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## Aurora, 1984

Eastern Kentucky University, English Department

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**AURORA**



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## A Little Breezy

Archie Borders

Ah, but when the weather gets like it is now, you know, kind of warm, but not too warm, a little breezy, but again, mind you, not too breezy, and the sun is just beginning to set over the trees, well, it's these kinds of days that old Bill usually comes pedaling around on his bicycle. It isn't one of those new fancy Schwinn bikes all the richer college boys have, but one of those types your older sister probably owned back in 1967. Blue peeling paint, rusty fenders, but the tires were always new, and Bill likes it, and I do too. When I sit out on the stone wall, and under the shade, Bill usually comes riding about. My apartment is covered with shade, and I have the feeling that if there wasn't any shade around, Bill wouldn't pedal this way. Bill does though, and he always stops to chat with me, about this and that, who's who, and life in general. Bill is one of the last great philosophers I know, and that's about all I know about him. Whether he's married, where he lives, eats, whatever, I don't know, because he won't talk about himself. He'll talk about anything else though, and I mean anything. Bill's also very old.

"Life's weird, Bill," I say to him one day. Bill is just standing there with his bicycle, one wrinkled arm holding it up, the other arm placed on his hip. I noticed his slight, worried frame is shaking slightly, probably from the five miles he boastfully says he just pedaled.



"And it's getting weirder," Bill says, letting the words sink in. I wasn't really that talkative that day, because too much had been going on.

"Did you ever date, er, no, uh, well see an older woman, Bill?" I asked him. Bill smiles, adjusts his new biker hat over his bald scalp, and begins playing with the handlebars.

"I've been thinking about maybe getting some hand brakes put on this thing," says Bill, who is warming up for something good to say, "but I'm afraid if I squeeze too hard, I'll go somersaulting over the front." Bill chuckles lightly to himself, and then demonstrated the flip by pantomiming with his hands. There is a kind of pause. Bill never talks about himself, but he has a lot of private smiles.

"How old is she?" he asks me.

"Thirty-three." I say.

"My. Any kids?"

"One. She's eleven."

When I go out with Gwen, it seems everything should go just right. I met her here at college, and she was a year younger than me. I saw her at an explorer's club meeting, and we seemed to have everything in common. Relationships like that, well, they seem to work for other people just fine. I mean, you know, same age, same interests, great conver-

sations. I just knew it couldn't last. I was a sophomore then, still living in the dorm. I can see it now, Gwen and me, arguing in the lobby.

"I need room ... space is very important to me right now!" Gwen screams.

"Who told you that? Carl Sagan? He a neighbor of yours?"

"What?" Gwen looks incredulous at me. "You aren't even beginning to take me serious, are you?" She shakes her head, and smiles, disbelieving. "Damn, oh damn."

"Don't give me any of that 'my space' crap. You're playing your damned head games again. I don't have the time or the patience for that shit." A few months of rage that had been swelling was starting to see the out. "All that 'testing' my loyalty crap. It's not for me Gwen."

She didn't seem to believe what I was talking about. She stared down at the floor.

"There is nothing wrong with games. Psychology proves that relationships go through tests constantly. The more tests they can weather, the stronger the relationship is. Think of it as a controlled experiment." She said this as if she was lecturing a freshman logic class.

"I don't like games. Not these kinds." I said.

Bill was still smiling at me. I couldn't tell if he was thinking about the new hand brakes he might get, or what I had been telling him.

"This thirty-three year old..." Bill asks.

"Yes?" I say.

"I hope she's not married." Bill sounds like a father now, but I don't know if he really is one or not. I set Bill's mind at ease.

"She's not married, Bill." Bill is quiet again, and the air is getting a little cooler now, because the sun has nearly set.

"Do you like this woman?" Bill asks me.

"Yes, I do. I like her a lot." I did. I liked her enough to want to continue our friendship. I told Bill that too. I met her through a friend. She was my friend's sister. I had asked him if that bothered him.

"No," said my friend, "I'd rather you date her, than the dicks she's been out with lately. At least I know what a dick you are." If it bothered him at first, it didn't later. The three of us often went out together.

"What do you like the most about this woman?" Bill asked me. I thought about it awhile, and had thought about it before.

"I guess," I said still thinking, "well, she's looking for a job, and she has to raise a daughter. She enjoys herself when she can, I think. She doesn't have time to play games."

AnnMarie had sent Sara to stay overnight with her grandparents. She rarely had time to go out much, because kids are hard to look after. I still had not got used to being alone with her, and lying with her.

"Your my brother's friend." she says to me, stroking my face.

"Your my friend's sister." I say pulling her close. We don't say anything to each other for awhile, but just lie there.

"This can't happen again," she smiles as she says this to me.

"I know." There is a pause, and then we begin to laugh. We have fun. Too much fun to not let it happen again.

Bill seems pretty interested in everything now. More interested than usual. His private smiles have become more frequent, but also his in-between smile expressions are more intense. Bill listens thoughtfully, and then he leans close.

"So is there a problem?" he says. I look over at the rusty bike fenders which are hard to see in the streetlight.

"No, not really." I'm thoughtful now. "It's kind of lonely though."

"You haven't got to the stage where you hear some goofy song on the radio and it reminds you, have you?" Bill asks. I laugh.

"No, not yet," I say, and then run my fingers through my tangled hair. Bill listens. I tell him where she lives, which is about a two hour drive from where we are. Because of this and school, I don't see her much. We write, however, and we usually write of our new friendship. Bill asks me if we officially "date." I tell him no, and how it would be impossible, probably.

"Why's that?" Bill asks.

"Because. She has enough to worry about without some little twenty year old kid pestering her. You know writing her, worrying about her. She doesn't need that." I stretched my arms out, and exhaled.

"Maybe you do," Bill says.

I see AnnMarie again about a month later. We never plan to see each other, we just go out and do something together, spur of the moment. I kind of like it like that, but it makes me awful nervous. It's a long drive to her house, and if I drive all the way there and she's out running around with her friends, or out on a date, it's very disappointing.

"I don't mind you just popping in on me," she says to me, "I like just taking off and doing something." Long drives are prevalent, and road trips are spontaneity personified. I never mention the word "dating" around her, because the last thing she needs is to probably be tied down to anyone. I'm a pleasant diversion but a diversion nonetheless. You have to keep

these things in perspective, so you don't get hurt.

"What are you doing here?" Gwen says to me. I knew what was coming, so I decided to go through with it.

"I don't know," I said, "I thought we could just take off and do something. You know be spontaneous."

Gwen shook her head and sighed. "God," she said, "you are really unrealistic, you know that. You can't get by with that kind of attitude." Then she shut the door.

The sun was just starting to come in through the windows, and I rolled over onto my back and adjusted the pillows. I looked over at AnnMarie. She was still asleep, with no expression. I pulled the covers up under my chin and looked about the room. It was full of wicker furniture and everything was covered with lace. We had left the radio on all night, and while the music was very low, I could make out some familiar pop song that I used to dance to at junior high school sock-hops. I noticed her daughter's picture, just over the headboard, and studied it. She looked very much like a younger AnnMarie, with wide, mischievous eyes, and a completely winning smile. I looked back at AnnMarie. Now that she was quiet and asleep, she looked more vulnerable than usual. It was also the only time she ever looked thirty-three to me, but the faint lines on her face

didn't bother me in the least. I felt good, better than I had in a long time, and I gently touched her shoulder.

"Well Bill, now for the big question." I brought my knees up to my chin and stared deep into his eyes. He reared his head back.

"Shoot," Bill says.

"Do I keep being spontaneous?" I ask. Bill begins to laugh lightly, and climbs back on his bicycle. It's not breezy anymore, but chilly.

"You know what I think?" Bill says, placing his hands on the handlebars. I wait for his answer. "I think I'm gonna buy those new handbrakes."

