not until I decided to go to New York. But that's another story. Besides, we're here."

The bus pulled into the parking lot and stopped. As they got off someone started to make pig noises at the girl again.

He watches the glow of her smoke and listens to her breathing. He wants her to tell him but doesn't ask again. He watches her smoke and listens to her breathing.

"You really want to hear about it?"

"Yes."

"Well," she exhales. "Like I said I was fourteen. I lived in a small town in the boonies that survived on tourism. There was a big lake and a river and every summer the place would fill up and we'd hang out on the beach near town and when labour day rolled around the cottages, motels and restaurants would all close up and there'd be sweet fuck all to do and I wasn't really into drinking but the kids I hung out with were a few years older than me."

She takes a drag of her smoke.

"My best friend was seventeen and she was going out with this guy who was twenty. Anyways, one night she invited me to a party at this place along the river. I told my mom I was just going over to her place because I knew she'd freak if I told her I was going to a party off in the middle of nowhere.

"It was a neat old cabin and there were a ton of people there. Like I said I hadn't done much drinking so a few beers and I was pretty wasted. Then I noticed that my friend had taken off with her boyfriend somewhere. I started to wonder how the hell I was going to get home but then a guy I'd never seen before sat down beside me and we started to talk. He seemed alright but the thing that really got me, the thing I thought was so cool about him, was this little Canadian flag he had tattooed on his arm. He'd taken off his jean jacket when he sat down and I noticed it right away. He had really nice arms. We talked and then he asked if I'd like to take a walk along the river.

When the group met the next morning he said good-bye to the Colombians and the group leader and then lifted up his pack. Jack told him the quickest way to the highway was to cross the railway tracks and then walk a little ways through the bush.

"Have a good one. And remember what I said."

"Right. About what?"

"About no hitch-hiking trip being complete ..."

"Ya, right. Thanks a lot."

They smiled at each other and shook hands.

Jack said, "Plan the work and work the plan."

"Will do. And I'll see ya back in T.O."

"Yup. Either there or Montreal."

"Okay, so long."

"Cio amigo."

"We walked along the bank until we found a clear spot. He took off his jean jacket and put it on the ground. God, I remember thinking--how romantic. We sat down and talked some more. He lay back and asked me to too so I did and we lay there looking up at the stars. I remember hearing the wind rustling through the dry leaves in the trees and I could hear the music from the party. Every once-in-a-while a cricket or a frog would chirp. I remember thinking it would be cold soon.

"Then he rolled over onto his elbow and looked at me. He stared at me until I said 'what?' and then he told me I was beautiful.

He got out to the highway and crossed the northbound lane. Halifax was no more than an hour or so away. He could hitch a ride there and fly home student standby. He was glad he'd let his parents give him that credit card after all.

"Then he kissed me. We kissed for a while and then he tried to untuck my shirt under my sweatshirt. I grabbed his hand and took it away. He sat up and I asked what the matter was. He said he really liked me and I said I liked him too so we started to kiss again.

Among the businessmen and vacationers the Chassidic jew stood out like a pork chop at a kosher butcher. He felt the departure lounge's collective scrutiny shift from his appearance--torn and dirty jeans, jean jacket and knapsack--to the darkly clad man in the big round hat who had long curls of hair that hung down behind his ears, rolled over his shoulders and under the edges of his beard.

He watched the man sit down in the lounge and wondered what he'd say if he told him that he was Jewish too. He though it was funny that they were the two everyone seemed

to watch, but that was only appearances--some of the other passengers were probably Jewish too, though no jewellery appraiser's eye was needed for this man and he suddenly knew that he'd be sitting beside him on the plane. He just knew.

"We kissed and then he tried to untuck my shirt again. I stopped him again but this time he put his hand on me outside my shirt but under my sweatshirt. It scared me at first but I liked it too. It was the first time anyone had touched me there. We kissed and I let him touch me outside my shirt.

In the cramped seats he was surprised to find that the man's clothes had none of the stale, bookish odour he'd expected. And he was much younger than he'd first thought.

With the plane airborne and level the man took his briefcase from under the seat in front of him and removed a book. It had a thick leather cover and the pages had gold-edges. The man looked at him and nodded.

"Hi," he said. "Uhh, mind if I ask you what you're reading?"

"No, not at all," said the man who lay the book gently in his lap. "It's the Talmud. The book of Jewish laws, ceremonies, and legends."

"Huh. I guess you follow that stuff pretty closely, eh?"

"Yes. The Talmud tells us how we must live our lives in order to satisfy the demands of God."

He looked at the man but said nothing else. The man picked up the book and started to read.

"After a while he tried to put his hand under my shirt again and this time when I grabbed his arm he grabbed my wrist and rolled up on top of me. I told him he was hurting me but he didn't stop. Then he grabbed my other hand and pulled them both above my head and he held both my wrists down with one of his hands. He twisted off me a bit and then reached behind his back with his other hand. I thought he was going to let go but instead he pushed down hard on top of me and stuck a knife under my chin. Then he said I'd better let him do exactly what he wanted to or he'd kill me and dump me in the river.

He watched the man read and wondered what it meant that he knew he'd be sitting beside him before they boarded the plane. Should he tell him that he's Jewish too? Recite the stories of how his parents' families came to Canada from Russia and Poland, or the one of how his grandfather got his

name? Maybe he should ask him some questions? Find out why he's chosen such a restricted life full of so many strange practices?

"He let go of my hands and then pushed my shirt up over my face and ripped off my bra. I felt his face on me and he was hurting and biting me. Then he undid my jeans and pushed them down with his feet and I felt his hands on me and his fingers went in. I wanted to scream but I was too scared. He forced my legs open and I knew right then that he was going hurt me inside but something in me said I had to help a part of myself get away from what was happening. This voice inside me said that I had to try and get away. So when he went in me, when he hurt me, I just tried to listen to the river, I listened to the river and tried to let it take me away.

"Uhh, sorry to disturb you again, but what are you reading? I mean, I know what it is, but are they prayers or something?"

The man closed the book and turned to him.

"You could call them that."

"Well, okay ... I mean I'm Jewish, okay, but like that's just something I've never understood. I mean I'm

religious, I think..., but..., but it's in my own way you know? I mean for me religion isn't just something I can get from following prayers. I mean, what's with all the rules and regulations? Don't you feel limited by them? Don't you feel like you're missing out on life by having to spend so many hours of every day performing certain tasks and obligations? I mean, what do all those prayers mean? What value is there in them for the individual? And what about ..."

"These are very good questions," said the man with a smile. "Very good questions indeed. But all I can tell you is that I try to see God in everything. God in a child, God in a tree. God even in this airplane. Of course, for some, and mind you I can't speak for them, but for some the prayers are just words, a lip-service to something they can't open their hearts and souls to. But for me, and, of course, I can only speak for myself, all the things you see as limiting are my way of talking with God. The daily practice of these rites and prayers helps me to become one with God and the God of our ancestors. It's the ritual of faith that is faith. The process of prayer. The act."

"But he was hurting me--moving really hard and fast and every time he pushed I felt like I was sinking, and every time he moved back, it felt like he'd taken something from

me and the more he moved the more I lost, the more empty I felt but still something in me said float, float away on the river so I tried to float, tried float away from the pounding, float away from the hurting and emptying and suddenly I did. Suddenly I felt free and could see myself floating on the river, I could see myself floating away. But then the water started to freeze and I got cold and I looked at myself and my skin had turned blue and when the pounding stopped and he pulled out I started to sink even though he rolled off me I felt myself sinking, sinking into the ground, into the river and I could taste the waterbloodearth in my mouth and I knew right then that a part of me had died."

"See God in everything. Ya. I really like that. I mean, what can you call a child's smile except the grace of God?"

"Exactly. And very poetic too." The man smiled.

"Thanks." A smile back. "But if it's the act of prayer that's faith then couldn't you just do it on your own? I mean, the system's so rigid, so institutionalized, it's"

"Listen. I believe everyone must learn to see God in their own way. As long as people do this, then our troubles will always be temporary."

"But I still don't understand how living such a rigid life helps you to see God."

