

THREE FICTIONS: APPLICATIONS OF
THE NARRATIVE RHETORIC OF
WAYNE C. BOOTH

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PREFACE

I cannot tell or show in these few score pages the extent to which I have profited from my graduate work in English and my participation in the Oklahoma State University Creative Writing Program. Whatever wisdom this experience has given me, I certainly know much more than I knew three years ago with regard to my potential as a student and a teacher. Specifically, I am now alert to the rich tradition of fiction within English and American literature, and, with my new awareness of this tradition, I have attempted to improve my own ability to write fiction.

I hereby thank all those who have offered their support as well as those who have proffered their challenge. Dr. Gordon Weaver's advice has been generous and incisive; his fiction, which summoned me, I shall continue to know and admire. I am also grateful to Dr. Jeffrey Walker, who has given me valuable knowledge of early American literature that I will be able to use in my work, and has shown me, with kind patience, how to fine-tune my documentative and teaching capacities. My debt to Dr. T. R. Hummer for his direction and reassurance can be repaid only during the time ahead, through friendship.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The rhetoric of fiction requires norms. According to Wayne C. Booth, an actual reader and an actual author have second selves, the "postulated reader" and the "implied author." The implied author encompasses the entire fiction: "Our sense of the implied author includes . . . the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole."¹ For a successful reading to take place, the postulated reader must adjust his beliefs to those of the implied author (p. 138). When the beliefs of the reader correspond to the beliefs of the implied author, such correspondence can be used to establish the fiction's norms, shared beliefs that provide a standard to which the implied author can adhere and from which he can vary. When a narrator acts in accordance with the norms established by the implied author, that narrator is reliable, whereas the unreliable narrator departs from the fiction's established norms (pp. 158-159).

In my own work, I have attempted to establish definite norms in order to employ purposeful variation. The advantages that I have discovered in this endeavor, and hope to illustrate in these stories, are plot formation through the control of narrator-implied author distances,

the development of a primary subject out of a flawed reflector, and the exploitation of the machinations of an unreliable narrator.

My first story in this collection, "Keeping The Light," is composed of five episodes that take place on the thirtieth birthday of the center-of-consciousness reflector, David. Temporal, emotional, and physical distances are consistently minor, providing a norm against which intellectual and moral distances are made to vary; the implied author provides a sequence of events during which the narrator and David, the reflector, become closer. As Booth emphasizes, "distance is never an end in itself [but] . . . is sought along one axis for the sake of increasing the reader's involvement on some other axis" (p. 123).

A close examination of these axes in "Keeping The Light" led me to a fresh view of the viewpoint character, and changed the outcome of the story. In earlier drafts, David was shown as someone who would seize the first available opportunity to assert his whimsical will against those who displeased him. His distress and confusion produced indecision on his part and ambiguity on that of the narrator. The norms of the story had not been established, although the decreasing intellectual and moral distances between the reliable narrator and David necessitated an action that would surprise yet remain believable and morally appropriate.

In the present revised version, David remains

emotionally unstable, yet he is also a man who seeks a right thing to do, something that will earn him a sense of self-control. He chooses a passive but still positive action, refusing an extramarital adventure; this refusal is indicated by his waving away his imagined and falsely heroic grandfather (actually the would-be lover's sailboat Lay-D-Lee) and swimming ashore toward a symbolic rebirth.

Through the control of distance, other advantageous narrative elements became distinct, such as the pervasive emphasis of events due to the sympathy-evoking immediacy of David's emotions and the unity of time. Because detailed description intensifies the properties of setting used to establish ambience, in this case a seaside atmosphere, while helping to develop characters by depicting their occupations and daily concerns,² physical distances between the narrator and David and the other characters that David visits have been controlled. For example, during most of the time David spends visiting people, he is physically close to them and what they do; even a few yards of distance is a significant separation. In this way, concerns of distance have influenced the implied author's selection of relative particulars.

An implied author's choice of objects is persuasive when the objects that appear in the fiction correspond to objects in reality. In "Keeping The Light," the implied author has used indigenous particulars (oysters, gutted fish) to imply meaning (protoplasmic oysters; bass with

mouths like men's fists). With reference to Eliotic correlates without objectives, Booth cautions the writer to avoid the use of particularity for its own sake: "The meaningless accumulation of accurately observed detail cannot satisfy us for long; only if they are weighted with a significance for the lives shown, will they be tolerable" (p. 14). The objects that David encounters are so weighted: he is enticed by the floral swimming apparel of a flirtatious woman, bemused by his wife's wan flower garden, fascinated by his grandmother's discarded rose-fence, and mystified by his own despair as he watches the roses move away on the tide, each flower a lost moment of sensuality. In the third and central episode, the floral motif is restricted to a picture post-card indicative of the norms of David's parents. The floral imagery that connects the episodes also provides an ironic tension by being incongruous with the nautical setting.³

Excepting geniuses immune to time, Booth cautions against the use of symbolic commentary (p. 197), having stated that "the author [of so-called 'pure' fiction] must somehow find a way to create a cleansed object which can speak for itself" (p. 96). Contextual clarity is prerequisite. Booth identifies Gogol's use of the objective correlative of "The Overcoat" as a crucial rhetorical decision because the object is, in Pound's words, "natural to its context" (pp. 97-98). The overcoat's absences both before it is purchased and after it is stolen manifest

the fiction's meaning. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative specifies a "formulation of that particular emotion."⁴ Such an object-stands-for-emotion "formulation" is most effective when confined to the context of a fiction, as is Bashmatchkin's overcoat.

Observations made by Cleanth Brooks regarding irony and "organic" poetry emphasize the value of such a formulation: "Any 'statement' made in a poem bears the pressure of the context and has its meaning modified by the context," so the "rhetorical force" of such statement "cannot be divorced from the context in which they are imbedded."⁵ Gerald Graff agrees with Brooks about dangerous extracontextual generalizations, but warns of intruding anti-thematic "cultural restraints."⁶ Abstract truths of thematic value, he notes, usually do extend beyond the work. Thus, the writer should consider the dangers of abstraction, as opposed to the theoretical control possible when using objects "natural" to the context.

Given a metaphor that represents the correlation between an object and an emotion, the vehicle of that metaphor should not lie outside the artistic parameters of the fiction; when the tenor lies within and the vehicle lies without these parameters, the vehicle becomes abstract, and--by being obtrusive commentary--distracts the reader. Similarly, a metaphor whose tenor and vehicle are the result of an association the narrator is unlikely to make will undercut the narrator's credibility. Certainly,

Booth's caution against using symbolic objects as commentary is a constructive if conservative one, and this writer is not eager to experiment for the sake of experimentation in the basement of the 'House of Fiction.' I have tried to select particularity that heightens the illusion of place and time, that for the viewpoint character has associative meaning--a memory, a wish, or a dream--but whose referent and object are together in the work.⁷

The opening lines of "Keeping The Light" offer an example: David's last act involves swimming ashore, ostensibly with a sense of rebirth, and seeing ahead the beach "gently sloped to receive him, its surf cottony," while above it bleeds "a thin wedge of sunset," whereas when David first appeared he was walking to the beach "between two dunes that looked like knees," and later "the on-shore breeze smelled like iodine." Because the day of the story is the anniversary of David's birth, these associations and sensations are contextually thematic as well as being indigenous particulars, and they have influenced the shape of the narrative by framing it with two scenes that are formally and temporally related. But I have tried not to suggest correspondence between the maternal sea, for instance, and David's grandmother, or David's oceanic immersions in the spiritual waters of his Neptunian forebears, in order to avoid unintentional associative meaning--what Brooks would consider abstraction.

To be complete, then, a fiction's rhetoric must

include norms that allow observable variations of narrative distances within a clearly defined context. Metaphors and associative meanings should not spill over the rhetorical parameters of the fiction unless the implied author intends the spillage and, as an Aristotelian might say, seeks to make the extraneous intrinsic (p. 93).

Whereas the third person narrative voice of "Keeping The Light" remained unself-consciously close to David, a new narrative voice and central intelligence developed during the rewriting of "Tomy's Starling." Booth devotes considerable discussion to James' recorded efforts "to develop" the situations of the characters in his fictions as he discovered potential for further use of the narrator (pp. 340-46). My discovery was that rather than Tomy's comic efforts to catch a bird, the immediate memory of the past life of the narrator had more potential for development, that Nancy's point of view refracted through two childhood events, and narrated from adulthood, contained tacit ironies and moral tensions which the original version lacked. Young Nancy changed from an unself-conscious narrator to a reflective central consciousness. The original viewpoint character--Tomy--became a two-dimensional character whose actions and remarks merely heighten events. Due to her temporal and intellectual distance, the adult narrator is able to recognize the significance of earlier events and articulate ironic truths. As she states in the opening paragraph, she is able to "see clearly what I could not see then: the

flow of those four month-like years--and me fluttering through them. . . ." Yet Tomy's relationship with Nancy from the day of her menarche to the moment of the hysterotomy remains implied, as do the norms of the implied author, who disapproves of feticide.

In order that the older narrator remain distant from her recollected youth and close to the implied author, some isolating elements were needed--reflective solitude, and what Booth calls reader sympathy, through a "sustained inside view" (p. 246). The principal property for achieving this was Nancy's sycamore tree, at once her refuge and her isolation, into and out of which fly Tomy's furtive birds as well as figurative intimations of nature's mysterious systems, even the fecundity and barrenness of the universe. Isolated in her tree from her family, her friend, and her later narrative self, Nancy is vulnerable and sympathetic as she experiences emotionally what years later she will experience intellectually: boys are like cats, and your own mother may decide to cut your seedling out of you.

