

**“LOSING NEIL ARMSTRONG”**  
**AND OTHER STORIES**

By

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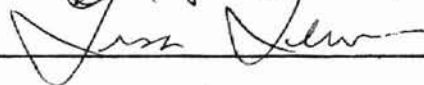
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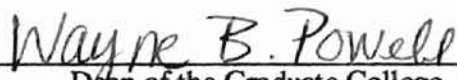
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

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## INTRODUCTION

The stories in this collection center around lower middle-class characters who reflect the life I came to know growing up in Pennsylvania. They are ordinary people, placed often in rather mundane circumstances, whose everyday lives are fraught with problems. The difficulties they face are intended as reflections of just how real contemporary sociological issues such as gender relations, violence, and cultural identity are to people in this social class. The characters here, however, have little concern for the sociological implications of their actions, they have enough on their hands already. They have no clear answers to their own dilemmas; they may want to believe they do, or even that they are in extraordinary situations, but the sad reality is that they are caught in an all-too-familiar world of internal struggle and unresolve.

The collection opens with "The Finger Puppets." In this story, the central character, Frankie, finds herself young and pregnant. In that

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regard, her situation may not seem extraordinary, but from Frankie's perspective it is nothing short of monumental. She has been made pregnant by a man she does not want to be with, but a man she will most likely marry. Marriage in such cases is the unwritten code of the lower middle-class. It is accepted as the "right" thing to do in a society which still often perceives women as subservient to men and incapable of making it on their own.

As she, her fiancée Bear, and his friend Flash sit around a dead Christmas tree, we get a glimpse of the subservient role that Frankie seems to have stepped into, a role which in many ways she seems conditioned to accept. For instance, right from the beginning of the story Bear acts to steal her voice when he interrupts her and thus, effectively silences her. Frankie seems to accept Bear's actions at first. As many other women in her social class, she follows a code of subservience by closing her mouth and allowing Bear to speak.

As the story progresses, however, Frankie begins to take action against the subservient role she seems to accept at the beginning of the story. When the three end up in a bar for the evening, she recalls how at first the relationship seemed so wonderful, but soon changed into something more like that between the bar's bouncer and the girl sitting

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upon his lap. She thinks of the girl as a puppet, subject to the whims of the male bouncer, and begins to see how the girl's situation parallels her own. When her probable future with Bear becomes even dimmer after he practically drools over another woman, Frankie breaks free of his control by pouring her glassful of beer to the floor, and then takes an even stronger stand by hitting him.

By the close of the story, however, she finds herself once again compromised by Bear's unwelcome advances. Publicly she can fight him; privately she gives in. It is in this manner that perhaps the real tragedy of her situation, as well as that of many of her real life counterparts, is revealed. As she closes her eyes it seems that no one has the answers for her: certainly not Bear, not herself, not even Flash with his winks and advice. She tries to think back on the stars, planets and moons above her that first night with Bear when everything felt right, but she finds herself swept away by the strong current of a dismal future she is only beginning to see.

As the earliest story written in the collection, "The Finger Puppets" also offers a preview of my attempts to find a working and efficient balance between dialogue, description, and action in order to paint a more realistic picture of the characters' problems. The story tends to be a bit

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“bumpy,” but much effort and attention was diverted away from a flowing kind of “transition-laden” prose and more given toward producing a plain story stripped down to its essentials.

What I was attempting to do in “The Finger Puppets” was to portray the complexities of the hierarchal gender structure still very much entrenched in the American working class through a modest and simple minimalistic form. In that sense, the story was in part, inspired by the early works of Raymond Carver and his ability to project a complex and realistic view of the American working class. Carver achieved this view in part, through a “pared-down,” yet smooth, simplistically elegant and forward-flowing prose stripped of all but the essentials. He insisted that “it’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things— a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring— with immense, even startling power” (Carver 15). I believe that placing “commonplace” details such as a pitcher of beer, Christmas ornaments, an eight foot sofa and darts into a precise minimalist style truly does help to accurately portray the straightforward lifestyle, attitudes, and ideals found often in blue-collar America.

The title story, “Losing Neil Armstrong,” is also centered around the

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lower middle-class. It often uses a minimalist style to help create a straightforward working class feel and at the same time to push the action of the story forward. But here, a wider variety of sentence structures and lengths breaks away from the almost oversimplified form of "The Finger Puppets." In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James warns future artists to avoid such simplistic formulas, even if those formulas have worked for other artists (433). He suggests that speaking from one's own experience is the most important factor in projecting reality and that the writer should utilize the freedom and "magnificence of the form that is open to him, which offers to sight so few restrictions and such innumerable opportunities" (James 433). Even though James did not necessarily write about the lower middle-class in his own work such as my experience dictates, his insight makes sense. With his advice in mind, "Losing Neil Armstrong" was not restricted to the minimalist style. It also incorporates "maximal" elements in an effort to better explore the realistic complexities of its lower middle-class characters.

Complicating the minimal style, therefore, are longer sentences with more description and transitional phrasing. The longer sentences are most often incorporated into the story to slow down the action at places where the narrative drifts into Jo-Jo's flashbacks. These flashbacks are presented

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to reveal his troubled, frequently violent, mind set and to better show the complexity of his problems communicating with his brother, wife, and children. They also serve to contrast the actions and the sometimes mundane elements of Jo-Jo's lower middle-class world against the internal struggles he undergoes throughout the story.

Divorced and growing more distant from his children, Jo-Jo seems to struggle internally from almost the first time we see him in the driveway until the very end of the story. He has little faith in the world about him and seems to be drowning in the midst of a fallen trust in those closest to him. Jo-Jo's dilemma stems from an unresolved past in which his parents' divorce, his own divorce, and an unfortunate incident where his grandmother loses her temper have combined to skew his perspective of the world. Jo-Jo struggles internally with this problem throughout the story with no apparent solution in sight.

Although his actions in the story do not offer him a solution, Jo-Jo does often react physically to his inner dilemma: he pulls to the side of the highway, he finds himself squeezing his children's hands, he fights with his brother as he did when they were children. His internal struggle many times manifests itself externally. This internal struggle is represented through a more maximal style, and the external through a minimal one. As

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the story progresses and this external manifestation negatively affects those about him, Jo-Jo's internal and external worlds collide, and so do the styles incorporated here.

In a similar vein, much attention was given in revisions of "Losing Neil Armstrong" toward producing an image field centered around the "moon landing." The description of Armstrong stepping onto the moon was inserted to help portray Jo-Jo's troubled internal world in a consistent fashion throughout the story. Jo-Jo's external world also contains reminders of Jo-Jo's obsession with the landing, such as the launch pad he erects with his children on the beach or the way the rings remind him of craters on the moon. Like the minimal and maximal styles here, the imagery is intended to reinforce the collision of Jo-Jo's internal and external worlds.

Jo-Jo's children, Little Jo and Jubilee, were also created in an attempt to reflect the troubled adult world of their father. They are anything but angelic in nature, and in that regard were very much influenced by Flannery O'Connor's June Star and John Wesley from her masterpiece "A Good Man is Hard to Find." O'Connor believed "stories of pious children to be false" (213). Instead, she created less-than-ideal children who symbolically reflected the horrors of the adult world around them. In my

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story, the children's physical dealings with one another are intended to reflect the "less-than-ideal," as well as the disturbing generational chain of physical violence they seem to inherit through the actions of their father.

By the climax of the story, Jo-Jo may just be beginning to see the impact his physical actions will produce in the eyes of his own children. The mixture of sentence styles in the final paragraphs is intended heighten his realization and to reflect the merging of his two troubled worlds. The collision between them is also highlighted by the image of Neil Armstrong and the landing once again. Here, however, like Frankie's dilemma, Jo-Jo's internal and external conflicts are left in a state of unresolve. We are left to wonder whether he will strike Ray-Boy again, or mend his ways to offer up a better example of conduct to his children. In either case, it seems safe to assume that even if Jo-Jo can save his children from the "plastic world" which so troubles his internal world, he is much too late to stop the vicious cycle of physical violence they already utilize in order to settle disputes with one another.

The third story in the collection, "Bobbing For Apples in the Amish Land," appears to be a different animal altogether. Some of this difference might be attributed to the fact that although it is placed in the middle of the collection, it was written last. The long sentences found within the story



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certainly do not reflect the minimal style of “The Finger Puppets,” nor even the mixture of long and short sentences in “Losing Neil Armstrong.” It is instead as close to an all-out maximal style as any story in the collection. Although it does sometimes utilize shorter sentences to push the action forward, much attention was given to creating longer sentences, more descriptive passages and smoother transitions to create a different “feel” and thus, a different “reality” than the other stories.

The reason for the shift in style in the story stems from my continuing attempts to pursue James’ advice, and to also display a lower middle-class setting from a different perspective. The fact that the story takes place in a junkyard and there are auto parts all around, rows of dissembled cars, as well as greasy men hopefully speaks loudly enough to set the story realistically in the lower middle-class. The maximal style was intended here to act as a contrast to that setting in order to better exhibit another view of the people of the lower middle-class which does not only address their straightforward ideals and values, but hopefully offers a window to the complexity and depth behind such a modest external view. It was also intended to reflect the contrast between two Asian women and the American junkyard where they work and live.

As close to having a political agenda as any story in the collection,

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“Bobbing For Apples in the Amish Land” depicts these two women as they question what it is to be American. The story does not attempt to provide a solution, but tries to explore this slippery issue through the eyes of Mai Ly, a Vietnamese immigrant who has become an overly patriotic American, and her daughter Sou. To enhance the dilemma, the story and its characters are set not only in a junkyard, but against the backdrop of the Amish country in eastern Pennsylvania. In addition, the character that both Mai Ly and Sou unite against by the close of the story is an old German in the employ of the junkyard. The German symbolically, at least, seems to represent an older European patriarchal order the women want to oust. The inclusion and representation of different ethnic groups in the story was meant not only to portray the conflicts which almost inevitably arise in such a diverse cultural landscape, but also to juxtapose those cultures against each other in order to better examine the women’s questioning of their American identity.

Of the two, it is Mai Ly who seems to hold a more traditional and idealized perception of America. Much of her view seems to be because she is an immigrant who has escaped censure in her native land after becoming pregnant through some sort of brief affair. Mai Ly insists upon, and in a distorted way represents American values and ideals which,

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according to some, never existed. She admires the image of a “bodiless” Washington staring at her from the invoices much as she does the partial view she holds of America, and holds a figure such as Johnny Appleseed in high regard although she knows relatively little about him.

She has broken free from a life of hardship, war, and shame by coming to America. She has found power and authority in her American-made role at the junkyard, but it seems she has done so through a union with Chuck. From that perspective, it is clear that she prefers the advantages of America over her old life in Vietnam despite the few warm memories she holds of her childhood and the fact she wonders whether “selling” is all America is about. Just how truly independent and free she has become, however, is questionable. In some ways, because she seems at least partially dependent upon Chuck, she is still very close to the old gender and hierarchal social structure of her past, a hierarchy similar to that of the Amish people with the wife subservient to the husband, and to that in the lower middle-class itself. In this sense, one can not help but question what America really has given her that is that much different.

Her daughter, Sou, who grew up in America, holds quite a different view of things. Sou does not buy into her mother’s idealized whims, such as her mother’s belief that they can become more American by bobbing for

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apples. In fact, she resists them openly. She questions her mother's desires to be American, the actions of the old German who works at the junkyard, and practically everything else around her. The fact that she questions openly, has an even higher regard for change than her mother, and works independently of the past suggests that perhaps she has become, in those aspects, more independent and free than her mother. In that sense, she represents the constantly changing landscape of American thought which may characterize "what it is to be American" more than anything else here. The differences between Sou and her mother certainly serve as an example of how Americans in the lower middle-class really can and do shift ideals and values even in the span of one generation.

Although both women seem to join together against the German by the end of the story, it is uncertain whether any consensus is ever reached between their points of view. The story hopefully is unclear in regards to which view should be held above the other, whether "traditional" or "progressive," or that either one should be held at all. It was purposely written in order to explore and exhibit a variety of views. Much as Mitchell A. Leaska, in his essay "The Concept of Point of View," suggests an omniscient "multiple-point-of-view" narrative will do, the attempt here was to place the responsibility for filtering and interpreting those views

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solidly upon the reader (42-44). The story was meant to project the complexity of the issue without authorial judgement.

Whichever of the multiple points of view that the reader chooses to sympathize with, what was intended to remain undisputed by the close of the story is that both women work toward ousting the German from their world, along with his insults, lewd behavior, and prejudice. But by falling from a ladder, Sou has found a different kind of action to achieve change—much different than the one her mother might have chosen. In this fashion, the story works to show that the debate over such issues as the “right” way to bring about change is not merely an academic one. That controversy and the issue of “what it is to be American” is fought out on a daily basis, and in each class of American society.

The fourth story in the collection, “The Taste of Well-Cooked Pork,” also focuses upon a very prominent issue which creates problems in every social and economic class of American society: the role violence sometimes plays in fantasy and sexual relations. It is an issue where authorial responsibility became not only a consideration, but a most central concern. In terms of responsibility, I agree with W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley that ultimately a work stands on its own and an author’s “intention” cannot speak as an “oracle” for that work (16-18). Because of

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that belief, however, I feel sensitive issues such as the one explored in this story should be handled very carefully so as not to add to the problem. I'd prefer to step clear of the reader's interpretation of my work. In that sense, the depiction of the characters and issues in "The Taste of Well-Cooked Pork" is a somewhat cautious attempt to address and represent some of the confusion felt by both genders when sexual relations venture into that questionable realm where the lines between fantasy and abuse become dangerously blurred.