We don't say anything at all for a minute, and then Bill starts to laugh and pedal away.

"Goodnight Bill!" I call to him.

"I have a wife and two kids!" he calls back, then he disappears into the night.





## Hushed Sounds

As rainbow-colored shafts of elusive light  
Glide gently, silently from diamond prisms...  
So does the sound of love  
Descend noiselessly upon those  
Soon to fall in love.

Sherrie Kinney

## Husband and Wife

The weather turned stormy,  
bright sun no more.  
Black clouds and thunder  
roll in from the ocean.  
Kids on the beach,  
a boy 8,  
a girl 7,

(The man is always  
older than the woman)

Seriously they build  
a castle of sand.  
Perhaps their mansion,  
maybe only their home.  
They hurry to complete it  
before the rain and waves  
come and wash it away.

Horace Hardison

As the Sun Falls Into the Ocean It Fizzles  
Like an Alka-Seltzer

Thomas Jefferson shuffles among  
the working class, sneezing and  
coughing during a January blizzard as  
he shakes their hands:

"Please vote for me".

A wolf pack howls  
to the moon. The pack  
feast upon the carcass of  
reindeer as Santa watches,  
his elves trembling behind him.

On all the streetcorners of the nation  
mailboxes run down the streets  
vomiting letters, cars refuse to  
start, bridges all fall down.  
Tin and steel extinct now,  
victims of genocide,  
and now comes the  
rebellion of the masses.

Horace Hardison

## Atlantis

Fish wiggle down the streets of Atlantis,  
Their tails causing the past to ascend--  
The dust of Poseidon's trident,  
Of an Atlantean throne,  
Of Tyrannosaurus rex . . .  
all swirling.

With the pausing of the fish,  
A settling occurs below them--  
Like periods into an ellipsis.

Anthony Smith

## Divorce

" . . . divorce."  
He had uttered the word, for better or worse.

The moment's focus became foci.

Inside an arena,  
With a conscience cleaved,  
The man was two:  
Spectacle  
And spectator.

Feeling bound yet unbound,  
The woman struggled  
Beneath a midnight ocean,  
Tumbling over and over,  
Searching for the elusive surface.

Anthony Smith



## Storm Choirs and Dancers

Kathy Ann Frasure

They were sitting on the patio, just outside the French doors, waiting on a storm that was coming from off toward Charleston, drinking Kahlua-and-cream. It was so distant, still, that they could not hear the thunder or see the flashes as it rolled across the tops of the hills, feeling down into the cracks of the valleys and licking the thin yellow tongues of light across the boiling water of the lakes and creeks. But the feeling of the storm crawled around in the open air of the small terrace and choked at the curtains on the windows behind them.

"It feels like Oregon. Do you know?" she said.

He nodded his head to agree. But then after a while said, "I don't know. About Oregon. It's been a long time since Oregon. So long."

There was a bird in the tree out in front of the patio. They could hear it chirping nervously, jumping from limb to limb, looking desperately for a hollow in the branches where it could hide from the rain and the wind. Running from the storm.

"Don't you think about it anymore? About Oregon?"

"No," he answered. "It's no use. Memories are no use."

She took a drink of the Kahlua and let the sweetness wash around in her mouth for a few seconds before swallowing. The bird moved on. To the back of the house where the wind just barely blew through the tops of the sycamore and silver maples. Still running away from the coming storm. She heard the rustle of the leaves as the light limb sprang up from the loss of its tiny weight. The perfect calm amplified the slight movement.

"You don't recall anything at all?" she asked.

"Nothing, really."

"Of all the years growing up, of all the storms out there, you don't recall anything?"

"Oh," he said, "some little things. Mostly about seeing the saw mill with the logs stacked up getting rained on. I always thought the rain should have made them rot. Some little things like that. And maybe a little more."

They did not look at one another when they spoke. The air from the storm whirled between them and they would not turn their faces into it, but only stared over toward Charleston, waiting for the first flash, the first rumble.

"All I can remember," she said, "is the storm choir."

She and her father were sitting in the front porch swing, in Oregon years before. The wind moved them back and forth without their having to push themselves. It was strong, and she could feel it pushing them with its invisible hand.

"It's coming," she whimpered up to her father.

"Now, Kathleen," her father said. "Remember what I told you about the storm choir?"

She shook her head numbly. She lay curled into a small ball, trying desperately to roll up in the hollow of his huge arms, to escape the roaring sound of the thunder.

"Well, that's all it is," he said. "Just a big choir, with the wind singing and the thunder playing bass drums and the lights flashing on the bright brass band playing behind it."

It did little to help her. She was terrified by it all.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he reassured her. "Just a little music. Wouldn't hurt a fly."

He stood abruptly and began to sing in a huge booming voice, some song that made no sense at all, that had no melody, that only rose and fell in time to the tremors of thunder. After a while he quit singing with the thunder and sat back in the swing beside her.

"You see?" he said. "Just a storm choir. Your Daddy wouldn't lie to you, honey. It's



just a little choir to sing you to sleep. It won't hurt nothing."

The same night, lying upstairs in her bedroom listening to the choir of the storm, a huge flash off the brass band lit the entire room, and when she awoke the next morning the barn was gone and the carcasses of all their animals were still smouldering in the ashes.

The air was getting thicker, drenching the patio in the smell of the storm. She got up and went inside to refill their glasses. When she returned she handed him his glass without even looking at him. It was the storm between them.

"What's a storm choir?" he asked her, his eyes riveted to the skyline toward Charleston.

"Oh, nothing," she said, sitting back down in the wicker chair. "Just a game we used to play when I was a child, back in Oregon."

He tasted the drink. "Were you ever afraid of storms?"

"No," she said very quickly. "Never."

She thought for a second that she saw the first lightning, but it did not reappear.

"Were you ever afraid of storms when you were a kid?" she asked.

"Oh no," he said. "Not me. Never."

He was only nine and riding on his father's shoulders through their backyard in Oregon. Bouncing on his father's shoulders with the low rumble in the background and the flashes lighting the dozens of stacks of logs that surrounded the saw mill out back of the house.

"You see, Tim," his father said. "It's nothing. Trust me. Trust me, it's nothing at all. You can play in it! You can dance in it! Storm dancers!"

He swung the boy down from his shoulders, sitting him on the ground. With the wind starting to blow strongly, he stood in front of the boy and danced an Irish jig, laughing loudly in the darkness of the clouds.

"You see? You see? Nothing! Ha! We'll be storm dancers. Me and you, come on!"

He reached a hand down for the boy, but the boy recoiled and, staring up at the dark clouds with the fierce yellow streaks in them, he began to cry. He sobbed uncontrollably while his father, no longer dancing, frowned down on him.

"Stop it, Tim," his father said. "You can't be afraid of it. You have to face it. It's a problem and you have to look it in the eye. You have to be a storm dancer."

The boy continued to cry in a long, whining shriek. "I . . . I can't," he choked out between sobs.

The wind pawed at him and the rain started pelting his hair and face. The flashes came closer together, outlining the silhouette of his father standing above him in the storm.

His father stood there for a second, seeing the frightened boy cringing in fear of the storm. And then, without warning he reached down and slapped the child sharply on the cheek.

"Face it," his father said. "Or you'll have to live in terror for the rest of your life."

He walked off, leaving the boy sitting there in the darkness, with the rain falling and the storm raging around him. And the light flashing, lighting up the logs that sat around the saw mill.

They had been sitting on the patio for almost an hour, feeling the tense, silent storm building. Waiting patiently, they did not speak again -- each waiting for the other to suggest that they quit the patio and go to bed. But neither of them would move first. They were frozen firmly to the patio floor and the feeling of the air.

