THINGS HOPED FOR, THINGS UNSEEN

By

RUSSELL BARLOW HILL II

Bachelor of Arts

Midwestern State University

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Name

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PREFACE

Let me begin this critical introduction with what I hope is an explanation and not an unnecessary justification. Things Hoped For, Things Unseen is not a completed work of fiction yet--for the same reason that it is far longer than was required, it will become longer still. There are too many things that need to be made clearer.

I do, however, believe that the story at present can stand on its own as a novella, even if that word is taken to imply less about length than about the structural differences between short fiction and long fiction, the short story and the novel. As indicated, what remains to be done with the story is essentially elaboration and clarification of themes and images and meanings which already exist. And it is this same elaboration and clarification which I see as the substance of this critical introduction. The language of ends and means is in more subjective terms the language of what I meant and what I have so far said. At some point the discrepancy between the two, if it is significant enough, will preclude this piece of writing from standing on its own.

That point--at which this introduction becomes simply what Oliver Wendell Holmes called "post-factor rationalization"--occurs if at all when the suspension of disbelief ends; and there seems little reason not to apply such a literary concept to literary criticism. Meaning is no less present because it is not initially obvious, as literature has always recognized. But criticism (unlike literature) cannot create meaning where none existed before, and this principle is the touchstone, the definition of any critical suspension of disbelief. If you decide that you agree with this introduction, that you believe the story said what it meant, then these 181 pages, for lack of a better word, are a novella. I believe they are. But if not, if this introduction gives more weight to the writing than it can bear at this point, then Things Hoped For, Things Unseen is simply an unfinished, hopefully promising, work. And as Philip said, I can handle that.

Every effort of writing attempts to communicate, to share experience, to mean something. At one extreme is writing which attempts to communicate the writer's own individual experience. Here the focus is the writer himself. It is likely that all writing begins in this way, at the extreme a childish self-indulgent effort to reveal one's self, to cling to the belief that one's

self is valuable of and in itself, to perceive one's self as the center of the world and of vital concern to that world. First poems are commonly the most vivid examples of such self-indulgence.

At the other extreme are the poetry and fiction of mechanics, of technique, concerned not with the writer but with conventions. Since we are speaking of extremes it is not hard to describe this type of writing--stilted, lifeless, often enormously complicated, and always, it seems, elitist--and it is just as likely that all persevering writers react in this way to a recognition of their own past indulgences. A recognition, it should be understood, which is only possible in conjunction with another recognition, that of one's own basic insignificance. As might be expected, it is the latter extreme which is most easily and intelligibly discussed, because it is the latter extreme which accepts and even demands the extinction of the individual (and thus unshared) experience.

I will speak later of the bisective properties of the human mind (or at least of language) and of archetypes. But it is enough at this point to argue that the former give validity to any discussion of extremes. And under the latter, archetypes, I include what seem to me to be two of the most powerful and shaping images of our culture, Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the Judeo-Christian <u>mythos</u> of the Fall. Common to both

images is a movement from one extreme to the other, and then back again. Plato's cave-dweller moves upward into the sun and then returns to the cave; Man moves downward from Heaven onto Earth, or out of the Garden into the World, eventually into Death and Hell, and then through redemption returns to Heaven.

The image has implications for writing, a means of expression historically and intimately tied with religion and philosophy. For in both the Cave Allegory and the doctrine of the Fall, the initial movement is not essentially a voluntary one. The cave-dweller is dragged kicking and screaming into the light, Man is expelled from God's presence. It seems probable that any man's life, and especially that of the writer like that of the philosopher and the righteous man, is characterized by the forced and increasingly unavoidable awareness of his own insignificance, his own meaninglessness, what both theologians and T. S. Eliot call the extinction of the personality.

And all men throw up what defenses they best can. Plato's cave-dweller refuses to look at the sun, only watches its reflection, to avoid being blinded; Man performs rituals for a God he is not allowed to see face to face, for a God with whom he will never become One; and the writer writes, at first, to convince himself of his link with other men, and as that link becomes more

strained he escapes into convention, into the traditions that shaped his own past, in the hope and faith that others too were shaped by it. He emerges from innocence and illusion gradually, and never wholly.

But until now there has not occurred a moral act. (The undefined nature of the word may itself be the very reason for its value, as I will discuss later.) The moral act occurs only when the cave-dweller, under no objective compulsion beyond himself, returns to the others in the cave, to show them the shadows as shadows, when the Messiah returns to Heaven from Earth not for Himself alone but "to prepare a place for you." And for the writer, that almost holy act occurs when he returns home and, in his writing, for others, recognizes the place for the first time. Writing is an attempt to communicate, an attempt to share experience, and if the writer recognizes the place only for himself, he has not yet committed the moral act. Whatever meaning results is not by his design.

And the moral act is essential to writing. Writing has value in the degree to which it participates in the moral act and no other. It is surprising that this concept should be so open to criticism by the same men who espouse unity and coherence so highly, because writing itself is always a more or less desperate effort to escape one's own isolation. Meaning is shared

experience, and men, and especially writers, will not accept meaninglessness. To write is to attempt to reach others.

Those who oppose a concept of writing as moral act, more specifically those who attack what John Gardner calls moral fiction, undoubtedly do so because of disagreement with what is meant by "moral." But this disagreement can only exist when the attempt to share experience is perceived as the selfish attempt mentioned earlier, as an attempt to preserve one's own importance in the universe by imposing one's own experience upon others. There is no other ground on which to attack a moral fiction. To attack the very concept of morality in writing, to eschew any moral act as its basis, is accurately possible only in conjunction with the complete abandonment by writer or reader of any attempt to share experience, to create or discover or achieve meaning, as long as unity and coherence remain qualities. Such may be possible, but not for the writer or the reader. For both men, for men who use language uncommonly, the need for meaning and the need for unity are the same need. The inconsistency, the inherent contradiction of writing without morality eventually precludes one or the other.

To properly argue, however, that any attack on morality in writing arises either from disagreement with

definitions or morality or from abandonment of coherence as a virtue, one must also admit that the archetypal movement toward the moral act is never in time a single consummated movement. Archetype and myth, pseudo-statements as I. A. Richards called them, are distinct from scientific or mathematic language (the language of correspondence) in that they can only have meaning in the immediately present context, and this is nothing more complicated than the recognition throughout literature and literary criticism of the value of metaphoric cycles and spirals and recurrences. If the validity of the Allegory of the Cave is to be extended beyond the present, Plato recognized, the cave-dweller must make his escape and return many times. Theology has contended for centuries that Christ is continually crucified and resurrected, and the Communion or Eucharist itself re-enacts or even re-creates the image over and over again. Likewise, the writer: the very act of writing is his first moral act, and subsequent moral acts affect that subsequent writing, as long as he writes.

Evidently these repetitive moral acts, infinite because they are repeated in time and within the infinite changes of context and content which time brings, would themselves dissolve into incoherence and chaos where it not for the common elements which remain constant. And the common elements of this archetypal movement seem to

be two: first, a forced movement away from home, and, second, a return. The essential value of the archetype, perhaps, is that it links the two.

I know very little about psychology or linguistics. But what I do know speaks strongly for what I vaguely sense to be an innate human need or faculty to dichotomize. The ancient vocabularies of gods and men, good and evil, God and Satan, the linguistic structure of reason itself, vividly illustrated in the binary structure of the computer, even the Marxist dialectic and the existential language of chaos and order, of the "I" and the "Other," being and nothingness, seeming and being, being and becoming, and the essential element of humor, the most human of faculties, which Bergson and Freud and Koestler all recognized as the collision of opposing visions--all these vocabularies use extremes. Whether these opposites are the result of physical patterns of the brain or are, as Jung and Frye argue, the result of patterns of experience (light and dark, cold and hot, life and death) is immaterial for the purposes of this introduction. What is important is that they exist for all men, conscious or unconscious or subconscious. And if the archetype links two movements together, it has gained a profound acceptance because men who have explored language and themselves and their experience have discovered a corresponding duality. They have

discovered, they have recognized, or at least they have acted upon the inherent link between both their own growing disillusionment, their own unavoidable amassing of experience, and their need for the illusion they once had, their overwhelming desire to protect themselves from further diminishing.

They have recognized both, and perhaps it has only been through their propogation and preservation of such archetypes that they have been able to share such an experience with others or to indicate that somehow the point of balance and mutual existence of the two has special significance, is especially worthy of communicating, of giving meaning. And if a dichotomy is simply an essential first step or curious analysis, how does that affect the meaning which archetypes and images and religions and literature have maintained through human history? Either the need springs from fear or enthusiasm--the need is still as strong, the myths are still as meaningful.

It is ultimately this need for meaning, this drive toward shared experience which makes the moral act intelligible. It is what defines the intended audience, which every writer and every myth-maker must do. It is what distinguishes between moral and amoral fiction, because moral fiction makes the assumption that the need of only one party, writer or reader, is always

insufficient to create meaning.

First it is the need for meaning which makes the moral act intelligible. Until now this introduction has argued what may well have been conceded: that writing is an attempt to achieve unity, external or internal. The indulgent first poem may attempt to achieve unity, but it is a unity that involves only the writer. For the reader there is no similar achievement, because the work satisfies only the writer's need.

But if for some reason the beginning writer's need continues, if this beginning writer fails to discover the unity he seeks and only accelerates his own isolation through his failure, the writing which results will change, will "mature." And the inevitable path of this change is through convention, tradition, ritual, because the need for meaning is not simply a lack of meaning. It is a <u>loss</u> of meaning. The writer has been dragged kicking and screaming from the cave, he has been expelled from the Garden. But his loss is not total because of his memory, because of his holy power to take the illusion with him. This is where the archetypes and the dualisms and the extremes arise, in the relationship between perception and memory. What we call experience links them both.

The persevering writer responds to his continuing need for unity, then, by resorting to his memory of unity,

his memory of meaning. And as Bloom and Eliot describe it, this return to the traditions, this anxiety of influence, inherently focuses upon the work itself, upon the tradition consisting of other works. It was from here that the writer traced his own lost meaning--that is why he writes. The writer's need for meaning demands that he devote his energies and perceptions to achieving meaning, so he studies his own remembered meanings and explores their characteristics and attempts to duplicate or recreate them. But the truth cannot be spoken, and the writer incessantly matures beyond his work, admits failures and tries again. The truth cannot be spoken, Watts realized in The Wisdom of Insecurity, because it cannot be frozen into speech and time. And it is essential to understand what is embodied in the Cave Allegory and the doctrine of the Fall, that the writer is attempting to keep something, to remain somewhere or in some condition. He is writing now to preserve or to recapture his own unity with the writing of others. The experience he tries to continue sharing or to share again is the experience of other writers and other writings.

For as long as the archetypes remain true for our purposes, the writer follows this path. He needs, he acts, he is forced to admit he needs again. And so he acts again, he writes again, this time differently. But

the truth cannot be spoken. The cave-dweller cannot look at the sun; Man after the Fall cannot eat from the Tree of Life; and eventually, when the writer's experience of his own failure to satisfy his own need is no longer deniable, the first archetypal movement slows and stops. The writer looks ahead and senses that to continue would be blindness, death, writing which was futile. His successes, his extinguishment of the literary personality, have been to no avail. The writer still longs to return home.

It is at this point that the writer considers his audience, his readers, and how best to return to them. Experience has forced him to admit he is isolated from them. With every attempt until now he has been disillusioned, and that is why he is here. His best efforts have not been equal to his need. If he cannot create or discover shared experience, he must quit writing. He must quit needing meaning.

But if he refuses to surrender his illusions to disillusionment, if he refuses to forget that meaning once existed, he has one other choice. He can commit a moral act beyond any he has yet committed, an act of faith more impervious to destruction by experience than any that has gone before. The same act of faith occurs in every repetition of the archetype, in every subsequent act of writing, but at some point there

occurs a quantitative difference which becomes qualitative. Because the act of faith no longer is based upon the writer's need but upon the reader's need--a need from which the writer has already admitted his alienation--there still remains a hope of sharing experience. That is the hope that lies in the reader's need for meaning, and at the point the writer admits his inability to create meaning this comparatively puny and helpless possibility of meaning becomes sufficient. The morality of the act lies not so much in any freedom of choice, but in the "objective" direction of movement. Truth becomes not so much a destination as a last stand, and as Kierkegaard described it the faith is faith precisely because it has no objective justification. If the writer has failed to discover unity with his readers, perhaps he must resort to new readers, more desperate readers.

And so, for the first time, the writer depends not on his own experience and not on his own relationship with his tradition, but on the experiences and traditions of others--not those who have given him meaning, not those to whom he traced any meaning he remembers, because at this point he has exhausted all of his own memories of and capacities for shared experience. He is reversing his movement. He depends now instead on those who will come to him, on those who will redeem him. His focus shifts from his writing to his readers.

As he relies more upon his readers to satisfy his need, he relies upon his own writing less. His energies lie in perceiving and understanding and waiting for his future readers so that he can call to them in a language they will understand, a language he has not before devoted himself to. He still writes, he still calls to them, but he depends now less on his own voice and more on their hearing. Writing becomes a ritual, a ceremony, not the invention but the re-telling of a story already received. The writer does not abandon technique--that would require too much attention--so he simply becomes satisfied with that he has, unpersuaded that a further change in his own meaning is worth the while. He is like a fisherman who has tried every bait he has--now he will try the same baits in a different spot.

In one sense, ironically, the greater the leap of faith the writer makes into illusion, the more divorced from perception and experience, the less it distorts that perception and experience. But in another sense he no longer strives for that accuracy of description, that degree of definition which expresses accurately his own individual experience or tradition, but instead is content to use the most undefined and undefinable of words. Not only are those the only words which he senses can withstand experience and disillusionment, but they are also words which appeal to the strongest of needs in

his readers, words which run less risk of highlighting the distance and separation between the two.

It is true that the writer's path now leads back toward the indulgent author of the first poem and away from the complexities of formalism and convention, back toward an unfounded reliance--a hope--on the reader and away from the techniques and mechanics grounded in experience and perception. But it does not follow that the end of this new path will be that same naive self-indulgence. For the writer, no matter how much he wishes otherwise, cannot forget or ignore. If he could, a far less radical act of faith would have been required. Now the writer will see the shadows as shadows, now he will know the place for the first time.