The characters of the story, Ms. Stringer and Mr. Appletree, are two professionals. Ms Stringer is a teacher at a public school and Mr. Appletree is a white-collar worker as well, as indicated by the way he is referred to by his surname. In that sense, the characters transcend the lower middle-class into the middle-class, but not by much. They meet in a grocery store after a dysfunctional affair in which Ms. Stringer's fantasy to be ravaged by Jesse James reminds Mr. Appletree of the abuse he witnessed as a child. When they end up next to one another in the checkout line, the problems associated with their brief relationship are suddenly ripped open again for both.

From Mr. Appletree's perspective, Ms. Stringer's desires for him to play the role of the outlaw Jesse James cross a moral line and make him

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feel dirty. The thought of it takes him back to his memory of the abuse of his sister by his stepfather. Although he at first seems to be enthusiastic about having his way with the restrained Ms. Stringer, he soon recalls how the sounds through the bedroom wall in his childhood took away his innocence. More significantly, perhaps, he is reminded of the fearful shadow which came to his own doorway and imagines himself not as a fantastical Jesse James, but as a real life abuser.

Ms. Stringer, on the other hand, sees no danger in Mr. Appletree assuming the aggressive role of Jesse James. As she waits for him on the bed with her fingers tugging upon the loose restraining handkerchiefs, she does not associate her fantasy with any reality and certainly sees nothing wrong with a little kinky fun. But what she considers fun, he considers dirty. When he refuses to play the part of "Jesse James" for her, she is angered, becomes self-conscious and feels "dirty" herself. The incident ends the relationship, but not without the cost of Ms. Stringer's sense of freedom and her own kind of sexual innocence. The meeting at the grocery store deflates her attempts to feel free again and forces Mr. Appletree to look at his sexual problems in a way he does not care to.

Margaret Atwood deals very successfully with this confusing and



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frustrating phenomena in her short-story "Rape Fantasies."<sup>1</sup> In her work, the shady border between fantasy, abuse, and victimization is explored through the female voice of a convincing and realistic potential rape victim. Atwood's depiction is successful because she does not attempt to suggest that women and men do not fantasize about such things, but rather that it creates all kinds of problems when they do. Atwood wisely does not offer any solution, but rather closes her story without one, leaving her character in a state of inward struggle and unresolve, her reader with a feeling of uneasy uncertainty in regard to the woman's fate. "The Taste of Well-Cooked Pork" in many ways is an attempt to do something similar. By the end of the story, the characters are left very much alone to face the confusion and hurt; Ms. Stringer is left deflated, Mr. Appletree thinking back to lost innocence, and the reader is most likely caught somewhere in the middle.

The last story of the collection attempts to travel into the problematic as well, but this time the vehicle is not so much any inflammatory

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<sup>1</sup> "Rape Fantasies" is found in the Toronto publication of Atwood's *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*. The New York and London publications of that same collection do not include the story.



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contemporary issue, but an internal struggle which rages in the unstable mind of 3-A, a delusional character. 3-A, as well as his neighbors Thursday and Thompson, are once again set more firmly in the lower middle-class. They all reside in the same building, and much of the story takes place within the walls of 3-A's rather unkempt apartment. Even more of the story, perhaps, is set within 3-A's head and the mental imagery of his disturbed imagination. This hybrid imagination consists of urban and jungle imagery as well as two enormous leopards 3-A believes are on their way to get him, all of which is cast against an equally troubling account told by Thursday during her visit. The odd combination is meant to heighten the communication problems which the three neighbors share.

By venturing into the mental landscape of 3-A's delusions and countering that against real-life actions taking place around him, "The March of the Leaf-Cutters" offers something similar to the balance between internal symbolic imagery and the external world attempted in "Losing Neil Armstrong." Within 3-A's mind, however, the lunar landscape is replaced by that of the leopards and the jungle. There is also here a conscious merging between 3-A's illusions of the leopards and the real world of the city, a mixture of real and illusion which Jo-Jo's characterization never attempts nor achieves. In that sense, the story tries

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to capture if only a little of the weird tiger and lion imagery which works so nicely to blend the sensational with the mundane in Julio Cortazar's "Bestiary" and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Of all the stories in the collection, "The March of the Leaf-Cutters" may also offer the most balanced blend between the minimal and maximal styles discussed earlier. Toward this end, sentences were shortened in an effort to "pick up the pace" and move the action forward in the "real" world outside 3-A's mental delusions. Likewise, sentences in which 3-A travels into his imaginary mental world tend to be longer, more complex constructions in an effort to slow down the story, highlight the contrast between the internal and external worlds depicted, and to ultimately create a feeling of unbalance in the reader's mind. Although it is extremely hard to view the impact of such an effort, the intent behind the mix was to encourage a reaction in the reader to mirror the state of turmoil, internal struggle, and unresolve found within 3-A's character.

Like some of the other stories found here, "The March of the Leaf-Cutters" ends with 3-A, its central point-of-view character, facing his not-so-extraordinary, yet personally significant dilemma alone. Although he takes it a little farther than many of the others in the collection, 3-A, through his mental delusions of the jungle, really does want to believe that

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he is facing an extraordinary situation. The sad reality in his case, however, is that his internal struggles are a reaction to the external world. To borrow from Freud: "The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (652-53). 3-A has lost his job, is being evicted from his apartment, and ultimately has nobody to turn to for help, not even Thursday. Like too many of us perhaps, regardless of social background, ethnicity, or even mental stability, 3-A must struggle and battle alone against the unresolvable dilemmas he faces in the reality of life.

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## The Finger Puppets

Flash sat alone on the eight foot couch, Bear in the recliner, and Frankie in a chair pulled from the kitchen. All three stared blankly ahead at the spruce tree in the center of the room. It slid down the slope easy enough, Bear told Flash after clearing his throat.

“The real trick,” he said, deepening his voice, “was lifting the damn thing, strapping it to the top of the car.”

Frankie added that the tree turned out to be much larger than either had imagined, but when she started to explain how small it had looked standing up on the hillside, Bear interrupted.

“It isn’t like the ones they grow and prune on those tree farms,” he said.

Listening to him speak, she thought of how Bear’s foot had slid underneath a tree root looping up beneath the white snow as they trudged up the mountain slope. When she helped him from the snow, her grasp on

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his sleeves loosened and she found herself slipping backward as he rose.

Frankie looked toward Flash, whose eyes traced the two branches rising awkwardly at the top of the spruce. The one leaned under the weight of a gaudy yellow star and the other they had left bare. The tree was rotated slightly to where the bare branch was positioned in the shadow of the other.

Frankie opened her mouth, then closed it.

“I had to cut about three feet from the bottom and trim the sides, but I think it shaped up pretty well,” Bear continued.

Flash nodded in response.

Frankie could still see Bear’s red hands as he jerked the saw in quick spurts across the trunk. The spruce had shook, losing needles. After a while, he stopped to warm his hands and brush away the curls and sawdust. He reached over and took her cigarette. She had hardly felt it between her fingers and did not really know it was missing until after he had stomped it into the snow with his boots. When he bent back down to his knees, yanked the saw toward him across the trunk again, she told him she had never had a tree growing up in downtown Pittsburgh— not a real one.

Bear had grunted, continued sawing with his back to her.

“Timber,” he shouted, bragging now to Flash how he had forced the

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spruce over to the hillside.

Frankie hated the way he had of making things seem more than what they were. Although it had only been a matter of weeks since she had told him of the pregnancy, she could not believe how different he had become. From the time he moved in, he suddenly became an expert in just about everything. Now, in front of Flash, he was even worse. First it was the tree and it wasn't long until Bear even brought up the ornaments, making it out to seem she had no part in them at all.

As he pointed them out to Flash, Frankie looked at the ornaments scattered about the tree. It was her idea, she who had gathered together the popsicles, glue, and scraps of cloth from the sewing kit. She had made a sled, the gingerbread house, and a dog with the tongue wagging wildly, all while he struggled pasting a cat with wide yellow eyes. Together they had made a ninny-goat, complete with a body of cotton balls and horns made from sea shells. They had placed it above the cat, above the dog, and beside the angel neither had made, nor believed in necessarily. All of the ornaments were hung beneath the plastic star Bear had found in a dumpster and was especially proud of.

The cotton balls on the goat reminded Frankie of stopping to make a snowman halfway up the slope. When he twisted two pine cones into the

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middle-section, his hands about them like he was fondling another woman's breasts, she began packing the snow between her mittens. She molded the snow, pressing harder as his fingers worked around the cones. She sculpted it into a globe.

It had felt good to her, shattering the snowball against the side of his head. She giggled as he raked the snow from his hair, rubbed and patted the skin about the ear with his fingertips.

"It looks like that ninny goat's about ready to butt the angel right off the tree," said Flash.

Frankie could feel Bear watching her every move, checking up on her, the way she looked at Flash. She stared at Flash despite him. She liked it when Flash rubbed his fingers together, the two forefingers against the thumb, like he was snapping in slow motion. He looked big to her, even against all that couch.

Her own fingers rose into the space between the three of them, curled around an invisible glass she tilted three times.

"I could really go for a touch of that red wine below the sink, if there's still any left," she said.

Bear rose slowly from the recliner.



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"While you're up," added Flash, "I could stand another cold one—Muffin." The corner of his mouth jerking upward, winking as he said it.

"Shut up," said Bear.

"So, Flash—" Frankie said as Bear bumped past her.

She looked to the kitchen, watched him remove the skewers, chopsticks, twist-ties, plastic measuring spoons, the silver-plated nutcrackers. At last, he lifted out the bottle opener. The handles slid against one another, the one swinging down toward the floor.

"—just how did you come to be called Flash?"

"I've already told you about that," Bear called from the kitchen.

"I know you have!" she shouted back, the form of her mouth shifting as she pronounced the words.

"I want to hear it first hand," she said, her lips much slower now. Her eyes darted toward the kitchen, arched back to Flash. She slipped her nyloned thigh into view. It pushed out from under her skirt, flashing as it glided, rubbing against the fabric.

"He's still such a boy sometimes," she whispered to Flash, wrinkling her eyes as she said it.

"There really isn't much to tell," stated Flash, reaching out and taking the bottle as Bear passed by on his way back to his seat.

## *“The Finger Puppets”*

“I worked summers for the pipeline to make it through college, had a job running the smaller pipe that ran the electric wires to the pumps. One day, out in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of an open field, I stood a long section on end getting it off the truck.”

He stretched his arms open, showing her the length.

“There were clouds and all, but I was thinking the storm was still too far off. When the lightning struck the pipe it went right through me.”

Flash jerked his hand in a squiggly line, the beer slapping against the sides of his bottle.

“I’ve never met anyone struck by lightning,” she said. “How did it feel?”

“It’s like when you lay your hands on a bare wire,” said Flash, his eyebrows jutting up. “Only much worse.”

Frankie, somewhat disappointed, slumped back in the chair.

“I’ve always found it a pleasure,” added Bear, adjusting himself, half his beer already gone. “Getting shocked— I mean, the pain and all. It’s kind of a rush.”

Before they left to go out, Frankie found herself in the bathroom staring at the mirror. As she painted her lips a bright red, curling them together, she thought of how Bear hated her to wear make-up. A while

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later she wiped it back off with a towel. After that, she found herself staring into the toilet, at the water gurgling down the neck. She wondered whether it was possible to pull the cord from his razor and run it live into the water.

\* \* \*

At the bar Flash told her how throwing darts was almost all they ever did, he and Bear.

"That was, when he went by Bear," added Flash.

Frankie watched Bear lean forward, his foot over the line, the dart easing toward the board and then back between his fingers. Flash moved his chair closer, lifted his hand, pushed his words to her ear.

"The secret to beating ole' Bear," he said, "is to take him down from the start."

Flash slid back in his chair. His whole face seemed to contort into a wink.

She stared at him a long time, followed his eyes as they traced Bear's movements up to the board. Together they watched Bear's thick short fingers as he pulled the darts out one by one. As Bear turned to make his way back to the table, her eyes performed a practiced roll.

"Your turn," Bear said, holding out the darts.

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Flash leaned over the table, dragging the pitcher with his big hands.

As the beer swirled into his glass, churning into a white foam which slunk over the top and down the side, Frankie thought of the view from the slope. They had stood together, tracing their footprints winding up and down the slope, sometimes losing sight of them behind the leaning trees.

“Like giant umbrellas,” she had said.

“We’ve come a long way up,” Bear returned, pointing to the road which spread below like black twisted rope.

Frankie stared down at the darts stacked upon one another in her palm. She followed the pitcher as Bear reached across the table and took it away from Flash. She looked to the door, at the people pulling out their IDs, at the bouncer sitting on a stool. A girl in a red and white Santa’s hat sat on the bouncer’s lap, moving in and out of the way as he swung about a tiny flashlight.