The storm filtered around them and they would not move on it. It would eat the patio, the curtains, the tall French doors; it would eat them eventually. But they would sit on the patio until they drowned in the rain.

Finally, after they had sat for half an hour without a word, nearly midnight, the sky

above Charleston screamed bitterly and lit the patio with a sliver of fiery yellow.

"Well," he finally managed to say under his breath. "I guess we should go to bed. Maybe."

"Yes," she agreed. "Maybe we should."

They rose without looking at each other and went into the bedroom, pulling the doors closed behind them.

An hour later, with the storm raging insanely, they were lying in bed, sweating, waiting for their breath to return to normal.

"Kathleen, do you know I love you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "And I love you."

They breathed heavily for several seconds, the lightning on the wall above the bed.

"Do you trust me, Tim?" she asked at last.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"I'm glad. Because I trust you. And the truth is important, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Let's never lie to one another, OK? I mean, if there's ever anything goes wrong between us, we'll tell one another. Won't we?"

The storm was in the room. Under the bed and between the sweaty hot sheets where their legs were still entwined. Under her head there was thunder; in her hair that was mussed and sprawled over the pillow there was lightning. The storm wrapped around his arm that was lying across her breasts. It rolled all over the bed and they could almost see it in one another's eyes -- dancing and singing.

"Of course," he said. "We'll never lie about it. Never."



Rats in the Attic

The world has come to nothing  
But fields of filthy orange  
And rats in the attic

(And I withdraw).

The Earth is really only dirt,  
And roads up Frasure hollow  
After all,

And once I thought it was an egg,  
An Easter egg all porcelain and blue.

But, once, I saw a wall in Spanish Harlem  
Where the poor wrote notes  
To one another,

And all that paint  
Just wasted on the wall

(And I withdraw).

The world has gone to Georgia dirt,  
All red and worthless,  
Shedding water

Like an impotent husband  
Shedding clothes and shaving.

If I were the last woman on Earth,  
With the mud in Frasure hollow,

I'd play the argument of rats--  
Sharp fangs to the throat

(And I withdraw).

Kathy Ann Frasure

## Snow Angels

Snow across Kentucky,  
And all those minor Christs and Angels  
Out parking cars in it,  
With the dirty slush around their knees.

My grandfather, or my father,  
It's getting hard to remember,  
With the round tobacco stains  
On the sleeves of powder blue pyjamas.

And this one; I like this one,  
My mother holding me  
When I was just a girl.

Oh the things they wore in 1940!

The heather dying out  
Across the way, on the banks,  
Leaving patches here and there, gray  
To break the white,  
And all those minor Christs and Angels.

This one, this one of Johnny--  
The last one ever of him,  
With his laughing eyes.

David in Da Nang-- a strange world photograph.

Uncle Thomas and his Studebaker.

This color shot on the final page,  
We didn't even smile  
Me and you in the snow  
Just black and white,

And all those minor Christs and Angels  
So finite, and counting.

Kathy Ann Frasure



Counting Peanut Shells and Brown Eyed Men

I've counted, counted, counted,  
And done so little good.

Jumped and whined and whirled away  
What moments that I could;  
Wasted hours like peanut shells

Strewn ankle deep across the barroom floor  
(A thing I never understood).

And then there was this brown-eyed guy  
With wind-blown hair and willow legs.

He wasted hours in times I didn't realize  
The size and weight and bulk,  
Of brass-band autumn days.

But, late, I've left off counting,  
(I never hope to understand)

I just throw peanut shells on barroom floors  
And wait for brown-eyed men with willow legs.

Kathy Ann Frasure



## Ice

The snow tenderly caresses  
the hillside, blanketing  
the world in a cool security.  
Temporarily.

Under the thick ice, green-  
brown, a new life is seen.  
Bubbling amidst the grass  
and tall cat-tails.

A more solemn life is there.  
Undisturbed by inflation,  
the fight to be on top,  
A tranquil life of love.

The tree on the bank  
has lost its leaves, I  
see them on top of my frozen  
protective shield.

Never to be disturbed again  
until a warmer time comes,  
melting my place of tranquility---  
again,  
until next year.

Ty Noe

## Breakfast with the Great Plains

A Play in One Act, by Francis Nesmith Stein

Dedicated to the finely honed administrative minds at Eastern Kentucky University -- and written simple enough for even them to understand

### PLAYERS

A Family. . .

FATHER: 42, slightly pudgy, slightly balding, slightly, face indiscernible because of a sports page held in front of it, plain grey suit, wearing seven watches on his right arm, six on his left

MOTHER: 40, plain beige bathrobe, haircurlers, glasses held in place by a protective chain, cold cream on her face, three watches on her right arm, four on her left

ONE MALE CHILD: 8, round glasses, brown hair, blue eyes, cute sailor suit, round rosy cheeks, to be seen but not heard

ONE FEMALE CHILD: 6, blond hair, blue eyes, braces, cute Sunday dress, round rosy cheeks, also to be seen but not heard

1/3 OF A CHILD: any available

Other Players. . .

TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS: perfectly normal, plain men, wearing white coats, with handcuffs, must have excellent sight (but be totally blind), and have perfect hearing (but be totally deaf)

BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE: totally naked, constantly wearing various costume as noted throughout

BIZARRE VOICE FROM OFF STAGE: an unembodied voice from Off Stage Left that changes constantly, never the same voice twice, or stays the same throughout (very flexible)

#### NOTE

For full effect, this play should be performed with all players moving and speaking backward, except for the BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE and the BIZARRE VOICE FROM OFF STAGE.

#### THE SCENE

Stage is bare and plain. Plain and normal. Plain and barren. Plain and plain. At Center Stage is a breakfast table with a red-checked table cloth and plain white dishes. A paper rose (NEVER, NEVER substitute a real one) is in a vase at the center of the table. Toasters (seven of them--this is a holy number) are sitting here and there on a table to the rear which represents a sink counter. Also on this table, at the very center of this table, is the sacred VEGEMATIC. The toasters should be arranged around the base of the sacred VEGEMATIC to appear as if they are paying homage. Beyond the table are curtains, representing a window above the sink, which match the table-cloth. The TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS are always standing Stage Right watching everything, bending and cupping their ears from time to time to make certain that they can hear everything that goes on. The FAMILY is sitting at the table about to eat breakfast as the play begins.

Curtain opens.

FATHER (whenever father speaks he must lower the sports page and then raise it immediately when he has finished): Good morning, Mother.

MOTHER: Good morning, Father.

FATHER: Good morning, Children.

ALL CHILDREN (in unison): Good morning, Father.

MOTHER: Good morning, Children.

ALL CHILDREN (in unison): Good morning, Mother.

FATHER AND MOTHER (in unison): Good morning, Children.

ALL CHILDREN (in unison): Good morning, Parents.

BIZARRE VOICE FROM OFF STAGE (very loudly from Off Stage Left): Good morning, John Boy.

MOTHER (looking Off Stage Left, annoyed): Is he going to be in this Play too?

FATHER: I guess so.

MOTHER (even more annoyed): I suppose we'll have to put up with that other fool, too?

FATHER: Maybe. But maybe he's not in this one. With this middle class budget and all... Let's not think about it. Act like he's not even there. Let's just go on with our lines, OK?

MOTHER: All right, dear. You start.

FATHER (clearing his throat, keeping the sports page in front of his face): How bout those Cards!

MOTHER (picks at her food and does not respond).

FATHER: How bout those Giants!

BIZARRE VOICE: How bout those Midgets!

FATHER: How bout those Yanks!

BIZARRE VOICE: How bout those Confederates!

(The BIZZARE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE enters from Stage Right, totally naked. He carries a huge bowling trophy in his left hand. He walks past the TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS who glare at him angrily. As he crosses behind the FAMILY he stops to pirouette from time to time, to show off the enormous size of his bowling trophy, then Exits Stage Left).