"Well, let me ask you something. Have you ever tasted a persimmon?"

"A persimmon? No, I never have."

"Then am I to tell you how a persimmon tastes?"

She lit another smoke. He saw the match flare but didn't look to the light.

"Did you tell anyone?"

"A couple of days later I told my mother the whole story."

"And"

"And when I told her exactly what happened she said it was my fault and called me a slut."

"What? You're kidding?"

"Ya I'm kidding. Jesus Christ, does it sound like I'm kidding?"

"No of course, ... I just can't believe that"

"Well, believe it. That was mom."

"So then whudyou do?"

"I ran away, what else? Stole all the money that was in the house one night and went to the diner where the bus stopped."

"Christ. Did you ever tell anyone else?"

"Ya one other person. The woman I'm going to see in Winnipeg. I met her at the diner while I waited for the bus. I guess it wasn't too hard for her to figure out that I was taking off from home. She bought me dinner and we talked-- nothing special. But after she said she wanted to take a walk and that we'd be able to see the bus from outside just as well as in.

"We walked down one of the side-streets and she asked me if I was running away. I started to cry and I told her the whole story. She put her arms around me and told me that she'd been raped by her uncle when she was nine. We held each other and cried. Until the bus came."

* * *

FOR THE BLUE ROSE

He's fishing. In the middle of the lake releases line from the reel, watches it unravel in counter-clockwise gyres, a linear web from the tip of the rod he's fishing three hundred yards leap from the spool but still no bottom, no sign of the line going limp and gathering in bunches on the surface the lake is deeper than he thinks he's fishing-- all the line gone now just a small sinew knot to trust if a fish should strike the test will never hold it big at this depth so he reels in, knows he needs something to play with, something saved.

He's fishing so wonders what he might hook; the different kinds of fish: ways to catch them fishing deeper than ever before, he hopes his line is strong enough, that he's chosen the right lure, a sharp enough hook. He's fishing afraid a big one will get away, the mistake of trying not to make one lowering of the rod-tip, pressure on the line without enough give.

Is he fishing? A strike. He stands. Sets the hook. Hard. The fish runs and he adjusts the drag fight is on, fish is deep, but he reels in--gains and loses line at the same time he plays it for hours; just him, the rod and something at the end of the line's constant hammer hammer tug, the whine of the reel, the inevitable surge from deep

dark water to suffocating light breaks the surface--God, as big as he is--it sees the boat and runs again he's fishing, readies the net, hold the rod above his head and pulls the fish towards its death in the net he sees the fish has arms, the fish has long red hair.

The fish is a woman. She drowns in air.

* * *

Blind into bright sun, his feet wet in the cool grass he looks down to the river, sees her in it, then goes behind the tent to piss then walks back to the black ashes of the fire and stretches to the sun rubbing his stomach and chest. He grabs his shoes and a pot and walks down to her at the edge as she's just climbing out, naked except for the long green t-shirt that grips her goose-bumped skin, clings to her breasts and he sees her nipples hard and strangely high on the firmround mounds of flesh.

She sees him looking so pulls the shirt away from her skin--it peelsucks back dripping wet and she shivers, hunches slightly, as he grabs the towel from the ground and holds it out for her.

"How's the water?"

She grabs the towel. "Wet."

"Very funny. I mean the temperature."

She stands on a flat rock buried in the bank and dries herself. He watches her bend, the hair on her legs lifting as it dries, the shirt coming up just below her ass and he starts to get hard so moves down the bank.

He fills the pot and feels the frigid water with his hand.

"It's freezing."

He turns and sees she's already changed her shirt with her back to him she bends to put on her underwear--a glimpse of ass as she pulls them up and then pulls on her baggy

green pants, her underwear, on one side, pulled up between her cheeks. She puts a plaid flannel shirt over the untucked cotton one. He walks towards her with the pot of water and then puts it on the ground.

She turns but he pulls her against him close and feels her wet hair and cold skin on his face and she goes rigid in his arms as he tries to kiss her.

He puts a hand on her breast and she struggles, "No! Don't!" But he mouths her hair with his lips, "What's the matter?" and rubs them against her cold, fresh face.

"Let go of me." And she pulls her head away.

"What's wrong?" He's smiling as he adjusts his grip on her arms.

"Nothing's wrong, just let go of me." And she tries to twist free and he says, "You smell so good." And she says nothing and he pulls her closer, kisses her hair on the lips and squeezes her breast, sliding his thumb against her nipple and she tries to push him away but he holds her arm tight and she looks at him now with all of it there in her eyes and he lets go but doesn't move so she turns away and he touches her arm now she whips around and as he's picked up the pot and she freezes.

"Do you mind taking this back and starting a fire? I'm going to take a walk."

He stood beside the bed. Snowflakes fell past the window and melted on the small cement sill. Flat daylight changed the pale yellow hue of the room to greybeige.

Propped partially upright with his skinny bluegrey arms almost lifeless on top of the mustard-coloured blanket and his unshaven face and chin dissolving to where his mouth should be, his grandfather slept. But it was not the face he remembered--oh yes, on the retractable bedside table, the blue plastic moon-shaped container of teeth.

"No, let him ..." but the nurse touched his shoulder and his grandfather's eyes winced opened without recognition.

"Hi, Pupa. How are you feeling?"

"Uhhh?"

"I said how are you? How are you feeling?"

"Uhhh? I'm Where are my teeth?"

The nurse reached across him and he moaned from the brush of her body.

"What'sa matter? It's too far to walk? You have to climb on top of me?"

"Pupa, she didn't hurt you. The nurses are being very good to you here."

"Sure, sure, they're wonderful. They're so wonderful I wish they were way over there." And he lifted his left arm

off the covers at the elbow, uncurling a grey, veiny finger towards the window but his arm dropped limp with the effort, the hand slipping down over the side of the bed.

The nurse held his teeth in front of his mouth. It opened and she slipped them in.

His grandson walked around the side of the bed. "You still haven't answered my question, Pupa?" as he lifted his grandfather's arm and put it back on the blanket. "How are you feeling?"

"I'll leave you two to talk," said the nurse. "Just call if there's anything I can get for him."

"See? They're taking good care of you, Pupa."

"Wonderful. I feel wonderful. How could I not feel wonderful in a place like this." He tried to make a sweeping gesture with the same arm but it just slid off the bed.

"With a Gorilla for a nurse, the way she throws me around." His grandfather's eyes closed as he finished the sentence and he watched him take a hard, painful swallow.

Staying on the edge where he can he climbs the bank and works his way through the dense cedars when the river gets too deep or too tangled with weeds and alders.

Half-an-hour upstream and well up the bank, he comes across an overgrown path that leads to an old wooden bridge over the bottom end of a fast set of rapids. He stands at

the first log spile driven into the bank of the river but doesn't step onto the bridge. On the other side there is no path, just dense, green forest.

His grandfather's eyes opened with that same lost look. After a moment he saw his grandson sitting on a chair next to the bed.

"Ohh ... when did you get here?"

"You saw me already, remember? The nurse gave you your teeth."

He lowered his chin to his chest, raised his fingers to his lips and the arm flopped down.

"No Kidding?" He looked around and then his face went hard with anger. "Now do you see how they look after me? They let me sleep a whole night with my teeth in!"

"It was just a few minutes ago, Pupa. Don't you remember?"

His grandfather looked at him, fading blue eyes in greyblack sockets.

"So how are you, Pups? How are you feeling? Are you eating?"

"I can't eat the garbage they give me. It just won't go down." He shook his head and gave his grandson a 'what can I do' look.

"But, Pupa, you've got to eat. It's the only way you'll get your strength back."

"Listen to me, would you please listen? I said I can't eat it. As soon as your father gets me out of here, then I'll eat. I'll eat anything you want. I'll eat non-stop for a month. Just get me home. I want to go home."

A terrible exhaustion had come into his voice and the last words were a sob, a stiletto sob to his grandson who now searched through the drawers of the nightstand for the biscuits and candies he knew were there.

"How about a cookie, Pupa? There're some nice cookies here."

"I told you, I can't eat."