Nor does it follow that the trip out of the cave and the trip back down are of equal value, or that the fall from Heaven and then salvation are of equal worth. The archetypes are unmistakable: the former movement is forced, the latter movement is the one which is moral, if only an instinct of survival. The former is characterized by disintegration, by chaos, by disillusion, by experience; the latter is characterized by faith, by illusion.

In a world where experience leads to isolation and proves in the end to be incoherent, unity can only exist in faith and hope, in what the languages of correspondence

and criticism call illusion and myth. "The fool multiplies words," the Bible says. We ultimately return, always, to the myths of old, Plato says. And in creating one of the most overpowering if brief myths of modern history, Adolf Hitler in Mein Kampf said what is no less true because he recognized it: the broader the appeal that writing intends, the simpler must be its content.

> The people in their overwhelming majority are so feminine by nature and attitude that sober reasoning determines their thoughts and actions far less than emotion and feeling. And this sentiment is not complicated, but very simple and all of a piece. It does not have mutliple shadings; it has a positive and a negative; love or hate, right or wrong, truth or lie, never half this way and half that way, never partially, or that kind of thing.

Things Hoped For, Things Unseen assumes that writing should be addressed to those who most need it. I cannot say that more sophisticated and perhaps complex readers have needs for meaning which are just as strong as those of more vulgar, simpler readers, because I am convinced that the most powerfully-written and well-executed works of literature in themselves mean less to the reader than far inferior works with which he sometimes establishes a non-literary connection. A personal letter or a first poem may well have more meaning than a cornerstone of the literary heritage, whether such meaning can be taught or not. Any theory of writing is

unsatisfactory which discounts the power of a work like Mein Kampf because it will not admit its external meaning, the shared historical experience beyond its syntax. Writing should be ultimately concerned with meaning, not with itself. Criticism may not allow itself to create meaning where none existed before, but if it discounts any meaning at all it becomes too proud, inadequate for those who are desperate for meaning. Meaning is not the exclusive domain of literature, any literature. And criticism is no less entitled to minimize it than are those forced to deal with the Third Reich:

> I remembered something from my own childhood that I had pushed away. It was 1936. I was thirteen, traveling to Vienna from my boarding school in England. The train stopped in Nuremburg--it was the day of the rally and we were told we would be held up for several hours. "Why don't you go and see it?" said the guard to me and another little girl. "It's exciting." We went. We stood way back on the very edge of what looked like a million people, all standing in perfect symmetry and brilliant light and darkness. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.
>
> And when this man suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and all alone, the sound of his steps echoing in the huge arena, walked the long distance to the platform, I felt and shared the vibrant silence of that mass of people. And then, when he arrived and the shout began: "Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil". . . I suddenly felt myself shouting with them--and so did my English friend, who spoke no German.
>
> Gitta Sereny, in Atlantic, August 1978

It seems unavoidable to me that just as the need

for meaning is proportionate to the loss of meaning and is reflected by the struggle for meaning, so too is any explanation of meaning revealing of the need and the experience which lie behind it. Simple meaning may be a sign of childishness and immaturity. It may also signal a desperation beyond words, just as hopeless grief is passionless. It may very well be that the movement from simplicity to complexity and then back again must be repeated, just as the escape and return to the cave, just as the Fall and the Redemption. But the need for coherence and unity and meaning demands that the cycle stop somewhere, and it can never end in isolation in the sun or in the finality of death. If it did it would never be retold. No enduring archetype or myth or religion or literature ends that way. The very fact that it <u>is</u> retold, that it is preserved, that it is repeated--that it is written--requires that it end somehow in the only way in which unity can be preserved, in faith, in illusion, in meaning which even though small and fragile is better than nothing.

The truth cannot be spoken, though perhaps it can be shown. Likewise, this critical introduction so far has provided a poor literary analysis of the story. But as I implied earlier, this introduction was written chiefly as an elaboration on what I meant in the story, not on what I said, as clarification of ends and not of

means. Hopefully, not only will the introduction help explain the story, but perhaps the story will also be of some help in understanding this introduction. The continuing process I have spoken of is one all men go through, and I have simply emphasized the writer here because we are concerned with writing. The story is not concerned with writers, except as they may share the experience of Philip and those around him. But it seemed advisable in this introduction to speak of a writer so that Philip could be understood on his own ground, a ground which too often, it seems, has been discounted by "serious" literature, by amoral fiction.

But continuing to use the dualistic language of extremes, it is no doubt time now to follow the advice of Samuel Johnson and to balance the general with the particular, if only briefly.

The most evident tensions in Things Hoped For, Things Unseen are between extremes clustered around two central images, the child and the father. If the story links the two, it is through a transition which Philip undergoes, and the characteristics of this transition determine the story's meaning. But excluding the question of transition temporarily, it is important to consider the extremes.

The story makes it clear that Philip sees himself as a child, who's "still thinking like a fucking kid."

Laura tells him he has "got to grow up sometime;" the old man in the bus station tells him, "you'll grow up, you'll see what a mess it is." The main section of the story begins and ends with images of Philip seated in a student desk.

Closely related both in structure and in Philip's perceptions are the various images of other children throughout the story. There is the high school girl, Ellen, whose teeth remind Philip of a goat's skull; there are the Mexican children who live in the next trailer, and the loud children at the laundromat, boys on bicycles and stockboys and the boys who work with Laura and the boys who tend bar or hitchhike. There are children playing tag in front of the church, and there is Lee's estranged son, Jeffrey, who plays Little League baseball, and there is the little girl who runs from Philip in the final scene. In many of these children are intimations of the Jungian archetype of the anima, the child (often female) who represents the soul.

And there is Laura, almost a decade younger than Philip. If the story is to succeed in joining two opposites, Philip's relationship with Laura must primarily evidence this duality or else provide a secondary context. It may be ambiguous--Laura may become motherly now and then--but the reader should

sense throughout the story what Philip senses in the car with Jan and in the final scene, that Laura is a child on whom Philip is acting.

At the other extreme are images clustered around the father and often recalling another Jungian archetype, the wise old man. Centrally, of course, is Philip's father, whose death and funeral are the focus of the first section of the story and who surfaces repeatedly in Philip's conversations and memories. There is an occasional reference to Philip's grandfather, a real cowboy. Lee is a father. Mac is fat like Philip's father. In the final scenes, Philip is almost a father himself, through the aborted child and the little girl in the hedges.

And there are the other images of this type. T. W., the mechanic, a farmer with his family, an old man gathering aluminum cans, the old man in the bus station, the men who argue doctrine outside church while children play, and Richard. There is the old man of the hitchhiker's story. And at the periphery of this group of images, where father blends simply into old age, are old women helping each other down curbs or selling sausages or wiping down dryer windows.

It is in the images of this latter extreme, the images of older age and fatherhood, that Philip senses something deadly serious. These are usually the images

which tell him what he should be doing or seeing: Jan, Mac, T.W., Richard, Lee, the hitchhiker, somehow his father--either explicitly or (through attraction or repulsion) implicitly.

Here it becomes necessary to address what may be seen as a weakness of the story, the images of religion. These images from the very first are linked unmistakably with Philip's father, as in the preacher who annoys Philip by standing too long beside the casket. The images of religion are not at all unambiguous, for there is an element of perversion in the paperbacks Philip finds, and in the hitchhiker's talk of baptism and collections, in Richard's talk of the holiness of LSD, in the apparently naive cliches Philip's sister uses, in Laura's abortion.

These are religious images recognizable to almost any reader. But there are other, less immediate images which may well have significance only to readers who share the more extensive or intense framework of religion itself. Philip's recurring interest in the sky, for instance, in the weather, the clouds, the sun, the moon, stars, aircraft, towering structures, and the like is likely too strained or subtle an embodiment of religion to impress many readers. But for those immersed in the traditions of religion, Frye's archetype of sky-father is second nature: God has always been the Father.

Psychological explanations of the origin of such archetypes in a dim memory of a large, towering presence, dominating and awesome, use a different vocabulary to describe the same vision, the same essential dichotomy and alienation perhaps born of fear. Similarly, there may be few readers who sense any significance when Philip stops for a hitchhiker and even his trailer, although structurally the obvious placement of the first scene containing a hitchhiker (at the end of the first section) should serve to highlight such an act; or when Philip finally consents to go to the lake with Lee, following a parallel scene in which he cannot persuade Laura to go to the lake on the motorcycle; or the implication that Philip has previously gone with Laura to get ice cream, which she in the story refuses to do with him. The obvious instance when Philip will not go with his sister to his father's grave only highlights the tension between Philip and his father. It does not erase the series of acts (which include his short-lived attempts to "cut down" on partying and his surprisingly good feelings about mowing the lot) to which readers accustomed to dealing in extremes might naturally if less consciously ascribe meaning. Moreover, Philip is characterized by what William Blake called the ability to "seek Love in the pity of others' woe." He notices old women in cafeteria uniforms waiting for a bus, and his sister's

politeness, the nicks and scars of a mechanic's hands, and dirty babies, and old dishwashers. Such pity is as often signalled by desperation as by love, and Philip feels both. He considers changing jobs, so that at least he'd be doing somebody some good.

And the single most important event in the story--the abortion--may provide the most vivid illustration of this difference in readers. If any story, at least in this time in history when men still confront the termination and completion and final definition of other lives, if any story now must confront in some sense as a whole human life to be meaningful, to imitate life, then the significance given to the abortion may decide this story's success.

As indicated above, there are certain images of relationship between the two extremes, and the theme of transition serves as the plot of the story. Philip feels pulled from both sides. He may feel guilty for thinking like a kid, but the young bartender assures him there's nothing wrong with that. Laura and Jan want him to slow down, to become more responsible, while Richard and the rest of Philip's friends believe in escapism. There is little doubt which path Philip has taken so far. He is for the most part passive, even helpless. He is the character who refuses to mope on the eve of his father's funeral simply because he is

expected to. He is the dropout from the normal processes of assimilation, a janitor and an alcoholic and a dope-head because he cannot deny his own experience and consequently is at its mercy. Philip cannot quit driving drunk just because of some scientific study. He cannot choose a girlfriend because all that matters is having somebody around. He cannot grieve for a father he does not yet love, and he will not forgive his father because he senses he cannot forget his father. "The only way it's any good is if you don't decide," he says. This is the determinism which inevitably characterizes unanswered experience and increasing incoherence and inconsistency, the determinism of being dragged from the grave and expelled from the Garden. Philip is pushing himself to the brink in hope of finding some end to his own insignificance. But he has not yet reached that stopping place. He lives in a world of imprecise language and thought and inconsistent action, and for Philip a reconciliation with his father would be a discovery of meaning. True, he draws nearer to a reconciliation--in the final scene, through a confusion of his own discovery of his father's paperbacks, hidden where he meant to hide something, Philip innocently and metaphorically becomes a perverted father, and the realization of such a reconciliation makes him blush. But the fact remains that Philip is

not a true father, and again in the final scene he is unable to think, unable to concentrate, with only the simple unity of a song he remembers from the radio. In the strict sense there has been no transition, no archetypal reversal at the end of the story.

If the story is to have meaning, if it is to be worth re-telling, it must have some climax, some transition between these extremes. Philip must commit the moral act, the act of faith. If he does not, the two extremes have not been linked and the inherent similarity with what the archetypes describe as human experience does not exist. But by means of its repeated and predominant images of transition and by means of the relative attractions and repulsions Philip feels for the two opposites, the story hopefully projects the act of transition into the future, even the very near future. And it may not be important to speak precisely of the form this transition will take: whether Philip will follow the hitchhiker, for example, or visit his sister in Colorado, if the sense of impending transition serves to emphasize sufficiently the possible uniting of the two extremes. For the reader who would demand that Philip be reconciled to his father through some religion (which may well occur), Philip may have already justified himself--he would have kept the baby; he has understood something about his father, discovered a pity;

and the grasshoppers, which before have been floating on the end of a line, on an iron hook, or have been dried onto an automobile grill, now float slowly and gracefully back down to earth. For the reader (if one is possible) who would demand that Philip not reverse his movement, not deny his disillusion, there certainly seems support in Philip's past, where any changes in direction have only been minor or temporary. He thinks of changing jobs but never does; first he abandons his station wagon to the mechanic, then he retrieves it; he goes for one day without a beer or a smoke and then drinks a beer to celebrate; it may even be that his attitude toward the abortion can only exist in the safety after the fact--perhaps, if the choice had been his, he wouldn't have kept the baby.

And for other readers, less interested in how the transition occurs than in that it occurs, the story indicates that it is inevitable. "Hey, dropout! It's about time you got here," the story begins. And from the first there are the images of the lake, of water, of what Jung calls "the commonest symbol for the unconscious," where shadowy stumps slide noiselessly past and beer cans sink slowly out of sight. Fishing is the most common context in which Philip remembers his father: at the lake, when Philip was young, in the storeroom among rods and lures where Philip finds the

paperbacks, fishing again with Lee. Philip picks up the hitchhiker in the rain. And closely linked with images of water are images of images, images of reflections, in store windows or bar mirrors or the classroom windows of the final scene. Philip avoids such reflections.

Through frequent images of travel, through Philip's vision of the migrating geese, "one swerving recklessly through empty space to join the other line," through his increasing awareness of his own precarious youth and health and even sanity--in sum, hopefully through the entire characterization of the desperation of Philip's world--the story makes clear that something will happen, something must happen, if only out of an instinct for survival.

Hopefully the story evidences what this introduction has tried to explain. In terms of narrative structure, I intended there be a quite small distance between the main character and the persona; and as I indicated, the significance which the reader attributes to the abortion may well determine whether the persona is interpreted as sympathetic or ironic. In terms of plot structure, the story in a sense is episodic, in that events are not tied as inseparably by cause and effect as in more traditional fiction. This looseness--for example the abrupt time and scene changes--is useful in describing

a world which is aimless. But to the extent that the movement of the story depends on the repeated swing, however irregular, of the pendulum from one extreme to another, the story is perhaps less than episodic. In terms of vocabulary and syntax, I have believed, if not intended, that the language is best suited for those readers not remarkably fond of complexity, those readers more attracted by the repetitive and almost hypnotic rhythms of religious literature. But I have also been willing to alienate many such readers in an effort to describe accurately and in detail their opposite, with decidedly un-religious language and environments. In short, I wanted to link the most antithetical extremes I could because I believe they both arise from the same desperation, the same need. And if I did not portray the movement toward faith with enough realism to justify a suspension of disbelief, I can only say that I will try again.