MOTHER (upset, talking very quickly): You see? You see, I told you. I told you we'd have to put up with him too.

FATHER: Now, dear. You know that there are people out there like him. We'll just act like he's not there.

MOTHER (to the TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS):  
It seems like you guys could do something about  
him. A person can't even have a nice normal  
play with his kind around.

TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS (in unison whenever  
they speak): Oh, don't you worry about him.  
We've got our eye on him. We've had dealings  
with his kind before. We've been after that  
one for a while. We'll get him. You'll see.  
There's a place for everything and everything  
to its place, we always say. His time is coming.

FATHER: Come on, now, dear. Just act  
like he's not there. Let's go on with the  
play.

MOTHER: All right, dear, go on.

FATHER (eats a bite of bacon): Ummm,  
the coffee is very good this morning, dear.

MOTHER: Thank you, dear, I made it in...  
(ALL freeze. Loud, grand music from Off Stage,  
fit for the heralding of a Greek God, should  
interrupt MOTHER just before she says...) the  
VEGEMATIC. (Long echo follows).

MALE CHILD (after a proper, reverent pause  
for the sacred VEGEMATIC): MOTHER, I wanted  
Pop Tarts this play.

BIZARRE VOICE: I wanted Broccoli, myself.

MOTHER: Be a good little MALE CHILD and  
be quiet. Remember, the PLAYERS section of  
the script said you were to be seen and not



heard. Besides, Pop Tarts were last play. This one is bacon and eggs.

BIZARRE VOICE: Oreos would be nice.

MALE CHILD: But MOTHER, I wanted Pop Tarts this play too.

(TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS are listening intently).

MOTHER: Now, MALE CHILD, you know what will happen if you keep this. . .oops. . .too late!

(TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS cross stage and handcuff the MALE CHILD. MALE CHILD struggles and cries as they carry him Off Stage Left. Shortly, the TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS Re-Enter Stage Right with a second MALE CHILD who is identical to the first. They carry him across and seat him at the table where he immediately begins to eat without complaining).

MALE CHILD (tasting the orange juice): Ummm, these are good eggs, MOTHER.

MOTHER: Thank you, MALE CHILD. I made them in. . .(ALL freeze, again. Herald music again). . .the VEGEMATIC! (Long echo again).

FATHER (after reverent pause): Is tonight the PTA meeting, dear?

MOTHER: Of course, dear, it's always on the first Wednesday of the month. It always was. It always will be. ALWAYS!

(Enter the BIZARRE MAN, Stage Right, still naked, with a calendar painted on his stomach. None of the days of the week are in proper sequence and there are one hundred and four days in his month. He is busy painting more on with a large paintbrush as he crosses behind the FAMILY and Exits Stage Left).

FATHER (shaking his head): How dreadful!

MOTHER: Awful!

FATHER: I hope they catch that one soon.

MOTHER: Yes, soon.

FEMALE CHILD: MOTHER, I don't want any orange juice this play.

BIZARRE VOICE: Me either! I want Brussel Sprouts this breakfast.

MOTHER: Now, FEMALE CHILD, you remember what happened to that other MALE CHILD!

BIZARRE VOICE: Lobsters and Fritos and rotted lettuce!

FEMALE CHILD (tasting the coffee): But MOTHER, the orange juice tastes funny. It tastes like...like...coffee!

MOTHER: Now, FEMALE CHILD, you'd better watch...oops...too late!

(TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS cross the stage and chase FEMALE CHILD around. They catch handcuff her, and then carry her, fighting, Off Stage Left).

FATHER (shaking his head): Oh, MOTHER, MOTHER, where did we go wrong?

MOTHER (patting FATHER'S hand): Now, dear.

(TWO MEN IN WHITE COATS return with second FEMALE CHILD. She immediately picks up the coffee and drinks happily).

FEMALE CHILD: Ummm. This is good orange juice, MOTHER.

MOTHER: Thank you, dear. I made it in... (ALL freeze. Music). . .the VEGEMATIC! (Echo).

FATHER (after reverent pause, looking at sports page): Wow! John Biff is batting .369 this year!

MOTHER: Who's John Biff, dear?

FATHER: I don't have any idea. But he's batting .369 this year. You see, it doesn't matter who he is, I'm the FATHER in this play so I'm supposed to say things like that.

MOTHER: Oh. OK, dear.

FATHER: Well, I'd better hurry and finish breakfast. I don't want to be late for (voice filled with awe, with great importance). . . THE OFFICE. It's already (looks at right arm) 8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. (Turns to read watches on left arm) 8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:25. . .8:26! Oh, NO! My watch is wrong! Quick, what time do you have, dear?

MOTHER (looking at right arm): I have  
8:25. . .8:25. . .

BIZARRE VOICE (mimicking an auctioneer):  
8:25, 8:25. I have 8:25. Can I hear 9:25?  
9:25, 9:25. . .

MOTHER (upset): Why does he always have  
to interrupt me? Why is it always me he inter-  
rupts. It's never you, just me.

BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE

Enters from Stage Right wearing roller skates.  
Still naked. He has six alarm clocks hanging  
from strings around his neck and a large wooden  
mallet in his hands. As he passes, the 2 MEN  
IN WHITE COATS lunge at him, but he eludes  
them. Approaching the sink/table behind the  
FAMILY, he removes the clocks and checks the  
time on each. All of those with the correct  
time he sits on the table. He then smashes  
all of those with the correct time, using the  
mallet, and Exits Stage Left taking only those  
with improper time).

FATHER (face aghast): Intolerable!

MOTHER (gasping): Sacrilege! He actually  
broke a. . .a. . .a clock!

FATHER (whispering): Next thing you know  
he'll be blaspheming. . .(Freeze; music). .  
.the VEGEMATIC! (Echo).

MOTHER (after reverent pause): Surely  
he wouldn't! Not even him! They. . .(motions  
toward 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS) wouldn't let him  
get away with it if he did.

FATHER: Shhh! They'll hear you talking about them! (2 MEN IN WHITE COATS bend forward to hear better). Act like you didn't say anything. (Quickly picks up his fork and tastes the eggs). Mmmm. The coffee is very good this morning, dear.

MOTHER: Thank you, dear. (Glances at 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS to make certain they are listening). I made it in. . . (Freeze; music) the VEGEMATIC! (Echo).

BIZARRE VOICE (with no reverent pause): Listen, people, I'm getting tired of this Freezing bullshit! It's giving me a crick. And we really got to do something about that atrocious music. And about that Goddamn V. . .

MOTHER (Jerking around quickly to look Off Stage Left at BIZARRE VOICE): Please! Really! Not in front of the children!

FATHER (in a calming voice): Now, MOTHER, let's just act like we didn't hear him. Go ahead, dear, now. Say something pleasant.

MOTHER (breathing out, trying to think of something to say): I think I'll change my hair.

FATHER (scowling, uncomfortable with the suggestion): Don't be ridiculous. Your hair has always been that way. You were born with curlers in your hair. How could you change it?

BIZARRE VOICE: Move it down to your knees! Shave it in a Mohawk! Telle Savalas!

MOTHER (annoyed again): I do wish the BIZARRE VOICE OFF STAGE would just leave us alone for the rest of the play, at least.

FATHER: He can't dear. He's the BIZARRE VOICE OFF STAGE. That's his job. That's what he does. He has to do that. How else would he feed his BIZARRE CHILDRENS' VOICES OFF STAGE? Even if he's not. . .normal. . .like us. And you'd better be quiet about (whispers) changing your hair. You know they (motions toward 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS) don't like talk like that. They might. . .oops. . .too late!

(2 MEN IN WHITE COATS cross to MOTHER. They handcuff her and start to carry her Off Stage Left).