"You said you can't eat the food they give you. But what about these cookies? They're your favourite."

He took out the bag of 'Chocolate Mallows' and opened it up.

"Hey, these look good. You better eat them before I do." He held the bag out to his grandfather and shook it gently. "C'mon, Pupa, just eat one."

"I told you already. I can't eat." He lowered his voice. "If I eat then I have to go to the bathroom. And most of the time the nurse won't even come to give me the pan. Then I have sit here in the wet and the stink"

Pain creased his grandfather's forehead, the pain of his dignity slipping away with his life--the mortal decay of skin and bones in the human air.

"Just me get me out of here. When am I going to get out of here? Your father has to talk to the doctor. He has to do something. Tell him I have to go home. I want to go home. I won't last another day here."

His eyes closed again and moved behind the lids. His lips moved too, either trembling or in prayer. His grandson looked around the room and noticed that the man in the next bed had somehow managed to get himself into a chair though his ankles were twisted and blue the man began to push his chair towards the door with his feet like rotting stumps, slipping, almost mushing against the floor, his gown bunched up on his lap revealing purple testicles between red, wizened thighs.

He looks into the river. Deep pools and eddies among the huge boulders and rocks. Perfect runs for speckled and rainbow trout. He walks onto the bridge to get a better look at the water is crystal clear.

From the middle of the bridge he examines all the pools he can see. There are no fish.

"Did you have a good nap?"

"Uhhhnn?"

"Sleep, did you have a good sleep?"

"What day is it?"

"It's Saturday, Pupa. Saturday all day."

"You don't say?"

He seemed brighter. This second little rest had done him good.

"What time is it?"

"It's 10:00."

"10:00! What're you doing here so late? Did you have supper?"

"It's 10:00 in the morning, Pupa. Look outside. It's daytime."

His grandfather turned his eyes to the window. "They got me so I don't know if I'm coming or going. They wake me up at all hours of the night. At all hours And they're rough. And they don't take care of me. Look at me. I haven't had a shave for a week."

"Would you like me to give you a shave, Pupa?"

"Uhhhnn?"

"Do you want a shave?"

"I just told you I haven't had a shave! Look at me. Do I look like I've had a shave?"

"I know, Pupa. I asked if you'd like one. I asked If you'd like me to give you a shave."

"Ohh, oh." His grandfather looked around the room.

"Whatcha got there?"

"What?"

"There on the table?"

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

"Right there on the table."

"You mean the cookies? You want a cookie?"

He held up the bag but his grandfather shook his head.

"What do you want, Pupa? What can I give you?" He looked on the table then opened the drawers. "These candies? Is that you want? The candies?" He pulled out the bag and held them out for his grandfather.

"Here. Have a few candies."

"I told you I can't eat."

"Candy's not eating, Pupa. Here. Have a few." And he laughed to himself hearing his grandfather's logic in his own voice.

"No. I don't want any."

He held the bag and shook it.

"Are there any eclairs there?"

"What?"

"Eclairs, eclairs. The toffee ones with the ... the whatchamacallit, the ... the ... oh, just give'em here."

His grandfather rummaged through the bag and pulled out three.

"You want me to unwrap them for you?"

He nodded and opened up his hand, took the unwrapped candies and put all three in his mouth.

"I'm just going to get some hot water to shave you. I'll be right back, Pupa. Okay?"

He picked up the bags of cookies and candies, put them on the table and left the room, his grandfather nodding and sucking on the 'eclairs'.

Something big moves in the woods on the other side-- branches, twigs snap. He looks to the sounds but can't see anything. Silence. He listens. And again, much closer this time to the river and the bridge, he hears the noises from the forest.

Scared now he wonders what it is--just a moose or a deer probably, but his imagination has it now visions of a bear ripping into his flesh vie with those of the demented bridge builder looking for a little company. Suddenly he thinks of the camp. How he's left her alone there with all of his stuff. He feels his pockets--no keys.

From the middle of the bridge he hears the sounds again. He looks down into the empty river.

When he came back with the water and towel he saw a pile of wrappers on the blanket and smiled. He put the pan of water on the table, then moved the chair from the bedside to in front of the window.

"Okay, Pupa, I'll have to put you in this chair if you want me to shave you."

He moved to the bed and cleared away the candy and the wrappers, his grandfather grabbing more from the bag as he did.

"Easy. Go easy. I'm very sore," said his grandfather, candy clicking against his teeth clicking against the candy.

He pulled off the blanket then slid his arms under the sheet as he bent his knees against the bed-frame in preparation for the lift, "Okay one, two, . . .," but he moved his grandfather easily, too easily he rose off the bed, cradled in his grandson's arms, the light blue sheet twisted around his bluegrey limbs covered in sores and bruises and hanging in all directions as a brown salivacandysyrupdrip spilled and hung out the side of his mouth.

The lack of weight shocked him. Made him move all the more carefully, his grandfather in his arms, as close

physically as they'd ever been but no words, no words to comfort--no--confront, each other's fears and regrets.

"Careful, careful. God you're worse than the mafia," said his grandfather as he tried to suck back the gooey dribble that ran further down his chin when he spoke.

He placed his grandfather in the chair.

"The mafia? What are you talking about?"

"The nurses. (suck) All of them. They're all in the mafia."

"Pupa, c'mon. The nurses are not in the mafia."

He went to the bed and pulled the blanket off.

"Listen to me. If they're not in the mafia then why do they tie me up at night and take me to the basement? Just ask what's'isname over there. My roommate. Mr. Schmuck among schmucks."

"Hey, not so loud, Pupa. He'll hear you."

He looked towards the other man who by now had pushed his chair almost out the door and had lifted his nightgown higher.

"Sounds to me like you've been dreaming, Pupa. I'm sure no one ties you up and takes you to the basement."

He wrapped the blanket around his grandfather's legs, tucked the edges around his hips then wheeled the table with the water, towel and razor over to beside the chair.

Just then a nurse walked by. She stopped at the man in the chair.

"Now, now, cover yourself," she said and pulled the man's gown down over his genitals. "We don't want the nurses distracted from their jobs."

The man made a toothless smile, a purple gummed gurgling laugh and he began pushing himself back into the room, the chair legs streaking the floor with short black marks as the rubber feet rubbed the linoleum.

His grandfather tried to turn in his chair but his body wouldn't move.

"I'm telling you. They tie me up and leave me in the basement a whole night. Don't you think I know what's what?" He winced and closed his eyes.

He runs from the bridge back the way he came. Branches and roots he avoided easily reach out to trip and scratch him at every turn. More noises, closer, and he turns still running to look over his shoulder and trips badly scraping his leg.

Up again running, limping he tells himself to slow down, to not be afraid but something might be chasing him and if not then she might have taken off with his car, all his stuff and he'd be stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Snow. He could see it beginning to collect on the window sill. Mixing the lather in a coffee mug, he looked out beyond the parking lot to the line of trees that separated the hospital from the Riverview Cemetery and wondered why they always put cemeteries next to hospitals and old age homes? Beyond them both, the frozen river.

"Is it snowing?"

"Yes Pupa, can't you see? It's been snowing off and on since last night."

"No kidding?"

He started to spread the lather on his grandfather's face.

"Easy, easy. You've got hands like a construction worker."

He looked down at his grandfather and laughed--wry old bugger--then gently lifted his chin, carefully spreading lather under it and on the sides of his neck. He dipped the brush in the mug.

Grandfather and grandson. He could just see their reflection in the window and then he looked down at his hands--the one with the brush, the other with the cup of lather, and he wished that they held much more.

Out of the bush he comes upon her at the river sitting on a rock in the sun. Blood trickles down his leg into the heel of his shoe.

"What the hell happened to you?"

He looks around. At the tent and towards the road. Gulps air as she stares at him.

"Back there. In the woods" He bends over to stop hyperventilating.

"Ya, what about it. C'mon, man. Spit it out."

"This bridge ... and A bear charged out of the woods at me."

He sees the fear in her face and is glad.

"Jesus Christ. You're kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding? We'd better go. It might be right behind me."

"I'm telling you. They tie me up and take me to the basement. If you don't believe me ask the truant officer."