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THINGS HOPED FOR, THINGS UNSEEN

"Hey, dropout! It's about time you got here. We'd about decided to give up on you."

Philip shut the door behind him, spoke over the music as he stepped toward the others. "Malone didn't show up till after eight, and I got a bite to eat on the way over." The room was smoky and he stood, expressionless, wondering where to sit.

"You know everybody but Marsha--she's Ellen's little sister."

Marsha smiled.

Philip lifted a wooden barstool from one corner and moved into the circle of people around the low coffee table, most of them older than him, and sat down. The girl next to him leaned forward and pushed him a glass. "Help yourself." He chose a bottle from the coffee table, poured his small glass full, and sipped tequila until the joint came around.

They talked and laughed sometimes and listened to the stereo. Philip drifted off now and then, studied an old heavy tapestry hung on the far wall, dull as a shadow in the lamplight, and scratched a lean grey cat at his ankles until it wandered away. Someone nudged his shoulder and clumsily passed another joint,

this one in a smooth white stone. As he exhaled into the circle Philip looked through the spreading smoke at Marsha. She looked like Ellen. Only a lot younger, he could tell by her face, probably in high school. Later, in the dark, with only the candles glowing around the room, she laughed across the table and he noticed her front teeth, small and even, perfectly rectangular, like the teeth in a goat skull they once found at the lake.

Philip leaned heavily against the wooden rail at the bottom of the old stairs and steadied himself for the climb. At the top, at his door above the garage, he jiggled his key in the lock. It finally, stiffly turned and the door scraped open across the linoleum floor. He sat on the edge of the mattress in the dark and undressed, tried to ease back onto the twisted sheets to sleep, but got dizzy and had to open his eyes. He thought how he had sprawled countless times on the old bed, his hands folded behind his head, staring up through the space at the high old ceiling, at the dusty light fixture, thinking it should be turned a bit to the right. Even in the dark he could follow the jagged crack across the plaster ceiling.

Then the phone rang. Only his arm moved, numbly. He pulled the receiver across the mattress to his ear.

It was long-distance, his sister from home, and his father had died this time. He listened to the silence after she spoke, waiting, speaking carefully. When she hung up he heard the buzz of the dial tone, and then pushed the phone back. He lay there for a while, eyes closed, trying to decide what he would need.

Philip struggled up and slumped on the edge of the mattress for a minute, raised his arm to pull at the shoestring dropping from the light above the bed. He dressed slowly in the one large room, gathering his clothes from the floor, and packed other clothes from wooden drawers into a paper grocery sack, and took his church suit from the closet where it had hung since he moved. Before he left he noticed a cockroach in the tiny kitchen, along a baseboard, and sprayed it as it ran, watched it, watched its oily legs jerk still, then pulled off the light.

The night air and the speed he swallowed with a coke woke him up. Philip liked to drive at night. The feeling that he was all alone in the thick darkness, that his little circle of light was the only thing that could be seen moving across the empty desert, was comfortable. He gazed at the red glow of his joint in the windshield, or watched an airplane drift across the black sky, a tiny constellation with its white and green stars and its blinking red one. Now and then he re-

adjusted the crackling radio as stations faded in and out. He smoked again.

The night was beautiful, trillions of stars, and the lopsided moon unbelievably white in the blue-black sky. He concentrated on the glow of cars about to appear over rises ahead, beams of light slanting into the sky and then lowering toward him, and then the sudden bright headlights until the shadows in the car rushed forward and it was dark again, the soft glow of the panel lights and the red taillights disappearing into the darkness of his mirror. After a while his back ached. He was tense with energy, his back and his palms sweating. He stopped at a truckstop once and watched a fat man in a business suit eating Mexican food, constantly wiping sweat from his red face with a paper napkin. Philip tried to picture his father in the casket.

Later he smoked his last joint. Blinking yellow lights and large flashing arrows drifted in and out of the dark, the orange rubber cones swishing past beneath the car window. The car filled with cold air at the foot of hills or when he crossed a riverbed. His head hurt. And finally he saw the little town twinkling like stars far away in the dark.

When he woke up, before noon, the living room was crowded with flowers. People from church and from school

where his father taught came and went and he enjoyed talking to the ones he knew. Everyone talked softly, and they were all pleasant with him. The familiar kitchen was crowded with pies and doughnuts and covered glass dishes. He stood beside his sister at the front door and watched an old man, one of the elders from church, talk about his father. Later two of Philip's friends from high school visited for a while and they shook hands with each other like men and talked about the football game that night, told Philip what school was like. He told them he would go to the game, that he wanted to get out of the house, even though he knew it would make his sister angry. But on the way to the funeral home, when he talked to her for the first time since the night before, he told her about the game and she only nodded, watching the highway, and told him the insurance company had called.

Philip stopped on the carpet beside the casket with his sister and looked at his father beneath the soft light. He remembered his father at the lake when they were little, in Bermuda shorts and an olive fishing cap, his white, thick legs, his sagging stomach, and the sweat gathering on his face, in his whiskers. Philip wondered what it felt like when his heart stopped, what he'd thought, what he'd said there on the floor. They left the funeral home and stopped for a pecan roll

and coffee on the way home, neither of them anxious to get back to the house, and they talked some more. He was very sad, he told her, but he wasn't going to sit at home that night and think about it just because he was expected to. An old man in tennis shoes washed dishes slowly in the back kitchen, behind the counter. It started to rain as his sister drove toward the house.

Philip drove around the town and smoked with his friends before the game, passing new drive-ins that had opened since he left, their bright neon signs indistinct through the mist. He told them about his job, about people he partied with. They told him about girls at school he knew, and then they drove into the gravel and stopped at the wire gate, bought tickets from the science teacher standing in his plastic parka, and drove across the hard slick grass past the wooden bleachers and tin-roofed concession stand, followed other cars parking one after another against the barbed wire fence. They laughed at a woman behind them in the bleachers who sang the national anthem like an opera singer. But it was raining hard by halftime so they left and went to a pizza parlor and stayed late drinking beer and playing pool. When he got home, Philip sat for a while in the old porch swing, squeaking back and forth on the chains and watching rain drip in the porchlight from the roof.

He woke up early and showered and dressed in jeans, watched cartoons and ate doughnuts and talked with his sister. A florist delivered flowers. Later he shot baskets in the puddled driveway and felt for the crunch of red ants beneath his tennis shoes. And then he heard, then watched geese flying toward him, flying high, their swaying V slowly spreading into a hundred tiny specks, one swerving recklessly now and then through empty grey space to join the opposite line, and they suddenly weren't moving so slowly after all and their shrinking forms drew together into a rippling outline again and then were no more than a hazy slit against the clouds. Philip looked up after them with the ball in his hands and then shot more baskets until it was time to get ready.

The funeral was what he expected. His suit fit snug and cool. Reverent attendants, hushed and efficient, escorted them to a luxurious blue limousine outside the house. An older man in an expensive suit stood at the car and held the door until he was seated beside his sister. They drove slowly to the little church, and people stood solemnly from the wooden pews and watched as they entered. After songs by those behind them who wanted to sing, after the preacher read scripture after scripture and then said a final prayer, after Philip and his sister sat awkwardly on the front

pew while his father's friends filed slowly in front of them, pausing to look into the casket, the little church was empty and Philip followed his sister to stand at the casket, annoyed that the preacher still stood beside them. They crept toward the cemetery, behind the white hearse, the two-lane highway occasionally dotted with motionless cars on the shoulder, all watching as they passed. The graveside ceremony was short, in the mud beneath the huge flapping awning, and afterwards the attendants drove them home.

Philip changed clothes, and his sister warmed a roast someone had brought. They talked quietly, about the number of people at the funeral and then about their father, and his sister took down the picture album from the top shelf of a closet and they sat beside each other at the table and looked through it. His father, young and trim and strange, and sometimes with his mother; their baby pictures; their grandmother, weathered and humorless, and the one brown and grey photograph of their grandfather leaning on his horse's neck in a line of other expressionless cowboys on horses, the unfenced grass rolling away behind them spotted with black cattle; and Stefan, the Hungarian boy his father had kept. It was raining again on the way out of town, and Philip stopped at his friend's house for a few joints.

Later, on the highway, he passed a dark hitchhiker beneath a dripping overpass and watched him gesture with his arm in the rear view mirror. It was soft and grey and cool on the open highway, and the marijuana was good, but still he wished it were night.

Tuesday.

Nothing is more irresistable to bass than a grasshopper, floating free on the end of a line, jerking out ripples and sounds.

Almost five-thirty. The sun was dropping, and the tangled shadow of a mesquite on the hard schoolyard was just beginning to reach Philip's wing of the building. He sat down in a wooden student desk, again, and leafed slowly through the coverless outdoor magazine.

He skimmed grey pictures of guides lifting huge salmon, read the small boxes of black print on the last wrinkled half-torn page advertising bird dogs, wire animal traps, lodges, and then let the magazine drop into the wastebasket in the aisle. The air was warm and still inside, outside not a scrap of white tissue or the uncut thin grass around the trunks of mesquites moved. Across the still, flat yard, just beyond the iron-pronged bicycle rack, a slow dog stretched to

sniff at the rope spiralling up the school's metal flagpole. Philip watched a flat-colored blackbird in the hedge just outside the classroom window, its tailfeathers ragged and pocked with holes when they were spread, jerking its head to its extended wing and quivering to dig out some mite with its black beak, clutching at a swaying twig with its strong, thin, knotty claws.

The magazine was right. Grasshoppers made fine bait. Not just for bass, but for perch and crappie. Philip had even seen channel cat swirl up through the slow brown lakewater for grasshoppers when he was young. His uncle showed him once how to catch grasshoppers with his shirt in the tall, scratchy weeds around the lake cabins: early in the morning, just after sunrise, when they were still cool and sluggish and slow to jump, how to hook them through the hard little collar so that the sharp black iron point just stuck out.

Beyond the buzzing coke machine under the stairs, Philip heard Mac's tinny radio come louder into the hall and his trashcan wobble heavily on its metal rollers to the next room. Five-forty. He stood stiffly again, an ache in his knees and low in his back, and picked up the small wastebasket and moved up the aisle between slat-backed desks toward the teacher's cabinet and the split and dusty chalkboard. He bent down for a

chewed, eraserless red pencil, orange chips crumbled on the worn carpet, a rubber band. Five-forty.

Just before seven, in the hall heading toward the teachers' lounge, Philip waited at the bottom of the stairs for T.W. The old skinny black man hobbled down the steps without speaking until he reached the linoleum hallway floor.

"You see Mac yet?" T.W. wiped his bony black fingers on the pockets of his loose grey trousers. They walked slowly down the hall. He leaned forward with his stiff shoulders, his shirt hung limp from the back of his dull neck.

"He was in 109." Philip nodded up the empty long hall, lined with hundreds of black metal lockers and their silver combination locks, the hot sunlight shafting through open classroom doors on the right.

"He say you left the stair door unlocked last night."

"He's full of shit too."

T.W.'s brown loafers shuffled ahead slow and steady. "Mister Gearhart chew his ass this morning."

Philip stopped. "You want a coke?" T.W. made a half-turn of his old body and a backward push of his brown palm.

When Philip walked into the lounge, Mac and T.W. both looked up. T.W. sat hunched forward on the plaid couch and looked back down at the cigarette and his hands.

Mac looked back down into his magazine, his bulk sunk heavily into the split vinyl easychair near the lamp, his ears stark above his short, bristled hair. Philip sat on the couch near T.W.

"You forgot to lock the stair door last night?" Mac laid the magazine across his thin belt and waited.

"Yeah, that's what T.W. said." The lamplight glowed in the two lenses of Mac's glasses. T.W. scratched at his bony ankle through a thin dark sock.

"I get tired of listening to that asshole Gearhart."

Philip looked at Mac's square, bulldog face, into his glasses for a second without saying anything, and then bent toward the scratched coffee table for a magazine, a women's magazine, the only one there. Mac waited and then lifted his magazine again, and no one talked.

Philip heard the squeaks of Laura's tennis shoes on the hall floor just before she reached the lounge, carrying two white sandwiches in cellophane baggies. He stood and walked to the door while she spoke to Mac and T.W. "You want that coke." he asked her, pointing to the coffee table. She looked at T.W. "I just bought it, you want it?" Laura shook her head. They left the lounge and sat on the unswept stairs.

Laura handed him a paper towel as he pulled his sandwich from the baggie. "Chicken spread." He took a

bite from the white bread and watched tiny fibers of dust float in the bright doorway across the hall. "How'd work go?"

Laura finished the small bite she was chewing and swallowed. "We did a one-forty lunch. I have to roll skins in the morning." She wiped tiny crumbs from the corner of her mouth and looked at Philip as she took another small bite, her eyes dark, her ankles on the steps smooth and brown above her white tennis shoes. They both listened to the coke machine behind them under the stairs. Philip took another bite.

"I partied too hard last night," he said. "Mixed too much." He shook his head. "Started feeling tight again, that's been happening a lot lately." Philip brushed at his moustache. "Nothing serious, I don't think, but it sure as hell didn't use to happen."

"I assume it's useless to tell you to go to the doctor," Laura said.

"I think what it is, somebody got hold of some paraquat." Philip looked at the sandwich and chewed. Laura brushed a fly away from her elbow; the fly came back, she flicked at it again.

"You've been smoking a lot lately," she said. "I thought you were cutting down." She was looking at him seriously.

"I was."

"You've been carrying the eyedrops with you everywhere."

"Oh," Philip said and smiled, nodded, looked away and then back at her. "Yeah, I think I'm getting addicted to eyedrops."

"Don't joke about it." Laura shook her head. "You know you shouldn't drive."

"Hey, I don't drive reckless. I don't endanger anybody. I don't give a damn what you think, that wreck wasn't my fault. Shit, I've got values, you're not the only one, I'm not going to hurt anybody. But I sure as hell will get wasted on my own time if I feel like it. I don't take chances. I'm not going to quit partying because some asshole survey of a million people says the odds are worse. I'm careful enough." Philip stared back at Laura. "I may quit for some other reason, but sure as hell not that."