MOTHER (struggling, screaming): But I didn't mean it. I wouldn't think of changing it! It was only something pleasant to say!

(Her voice dies away and the 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS Re-enter from Stage Right with second, identical MOTHER, placing her in the seat where she immediately starts primping her haircurlers into place).

FATHER (standing and stopping 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS): Wait a minute, you guys. I'd like to register a complaint with the people who handle problems around this play.

2 MEN IN WHITE COATS: That's us. Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.

FATHER: Well, you see, this BIZARRE VOICE OFF STAGE and that BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON

STAGE are really starting to bother me. Can't you do something about them?

2 MEN IN WHITE COATS (turn to look at one another for a second, then turning back to FATHER, in unison as always): Of course we can. We can handle your problem through. . . PROPER CHANNELS! To protect and to serve!

(2 MEN IN WHITE COATS both take out pads and pens, and taking 26 sheets of sacred CARBON PAPER, they write FATHER'S problem down -- this particular action could take several minutes, several hours, even several days depending on things like coffee breaks and such. When they finally finish, they tear off and give FATHER the original).

2 MEN IN WHITE COATS: There! That should take care of everything. We'll be in touch. You've got nothing to worry about. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!

FATHER (relieved): Thank you, thank you very much.

2 MEN IN WHITE COATS (returning to their places, Stage Right): We aim to please. Our loss is your gain. (As they walk back to their places they crumple up all the carbon copies and throw them away over their shoulders). There, that should take care of that. A job well done! Anything worth doing is worth doing right!

FATHER (sitting down): I'm glad that's taken care of.

BIZARRE VOICE: Me too!

(BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE Enters from Stage Right, eludes 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS and crosses to sink/table. He is carrying two rolls of toilet paper. 'Do Not Fold Spindle or Mutilate' is written across his stomach and chest in large red letters. When he reaches the sink he wraps all seven toasters in toilet paper until they are completely covered. When he runs out of paper he Exits Stage Left).

FATHER (slamming his hands onto the table): That BIZARRE MAN has gone too far this time! Now the toasters will never work!

MOTHER: But, dear, they didn't work before.

FATHER: Yes, but now we'll never know they're not working with all that paper covering them up.

MOTHER: Don't worry about it, dear. We'll have the Maid clean it all up.

FATHER: The Maid isn't in this play. She only comes in every third or fourth play to help clean up. With this middle class budget we can't afford her every play.

MOTHER: Now come and sit down, dear. Let the 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS handle him.

FATHER (obviously disgruntled): Well. I suppose there's nothing else to do. (Sits and continues reading sports page. After several minutes of silence he looks across at MOTHER). Wasn't the BIZARRE VOICE FROM OFF STAGE supposed to say something here?



MOTHER: I think so.

FATHER (upset with the lack of punctuality and responsibility on the part of the BIZARRE VOICE): I'm sure he had a line here. It's terribly irresponsible of him. Not delivering his lines when it's time. It throws the flow of the whole play off.

MOTHER: And the BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE was supposed to come on again. I'm sure of it.

FATHER: That's it! I'm finished! I'm through! (Looks Off Stage Left toward BIZARRE VOICE). All right, you! I've had it up to here with you and that other clown. Are you going to say your line, or what?

BIZARRE VOICE: No

FATHER (raging): And why the hell not?

BIZARRE VOICE: Because I don't have the next page of the script.

FATHER: Where the hell is it?

BIZARRE VOICE: I think I lost it. Or maybe I left it at home in. . .(freeze; music) the Goddamn Vegematic! (Echo).

FATHER (hurling sports page to the floor): THAT'S IT! NO MORE! (2 MEN IN WHITE COATS run across stage towards FATHER). I can't handle this! This whole play's gone mad! I quit!

2 MEN IN WHITE COATS (trying to put handcuffs on FATHER): Now, FATHER, don't lose control. Loose lips sink ships!

FATHER (to the 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS: Me lose control? Everybody here's lost control! you guys haul my wife off because she was born with curlers in her hair and didn't like them. You drag my kids off because they wanted Pop Tarts. My watch doesn't work. My coffee tastes like eggs, my bacon tastes like orange juice, and it all tastes like it was made in a Goddamn Vegematic! And YOU want ME to keep control! You and your 26 carbon copies want ME to keep control! (FATHER starts tearing his clothes off as 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS and FAMILY struggle to drag him Off Stage Left. They finally succeed, leaving the stage empty).

(BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE Enters from Stage Right, still naked. He has a large red-ink sign stamped across his stomach and chest which reads USDA REJECTED. He moves to center stage in front of table and begins to recite a poem -- it is important that no one remains on stage, so no one will hear the poem).

BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE (reciting):  
I have known. . .

BIZARRE VOICE (interrupting poem): Hey  
is this thing over yet?

BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE (turning to look Off Stage Left): No, not yet. It isn't over yet. I'm reciting the poem. (He continues reciting). . .the inexorable sadness of pencils. . .

BIZARRE VOICE (interrupting again): I'm terribly sorry, it's hard to hear Off Stage Left like this all the time. But is this over now?

BIZARRE MAN WHO COMES ON STAGE (turning to look Off Stage Left again): No, it's not over yet. Not yet. Just a little more. I'm still reciting the poem. (Continues poem). . . .Neat in their boxes,. . .

(Enter from Stage Right 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS carrying new MALE CHILD, FEMALE CHILD, and 1/3 CHILD. When they see BIZARRE MAN they run after him, sitting children in chairs. BIZARRE MAN escapes Off Stage Left. 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS go Off State Right and return with new MOTHER and FATHER. 2 MEN IN WHITE COATS sit MOTHER and FATHER in chairs and return to their places).

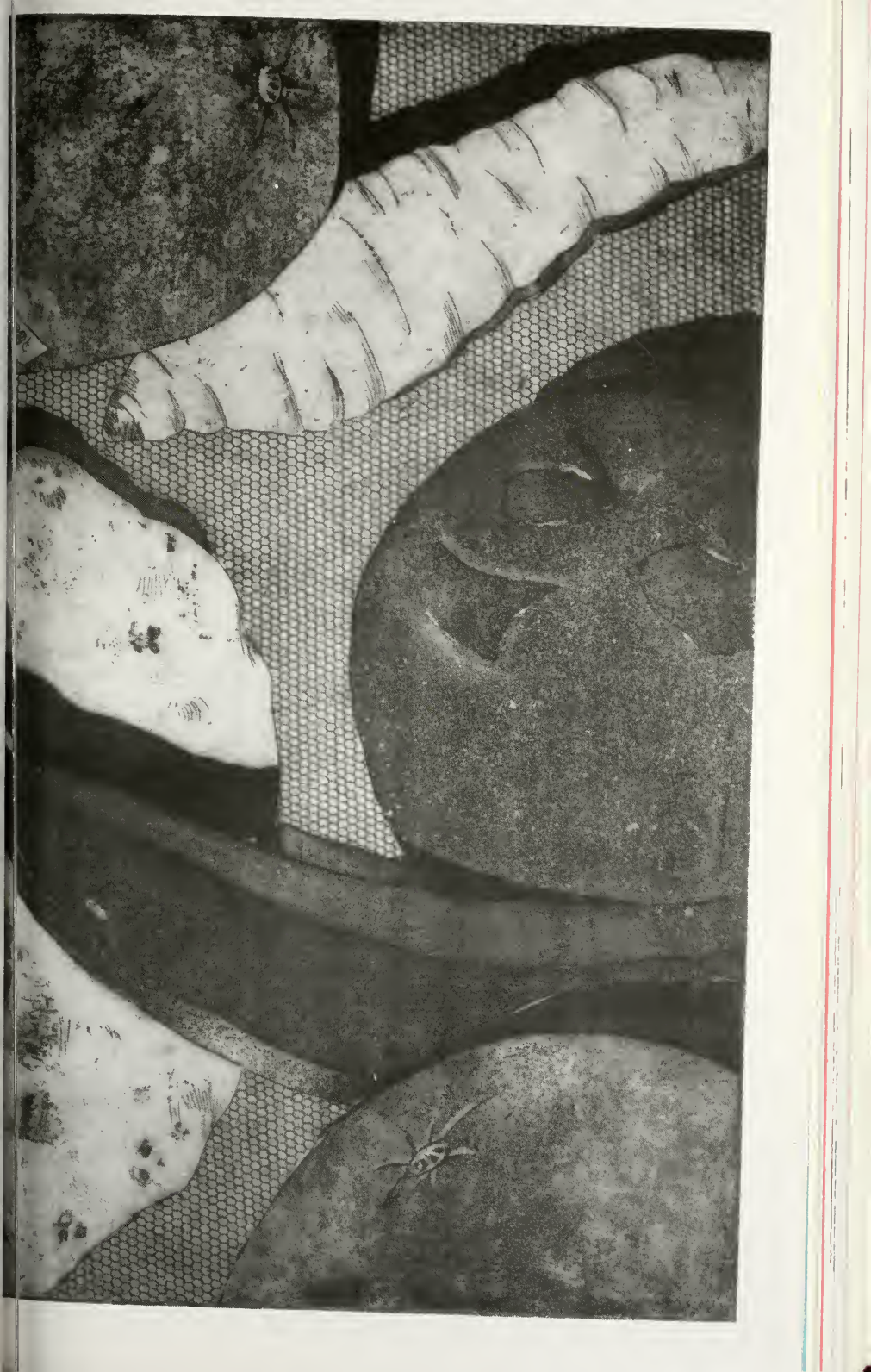
BIZARRE VOICE: Now is it over? Are we finished yet?