These changes have affected the form of "Tomy's Starling." Because the narrator is aware of her loss as a youth, she looks back to the second and first events as if through a scrim. The closest temporal distance is twenty years, the next twenty-four years; to use specific dates in order to illustrate these distances, from her temporal position in 1984, the narrator sees who she was

in 1960 through her knowledge of what happened to her in 1964. Her view telescopes back through time, thus reducing the depth of field of her recollected experiences and merging the second into the first as birds flying at great altitudes appear to merge with stars. In this way, the substance and shape of "Tomy's Starling" have been concomitant in their development.⁸

The transformation of the narrator into a central consciousness increased what Booth designates "practical" and "moral" interests. Practical interests accompany the reader's "desire for the success or failure of those we love or hate, admire or detest" (p. 125). Functional to this phenomenon is the reader's desire for a moral change in a character, or a morally related outcome, as well as the hopes and fears consistent with that reader's moral perspective. Although I can stand aside from the moral dilemma my fiction regards, I cannot remain aloof. Should readers of this story second-guess its narrator in order to evaluate the actual author's moral position, rhetorically the story can stand alone; by implying an author with a definite stance, I have excluded my personal thoughts about the morality of abortion, specifically the contemporary issue of public access to abortion facilities. Yet, were I to write a similar story with a proximate implied author and narrator for whom this particular moral propriety is reversed, were I to write what some readers would label a "pro-abortion" story, would my fiction be capable of

immorality?

The novelist John Gardner has approached this question deductively in On Moral Fiction by equating goodness and morality: "The Good for man, which rightly understood cannot be divorced from what is good for his society and environment, is by another formulation (whenever action is called for) the moral."⁹ Approximating Booth's "practical interests," Gardner conditionally equates goodness with fiction that prompts reader involvement on moral grounds:

If the fiction contains life-like characters, then, and if in the process of reading we come to understand them and worry about them, feeling suspense because their ways of behaving, right or wrong, may get them into trouble, and if reading a work of fiction we anticipate events and hope that characters will act in one way and not another, bringing about happiness and moral satisfaction, nor misery and shame, then fiction is concerned with the good (p. 139).

The suggestion is that fiction unconcerned with "good for man," for instance fiction that objectively or inconsequentially portrays badness for man, or simply contains no moral values, is immoral fiction, and bad fiction.

Both Gardner and Booth have considered the artistic integrity of the writer. Booth says, "the artist has a moral obligation, contained as an essential part of his

aesthetic obligation to 'write well,' to do all that is possible in a given instance to realize his world as he intends it" (p. 388). Gardner alludes to poetry, extending the writer's social responsibility further:

Frost was right in claiming that the choice in each image in a poem is a moral choice, but only because it is the poet's obligation to make no bad choice if he can help it. The immorality of an inept poet is like that of a sleeping guard or a drunken bus driver (p. 144).

The Frost comment indicates that the behavior of a writer with low artistic integrity is antisocial, thus immoral. Discussing John Cheever, Bernard Malamud, and John Updike, Gardner singles out the latter as an immoral writer who "worries no more about his characters and his readers than does Rabbit about his women."¹⁰ You can't write moral fiction, Gardner seems to say, unless you care about your characters and readers. Booth suggests that the implied author is the contextual element about which the writer should most care:

The writer should worry less about whether his narrators are realistic than about whether the image he creates of himself, his implied author, is one that his most intelligent and perceptive readers can admire (pp. 395-96).

And from here Booth extends his final moral consideration to the select audience: "The ultimate problem in the rhetoric of fiction is, then, that of deciding for whom the author should write" (p. 396). Always the rhetorician, Booth contends that fiction's goodness is foremost a matter of stance.

The reader who questions a fiction's morality is concerned with content, and this concern will supersede his concern for the style and form of the work if the implied author reaches beyond the postulated reader in order to assume a general, extracontextual stance rather than a stance specific to the fiction's norms. Conversely, the part of a fiction's audience that rejects the norms of the implied author may reach beyond him and question the actual author's morality. In either case, the work ceases to operate entirely as a fiction and becomes a non-illusory creation, even a dogma.¹¹ Moreover, Booth warns that "there is a moral dimension in the author's choice of impersonal, noncommittal techniques." Non-commentative objective narration, especially by an unreliable narrator, can present deplorable characters "through the seductive medium of their own self-defending rhetoric" (pp. 388-89). The rhetoric of fiction will allow any stance, although that stance will not be considered moral by all readers; if to this rhetoric manipulative or dogmatic or extracontextual rhetoric is added, the work will be considered fiction by few readers.

In his chapter on "The Uses of Authorial Silence," Booth proposes that unreliable narrators provide reader-pleasure of three types, and that to evoke these three pleasures--pride, ridicule, and collusion--the author conspires with the reader behind the narrator's back.¹² There are more virtuous reasons to justify a reader-author "secret communion," yet Booth's conspiratorial concept does allow partial identification of three typical faults of an unreliable narrator. First is reader pride derived from a sense of communion: since reader-enjoyment increases as fewer and fewer readers are in on the irony, the readers who recognize more irony will receive more pleasure, so on a sliding scale the narrator is to a decreasing number of readers a greater fool. Second is reader "ridicule of the ignorant narrator"; and third is reader awareness of the plan of the "silent [sic] author": the silent author, "also knowing the facts, has created the trap for his narrator and for those readers who will not catch the illusion" (p. 305). The faults that can be inferred about this implied author are, one, that he (or she) is to some extent a fool, two, an ignoramus, or three, a hunted man (or woman). The narrator of "Boiled Beets" generally satisfies these three criteria of unreliability as suggested by Booth.

The narrator of this story "tells" his readers that he is a fool; in an emergency such as the one this fiction contains, he will stand still and do nothing until he

thinks of a face-saving way out of the situation, and by deciding to "go along with her fiction" and to "enter it," he makes probable the expansion of his foolishness. His ignorance shows in slightly more subtle ways: he gives credence to "Digitology," a quack method of diagnosing a person's health, if such a method exists; he presumes all women to be of two types--young and lovely hip-rockers or witches; and he thinks a garnet is the birthstone for February twenty-second, Washington's Birthday, no less. As Booth says, the narrator has become "himself the butt of the ironic point" (p. 304); he has been trapped by the grievous witch who pokes him in the chest with her arrow of accusation. Additionally, this narrator is misleading: his grocery cart easily glides along until he passes a pretty woman, when suddenly he remarks the cart's sticky wheel, and his recollections are indistinguishable from his imaginings. If he is so willing to mislead himself, can he be reliable? No--and this willing self-deception accounts for the sort of reader-author collaboration that Booth describes. Nevertheless, such a fiction will work only to the extent that the negative qualities of the narrator are counter-balanced by the reader's interest in him, and this interest is the result of the implied author's art, which arouses the pleasures of conspiracy; that is to say, the implied author's success is commensurate with his development of an interesting narrative persona with visible ignoble traits. Also, to some degree reader-implied

author tension can result from the reader's sympathy and identification with a narrator who is adrift, unguided, and thus convincingly human (p. 286).

Although Booth cautions that these prescriptions of narrator unreliability are not invariable, reader collusion with a sly implied author at the expense of the narrator appears to be symptomatic (p. 309). Fictions by Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe demonstrate their authors' different methods of inducing Booth's three kinds of reader-pleasure, methods developed by these men early in the tradition of the printed short story. Whereas James provides implied author commentary in order to emphasize his narrator's unreliability, Poe sets up his narrators by giving readers clues in the form of evidential particulars. Poe's tales of ratiocination, of course, provide veritable clues; ironic shifts of distance occur among implied author, narrator-confidant, reasoning reflector, and reader. Poe rhetorically manipulates his readers in order to prompt their wonder and ridicule.¹³ The narrative weakness of the ratiocinative tale, however, lies in the difficulty of achieving an "effect" that will not be supplanted by the reader's attention to the presented puzzle. Poe was outspokenly concerned with the balance of incident and tone in a fiction, restricting predominant incident--characteristic of the Dupin narratives--as well as predominant tone--for Poe, typical of Washington Irving's tales of "repose."¹⁴

Booth's three kinds of reader pleasure can be derived from Poe's "Ligeia." The story's invocation, a misquote of Joseph Glanvill, presents an early if remote clue in the guise of documentation that is asserted by the implied author, again by the character Ligeia, and repeatedly by the narrator; the misquote of Bacon is another clue.¹⁵ With no Dupin to explain things, the astute reader who sees something askew here can pride himself on his communion with the implied author, whose visible purpose is persuasion through testimony. As for ridicule, the narrator makes that self-evident: he is a man who obsessively mourns a wife with whom he "cannot . . . remember how, when, or even precisely where [he] first became acquainted. . . ." ¹⁶ Later in the opening paragraph he suddenly realizes that he has "never known" what her family name was. Possibly, this is a clue that places Ligeia's existence only in the narrator's imagination, not the imagined reality of the fiction; that this is possible further evidences his unreliability. Like the narrators of Poe's tales of terror, this man is the embodiment of some weirdly ridiculous experience he has lived with less than full comprehension, and while the reader becomes interested in the details of the incident, he is also drawn away from the narrator toward the implied author by the fiction's bizarre "tone," a term Booth has used to describe an implied author.¹⁷ As for collusion between the reader and the implied author, both share in a

mutually confirmative, head-nodding awareness of the narrator's opium addiction, which through repeated confessions invites reader-understanding but not sympathy.