A child, she thought, sitting there and letting him slide his hands into the creases of her dress, jerking her hands and legs just like a puppet, turning her head with the pull of a string. The whole thing made her feel sick.

She wanted to get up from the table and leave. She pictured herself walking away, running now past the bouncer and the girl, pushing open the

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door and escaping. She turned to Bear as if to say something. When he lit up another cigarette, the flame cast a warm glow across the contours of his face. It reminded Frankie how he had held her up, her feet dangling in the air that night as she pasted the stars and moons, the planets upon the ceiling above her bed— when it was still just her bed. She had stared into the stars for what seemed like hours as they came together under them, amazed at how they seemed so bright that night, how they shimmered, their warmth spreading across the ceiling almost like magic.

Bear stretched back against the chair, eased the lighter into his pants pocket. Frankie’s eyes fell to the darts. She let them tumble from her fingers to the table, reached again for her glass, then stopped herself. She wanted to believe it would all work out, that maybe things would get better, but as her fingers found their way around the darts once again, she thought of how he hadn’t touched her like that since. She doubted if he could.

“No,” said Flash, waving off the cigarette Bear offered. “Thank you, no. I quit, decided it was time for a change.”

“I can quit whenever I want,” said Bear, leaning back again, his own cigarette jerking up and down between his teeth, glowing redder with each inhale. “I can quit tomorrow.”

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“I have to quit tomorrow,” Frankie said. “Doctor’s orders.”

“You have to want it.” said Flash. “I mean really want it and for yourself.”

When Flash and Bear went for another pitcher, Frankie stared at the ashtray. One of the cigarettes was torn in half, the flattened tobacco stretching out from the broken ends like a hundred dead fingers.

She pulled a new pack of cigarettes from her purse. She held the box between her fingers, tapped it quick and harsh against her palm. She frowned, rubbing her thumb around the corner of the box, thinking as she found the tab how she had stopped him from using it.

She lifted the lid up, tilted it under the dim light, clamped her fingernails upon the foil. She thought of how quiet Bear had been when she first told him. She remembered the puffy look on his face. She ripped the foil out with a clean jerk. She felt her stomach with her hands, knew it was already growing. She put the cigarettes down.

When Bear and Flash emerged from the crowd, Frankie raised a hand up to the table again, coaxed a cigarette from the pack with one finger. As they stumbled back to the table, she could see the frothed beer spill over onto their hands, splashing down upon the floor.

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She looked away.

"It's really something," she heard Bear saying to Flash. "One morning you wake up and everything's just different."

He put his arm about her, pulling her into him.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

As he moved the pitcher, tilted it over her glass, she followed the movement of his nostrils, the way the skin pushed out and then collapsed.

"My biggest fear would be if something happened to my little girl here," said Bear, his arm working its way around her even tighter.

"My worse fear is being suffocated under a big fat pillow," she said, squirming from his grasp.

She lifted her glass from the table, extended her arm fully in front of her, poured the beer out upon the floor.

"What are you afraid of, Flash?" Frankie asked, curling her lip up.

Flash said nothing, just stared at her. He took a long draw, his eyes following her glass as she placed it back on the table upside down.

"I envy you two," he finally said, looking toward the floor.

Flash took another gulp of his beer. Bear settled back, turned in his chair. He traced the curve of a woman as she sauntered by the table,

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brushing against him as she passed. Frankie watched Bear's eyes swing about the woman violently, slowing eventually upon the jiggle of the woman's breasts.

She drew her arm back as far as she could, clenched the fingers into a tight ball.

"What?" howled Bear, his shoulders arching, palms rotating, held up toward the ceiling. "It's human nature. Why suppress it?"

"Did you know what ole' Bear here told the future mother of his children?" Frankie asked Flash.

"He," she said, rising from her chair. She stopped, pivoted, pointed her finger toward Bear, twirling it in circles which spiraled down to where he sat. "He told me I was fat, that I had a big you-know-what!"

Flash acted like he hadn't heard.

Bear worked his fingers into tiny circles, worked them into, out of his shoulder.

"You asked!" he shouted after her.

\* \* \*

After a long taxi ride home, they sat again around the tree, passing a joint. Frankie curled up in the recliner, Flash alone upon the couch and Bear on the chair pulled in from the kitchen.



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"Did you see the lights?" Bear asked Flash.

"You have to see the lights," Frankie said. "They're the best part."

She struggled off the recliner, made her way behind the tree, lifted the plug, fit it into the socket.

"It's almost perfect," declared Flash, pointing with the joint. "All except I can't make out the goat."

"You never did tell us about your worst fear," Frankie said to Flash, positioning herself back into the recliner.

"I once saw a woman," said Flash. He got up, the joint between his fingers. He carried it across to Bear.

"She was beautiful, could have been a model or god knows what—only the left side of her lip curled up from off her chin, into her cheek, just enough to make her look like she was snarling at you the whole time."

Frankie waved her hand when Bear rose from the chair and moved toward her with the joint. "No more," she said.

Bear handed the joint back to Flash, then moved to the spruce and dropped to his knees. Frankie pulled a blanket and pillow out of the closet for Flash. She watched Bear as he lifted the lowest limbs of the tree up, placed his finger beneath the water jug fastened with tape around the trunk of the tree. They had made the watering jug together, fitted it with a hose,

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modeled it after a feeder he had used as a child to water his gerbil.

"It's stopped taking up the water," he said, looking out from under the tree.

As Frankie stretched the blanket over Flash, she noticed the flashing lights spilling down upon the floor like a waterfall. Flash nudged his head into the pillow, pulled the blanket to his chin and disappeared beneath the creases.

When Bear struggled up from the floor, she moved quickly from the couch to the outlet behind the tree. She remembered how neither she nor Bear had particularly liked the tree when they came upon it, but the long struggle up the slope had tired them both. It did look a little better after they had hung the ornaments and added the lights. She leaned over to the outlet, slipped her fingers around the plug. She pulled it out.

For quite some time she could still see the afterglow.

Frankie stared at the ceiling as Bear struggled with the silk boxers she had bought him. She had thought they would look so good on him, feel so nice against her at night. She remembered the way they had felt in the store when she slipped her fingers across the pair on the plaster mannequin—the kind cut off just above the waist and again at the knees.

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Bear lifted the blanket and climbed into the bed beside her. With one quick jerk he tossed out the boxers. He rolled over to her, drew his fingers through her hair. He pinched the skin on the bottom of her ear lobe gently between his teeth, just the way she had told him she loved it.

"Did you say something to him?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Who?" He drew back, the wetness on her exposed to the air.

"Flash," Frankie said, pushing him even farther away. "We need two, remember? A maid of honor and a best man."

"I'll ask him tomorrow," whispered Bear, moving into her again, his breath warm on her neck.

She rolled over onto her side.

"Not tonight," she said.

"Why not?" He moved closer again under the blanket. "The doctor said we could."

She remembered how they had taken turns twisting the spruce, trying to break it free from the stump. She sawed as he twisted, he twisted as she sawed, each voicing directions which the other could not hear above their own breathing.

"Say," he said, giggling now.

He rolled her over on her stomach, slipping down the blanket and

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exposing her to cold air. She could feel his finger making its way inside her.

"It's not funny, you know," she said.

She could feel it moving more deeply. She closed her eyes, squeezed them so tight she saw light flashes moving across the dark.

She tried to think of the little fluorescent stars, the moons, the planets upon the ceiling. She tried to form the tiny stars and moons in her mind, the way they looked above her in the dark that first night with him. Only now she saw them too clearly, much more defined now, the way they looked as if they had all been pressed out by cookie cutters: five sharp points jutting out from the center of every star, the jagged edges bitten off the moons.

## Losing Neil Armstrong

When he pulled into his brother's driveway that Thanksgiving, Jo-Jo had long since lost faith in the moon landing. As the wipers slowed, he for the first time began to take a long look at the plastic cover draped over Ray-Boy's Vega as well, reconsidered the cellophane wrapped tightly about the wooden sheep in the front yard. The sheep and the plastic had been right in front of him his whole life, but he was just now seeing how very sad it was, how truly sick his brother had become.

He looked to the back seat where his children were strapped in. Little Jo was slapping Jubilee and Jubilee had Little Jo by the nose. Jo-Jo turned around and warned the two to settle. When he tried again, this time raising his voice and shaking a finger, the children for a moment fell silent. He shut off the engine. He massaged the temples of his forehead. When his eyes re-opened and fastened upon the sheep, Jo-Jo wondered whether it was

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possible to shield the children from the plastic wrap of the world. He worried that he could not spare them the truth about the moon.

Jo-Jo had suspected the moon landing a long time before, but really began to piece it all together on the way back from a trip he and his ex-wife had taken to the canyon. It had all come together when they happened upon an accident, all the pieces with their curling sinister edges snapping in place as his wife screamed for him to stop, the smoldering remains of a car panning frame by frame across the windshield in front of them. Jo-Jo came to realize the landing on the moon had been staged. They must have made it all up, filmed Neil Armstrong jumping in the desert somewhere, set him up against a painted backdrop of stars.

Much later, he pulled to the shoulder of the road in a cold sweat. Jo-Jo moved to the passenger side and sat silent as his wife took a long turn behind the wheel. When he finally relieved her in Missouri, he found himself in the moon suit, his feet weightless, clumsy against the pedals, the thick gloves closing awkwardly around the wheel. But through his visor, he watched the low buildings in horror, the fenced fields and the cows lowing as they rushed away in front of him. It was so much different than how he imagined it as a boy. Not even the suit could save him this time and Jo-Jo started to question everything else he had been led to believe. He

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worried about his wife asleep beside him, at how quick she had been to kiss him after she had vowed "I do."

Wiping the fog from the windshield, he watched Ray-Boy slowly wearing down the paint on the Vega with a damp rag, his brother in a raincoat methodically lifting up the edges of the plastic and sponging the tires in the rain. In the rearview Jubilee and Little Jo were already screeching and swatting at each other again. The children had argued the whole way from their mother's. The two had begun as soon as they were strapped in the back seat, their reflections pale against the windows, the door closing upon their mother's shrill tones. Jo-Jo thought of how, as children, he and Ray-Boy always seemed to be in some kind of scrap or another too.

In the back seat, the children grew louder. Jo-Jo wondered how much longer he could handle their whines and cries. He adjusted the rearview. The reflection of Jubilee reminded him of his wife. He remembered how she had laughed at him when he told her about the moon men. Jo-Jo thought how much Jubilee was turning out just like her. He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. He did not want to face Ray-Boy and Marva, certainly not today. He did not want to get into it over the rings again. He wanted to shut it all out, to escape like a boy back

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into the thick folds of the suit.

It was Little Jo who kicked with his tiny sneakers against the back of his seat and knocked him out of it.

"Why aren't we moving?" the boy asked, his chest pushed out against the seat belt. He was squirming against the straps, searching fruitlessly the rear view mirror for a glimpse of his father's eye.

"Cause we're there, stupid," answered Jubilee, not waiting for the answer.

It had reminded Jo-Jo of the time he had the two out on the beach erecting a launch pad from sea-pails and a milk carton. They had finished the base and started positioning the tower, when out of nowhere, it seemed, Little Jo had risen from the sand with a plastic shovel scoop. The boy's outline appeared so tall against the rushing sea, the sand dropping in clumps to his feet. He stood and asked Jo-Jo why.

"Why?" Little Jo had asked, the shovel pointing to the clouds scuffling across the sky.

"What's the point," asked Little Jo, "when the water's just coming to wash it all away anyhow?"

Jo-Jo had told the boy not to be silly, but it had bothered him the way Little Jo had sounded too much like himself.



*“Losing Neil Armstrong”*

\* \* \*

When the rain slowed, Jo-Jo hurried the children out of the car and into the drizzle. He stopped to help Ray-Boy secure the cover back around the Vega, told the children to go on ahead. As they rounded the empty carport, Jubilee leaped high into the air, her little pleated skirt rising to life. Jo-Jo watched her white stockings arcing higher, falling just as quickly, driven it seemed toward a puddle. He thought of the parachutes opening as the landing pod fell toward the ocean, how it had looked so real on the small screen.

He had watched the moon landing itself with his mother and Ray-Boy just after they had moved in with his grandmother. He and Ray-Boy had been calm at first, not really understanding. But there was something about the way Armstrong seemed to move in slow motion, stepping from the ladder out into the dark, bouncing across the moon. It made Jo-Jo feel that everything was going to be all right, the earth a giant orb looming in the background over his padded shoulder and the plastic helmet encircling his head like a halo.

With the plastic secured once again about the Vega, Ray-Boy and Jo-Jo followed the children in— Ray-Boy stopping to allow Jo-Jo to enter, and Jo-Jo shaking his head no— insisting Ray-Boy be the first. Inside, Ray-

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Boy's wife, Marva, pestered him about the napkin rings until Jo-Jo's hands disappeared into the depths of his coat pockets, his fingers tumbling awkwardly for the silver rings. He had taken the rings away from his mother's house after she passed on. They had been handed down from generation to generation and were the only things he had wanted. Jo-Jo pulled them out of his pockets, placed them one by one in a line wandering across the kitchen table.