FATHER (to MOTHER): Are you ready, dear?

MOTHER: Yes, dear, I'm ready. Go ahead.

FATHER (picking up sports page from floor): Good morning, dear. . .

BIZARRE VOICE (groaning): Oh, shit!



The Delusion

I touch the hard smooth angles of my forehead,  
the dents of my cheeks.

I look down at my short fingers,  
the tattered nails,  
the translucent blue veins  
coursing beneath my skin.

These are not the mere bits and pieces  
of some complex machinery of blood  
and bone.

How absurd,  
for one to say  
I am only the product of egg and sperm,  
X-chromosome and Y.

I feel the heavy pulsing of my heart,  
the gentle whispering of breath  
in the night air.

Tilting my head back  
I laugh at the cold stars  
that sing in the bitter dark.

ou see,

Death is but a ghost,  
a raven spirit easily quieted  
with the exuberance of my youth;  
the horror of a child's nightmare  
shed carelessly in the light of day.

knowing smile settles on my lips,  
the remembrance of a sweet secret  
shared only with myself.

am immortal,  
unparalleled,  
and infinite.

single soul apart from Humanity;  
an exception to the primeval fate  
of Mankind.

Anita Marie Hagan



Mary Had

Georgia Carrey

Mary could feel that thought on the porch of her ear. It was sitting there glistening like a tiny stainless steel claw. That thought always came in that way. Oh, she had never seen it sitting there. She had tried to catch it in motion without success. But she could feel it, cold and surgical, braced there at the entry. This particular time it had lingered much too long and she was afraid. Often it would arrive and enter immediately, vigorously, reaching its steel claw self into her brain as quickly as an owl might clench a fat shivering mouse. Yes. Just like that. Her brain was a shivering, squishy mass of soft gray. Whenever the claw snatched in, she would shiver and as it contracted itself to itself, she would wince inwardly and endure the brief excruciation. But sometimes, like this time, it would make its presence known by pinching her ear and then it would perch, almost nestle, in her ear and glisten. She would listen.

Now she felt that thought on the porch of her ear. She couldn't understand why it kept waiting. They both already knew what it was going to do. It was going to squinch itself up very politely and thread its way through her ear and then it would stretch its talons for eternity into her brain. It would stretch all the way across her dense and shivering brain. And when it had a good claw full, it would begin to squeeze slowly, cutting the soft gray mouse that was her brain. There



would be no quick shock and pain. There would be instead four simultaneous incisions without anaesthesia. She would feel sure she could stand it no longer. She would know she would have to faint. But she never did.

The claw had an uncanny ability to assume the voice of the next person who would speak to her and it would say, "Did you hear me?" And she would whine back, "What did you say?" wanting desperately to know the thought's thoughts. And always the identity of the voice would disorient her and keep her from demanding some explanation of the claw long enough for a person to arrive and say, "I said," followed by something irrelevant. It bothered her how everyone she knew seemed always to begin a conversation with "I said." They hadn't always done that to her but they were certainly doing it now.

"I said, I can't figure out what's the matter with you." It was her mother. Mary opened her green eyes on her and sat still a minute. "Mother, did you ever consider the possibility that there might not be anything the matter with me?"

"I know there's something," she said quietly.

Mary got up and left. What could she say to the person she loved best in the world? Her mother was part of the cause. Not directly, of course, but still part of the cause. Mary had been probably ten years old when her mother got pregnant again at the age of forty-three. After a while she began to bleed badly and the doctor quite wisely recommended a therapeutic abortion which her mother did not want. It didn't matter that the baby would be abnormal

if it happened to live. It didn't matter that she could easily die in the delivery if she didn't bleed to death during pregnancy. It was her baby just like her five living children were her babies. She loved them all and believed in them all and she would no more let this unknown baby die any more than she would let the others. But the doctor finally insisted and explained until she agreed to have a D and C against her better judgement. The night before the morning of the operation, her sister, an R.N., did her mother the moral favor of asking, "Are you sure this is what you want?" Mary never forgave her aunt for that. To her it was as if her aunt had said, "You have to accept the responsibility of letting this poor little baby die. All of it!" instead. Mary thought that her aunt had probably said that and her mother had changed the words to protect the innocent--herself. She wanted to say, "Mamma, you did the right thing," but neither of them would ever have been able to believe it or admit it.

They had been told how wrong abortion is on many, many, many occasions. A favorite example that men always seemed to love to use was this one. And they had a doozy of an approach! They would begin, "I want you to make a judgment on this situation. This woman has been pregnant x number of times and for the last x times she has miscarried. Her constitution is frail, her children that have lived tend to deafness, and she probably won't survive this pregnancy. If you were her, what would you do?" The answer was obvious and she gave it. "I would Abort!"

"You would have killed Beethoven." How could she say, then, "Yes! Yes! I would kill Beethoven. No one has ever missed something he's never had. Yes! I'd kill him! I'm alive yet. Why should I give up my life? I am young! Yes! I would kill him! It isn't wrong to want to live." That was the wrong answer and she knew it. She could tell by the accusatory tone in "You would have killed Beethoven." Of course those people could say it would be wrong to kill Beethoven. But why couldn't they see the wrongness of suicide? They would never have to make such a decision so it was easy for them. She just wondered how they would answer if put in the situation. Or if they were engaged to be married and found themselves pregnant. No doubt they would say they wouldn't let that happen in a holier-than-thou attitude. She would never had the heart to point out what consequences that answer would yield.

She was near the pond now. She had left through the back door and climbed the hill, opened the gate, followed the rocky road past the milking barn and walked to the pond. It wasn't really a long way to have held all that thinking. The plopping of the bull frogs had broken her reverie. The pond was deep and brown if you looked under the reflections on top. When she was little, the sky had made her believe that the pond was blue but when she grew older she was undeceived. The crickets' and the birds' noises broke into her in spite of her brooding and she smiled at its skipping. Of course nothing was the matter. It was time to go back and apologize to her mother.