They finished their sandwiches without talking, the air warm and still and full of dust, and Philip walked to the white porcelain water fountain on the wall while Laura chewed her last bite and gathered up the baggies and paper towels. Just outside the hallway door, on the cement porch, they stopped, and Laura dug into her jeans pocket for her keys. "I'm leaving at ten-thirty tonight--T.W. said he'd punch me out." Laura nodded and they kissed lightly before she walked around

the brick corner into the late afternoon shade of the back parking lot. Philip leaned a shoulder against the doorway and waited until he heard her Volkswagen sputter away.

Later, with only the pink and blue and purple of dusk beyond the steel flagpole, Philip pushed the yellow chalkdust with an old towel down the long aluminum blackboard tray into his wastebasket, powdering the aluminum cans and wads of notebook paper and candy wrappers. Eight-forty. He stepped into the long hall, dimming now with only every other fluorescent tube glowing from the ceiling, and dumped the wastebasket into the large black trashcan tilting on its rollers outside the door. Far down the hall, past the rows of dark vented lockers and the white hall clock and glowing red and white Exit sign near the stairs, he could see Mac's trashcan with the metal dustpan hanging from the rim.

It was dark outside when they pulled their squeaking trashcans across the doorway and onto the rough cement porch. The grids of closed windows were black in the brick walls of the school building; the streetlights around the lot and the yellow lights mounted on the building corners were faint and separate. Philip grabbed one handle, Mac the other, and they heaved the trashcan up to the rim of the sour metal dumpster at the

curb. Dirt and paper and cans and a slick mixture of syrup and water slid out onto the black heap inside. They banged Philip's trashcan down on its rollers and swung Mac's up over the edge of the dumpster, held it there dripping, listening to the soft trill of crickets from the dark grass against the brick building.

Philip sloshed brown sudsy mopwater down the sink in his crowded closet and swirled faucet water around in the crusted metal bucket, banged it beneath the metal sink and stopped to look at the grey cotton commode scrubber on the wooden shelf above the sink, still damp, the fresh plastic-wrapped dustmop heads next to it, the damp stringy black mop propped in the corner among large blank plastic jugs of disinfectant. He pulled at the lightbulb string and shut the heavy door. Ten-twenty.

It was barely cooler outside in the parking lot. He opened the stiff door of his old station wagon and slid in, onto the dirty blue sheet draped loosely over the back of the seat. The engine turned and rocked the dark car as it caught gas, the red oil light glowed small and round and bright, recessed deep in the metal dashboard. Philip pulled out of the parking lot and away from the school building, down the street with the night wind coming faster through the open windows, rushing loud above the clicks and rattles and the radio.

He pulled around Laura's white Volkswagen and up

onto the worn grass. Only the kitchen curtains were lit in the white ribbed siding of the trailer. Inside he spread the curtains across the open window, ate a bowl of cornflakes, then clicked on the small radio near the door and listened to music and the eleven o'clock news while he smoked what was left of a stained, twisted joint in an aluminum ashtray. Laura was still awake when Philip came through the narrow hall and into the small bedroom, her crow-black hair against the white sheets, thick and close around her face. She watched from her pillow as he undressed in the broken light from the streetlamp outside, her heavy breasts beneath the sheet. Philip climbed onto the mattress, and could still smell the pizza sauce on her hands. He traced his fingers across her brown lips, over her nose and grinned at her, across her cheekbones, and then whispered. She moved the sheet and touched his stomach. "Maybe I'm not so tired," Philip whispered and they moved against each other on the warm bed. He could feel the tiny stubble of hair on her legs against his, faint breaths of air through the windowscreen and the faraway resonated lurches of great iron boxcars spreading the heavy length of a train as it stopped and started downtown. Later, when they were both through, when Laura had dried herself with a towel and rolled onto her breasts, Philip pushed her warm hair off her

shoulders and stroked his fingernails down her smooth broad back until she feel asleep.

He was vaguely aware that Laura was up and dressing, even her bare footsteps in the kitchen thumped through the trailer, but he went to sleep again and didn't wake up until amost ten. He lay there on his back staring at the low plastic ceiling, lined with strips of woodgrain trim and rows of sunflower brads, and the brown stain ripples at one corner where water seeped when it rained hard. The trailer was still cool. The nights were getting nicer now, finally, and Philip rolled over to look through the open window and wire screen. It was bright and clear and blue outside, and he could see the sunlight on the brown grass and his old rust-red station wagon, its crumpled hood lashed almost closed, just beyond the rectangle shadow of the trailer. Beneath the trailer on the next lot, through the white plastic water pipes and tie-down cables and the scraps of lumber stored underneath he could see now and then the tiny brown feet and legs of Mexican children running on the other side, hear their squeals and play.

He turned a dull black knob on the gas stove and adjusted the blue flame beneath the coffee pot. At the round kitchen table near a window where the curtains rocked slightly, where they played poker, Philip sat

and waited for the coffee to warm up and stared across the patterned linoleum floor at the room. This was what he owned, he thought--the vinyl couch, an old wooden endtable and a gooseneck lamp, particleboard shelves on cinder blocks, the padded chair where the little radio sat, all lined close around the brown woodgrain panelling of the trailer, a small cabinet the only separation between the kitchen and the living room. The round table where he sat was cluttered with the morning newspaper and envelopes and an ashtray and the thin phonebook, Laura's vinyl checkbook and a cloth potholder; the cabinet top held the black phone, an iron, more envelopes, one of Laura's paperbacks. And the stove beside him was scattered with styrofoam beercan coolers and open books of matches.

In the shower, Philip found the blue bar of soap soft from soaking in water in its dish again.

At the grocery store, he pushed the wire basket slowly up and down the cool aisles, stopping often to read the labels on cans or to calculate differences in price between large and small boxes of cereal or laundry detergent. He looked at everything. On the dishware aisle he saw plain ceramic coffee cups, glazed a lighter brown near the rim, identical to the one his grandmother had when they lived with her, in elementary school. He had always assumed they didn't make cups like that

anymore. He had never seen another one like it, and it affected him to see so many of them now in the fluorescent light and chrome of a supermarket.

He moved to make way for a younger girl with a dirty baby facing her in her basket, and then to the cellophane-wrapped meats and the cold freezer shelves stacked with six-packs of beer. He picked up one carton of dark bottles and put it in his basket, then several seconds later left his basket and came back for another. In the checkout line he waited and flipped through a clean new magazine and watched an old woman in a checkered apron offering samples of sausages to whoever walked by, smiling and calling to them when they did, until the young boy pulled his basket behind the counter and began mumbling prices and clicking the cash register keys.

On the way home Philip finished the joint he'd rolled before leaving the trailer and enjoyed the wind through the windows and the exaggerated bounce of the old station wagon. At a stoplight, he realized that two boys in the car next to him were passing a joint while an older man, their father, watched from the back seat. One of the boys saw him watching and quickly lowered his hand, nodded to Philip, and all three of them watched him self-consciously; and Philip suddenly realized he wasn't laughing, he wasn't even

smiling. He nodded back and lifted one hand toward them, reached down and picked up his own joint from the ashtray and put it between his lips, picked matches from the dusty dashboard and tore off a match, struck it, and held it to the blackened end of the joint. He could hear only his radio, but when he finally looked over at them again he saw they were all laughing warmly behind their windows, even the father. The light changed and they nodded to each other, grinning, before driving off.

Philip pulled onto the lot over dirt soaked with oil, and only then squinted at the tiny red oil light in the dashboard, faint in the daylight.

He set one paper bag of groceries on the wooden steps and unlocked the aluminum door. It was nearly one o'clock by the time he had arranged the groceries one by one on the wire shelves of the refrigerator or in the woodgrain pantry above the kitchen sink. He opened one of the brown bottles of beer and gathered the newspaper from the kitchen table and carried both to the couch, where he read until he was drowsy. Philip set the small round alarm clock for two-thirty and wound it, then stretched tiredly across the vinyl pillows of the couch and finished his second beer lying down.

Friday morning, Philip pulled open the heavy wooden

door, dark and fitted with red stained-glass designs, and walked inside. Lamps with plastic shades matching the stained glass in the door hung from the cedar beams of the ceiling over thick wooden tables, dropping a dim light that was almost darkness compared with the bright sunlight outside. He stopped just inside the door to let his eyes adjust and to pull a small comb through his tangled hair. To his left a large plate glass window showed the bright kitchen, two pairs of heavy black steel ovens, the silver stainless steel table, and just above it on the brick wall the row of tilted stainless steel bins holding green peppers, onions, black olives, jalepenos, and thick red pizza sauce. The bottom of the window, like the kitchen counter, was dusted with white flour. Philip walked past the window, past the tables and low lamps, to a large man in a white shirt and black bow tie waiting at the cash register window.

"Is Laura here?" Philip nodded at the manager as he spoke. The manager nodded back, brushing at his moustache as always.

"She's in back doing prep."

"Be okay if I go back and talk to her for a minute?" he asked.

The manager made an exaggerated sweep of his arm. "Oh sure, no problem." Philip nodded again, and walked past the lustrous bar.

Laura was bent slightly over a humming silver meat slicer, pushing and pulling a large brown tube of pepperoni on the tray back and forth smoothly over the spinning blade, wafers of mottled meat curling down and dropping onto the pile below. Her black hair was pulled into a thick ponytail at her neck and dropped between her shoulders, her back rocking regularly at the slicer until she looked up, surprised to see him, and smiled.

"Working hard?"

She reached behind the slicer to flip some toggle-switch and the machine was quiet except for the faint whir of the blade as it spun to a stop. The pizza parlor T-shirt she was wearing hung loose and untucked around her middle, and she wiped her hands on the smeared white apron tied across her front.

"It's Friday." She was still smiling. Philip glanced at the stacked cardboard boxes of plucked yellow chickens on the prep table behind her, damp cardboard boxes of lettuce beside the stainless steel sink, thick blocks of yellow waxpaper-wrapped cheese, and in the center of the cement floor a pale plastic trashbarrel, the same size he used at work, without rollers, three-quarters full of the thick red pizza sauce.

"Had to mix sauce, I see." He grinned, showing his broken tooth. "Great." She put both hands up to

his face.

"Here, smell."

"Come on out front, I want to show you something." Laura stopped and looked at him for a second, wiped her hands on her apron again. "Come on." She followed him out of the back room and toward the cash register.

"What is it?" The manager, in his white shirt and black slacks, was wiping off one of the tables across the dim dining room, a round aluminum tray scattered with pieces of chewed crust in his other hand.

"I'm just going to show her something for a minute," Philip called. Laura pulled at his sleeveless denim shirt from behind. They walked in front of the kitchen window, Philip intentionally casual. "She thinks it's a present," he called, with a grin back to her.

The bright light hit their eyes as soon as they opened the door outside, and then the heat. Philip stopped and waited while Laura squinted out at the bright asphalt parking lot, where only her white Volkswagen and two other cars sat reflecting sunlight from the chrome, and a motorcycle leaning against its black iron kickstand. "You see my car?"

"Did you buy a motorcycle?" She looked at him, no smile, no expression.

"I sure didn't walk here." Philip walked out to the small motorcycle, flipped at the plastic fender

high above the black front tire.

"You sold your car?" Laura walked across the hot asphalt and stood in the sunlight looking at the motorcycle while Philip climbed on and straightened the bike.

"Hell no. I just saw the ad in the paper and went out and looked at it." Philip clicked the key between the handlebars. "It was a damn good buy." He startled her when he rose up off the black seat of the motorcycle and then kicked down sharply on the starter. The engine made a dull turn. He kicked it again and it sputtered alive, loud and annoying, puffs of white smoke popping from the rusted exhaust pipe just below the seat.

"Get on."

He kicked out the back foot pegs for her and she climbed on heavily, unenthusiastically. She was barely on when he released the clutch lever and took off so quickly she had to grab him to keep from falling off. The engine was loud and the exhaust pipe was hot. "Don't burn you leg!" he shouted. Philip shifted through gears, with each one the motorcycle surging ahead, its whine growing higher, shriller. Laura clutched at his waist as they leaned into a wide turn around the large parking lot and raced back toward the cars and the brick pizza parlor. He pulled between two cement parking bumpers and against the concrete porch in front of the

wooden door. Laura climbed off and Philip just sat there, balancing the motorcycle between his legs, twisting the throttle handle and making the exhaust pipe spit louder. "I took out some from the bank." He waited, his hair bushy and tangled again from the wind. "This is the best time to buy one, before winter."

Laura looked at him and smoothed her hair.

"We'll take it out riding tomorrow," he said to her, bouncing the small frame up and down on its spring shocks. She nodded from the porch and smiled. He sat looking at her while she pretended to study the smudged silver engine and the black chain for a minute. "Well, don't work too hard," he shouted, the last words unclear in the noise, and backed the motorcycle away from the curb and sped and shifted across the asphalt parking lot.

Philip hadn't realized it would be cool riding the motorcycle home from work, and he enjoyed the newness of it. The small bouncing headlight between the handlebars was too weak to light the whole street, and instead simply illuminated the spinning black front tire and the blacktop directly in front of him for several yards. Everything else was faint until he drove under a streetlamp or pulled to an intersection, motionless in the warm night air for a second. He exaggerated the leans of the motorcycle around turns,

and on the last stretch of quiet street leading to the trailer he swerved from curb to curb, dipping as low as he dared on the unfamiliar machine, and then off the paved street for several lots and up easily onto the grass between Laura's Volkswagen and his station wagon. It was still and quiet and dark when he turned off the key.

"I wish to hell you'd quit pouting about it. Don't you think I know how much money I've got?" She was sitting at the kitchen table. "You'll get paid." He was shirtless, opening a small box and pulling out a frosted dough-topped pot pie in its crinkled foil. "That really makes it a lot of fun for me, having a new bike and you getting pissed off." The rectangular glass window in the oven door fogged as it heated up. Philip placed the pot pie on the dented aluminum pizza tray, beside another one. Laura was quiet, scratching at a tiny drop of cold grease on the table.

"You want chicken or beef?" Philip stood waiting with the refrigerator door and the freezer door near the top open, impatient.

"I don't want one."

"Oh hell, eat one." He reached into the frost-thick freezer and took out another square box. "It's heating up the kitchen anyway." He punched a fork into the top of the hard crusts and then rattled the tray

onto the wire rack inside the oven and closed the door.