Poe's objective as the actual author of "Ligeia"--his desired effect--was to persuade the reader that what the narrator says happened--at least for the narrator--did happen.¹⁸ Yet the narrator is unreliable, evidentially and by his own admission, and must conspire to decrease the distance between himself and the reader. In order to convince the reader of the reality of an imagined reality, the narrator needs all the rhetorical support his implied author can provide. The Gothic properties are extensive, but they are of less importance than the narrator's diction. The living Ligeia is fluent in tongues, the narrator says, not language or dialects, her hand on his shoulder is marble, connotative of color, weight, texture, and coldness, and her appearance he can only describe abstractly: a lofty, faultless forehead; "harmoniously curved nostrils speaking the free spirit"; her chin's "gentleness of breadth, the softness and the majesty, the fullness and the spirituality, of the Greek." Her eyes are beyond his powers of concretion and he says so: "For the eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. . . . They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad." This diction has been praised or condemned by numerous critics, but most important is its relationship to distance. Although the reader

may mistrust this narrator, the reader is nevertheless drawn to him, not only for all there is to know, but for details that are filtered through the narrator's altered consciousness.¹⁹ If the reader accepts the fiction at all, he must stand close to and accept it from the narrator, in vacuo, and the implied author whose choice it is to create the illusion sells it to the reader through the narrator's powers of persuasion.

For the sale to be final, however, the narrator's tone of voice must be modulated in order to heighten the attitude of the speaker. Donald Barlow Stauffer has made syntactic observations that explicate Poe's implied author's modulation of the speaker's tone:

The center portion [of the narrative] is marked by complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences quite different from the simpler syntax of sentences in the early part of the tale. In his recollections of Ligeia he has been rhapsodic, conveying to the reader the frame of mind into which the memory of her puts him; now, in the second half of the tale . . . he attempts to get a grip on himself and his emotions as he recounts the early history of Rowena dispassionately and with apparent detachment.²⁰

The tonal oscillation that Stauffer has traced follows the elliptical form of the tale, while "The Fall of the House

of Usher" has a narrator whose tone of voice indicates linear complication similar to the maddening crescendo of perceptions experienced by the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart."

The unreliability of the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" develops gradually as he further embeds himself in the narrative, until Madeline's ghostly personage hurls itself, and death, upon Roderick. As the narrator begins to realize "the wild influences of our fantastic yet impressive superstitions," the reader begins to accept the supernatural state of things, if only to the extent of its being perceived by a narrative persona who is beginning to believe it. Ultimately, as noted by John S. Hill, Usher includes the narrator in his collective "we"--"We have put her living in the tomb!"--and addresses the narrator as his fellow "MADMAN! . . ." ²¹ Booth indicates that this type of narrative speaks with "intrinsic" rhetoric, which is preferable to the hovering introductory voice of "The Premature Burial" (pp. 201-202). Equally important is the way in which the closing distances between Roderick and the narrator intensify the action, drawing reader and narrator shoulder-to-shoulder as both the mansion and Usher begin to disintegrate.

Compared to Poe's narrators, those of Henry James are usually rational, courteous, and sophisticated people. James learned to consider his reflector second only to matter when planning a fiction, and his consideration of a

reflector often led him to the discovery of new matter. Unreliability, or what Booth describes as James' term "inconscience," can apply to either the third-person reflector or the first-person narrator (p. 159). An unreliable reflector is unconscious of certain motivations he has incorporated into his behavior, as witnessed by the anonymous but reliable narrator; likewise, an unreliable narrator is unconscious of why he narrates what he does.²² The narrator of James' "The Liar" is reliable, while the reflector Lyon is not; in "The Aspern Papers" there is no individualized reflector, and if there were he could not be seen reliably because the narrator is unreliable, and a flaw on a mirror's primary surface will distort all secondary views. If Lyon were a first-person narrator, the narrative voice would be embodied in him, but the other characters would come under his narrative control and the ironic contrasts between Lyon's and the Capadoses' prevarications would be lost. The narrator of "The Aspern Papers," on the other hand, remains immersed in the deceptions he creates, and himself becomes lost in the Venitian intricacies of his own fictive canalizations.

Occasionally the narrator of "The Liar" comments on what he has narrated, asserting for the reader something of which Lyon is unaware:

[Lyon] wouldn't be surrounded by the quiet that ministers to good work; however, it had never

interfered with his work to feel the human scene
enclose it as a ring. And though he didn't
know this, it was never quiet at Stayes.²³

This narrator knows more than the reflector knows, but less
than his implied author:

The point he made of some visible contrition
in her on this head may strike the reader as
extravagant, but something must be allowed so
disappointed a man (p. 354).

Quotes isolate an ironic comment intended for you-the-
reader:

As he saw nothing else in the Colonel today, so
he gave himself up to the joy of "rendering"
nothing else. How he did it he couldn't have
told you, but he felt a miracle of method
freshly revealed to him every time he sat down
to work (p. 361).

Although such commentary may be attributed to an intrusive
implied author, Booth maintains that James' use of commen-
tary does not interfere with the narrative illusion; rather,
it heightens ironic meaning by clarifying causative con-
nections and is intrinsic to the fiction's rhetorical
"core."²⁴ Yet James sacrificed his intended sense of
times-past and old European setting in "The Aspern Papers"

in order to exploit these ironic maneuverings of his covetous, self-defeating protagonist.²⁵ Whether or not James lost more than he gained in such a narrative trade-off, Booth's three indications of unreliability can be discerned. This narrator's unreliability is the result of an ambition that lures him into the implied author's trap while pleasing those readers who ponder, then recognize the narrator's errors, and scorn his condition.

The conclusion to which a writer of fiction must come regarding rhetorical principles and related critical theories is that such principles are generative of meaningful content. Booth's concern for the rhetoric of a fiction is based on a theory valuable to writers and critics: a fiction containing norms has an integrity of parts, has designed into it the tolerances and controls required of an efficient rhetorical machine.²⁶ With carefully controlled distances that establish such norms, maintain them, and permit them to change, the writer can achieve distinct formal and contextual values. These values can be generative of a particular narrative voice and central observing intelligence, which in turn can generate content in new forms, whether they be realized with moral commitment by the author to content (Gardnerian stance) or rhetorical commitment by the author to the implied author (Boothian stance). Moreover, the reliability of a fiction's narrator can be exploited by the author who knows the key traits of an unreliable narrator, knows

how to control the collaboration of the reader with the implied author, and is thus cognizant of the fine tensions that are possible between mistrust and fascination, repulsion and attraction. The three fictions that follow have been written with authorial attention to normative distances in "Keeping The Light," central consciousness in "Tomy's Starling," and unreliable narration in "Boiled Beets."

NOTES

¹ Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 73. Subsequent paginal references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text.

² Walter Allen, Six Great Novelists: Defoe, Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Stevenson, Conrad (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), pp. 87-88. Occupational detail was valued early by Sir Walter Scott for character development: "Scott saw men primarily as they were shaped by the work they did. What interested him first was the lawyerliness of the lawyer and the peasantness of the peasant, then the individual, because unlike English novelists he saw that . . . a profession or a trade can influence the man who follows it, setting up a permanent bent to character and expression."

³ This incongruity is thematic: having retired from the sea, David's grandmother gardens. David's life contains a parallel incongruity: having grown up in nautical surroundings, he is now a corporate accountant. His dissatisfaction complements the distress of his marital problems, and a related guilt, as well as the customary discomfort of becoming thirty years old. His parents--a transitional generation--are not present in the fiction so

as to heighten the changing relationships between David and the other characters.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and his Problems," The Athenaeum, (26 September 1919), pp. 940-941. This review of an essay entitled "The Problem of Hamlet" contained the objective correlative definition as a way to make clear Eliot's contention that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible. . . ." and that "here Shakespeare tackled a problem that proved too much for him."

⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "Irony and 'Ironic' Poetry," College English, (February 1948), pp. 231-37.

⁶ Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in a Modern Society (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 163.

⁷ Booth points out that James disapproved of Flaubert's attempt to compensate for the insensitivities of the reflectors of Madame Bovary by providing commentary with a mere rendering of surfaces (p. 43). James and Sartre both resorted to formal controls to make subjects convincing; Virginia Woolf looked outside her fictions for meaningful surfaces (p. 56).

Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy has, Booth says, made the reader experience a concentration of sensation impossible in any other mode," and because the narrative is "unmediated by any interpreting mind," the reader must "infer . . . reality through what is left out." The result is an "extended dramatic monologue . . . isolated from the rest

of human experience. It is, thus, less closely related to the traditional forms of fiction than to lyric poetry" (63). Robbe-Grillet has acknowledged his dependence on Eliotic objective correlatives, and has used an object's correlations generatively in order to discover content. Bruce Morrissette, The Novels of Robbe-Grillet, English language edition (Ithica, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 62-74.

⁸ The proportion of years between the three temporal narrators (4:20) has lent its shape to the narrative: Although sequential, the two early events are compressed and viewed across a distance five times as great, plus some unknown factor indicative of the leap from puberty to young adulthood.

⁹ John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1978), p. 134. Subsequent paginal references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Gardner says, ". . . one cannot help feeling misgivings about Updike's intent. Certainly he appeals, intentionally or not, to the two chief heart-warmers of the mindless in America, religion and sex. . . . Like Rabbit, . . . the optimistic Christian may be inclined to leave too much to heaven" (p. 99).

¹¹ Graff argues that in the "new criticism" movement, no extracontextual significance is allowed, and if it were, correspondence between fictional and actual reality

would be challenged by the belief of contemporary critics and readers alike that reality is a fiction" (pp. 7-11).

¹² Booth assumes the view of the readers: "Our pleasure is compounded of pride in our own knowledge, ridicule of the ignorant narrator, and a sense of collusion with the silent author. . . . The fun is increased as the privacy increases" (pp. 308-9).

¹³ Poe's ratiocintative tales have in common, besides the presence of the confidant-narrator, stock characters Northrop Frye has termed the *agroikos* (Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957, pp. 171 ff.), who allows even the nescient reader to feel less ignorant than someone in the story, e.g., Jupiter in "The Gold Bug" and the Paris Police Prefect, Monsieur B.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, "Twice-Told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne," the second review, *Graham's Magazine*, May, 1842, rpt. in James A. Harrison, ed., The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965. Vol. 11. Unimpressed with Irving's scenic tales and Hawthorne's "sketches," Poe admired most the fictions of Hawthorne that he considered to be true tales, and praised Hawthorne's use of tone and incident together: ". . . novelty of tone as in novelty of matter."