He put the brush in the mug and put it down on the table.

"What truant officer, Pupa? What are you talking about?"

"The truant officer. The same one who dragged me off to school when I was a kid. You remember the story, don't you? My father had just died and it was winter. Snow and more snow and freezing cold. Freezing. So cold my brothers just left their papers on the other corners and went home. It was so cold that after holding the papers under my arm I couldn't bend it to take one out and my fingers were frozen in my pocket holding pennies.

"No one was buying papers. No one was on the street except for me and then this man comes up and asks me why I'm not in school. I says I do go to school, I go to Hebrew school like I should and when he doesn't leave I ask him if he's gonna buy a paper but he acts like I didn't say nothing to him, like I hadn't said a word, and then he tells me I have to go with him. I tell him no but he says he'll call the cops so I go because I didn't want no more trouble with them, the lousy cops, they'd . . . ready been out once that week to break up a fight between my brothers and some veterans who were trying to take our corners. Guys twice our size and age and the cops didn't do a thing.

"So then just like before he takes me off to school but this time the class is filled with my family and friends--all the ones who've passed--and they're on one side of the class and I'm on the other and in the middle--oi-vey I know this sounds crazy, but in the middle is this little stream filled with golden fish and"

"Pupa, you've been dreaming. Can't you tell this was a dream?"

"I'm telling you. Go ahead, ask the truant officer. He said he's coming back for me tonight."

"That's the station there on the left."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. I'm just giving you a tour of Winnipeg. Of course I want you to stop."

"But you said you were going to visit that lady. Don't you want me to drop you off there?"

"No, I'll call her from here."

"But"

"But what. Stop the car."

"Okay. Fine."

She grabs her duffel and gets out.

"Hey, listen. I'm busted. Give me some money."

"What?"

"Are you deaf? I said give me some money. C'mon, give me fifty bucks."

"Fifty bucks? are you"

"Okay, okay, just twenty-five. Please? C'mon, you're holding up traffic here."

"Why the hell should I"

"Oh for fuck's sake just forget it then."

She turns and walks away from the car.

"Hey, wait a second. Don't just walk off. Hey, don't go."

She turns and waves. "See ya round."

"Hey, I"

She disappears into the station.

He looked at the top of his grandfather's head. He'd had such beautiful thick hair but now it ran in thin wisps over a grey and flaky scalp.

"So then what happened?"

"Uhhnnh?"

"The fish, Pupa. The classroom with the stream full of fish."

"Oh, you think it's a joke, eh? You think I don't know what I'm saying?"

"No, I believe you. Really. Go ahead."

He picked up the razor again and looked through their reflection out the window. A crow flew out of a pine tree and hopped very black on the new snow near the trees bordering the cemetery.

"So the truant officer takes me in and then, just like years ago, the teacher tells me to come to the front but this time it's not the teacher, it's just a voice like ... like a mist and it asks me my name and I say my Hebrew one

but then just like with the teacher the voice asks for my English name and I don't say nothing but just look around the room and it's filled with children again and the stream is gone so I go up to the desk and the teacher asks me my name and again I don't say nothing but just look around and now the children are gone and it's the others again and Sol and Lily and my mother and father are there and my father rubs his beard like he used to and nods at me so like before I ask the teacher what she's got the most of and the mist says--Harry, we've got seven Harrys--and I step over the stream to stand with my family and just like before I says--so now you've got eight."

He dipped the blade in the hot water. "No kidding?" And gently slid it down his grandfather's cheek.

* * *

Flaming coin sun into breast pocket of sky
the inference of time's assembly lies adrift with anchor
lost he's still caught on question's hook of how to live
a breath from the grave
how to plot a course
though all light fades no matter how tight he holds the
wheel will turn
cross the line between here
and the other side of this country still a ways away now
wind blows hard from the west, slows him down and up comes
the moon without intention or destination he's revolving
with the thought that there's nothing more than this motion,
going through them, until the next true moment of ecstasy
amidst misery, the agony of time between them and after,
before the next bend in his soul's road coming sooner than
greater though he sees this night's still bright horizon
falls and rises with his breath, the debt he owes for stars
echo of songs forgotten by thoughts strung like fences
through this one big fucking farm drowning in its own stolen
ground fecund with defeat, old farmers' furrowed faces in
each blade of wheat bent well over by the wind from a too
big mouth of sky, body of land big enough to die in but too
small to hide in one hand a hammer in the other a spike, the
last one driven into an already dead rail "God Damn it,"
said the man when the wagon axle broke, "we're stayin' right
here" now a hundred years later, their legacy on history's
highway--Buffalo Mini Putt and Driving Range--Home Cooked
Meals--Chicken Fried Steak--two miles next left alone he
wonders what would his eyes see without him, he imagines
this ground resting under blankets of snow, the voice of its

sad soul howling daemon winds or the very song of God, both gave first breath and both will take the last sigh as cloud corpses float in a porpoise-blue sky and a jet-stream rises, ends then begins again above these plains a plane flies high above him just the dot on this question mark of road, the way home lost long ago and now finally his faith in the map to chart the journey's slow decaying thoughts of tomorrow and he loses his way today he stopped riding that AM wave, songs from life's cliched highway, when he hit a ground hog but didn't kill it, saw it wriggling in his rear-view so stopped, turned around, ran that dying hog down this line of dawn to dusk casts him out in worm-like direction even though he knows he's the one that turns this round wheel, decides which way to go and tries to save time by driving faster until he can't even stop to watch himself arrive feeling like he's passed himself on the way back before he even gets there too late, too soon, wheat scythe waits for harvest moon made of cheesy dreams of transcendence, his illusion of finding the right, wrong way and again he's lost on some back baggage road, unable to find even a way from there to here he sees words have no memory, the language of the land left to rust in a junkyard of sun-bleached boxcars, black-eyed susans growing up through the wheels, yellow flowers between rotting rails, stations with vaulted ceilings and the echo of empty church pews, the palms of his hands pressed too tightly to this wheel as his destiny

slowly reveals itself, his propensity to feel the thin blade of perception as it enters the bloodwars of his heart cries with shame until all the shame is out of him and he sees the false unity of these great prairies, sees wind ripple wheat fields full of geese splash river water in the face of his own loneliness, the unknown spirit of his circle mind sees road signs of questions that ask what is it? and now he answers simply, it is--man walking head bowed in highway wind tangle of grass says your worlds I have seen over and over and over again, the many many with so very few confront death the way trees do you think daylight is something that can really be saved from this shadow hanging over him, invisible waves of desultory liquid light fading to a century ago, herds of grazing buffalo kicking dust into a redorange dusk descends again and he pulls into a full service station, his home away from thoughts of home send him back to the senseless nightmare road of regrets carried the way Indians carry their dead deer in the middle of the road, dry brown eyes in sunset shadows flutter and give the illusion of movement, false hope of resurrection and suddenly the line is broken, there is room to pass, as almost by accident he meets himself now his foot off the pedal around the bloodglasssmear on the road of his soul wants to know if there's some law he's broken? the speed limit, or driving while impaired by the past, can he really attempt to use words to describe this world as swallows

sweep swirl rush sidelong past, the last glimmer of day
shattered and split on the highway, the map's failure to
encompass the many one direction, what he must now do with
all this dying gift.

* * *

The car comes towards him Jack's driving--Hey, how the hell? Get in, Jack says, but now he's driving and says it's really good to see you, Jack, you look great. Man, is this for real? And Jack smiles and nods and he smiles back and asks if this means he's come back? And Jack smiles and nods again so he smiles back, looks at Jack sitting in the passenger seat so alive and then remembers the rain and his feet in the mud as he carried him and thought--in the ground is such a stupid place to be but he looks at Jack and again asks him if he's really come back? And Jack smiles and nods so he says--then where're we going? And Jack says just pull back on the wheel, he says--Say what? Just pull back on the ... coast falls away below them blue water. Man, this is great. We can go anywhere we want. Ya, says Jack, I guess it's alright. But sometimes I wish I was still on the ground, my wheels again touching the road. And they look at each other then Jack gives him a rose.