Both of them were quiet after that, sitting at the table. Philip sprinkled dried brown marijuana into the crease of a cigarette paper and then rolled it back and forth inside a dollar bill before licking the gummed edge. The beer in the brown bottle was cold, the bottle sweating. Laura's bottle was empty. He got up and lit the joint on one of the gas burners of the stove and then moved away from the heat of the oven to smoke. Laura sat at the table, cleaning bits of dough and pizza sauce from her fingernails, sweating, shook her head when Philip offered her the joint and then slid the newspaper from the cabinet. Philip turned on the little portable radio.

He finally took two of the pies from the oven, the heat rushing into the room, and dropped them quickly onto ribbed white paper plates on the table. He left the third pot pie in the closed oven, turned off the gas, and sat down to eat.

Laura flipped her pie upside down on the plate, jerking her fingers back from the hot foil, and then pried the foil off with her fork. Philip punched open the brown crust of his pot pie while Laura spread hers open on the paper plate. Warm steam billowed up from the pies into their faces, Philip watching as Laura spread the brown gravy and crust and bits of vegetables

and blew on them to cool.

"I don't know why you have to dirty a plate like that," he said, raising a spoonful to his mouth from the foil cup and blowing on it. "All it does is soak through on the table."

Philip woke up when Laura eased out of bed and walked to the built-in dresser below the mirror near the closet, made of the same grey-brown woodgrain panelling as the rest of the walls in the trailer. He watched her raise both arms into a blue pizza parlor T-shirt and pull it over her head and down over her white bra. She pulled her hair out of the T-shirt and saw him, but simply stepped to the small closet, reached in to sort through the clothes packed close together and pulled a pair of large faded blue bell-bottoms from the tangle of hangers on the wooden dowel. She lifted one strong brown leg and then another into them, and only glanced at Philip again as she walked out the bedroom door. He heard the bathrooom door close.

He laid in bed, listening to her bare footsteps in the kitchen and the clank of a stainless steel pan on the rough black iron prongs of a stove burner, until he could smell the cereal cooking. She was already eating when he came into the kitchen, wearing only his

jeans; he brought the large pan from the stove and set it on a folded dishrag on the table and sat down.

"I'll get you a bowl." Laura looked directly at him for a second, and then back down at her cereal.

"No need to dirty up another one," he grinned, bared his broken tooth, but she only shook her head once without looking up. Philip spooned a scoop of margarine from the plastic bowl, scraped with his spoon at the hard chunk of brown sugar in the wax paper at the bottom of a box.

"I hope you're not still pouting about the motorcycle," he said, stirring the thick cereal in the pan into swirls of white and yellow and brown. Laura looked up, and then back down into her cereal. "Well if you are, that's just tough shit." Philip stared at her, she didn't look up. "It's bought so you might as well just fucking forget about it. I'm a big boy, I think I can manage my own fucking money."

Philip finished eating while Laura brushed her teeth in the bathroom. She was still there. He heard the mirror slide in the rickety metal medicine cabinet when he stood from the table and carried the pan to the sink.

"If you'll rinse your bowl out when you're through, that cereal dries out like cement, you won't have to scrub your ass off to get it off." He listened to the

brush swishing through her hair, then turned on the faucet and splased water into the pan until it was full, and slid Laura's bowl and spoon into the grey water.

"Hey, did I wake you up?" Philip sat bent over on the couch, holding the black phone to the side of his uncombed head and trying to work a white cotton sock onto one foot with one hand. "What did you do last night?" He finally pulled the one sock over his pale ankle, sat back into the couch and left his other foot bare. "Listen, I was going to take that little bike out this afternoon and jack around, you feel like going?" Philip waited. "Yeah, no big deal, I know what it's like. No problem." Then, "You still playing cards tonight? . . . Who all's playing?" Laura squeezed through the bathroom door and into the narrow hallway with a plastic laundry basket heaped with dirty clothes, shirts and socks and bras and blue jeans and underwear. Philip looked at her. "Hey, that's mighty white of you. Yeah, I think we'll probably go over about nine or so. . . . Okay, we'll see you there. Have fun." Philip reached to the cabinet between the couch and the kitchen table and set the black receiver back into place. Laura was kneeling in front of an open cabinet door below the kitchen sink, reaching inside below sink

pipes for a box of detergent.

"You'll notice the new box is behind the old one," Philip said, sitting on the couch, pulling on a leather workboot and grinning. Laura looked up at him and rolled her eyes once and shook her head again, lifting out a box with a cardboard flap torn open at one corner. "Be sure and use up the old one first."

"You deserve to live alone." Laura didn't smile, but Philip's grin broadened.

"Just carrying on the family tradition."

"Oh boy."

He stood from the couch. "I'll do those. Come on, let's go ride out to the lake and jack around." Philip brought clumps of clotheshangers from the bedroom closet and into the living room, where the clothes basket and box of detergent sat at the door. "Or I'll let you do these when we get back."

"Oh will you." Laura was tugging at the sheets tucked under the mattress. "I know what'll happen, we'll get out there and stay all day and then come back in and it'll be time to go play cards. I know how you operate." She arranged the large bundle of sheets on top of the dirty clothes, balanced it there, and took the clotheshangers from Philip and wedged them into the side of the basket.

"Come on, I promise we'll come back the minute you

want to."

"I just really don't want to. I meant to wash these yesterday after work and just didn't feel like it. You can find somebody else to go out and play with. Why couldn't Gary go?"

Philip leaned against the doorframe, Laura finally finished arranging the basket and leaned against the wall panelling facing him. "Actually I'm just trying to keep you from doing the clothes again and breaking us," Philip said, expressionless.

"I did not use that much soap." Laura pushed past his shoulder, past his grinning face, and opened the door. "I used just as much as I always do--"

"I believe that."

Laura stood still and smiled at him, shook her head slowly. "I swear, I've never seen anybody so cheap in my whole life."

"I have to be." Philip waited. "I spent all my money on that motorcycle."

Laura didn't smile.

"I tell you what, I'll go wash the clothes and dry them and hang them up--like they ought to be--and then come back and we'll go out to the lake. You can even set a time."

Laura bent down for the box of detergent. "I just really don't want to today, maybe tomorrow. I just want

to take it easy this afternoon."

"Hey, you trying to let all the flies out of the trailer?" Philip interrupted.

"Jan's going shopping for a dresser and I told her I might go for a while, while the clothes are in the wash."

"Well, if you want me to have a wreck out there all by myself. . . ," Philip lifed the bulky clothes basket carefully. Laura swung back the aluminum door for him. ". . . lying in a ditch, calling for help."

"Better you by yourself than me with you." Laura closed the door behind him and waited while he felt his way down the loose wooden steps. "That's be easier if you had on another shoe, you know." She opened the light Volkswagen door and he wedged the clothes onto the black bucket seat. Philip closed the door and leaned in the window peering around the clothes while she climbed behind the steering wheel, into the close interior of the car.

"Thanks a lot, friend." She smiled apologetically. "You want to go over to Gary's tonight?"

"Do I have a choice?" The Volkswagen was clicking. She tested the clutch.

"He said everybody was coming over about eight-thirty or nine." Philip stood up from the window, and then bent down again. "Hey, how long are you going to

be out shopping?"

"Probably a couple of hours," Laura answered. "I can get the lady at the laundry to put everything in the dryers."

"No, I was just thinking, I might go along, if you don't mind. Hell, I've got nothing to do, nobody will go to the lake with me, I might as well share the company of two beautiful women." Laura looked past him, her brown leg bent at the knee, rocking on the clutch pedal. "Do you mind?"

Laura shook her head quickly. "No, I don't mind a bit. I don't know what Jan's got planned."

"If you don't think she'd mind, I'll go in and take a shower and you could come back by to get me before you go to her place." He thought for a second. "Hell yeah, I wouldn't mind looking around at everything we can't buy." Laura waited, and Philip looked at her. "I don't care, it's no big deal. If you've got something planned let me know."

"No, we don't. It's just that we're taking her car, it'll be awful crowded."

"Shit, no problem. Why don't you come on back by after you put in the wash. I'll buy you both a coke or lunch or something."

Laura began backing out of the lot, into the narrow gravel drive between rows of mobile homes, and Philip

trotted several steps after her and slapped the hollow Volkswagen roof and leaned back into the window when she stopped.

"You might ask somebody to measure your soap for you." Philip stood and watched her car crunch away, leaving slow sweeps of white dust to settle back into the limestone gravel.

Jan opened her apartment door and looked at them and then smiled. "Ahh, this feels great," Philip sighed, the cool air coming through the doorway, and they all talked for several minutes in the cool while Jan turned off a color television and gathered her purse. They were standing in the hot shade on opposite sides of Jan's tiny sportscar minutes later, beneath the corrugated tin carport cover, the heat rising from the ground beyond the shade, while Jan fingered through her metal keys.

"How are things going with you two?"

For a formal second he waited while the two sisters looked at each other across the vinyl roof of the car, and then Jan ducked inside and leaned over to unlock Laura's door.

"Okay, I guess," Laura said as she bent down and held the bucket seat forward while Philip crowded into the back seat. "He's still the same old Philip. How's Arthur?"

Laura stood behind a beautiful thick-furred sofa, stroking the fingers of one hand across the cool soft back and watching her sister wiggle drawers in an antique mahogony roll-top desk across the carpeted aisle. Above them hung a sparkling cut-glass chandelier with tiny candleflame-shaped bulbs, its electric cord taped across the acoustic ceiling to a central metal outlet, where other cords converged. Philip sat rocking in a plush lounge chair.

"I'd love to have one of these in the apartment."

The saleswoman smiled and asked Jan again if she could be of any help and then wandered back to the cluster of desks at the rear of the showroom to resume her conversation. Laura and Jan browsed into a lavish show window bedroom suite and Philip followed, rustic maple bedposts and dresser and a rich brown and white bedspread design of wild ducks in the hovering instant before splashing onto a blue lake.

"I don't see how you can live in that trailer," Jan said, shaking her head and smiling politely. "It looks like one of you would get tired of it."

"We're both tired of it." Laura looked into a beautiful framed painting on the wall panel, a leaning grey plank barn and a silver windmill, an orange sunset.

"Philip doesn't really like it that much either, he's always putting it down. . . . "

"Well then why don't you move?"

"Good question," Laura said and laughed.

"She's just still pissed about finding a scorpion under the sink," Philip said from the bed where he sat.

"He's always mad about having to fix things up around the trailer, he's not exactly handy." She looked at him from the corners of her eyes, grinning. "I think maybe he's just afraid a little to move somewhere nicer. He's lived there a whole two years." Laura rubbed the top of a polished headboard.

"I'm not about to pay fucking rent, that's what it is," Philip said. "I did that too long, that's just money down the tubes."

"I guess that's smart." Jan shook her head again. She lifted the price tag tied to the maple dresser and shook her head again.

"He's only got about a year and a half more on it."

"I don't know, I'd just rather not live in a trailer."

"Don't then," Philip said.

"I know what you mean," Laura said. "It can get real old sometimes. But you get used to it." They slowly moved around the wall panel and into another show window bedroom suite, this one all white. "Oh, look at that night table."

The heat hit them when they walked outside, and the locked car was an oven. Jan turned the ignition and immediately hot air blew through the air conditioning vents. Philip was sweating in the back seat. They drove with their windows down in the hot afternoon wind, the streets and building bright through the windshield, until the air conditioner cooled.

"That's another thing," Laura said, reaching to turn down the tape player. "We went through all summer without air conditioning. God, all we had was a little fan, we'd keep it on all day, move it to a window when the sun went down to suck in the air, and even at night it was hot."

"It still is," Philip said, leaning forward between the two bucket seats to feel the cool air. They drove through an intersection where several old women in their brown cafeteria uniforms stood waiting for a city bus. "At least I guess we'll enjoy winter more."

"It sure sounds fun. You don't have air conditioning, you don't have a stereo, you live in that trailer all the time--"

"There's one," Laura interrupted and pointed through the windshield. Jan braked hard and bounced into the driveway, past the hamburger boy with his long aluminum pole sticking plastic letters and numbers up high onto

the sign, stopped behind a line of cars, Philip joking about the sportscar and Laura laughing.

"Hell, if you crash it, just buy a new one. It's only money."

"You sure stay loaded a lot." Laura looked quickly at Jan, who was pawing in her purse, not looking up.

"He doesn't smoke that much," Laura said as they pulled slowly ahead, tiny quick sparrows flitting between cars, picking scraps. "Besides, he gets romantic when he's smoking." Laura waited for Jan to look at her and then laughed.

"Horny," Philip said from the back seat.

"Philip," Laura scolded, laughing.

"Actually she means gushy. Laura likes a lot of gush." Philip leaned forward and tried to kiss her and she pushed away, still scolding, still laughing. "No, actually I don't smoke enough," he said to Jan as he sat back. "I'm a lot nicer when I smoke, ask Laura. That's why you two are having such a good time with me along, I'm not being a grouch. An asshole maybe, but not a grouch."

"Right," Jan said.

"Hey, I tell you fucking what, they may not be heroes but at least they're not the ones climbing over everyone else to get ahead. I know a lot of people who've fried their fucking brains, I'd <u>still</u> rather be

around somebody like that than some ambitious asshole who's got it all figured out. They're the ones that do the real fucking damage. I'd rather be around somebody like them than somebody that's dangerous any day."

"Okay, okay," Laura said.

Jan pulled to the drive-up window. "What do you want?" she asked flatly, reading the fluorescent menu inside and rolling down her window.

"Medium coke."

"Tea."

Jan ordered and rolled her window back up, looked past Laura to the parking lot, to the cars beneath the tin covers with their open windows and balanced aluminum trays and hamburgers wrapped in thin white wax paper. "Where should we go next?"

"It's up to you," Laura said. "You're driving. I know you've got things you need to do."

"Philip?" Jan said, easing the car ahead slightly.

"I guess I'd better get on back. This shopping gets to me after a while."

Jan rolled her window back down and reached out to pay for the drinks and handed one of the wax cups across to Laura. They all took long drinks through their straws, not talking again until the car was around the clean brick building and back onto the street. "You

ever going to get that tooth fixed?" Jan asked, her eyes in the small rear view mirror watching him.

"Are you kidding," Laura said seriously.

They pulled into the crowded parking lot of a shopping mall and Jan stopped beside a curb just beyond a department store entrance while Laura went inside, idling, quiet.

"I hope I didn't sound like an asshole back there," Philip said to the back of Jan's head. "You're right, I probably do smoke too much."

"No, I don't care what you do, you smoke it every day if you want to. I just don't want to see Laura get started."