¹⁵ George McMichael, ed., Anthology of American Literature, I, 2nd. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980). Editorial footnotes in this recent anthology indicate authorial manipulation by Poe: "Joseph

Glanvill (1636-1680), English philosopher and believer in spiritualism and the occult. The quotation has not been found in his writings" (p. 932). The editors also identify an altered quote from Bacon's "Of Beauty," possibly a planted clue: "Poe substituted 'exquisite' for Bacon's 'excellent'" (p. 933).

¹⁶ Poe, "Ligeia" in McMichael, pp. 932-942.

¹⁷ Booth says that "'Tone' . . . refer(s) to the implicit evaluation which the author manages to convey behind his explicit presentation . . . (p. 74), and suggests that unreliable narratives . . . depart from their [implied] author's norms; the older term 'tone' . . . covers many effects that we should distinguish" (p. 159).

¹⁸ Gordon Weaver, "The Teller and the Tale," Proceedings Comparative Literature Symposium, Vol. 13 (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1982), pp. 119-132. "Poe has to persuade the reader, not that this is possible, or that it might be possible, but that such a "reality" can be deeply and convincingly imagined" (p. 129).

¹⁹ Weaver, p. 129. "Poe relies almost exclusively on his narrator, that first-person persona who is the source and authority for everything the reader perceives, for every piece of Gothic machinery, for every connotation-laden word."

²⁰ Donald Barlow Stauffer, "Style and Meaning in 'Ligeia' and 'William Wilson,'" Studies in Short Fiction II (1965), p. 322.

²¹ John S. Hill, "The Dual Hallucination in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Southwest Review, 48 (1965), 401-402.

²² Notwithstanding grammatical noun-person connotations, there can be either a reflective narrator ("I") or a non-reflective narrator ("I"-effaced), always the "first" person speaking to the reader who is the "second" person. The third person is the reflector, usually "he" or "she." Either a narrator or a reflector can be unreliable; either a narrator or a reflector can be effaced. Generally, there are only three narrative possibilities:

<u>Reflector</u>	<u>Narrator</u>	<u>Example</u>
totally effaced	reflective narrator (uneffaced "I")	"The Aspern Papers"
"he"/"she"	"I" effaced to any degree	Poe's tales to "The Liar"
narrative reflector ("I")	"I" totally effaced	"After The Storm" "The Killers"

In "The Aspern Papers," no reflector is present; the narrator is a self-reflective consciousness and unreliable. The narrator of Hemingway's "The Killers" and "After the Storm" is totally effaced, directing the reader's attention to the first or third-person narrative reflector; as Booth points out, no narrator exists in "The Killers" save the author's second or implied self (Booth, p. 151). Poe's first-person tales, including those using unreliable narrators, and James' "The Liar," represent distant points on the

scale of partially effaced narrators.

²³ Henry James, The Novels and Tales of Henry James, Vol. 12, New York Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 315.

²⁴ Booth explains that ". . . a rhetorical aspect is contained within the conception: the subject is thought of as something that can be made public, something that can be made into a communicated work" (pp. 104-105).

²⁵ Booth laments James' occasional loss of matter to viewpoint, and suggests that the narrator "was not adequate to the task of evoking the poetry of the visitable past" (p. 356).

²⁶ Weaver observes that "what we have in Poe's 'Ligeia' is a wondrous rhetorical machine. It is a machine, not an organism; when they succeed, such machines give the illusion of organic life--of 'reality'" (p. 131).

THREE FICTIONS: APPLICATIONS OF
THE NARRATIVE RHETORIC OF
WAYNE C. BOOTH

KEEPING THE LIGHT

David entered the beach between two dunes that looked like knees. The hot sand began to give and slip beneath his feet, and the wind rippled through his shirt, tapping the fabric against his nipples. The on-shore breeze smelled like iodine. He kicked off his sandals, tossed his shirt aside, and sat cross-legged near the water. The sand's heat pressed against the flesh of his legs and thighs. Overhead, a gull changed from white to black as it slid across the sun, but the sun made colors when his eyes closed, blazing violet, yellow candle flames blooming into green. He licked his lips and tasted salt, stood and brushed the sand from his thighs.

The surf was full, cresting high and brightly, but beyond the surf the sea was smooth, excellent for swimming, especially for strong swimmers. He could swim for miles in this calm sea.

He ran and dove and burst through a wave, leaped into the next and plunged again. He swam out into deeper, colder water, where he paused and scissored his legs slowly, felt himself suspended at the surface like a balloon fifteen fathoms above the ocean's ground. Rising with a swell, he saw following swells, mounting, each mirroring a gash of sunlight.

He dove and opened his eyes under the water, circling.

He saw a body-length away the bright flicker of hand-size fish and beyond them a dark form as large as he, a human form, with colored garlands from chest to abdomen--pink, red, and purple. The head was bald and dotted with blossoms. Face-to-face, the swimmers surfaced.

"Good morning," she said. Her teeth flashed. He coughed, almost choking on the sour broth in his throat. She laughed at him. "Isn't the water lovely?"

He scissored his legs; he felt the pulse of her legs pumping in the water. She wore a bathing cap, wonderfully out of fashion, with three-dimensional flowers protruding from the taut white latex. "You are," he said, "as lovely as the sea."

"I know." She filled her mouth, pursed her lips, and squirted warm water at him. He dove deep. She reached for him and as he surfaced pulled herself in front of him, her hands slipping down his shoulders. "A moonlight sail tonight. Will you board us?"

David raised his arms in the air, sinking as he spoke. "Today is. . . ." He moved only his feet, rising slowly.

"Oh come. Not a whole crew, just comfortable. Why are you laughing?"

"Your bathing cap . . . is gorgeous. Do you know what it does to your face, your lips? I'm having trouble treading water. They're blue, by the way--your lips."

"Pink!" She touched her smile. "Oh, you mean these?"

He laughed and sank burbling. Before him, Lee's body

canted, and her legs parted. She scissored powerfully and began to swim toward the beach. He surfaced beside her and felt their rhythms merge, their strong arms stroking. As they neared the surf, she slowed and called to him.

"I have to quit this joy and be busy. See you later!"

She went under and came up inside a cresting wave, the soles of her feet all of her that showed as she rode the breaker in. David went under, heading out again. As his body flexed, his hair wavered near his eyes, and the bubbles streaming from his nostrils brushed his lips like rose petals.

Salt crystals tingled on the backs of his legs. He stood by the flower garden, his sandals rolled up in his shirt and tucked under his arm. The red garden hose curved through the grass, brightly swollen, a slender jet of water from a tiny leak arcing toward him. The grass beneath his feet felt cold and slimy. Ann was working in the garden. Through the thin fabric of her chemise, he could see the bell-shaped line of her hip, the incurvation of her waist, her shadow-dotted vertebrae. She stood immersed in green, the cordiform leaves like thousands of inverted hearts. David raised a hand to his ear and tugged at the lobe. Hot water popped free and dribbled into his fingers.

"Give up," he said.

Ann turned but did not face him. He saw three rings on the fingers of her left hand--the gold-cable wedding

band and the chromium loops of the scissors. She worked slowly. When she pruned, she pulled the leaf parts away from the stalk of the plant with her forefinger and thumb, cut, then held the snipping aside and released it as a child might a feather to watch it fall.

"There's too much shade," David said. "I told you that."

Ann did not answer. She raised her right hand and combed her fingers through her hair, then moved to another plant. She examined it closely. She opened her mouth, licked her upper lip, pressed the knuckle of her thumb against her lower teeth, and shifted her stance. As her hip swung out the plant beside her swayed, its dull blossoms rocking on thick stems.

"I came back to shower," David said. "After that I'm going to see my grandmother and after that I'm meeting Tom. Don't expect me."

As if she had noticed him for the first time, Ann looked up and spoke without inflection. "I expect nothing." The scissors pointed down. A flash of sunlight burst from the blades.

He strode across the patio, yanked the door open, stepped in, turned, and slowly slid the glass door closed. He placed his fists against it and touched his forehead to the glass. He looked out. Ann was kneeling in her garden, submerged to her shoulders, her pale face floating on the dark foliage. He felt his shirt and sandals slip away and

fall between his feet. Grains of sand spattered on the floor, and the smell of brine came up to him like a surfacing swimmer.

Clam-shell crackled beneath the tires of David's car. He parked in his old space behind the market. His heels pressed into the fragments as he walked, each year's shuckings a blanket over the shuckings of the year before. The building's whitewash gleamed in the mid-day light, and as he reached for the handle of the door--the old brass cleat--he felt the sun's heat in it. The market now was empty. This was too early in the afternoon for customers. He stepped inside, saw a bright trapezoid of sunlight on the floor below the window, and centered in it the fore-shortened shadows of the window's black lettering: F.
Esposito, FISH.

"Hey, Davy!" Esposito came out from behind the cold-case, his white apron folded down from the top and banding his broad chest, knife-sharpened yellow pencils protruding points-up from his shirt pocket. The men shook hands. Esposito's hands made a sandwich of David's.

"How's business, Frank?"

"The fish business stinks." They laughed at the old joke. "Each time you stay away longer, Davy. How are you?"

"The same old same old."

"Your missus?"

"She's fine."

"Hungry?"