Jo-Jo stared at them until at last they were but silver blurs. He thought of the Thanksgivings growing up, especially of the oyster stuffing, how it was so different from the potatoes they had grown accustomed to after their father left. Jo-Jo and Ray-Boy had fought over almost anything after he was gone. There was something powerful and soothing about the feel of his fists sliding against Ray-Boy's crooked nose, slamming into his brother's soft belly. He had really wanted to hit Ray-Boy one particular Thanksgiving. The rings in front of him again, he remembered having seconds, then thirds that day, not noticing his grandmother's brow wrinkling deeper, not paying heed to his mother telling him to slow.

When he asked for another serving, his grandmother had gone frantic. She filled a giant bowl with whipped potatoes, carrots, corn, cranberries, and stuffing. She placed it before him and forced him to eat

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with a tablespoon until he couldn't anymore. Spoonful after spoonful, she ambled around raving, ranting the whole time about the extra burden of raising little hogs not her own. His mother begged his grandmother to stop, but to no avail. Defeated, she soon slunk down beneath the sink, his mother sobbing under clenched hands, her fingers clenched about two rings. Jo-Jo remembered Ray-Boy's jeers, his shoulders hunching up and down as his grandmother made him chew and swallow. He had stared into the silver blurs on the table for a time afterwards, tried to make the edges softer against the tablecloth.

The rings seemed the outline of craters across a vast pale landscape as Marva rolled the cloth napkins. She picked the rings up one by one and twisted the napkins through. The white tips grew so distant from where the ring had settled that it sometimes became hard for Jo-Jo to tell exactly how the ring had found its place upon the thick seemingly endless shaft of material. Every time she or Ray-Boy spoke, Jo-Jo felt something rising within him, found himself wanting the dinner over, Marva clearing the table and Ray-Boy bringing up the rings. He could hardly stand the wait.

But after she had set the table, Marva at last announced it would still unfortunately be at least half-an-hour until it was time to eat. Ray-Boy, sitting beside Jo-Jo the whole time, rose from his chair, pitched his fingers

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into a tent against the kitchen window.

“A grown man acting that way!” he said, tapping a finger against the glass. “He always was one for talking stupid, but now he’s gone and done it.”

Jo-Jo stood behind his brother now, staring out. Across the yard, over the fogged cellophane wrapped about the sheep, and past the plastic fence posts at the edge of Ray-Boy’s yard, a small figure led a tall quarterhorse through a pasture, the steam rising from the horse’s darkened flanks.

“Old Earl’s lost it for good,” continued Ray-Boy. “Just look at the simple bastard taking that horse around out there without so much as a blanket!”

“Poor Dora!” echoed Marva.

She lined up behind the two brothers, her hand pushing down gently upon Jo-Jo’s shoulder.

“Shoo,” she said to them both finally. She winked at Jo-Jo. She whacked Ray-Boy playfully upon the buttocks. “Why not take the kids over to see the poor ole’ thing, lure Earl into the barn and save her from catching her death.”

\* \* \*

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The children did not care much to go out, not just to see some broken down old quarterhorse. They did, however, like the idea of slipping their toes into the brightly colored galoshes and jumping in the puddles, so out they went.

In a yellow cap and coat, Little Jo looked very much like a duck. Jubilee, in her red slicker, immediately ran and jumped into a muddy puddle. Jo-Jo grabbed the girl by the arm and scolded her. Jubilee squirmed about the whole time, finally breaking free by kicking him in the shin. As he watched her run away from him, Jo-Jo thought of his own father, of going that one time to watch a baseball game. At the stadium that day, it seemed the rain would never let up. It had formed into puddles upon the seats and he remembered the hideous umbrella his father, his brother, and he had all sat under.

Underneath a stiff red, white, and blue umbrella, Jo-Jo made his way behind the children. He avoided the puddles until he inadvertently stepped in one while screaming and stamping at the children to stop and look before crossing the road. The two sulked away with their heads hung down after that. It felt as though he betrayed them somehow, and as they neared the electric fence with its snapping and snarling in the rain, Jo-Jo remembered the fight his father got into. There had been a rude man a

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row beneath them, the man standing upon the rail so that Jo-Jo and Ray-Boy could not see. His father pushed the man when he would not sit down and one thing led to the next.

Jo-Jo could still draw a picture of the security officer, the lines of the harsh chin, the badge and the thick arms around his father, forcing them to go. His father had put up a struggle, but the officer was bigger and the fight a brief one. Jo-Jo had closed the new glove his father bought him tightly over his face as they were led out of the stadium. It was all damp and he could no longer smell the fresh leather.

In the distance, Earl led Dora across the little stream and up the trail which meandered back to the barn. Earl must have been waiting, Jo-Jo figured, because he had started towards the barn almost as soon as the three emerged from the trailer. Earl could hardly have missed them, Little Jo chasing Jubilee and then Jubilee sprinting, cutting across the green and chasing Little Jo toward the barn, Jo-Jo limping behind them under the umbrella and in Marva's purple poncho.

The doors to the barn were open and the children made their way right in. There was only one stall in the barn. The three walked over to it, the children leaning and swinging against the metal gate and Jo-Jo watching out the door. As they waited, it was Jubilee who asked the question this

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time. She asked the one Jo-Jo had been dreading— whether he was ever coming back to live with them again. He had seen it coming, had tried to figure out an answer, had thought a long while on what he might say.

Instead of answering, however, Jo-Jo pointed to Dora, shouted out a hearty hello to Earl as he tugged on the lead rope, coaxed the horse into the barn and closed the pasture gate behind him. Dora whinnied and Earl came to where Jo-Jo had pushed the two children up against the bars.

“Well now,” said Earl, handing each of the children a carrot from his pocket. “And how are my little partners today?”

“We’re not your partners,” declared Jubilee, climbing upon the gate. She poked the carrot into Dora’s nose, then yanked it away.

Jo-Jo hoisted Little Jo up above the rails. The boy began swinging his carrot across the horse’s twitching ears, swinging away until Dora’s head raised with a snap, the teeth flaring out it seemed, extending past the velvety nuzzle. Once the boy held it still, Dora’s teeth found their way upon the carrot, pulling it gently. But Little Jo yanked his fingers away quickly, crying and screaming at the top of his lungs about how she had bitten him.

Jubilee squealed in delight. Little Jo put his fingers in his mouth. Seeing there were no more carrots, Dora backed away from the children to

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the opposite corner of the stall.

"They sure do grow up in a hurry," said Earl, eyeing Jo-Jo.

After putting down some fresh hay, Earl got out the brushes. Dora's tail twitched, fanning gently with the swift swipes of the brush as Earl worked them against her flanks.

It reminded Jo-Jo of the mules they had ridden into the canyon. He had still believed his wife could give him back the moon as they made their way down the narrow trail. She was directly in front of him, bouncing up, the mule's tail shooing away flies as it carried her. As they went down, he looked to the other side, then to where the canyon just kept dropping. It seemed a thousand moons could fall to where neither he nor his wife could see the Colorado twisting, or even hear its roar. The way she led her mule so recklessly down the trail had scared him, the hooves sometimes sliding, kicking gravel and tiny stones over the edge.

"It's nothing," he said to Little Jo, examining the reddened finger.

"A mere love-bite," added Earl, looking up from the brushing.

Jubilee was nothing but smiles, giggling and openly taunting her brother the whole time.

As he held Little Jo from Jubilee, Jo-Jo remembered stopping to look across the Meteor Crater on their way back across Arizona. The crater



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looked so small, so unreal compared to the wide stretching mouth of the canyon. The Apollo astronauts had trained there and Jo-Jo stood with his wife before their photographs on the wall of the crater museum. The pictures showed the astronauts jumping about in their suits, grinning within the round plastic helmets, bouncing across the crater, making footprints with their rubber boots. That was before Jubilee and Little Jo, but already during the trip, Jo-Jo began to see the difference in his wife. She had made him mad taking chances like that on the trail. He had wanted to scream at her.

He grabbed the children by the hands, one on either side of him, and dragged them from the barn. It made him angry the way they tugged and pulled against him. It reminded him of how he had gazed hand in hand beside his wife in front of Neil Armstrong's yellowed, already shrinking and stiffening moon suit. She hadn't even wanted to stop. As they stood staring at where Neil Armstrong once stood, at the very suit which walked upon the face of the moon, Jo-Jo imagined the two of them moving into middle age. He saw his wife greying and his own hair slowly disappearing, the line of it moving farther back on his head. He could see her thighs and arms widening comfortably in his mind, she appearing more and more like his mother, changing as his grandmother had. He could already hear the

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shouting, the sobbing, the cold silence to follow.

Jo-Jo hurried the children back across the road. He pulled them forward through the grass and puddles. On the way he tried not think about his wife or to get short with Jubilee when she broke free and ran around him to kick and splash Little Jo. He tried to forget that bastard Armstrong and not to shout too loudly when Little Jo slapped Jubilee and left a welt across her face.

\* \* \*

They stood around the table hand in hand, their heads lowered. Jubilee leaned forward and scrunched her nose at Little Jo, Little Jo curled his tongue and stuck it out at Jubilee. Jo-Jo stood between the two, watching from out the corners of his eyes, holding their entire hands between his thumb and forefingers. He held them gently until Ray-Boy, in his blessing, brought up the past as he did every year.

“Lord knows,” Ray-Boy said, his eyes clenched shut, his head nodding back and forth, “there’s been better than those gathered around this table. Lord knows those gathered here today ain’t near so good.”

Even though the same thing had been said nearly every single year after the death of their mother, this time it was somehow as if Jo-Jo was hearing Ray-Boy’s words for the first time. The more he thought on it, the

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more his eyelids pushed against one another and his fore-fingers drew nearer to his thumb. Before he knew it, an almost inaudible whine started on either side of him and grew louder until there were cries and wailing and he in the middle of it all.

"Dad!" shrieked Jubilee and "Daddy!" sobbed Little Jo and almost before Jo-Jo had loosened his grip, Marva had taken the boy away and Ray-Boy the girl. They rushed the children to the sink faucet, were already splashing their little hands beneath the tumbling water.

Jo-Jo closed his eyes, clenched them tightly shut. He placed his own hands before him, cupped the palms over his eyes. His fingers burrowed into the tight skin stretched across his forehead. Frame by frame he could see Neil Armstrong jumping, the frail white lines and dots from the film flickering across the screen. He saw plainly the props behind Armstrong, the men moving the scenery, the director sitting back and watching it all. The director's face was sullen, the mouth widening and the teeth as he shouted out orders. Jo-Jo thought about the cold inhuman look in the director's eyes even when everything calmed down and they all found their places again around the table.

After the sliced turkey, the mashed potatoes and yams, Jo-Jo and Ray-Boy remained at the table watching the tiny flashes of rain erupt and

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disappear outside the kitchen windows. Little Jo chased Jubilee, then Jubilee chasing Little Jo around them. Jo-Jo looked right through the children and out to the world beyond the window. He wondered whether there really could never be rain upon the moon.

Ray-Boy talked, but Jo-Jo could no longer focus upon anything, nothing at all until Marva placed the silver napkin rings before him on the table. Jo-Jo's eyes fastened on the silver rings. He remembered how his mother had clutched them so tightly. He began to see his own childhood more clearly. His mother was up on a chair, getting them out from his grandmother's cabinet, the rings shining, reflecting the light and then her whole body suddenly quivering, the bright yellow of her dress pressed now against the sink, his mother dropping to the floor and her fingers clenched tightly about the rings, her fingers tumbling the rings as his grandmother had forced him to eat and eat.

Jo-Jo remembered his grandmother as Marva cleared the table. He had never been able to forgive her until it was too late. She was always asking if he wanted more after that, always pushing creamed corn, string beans and lima beans, pork-chops and sauerkraut, rhubarb pie and apple-butter toward him from across the table. He could see her offering him the chicken from her tray even at the hospital, the tubes running from her nose

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and down her arms. He refused her even then.

When Marva moved to the sink, started to scrape the spoons, the forks and plates, Jo-Jo wondered whether Little Jo and Jubilee would grow up hating him as he had his grandmother, the way he had his own father for leaving. Maybe they did already.

He heard Ray-Boy clear his throat the way he did every year just before he brought up the rings.

“You know she had promised Marva those napkin rings not two weeks before, almost like she could see it coming,” stated Ray-Boy, his voice rising.

Like she did every year, Marva moved quietly beside her husband. She calmly placed her hand on his shoulder, telling him no, not to get into it on Thanksgiving, and after such a nice dinner— certainly not in front of the children. “No,” continued Ray-Boy, pushing her away.

Ray-Boy’s fists came down hard against the table, rattling the rings from the towel they rested on. The rings jumped— spinning about, rocking against the table.

“They were meant as a set. The two together, the table and the rings!”

Jo-Jo felt that same bumpy and weightless feeling he had as a child.

### *“Losing Neil Armstrong”*

He wanted to hit, to feel the roughness of his fists against something. Before he could catch himself, the table was turned on its side and the rings were spinning across the kitchen floor. The two brothers were tumbling over one another, each struggling for position, exchanging blows.

When Jo-Jo gained the top and started landing a few, some connecting to Ray-Boy’s jaw, some sliding across his ear, he began to see flashes of Neil Armstrong stepping from the ladder again, bouncing slowly across the moon. He could see the stiff flag propped up against the stars. Their mother was screaming for them to stop, her flat white sneakers jumping, hopping about them as they turned over upon one another. He could feel his grandmother’s hands at his arms, sometimes slowing his fists as he swung.