\* \* \*

Another time. God! How it hurt her. At least it was quick. Not painless, but quick. She had apologized and gone to her room. She was twenty-one and in college, but while she was off for the summer she lived with her parents. She had shared the room with her two sisters. One of them was a nurse, a remarried divorcee who never wanted to have children. The other had had trouble getting pregnant but had finally succeeded after eleven years. While Mary was visiting once before the baby came, they had gone to church where the preacher was talking about sinful Russian women who aborted their babies and left the parts in trash cans out back. Her sister got sick. So did she, but for a different reason. She was reminded of another preacher who told the story of the woman who went to her doctor to get an abortion when she had an unwanted pregnancy. She hadn't even told her husband. For shame! And the doctor told her no. Still she persisted and finally he gave in. He said, "O.K. I won't give you an abortion now, but I'll tell you what I will do. You go ahead and carry this baby to term and I'll deliver it for you. Then I'll hold it up by its little feet like I always do and I'll give you a butcher knife. If you want to cut its throat, I won't say a word."

It had taken her some time to get over that one. Then she noticed that she really did believe that there was a difference between a born baby and a cluster of cells or even a fetus. Those men could never understand what threat a baby could be to a woman's life. It might not kill her body, but it could take

her life away from her. Mary had a friend who had decided to abort rather than quit school. And her life. The jerk who helped her get pregnant had told her he was sterile. Mary didn't deny that many women had made the stupid mistake in getting pregnant. She also knew that for many it would be a stupid mistake to try to be mothers when they weren't. Some people, she knew, couldn't handle resentment. She could feel the tingling on her ear. It would be quick this time. This time she recognized it. She read the inscription on the steel talons: I think I'm pregnant.



Eve

She carried the seed of us all.  
We were all there  
clamoring in her belly, unheard,  
well concealed.

No, darling, I don't hear anything.

Lauren Willoughby

the odyssey

They prance on silver boughs  
and leap into an enchanted sea  
Stretching for a rainbow  
with arms that won't reach  
They topple into the water  
and make a meager splash  
And crawl from the sea  
to leap again.

Lauren Willoughby

October

leaves redden  
crumble  
Fall,  
frost's chill  
hushes the insect choir  
not yet  
Still,  
hardy crickets  
sing  
disputing silence,  
Winter.

Lauren Willoughby

Free Flight

Night, enfolding shroud of the forest  
rests heavily on the wood  
sheltering the sensible prey  
exposing the vulnerable  
to flashing talons, ivory fangs

the aerie wears the night  
as a black velvet cape  
on black velvet wings  
slicing the air  
as a warrior's sabre

Glowing orbs of a pagan forest god  
sees movement in the bush  
a fitting sacrifice to a night-god  
Mighty wings fold  
Whistling air heralds his descent

Lauren Willoughby





End of Em

Mary Branham

Em Burke sat at the kitchen table nibbling her peanut butter cookie. It tasted bitter. She should have known. The cookie was mushy soft and brown in the center but burned to a black crisp on the edges.

"This is awful," she told her sister, Millie. Em hated peanut butter, but it was the first homey sweets she'd had in a long time.

"You think you can do any better," --Millie slammed the tin pan on the oak table-- "do it yourself."

"I don't have to," Em said. She had never had the responsibility that Millie had. But she was just two years younger than her "grown-up" sister of fourteen.

"They ain't so bad, Millie," Kathy said. The two older Burke girls had forgotten the presence of their young sisters.

"Chocolate are better," Em said.

Millie picked the hot pan off the table. The heat had burned a smooth black spot on the otherwise rough table, darker and deeper where the pan was heaviest. "I don't like chocolate. I can't make them."

"When Mama comes home," Em said, "she'll make me chocolate cookies. She won't yell at me. And she'll bake bread, and wash dishes, and make beds. When Mama comes home."

It had been difficult on the girls ever since Mama had first been sick--from Millie all the way down to the baby, Sue. Night after night, one of the girls would wake up screaming, drenched in sweat, terrified of something that faced every young girl at one time in her life.

"When Mama comes home," Em repeated, this time in a whisper.

"When Mama comes home," Millie mimicked in a childish voice. "When Mama comes home, she'll be just as sick as she was when she was in the hospital."

"At first," Em screamed back. "But she'll get better. I know she will."

The hoarse yells echoed through the empty house. The men of the family had gone to get Mama. Sue had been frightened ever since they left and it was obvious to Em that Sue thought something was wrong because of all the screaming. She started to cry.

"Now look what you've done," Millie said.

"When Mama comes home," Em said again.

"Grow up, Em."

"You'll see," Em said, and she thought, "I won't have to grow up."

The screeching sound of a car came closer and closer, the engine roaring a beckoning sound. Leaving Millie to mother the young Sue, Em rushed to the big window, expecting to see the brown panel station wagon her father drove. But it was just Keith from next door, sounding off his new car.

Em stood at the picture window in the living room for fifteen minutes, thinking and wishing that that would make the time go faster. Wishing would make the car hurry home, she knew it would. But the outside landscape never changed. No car broke the frozen serenity of the view. The big yard and front corral that Em so loved was bothering her now. It needed rain. The grass that was usually so beautifully green was parched, brown, and ugly. There was not any need to mow it--it was dried out like hay, just lying there. The flower garden was almost as bad with its wilting daisies and dried brown marigolds. At the first of the spring, the marigolds were blooming with vivacious colors, but now, because of neglect of the snakelike water hose, they were monotonous dry. They needed rain. They always needed rain in June.

Em let the soft silk curtain fall back, its movement tickling her face. Now the front yard was just a white haze. Em could see herself in the glowing silk. She was a small girl and looked like her image of any twelve-year-old girl. But she didn't look like any of the girls in her seventh-grade class. They always had their hair cut in the most recent style and were always thinking about how the boys would like it. Not Em. Her straight

blond hair was either left stringy or pulled back in a tight braid--like it was now. Impulsively, she pulled the braid up to her face and toyed with the big blue balls on the band that held her hair together. A slice of light slivered through the slim opening between the curtains and struck the balls--the brightness stunning her eyes.

Liking the way it sparkled, Em widened the opening and saw a brown blur in the distance. Too deep in thought, but not thinking, Em twisted the ball to catch the light full force. Crackling gravel interrupted her thoughts. Looking again, she realized the blur was the long-awaited car.

"They're here," she whispered, a little nervously. "They're here," she said a little louder and finally screamed, "They're here."

She was crying now, from emotion and the glint of the sun. When she looked at her sister, their brown heads were just a dull haze. The four stood motionless for seconds that seemed like eternity.

"They're here?" Sue asked, hesitant to understand. "Mama's home?"

Millie released the hand she had been holding since Sue had started to cry. "Yes," she said. "Mama's home."

Em grabbed the little hand, wet with wear. "Mama's home," she said. She grabbed Kathy's hand and they started to dance. Up and down the three heads went as the feet pranced in

a circle. "They're here. Mama's home. Mama's home," they sang.

Wood ringing against metal silenced them. Something unusual was happening on the farmhouse porch. Before any of the girls could reach the door, their brother Wes stuck his head in. "Why don't you all go play in your room for awhile," he said. His red-rimmed eyes were puffy, Em noticed. He'd been crying because he's happy, she thought.

"But I want to see Mama," Em pouted. "Why can't I see Mama? She's home now." The doctors had only allowed Em one visit to her mother's room in the hospital.

We can see her later, Em," Millie said. "Mama might be tired. I'll let you play with my old Barbie doll." Millie understood. She always did.

"Okay," Em said. "But later." She didn't move from her rigid stance until she got a promise nod from Wes. She led the racing girls up the stairs.