David shrugged. At ease in the market, he went behind the counter, opened the door of the walk-in box, and entered. Fog rolled over his feet. The refrigerated air smelled clean. He placed his hands flat on a canvass-covered block of ice, felt his fingers begin to stiffen. "Still cake ice," he said, his breath visible. He looked for the ice pick in its place. "Still there." Near him, the wood slats of a crate of littlenecks sagged like weathered bulwarks, and bushel-sacks of chowder clams lay against the wall like sandbags, the burlap worn and muddy. "I ought to hose these babies down." As he left the walk-in and the heavy oak door swung shut, he held onto the cold iron handle, feeling in his palm the thunk of the bolt into its keeper. Esposito was standing by the cash register. Above his shoulder, tacked to the wall, was a picture post-card. David removed it. The familiar handwriting concealed beneath his thumb, he read the message printed in the upper right-hand corner of the card: Overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, majestic palm trees greet the spectacular Florida sunset. The luxuriant five-petaled blossoms in the foreground are native Royal Poinciana (red), Bauhinia, the poor man's orchid tree" (purple), and the extraordinary Hibiscus known and loved throughout the world (bright orange).

Esposito nodded. "Your parents say they're in paradise. They want nothing." The post-card rose to its white rectangle on the yellowed wall, and the tack reseated itself

exactly.

"What they want," David said, "is a kid to take to Disneyland." Esposito laughed. David faced him. "Look at me, Frank." His arms fell to his sides, hands open, palms forward. "Look."

"The sandals?"

"Higher."

"The shorts? Shorts and sandals--you're a beatnik."

"My shirt, Frank. Esposito smoothed his own sleeves, the limp blue denim salt-streaked and faded. "It's white, Frank. All my shirts are, corporation white."

"So?"

"So this is my friggin birthday present, from Ann. Christmas the same, plus another watch. Capisci?"

Esposito hesitated, his bottom lip puckering. He folded his sleeves back neatly to the elbows, then crossed his arms. "Sure I do. But accountants make regular money, every season of the year. You can always fish on the weekends."

David stepped forward. "You were almost a godparent, Frank. Six months after my wedding."

A tremor moved along Esposito's jowl. He looked past David toward the window. Stark in the sun, the backward letters of his name arced his pupils as they shrank.

"We scuttled it, Frank. We weren't ready then. Now. . . ."

Esposito turned away. His right elbow flexed and rose,

descended, moved in and out. The apron's strings slipped their knot, but strong brown hands came round to tie them tight again. He stepped up to the big box and went inside, moving heavily, making things clatter, and came out in a cloud of rolling fog, the breath of the walk-in. He wiped his face with the hem of his apron.

"Hungry, were you, Davy? I must not have heard what you told me."

"Yeah, Frank. I think I am."

Out of the reach-in came a tub of oysters. As the tub slid onto the cutting table, fist-size chunks of ice rattled and ticked over the oysters.

"Go ahead, Davie, shuck a few. There's the knife. Still got your touch?"

He picked up an oyster and cradled it in his palm, the ridged edge of the shell against his fingers. He raised the knife and inserted the tip of its thick blade into the knuckle of the shell. Cold liquid trickled through the crotches of his fingers. He pressed the knife and twisted, flicked to and back, and the oyster was open. He watched the livid body shimmer and contract as he raised the half-shell to his lips and sucked the oyster in. He felt himself grin as he swallowed.

"Protoplasm," he said.

"Old lover's tongue."

Spinning on the table, the shells' empty interiors opalesced Delft blue and white, soft gray, purple. David

opened two more, and the men raised their shells, their voices one. "Salute." They drank.

"Going to visit your grandmother, Davy?"

"It's my birthday."

Esposito swung his leg out and hooked the toe of his rubber boot inside a crate, its metal rasping against the concrete floor as he pulled the crate close and raised his boot heel to it. "Yes." He rested his elbow on his knee, the metal creaking under him, and turned one hand inside the other, rubbing the palm with his thumb. "That was the day I got these." He raised his hands, both palms banded with white scars. "Thirty years and one whole hell of a lot of fish from the sea ago."

David opened more oysters and placed them at the edge of the table. The shells rotated slowly, halfway round. "And remember when this place was first mine, Davy, when your grandmother retired from the fish business, to raise flowers, she said, to garden and to cook?" Leaving its shell untouched, he lifted an oyster with two fingers and flicked the gray meat into his mouth. He chewed twice and swallowed. "Twelve years old you were, just beginning to tug at the front of your pants, and already you could shuck oysters as fast as any one on the dock. Good days."

"Did you know my grandfather, Frank?"

"No." He shook his head slowly. "Nobody here did, Davy." He picked up a chunk of ice and turned it in his hands. The meltage dribbled from his wrists. He dropped

the ice into the oyster tub and dried his hands on his apron. "To us, your grandmother was just herself and her son--your dad. A strong person, your Grandma, always looking half her age, but scheming like an old sailor. Came from California during the war and got the jump on everyone. You've heard the story. I love to tell it. Started the best fish business in Jersey, ended up with three trawlers, a store, and a restaurant. Some lady. Once in a while, on the dock in bad weather working net, there'd be a little wine and she'd talk some about him. Hah. I ended up with her store and a thousand problems. Not quite what I bargained for." He pointed to the last oyster. "Mangia."

"I wish I'd known him, my grandfather. I don't even remember his name. We're alike, I think." He ate the last oyster and returned the tub to the reach-in.

"No, your grandfather was a mean man, Davy. He liked to get himself up inside skirts. Like all mean men, he was stupid. Thank God you can't inherit stupidity." David gathered up the shells and tossed them into the bone-tucket. The shells clattered like broken dishes. "And he was a betting man, Davy. Lost both his sloops that way. She told us once how he bet too heavy on a race from--what y'a call--Point Reyes to Half Moon Bay. That's west coast, you know, near San Francisco." Esposito held his hands slanted at his apron top, one partly above the other. "He was tacking on the weather side, in order to keep the wind. Figured he'd get the leeward boat into his shadow. But he misread

the sky. The wind shifted a couple of points and first thing you know he's under a corner of the other man's trawl. See?" The hands evened. "The leeward boat won clean."

David rinsed his hands in the knife pail. "What did Grandpa lose, Frank?" He dried his hands on his shirt-tail. The old man straightened. He kicked the crate aside and grinned.

"Your grandmother."

From outside came the crackle of tires on the clam shells, a car door slamming, a heel pressing into the shells. Now the afternoon people would begin to come, to buy fresh seafood for their dinners. They would stand in front of the cold-case and look through the slanted glass, asking Frank questions about the season and the luck of the fleet. In white enameled trays were overlapping fluke filets and gutted whiting, the ventral cuts pink threads, rows of soft-shell crab, tubs of headless shrimp, and stacks of whole, hard-eyed bass thicker than a man's arm, their mouths clenched fists.

"Still sell marinated olives, Frank?"

Esposito laughed and clapped his hands, the palms cupped and thudding like a wave running in along the jetty, trapping air between the boulders. "Sure. I'll give you a pint to take along--for your birthday."

"You know," David said, "the way things are with us it's best we have no children." He reached for the olives.

Frank nodded.

"Yes. For them."

David stood aside for the customer, then turned to leave. The paper sack crinkled in his hands.

"Davy, tell your Grandma I'll have fresh lobster-- Friday the latest. Good weights."

He rang the doorbell, read his own surname above the gnarled black button. He called through the screened door. "It's David." In the narrow hallway, the echo of his greeting blended with the drone of the old bell, its clamor thickened by layers of paint. He waited. He remembered throaty yelps, the race suddenly begun, his hands out against the wall to block his cousins as he rushed ahead to get into Grandma's arms first or fall down trying. "Hello?" He made shade with his hand and peered through the metal screening. He could see down the hall into the parlor, but there were no slippers on the sofa, so she wasn't napping. He tugged the door handle, but the hook was fast.

Half sunk into the lawn beside the house, its lapstrake hull now loose and passing light, a wooden dory painted white overflowed with red geraniums. David walked between the flower boat and the house, stooping to look in the parlor window. A crocheted pull dangled like a little life preserver on a satin ribbon from the window shade. On the cushions of the sofa lay a yellow trapezoid of sunlight with the shadow of his head and shoulders in it. The sack

containing the marinated olives crinkled, and as he shifted it to his other hand the shadow on the sofa rolled over. He went to the kitchen window, ready to tease her about not hearing the doorbell, but she was not in the kitchen. The captain's chairs were in their places. A basketed Chianti bottle stood in the center of the table, the white candle in the bottle half gone, its wick a fishhook. She would be in the yard, then. As he stepped around the corner of the house, his heel snapped a twig and he felt his face break into smile.

She waved. He stood still, the sunlight hot on his chest, and looked. The wire fence dividing his grandmother's yard from that of her neighbor had become a skeletal support for a solid wall of pink roses. He studied the pinkness of them, thousands of roses, their stems woven into the wire mesh of the fence, thousands of individual pale red whorls, each glowing in soft shadow like some marvelous confection. His grandmother smiled, small against the rose-fence. He walked toward her slowly, as if the air had the consistency of a creamy batter, his legs wood spoons stroking through it.

"Thirty!" she said, reaching out with both hands to touch his face. He kissed her cheek and took her hands in his, felt their arthritic stiffness. They no longer mended net, but these hands could garden. Her black eyes reminded him.

"I stopped by the market." He lifted the container of

olives from the bag. "'Frank's Famous' Lobster by Friday, he says. Good weights."

She nodded. They each took an olive. David rolled the olive against the roof of his mouth with his tongue, as she had taught him to do, to get the flavor of the garlic oil, the oregano and basil. "How's Ann?" she said.

"Fine. Gardening too, when I left."

She chewed the olive slowly, watching him, smiling. The flesh of her throat was loose, sagging from her jaw. She turned aside to spit out the olive pit. It arched flickering into the grass. He watched as she worked her hands into a pair of canvass deck gloves, holding her hands erect so they would not lose the gloves before her disobedient fingers were in their places. He remembered how these hands cleaned and floured fish, broke bread, had delighted him for hours transforming lengths of cord into complexities of knots that became whales and butterflies and the heads of babies. She touched his arm. The fingers of the glove were rough as weathered wood.