* * *

Barricade blocks crossing, redlights flashing bells
ring morning train whistle blows hello bright sun from river
bed speaks pinegrove whippoorwill, sings with rocks only
water can wrinkle, carves canyons through continents of
skyward crashing granite mountains stab cotton ball clouds,
draw bloodsnow that never melts from a skyheart of love's
dark shadow is power of the pine is mightier than the pen as
is the sparrow knows the language of the wind you hear first
before you feel the speed at which no time moves here trees
grow in what once was the sea now this being mountain born
from diamond ice cut gems of rock, moss and meadows full of
forget-me-nots, sorrel and saxifrage pebble-sized petal with
spider on it and he grows smaller now than the silk of its
web, smaller still to enormous perfection as drops of rain
turn to snowflake faces, all the faces that have ever been,
each one uniquely meaningless, we are exquisite in our
unimportant eternity of questions scratched on the forest
floor with a twig--what does night say to stars? what do
flowers think of this rain? the trees wrapped in sheaths of
shivering, shimmering ice, all the deathspawned beauty,
manuscripts of bone and the mystery of nothing remains
nameless in the space of endless everything as snow becomes
rain again rain becomes snow, black bird from spruce bough
chases crow through misty meadow river bed with its elk
track speckled edge, the somehow sun still shining in the
storm as thunderheads hammer thoughts to breath, the world's

wordless message of precious life roars in silence here
there is no grief, the candle by which he begins to write
more real than any words, his handless hand, the sunset's
moonrise, rainbows in the sky reflecting orange light onto
the mountainside now dark with night and the solitude of
spirit and mind as thoughts without shape flood him in
moonlight shadows, shine darkness in the darkness and he
sees he can live only one breathmoment to the next, sing
simply to the spirit of all things, shuffle his feet, dance
a step in this circle time parade and the forest whispers--
dead trees fall on still days--and the rain and the rain and
the rain nurtures ages of intricate tangles hold grass to
stand against the world's winds, show the green and tender
faces of truth--joy and suffering, suffering and joy, as he
reaches for the coast, the edge, the end, and is born to die
again.

* * *

Waiting for Benny and for the car to warm up, he huddles against himself and shivers. Like the dew and condensation that fogs the wet windshield, his sleep is slow to dissipate. He yawns, rolls his neck. Stuffs his hands between his legs.

Is he really leaving tomorrow? Leaving Benny and the others for the long, lonely drive home. And what then? Home. What will he do then? Declare it when he can barely whisper to himself--I want to write, I think ... I am a poet? Will he scavenge truth the way Benny searches for his? And he laughs to himself remembering the way they'd met at the fisherman's wharf--Benny digging through dumpsters like a mad racoon rummaging for that perfect piece of refuse--the right scrap of rope, section of broom or hunk of metal and then, the exaltation, the joyous child glee when he found what he was looking for, said, "C'mon," and half running, half walking, always hitching up his pants, led him back to his studio and yard full of sculptures made of crushed tin cans, broken radios and tvs, gutted umbrellas, decapitated dolls, plastic dinosaurs, broken telephones, shoes, bicycle parts--you name it and Benny had a piece of it nailed to some other piece of junk or to a broom-handle totem of brightly painted sticks.

The way Benny ranted and raved as he 'worked', threw things around, manic in a maniacal way and all he'd wanted to do at first was find a way out, a way to say--oh I just

remembered--but he was drawn to the madness, the genius he suspected was there even though Benny refused and still refuses to answer his questions about 'intent', 'meaning' or 'metaphor' with one piece or another, saying simply, "You're walking on tacky ground here, mighty tacky, m'boy. You know I just hammer the shit together and throw on a few licks of paint."

He turns on the wipers to clear the windshield and looks through to the dark predawn day. Was that really almost three weeks ago? Afternoons spent in museums, galleries, and the weekend trips to the dilapidated homes of Benny's artist friends down the coast-- what was her name again? Kathy? Living on a barge in a dried up river-bed and they'd had to sneak through a farmer's field and then wade through the mud to see her loneliness clinging to her like the mud they let dry and fall off in the sun.

Benny had one of her paintings, but her place was full of them, dozens, and every one a scene from the circus. 'Woman On The Tightrope', 'Clown With Trick Flowers', 'Elephants On Parade', 'The Human Cannonball', until finally, he asked her, "Why the circus?" and she and Benny had looked at each other and laughed.

Then there was John. His shack in the woods made out of scraps. And over the front door, if you could call the missing piece of wall a door, a giant hand mounted like a hunting trophy.

His paintings were wild--cars and straw huts floating in space on broken bits of road, junkyards of the mind under a question-mark sun, lost fingers with string around them and little piles of teeth all in bright, comic-strip acrylics. So silent and sullen this man was and, as with Kathy, he had finally asked, "Why the finger? Why the finger, John?" And he'd wiggled his pointer under John's beard. But John too had simply smiled, his arms resting on his beerbelly like a contented Buddha.

He looks up and sees Benny in his uniform coming out the front door of the building. He turns on the lights, waits for Benny to get settled, then backs out and pulls away.

Mind empty as the road now he watches only for streetlights and streetsigns, the rest of the city still under its dark cloud blanket of uneasy dreams. There's no need to speak. Three weeks and he feels as if he's always known Benny.

By the time they pull into the bus-yard, a faint lightening has begun to seep into the horizon like a grey turpentine wave slowly rolling across a dark canvas of sky. Benny shows him where to park and then gets out.

"I'll be back in five minutes."

He watches Benny disappear into a small red-brick building then looks around the yard. Streams of steam and diesel smoke swirl around the idling buses making them look

soft and animate as if, at any moment, they would wink at him with their headlight eyes. He winks at one and smiles to himself. He's glad he let Benny talk him into this early ride to the island and back before he left.

Benny returns to the car carrying two cups of coffee and a bell and motions for him to get out.

"Cream and sugar, right?"

"Close enough."

He takes the coffee and removes the plastic lid. Inhales the steam and shivers, some coffee rolling over the edge of the cup, stinging his cold hands. He looks at Benny and the buses, that heavy, tired feeling finally drifting away--dissolving slowly with the other remnants of the night.

He tries to sip the coffee but it's too hot. Benny drinks his and walks away towards the buses.

"What's the bell for?"

"It's Friday."

He follows Benny to the bus. He was used to answers like that now and watching him walk he again thinks of how much Benny reminded him of Jack.

"You're a black Jack, Benny," he'd told him the night they went drinking at the Blue Moon Bar and Grill. "A black Buddhist Jack."

They sat silent and then both had another swallow of their beers.

"Shit, I wish you could have met him, Benny. And I wish he could have seen your bus."

"Well, you know I don't let just anyone onto the bus."

"I know. But I think you would have let Jack on."

"Well I certainly wouldn't have let him jack off!"

Benny leaned over and poured his mug of beer into his lap. He took the pitcher and reciprocated in kind. They laughed like school boys and the manager, flanked by two bouncers, came over and asked them to leave and they spent the rest of the night walking around the wharf and boats, Benny making about as much sense as the gurgling slap of the ships in their moorings.

Benny reaches in through the window on the driver's side of the bus and the front doors open with a rush of air. "Hop in. I'll be right back."

He climbs onto the bus and stands by the driver's seat where the hum of the engine gently vibrates the floor. He looks at the control panel and then down the aisle, scanning the posters above the windows. Out the back window he thinks he can barely make out the water below the railway bridge and then sees Benny walking back through the spot-lit yard. He could still hardly believe Benny had taken a bus just about like this and

"Ready to roll?" says Benny as he climbs the stairs, puts his coffee, bell and a clipboard on the dash-mounted

holder and gets into the driver's seat.

"Sure thing."

"Well, let's go, man, let's go."

Benny puts the bus in reverse and it squawks like a mechanical bird. When the side-view mirror clears the metal girder that marks the side of the stall, Benny cranks the big wheel clockwise through his hands and the bus swings around into the yard. He puts it in forward and the reverse warning goes silent as the sound of the big diesel engine fills the bus and increases the vibration of the floor.