The girls' room was just at the top of the pleasantly carpeted stairs. It was the biggest room in the house--and the most colorful. Two sets of oak bunk beds staunchly evened the room. The matching chests of drawers stood at attention at the foots of the beds. On various paneled walls, stuffed pink elephants; blue poodle dogs; yellow horses; and a lone green turtle rested in their favorite hanging positions. Small head shots of the girls outlined

a portrait of the four together. Thin blue curtains, hung from the two four-paned windows, matched the blankets on the beds. Upon the blue, a soft-haired Barbie sat. She was the most magnificent of the dolls--and they were many--in the set. Only it was Millie's and she never let anyone play with it. Until now when she could monitor the playing to make sure Em didn't cut the blond mane off, as she had done to Millie's first one.

Em wrapped her dirty hand around the doll, shaking some of the cookie crumbs onto the tiny dress as she did so. Em saw Millie cringe then straighten and not say anything as the hard and soft peanut butter smashed into the dress and ground into the red velvet. Em grabbed a plastic-headed Ken out of the travel van and began a conversation between the two dolls and Sue.

"Hello, Barbie," Em said in a low cracking voice for Ken. "Did you know Em's Mama is home?"

"Yes, I did," Em's voice rose properly for Barbie as she pushed the doll into Sue's face. "Are you happy your Mama's home, Sue?"

Sue giggled but was suddenly solemn. "What if she doesn't stay? Miss Ev didn't stay when she came home from the hospital."

That silenced the playing girls. "She's home and she'll stay home," Em said. She went to the tightly shut door and tried to listen. "Mama's home," she whispered to convince herself.

But she hadn't seen Mama. She had only been told that Mama was coming home. She had believed them--until now.

Carefully, she opened the door, leaving the magical room to enter the real world again. What if they lied? she thought. The question convinced her to take an early peek to answer it. Quietly she crept down the brown steps, inching her hunched body to a place she knew would give her a good view of the living room without being seen.

Her brothers were working meticulously to set up an old white hospital bed while their father sat in the plush chair holding the limp form of their mother. Mama's glazed eyes were sunken into her head from so much weight loss. The blue crystals stared at nothing in particular, but they never moved, except for the constant blinking. Her bony legs protruded from the hospital gown and flung carelessly over the arm of the chair. She looked worse than she had in the hospital, not better.

Em ran back up the stairs, this time not caring for the sound she made. Running into the closet, she hugged her knees to her chest--protected by the warm shell of the hanging clothes. She didn't come out that night, and she stayed in her room all the next day, only looking at her family when they brought food in and she had to go to the bathroom.

When she did leave the protective same of her room, the world was a black night. Mama had been home for two days. Now everyone



was asleep and she could see for herself what her family had been telling her through the closed doors.

Mama was in the bed like she was in the hospital, her thin body hidden from the world by the hospital blanket. Em thought what she had seen before had only been a horrible nightmare, because here Mama was home and she looked better to Em's eyes. Mama looked so peaceful, almost that peace everyone says people look when they're dead.

The cold metal of the safety side scratched Em's arm, tickling a series of goosebumps up her arm. Moonlight fell through the open curtain onto Mama's body. Her face wet with tears, Em smiled and felt better. Em sighed heavily prompting Mama's eyelids to flutter in startled pulses. She only stared at the dark ceiling but her cool hand felt for Em's.

"My little Em," Mama whispered hoarsely. "Em. Em. Emily. Emily."

No one called Em Emily except for her grandmother who always said, "What a grown up girl you are, Emily, Emily," when she pinched her granddaughter's cheeks with her rough, wrinkled hands.

Em didn't like Granny's gnarled hand rubbing her cheek when Granny said that. But now she didn't mind being Emily, because Mama was home and she knew Em. Kissing her mother's forehead. Em pulled the rocking chair to the bedside and held the cool hand as she slept there all night.

Mama had been home a whole week and she was getting better, Em knew she had to be. Why just this morning, she had called out many things as Millie made out the list for groceries. Mama's eyes still never focused on anything, but that, too, would change.

Em thought how silly she had been the last week when Mama came home. Soon Mama would be out of that hateful bed and eating at the table with Em. And running with Em. And telling Em how things would be better soon. When Mama got better. Em smiled as she ate her Cheerios and went to her room to play, not a worry in the world.

Three hours later, Em heard the muffled whimpering. Opening the door, she heard the cries better. Something was wrong, Em could feel it. She crept a little farther into the hall, catching the panel wood with her sweaty hand, wanting but not wanting to see what was happening.

She descended the stairs in a childlike saunter, as if she thought nothing was wrong. The massive bulk of her father curled over Mama in the hospital bed stunned Em into a sudden stop. Millie tried to hug Em but the little girl slapped her sister's hand away.

"What's wrong with you, Millie?" Em said. "When Mama gets better, she can hug me. You don't need to take care of me, Mama will. You go take care of Sue."

"Em..."

"I'll get Mama." Em walked to Mama's bed as her father was pulling the blanket over Mama's head. "Is Mama's head cold, Daddy?" Em knew the ritual of death from Miss Everson's funeral, but she didn't get better. Mama would

"No, Em," he said. "Mama's gone."

Finally, Em cried. But she wouldn't allow her father's hands to comfort her. She ran to the only comfort that she knew was constant. The closet wrapped its warmth around Em, holding out the real world. The painful world. The unhappy world.

Em cried into her knees. Now no one could reach her. She didn't have to see anyone. She didn't have to go out into the big room where all the family came to visit Mama. And she could make sure none of them could try to replace Mama. Mama would be better so and she would think them all foolish. Except for Em, because Em knew Mama would be better. Em hugged the painful knot in her stomach.

The closet door slipped open. Stepping in, Millie smashed Em's toe. She sat beside Em and pushed the door closed with her feet. She, too, hugged her knees to her chest for the comfort of a child.

"What are you doing, Millie?" Em asked, surprised to see her sister act so childlike.

"I'm with you Em. I'm going to stay here until Mama comes home," Millie said. "When Mama comes home."

Em smiled, happy to have someone on her side. "Then we can all go out to pick daffodils. Just you, and me, and Mama. Like we used to, when I was the littlest."

"Yes," Millie said. "Without Kathy and Sue."

"Where do you think Mama went to Millie?" Em said. She was a little afraid to hear the answer.

"I don't know," Millie said. "I thought she was still in the bed. But I just saw a big black car take her away." She looked anxiously at her sister. "But she'll be back soon."

Em thought for a minute and stared at the floor. "Will she?"

"No, Em," Millie said in a choking voice. "I don't think she can."

"Just like Miss Ev," Em said. "A black car took her away, too."

"Yea," Millie said. "But I wish she could."

"Me too," Em said. "Millie, can grown-ups cry?"

Millie smiled at her sister. "Yes, Emily, you can cry."

Em was Emily now and, five months later, she was thirteen.

Two Poems of Fear and the Sea

On the Sea at Sound

A fear may become perfect.  
A boat going down.  
Waves not lapping on anything.  
You can swim dead in your grave

while a shark tends toward the vertical,  
and this floating at terror  
embarrasses the body.  
One could swallow and be done with it,

one could breathe and pass into it deeply,  
or one could tend toward the best fear.  
It is down there, quiet.  
Its eyes fill the sea.

One imagines, in darkness, the unseen thing  
striking out at the body,  
and the body toppling over,  
the center of it changed.

One imagines the cold snap  
and the legs being freed,  
disbelievingly walking on water.  
With no mind they adapt themselves,

running from each other,  
one deep, one coming off shallow.  
The mind barks an unthought reflex of horror.  
It cannot be made better.

Blue Note

I was going to build a house  
with white sails and a rudder,  
find someone like Rhonda,

sail off into the sunset,  
make love on the balcony,  
troll for blue marlin.

But no doubt in the morning  
there would be sharks on the patio,  
and Rhonda would have me

bailing out the basement,  
trimming all the gutters,  
weeping in my chowder.

Steven R. Cope