"Will you help me, David?"

"Of course. He looked around the yard for something to be moved, perhaps the hand-lawnmower, the old sickle. He picked up an empty bushel basket, and while he waited to be told what to do with it, his grandmother bent down with a groan, her legs spread for balance, her swollen feet spilling from the insteps of her blue felt slippers. She lifted a pair of hedge shears. Parting her lips, her teeth

a white gash, she forced her hands around the wooden handles. Slowly, she began to work the shears. The blades clanked shut and opened, sunlight glinting on their bevels.

"What are you going to do?" David said.

She moved close to the rose-fence, jammed the shears forward, and snapped them shut. A dozen roses leaped into the air, somersaulting brightly, tumbling to the ground.

"Grandma?"

She stared at him. "What?" She nodded toward the sun and raised an elbow toward the roses. "They keep the light." The blades clanked. Roses leaped and tumbled. "These things aren't doing anyone any good." She spoke with anger, her bridgework shifting. David waited to hear her teeth thunk into place. "So."

The ground was becoming pink. David got busy. He filled the bushel basket with roses and carried them to his car. He rushed back past the geranium boat, huffing, his shirt damp. He knelt to refill the basket. Thorns nipped at his wrists and arms. He giggled. "Birthday roses, Grandma. I'll decorate my cake with them!"

The blades stopped cutting. The shears hung, touching the ground, tugging her arms straight. She shifted her weight to one foot. Her cheeks filled with lines.

"Frankie caught a dud torpedo in his trawl. Shark, he thought, and tried to haul it up. Could have blown him clear back to Brooklyn." She laughed. "Frankie was always lucky, till he got ambitious." The sleeves of her white

sweater fell to the cuffs of her gloves. "In the afternoon we were on the market dock working net. I was, anyway. Frankie just walked in circles and cursed his luck, squeezing a chunk of ice. Your father called. He says, 'What time is it, Ma?' Eight-oh-five. He says, 'We named him David.'"

"That's all he said?"

She seemed not to have heard his question. She gazed past him. "A baby's a baby, no matter the name. So Frankie and I celebrated pretty good that night, him holding his wine glass with two bandaged hands. He'd got line burns across his palms from hauling in that torpedo, deep ones. Months later I could feel the welts like leather straps when he touched me." She shook her shoulders. "Your father came in about midnight. We all got drunk." She turned and looked toward her kitchen door as if she had heard laughter. She nodded. "Dud torpedo. U-boat, we figured. Nazi."

She raised the shears, clipped rose vines with the bladetips, and yanked out the long, thorny stems as though they were the innards of fish. She worked the shears expertly. Some lengths of vine caught in the thick wool of her sweater, dangling by their thorns like hooks with wire leaders, swaying rigid when she stooped to lunge again with the shears. Holes had opened in the rose-fence, and through the holes passed swaths of sunlight to a double row of young tomato plants, forming light green crescents on the bright green fruit. She turned and laughed with satisfaction.

"There. Now we'll have sauce." She winked and poked her elbow into David's chest. He stumbled backward. "You can't make tomato sauce out of roses, David. Here." She kicked at a heap of pink blossoms. They splashed up his legs. "Here." He ran to his car with another basketful.

The trunk of David's car reeked with rose must. "Fumes in here," he mumbled, "like black bananas." He plunged his hands into the pink mound--"brown baked apples"--and carried more flowers to the end of the dock, where he sat with his bare legs dangling and tossed the roses one at a time into Shark River. The current was strong. The ebb had been increasing since mid-afternoon, flushing nutrients downriver from the tidal flats, taking out his floating line of roses.

Gulls were overhead, gyrating in the sky, dissecting the arcs of their flight with their raucous cries, sliding downwind, oceanward. David counted the charter boats--just a few--docked near the bridge. The marina was nearly empty, all the big party boats gone out. The fluke were biting. Right now the afternoon party boats would be off shore where the double-eyed flatfish lay, each boat white on the water, dozens of bright-hatted people leaning over the gunnels, their poles dipping and rising, their lead-weighted lines plumbing bottom, fingers tense, waiting for the tug of found food. Later, in August, the blues would be hungry--ferocious--and bluefish trolling would be good as long as

the weather stayed cool. Blues run deeper in the heat. He tossed a rose and watched an eddy take it toward the bow of Tom's boat. It was a Leuhrs, cabined version of the Sea Bright skiff, an old rum-runner and a good blueing boat. As the rose swung past the bow of the Leuhrs, vibrations of a footfall moved through the dock. David felt them with his thighs and recognized the walker.

Tom stepped down onto the transom of his boat, went into the cabin and brought out a fifth of Canadian rye. Remounting the dock, he broke the seal of the bottle and pocketed the cap. "Happy birthday, Dave." He held out the bottle. "Half your life is gone." David took the bottle and guzzled. Tom crouched at the edge of the dock and spat into the river. Muscles in his neck twitched.

I've decided," David said, "to take the plunge."

"Tonight?"

"Aye."

"Tommy'll cast off early."

A breeze came upriver, and as the water flashed green-gray cold air pulsed out from beneath the dock, tickling the hair on David's legs. He reached down and brushed his legs with a fist of roses. Tom nodded.

"You old sailor-man."

David laughed. "Are you serious? I'm a landlubber, a commuter-man." The sky slanted in Tom's mirrored glasses, then the river, then David's face.

"Sailor." Tom took the bottle, drank, and gave it

back. "Salt water and fish milt."

Whiskey tickled David's chin. He wiped away the whiskey with a rose. Tom took the bottle and pointed down with it as if the bottle were a flashlight. "Snappers busy in the river." David spread his feet apart and looked in. A school of killies edged out from beneath the dock. The killies swam as a single fish, each individual killie swerving parallel to all the others. A snapper blue with a mouth the size of a human mouth took a killie in an eyeblink. Several fish from the school burst into the air. "There we go," Tom said. Raising both hands, David tossed two roses.

"Life is an infinitudinous bitch."

Tom picked up a rose and twirled it in his fingers. "How many of these have you chucked so far?" David counted with his fingers.

"If I conform to the national average, which is nine-and-a-half times a month, allowing for menstruation and ovulation, about three years' worth." He stood, craning his neck to see into the trunk of his car. "Most gone now."

He stumbled and reached out, remembering what he had eaten all day, three oysters and an olive. He steadied himself and waited to feel sick. Across the river, the eelgrass bowed toward him and seconds later he smelled decay, the stench of some carcass rotting hidden in the grass. Tom guided him toward the transom of the Leuhrs. They stepped down. David's knees buckled as the boat

rolled with two men's weight, but Tom caught him and eased him into a deck chair. The boat's lines were cleared, the diesel engines were rumbling, and they were moving. More gulls were up, in a yellowing sky. Against the sky's light, a fly-swarm hovered above the stern like a bruise.

The river was low. The boat's outriggers passed beneath the bridge with room to spare and the Leuhrs moved quickly toward the ocean. David faced aft. Homes receded from his peripheral view, some with their rooms visible, their lamps lighted. The wakes of the diesels spread like legs on the water, with roses floating between them. The Leuhrs cleared the ends of the jetties, her stern descending as she mounted the first ocean roller to its crest, and plunged. Stooping, David crept forward. He steadied himself behind the main deck windshield. He could see far, other boats too, in a flood of blue light all across the water. And the moon was coming up--he could feel it--a big birthday cake of a moon was about to bulge from the sea.

Tom shouted down from the deck of the flying bridge. "There she is, starboard bow."

Moving forward along the sheer, David clamped his hands to the rail and leaned into the spray. He spotted one of the roses on the water, saw others astern of the yawl, her mainsail swollen with pink and violet light, her bow rising languidly, cradled in cream-colored foam. He felt the surge of the engines in his palms.

"It's my Grandpa Francisco!"

"Your who?"

"My gambling Grandpa," David yelled, "running windward!" His shirt flew overboard, the sleeves spread like a gull's wings. He danced out of his sandals, legs apart and sure on the narrow bow walkway. He ducked under the rail and crouched, ready, his torso dripping wet, arms rigid, hands clutching the bow cleats, the wind binding his shorts tight in his groin like a diaper. But Tom veered toward the yawl, against the chop of the waves, the Leuhr's bow elevating, hovering, falling and swaying, elevating, hovering, falling. Indigo and green, the horizon rocked. David sank to a squat. Reaching behind, he gripped the rail with both hands and vomited into the wind, fouling himself each time the bow rose, choking, feeling the spray cleanse him with each descent, and laughing at his confusion, his predicament, his grandfather's yawl sailing toward this cake-rise. He waved to Tom to come about. Tom ignored him, slowing to approach the yawl, where two women stood by the mizzen, their faces dim. David shouted--veer away!--but the wind blew back his words and the spray forced them down his throat like chunks of bone. He let go, leaped free.

The water buoyed him up. The Leuhrs began to circle, slow, rolling on the swells. Tom called from the bridge, his voice far up, his head among the night's first stars.

"Climb out of there, you lubber--we've got business aboard the Lay-D-Lee."

"I'm swimming in."

"The tide's against you!"

He scissored his legs and kicked. Tom was wrong. The tide had slackened. The ocean was warm, obedient, and each stroke of his arms drove him forward. His breath bubbled from the corners of his mouth. Far ahead loomed the dark shoulder of a jetty. The beach was to his right, then, gently sloped to receive him, its surf cottony, and bleeding above it a narrow wedge of sunset. As he swam, the moon's light silvered the backs of his hands.

TOMY'S STARLING

When I look back on my twelve years of childhood, I think of that period as the first trimester of my life. Beyond the twelfth, unseeables grow into monstrosities, like speckled eggs become eaglets, fluffy dinosaurs. I've come full term, and at thirty-six have borne more than blood and soft bones. Now I can see clearly what I could not see then: the flow of those four month-like years--from the twelfth to the sixteenth--and me the adolescent woman fluttering through them, excitedly hungry, as badly feathered and as clumsy as a young thrush.