Standing beside Benny, he holds onto the pole at the right side of his chair with one hand but with the bus moving fast now he sits down in the first seat of the long bench opposite Benny and turns sideways to see him and out the front window. He opens the coffee again, blows across the surface and sips.

"Here," says Benny as he reaches onto the dash and grabs the bell, "you might want to hold onto this."

He takes the bell and looks at it. It's the same one Benny keeps on the wooden shrine that takes up most of his small apartment's living-room.

Kneeling and meditating at the shrine Benny had held the clapperless bell in front of him and said that when he achieved the true enlightenment of 'tat tvam asi', and he himself became as the Buddha, the bell would sound on its own. He had laughed at this and an indignant Benny, after

lighting some more incense, had challenged him to try it for himself.

More than a little self-conscious, he finally surrendered to Benny's insistence and made his way to the shrine. He knelt there for a long time, holding the bell and trying to clear and relax his mind. He examined the bell closely and carefully. Then the shrine. He marvelled at the intricate details of the carvings and then suddenly, having not remembered closing them, he opened his eyes. On top of the shrine was a small, delicately carved stick. He picked it up and hit the bell once firmly.

"If you want the bell to ring, Benny, you've got to ring it." And he turned to smile at Benny who had stood up.

"Follow me," said Benny, "I've got something to show you."

Finishing his coffee, he focuses on what he's been staring at out the window. Just out of the city now, through the trees along the roadside, the odd light can be seen in a window or on a front porch.

They're driving west. Chasing the night. And the headlights of the bus bore into the back of the slowly retreating darkness.

"Here it comes," says Benny with a quick glance over his shoulder.

"What?"

"The big smile."

"What's that?"

"You'll see."

He gets up and stands beside Benny. Holding the pole with both hands, he bends his knees a bit and looks out the window and sees a set of lights coming towards them on the empty road.

"Is that it?"

"Yup."

"The big smile?"

"Yes sir."

As the lights come closer Benny begins to slow down. It's another bus. Benny stops in the middle of the road and flashes his lights. The other bus flashes and pulls up beside Benny, the two driver's windows perfectly aligned. Both drivers put on small interior lights and open their windows.

"And a very good morning to you."

"Good morning, Benny."

The woman driver tips her hat and then takes it off. She runs her fingers through her blonde hair and shakes her head so her hair falls in place around her shoulders.

"How are you today?"

"Oh, pretty good, Benny. How are you?"

"Fine, just fine. Showing my young friend here how I spend my sunrises."

He moves his head forward and peaks over Benny's shoulder.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Benny leans back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. "So I guess tomorrow's the big day?"

"Yes, Benny."

"Then you're still going through with it?"

"Yes, Benny, I am." And she turns and looks directly at him with two very big and round brown eyes.

"Well, what can I say." Benny leans back further in his chair and stretches his arms further back. She puts her hat back on and shifts in her seat.

Benny sits forward again and puts his face out the window. "You know that I love you."

She tips her head down.

From the side he can see her cheeks flush sunset red. She turns to face them and he watches the corners of her mouth spread open like night's horizon, her lips of cloud parting to reveal a bright crescent moon of teeth. He looks at her lips, her teeth and then, for just a second, into to the vast, dark sky of her eyes.

She says, "See you a week Monday, Benny." And the clouds roll back across the moon.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

She closes her window, puts the bus in gear and pulls

away. Benny starts to drive again too.

He followed Benny out of the apartment and down an alley next to the building that led to a large parking lot. At the end of the lot was a derelict house and they walked around the back.

"Well, here it is," said Benny. "My pride and joy."

The bus was in a grassless yard and looked like a beached whale left to rot in the sun. The tires flaked off the rims in black greasy strips and two long, rusted metal cables hung off its back like old harpoons. The windows were boarded over and any colour the bus might have once had was now indistinguishable under layers of sun-baked dust. The front doors had been replaced with one large metal padlocked door and the side doors had been covered with sheet-metal that was riveted to the exterior frame.

Benny pulled an endless chain of keys from his pocket that was attached with another chain to a belt-loop on his pants.

"This is the same kind of bus that I used to take downtown when I was a kid," he said to Benny as the lock sprung open.

"Oh, ya?" Benny opened the door of his bus.

They drive on in silence. Mist begins to fill the small dips and valleys in the road and, suddenly, they're in dense fog.

"The sun should burn this off by the time we get back from the island," says Benny as he adjusts the bus' lights and slows down. "It'll be up in about a half-hour. If not, it's going to be an awfully slow ride back."

"Why's that?"

Benny laughs. "Because I won't be able to see the stops."

"Oh, right." He moves away from Benny's seat and sits back down on the bench. Out the front window the lights reveal less than ten feet of road. He watches the solid yellow line just outside the left headlight and is glad someone else is driving for a change.

"So what's the bell for, Benny?"

"I told you before, it's Friday?"

"Ya, so?"

"So on Fridays I ring the bell every time someone gets off the bus."

"Meaning?"

"Shit. There you go with that word again." Benny smiles, watching the road like he isn't going to say anything more.

"I ring it on Friday to tell them that their journey with me for the week is over--it's the end of the line, the top of the wheel. They're released from my domain and my control. What they do from then on in is completely up to them."

He followed Benny onto his bus. It smelled of incense and wood and Benny went to the drivers seat and flicked a switch for the bus' interior lights.

"Holly shit, Benny this is incredible."

Benny stood at the front of the bus with his arms folded.

"Can I touch this stuff? Jesus Christ this is amazing."

Benny nodded and then pulled a stick of incense from the fair box. He lit it and placed it in the sand-filled copper bowl that hung from the horizontal hand rail above where the first bench used to be.

Except for the bench along the back, all the seats had been replaced by long tables, shelves and small wooden cases. Everywhere he turned carved statues, masks, weapons and musical instruments were displayed in hand painted settings complete with three dimensional landscapes.

As the bus nears the coast the fog lightens to the mist it began with. Benny slows down and pulls into the bus entrance for the ferries. A man in a fluorescent orange vest steps out of a small booth. Benny stops and opens his window, "Good mo ..."

"You're late."

"Tell it to the fog, it was thicker than ..."

"Okay, save it. The main ship pulled out ten minutes ago so you'll have to go across on the flat-top. Now get your ass onto the boat."

Benny takes the bell off the dash and hits it with the stick that hangs around his neck. He pulls away. Fast.

The small ferry looks even smaller in the huge mooring.

"We gonna fit on that thing?" he asks Benny nervously.

"Oh, ya. It's no problem in calm seas. Actually it's kind of nice. In the big boat we get stuffed below decks."

As Benny nears the dock, another man in a fluorescent vest waves a flashlight. Benny waves at him and drives up the small ramp onto the deck of the ship. He follows another man's signals into position and then turns off the bus as the man approaches.

"Get stuck in traffic?"

"Very funny."

"Fog's been a real bitch this month."

"Tell me about it. Smells more like smog than fog."

"Y'got that right."

The man smiles and then hollers to the others on deck before turning back to Benny. "We'll get ya secure and be out in a jiffy. You fellahs c'mon into the house and have a cup. Best coffee from here to the end of the pier."

"Sounds good to me."

Benny stands up. "You coming?"

"Uhh, if it's okay, I think I'm going to stay here and have a little nap."

"Suit yourself. His coffee stinks anyway."

He stared at Benny in disbelief. "Jesus Christ, Benny where the hell is all this stuff from?"

"Africa mostly," said Benny as he walked down the aisle adjusting a statue here, brushing dust from a carved wooden mask that hung from the metal bars. "But I think some of it's from Egypt too."

Putting down a small wooden bowl, he noticed a display of carved turtles beneath the long table. Benny had set them in the cavity of an old wooden television console. Under a yellow lightbulb sun the turtles sat on papier mache rocks overlooking a lushly painted lagoon. At the water's edge were three miniature palm trees and a pair of ebony crocodiles. Next to the console was a large carved chair, its back the face of an old, bearded man. On the seat rested a long cylindrical container made out of skin and fine rope. He picked up the object and examined its texture.

"This is unbelievable, Benny. The stories behind these things must be incredible. I mean, were they all used for specific rituals and things?"