His left hand was bloodied, clenched tightly about Ray-Boy’s neck. The right one poised to strike, Jo-Jo noticed the shadow stretching across Ray-Boy’s features. As if for the first time he recognized something of his mother, of his grandmother in the lines of Ray-Boy’s face, the curve of the nose and bloodied lip. He froze for a second and from the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of something else.

When he turned fully to look, he saw Little Jo and Jubilee, each with one eye clenched shut, the other eye wide open, peering out from behind

*"Losing Neil Armstrong"*

napkin rings and the overturned table. The children's eyes appeared larger somehow behind the rings, the silver circles held up like some kind of old fashioned looking-glass.

## **Bobbing for Apples in the Amish Land**

It was nearly noon, the time the men and Sou would come in for lunch, when Mai Ly returned to the office with the tea. She paused for a moment at the window to set the cup and saucer down and stretch the fingers still sore from the knitting. Outside, the snow swirled and then slanted at harsh angles, driven toward the parking lot and scurrying across route 30, the Old Phila. Pike. She thought of how a few days earlier the curling leaves had covered everything, blanketing even the Amishmen's fields with their bumping rows and the short cornstalk stubs. She smiled out in admiration of the snow and how American it seemed.

Mai Ly followed the slender movements of her daughter Sou as she shoveled the parking lot. The snow slid from the shovel, thrown to the side time and again, until Sou stopped to watch a horse-and-buggy making its way up 30. The changes in Sou's figure were apparent even under her bulky parka and reminded Mai Ly of how Sou was almost a woman now.



### *"Bobbing for Apples in the Amish Land"*

It hardly seemed that long ago that Sou was not yet born and Mai Ly in Vietnam. She had believed that it had all come to an end, her life cast away for a moment of senseless passion. But here she was in America and although she hated the junk business, she was with her daughter and a man she could stand. After all, she kept telling herself, they were not starving. It could be much worse.

Beyond Sou, Mai Ly noticed the steam rising from the horse and from its nostrils, the nostrils flaring as the horse snorted, its eyes behind blinders, the head tossing and the mane. Inside the buggy sat an Amishman. He wore the traditional beard and his wife a bonnet as she shivered beside him. The children were crouched behind. They took turns looking out the tiny rectangular window which graced the back of the buggy, positioned above the modern florescent orange triangle required by law. The children waved at the traffic behind the buggy, at the line of cars with their dull winking headlights and the steam rising from the cars' exhausts. The line stretched down the hill, some of the cars fish-tailing on the ice as they crept up the slope behind.

What a horribly silent life it must be pulling a gigantic wooden box about through the biting cold, Mai Ly thought as the buggy finally topped the hill. She lifted the tea back up from the window and moved past the

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desk. She thought of how with the cool weather having already arrived, she might have to ruin the surprise and give the hat and scarf to Sou early. She placed the tea with its saucer down gently upon the counter, lifted the tea bag out and wrung it against a spoon. She took her station on the swiveling stool behind the counter, across from where the greasy men would come and stand waiting.

The bust of Washington stared at her from under his wig, from the top of the invoices, tight-lipped and toothless atop the letters which spelled out MOUNT VERNON AUTO PARTS. Mai Ly sometimes wondered whether selling was all America was ever about. She hoped not. She worried that in all this time she had never really come to understand. At any rate, it was not too late for Sou, and since there would be no customers on such a day, it would be a perfect chance for them to be more American. Today would be a fine day for them to bob for the apples.

Her mind settled on the matter, Mai Ly looked up to the place where the old wooden pail hung from the wall on iron spikes above the horn and wiper motor bins. She would ask either the old German or Sou to retrieve it with a ladder, carry it down balanced on the shoulders. She could already see the pail lifting up and shifting down with every step, the water splashing, surging up and over the sides, and the yellow, red and green

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apples turning about.

As Mai Ly moved over to the big doors, she pulled her sweater tightly to her and braced herself for the gust. She wondered whether Johnny Appleseed looked at all like Washington.

"Sou!" she cried out, her voice almost lost in the wind.

Mai Ly called a little more forcefully. "Cai-Sou!"

The figure of Sou stood up from shoveling and Mai Ly swung the door shut. She lifted the cup from the saucer, her upper and lower lips curling out, puckering almost and then the three quick blows. She followed the girl's jerky movements as she made her way closer, stiff under the shroud of the old parka. She worried how the girl seemed always to be cold.

"Yes, mother?" asked Sou, stamping the snow from her boots.

Mai Ly brought the cup up to her lips once more, blew ripples across the surface of the tea and drew in a sip. Her lips tightened crookedly and she shook her head. She pointed to where the pail hung high upon the wall.

"God, mother," returned Sou, her eyebrows rising. "Not this again! I hope you don't expect me to climb up there to get it!"

"Then fetch the German," Mai Ly returned with a grimace, placing

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the tea cup down upon its saucer once more.

Sou let out a deep sigh.

“As if I don’t have anything more important to do!” she said, the door slamming behind her.

\* \* \*

Chuck and the old German were out in the barn inventorying. Sou made her way through a crudely shoveled path that ran beneath the icicled roof of the main building. She looked out across the rows of cars in the yard. The rows extended as far as she could see in the gray haze, their forms exaggerated, almost soft under a blanket of snow. If only she could cover her mother over with snow, she thought. She couldn’t believe she was at it again, she and her stupid apples, her damned American pie.

Sou drew her arms together, crossing them into her parka as she shuffled quickly toward the barn. As she made her way, she thought of how she hated the German so much more than even her own mother. He had this way of calling her “girl.” It always got her going so, but worse was when he would grab the cats, pull the loose skin at the back of their heads taut, and say, “Look who it is. Why is it little-little Sou-ee or maybe it is her mommy?” Was that the America that her mother wanted for her?

Closer to the barn she could hear the two men laughing. It reminded

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her of the endless tortures the German had subjected her to: the greasy hand prints on the back of her parka, the way he smacked her as she walked past him, the way he was always sneaking up on her and startling her, making her jump and shake. Her nose wrinkled when she thought of how he would always try to frighten her when she was up on the ladder after a part. She figured the old bastard must get some kind of sick thrill out of shaking the ladder and making her think she was going to fall. He would do it at the worst times too, always at the precise moment she would be at her weakest, the moment she would reach away from the ladder to bring down a dashboard, to hang a fender, or something else just as heavy. On top of everything else, he would always have this smirk on his face, like he was looking up between her legs the whole time.

“Dirty old German!” she thought.

She hurried her pace when the wind picked up. It drowned out the sound of the men but felt like a thousand pricking needles rushing against her. She lowered her head and shuffled through the path and the snow spilling near the doors of the barn. She thought today just might be the day she could get the German back if she could get him up the ladder after the pail. Perhaps she would shake with such fury as he neared the top that the old bastard would lose his grip and come tumbling down. Sou giggled

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when she pictured the look on his face, his moustache stretching down atop the oval of his gaping mouth and the eyes bulging from their sockets, the sound of him striking the floor. Today just might be the day, she thought.

Once she had the door closed, it was dark inside the barn. Sou allowed a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. There was no electricity and no heat either, but it was better than outside. When she could finally see again, Sou made out the low flickering glow from the lanterns and started back to where the silhouettes of the men stretched up, the figures thin and awkwardly slanting toward the roof. She found the two in the far corner working their way through the carburetors and the row of transaxles.

“You,” she said, pointing to the German when she reached them. “She wants you to bring the ladder and climb up and carry down that old pail.”

“I’m too damn old for ladders,” the German returned, turning about fully now to face her.

“What does she want with the pail?” Chuck asked, looking up from his clipboard towards Sou.

“She wants to finish me. It’s as plain as those slits for eyes on the girl,” the old German said, pulling the skin about his own eyes taut.

“Go on, old man,” said Chuck, lowering his board, reaching over to

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where the thermos of coffee rested at an angle atop the clutter of intake manifolds.

“She’s just bucking for a reason and you best hadn’t give her one.”

“You know how she gets,” he said under his breath.

The old German hoisted his lantern sharply from the packed dirt of the floor and followed Sou to retrieve the ladder.

When the barn door was cracked open again, the light swept into the dark, almost blinding the two. The old German stopped for a moment. He turned down the lantern and waited for the sound of it going out before hoisting up his end of the ladder again.

“Hold on there, girl,” he called to Sou.

She was out along the wall of the building already, feeling the full brunt of the wind. About time, she thought, when he finally picked up his end.

Sou felt him behind her, pressuring her through the ladder, pushing her forward. Her heart raced as she made her way quickly along the stones and through the drifts. The old man behind her seemed to be dragging now, and she became irritated thinking about him purposely out of step with her at the other end of the ladder. But a smile crept across her

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features when she thought of him going up the ladder, climbing higher step by step as she held it steady beneath him.

She pictured the tread of his boots worn smooth above her and the German stretched out, extending himself from the ladder, reaching out for the pail. Just as his fingers were about to touch it, she would shake with all her might. It was all she could do to stop from giggling when she thought of his boots slipping from the rungs and his old arms swinging on the way to the hard cold floor.

When they made it back to the main building, Sou purposely slowed just inside the door to give the German his fair share of the biting wind. She squinted harshly at her mother sitting so cozy upon her stool.

“You can’t expect an old man to climb up there and haul that heavy pail down,” stated the German coldly to Mai Ly once he was finally inside.

He put down his end of the ladder. He stomped the snow from his boots. He stepped back to close the door behind him.

“It makes no difference to me,” Mai Ly returned, her eyes rising from the apple tree she had sketched next to Washington. “But someone must go, either you or the girl.”

“Then let it be the girl,” the German said. “She is younger and could stand the fall.”



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Sou stood silent, looking at the pail and where it hung on the wall. Just like her mother to let the old bastard have his way, she thought as the German worked the ladder past her and propped it against the wall. He rocked the ladder until it seemed steady and then turned to face Sou.

"America," she said to her mother as she made her way forward. "Home of the free."

Sou tried not to think of the German looking up after her as she climbed. She tried to think of anything else, of the last time when she made her mother so upset by simply grabbing the apple out of the pail with her fingers and taking a bite. She felt her teeth penetrating the skin of the apple and the apple juicy, the apple pulpy, dissolving in her mouth and her mother so deliciously maddened.

Her hands firmly working their way up the rails, she placed her feet carefully one after another upon the rungs. The wooden pail grew larger and the ladder shook with every step. The German stood fully beneath her, positioned directly below her now, leaning into the rails and holding them steady. Sou stopped and looked down to him.

"Keep going!" he called up to her.

His face lifted toward her with a wink and then he smiled at her. His twisted way of smiling, she thought. She tried to put him out of her mind

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once more. She could picture the apples rising and falling in the water, the water swashing from side to side. Then she imagined her head slipping beneath the water.

She felt the sting as the water made its way up her nose. She clenched her eyes tighter as she tried to work her teeth around the apple. And then her head went fully under. The dull hum and gurgle of the water pressed into her ears, against her eardrums. She thought she might drown.

"Careful girl," came the words of the German. "Steady up there."

It was then that it came to her and she remembered the stem. She turned the apple beneath the water with quick nibbles and a lash of the tongue. She worked the stem, clamped it between her front teeth. She took another step, pulling the apple up through the water then out into the air. She could almost taste the stem between her teeth, the tug of the apple as it broke free.

She reached the top rung with a grin, stretched her arms up toward the pail. Just like the stem, it was there before her the whole time. All she had to do was let go. How perfectly natural it would seem, her boots slipping from the rung, jerking backwards from the ladder, her arms flailing about recklessly as she fell.

And then the German called to her from below.

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“Girl,” he hollered up, “careful there!”

She had heard the words before, time and time before. Shortly after, the vibrating would come. Then the German’s laughing, the tremor always growing into a shake and she would be left hanging, struggling to find balance. In her mind it seemed so simple, all she had to do to rid herself of him was to fall back into nothing, into the hold of the empty air.

Damn that German, she thought. She wished he’d hurry up and do it.

When the vibration finally came, the German laughing beneath her, she let her feet slip from the ladder. But as she fell her fingers searched frantically for the rails, her feet kicking, her arms thrashing about in desperation. Beneath her, the old German gave way, turning her about, rolling her over on the way down so that her face slammed to the floor.

Mai Ly pushed by the German to her daughter. The girl cupped her bloodied nose and jaw with one hand, rubbed the fingers of her other in a figure eight about the left elbow. The German lifted himself slowly from the floor, trying to shake it off. Sou hated the way he was suddenly hovering above her, blanketing her almost and she swatted his hands away.

“You done it now, old man,” she managed to blurt out, two front teeth missing and a mouthful of warm blood.

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Her voice seemed at any moment at risk of drowning in her awkward gasping and swallowing.

"Dirty old man," she said, pushing her mother away as well.

"Time for you to leave," said Mai Ly, moving quickly between her daughter and the German, staring the old German down flat.

Mai Ly stood, her feet firmly planted, spaced apart, one hand on her hip and working the other like the sight of a rifle into tiny jerking circles, the pointing finger aimed toward the door.

The German slid his boot straight forward and then in a kind of spiral backwards. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then lowered his chin.

After that he left.