"Shit, you were probably smoking at that age too, you just--"

"I was not," Jan snapped without turning around. "Don't tell me when I was smoking."

"Well you're fucking smoking now." Philip watched her eyes in the mirror.

"You don't start any earlier than you have to," she said, her eyes staring at him, the tiny car vibrating the mirror. "You don't know that you, you're as goddamn immature as I thought you were."

"Fuck your ass," Philip said.

The afternoon was hot and clear. Philip was on the

long empty road to the lake. He still rode the little motorcycle close to the dirt edge of the two-lane asphalt road, his spread arms tense on the handlebars whenever a car passed, kicking dust or sand up and stinging into his face and his bare white chest and stomach. Mostly the winding drive was lonely, though, and Philip kept the motorcycle at a steady thirty or thirty-five, except for once on the long straight stretch over the dam. On either side the road dipped into culverts bushy with tall Johnsongrass, and dull yellow grasshoppers occasionally buzzed across the blacktop or into the weeds as he passed; beyond the culverts, following the road, were miles of grey, crooked and knobbed cedar fenceposts stretched with strands of rusted barbed wire, now and then interrupted by the small black and yellow sign marking an underground cable; and then, beyond the fence lines, acres and acres of wheat-colored needlegrass and wispy green mesquites and huge old piles of dead grey mesquite wood, steep dirt-sided little draws, and widely spaced humps of bare red dirt, cracked and cut by water, where bulldozers years ago had shoved out the hole for muddy stocktanks where cattle stood stomach deep. Brown horses stood motionless in what little shade they could find, their heads down, their hot flanks to the sun, and highway department crews, dark Mexicans with their black hair

dangling from beneath caps and headbands, raked at new asphalt. Only once did Philip see, far away between rocky hills, a planted field with a green and yellow metal combine paddle-wheeling dustily through the brown wheat.

On a rise in the road Philip caught sight of the brown lake again, through the scrub brush. He turned left at a stop sign peppered with rusted bullet holes, in front of the state park campgrounds, and followed the blacktop around the lake, out onto points and in around coves, leaning with the motorcycle on turns through the hot wind and gassing it up hills, past small woodframe houses and old mobile homes with gravel driveways and uneven yards full of stickers and old cars and crusted lawnmowers and bent swingsets. He stopped to rest once at a dry, empty campground, sitting on a cement table under the shade of a tin cover, looking out at the brown water catching the bright sunlight, while the motorcycle, leaning on its kickstand in the dirt, popped sporadically as its engine cooled. Two small boats, one a green fiberglass bassboat and the other a simple aluminum flatbottom, were tied to opposite corners of a massive orange oil derrick rising broad from the water and narrowing past metal beams and crossbars to the screen-floored platfrom high above. The men in the boats were motionless in the sun, their

rods propped up into the air. Only the boats themselves bounced gently, almost imperceptibly against the steel derrick.

Several hundred yards down the road, where it turned toward the lake, was a small white woodframe churchbuilding, low-roofed and plain, two cars sitting in its white gravel parking lot. They had gone to a church like that, he and his father and his sister and his grandmother, every Sunday morning, every Sunday night, every Wednesday night. Philip sat on the cement table and knew what the churchbuilding must look like inside, the wooden pews with backs holding songbooks with knotted or frayed ribbon markers, the rectangular wooden communion table at the front, a wooden pulpit above and behind it, and above and behind that the white and green and blue mural of a river around the baptistry; there would be ceiling fans turning slowly above the pews, small low windows along the sides of the main room hung with Venetian blinds, and at the front of the pews, on either side of the main room, the closed wooden doors of the two small classrooms where children memorized verses and young boys learned to lead singing. And the voices of women in hymns, and at night, after church, children played tag in the yard with the metal church sign as base while the few serious and intent men with short haircuts and dark suits

and narrow ties argued doctrine near the front doors, bright headlights of cars swinging one by one out of the crunching gravel and into the dark.

Philip straddled the warm motorcycle and pulled carefully through the dried ruts and onto the road again. Around the curve, past the churchbuilding, and winding beside the lake, the vibrations in the rubber handlebar grips suddenly new again. The sun was hot on the backs of his hands and he could already feel the sunburn on his cheeks and shoulders.

Philip knocked on the solid apartment door and heard Gary's dog bark from inside. They waited, Philip holding a brown grocery sack of beer, until the door opened and Gary motioned them inside. "Howdy howdy."

"Alright, everybody's a winner tonight," David called from the kitchen, where several people sat with beer cans and a sack of chips, "Philip's here."

"That's the attitude, that's the attitude," Philip said as he walked past the table to the refrigerator. "This is going to be easier than I thought."

"Hey Laura," Lee nodded from the table. "Glad you could make it." Gary brought a folding lawn chair to the table and opened it next to an empty one. "Did you bring us a pizza?"

Laura smiled as she sat down. "No, sorry."

"Can't you smell it?" Philip called from the refrigerator. "Anyone need a beer?"

"I'll take one," Clare called.

"Make that two," Gary said. Philip brought the cans and bottles of beer packed between his hands and sat at the table. Sherry took a joint from Lee and passed it to Philip without smoking it; he took a drag and passed it on, holding his breath. Across the table David shook his hand. "I'm trying to cut down. Again." They smoked that joint and another one and drank beer, listening to music and watching a silent television screen until Gary said, "Let's play some cards." Gary set a shoebox half-full of red and blue and white plastic poker chips on the table and began counting them out as people slid him dollar bills. "We'll take five each," Philip said.

David shuffled the deck of cards while Gary counted out chips. "This is just right, seven people." He spread the cards along the table and everyone turned a card over. Philip turned a seven, Laura a jack. "Four deals," David said and shoved the cards to Lee, while Gary counted out the last chips.

Lee shuffled again, David cut, and Lee thought for a minute, the cards in his hand. "Starting big, a little Mexican sweat," he said, and began to deal cards face down.

"Laura loves this game," Philip said, grinning at

her, and David laughed.

"Ante a nickel, and don't look at your cards."

By ten o'clock the game was underway, the stereo louder. Philip was counting chips into measured blue and red and white stacks, almost eight dollars up. Laura was almost even, watching, talking briefly now and then. Gary, the big loser so far, was shuffling, threateningly quiet and intense, but everyone else talked among themselves. Clare and Sherry and Laura sipped at their beers and passed joints from one side to the other, Lee brought in more beers from the refrigerator.

"So when's the big day?" Philips was feeling good, talking too loud, the same as Lee and David and even Clare. Across the table, through the smoke, he saw Sherry pause to see if Gary would answer and then she smiled, barely.

"March twenty-eighth, I guess," she said. Gary was spinning cards around the table, ignoring everything but the chips that slid and bounced into the middle.

"You guess?" David laughed, coughed smoke that spread across the table. "Shit, don't tell me you're putting it off again."

Gary killed whatever laughs had begun: "High Chicago," concentrating on his cards. "Queen bets."

By midnight Lee was gone and John in his huge straw cowboy hat with the green and yellow feather and

a friend with slow eyes and thick blonde hair to his shoulders had joined the game, alternating hands when there weren't enough cards. It was quiet. Philip was almost two dollars down, beginning to play recklessly and giving bits of cold advice to Laura next to him between hands, only a handful of plastic chips on the table in front of her. Empty, weightless beercans, their aluminum tops sprinkled with black ashflakes, and thick brown beer bottles cluttered the shag carpet around the legs of the table and chairs, and the countertop near the refrigerator; Philip nudged away an ashtray filled with squashed, bent cigarettes and cellophane cigar wrappers and a scorch-tipped pair of metal hemostats still clamped onto a short twisted joint. Gary was beginning to joke now, Sherry leaning toward him with one hand on his shoulder, while David in the living room still knelt almost motionless beside the silver-front stereo receiver lined with large and small knobs and black etched calibrations, sifting one by one through the rack of album jackets. On the noiseless television screen a pretty grey woman in jeans and boots and Western shirt and hat swung off of her horse onto a dusty street, tucked her thumbs into her gunbelt and walked stiffly down a boardwalk toward a saloon. Philip watched the old movie for a minute.

"Bullshit," he muttered. "Man, that's so much

bullshit it's unreal." Laura looked down, fingered her plastic chips. "Fucking cowboy movies."

David left just before two, and Clare shortly after. John's friend lay asleep on the couch in the living room, his cheek and parted lips stretched comically tight against his arm. Laura stood behind Philip, rubbing his shoulders and watching as Gary flipped up another card to Sherry, who turned the rest of her cards face down. John slid a blue chip into the other chips on the table and Philip folded. He was over twelve up now, like Sherry just waiting until John or Gary called it quits. John was down almost thirty dollars. Gary suggested last hand. "Fuck you," John said without looking up, and the words erupted for a minute, but Gary quieted first, with the unspoken emphasis that at least he was ahead. Both turned up their cards now, and John gathered the plastic chips toward him without a word.

"Fuck your ass, I'm quitting at three," Gary said. Sherry was still relaxed, though, and she began to shuffle.

John dealt the last hand before three, Man's Hand as everybody expected, with no limit on matching the pot. The game lasted almost twenty-five minutes and the pot built to thirty-six dollars once before Philip went alone and on an eighteen-dollar pot with a flush,

ending the game. John left the cards where they were, stood up from the table and walked out without a word, leaving his friend on the couch, while Philip counted the chips into stacks and folded a piece of notebook paper with John's IOU pencilled on it. Gary wasn't in a laughing mood, he had lost five dollars in the last pot, but he said he was still almost ten ahead for the night and the four of them talked tiredly while he counted out money and pushed plastic chips over the edge of the table and into the shoebox.

Philip and Laura walked beneath the yellow light in the hallway outside the apartment door and across the dark parking lot, quiet except for the rumble and squeal of hotrod cars blocks away. She held his arm and he smiled, waiting for her to ask him. "Well, counting the five you lost," he paused, nudged her side, "approximately twenty-three thirty-five."

"Approximately?" They separated around the Volkswagen.

"But that's not counting six John owes me," he said across the round roof while she unlocked her door, opening it with a creak that was loud in the dark, "and plus the five you owe me, that's almost thirty bucks."

"Just put that five on my tab."

The Volkswagen rocked slightly as she got in, and he waited, patiently, while she pretended she wasn't

going to open his door. "That damn John's on a streak. I don't think he's won in a month."

They ate a huge meal on the way home, chicken fried steaks and potatoes and black-eyed peas and rolls and cheesecake, and the little car was dark and breezy on the way to the trailer, the streets almost empty, the gleams of streetlights and headlights playing slowly across the chrome bumpers and shiny trunks of the few cars briefly ahead of them. They opened the curtains and windows in the trailer and went drowsily into the tiny bedroom, the steady warm breeze brushing over them.

"You sure didn't talk much tonight," Philip whispered.

"I was just tired."

"I hope so. You'll get to know them better. They're good people."

"I know," Laura whispered. Philip slid his hand beneath the warm sheet, across her stomach, onto her hip gently. "I'm not as sleepy as I was," she smiled.

Philip grinned. "Just be careful with my stomach--you push it too hard and I might explode." Laura rubbed his stomach and he swelled it as large as he could.

"I'm glad you won tonight," she whispered to him later, just before they went to sleep.

They slept late. Laura got up first, and Philip

vaguely heard her car buzz down the road. He woke up again when she came back, the sound of the Volkswagen close beneath the open screen window at his head, and then quiet again. When she came in the aluminum door, loud with the rattle of a grocery sack, Philip sat up on the sheets and reached for his jeans on the trailer floor.

There were two glasses of white milk and paper plates and sprinkled donuts on the table when he came out of the bedroom, rubbing his palm over his wiry hair. Laura finished folding the brown sack and stuffed it into a cabinet above the old rounded refrigerator and then sat at the table and watched Philip's throat tighten with his first loud swallow of milk.

"Couldn't you get a little less air?"

Philip set the glass on the table, sighed "ahhhh" slowly at her, and grinned. He pulled his forearm across his wet moustache.

Laura didn't smile. "Don't be crude." She looked at him until he reached for a donut. "It wouldn't hurt you to wear a shirt to eat, either."

"Hell, I might as well go on to church." Laura looked at him for another moment and then shook her head without interest.

Philip took two large bites of a donut and chewed

several times, his cheeks full, looking at Laura. "Aren't you off to a pleasant start," he mumbled and grinned again, his mouth still full and tight.

"Cute, very cute."

Philip was bent motionless on his knees on the patterned linoleum floor, his arms spread wide over an open newspaper that fluttered and curled rhythmically as the small fan turned back and forth. Laura wiped the powdered sugar over the edge of the table into her cupped hand and then stood over the brown trash sack, twitching crumbs from the rag.

"What do you feel like doing?"

Philip finished reading a paragraph and then slowly turned a large page, scanning headlines. "I don't know." He smoothed the paper flat on the floor. "What about you?"

"We need to mow, I guess."

"Not on Sunday. I'm not about to get out there and sweat my ass off today."

Laura bent down beside him and sorted through folded sections of the thick newspaper. "I don't care, it'll just be easier before it gets too thick. It's supposed to cloud up." She sat cross-legged on the vinyl couch and began to read.

"Pretty legs," Philip said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"What time do you go in?"

"Five," she said.

He listened to the television in the next trailer, the voices and cheers, and then running children's footsteps and the mother yelling in Spanish.

"What'd she say?" Philip asked.

Laura looked up. "I wasn't listening," she said, and looked back down at the paper in her lap.

As Philip turned another page, the little fan swept to him, catching the paper and balooning it apart. "Goddamnit." He scrambled to flatten the disorganized sheets against the floor. Laura watched him from the couch.

"Feel like tennis, up at the school?"

"I told you I don't feel like sweating."

"What about a movie?"

"I don't know, that might be okay. What's on?"

"I don't know. You've got the movies there somewhere."

Philip folded up the wrinkled section and leafed through others, neat and smooth, beside him on the floor. "Well I don't see it."

"Maybe it blew away."

He looked up at Laura for the first time as she smiled. "I'm glad to see you can still laugh, at least. I thought maybe you were dying or something." Philip

held back a grin and then returned to the sections of newspaper, aware that she was still watching him there on his hands and knees, his hair uncombed, his stomach hanging round and relaxed.