"I suppose so," said Benny, flicking his fingers across the skin of a beaded drum. "I really don't know."

He looked at Benny looked at him and he put down the container and moved further down the aisle.

"Well, what about this?" He held up a long pointed stick. It was hollow and had holes in it like a flute but both ends were razor sharp. "Is it a musical instrument or a weapon?"

Benny shrugged his shoulders.

"And this?" He pointed to a hermaphrodite statue with huge sagging breasts and an equally enormous phallus. "It must be some kind of fertility god or something, right?"

"Ya, probably," said Benny. "I really don't know."

He watched Benny watched him. He stood silent for a moment then finally said what was on his mind.

"I don't get it, Benny. You've collected all this stuff, I mean it must have cost you ... it must be worth a fortune. Don't you want to know what all these things were used for?"

Benny sat down on the carved chair and picked up a small bag made of a brilliant blue material and decorated with gold beads. He opened the bag and took out a handful of small bones.

"What's the problem?" He spread the bones out on the side of the bag as if they were gems. "I buy these things because I like them. I like their shape and I like their smell. I like to look at them and touch them and build little shrines for them here in the bus. I just like to have them. That's all there is to it."

"But Christ, Benny don't you want to know the stories behind them? The tribes that made them and used them in their lives? Like that bag of bones. I mean, what kind of bones are they? Were they used in a hunting ritual or did the bag belong to some witch doctor or medicine man? Don't you want to know what all these things symbolize? Don't you want to know what they mean?"

"Oh, so that's it," said Benny cupping the bones in his hands like an offering. "You want to know what they mean. Well, why don't you tell me. Tell me what they mean. What do your bones mean to you? How much are your molecules worth? I obviously don't know, so why don't you tell me."

"Benny..., I ..."

"C'mon, it's easy. I'll even help you." He picked up the bones, put them back in the bag and shook it in his face. "Look at this bag. Look at this blue bag of bones." He shook the bag again. "If something's blue does it make you feel cold? Wait, I'll re-phrase that. If it's cold as bones do you feel blue? Oh, I'm blue, oooo I'm cold, I'm coldblue, I'm bluecold. I'm so black I'm blue. I'm so blue I'm black. You don't have to be black to be blue, you know. And of course we can't forget the blues with five flats--now man, that's blue, blue as dem rattlin' bones."

Benny laughed and shook the bag.

"So you're saying that nothing means anything?"

"No, I'm saying anything means nothing, I'm saying what means anything, I'm saying meaning is a dead fish washed up on a dirty beach, so quite chasing the great white word because the big one is meant to get away."

He opens his eyes and sits up. Looks out the back window of the bus to the fog shrouded coast and for a second he thinks that the bus is still running then realizes the hum is the ship's engine moving them across a dark and calm sea darker than the blueblack sky that waits for the sun to rise from beyond the land he can't see.

He opens a window just enough to let the cool rush of sea breeze drift over him and hears more clearly the sound of the ship's diesel whisper slow moving over ocean waves cresting with the wake of another boat that passes silently--too early for the horn so just a dawn blink of lights.

He watches seven gulls circle low around the stern, hears them laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh as they rise up towards clouds slowly rolling in on waves of almost morning sky that shimmers the sea with liquid light and he grabs Benny's clipboard and he writes--Does the sun know the date? Does the moon know why I need to know if this only earth will survive the dying mothergod who carried this womb of star and bore the spectacular sorrow of life pounds in my chest, the day before me--birth's death and I've got ghosts bringing me roses, this paper burns as I write my ocean carriage brings me to return and sets the scene for this

final first cast of character to my as-if world, the pages I
will paint the darkest hues seep through my soul's
pentimento lines slowly unwind no longer hooked on meaning
that dangles then tangles on objects without anchor are
caught in the empty net held to be self evident, I have
fished for minnows while standing in a whale of a dream more
real than nothing more nothing than I reel myself in this
stream of mind mirrors and see myself seeing myself seeing
myself see, a sacred horror deeper than eternity, the cold
face of pure mortality going round and round the mulberry
ruins, where she stops, nobadady knows when the bloodred
wind blows set sail with pockets full of ashes, our ashes,
fuel for the next whirling whorl world of interesting agony,
smoke-stack tree-tops and plastic ecstasy, cherished hatred
that sells the magic of life for disease and hypocrisy sees
harmony melt like snow in the cruel, radiant, blind light of
day becomes night becomes day after day, again and again we
create God to lovingly crucify, drink from the gaping wound
of perplexed blessings receive nuclear joy from our re-run
lives, give half-love to the selves we've settled for fear's
feeble excuse, a maggot's eye view of abhorrent routine, the
rhythm of five o'clock subway rushing footsteps stampede of
despair's denial of spirit left searching for sales in the
bargain basement of belief, a way to stop now and here from
going nowhere faster than a speeding bullet stakes a claim
without emotional investments we're just cold hard facts

under the barrel-headstone, yards of intestine reduced to
clear the way for everything you want and nothing I need to
make essence existent, the infinite from a language I can no
longer speak of tomorrow with yesterday's words, sell freeze
dried moments for a dollar's worth of rides on the escalator
through the shadow of the department store graveyard, though
art may be with me I'm still afraid I've misread the map
says--

"YOU ARE HERE", before the beginning and after the end
comes the leap knowing I won't survive the fall beneath the
wheel rolling on without me my eyes will be blind, my bones
unable to step through the soul's revolving door opens like
newspapers blown down dawn empty streets, all the traffic
lights blue and the signs all read--you can do time or it
can do you smile at smiling faces devoured by doubt, fed
nothing but tragedy that tastes like a Big Mac, like
macaroni spirals covered in Yeat's sauce, Pound cake with
just a hint of goose step faux gras--now, now, let go my
ego, smothered in earth onions, wrapped in a body baguette
you can wolf it down or savour the irony because no matter
how you slice it always comes up bleeding, eyes bulging with
dead wonder that the hook is so easily set, nothing more
than a little tear in lips and the blood drips through the
paper bag under the sink clogged with hair I braided slowly
twisted your heart into mine, clinging is not entwined in
sorrow's kitchen I lick out the all the pots then try to

sleep in the attic of the moonlight reflects my idea of you
turn away as my lips mouth hello, say, see you soon murder
with good-bye and continue to die the worst death of all,
the one of life's what you make it don't start in the grave,
between the lunch room and the loading dock, between the
night-shift and the pink-slip slick handshake smile of no
thanks, time running out before the pension comes through
the fast lane, Erebusloads of the living dead let someone
else decide which way to turn, what complacent road to
follow in a luxurious, air conditioned coffin ride to the
cemetery for the rich and famous confess to crimes for
probation and small fines while the innocent are condemned
to freedom, sentenced to live the death penalty one day at a
time and we all know how and we all know so why are we
puzzled by pieces that won't fit together we stand divided
looking for some one else to take the fall into this speed
trap, web of bright blank space graver than gravity fields
don't understand fences, what need does nature have for
truth, justice and peace certain if no war certain if no
peace on earth, good will toward men take from what women
make love is made of gifts not refusals to travel the
tiring, solitary miles beyond the map to a place where
poetry has no words and joy so fresh and thick you can taste
it is closer than air all the time's talking trouble now the
vagueness of my dreams is replaced by the particulars of
death, the way a salmon dances in the net under empty,

regretful strips of sky my father buries his father as
someday I may bury mine, so may my children bury me, lay me
down before I rise to the mountain of light in your eyes I
see the face of grief and it is my own soul's road to the
one destination beyond the grasp the handles firmly
gentlemen and Yit-gadal v'yit-kadash sh'mey reba, the dead
cry flesh for our bones someday nestled and touching beneath
the earth is all that endures the sound of my feet on this
bus' floor, the slow surge of blood through my veins, the
rhythm of these shadow words across the decaying page is
circled by lawyers of literature discuss the numismatic
value of a coined phrase, foreclose on the mortgage of
meaning as much as always dawn I will lean against the wall
in the house of the Word they want an option to buy back the
lost city of their souls scheduled from the cradle to the
grave-digger pours coffee hot from the pot as the brightest
maple leaf tumbles to the ground at my feet will no longer
walk in an unauthentic life, my hands and heart will no
longer hold malignant valentines for women without words to
describe the world through their eyes are fixed upon a
broken promise raked across their naked dreams as simply as
if the yellow yolk sun and some cream coloured clouds were
coat-hanger pulled from the blue bowl of sky and then fried
on the electric griddle city at night ablaze with false days
know nothing of the tales told by years spent trying to kill
the death we've made bliss of simplification, False Evidence