\* \* \*

Mai Ly moved from the spot where she stood with finger outstretched towards the dark cold beckoning outside. She tried to get near her daughter, wanted to take her to get some help, but Sou pushed her away.

She searched hopefully for Chuck out the back door. She looked across the lines of cars in the yard, at their softened white outlines. She wasn't quite sure what to do.

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She made her way to the desk. She stopped before the pad with its scribbles atop the desk as if trying to remember something not so distant. Counting two drawers down from the left, Mai Ly pulled the third out and drew from it a small rectangular package wrapped in the Sunday paper.

“I had this for another time,” she said, turning, making her way back toward Sou. “But with the snow and all and the old parka not doing so well. I figure it is time. You should not wait any longer.”

Mai Ly cradled the package and presented it to Sou. Sou took it without a word. Mai Ly watched her as she worked the newspaper carefully from the ends. She made her way carefully through the wrapping with her fingers, until at last, she separated the lid and removed it from the box. Inside, wrapped in tissue paper was the cap and beneath it a scarf, both knitted from the red wool yarn Chuck had bought from an Amishman.

Sou fit the knit cap down snugly upon her head, wiggled it down on either side past her ears. She pulled her old parka tighter to her, zipped it again and then buttoned up the front. Sou drew the parka’s sleeve across her chin. She smiled, a stiff-lipped smile. But she closed her mouth quickly with the coolness of the air and pulled the scarf from the small box with its wrapping of newsprint, the tassels lifting at last from the tissue

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paper.

It was time again to shovel, and Sou went out the front doors. Through the ancient glass of the doors, Mai Ly watched the distorted figure of Sou lift the shovel from its place beside the doors and step back into the snow. Mai Ly returned to the counter, lifted her cup from the saucer, drew in another sip of tea. She worried the cap and scarf might itch, tried not to think of the missing teeth. She followed the movements of her daughter as she made her way out in the snow. She traced the tire tracks of the old German's truck out from the parking lot as far as she could into the plowed lanes of the highway. She felt so helpless, so un-American.

The snow was piling up so much that Mai Ly could hardly make out the highway. She caught a yellow flash glowing for an instant over the hill, illuminating for a moment the outline of the road, and then the yellow disappearing into the other side of the hill. She traced the faint beam emerging again, reaching from under the rushing snow and ever so slowly finding its definition. It swung toward the office, toward the stone outline of the old building and on through the parking lot once more. The yellow light and its revolutions a dull slow throbbing above the truck as the plow thrust the snow up from the iced asphalt, the snow forced into the curve of

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the blade and off like falling water to the side of the road.

A string of paired headlights pursued the truck, emerging dull against the blurring snow. The dump-bed of the truck was tilted at an angle, the rock salt it carried spraying out from behind, tossed from its wake the same way Mai Ly's father and mother would spread about the seed when she was a child. She thought of the war and the way the seed fell as if sliding across a slate of glass, how it slid from her own hands before she had escaped to the city. She remembered the first time she had seen Chuck in his dress uniform with the gold stripes, a cap tilted on his head. America, she thought, as the truck disappeared again down the hill, as the swinging yellow peeked up and out one last time.

Mai Ly tried to make sense of it all, of the figure of her daughter shoveling and the cars creeping past outside, the cars crawling it seemed, their wheels spinning and they twisting much like turtles turned on their shells. She wondered what Washington would do, what Johnny Appleseed would. She could not help but be disappointed about the apples. She supposed she and Chuck would have to eat them unceremoniously now.

## **The Taste of Well-Cooked Pork**

Ms. Stringer sat across from the chair which squeaked and stared at the coiled phone cord hanging over the edge of the kitchen table. She tossed back a shot of tequila and waited.

When she could no longer stand the cicadas' echoing moans, she opened and started chewing the last stick of gum. She furrowed her brow, tried to make the phone ring through sheer concentration. When she could no longer focus, she glanced quickly from the corner of her eye at the window. She turned around fully, quickly in the chair so as to startle the figure in the window, to catch it move.

She stared at her cat Harley through the table top's wrinkled glass. She slowly ran a fingernail beneath the lid of the last box of treats, felt the glue giving way. A distorted Harley rose from the rug beneath the table, leaning, rubbing against the hollow table leg. His padded feet made invisible ripples upon the floor, the tiny circles subsiding as he settled back



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down and curled into a ball. Pulling a biscuit from the box, Ms. Stringer held it before her in the air until Harley sat at attention, the tail curling in the air and behind the tail a dark silhouette.

When she moved to the bathroom, she kicked Harley out from in front of her. Leaning above the sink on her tip-toes, Ms. Stringer frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She worried about the time her cheeks would start to sag and droop on either side of a double chin making her look like a bulldog. She clamped her fingernails firmly upon a dark hair which jutted out stubbornly from her chin. Closing her eyes, she yanked.

Now a thought, a sudden need came upon Ms. Stringer as she followed the blur of her own nails clattering against themselves upon the glass. Balancing herself against the porcelain sink, she reached down and unlaced her tennis shoes.

“You’re the lucky one— You know that?” stated Ms. Stringer to Harley, who paid no mind to her.

Using the tip of her left shoe as a weighty shoehorn, Ms. Stringer eased the right shoe down from over her heel, felt the arch lift, her toes working free from the deep belly of the shoe.

“Well,” said Ms. Stringer, winking at Harley now, the left shoe giving way.

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Then the ankle socks were worked down and peeled away, the pressure of the cotton loops still indented upon the skin underneath, the reddened swirls exposed to a steady gust of air pushed by a fan across the hallway floor.

As she fumbled with her keys and gathered up her purse, Ms. Stringer thought of Mr. Appletree. She frowned when she thought of how he made such a fuss over so many stupid little things, like the bouncy way she had of walking, the fact she that she liked processed cheese, and how he went crazy every time she lifted a ketchup bottle, or poured anything at all over her food. Better off without him, she told herself again.

She pushed Harley back from the open door with the base of her foot and locked the door behind her, pushing in on it three times to make sure. The damp wood of the porch felt cool to the nakedness of her toes and the dewy blades of grass tickled her in the same way she had almost let herself go when he had held her the way he had with his strong fingers.

The bastard, Ms. Stringer thought, feeling at once the sharp edges of the stone driveway beneath her, the words almost forming upon her lips as quickly as the pain shot up her calf, all the way up her thigh to some point in the very center of her. Her arches leapt into the air, jerking up and then higher until all her weight fell back upon the pads of her toes.

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In the car, her toes finally found the comfort they deserved against the soft floor mat waiting for them under the pedals and beneath the dash. But the ribbed pedals felt cold and foreign, her bareness awkward against the accelerator until at last her toes found their way over the edges. She smiled as she thought of making her way into the market without any shoes, her toes naked and rebellious against the harsh cold floor. Just like Jesse James, she figured.

Just like Jesse James, she had told Mr. Appletree so blatantly, though he must not have heard her or maybe decided to ignore her, choosing instead some perverse fantasy of his own. God knows if it even included her. She had just wanted to have some fun and he had left her feeling so dirty.

The bow-tied bastard, she thought, this time aloud.

On their second meeting Ms. Stringer had let him call her Samantha and told him of the neighbor boy who had been her first. She was twelve years old at the time, called Sam then, she added, and her father somehow found out and always held it against her.

Ms. Stringer worried that her frankness had startled Mr. Appletree in much the same way her announced period and her fear of bleeding on

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his white rug had the night before. He had told her the most wonderful story, though, about his own childhood and the way he and his sister used to collect empty soda bottles, and hold concerts with them in the alley behind their house. She noticed the way his lips quivered when he breathed in before telling her how innocent they were then.

Mr. Appletree then told Ms. Stringer of the late night visits of his step-father to his sister's room, the sounds creeping through the wall to reach him as he lay in his own bed and how he, being a child then, had felt jealous, less than loved. He described the shadow which came into his bedroom at night for quite some time after that. It loomed about the door frame, staring without any eyes, only dark recesses where the eyes should have been, the rest like hardened rubber.

When Mr. Appletree confessed that he had never told a soul outside the family until that very moment, Ms. Stringer reached across the table, her fingers kneading into his arm.

“Poor thing!” she voiced softly.

Mr. Appletree adjusted his tie, moving it from one side to the other.

Mr. Appletree told her then that the shadow stopped coming after the night he chased it away with his Louisville Slugger, but how his heart still raced when he thought on it. He admitted that sometimes he could still see

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it inching closer when he closed his eyes only to find it again, frozen in a different position— that even now he was haunted by sights outside his windows at night. It had scared her the way his hands shook.

The headlights of Ms. Stringer’s car swung violently into the parking lot of the twenty-four-hour grocery and plowed right into the tail end of a small red convertible.

The glow from one of the headlights illuminated a tangle of chrome bumper, then a fractured tail light and the convertible’s trunk lid, next to which Ms. Stringer parked after putting her car in reverse and aiming the nose between two of the parallel white lines. She grabbed her purse from the passenger seat, held in her stomach, forced open her door and stretched her bare toes toward the cool dark macadam.

Ms. Stringer stood erect, checking that her blouse was tucked in and her belt in place. She patted her hair down with the tips of her fingers. As she made her way toward the light of the windows, she bent down to brush off her feet, picking off a cat hair and wiping away the driveway gravel.

She snickered at a pair of women. The spandex spinsters, she thought, strapped so tightly into their heels, emerging in their tight little plastic outfits from the giant doors of the store. She admired the faint

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sheen and relaxed movements of her own feet. As the automatic door slid open under the weight of her toes, she complimented herself on the alluring shade of red gracing her toenails.

After easing a fingernail under the bent wire rods and lifting a basket from the stack, Ms. Stringer made her way into the market. She pouted a little that no one, not even the cart boys, seemed to be shocked by her naked arches, her naked toes. As she made her way through the fruit and vegetable aisle, her fingers slid across the wet grapes, her fingernails tracing the contours of the clear plastic, scraping against the lids protecting the strawberries from bruises. The mangoes were open to fondling and she picked several up, rolled them one by one between her palms.

She felt so alive, the floor sometimes cool and smooth, sometimes gritty underneath her as she passed by the orange juice and milk, the low-fat sour cream, the whipping cream, and the pudding. She thought of how each might feel against her, how an egg might oozing down upon her, spread with strong fingers into the very pores of her skin. As she passed by the coffee bean and cereal aisle, her fingers found their way from one shoulder blade to the other, forming an arch across her chest like a looping pearl necklace at first drooping across her, then drawn taut.

She turned right up the aisle with the party mixers, made her way

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past the rubbermaid dish racks, the ice cube trays, the heavy wooden rolling pins, the glass mixing bowls and the iron skillets. She stopped in front of the utensils, searching through the basters, the skewers, the thermostats and the melonballers.

No, she thought, they wouldn't be here.

As she made her way toward the other side of the store, Ms. Stringer couldn't help but notice how dead all the other customers looked in their clodhoppers, cross trainers, wing-tips and heels. Their eyes seemed vacant, moving almost mechanically about them, never looking down in front of them to where their feet were taking them. She smiled, however, whenever she saw or heard footfalls about her come to a halt, imagining them admiring her boldness.

Perhaps it was because she was too busy admiring the way her own feet worked. Perhaps he had simply been hidden by some other customer, down some aisle she had not been interested in. At any rate she had not seen Mr. Appletree standing there until after she had turned from the kitty toys, away from the litter. Even as she panned past him and on toward the sponges and potscrubbers, she still did not really recognize him. But when her eyes moved from the clothespins and focused upon the turns of nylon

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fiber in the bundles of clothesline rope she remembered his shoulders, the bulge above his belt and the way his trousers fell about his buttocks.

It upset her that she hadn't spotted him earlier. But there he was, standing in pennyloafers, standing with his back to her, his hands moving all about the styrofoamed, cellophane wrapped cuts of chicken, his hands all over the pork, all over the beef.

After that Ms. Stringer had turned.

She hurried to gather together the tweezers, cheese, tampons, dog-biscuits, an ice-tray and her pack of sugarless gum. She tried to imagine herself tip-toeing from the hard polished floor out onto the macadam and the free flowing lazy saunter of the air outside, but from the corner of her eye she still saw flashes of him through the aisles.

Ms. Stringer felt the hurt all over again, not quite as sharp now but a dull thumping, pulsing against the top of her chest. She looked down, tried to concentrate upon the movement of her bare toes. How deflated they looked, she thought, how dry and wrinkled as if dissolving, disintegrating into the black and yellow checkered tile.

\* \* \*

Mr. Appletree had not thought of Ms. Stringer for some time, but as he made his way past the refrigerated beer and packaged pasta, through the



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aisle of trash bags, freezer bags and rubber gloves, now as his gaze lifted from the colorful packages of pet food he felt drawn to a woman who looked like her from a distance. He hurried past the tiny light bulbs with their twisting ends, the match sticks, duct tape and masking tape at the end of the next aisle, toward where the woman had come to a halt in the checkout aisle.

There was something about her that he could not turn away from. She stood balanced on one leg like a flamingo, the toes at the end of the other leg seeming to massage a well-defined calf. And as he drew nearer through the toothpaste, deodorant, mouthwash and the cologne, moving past the numbered checkout aisles hung with lighters, lighter fluid and mace, he became more and more drawn by the similarities between the two women until at last a slight tingling spread over him, then a throbbing through him.