Before long the bright afternoon heat was seeping through the closed curtains on both sides of the trailer. Laura was asleep on the sweaty vinyl couch, her thick black hair rustling regularly against her arm, several strands sticking damply to her cheek. The fan on the floor made turn after turn through the still air across her to the cabinet and to Philip at the kitchen table, one hand around a wet brown bottle of beer, looking slowly from the beer to pictures of Laura's family in plastic frames on the walls, and the walls, and then to the curtains, and then to the whishing fan, and leisurely around the quiet room, and back to his beer. He set the dark glass bottle onto the table and watched the suds inside sliding down behind the paper label. He stretched for the phone on the cabinet and clicked the dial around.

"Hey, Bobby, what's going on?" Laura opened her eyes, barely, and watched the blurred grey circle of the metal fan blades inside the wire cage while Philip watched.

"Yeah, I was thinking if you were I might come over. Bring some beer." Philip peeled at the wet label

on his bottle. "Any preference?"

He stood in the bedroom door, buttoning his faded blue cotton workshirt, and glanced at Laura. She lay in the same position as before, watching him now.

"I'm going over to Wilson's to watch football." Laura still looked at him, and then sleepily closed her eyes again and shifted her cheek on her brown arm. Philip opened the door and closed it behind him, the wooden steps creaked, and he climbed onto the black seat of the little motorcycle. He knew she could hear the hollow sound through the windowscreens when he kicked down on the starter and he kicked it hard, impatiently, several times until it revved alive, stuttering loud between the mobile homes. Philip rode slowly away from the trailer, down the gravel lane, and thought about Laura, whether she was alseep, whether she was sitting up now on the slick vinyl couch, wiping the hair from her face and gazing into the glowing yellow curtains where the sound of his motorcycle was fading.

When Philip came home, the patterned linoleum floor was still spread with folded sections of newspaper, the little fan turning in front of the spread curtains. Laura was in the shower, under the loud, splashing water, and Philip knew she could feel the vibrations

through the tub when he closed the aluminum door. She listened for a moment.

"Is that you, Philip?"

He measured his solid footsteps in the narrow hallway outside the bathroom.

"Philip," she called tiredly. The shower curtain puffed toward the door of the tiny bathroom as it opened, just as she pulled it back on its rings to look out.

"It's me," he answered loudly.

She slid the plastic curtain back against the front panel of the shower stall and Philip slid it open and leaned in, the jets of water splattering off her brown chest.

"Close the curtain."

"Need any help?" Philip grinned at her, drunk.

"I'm almost through."

He looked at her, raising his eyebrows, grinning.

"Come on, close the curtain. You're getting water on the floor."

Philip let the curtain fall back. He unzipped his jeans in the warm mist from the shower and knew she could hear the splashing in the commode.

"Couldn't you wait till I was out?" she called. She turned off the shower and waited, waited until he flushed the commode before she reached out for the white towel on the sink counter. Philip pulled the curtain

back and watched her, water heavy in her matted black hair and dripping from her fingers and running down her legs. She looked at him while she spread the worn towel and patted it over her breasts. He leaned toward her and propped his forearms on top of her wet shoulders and smelled the alcohol on his own breath in the humid, still shower, and kissed her. Laura kept her hands on her breasts, holding the towel between them until Philip moved his face back to look at her and then straightened up.

"I wish you'd let me dry off."

Philip grinned. "Go ahead."

"Boy, don't you look drunk."

They looked at each other, and she tucked the towel around her, under her arms.

"Hand me out another towel, would you?"

"Ah, shit, don't dirty up two towels."

"Well then get out of here and let me dry off."

"I tell you," Philip said, shaking his head, looking at her, still grinning, and he walked out into the hall. He turned to see Laura unwrap the towel and rub it over her hair until she stopped and waited, so he left.

When she came through the kitchen, the white towel around her and her brown legs bare, her black hair wet and combed flat and straight down her shoulders and back,

Philip was sitting at the table, chewing, a half-eaten sandwich on a paper plate between his elbows and an open bag of bread and an open jar of thick brown peanut butter beside him. She sat down across from him, the trailer quiet except for the pops and gurgles of the small water heater in its closet just beyond the panelling.

"I hope you're at least going to brush your teeth."

"Want one?"

"I guess it would be asking too much to take a shower?"

Philip raised one arm and pressed his nose into the blue cotton shirt. "No need to." He looked back at her. "All we did was watch football all day and then go over to David's and sit around."

"And party."

"No joke. David had some tequila he bought for a birthday present for his brother." Philip grinned again. "We told him he shouldn't." They sat at the table, looking at each other, while Philip chewed and chewed. "Then some guy called from the Cave, said Richard was drunk as shit and buying everybody drinks, so we went down there for a while." He showed her the purple ink smudge on the back of his hand, then slowly arched back from the table and pressed his palm against his back, staring blankly. "I was going to tell you something,

I forgot it." He thought for a minute more and then shrugged his shoulders. "So how'd work go, cutie?"

"Busy. We did three-seventy second shift. The after-church crowd." Laura turned the lid slowly onto the peanut butter jar. "That new kid isn't going to last long, I don't think."

"How come? He a fuck-off or what?"

"Not really. He's just not used to working, this is his first job ever. Plus I guess he is."

"Is what?"

"A fuck-off." Laura looked down at her hands. "He doesn't do anything unless you have to tell him first." She pulled the plastic bread bag toward her and twisted it closed.

"Fucking spoiled brat is what he is, probably," Philip said disgustedly. He wiped the tiny white crumbs with the side of his palm over the edge of the woodgrain table and onto his paper plate, and held it there just below the table while he looked at Laura.

"You really are a good looking girl."

She looked back at him, almost scoldingly, and they sat at the table for several seconds. "I'm surprised you can see, your eyes are so bloodshot."

Philip stood up. "Speaking of red eyes, feel like smoking one?" He looked at her shake her head and then picked up the bread and jar, one in each hand, and

shoved them onto an empty wire rack in the bright refrigerator. He pulled out a water bottle and unscrewed the cap, took several gulps.

"I'm going to bed." He felt Laura watching him in front of the open refrigerator, head tilted back, swaying slightly, his throat tightening and relaxing. She stood and carried his paper plate to the trash sack behind him and clanked the knife into the dish sink among several plastic bowls and metal spoons. And then she lay under the sheet in the dark, warm bedroom and Philip watched her from the chair by the front door nearby, smiling now and then, the soft streetlight coming through the bedroom screen and onto the bed, and the first faint smell of marijuana smoke easing into the air in the trailer around them, dissipated now and then by equally faint breaths of night air through the window. Philip came in later and sat carefully on the edge of the mattress, his back to her, and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, pulled at his workboots and his white socks, and finally stood and unbuckled his belt. Laura watched him as he crawled onto the mattress and bend down to kiss her and her black eyes changed when she felt the sheet slide off her chest and stomach.

"You good-looking thing," he whispered into her ear. "I love you." Philip felt where the occasional

breezes cooled her wet hair, and on her neck and cheek where his mouth ahd been. "I live you more than anything in the world."

"You smell like peanut butter."

"I'm serious." Philip rubbed her. "I apologize about the motorcycle," he breathed to her. She didn't say anything. "I should have at least told you first. I didn't even know I was going to get it till I looked at it."

"You're plastered."

"I know. But I do love you. You make me feel very, very lucky." Philip raised his head and looked at her in the dark, his breath between them, his forearms pressed into the pillow on either side of her face. "God, you're pretty. You are. I don't know why you don't think that."

"Well I love you too." Laura nodded once and raised her face toward his. "My hair's caught."

Philip shifted his arm. "I'll start to try being a little more gentleman." He looked at her. "I know I pester you sometimes," he whispered, slowly. "I don't mean to. Sometimes I just want to be talking to you more than I'm thinking about what to say."

Later, Philip lay on his side on the sheets, his head on his curled arm. "I was thinking about applying with the fire department." Laura lay beside him on her

stomach, her face toward him in the pillow, almost asleep, her hair on her smooth wide back and her strong, round calves spread from beneath the pulled sheet. "They pay you for training school if you get accepted." Philip was quiet for a minute. "Plus it's at least doing somebody some good." He brushed Laura's soft hair off her face, behind her ear with his fingers, watching her smooth eyelids. "Plus you sit on your ass most the time."

Laura opened her eyes, looked sleepily, impatiently across at him through the shadows. "You thinking about quitting at the school?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"You're going to have to decide on something sometime." Their faces were close, his hand still stroking her temple. Her voice was soft, motherly, sincere. "You're twenty-eight years old. You can't just knock around all your life." Philip looked at her, his expression, his lips, even his eyes motionless. "Sometimes you get too caught up in yourself." She smiled at him sympathetically. "You're not your father. I love you, but you're making yourself miserable."

Philip brushed at her hair several more times and then moved his fingers for a moment to the bare point of her dark shoulder where her fluffy hair parted. Then he moved his face to hers, still expressionless,

touched his lips to her cheek, and rolled onto his other side. After several minutes Laura moved her legs and Philip wondered if she felt the slow, delicate night breezes move cooly over the perspiration where the warm sheet had been. Not if she was asleep, he thought, looking out the bedroom door into the dark trailer, focussing his eyes. Not if she was asleep.

Monday morning, Philip woke up once slowly in the dim bedroom, listening to the quiet trailer, his head hurting, and went back to sleep again, thinking it was still early. Half an hour later he woke up again and saw the softness of the light in the bedroom, the woodgrain panelling somehow different, something uncertain about the air, and he raised his head to look out the windowscreen at the shadowless cars on the dead grass lot and up at the smooth grey sky. Laura was asleep on her stomach beside him, uncovered, one leg drawn up, a smooth fold of brown skin between her waist and her hip, her hands tucked beneath her. Philip hardly ever woke before Laura, even on Mondays, and for a while he looked at her naked body, at the impressions of the wrinkles and folds of the sheets on her brown shoulder and her brown cheek, comparing his own pale legs, before he sat up gently and eased onto the linoleum floor, sluggish and thinking of aspirin.

Laura said something from the bedroom window about his white feet and his blue jeans legs on the ground beneath the station wagon, and Philip lowered the rag and stared at the smooth inside of a black tire and the rusted tire rod near his face.

Inside, he held his hands beneath the water at the kitchen sink and squirted another shot of slick dishsoap from the plastic bottle into his black-smudged cupped hands and dropped the bottle behind the long faucet. "I think I've got a leak in the back seal." He rubbed the soap up and down his forearms and over the backs of his hands and his fingertips, all smeared with thick black grease that dropped a grey lather into the sink. "I guess I'll take it down to Jeff's." Philip turned the water off and jerked a paper towel from the roll behind the plastic dishrack and scrubbed at his slightly cleaner hands; he wiped the dishsoap bottle and the sink with the limp wad of paper and then dropped it into the trash sack. "I sure hate to shell out right now."

Laura, in frayed cutoff blue jeans and a loose sleeveless shirt, tapped the ashes from a tin ashtray into the jumble of newspaper balanced on her other arm. "How much will it cost?"

"I don't know, maybe forty or fifty. I don't know,

maybe more. More than I've fucking got."

They passed each other in the kitchen, Laura stuffing the newspapers into the trashsack, Philip dropping onto the couch and reaching for the black phone. "It's lucky I got that damn motorcycle," Philip said at her, "while it's in the shop."

Laura spun the ashtray onto the kitchen table and looked at the phone on the arm of the couch while Philip clicked the dial.

"I hope it doesn't cost you too much." She turned away, toward the sink, and Philip watched the backs of her legs. "I noticed oil leaking on the ground."

"Yeah, I should have taken it down a week ago." Philip listened into the black receiver and set it back onto the cradle. "But I didn't so I'll just fucking take it down now." He called to Laura in the bathroom. "You off today?"

"Yes."

"Can you follow me down then?" Laura didn't answer. "You got any big plans?"

"No--" she answered, and turned on the bathroom faucet. "I was supposed to go over to Jan's at three-thirty."

"We'll be back by then." Philip was dialing again, the thin phonebook spread on his lap. "I'll ride that bike to work." He slapped down the receiver.

Laura came back into the kitchen with the bathroom trashsack. "You think it will rain?"

"How the hell should I know? The one day in a month it's cloudy--I'm not a goddamn weatherman."

Later Philip finished dialing again and immediately hit the receiver down. "Fuck it man, he's probably talking on the phone all morning."

Philip inched carefully toward the warped sheet of aluminum in the blank back side of the trailer, a small door that once fit flush on its hinges across the hot water heater compartment but now was simply bent and wedged into the opening. He stretched his left hand toward the bowed middle of the aluminum where he could get hold, and balanced in his right hand the long, split wooden handle of a rusted iron hoe. Laura stood several feet behind him, her rubber thongs invisible in the ankle-high weeds, her palms squeezed between her thighs.

"There comes one, look out!" she squealed, bouncing backwards and pointing into the air.

Philip ducked and took a wild step back. "Goddamnit!" He glared at her. "I thought you meant it was right on me!" He found the whirring yellowjacket in the air high above them and stepped boldly back to the trailer. "Just control yourself for a while, okay?"

Philip grabbed the sharp edge of the aluminum and jerked it from the opening, a loud metal scrape, and let it fall with a whobbling sound onto the grass, and he rushed back past Laura, who suddenly realized where she was and scrambled awkwardly to catch up, her arms stiff and her breasts heaving. A half-dozen buzzing yellow-jackets trailing long legs bobbed out from pipes and cords around the tilting water heater and hovered slowly at the opening.

"You keep a good watch now," Philip ordered, not looking at Laura behind him, stepping carefully forward, squinting into the shadows, at the white pipes and metal straps and dirty corners of the compartment and around the rusted cylinder tank, looking for the nest and keeping much of his own attention on the blurs in the air as well. He spotted the grey, paperish nest, its underside honeycombed with small round chambers, some plugged with eggs, hanging from a plastic valve and propped against the side of the tank. He jabbed clumsily toward the next with the long, heavy, unbalanced handle of the old hoe, moving quickly from side to side while Laura's advice grew more excited, until finally the dry old handle slapped against the hollow tank at the valve and the next bounced lightly to the sunken and rusted bottom of the compartment. Philip shook his head wildly at a tingle on his ear and rushed back

beside Laura, and then both of them backed even farther away, beyond where the yellowjackets would follow.

"Did he get you?" Laura was whining, holding to his arm.

"Goddamn, how am I supposed to know when one's really on me when you're yelling all the time! Damn, Laura, I could have done as good by myself." Philip turned his head away from her hand. "No, he didn't get me, no thanks to you."