While we watched, me from my porch-side bough, my friend Tomy from below, a dozen starlings toddled in the grass by the pink dogwood in the corner of Tomy's yard. They ducked and fluttered past each other like black-coated people in a sidewalk rush. Tomy had been reading about training wild birds to talk. According to his book, young crows could be taught to say things like evermore, and as people knew, starlings mimic words as well as crows do.

"Their color shows their intelligence," he said. "Crows and minah birds and starlings are related. By their blackness and because naturally they're mimics. So you can teach them to talk in the words of a person." I looked down on his speckled head, fuzzy with new-grown hair around white loops like Cheerios where the scabs were. The doctor had

told him he was lucky not to have lost an eye. "That's why I'm going to catch a starling," Tomy said, "a young one that doesn't have his own cluck-patterns learned. So I can teach him words." He peeled a sheet of bark from the trunk of my sycamore. I held my breath and counted backwards. "Forget all that egg-stealing business." He rubbed his scalp and pointed across the hedge. "Look. Him, for instance."

One of the starlings moved more awkwardly than the others, fluttering side-to-side, pecking unselectively. It had yet to learn to strut the way its elders did, their black eyes flashing, their heads bobbing, their wings rigid like the shoulders of marching drummer-men. This young one stopped to peck at something, its beak plunging deep into the grass. In me, low in the center of me, something pinched. I kept still, the bough of the sycamore hard beneath my vertebrae.

"I'm going to try another way," Tomy said. "I'm going to use corn this time. See you later, Nance."

I lay still, my knees braced against the sycamore's mottled trunk; behind me, the tree's bough sloped up toward my bedroom window like a ramp for someone in a wheelchair. Another peck. A breeze moved the green rocker on the front porch, as if whoever had been there rocking, thinking and rocking, had gone inside the house. I waited.

My mother came to the summer door at noon. She peered at me through the puffed-out screening, her arms folded, the

pocket of her apron bulging with a rumpled handkerchief. She suggested lunch, creme of celery soup with wheat crackers crumped up in it, but my favorite sounded painful now. Later she brought out the daisy-chain pitcher filled with lemonade and Grandma's centennial plate ringed with honey-grahams. She placed these on the wicker table beside the rocker. As the summer door creaked, she turned to speak to me. Through the screen, her whiteness was a green blur. I told her I was fine. Mosquitoes never bite in daylight. She said my name, Nancy, and went inside.

I was thirsty, but when I thought about the lemonade I imagined myself chewing lemon pits and my mouth flooded full of bitterness. I turned away and blinked twelve times and pretended that each time I opened my eyes a year had passed. I gazed into my sycamore's complexity of limbs and leaves, bright green rocking palms, hands with their fingers sliced away, bleeding blue light. Again I turned my head toward Tomy's yard. The foreshortened shadow of the sycamore lay halfway across the yard, a huge head of broccoli with a dimpled turnip in its center--Tomy's backside, grinning at me over his beltless jeans. He crouched perfectly still, his knees drawn under him, his buttocks high, leaning on his elbows with his hands pointing forward like a blade. His fishing pole was beside him in the grass. Although I couldn't see it, I knew there was a line, a taut nylon line extending from Tomy's fingertips across the lawn to the stick that propped up a cardboard box he'd set beneath the

dogwood tree. By pulling on the line he would dislodge the stick and spring the trap. And I knew that the trap was baited with corn, a talon-yellow mound of it. We waited.

There was not a sound anywhere, not even birdsong. The air was all hush. Higher than my house, a breeze caught in the top of my sycamore and tugged. I looked straight up and squinted, focusing farther and farther up till only the highest leaves came clear and I saw in them silent black fists. Each bird held fast, feet clasped tightly to a knuckled finger of the tree, waiting for the surge they felt coming. Wind rushed in, bending the high branches all one way, inverting the leaves and making their pale undersides flash sideways in the sun like fishbellies. The starlings flexed their wings but clung to their perches. The sycamore leaned, held by the invisible, and I counted . . . eight . . . six . . . until the wind let go and in the same instant the birds let go, flew free, descending in a long, steep arc toward the dogwood while the sycamore straightened and down the length of her, up my bough, through my spine, came the splinter of a groan.

I pressed my stomach flat with both hands and called my mother. She brought out my rolled-up saddle blanket and placed it close by on the porch rail. She told me where everything upstairs was--the old towel, the pads and the pins. She'd make hot tea if I wanted some. I wanted none. I had time left yet. When she went inside I squinted and made myself whistle through my teeth for Tomy. He ran

up the porch stairs, plopped down in the rocker, and helped himself to a handful of grahams, warming lemonade.

"Almost, Nance. The young one--the one I want--I almost had him. The old boys ate the corn but they didn't buy the trap. He almost did." I thought of the box in my mother's closet, standing open-end up, beside her red shoes. Tomy nodded, and when he spoke graham crumbs spurt from his lips. "Birds I guess don't trust things with corners." He filled his mouth, three grahams at once, and a swig of lemonade to melt them into mush. Beneath my ache I was hungry. I turned myself toward him and lay with one arm crooked, weaving my fingers through my hair, my free arm loose along my hip. For a moment I relaxed. Tomy munched, rubbing the scabs on his head. "These things itch." He picked at one. Upstairs, on the doily on the commode tank, was the gauzy bandage like a slab of French vanilla ice-cream. I felt laughter rise from me, heard it echo along the front of the house like a ribbon threading in and out of the porch rail banisters.

"Tomy," I said, "give up. Go to the pet shop and buy a parakeet. They can say a hundred things, and besides, they're pretty."

Sunlight dribbled down his nose like rain. "Pretty is exactly what I don't want. Can you understand that? Black is realer. Besides, a wild bird tamed is best. Any more graham crackers?"

"You devoured them already."

"C'mon--I've been here for hours, remember. Did anything happen yet?"

I shook my head, wishing instantly that I had not, because I regretted our confidence, my honest explication. Now I wanted to keep this event to myself. It was mine. "Tomy," I said, his face dimming as my eyes closed, "mind your own business. Run along and chase the foolish birds." When I heard his sneaker soles below me, scuffing the dry earth where we had worn a break through the hedge, I opened my eyes. Inside the summer door, my mother looked out, her face pale with the powdery light that sifted through the screening. I turned away, taking my bedroll and making a pillow of it. I lay back and locked my arms across my chest. I focused my eyes on the bark of the sycamore. Always here and there some bark was peeling free, exposing its underskin, green-gold, brown, and gray. The bark came loose in puzzle-pieces. Tomy and I had made collections of them that we kept in flat boxes with pictures pasted on their lids, pictures of trees. I looked for him.

He was crouched in ambush behind his father's compost pile. In the center of the yard lay an oval of bread, torn hunks of it, and within the oval a single round ball of bread, a white dot. I knew the line was there, the invisible line from the breadball through the grass to Tomy's fishing pole. I looked hard to be sure: yes, the fishing pole--in his hands now--and embedded in the breadball a hook. I rose, my arms rigid, my legs straddling

the bough. Something jolted inside me, not like my sycamore's bark, thin and flaky, something like a wedge of snow dropping from her limbs. The starlings descended from the dogwood and settled near the oval. They converged on the bread, each strutting, some rushing ahead to assert possession of the food. The young one fluttered past them all, to the center of the bread ring, excited, wings half open.

"Tomy," I called. The birds--all the flock but one--cowered. "Tomy!" They flew up, all together, but the victim had taken the hooked bait in its beak and as it rose the sunlit nylon line ascended with it like a thread of cobweb. The fishing pole whipped back and forth, its metal tip slashing. The young bird lurched and began to fall, the hook lodged in its throat, I thought, tearing everything--its voice--and at last Tomy understood his stupidity. He opened his hands and the pole rolled down the compost heap. His face paled; his mouth became a dark red spot. The starling let go too, when it remembered how, and the breadball dropped like a feather from its beak. Flying toward me, the bird swooped low, close to the ground, and hid in the hedge.

My mother helped me from my bough. She held my arm as I stepped onto the porch rail and down to the summer door. Then she leaned over the rail and unrolled my saddle blanket so it draped the bough like a bed cloth, and she smoothed it with her palms for my return. Her apron filled

with pale green light. I smelled her soap. I saw the white, tightly woven fabric of her blouse, freshly pressed, the collar starched and shiny with the pin hole, and the faint, soft lines of her throat.

For its iron, they made me eat a slice of the liver of a calf. My father called this my communion supper. "You've come of age today. You've got your responsibility." He smiled without showing his teeth, without blinking. I had his freckles and his wiry hair, the color of rust. "You ought to have girlfriends," he said. My mother nodded. I cut my liver into tiny pieces, mixed them with my mashed potatoes, and swallowed without chewing. A buttery mist rose from a mound of steamed spinach in a clear glass bowl. I spooned a fold of spinach onto my plate and when I could without being seen touched the limp, veined leaves. My body trembled as I told them--Tomy is my best friend.

"Right now."

"Boys catch up, out of nowhere, like cats."

They nodded.

We had flowers on the table, not the kind that florists send to hospitals in plastic baskets, but true garden flowers that my mother said were Asters but the seed package called "fleabane"--blue Sincerity, violet Dignity, deep pink Felicity. The centennial plate was on the table, with watermelon wedges like Christmas sponges and in a ring around them whole strawberries lying back on their

shoulders. I raised the ripest to my lips and nibbled at the tip. I formed a tunnel of my left hand, the insides of my fingers soft ribs of the tunnel's wall, and peered through to the strawberry's bleeding.