Now he stood directly behind her, not quite by accident behind her in the express lane of the market. Too late, Mr. Appletree thought, to back away without attracting her notice. Too close, he figured, to get free without some comment or a telling glance.

He watched impatiently as the woman's items moved almost effortlessly along on the conveyor, jerked one by one across the price

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finder with its fragile red flicker of light. He heard the cashier's slight impatient cough. His head bobbed with the last item as the cashier moved it across the scanner. He followed it until it disappeared into the cashier's fist, his eyes perfectly still until the white, pink, and gold pack of chewing gum materialized again from the cashier's grasp, the fingers opening up slowly before her.

Ms. Stringer reached out for it, took the smallness of it into her hand and looked up for the total. The motions of her head were slight, her eyes cautious. She stood swaying slightly, dug through her light pocketbook, the one with the velcro. She pulled out and sorted through the bills, handing over a five, the ones and then the change: a quarter, a nickel, and four pennies.

Mr. Appletree squinted, trying to make out the shine of her toenails against the tiles. Like little red boxes, he had thought on the third night when he found her toes between his fingers. She had not been ticklish for some time, had told him that as he drew wandering triangles, slowing at the corners, circling one point at the heel, another at the pad beneath the big toe, and still another at the little toe. She had voiced something when he held her feet between his trembling fingers. For a moment he swore she had whispered to him that she loved him.

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Mr. Appletree watched her saunter away with the plastic swinging beneath her small tightly clenched fist. He thought of the day he had gone to see her at the school where she taught the second grade. He had taken off work for the event, for her Field Day and thought he had never seen anything quite so lovely as the image of her leading the children onto the lush blades of the green field. The children followed upon her heels in single file, curling and swishing and snapping across the grass behind her, the last five shaking tambourines and maracas. It made Mr. Appletree think of his own childhood.

In his mind he could see the shadow clearly. He still could feel the shame of it all, the secret still chained to him and how stupid and horrible he felt not rising from beneath the covers earlier. Mr. Appletree remembered closing his eyes tightly and wrapping the pillow about his ears. Even after years and years he still felt dirty for thinking of a woman that way.

“You can see what we are?” Ms. Stringer had asked him as the children disbanded, exploding across the field in their brightly colored shirts like falling confetti.

After she had disappeared out the giant doors, Mr. Appletree

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coughed, raised his finger to the cashier, gathered his items into his arms. For a moment, Mr. Appletree froze at the head of the line as if dumbfounded, standing there with his four items staring out into the dark. But after a quick word with the cashier, Mr. Appletree set all four items back down.

Mr. Appletree straightened his bow tie, filed past the other customers standing in line back into the store. He made his way quickly by the potato chips and soda, past the plastic bowls and aluminum foil pans. He quickened his pace, hurried by the end of the aisle where the six inch culinary knives hung all in a row, the knives side by side and the glint of their sharpened edges. Mr. Appletree was almost running now, his chest heaving beneath his neatly pressed white shirt, moving quickly around the pasta, ground coffee and cereal. He slowed at the row of jams and the jellies with their brightly colored labels, stopped where the hard tight jars of barbecue sauce were packed tightly one after another upon the narrow shelves.

When Mr. Appletree returned, his items were pushed to the side, stacked neatly to the left of the checkout boy, the garlic above the fresh parsley, all balanced atop the two thick boneless slabs of butterflied pork. Mr. Appletree stood, trying to stare blankly past the others and out into the

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darkness beyond the ten-foot panes of glass which lined the front of the market.

Mr. Appletree could see himself against the night. He stared at his reflection peeping out from behind the other figures in line: the young couple, a boy with his arm loosely around the girl's neck, the elbow jutting out toward its reflection and an old sagging woman in a horrible pink jumpsuit, one shoulder drooping, forced down under the weight of a humongous black leather purse. It was funny, he thought, how in the reflection it did not appear that his forehead, his cheeks were as flushed as he knew they must be.

Mr. Appletree thought of how she insisted he call her Sam that night after the bar, how mad he had been that she had almost gotten him into that brawl with the plaid cowboy, the one with the gigantic belt buckle in the shape of a steer or something, of a bull's skull. On top of that, she had dumped a full pitcher of beer into his lap over something he had said about that crazy habit she had of drowning everything in sauce. The beer had splashed, running down his thighs, soaking his slacks to the ankles.

Mr. Appletree passed the jar of barbecue sauce slowly from one palm to the other and back again, smacking it harder against his palms. He thought of Ms. Stringer twisting upon his bed, how her fingers tugged

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upon the silk handkerchiefs she had brought with her in her purse and had hung from the bed post in lazily twisting loops.

He at first had smiled, imagining himself in spurs, his eyes shaded beneath a cowboy hat, a handkerchief stretched tightly across his nose and hanging down past his chin. But as he busied himself undressing, working the shirt from his back, his trousers down his shins, he heard the banging through the wall again and thought of the shadow in the doorway. He suddenly could see nothing but his own form, his own face in the shadow of hers, and Mr. Appletree had finally shouted no, he could not, would not do it!

“Fine,” Ms. Stringer had said, rising from the bed. “Screw yourself then.”

When it was finally Mr. Appletree’s turn again, the cashier lifted his items, slid them onto the conveyor once again to which Mr. Appletree added the honey smoked sauce. The bottle bobbed its way across the frayed belt of the conveyor until it was nuzzled into the other items.

“Ah,” said the cashier, both he and his customer eyeing the barbecue sauce. “There’s nothing quite like barbecued pork.”

“What?” Mr. Appletree asked, his eyes moving from the thin blue

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digits, the readout displaying the total. He pulled out his wallet and handed the cashier a twenty.

“Barbecued pork,” returned the cashier, taking the twenty between his fingers, pulling it out by the ends, creasing it to fit neatly under the metal retainer in the register. “Sure is sweet to the taste.”

“No,” Mr. Appletree said, feigning a rather stale laugh. “No sir. I wouldn’t disgrace such a fine slab of pork like that.” He thrust out his open palm and focused upon the discolored lump on the cashier’s freckled cheek.

On the way home Mr. Appletree did not look up, not even once to see what colors the traffic lights pushed out over the black surface of the street, onto the pale white lines of the crosswalk.

After he had prepared the pork that night, grilled one side and then the other, brushing it with butter, parsley and garlic, after he had steamed the snow peas, Mr. Appletree placed the sauteed strips of yellow and red pepper over the pork with its charred lines. Something, how much it looked like a prison uniform, he thought.

The pale and tan pork surrounded now by the deep forest green of the snow peas on the plates, Mr. Appletree sat with the barbecue sauce and two glasses of white wine. He lit two candles which flickered softly against

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the polished surface of the dinette table. He thought how it seemed a long time since he had grilled pork. The last time was with her. Now Mr. Appletree tried to recall the lines, the soft shadowed contours of her face. He tried to imagine her across from him.

Squinting, he let his focus drift into the dark roots closest to her skull. Mr. Appletree followed the light strands of hair, one after another, followed them out from the dark, one out into the light among the others and then another down to some invisible point he could not quite make out, sometimes upon her pale shoulders, sometimes disappearing behind her back. Now he began to draw the rope around her neck.

Stop it, Mr. Appletree told himself.

He jerked his knife through the pork, grimacing as he discovered how dry it had become. Feeling a dull steady pain stretching out, spreading out it seemed like a toothache from the very center of him as he chewed, Mr. Appletree loosened the bow tie, jerking it from underneath his collar. He twisted the lid, pulled the edges of the torn paper from the neck of the bottle of barbecue sauce.

Mr. Appletree stared at the neck of the bottle, stared across the exposed opening and thought how he and his sister used to fill the empty bottles partway back up with water in the alley behind their house, how the



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necks all stretched up to an opening and how as children they used to blow across the mouth.

## **The March of the Leaf-Cutters**

As always, when Thursday came over in her bathrobe with the brandy, 3-A did not open the door straight away. He muted the TV and listened to her knock and rattle the doorknob like he did sometimes with the phone ringing and did not rise from the couch until he remembered it was almost midnight and a Tuesday. It was a Tuesday and not yet a Wednesday, which was the day Thursday's children would come knock on the door and hang on his doorknob, swing from it like the tiny monkeys they were.

It was not a Wednesday so 3-A propped himself up on the couch and wiped his face with his hands, jerked his fingers through his hair. Then arching his shoulders, he got up, opened the door to find Thursday standing there in her nightgown, the silk one with the oriental swirls, a snifter of brandy and a cigarette in one hand, the other hand formed in a fist with the thumb stretched to one side, about ready to knock again.

In the hallway, Thursday stamped her slippared toes into the carpet.

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3-A looked at her as the smoke came out her nose, her nostrils flaring out as if in protest against the pink smears of blush streaked across her cheeks.

"Did anyone ever tell you could very well get ants in here if you don't clean this place up soon?" she asked.

She shoved by him into the kitchen. She cleared a spot for her brandy on the table by pushing aside a stack of envelopes and ad fliers. As she pushed the torn, twisted edges of the envelopes all addressed to 1694 Treetop Drive, Apt. 3-A, the mountain, the whole shuddering mass trembled.

"Honestly!" stated Thursday with a toss of the head, stooping now to clear away the chair. "I sometimes wonder how it is that you are still among the living surrounded by such filth, such clutter."

"And such stench," she added once seated. She waved the smoke from before her, pointing toward a stack of dishes which completely obscured what was once the smooth elegant porcelain contours of a sink. "And after all that I went through to come over and clean it for you that time, me and the cute little nurse in 2-A and she in those white stockings you go on and on about every night."

Thursday yelled now from the kitchen to where he was in the livingroom, hunched over a clearing on the blurred glass top of the end

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table, breaking up the stalks under the lamp, then separating out the seeds with the lid of the papers. He had forgotten she was there and her voice startled him, but he continued folding in the one end, rolled the paper tightly around the leaves, rolled everything out from the middle— but not too tightly— and then ran his tongue around the edge.

“I seem to remember it was you who screwed the whole thing up!” he yelled back after a while.

As he dug about his pocket, pushed the lighter up along the seam with his thumb, the laughing began. A high pitched snorting, really. Just like a damn hyena, he thought. They at first ran in circles waiting for the thundering hooves to slow. With their gold glowing eyes they would then follow after the big cats, sometimes lions, but more often the leopards, the hyenas making their way through the night across the grassy plains to fight and scavenge for the leftovers. And then 3-A thought of the two leopards, could see them purple against a sky of burnt orange, like monuments erected atop the dark blue earth, one’s mouth stretched out in a roar, the other shifting weight from one paw to the next.

In the kitchen, Thursday had stumbled onto the eviction notice. She pulled the envelope out of the stack, her fingers in the process of shoving the letter back into the envelope when the phone rang.

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3-A ignored it.

“Why don’t you just unplug the damn thing?” Thursday called, the pitch of her voice changing as if pulled in and out between the rings.

It stopped ringing.

When it started again, the painful sharp echoes struck him like a hundred bamboo javelins and the figure of Thursday emerged into the livingroom. The body vanished and the face came toward him like a witch doctor from behind one of those hideously beautiful carved masks. He remembered all the times he knew she was on the other end, ringing ceaselessly it seemed, ringing and ringing and he beneath a pillow, drawing the lumpy padding to his ears.

He burrowed through the mounds of trash, digging through the empty bags of fast food, stopping to examine the pig-tailed girl smiling from one of them. It was just like her to bring up the ants, he thought. First it would be the ants and then the leopards not far behind. He creased the bag until the pig-tailed girl stood erect against the wall like a scarecrow. That would keep the ants away. He pushed aside plastic knives and forks, plastic spoons and the strewn magazines, the paper airplanes made from the pages of the phone book, until at last he found the cord. From here, it was just a matter of following.

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“Yes,” 3-A said.

He drew the handset to his chin, pressing it to his ear, settling it in place balanced almost naturally against the shoulder. 3-A nodded, the joint hanging loosely now from the corner of his lips. The smell of butane escaped into the room as he lit it, then a thicker smell, like a thick choppy, and then a sticky low fog. He drew it in much more deeply. Yes, and then holding the smoke in and handing the joint to Thursday between nods. “It’s looking up— It won’t be long now before I have them all by the balls” and “no, there’s no one else here, no one special. But it’s only a matter of time.”

“I love you too,” he said finally, winking and blowing a kiss, putting his lips together and touching them to his fingers, then making a blowgun with the curled fingers of his hand and shooting the kiss through a misshapen tunnel toward Thursday.

Thursday, once struck, tumbled, falling backwards. As she fell, her legs swung freely above her, stretching up out of the bathrobe with its swirls. She was giggling, the teeth flashing a bit more slowly it seemed to him, the teeth almost blinding now and then the dark opening between the teeth dropping a bit more deeply about the tongue as it rose.

He dropped the phone and was sneaking toward her on all fours

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when he heard the distant thunder. He froze, crouched down mid-stride, head tilted toward the sky. 3-A put a finger to his lips.

“They’re moving again.” he whispered, pointing above him.

Thursday moved into the kitchen for another touch of brandy.

“You’re something else,” she giggled when she returned.

3-A remained frozen, listening to the footsteps above.

“Say,” she said, her eyebrows jutting up, then taking another hit, moving the joint before her extended lips, moving the joint quickly in and out. “You didn’t happen to hear anything strange the other night coming from my place?”