Appear Real, built cults of material happiness on comfort and convenience that serves us, that enslaves us to the inconceivable violence brought by armies of false salvation market the future to sell our past mistakes, the history of facts not feelings make a desert of this garden full of sad gladioli, Hitler and Abraham planting apple seeds but nothing grows like love in women and children first only while this ship is sinking my unborn blows bubbles in the womb nothing more than short-term storage for the customers of tomorrow, bent into convenience we can't reach the miracle of my mind is no longer satisfied with a square frame forced over the whole truth and nothing but the truth remains missing in action but if you're my friend then I don't have to worry right for the wrong reason you said that was because you thought I meant something other than what you said was not what I meant when I said what I thought that you'd know what I meant was not what I think I said that what you meant and what I thought you meant to say something once why say it again I can't pass the get-go but still collect 200 dollar's worth of five dollar words monopolise conversations like the chattering of tea cups on china plates of fortune cookies crumble in my hands try to hold back the universe is so big and this, such a small piece of paper to keep score on now that cards are dealt, check or will you still place your bet when there's nothing to get this game isn't meant to be won or lost, just played

straight out until the call somewhere on I-55, under the
blue, doughnut hole moon, maybe in a bathroom in your
bathrobe or alone listening to moans through thin motel
walls and BINGO your number comes--please hold up your card
so the coroner can do the autopsy fails to reveal if death
is the absence of time or if time is the creator of death I
know, is dying for the last taste of me in the malleable
flesh, its infinite hunger an open sluiceway of generations
wave with other faces now in the photographs like rainbows
they fade or are swept away with sudden and unbearable
clarity I now see myself in all the broken glass at this
accident scene, project cuts and tear along these final
dotted lines of the driving me not the driven I am no
Lazarus, have no secrets of the dead, can only tell you more
of what you know you will die, some day you will and so will
I be buried with butterfly larvae in my mouth speaks too
soon I'm tongue tied and twisted in language can't even
describe what chicken tastes like but I've got no complaints
today I'll eat my fill, get stuffed like a graveyard as my
disregard breeds and there'll be no saving me for only the
worms can dream of a dream that comes back to haunt you,
comes back to hunt you say you don't understand what I mean
when all I want is that you feel what you see what the words
exclude, like brotherhood of man does not face his fears are
replaced with a toxic zest for progress running out of
excuses for this excess of repulsive sameness that would

never dare to ask what is first and last in a circle back
and come out with it, out with it, tell me that you believe
it will all work out in the end a mind is a mind is a mind
your own business is business before death is preferable to
any more of this life is so conditioned and controlled,
conditioned and controlling the deepest waters are so dark
and difficult to get down to the bottom line is there are
only two choices: life or death I will write you out though
you wear me to my bones will tap-dance on the open coffin of
today birds fly from my mouth comes this dust voice of
wonder that sings this poem is a mirror not a picture me in
my car at some point on the pregnant road there's just one
thing I'd like to drive home, into you so you come and, see,
you've already allowed yourself to be deceived, took it the
wrong way and changed the intended directions are just marks
on this map is an act of faith is not an act of will has
brought me to the final fork in the road without a dish or a
spoon I honk my lost horn and quickly turn to avoid another
dead end, a cul-de-sac without letting the cat out of the
bag I can tell you there are no judges, only witnesses who
sometimes idly wish they didn't know now what they didn't
know then there are those who will hurt you, regardless what
you can offer them anything but time for a little wreck-
creation so grab your gun and once you've killed it, cut it
open, emptied it and had it shellacked it just don't look as
big but they tell me sometimes big isn't always better when

it comes to fishing you catch your next one with a piece of
the last one shining and stinking the jewelled apocalypse
has been said to be on its way since the day laughter
breathed life into the world can stand so little utopia is a
dive to the communion of chaos can't predict what will
happen today, on the next page maybe something I can
remember, something I won't dismember particles of almost
nothing dance in radical amazement of creation is true only
in its creating reflections of love is where it is such a
beautiful failure to find hope despite the times will be
what they will be and you are the Messiah shopping for
Christ is such a tough act to follow but walking on water
wasn't built in a day will come when the sun will rise
without me listening to you say that's just the way it is
and I say yes, for you don't even know my real name is no
one has your heart sees only what your eyes make welcome to
it's all true because none of it's real or imagined I made
it so I believe it's gone for what is and shall forever be
the form of emptiness has fingers soft as feathers built
this cage of shadows from fear is the way we die thinking of
how things might have been but for now and now and now and
now the siren bloodbeat still sings to the unimportant
ceremonies of belief faced with the joke of time flows over
these paper oceans towards reasons' deceiving horizons that
I'll pursue the creative act until the process becomes the
state of mind is not where I've been but when nothing

absorbs allness and language dissolves into being forever in
the unknowable place of now you tell me I'm stuck in a rut
but I know I'm in a groove, kicked back with my sunglasses
and radio on ya dig it, dig it deep into death may be the
most exciting thing we have to look forward to being given a
second chance I still have to live with the first mistake of
being taught to see a temptress in my mind when I know I've
got a woman by my side and If I'm lucky, hell I am Lucky,
Lucky waiting for the chemical analysis of the moment so I
can make the wrong right turn away from this sorrow I will
make my love rich with today there's nothing like tempting
fate is a slave to love is the knife in your heart long
before your birth the future of possibility was drowned in
the blood of reality is where I'm Atman your terms, spread
your words hang nailed to my chest heaves like a rabbit in a
wolf's mouth, to breathe is to have taken my breath says I
am, that is all, it is enough is enough of this paradox of
ironies can't possibly express or explain how the moment of
the moment creates itself just before I get lost in you may
have seen a woman eating a cheese muffin between her knees,
between the gap in the words she sat alone in a cafe window
with her ankles crossed just so there's no doubt, my lights
will burn out long before I can light up the smallest piece
of this worldless dream, this dreamless world is so tight it
may burst like a blueberry crushed in a bear's teeth can't
wound me like your blade lip service with a smile me down

you bastard, you asshole but you know I'm just kidding,
there's more than enough fishing in me for the both of us
now know, seeing is deceiving more than what meets the eye
and I aye captain, I'll walk the plank at dawn's mutiny
because of bounty I've dedicated my life to life with no
regrets I'll take a full moon over a full wallet, after all,
that's why I'm trying to do this for a living this dying
over stacks of dirty paper and piles of broken poems like
old moccasins and snowshoe rabbits dance to the music of my
vision lives on the flesh of air comes the last first time
rolled and smoked like a cigarette ashes from the frozen
fire of a candle flame life picked clean by our taking
everything I've got I've given to you might take it as a
joke, but I mean it as a gift, a little something to
remember me by the way, this is a testament not some fucking
monuments are towers in castles made of sand under my
fingernails, in my ears, in my dreams I am a seeker of
nothing to write, everything to live life and love it, love
life and live it all moves within me my heart beats like an
ancient drum with the arrival of each eternal moment
different as snowflakes melting on my warm tongue and I
conduct nature's symphony of blessed difference in knowing
what I want and wanting what I know now that wherever I am,
I am, wherever it is, it's eternity, it's not going anywhere
around here will be a fine place to stop for there are there
things about the road that no one can ever really know what

is there in the darkness of the light but if you look with
your heart and not your eyes you may find truth in the
articulation of all my dreams and memories give life to the
dead don't yawn or shiver, the beautiful quiver flows deep
through the wilderness of me as "if" is the middle of life I
don't ever want to leave you were sanctified in an act of
love is why I'll take my jump at the yo-yo sun walks the
God.

It has begun.