Outside again, on my bough, I discovered a strawberry seed lodged between two bottom teeth, sucked it free and spit it out. I let my eyes wander down a gray branch to its branchlets, from which in twos and threes the sycamore's seed balls hovered like planets. All around was watery light, as if the August heat welling up from the ground were a color barely visible to human eyes. I turned. In the middle of Tomy's yard something strange was happening.

Tomy was standing there still as a statue, shirttails out, sneakers unlaced, holding a paper sack. A few yards ahead of him gaped the unlidded mouth of the trash barrel. Slowly, he lowered the sack of garbage. He crouched, his knees to his chest, and reached forward with his hands like hooks as he crept toward the barrel. He pivoted on his heel, seized the barrel's metal lid, leaped up and clanked it down. He'd moved so fast he'd sprung out of one of his sneakers. He limped around the barrel, his bare foot pale in the blue-green grass, like a hairless rabbit.

"I have one," he mewled. "Now I have one."

He raised the lid a few inches and reached in, his shoulders rounding. From inside the barrel came the sound of talons rasping metal. The lid fell aside, the metal handles tinked, and slowly he raised his prize, the

starling's head back, its beak open. Tomy straightened.

The heart of my sycamore ticked. Evening breezes were gathering. All around me the seed balls shook, and I felt an in-rush of comprehension, the real scale of things, the presence of as many seeds in each ball as there were balls of seed on my tree, and sycamores on Earth, and earths. Sometimes we'd collect them, trying to have them all, and sometimes we'd disassemble them, plucking the splinter-like seeds, counting out thousands, leaving on each stem a bulb of floss softer than kitten fur, but sometimes we'd scrape away everything, exposing the kernal of the seed ball, its core, hard as a tooth.

Up from the darkening ground came a soft whir. She floated past my cheek like thistledown and lit on my arm beside my vaccination mark. My chin pressed against my collar bone. I studied her chrySTALLINE wings, her hunch-back thorax, bent-eyelash legs, the fluffy snout and blood-taking proboscis. Only the females bite. She positioned herself methodically, rear legs up.

Tomy raised the starling to his face. He made kissing sounds. Between his crossed thumbs protruded one corn-yellow talon, between the heels of his hands the other claw and the stubby black tail. Tomy cocked his head as he spoke. "Your heart goes so fast." Then came the prick of the needle in my arm. "I'd better not keep you," he said, "because if I do, you'd better not live." How, I wondered could he mean this? Tomy let go. He opened his hands and

through his teeth hysst-ed his starling into the air, as if he were flying. The freed bird blew up from him, swooped, flew toward me, my shadowy tree, and I saw nothing, knew nothing, until suddenly the dark wings were rushing in among ten thousand clapping palms.

My mother wheeled me into a tiled room and the doors flapped closed behind us. She whispered, "Just a small scar, babe." Brighter than a noon sun, the huge glass eye bulged over me, ringed with white-handkerchiefed faces, the eyes of each awaiting one tiny face to be forever masked. My mother held my arm, listened to me through her stethoscope. I saw her nurse's emblem, the serpent and the eagle on her collar like a silver insect. I counted--sixteen . . . fourteen . . . twelve--and there, inside an inverted flask tethered to me by a nylon line, the flask a lens that in this white light somehow collected dark, there perched Tomy's starling, bright black, watching me with all its feathers.

BOILED BEETS

An ex-love phoned me on Saturday afternoon. The conversation became sentimental, then dreary. I hung up. I went to my car and started driving, remembering the drizzle of our worn-out words while I listened to the thunk-swish of my windshield wipers, the spitty sound of the tires on wet asphalt. The road ahead converged to a bladed point, and the hood of my car was the feathered end of a long-shafted arrow, with me riding in the notch.

After a couple of hours of aimless driving, I stopped at a supermarket to buy a newspaper and a few groceries I needed. Inside, the air was dry and bright, musical. The store had a familiar floor plan, much like the market I was used to, and I forgot that I was in a strange place. I whistled softly as I pushed my silver grocery card with my thumb and pinky, reaching out for this and that: canned vegetables, a can of peach halves, a can of coffee. . . . I had just picked up the coffee and was rounding the end of the aisle when I saw her.

She was a nurse, I noticed, with white shoes and white stockings. She was wearing a white vinyl coat with a white fur collar, out of which her face protruded like the center lip of an orchid. We passed each other quickly and I headed for the frozen juices. My cart had a sticky wheel, with a flat spot on it, maybe. It kept wanting to swerve, and did,

touching the cart of a younger woman--lovely--to whom I gave my warmest smile. She returned it. I swung my head round to watch her walk, her hips rocking wonderfully, her cart rolling smoothly before her, and was stepping sideways, reaching into the freezer case for a can of orange juice, when I discovered an arm parallel to mine reaching in for lemonade. My breath clouded. A bony hand extended from a white sleeve; the hand's ring-finger wore a large red birthstone--garnet, February twenty-second--the facets of the cheap gem like dents in a maraschino cherry, the knuckles of the finger gnarled, woody.

A person's entire state of health, I've read, can be determined from a finger. "Digitology," I think it's called. The bones of this finger, I thought, were beginning to warp with age. Hansel and Gretel's deception, the twig the witch would feel to see if the time had come for her to light her oven--and was that the only part of Hansel the witch reached into the cage to feel? Witches--they grow strange when they get on in years. I remember one witch who sat in the back of my night-school economics class. She wore white net stockings, with a pleated skirt that nearly popped its hems when she spread her knees for the man who dared gaze into her frost-mantled cave of fruit.

I had finished my shopping and was too close to the 10-Items-Or-Less register to back away without doing so clumsily when I saw her there ahead of me. Now, with people behind me, I was stuck, and to look outside beyond the

window sale-signs into the clearing sky, the sinking yellow twilight, would be to look her way. So I gazed down at the food she was buying: a small steak, a chicken breast, half a pound of cheese. Cocktail olives. They were single person's items, I understood, just enough to get her through the next few days. She was rationing her hope that before this food ran out she'd hear from a friend, maybe some friend to go out and get drunk with, dance up a sweat, jump into bed. I moved my groceries forward, my frozen juice, my can of coffee, my this and that, and I risked a stare.

She was wearing too much mascara. I pictured a long black smudge on my pillowcase. Her heat-curled hair had unraveled in the rainy air and was snaking out in all directions. She touched one drooping curl and pretended it was in place. The garnet glittered. She picked up her bag and walked away. Suddenly I was pocketing my change, lifting my bag, walking toward the exit with my lips pursed to whistle a happy tune. Six paces outside the door the witch confronted me, her long-nailed finger pointing like an arrow toward the center of my chest.

"Why did you leave?" she said. I froze. She stepped closer, pushing a hip out to support her bag of groceries. Her hair shook. The cloud-smearred yellow sky gleamed in her eyes. Her mouth hardened, the lips like day-old scabs. Her words crackled. "I've accepted the facts--finally. I've found a new identity. Dr. Abrams helped me find it. I know I'm too old to remarry, to be normal. I'm too old

to have children, and I can live with that, but I've never known just why--tell me--why did you leave?"

My God, I was amazed! I couldn't believe this was happening to me. Already passers-by were turning their heads like signal-seeking antennae, trying to analyze this terribly distorted radiation. The woman was crazy. For some strange reason this unknown, abandoned soul had fixed on me as the cause of her disjointed existence. I had reminded her of him. But why? Had she sensed my silent mockery of her live-alone life? Whatever had touched off this explosion, an explosion had most definitely occurred, and my first impulse was to shield my face with my arms. But I'm a foolish man in an emergency, who would throw water on an oil blaze, try to run from a bullet. I know myself; I don't react well to sudden threats, and knowing this is my best defense against those dangers that my instincts create. Wisely, I stood still.

More people turned to watch us. I made calculations. If I abandoned this confrontation, just walked away, she would try to salvage fragments of her pride. She would shout at me, curse me, come after me and give the observers more of the ludicrous relationship she thought she remembered. So I decided to go along with her fiction. I would enter it, and she would be so startled by the presence of another person in this fantasy that she would leave.

"I am sorry," I said. She blinked with surprise. How many others had she accosted like this? I went on with it.

"You're right. I should have stated why I was leaving you, but at the time my head was a jumble of thoughts and all I could do was get in the car and drive away. I wanted to let it all recede behind me," I said, "like used-up road in a rear-view mirror. And that was just as well, because my love was all worn out and I felt mean. Believe me, it could have been worse. I might have done something cruel."

My strategem was working. Her pupils dilated then contracted as she grappled with my words. Through the brown paper of my grocery bag, my fingers clenched the ribbed wall of a can and creased the metal. My thumb nail split up the middle, the pain like an icepick pressed through.

"I was faithful to you," I said. "I had no other lover--but I wanted to. I craved other women the way trees crave water, the way the birds that roost in them crave flight. I was bored. Bored with you. So I left, and I've kept on leaving, and life alone gets bad sometimes--worse than I thought it would--but I'm never bored. Not with myself. Not ever!"

As I spat out my last words the overhead lights of the parking lot winked on. Empty cars and grocery carts and white lines on the pavement glistened with beaded rain. She stepped back, her mouth open, but she could not speak. She was beaten. The crisis was over. All that remained was for one of us to walk away. First. Someone must fall asleep first; someone must hang up the phone first--which of us would be the first to turn aside, to move a foot,

drop the stare, or take a breath? I waited. I waited too long.

The horn of a nearing car bellowed and I had to get out of its way. As I stepped closer to the building, my grocery bag split open like slashed flesh. I tried to catch a falling can--the wrong instinct--and instantly all the cans were falling, hammering my toes. One of them got a good start and rolled into the parking lot, its label wet, peeling free, its rims grating, its dimpled metal winking back at me--the runaway--a can of boiled beets.

I swore. I stooped to reach for the nearest items, and when I looked up the stranger at whom I had been shouting was gone. It took me less than a minute to gather up my groceries and run to my car, although it felt longer. I left the beets.

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