But 3-A remained frozen in place, head tilted toward the distant rumble. Elephants, he figured. He could see the dust rising about their thick trampling feet, the snouts curling up into the air before them, each one like the bell of a trumpet, or maybe a bit more sloping like a trombone, perhaps, and then one by one sliding out the call to charge.

“Hey,” said Thursday in a deep voice, her nails digging into his shoulder, her nails all in unison working almost like the teeth of a hyena or a lion, maybe even a leopard. “Seriously, remember how you told me to try out a negligee and heels under that long trench coat of mine?”

3-A began to remember a little about the whole affair then, how

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Thursday had waited for months, had gone without throughout it all, holding out for this her latest, the bubble bath man. This one had treated her to champagne and strawberries, had invited her to live among the jagged peaks of the Rockies, had been flying into their small airport, risking life and limb to see her in one of those propeller jobs.

He recalled then that it really had been quite some time since he had heard her knocking at the door, watched the doorknob jiggle and slap back and forth. It had been some time since he had to ignore the endless ringing of the phone.

"Now that you mention it," he replied, rising from the rugged terrain of trash now, "I haven't heard a damn thing from you in days."

3-A opened a window to draw out the smoke. He listened to a couple arguing as they made their way down the sidewalk outside. He listened to a freight train in the distance growing closer and nearer, the high cheerful horn from an imported car. 3-A looked to the dark outside the window and could make out nothing except the dull glow of a distant street lamp. He knew the leopards were out there somewhere.

"Nothing," he said, making his way into the kitchen once more with the joint between his fingers again and Thursday behind him.

"Well," said Thursday, lifting her brandy from the cluttered kitchen



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table in front of where 3-A sat down, replacing her in the chair that she had cleared away.

He noticed the letter from the office sticking out from the stack, much lower in the stack than where he had placed it. In one swift movement he pushed it back in.

"It's no surprise," she continued, pretending not to notice. "You just wouldn't believe what kind of week it was. You really couldn't possibly imagine."

"Why not?" he asked her, rising from the chair, opening the refrigerator door, pulling out a beer.

"I can imagine quite a bit, you know," he said as she followed him back into the livingroom.

3-A listened for the noises above him and for the first time noticed the ants, the leaf-cutters as they filed in, invading, scavenging through his place, making their way into the apartment over the metal tracks of the window sill and down the wall to where his possessions were. The leaf-cutters never stopped, never even slowing, right past the pig-tailed girl. The ants were chewing, cutting away giant pieces and hauling them away. The pieces were a hundred times their size but the leaf-cutters carried them, the odd pieces moving in single file, the jagged edges toward the

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open window, the pieces jutting up and down across the window track, the ants forming a column and filing in and out without ever really looking at one another.

"Well," Thursday continued, moving, almost stumbling now closer toward him, her voice in a hoarse whisper. "You were right about it all. I've never seen a man so worked up as he was after I showed him, when I opened up and flashed him in the airport. I could hardly keep him off me in the car."

The leopards came closer, were moving now above the ants. He could see them clearly off in the distance, across from the buildings jutting up into the skyline, the leopards still off in the distance despite the miles and miles of telephone poles and the telephone lines stretching out toward the trees as if to strangle them. He could see the two looming there above even the tallest of buildings, dwarfing it seemed everything about them, bigger than even the sun. The colors melted into the ground beneath their massive paws, beneath the shadows swinging under their curled tails.

"I had to remind him a girl needs time to get in the mood," Thursday said, one whole half of her mouth stretched open, the loose skin about her left eye wrinkling into a wink.

3-A backed as far as he could against the wall, took another swallow

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of his beer. He knew from the ants that the leopards would soon be making their way closer. They would be working their way almost silently between the farmhouses, between the fenced fields which circled just outside the city limits. Soon they would cross the interstate, would make their way into the narrow streets, the shadowed alleys of the city, stepping through the wet streets, the heads turning and the eyes glowing as they moved.

Thursday swirled her finger about the brandy, pushing an ice cube against the side of the glass with her fingernail, the ice clear and pale against the deep red of the brandy.

"Oh my," she said. "How wonderful it all was going."

Thursday pulled her finger from the brandy, raised it up to her waiting lips, the brandy running weakly to the tip of the nail, falling at first in a steady stream.

"Wonderful!" she continued, pulling her finger fully out. "It was the strawberry treatment all over and more. He was looking as if he might lose himself the whole time, as if he might well just explode at any moment."

3-A could see the teeth moving, the sharp yellow against the pale then darkening flesh. 3-A could almost feel the thumping, the still

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throbbing. His own finger brought to his mouth, the edge of the nail now pressed between the sharpness, the teeth tearing a broad section from the edge.

Thursday backed away, stumbling into the counter.

“So we finally make it to the bedroom,” she added, regaining her balance, propping herself against the counter now, the glass of brandy still firmly in the grasp of her left hand. “And, well, you know—”

Thursday raised the glass to her lips once more, starting to giggle once again but stopping herself, rubbing the silk sleeve across her face as if wiping away all expression and 3-A thought of Roberts with his glowing yellow eyes and the black slits. Roberts who had called him into the office and fired him. 3-A could still see the tight curls of Roberts’ beard, the way his face darkened and the hair as it reached out from above the face, the hair leaping before like fiery ropes, fiery rings jumping and then drawn back to the sun. 3-A could see the head emerging again, the ears slanted back now just like the rest, stretched tightly back and the teeth moving up and down, the tendons in the neck shifting. He heard the low gurgle from the throat.

“All of a sudden,” Thursday continued, almost soberly this time. “All of a sudden-like he pulls himself up from the bed and there’s all this

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blood spraying everywhere— it's all over my brand new silk sheets and it's spurting all across the walls and I can tell it's already tracked all across the carpet."

3-A felt himself go weak, felt the air rushing from his lungs as if he were suddenly thrust upon a bamboo pike. The teeth had ripped him open, had forced their way through the rib cage.

"I found him hunched over the toilet," continued Thursday, shaking her head as if sadly at first. "There he was, holding himself with a burst blood vessel, more like a pin-hole really. The blood was all over my bathroom too and me beside him, patting him on the shoulder, wrapping him up with gauze, my whole weekend shot to hell."

3-A struggled up, lifting himself back upon the chair.

"He refused to even go to the hospital and just waddled around the place for a couple days until the whole thing shriveled up and turned black and blue," said Thursday, looking as if in better spirits.

"The strangest thing," she continued, beginning to giggle in sporadic spurts. "The funniest thing happened after I finally convinced him to go to the hospital. There we were in emergency and he could hardly stand or even move at this point and there we were trying to tell the nurse what had happened."

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Thursday began to snort every so often as she spoke, once so severely that she pulled a kleenex from her right front pocket. She wiped her eyes and then blew her nose, scrubbing under it, across it four times.

“Anyway,” she said, regaining her composure, folding the kleenex and moving toward where the trash can had once been placed against the wall. “There we were in the waiting room and this Scandinavian god of a male nurse comes in through the door.”

Not finding the trash can, Thursday moved toward the cabinets. She opened the doors one by one, swinging the hinges open and then watching them spring back upon themselves.

“You know,” she said, looking about her one final time, holding the kleenex out from in front of her and then her lip straightening as she pushed it back into her pocket. “About six-four. The kind with the blond wavy hair and those ice-blue eyes, the kind that can look right through a woman and make her melt to her knees, the broad shoulders and the broad thighs and the—”

3-A followed a C-D jut up upon the window sill and disappear into the dark. The ants were making their way up and over Thursday’s slipped toes, the leaf-cutters carrying out a light bulb and pieces of the kitchen table between her legs and beneath the swirls of her nightgown. He

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marvelled at how much the ants reminded him of cars, or maybe tiny tractor trailers, how they followed one after the other on the freeway, how on the expressway they moved for position and on the super-highways looping in and out of the city. The leopards were closer, already they were stepping over the traffic, their shadows stretching across the freeways.

"Anyway," Thursday struggled to say between spurts of laughter again, her head beginning to ratchet back and forth and then her teeth forming an arching blur, it seemed to 3-A. "All I remember is how embarrassed he got, how silly he looked all shriveled up and tiny like that and how he himself really looked even smaller, like a tiny little mangled piece of beef jerky as that nurse stooped down and held it in one of those big strong hands of his."

Thursday began her maniacal giggling again to which 3-A raised a finger in the air. He pointed toward the ceiling, drew the finger down until it quivered, not quite erect before his curled lips.

"That's when it came to me. That's when something came across me all of a sudden," she continued, her voice rising, she choosing to ignore him. "That very moment I knew somehow that it was all over between us, the end of the trail— Rocky mountains or no. I knew then that somehow it could never be quite the same."

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3-A could hear the moving above. His eyes darted from side to side. He wondered whether the leopards could have made it there so quickly. He was down on all fours again, scrambling toward the living room when Thursday began her laughing.

“What the hell—” she said, the laughing echoing louder, bouncing off the walls as he began to burrow into the mounds of trash.

It was when he turned over one of the styrofoam boxes and pushed aside a tumbling crumpled paper bag that a spider about the size of a quarter stretched its spindled legs out from the body and started moving across the floor. The color drained from 3-A’s face. His mouth stretched open. He backed to the wall, stumbling in reverse and fell. Thursday began laughing all the harder. 3-A started up and kicked the trash with his shoed foot, kicking the plastic wrappers, the paper cups, and the lids, the lids with the straws still through them. The long-legged spider disappeared and then resurfaced from time to time as it made its way hastily through the trash with its tiny dotted back, moving like a scorpion but without the tail.

When 3-A backed into the corner Thursday’s laughing slowed. The smile dropped from her face, her cheeks relaxed— now only an occasional giggle, one or two every once in a while until she stood awkwardly in the



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center of the room. 3-A's whole body sustained a quiver, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His fingers moved about each other and his eyes stared ahead, focusing upon something that was not there.

3-A heard the moving upstairs, the heavy footsteps, the footprints pressing down through the ceiling, the closing of a door and then the coming down the stairs. He looked at Thursday. Their eyes met for a moment and they both listened, remained perfectly still as the footsteps continued down past the landing with the outside doors. The footsteps continued down another flight, the steps creaking beneath the weight, and down another flight to where every door was marked with an A.

They stood staring at each other and listening until the footprints disappeared. The steps could be heard no more and only their breathing through the long intervening silence until the knocking. A short sharp rap invaded the room and then the whole apartment stretched, vibrating in with a hovering and then the knocking again, four more raps. Thursday moved to the door, her fingers beneath the latch, turning the lock, rotating it and pulling the door open. Thursday pulled the door open and stood there to face Thompson.

Thompson in the doorway stepped back.

Thompson said nothing, his breath heavy, his face reddened. His

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chest heaved up in quick bursts, up and down against the t-shirt he wore beneath a sweater.

"Oh, you mustn't blame him," 3-A heard Thursday say. "I asked him to cheer me up and boy did he ever!

"No, it was me you heard laughing and not some little slut of his— Mine are fine, they are doing just great and how about your own?" And then, "why, yes, I could do with more cheering."

Thursday returned back into the kitchen for the swirl of brandy at the bottom of the glass she left on the table, the cigarette pack already snugly in her silk pocket. She winked at him now, the very tips of her left fingers forming a tiny wave to 3-A. He listened to the sound of Thursday and Thompson making their way back up the stairs and then of the door closing.

After she left, he followed the ants, the leaf-cutters chewing in from the edges, cutting out pieces and chunks, some already carrying out the oddly shapes, the jagged pieces on their backs. As he watched a piece of the toaster, and then another of the alarm clock march by, 3-A heard Thursday. 3-A could hear them both. The two of them were above him, their tails curling and they rolling about playfully and batting at one another with the pads of their massive paws.

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3-A imagined them on top of each other, the dust rising between Thompson's kitchen and Thompson's living room. 3-A heard Thursday laughing. He knew it must be Thursday laughing above him somewhere. It must be her, he figured, he knew, but she sounded different from the other side of the ceiling. It was something, how muffled she sounded, funny through the ceiling and laughing so much differently now. He thought of looking for the broom and hoisting it up, pounding the wooden handle to where the sound of it might reach them.

## VITA

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Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: "LOSING NEIL ARMSTRONG" AND OTHER STORIES

Major Field: English

### BIOGRAPHICAL:

**Personal Data:** Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, On April 16, 1968, the son of Mel Zink and Mary Kieffer.

**Education:** Graduated from Twin Valley High School, Elverson, Pennsylvania in May, 1986; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from The Pennsylvania State University at Behrend, Erie, Pennsylvania in May, 1994. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree with a major in English Literature and a specialization in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University in July, 1998.

**Experience:** Born and raised around garages and muscle cars; attended Vo-Tech for Auto-Diesel and was employed during high school as a gas attendant, an auto mechanic, and then a diesel mechanic; ten years experience after high school working as a laborer/machine operator/supervisor in metal fabrication industry; employed by Oklahoma State University as a graduate teaching assistant with two years teaching Freshman Comp. I. & II., one year as a Writing Center tutor, and a semester as the OSU Writing Center Assistant Director; Fiction Editor, *Midland Review* 1996-97.

**Professional Memberships:** OSU Creative Writers' Association (President 1996- 97), English Graduate Student Association (Special Events Committee 1997-98).