They waited. Laura got a sticker between her thong and her foot, and then Philip ventured back with the hoe handle and scraped the nest out of the compartment onto the weeds. He sent Laura inside the trailer for a book of matches while he pulled the dented red and yellow gasoline can from beneath the trailer, from behind the loose aluminum skirting and among the black plastic sewer pipe. He was already sloshing gasoline onto the nest in the weeds, away from the trailer, the strong fumes shimmering up like heat, when Laura asked him if he had to burn it, couldn't he just move it somewhere else.

"Goddamn," was all Philip said, shaking his bushy head, sweat collecting at his temples. Then he struck a match and flicked it onto the nest and the dark, glistening wet weeds which burst into yellow fire and burned and burned, long after the nest was black and

brittle as paper, the last yellow flames weak and ugly in the hot sunlight.

Out of the bright sun, inside the dim trailer where the small fan stirred the still air, surrounded by closed curtains, Laura made lunchmeat sandwiches on paper plates on the kitchen table while Philip gulped at a wet bottle of beer.

"I don't mind mowing at all, if you'll just get the lawnmower started."

"I don't want you mowing the grass, I told you I'd do it when I get good and ready." Philip finished his beer with two long swallows. "The first thing we've got to do is get that damn station wagon down to Jeff's. And I'm not about to mow this damn yard right before I go to work, I tell you that."

"I was just thinking we should do it before it rains."

"Hell, it's not going to rain. You saw what happened to those clouds." Philip clicked the refrigerator handle open and pulled another brown bottle of beer from a cardboard six-pack inside. Laura slid a paper plate with two white sandwiches across the table to where he had been sitting. "I told you I'd get it done." Philip sat down and got up immediately and opened the refrigerator again and brought a small red bottle of hot sauce back to the table. "Maybe I'll get up early

tomorrow and do it."

Laura was through ironing a blouse on a towel spread on the cabinet, so there were no more sounds of steam or tiny sloshes of water in the quiet trailer. The hourly news was over, Philip was listening to music on the portable radio, waiting for Jeff to get back to the garage from lunch, when the phone rang beside him.

"She's in the bathroom. Is this Jan?" Laura called something from the bathroom. "Want me to tell her something? How should I know? She'll be right here." Philip laid the receiver down on the couch and drank almost half a beer, waiting, before he yelled to Laura in the bathroom.

"She says she'll call you back in a minute," Philip said into the phone. He listened for a moment and then hung up the receiver. "Bitch," he said to himself.

Philip listened to Laura in the tiny bathroom, at the sink behind the closed door, the water running, in there with the toothpaste and deodorant and powders and crystal bottles of gold perfume and the sliding mirror panels on the medicine cabinet. He was about to ask her something when his sister called from Denver, and they talked enthusiastically, loudly, for the first time in over a year. When Laura came back into the

kitchen from the hallway Philip was rolling a sprinkle of brown marijuana into the fold of a thin white paper. He looked up happily at her. "Time to celebrate," he said, and told her his sister was coming on the bus.

"I guess I'll take off," Philip said low, sleepily, lying on his back on the worn vinyl couch, using one of the back cushions as a pillow, with several empty beer bottles on the linoleum floor beside him. He lifted himself up with an effort and sat leaning, his elbows sweating on his knees, motionless. He realized Laura was not in the room, and then noticed the clip and the short joint in the ashtray on the arm of the couch. "Right after I finish off this little baby, that is," he said to himself.

Philip stopped at a clean, air-conditioned convenience store on his way to work and bought two cardboard cans of overpriced motor oil and untied the hood of the old station wagon there in front of the store's plate glass windows on the hot asphalt parking lot. The small sludge-coated engine was already overheated--Philip burned his fingers on the oil cap, and when he did get the cap off smoke and the smell of burning oil rose from the crankcase. But after punching the two cans with a yellow-handled screwdriver and pouring the smooth, golden oil onto and into the

crankcase, and then starting the station wagon again, the tiny glowing red oil light in the dashboard went out. He tied the creased hood down as tight as he could and left the empty cans on the lot. Philip lost himself for what seemed like an unusually long drive, until he creaked the old car past the chain link backstop and hard brown schoolyard and the windows in the front of the brick school building and the iron flagpole, and then around to the side, into the hot parking lot where teachers were scattering to their cars and across from the huge green dumpster.

Philip and Gary sat in the dark in Gary's pickup, windows rolled up to preserve the strong smoke of the joint they were passing, one tiny green tape deck light in the darkness beneath the metal dashboard, and the rippled reflections through the windshield of the few white school building floodlights and one small grid of blank yellow windows lit in the dark brick wall. On the horsehair seat cushion between them was a brown grocery sack, rolled and creased closed at the top to provide whatever insulation for the beers inside.

"This is going to be nice tonight. Sleeping."

"No joke," Philip rasped loud over the music, still holding his breath. He exhaled into the hazy cab. "This is the first time it's rained in a long time. Here you go."

They touched fingertips in the dark for several seconds, passing the red glow of the short joint. Philip looked out, through the drops that inched sporadically down his window. "It sure seems high up here. I never can bet used to it."

"It's high alright," Gary said, and then exhaled with a laugh.

Philip chuckled through his nose. "Really." Then a minute later, "This is good stuff."

"Yeah it is."

They smoked until the joint felt hot on their fingers, then Gary squeaked open the ashtray and dropped it inside. Philip was already rolling down his wondow. "Ah, that smells good." There was a loud rustle of the grocery sack in the music and Gary reached inside and pulled two cans of beer from the plastic rings.

"No, what I was talking about being high was in the pickup."

"I know."

"Well fuck you then." They both grinned and nodded.

"You want a bag?"

"I might." Philip tapped the top of his can with his fingernail and popped off the tab. "Laura's been smoking now and then."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Which means less for me." Gary laughed.

"She's a lot of fun. She won't try anything else, though." Philip was quiet. "I'll have to wait and see how much my car will cost."

They sat enjoying the cool, damp air, drinking beer, their arms propped in the windows, in the tiny, cold droplets of rain. Gary turned up the tape player, and not long after another grid of windows lighted, these with the windowshades still up so that Philip could see Mac, small and old and illuminated inside, moving slowly, heavily, among the student desks.

"So you and Sherry going to do it this time, huh?" Philip was still facing out his window, gazing up toward a streetlight where the drizzle could be seen floating from the dark sky.

"I guess. We've got about three hundred bucks saved up."

"You feel pretty sure about it?"

"Oh yeah. We ought to, it's been long enough."

The music dwindled and ended for a minute and then the tape player with a sudden loud clack began another track.

"What about you? You and Laura getting along?"

Philip watched Mac clean the blackboards, making short sweeps with his arms. "Okay, I guess. She puts up with me. Laughs at my jokes." They were quiet for a while. "I don't know, the older you get, it seems

like all you're looking for is just someone you can put up with. Nothing special, you just end up deciding to take what you can get."

"No, hey, I think she's a nice-looking girl, there's nothing wrong with her. She's a lot of fun."

"I know, that's not what I meant. Too heavy maybe. You should see her sister." Philip raises his eyebrows and grinned. "I like her a lot." He took a swallow from the can of beer. "You just get tired of worrying about somebody else. Man, I don't have the energy to look around anymore." Philip lowered his beer to his leg again. "She was the first girl I went out with in over a year. A year. I was starting to wonder."

"She's pretty young, isn't she?"

"Twenty," Philip nodded. "But she's been around. In high school." He scratched the rough whiskers on his neck. "She's a sad girl. She used to cry all the time when I first met her. I think the only thing she wants is a family."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Philip shrugged. "We don't talk about it anymore." The first split-second glow of white lightning far away silhouetted towering black clouds. "I don't know, it just seems like the most important thing after a while is having somebody around. There

doesn't seem to be that much difference who." He stopped to take a swallow from the can. "I think what it is, we're just getting used to each other, finally. I'm not bullshitting her much anymore, if she doesn't like it, tough." He held out his beer toward Gary and grinned. "She likes to ball as much as I do. Get creative."

"Kinky, you mean."

"I'm lucky to have somebody to still put up with me. You get harder and harder to live with. I don't know." Philip stopped talking, self-conscious, and took another drink from his beer, and couldn't see Mac in the schoolroom now.

Gary pulled out the tape and the pickup was quiet, they could faintly hear the thunder, and the green indicator light had disappeared in the darkness under the rusted dash. Gary reached across to the glove compartment in front of Philip and picked out another plastic cartridge. "That okay?"

"Sure."

He pushed it into the tape deck and the tiny green light came back on and music vibrated from speakers in the door panels. Philip dropped his empty can onto the floorboard, onto the dense steel tow chain bunched there, and rolled open the grocery sack. "Yeah, I've got to take my damn car down tomorrow and get an oil

seal fixed. I've been leaking oil for a month."

They drank the last two beers there in the dark pickup cab, listening to music and watching the light rain come and go. "I guess I better roll," Gary said. "Thanks for the beer."

"Shit, thanks for coming up. This was a lot better than dicking around inside."

"Don't work too hard."

"Are you kidding? Except this rain means all those little farts will be tracking mud and grass everywhere tomorrow. Great."

"If you want a bag, let me know."

"I'll do that. Adios." Philip stepped down from the pickup into the mist and slammed the door closed. He stood and watched Gary's pickup pull away, its headlights showing the rain and the reflections of his red taillights glinting from the wet blacktop. Then Philip turned and jogged sluggishly toward the bright hallway door, past rainwater drumming against the bottom of a drainpipe at the corner of the building.

Tuesday morning, the low clouds that hid the sunrise were beginning to break up. Laura drove off the hard wet trailer lot for work, and by the time Philip looked out the windowcreen again the grey-bottomed clouds moved across the sky like great, slow

whales. Philip called her at work to follow him down to Jeff's--she said she couldn't leave, but finally asked Ken and said she could take off after lunch rush was over. The streets were dry when Philip left the trailer in the old station wagon, the tiny red oil light on again. On the way back from the garage to the trailer they stopped at a convenience store for gas, and Philip was leaning against Laura's Volkswagen, pumping gas, watching her walk away from him across the black-top toward the brick store, when he noticed her short blue jeans cutoffs and her legs brown and smooth and surprisingly graceful, it seemed. He whistled at her and she looked around and frowned. She told him when she came back that she was doing prep all day and Ken didn't mind her wearing cutoffs. They drove past an old skinny man pushing a wire shopping cart down the street next to the curb, gathering aluminum cans, past the glinting wire spokes of boys on their bicycles. Laura pulled onto the flat grass in front of the trailer and left the Volkswagen running, so Philip got out and thanked her and closed the door. She backed into the gravel lane and drove off again.

She was motionless and quiet in bed when he got home from work and Philip didn't try to talk to her.

Wednesday Philip woke up when one of the Mexican children from the next trailer began crying and then screaming. He rushed out of the empty, wrinkled bed and pulled on his jeans, zipping as he scrambled down the wooden steps. Behind the trailer, near the motorcycle leaning on its kickstand in the bushy brown wees, the tiny brown girl stood screaming and pawing frantically, uselessly at herself through her gingham dress while a little brown boy, her brother, stood scared and dumbfounded several feet away, staring. From somewhere Philip remembered a little clearing in the dry weeds, a dark dirt antbed. He grabbed the girl by the arms and lifted her toward the boy, and heard while he carried her in the air there an aluminum door slam open against the side of the next trailer and felt the stickers in his feet and saw beneath the next trailer the other brown feet running and then the little boy backing away from his crying, gasping sister. Philip brushed at the girl's tiny arms once before the young Mexican woman reached them; and then he stood and watched as she shoved her arms beneath the frantic girl's little dress and then picked her up by the waist and carried her back around the trailer without ever looking at Philip, the black-haired little Mexican boy following, meekly explaining.

Philip pulled the dented gasoline can from beneath the trailer again and soaked the antbed, and lit it, and stood angry, impatient, while it burned down.

And when Philip got home that night Laura was in bed again and wouldn't get dressed to go for an ice cream cone. "I'll be goddamned, you better not still be pissed," he said over her, in the wood-framed doorway of the bedroom. "Just don't ask me to go get one again." He closed the aluminum door hard and walked down the steps to the motorcycle by the door and climbed on, the engine still warm through his jeans legs, kicked it started after half a dozen tries, loud again in the dark between trailers. He turned off the gravel into the smooth road and decided to get something to drink.

Philip woke up once, still drunk, when Laura got up. Neither of them had slept well. After her Volkswagen crunched into the dirt and gravel and faded off he lay there, the fan on him, the laughs and squeals of girls playing tag around the next trailer. He dozed again, uncomfortable, his mouth dry, until it was too warm to sleep. Then he got out of bed and poured a bowl of cereal.

There were still droplets of dew in the weeds and on the black seatcushion of his motorcycle. Philip released the catch and opened the black metal tool

compartment under the rusted exhaust pipe and pulled out the plastic baggie of crisp green and brown marijuana. In the trailer, at the kitchen table and with the portable radio on, he crumbled the brittle buds in his hands and onto a folded section of newspaper, and brushed at it again and again with his drivers license to separate the tiny, hard seeds. He rolled and smoked another joint, spoke to himself now and then as he did, and for over an hour sat at the end of the couch near the plastic endtable with the little radio in his lap, turning the dial slowly, pointing the bent silver antenna, finding a song or commercial or a newscast, and then when it was over dialing again into the middle of another song. Finally he moved the fan into the living room, onto the linoleum floor in front of the old couch blowing back and forth, took off his jeans and fell asleep with the radio playing country music.

The wind-up alarm clock on the floor rang just after two o'clock. Philip sat up, leaving sweat on the vinyl cushions, and called Jeff's, then grabbed his jeans from the floor, went into the bedroom for a white T-shirt and white socks in the open woodgrain dresser drawer, and the heavy brown leather workboots. He had to kick the starter several times before the motorcycle even fired, cursing, but once he was moving the wind dried the sweat on his forehead and beneath his

eyes.

He pulled from behind a line of closed-window cars at an intersection stoplight, just past the chrome bumper ahead of him, and revved the motorcycle loud, close between cars and the curb, half riding and half walking the bike, reached the intersection and the light still red and turned right onto another road instead, simply to be moving in the heat, popping the clutch and whining fiercely through gears to forget how tired he was.

He walked inside Jeff's garage, between the raised cars and open hoods. Jeff was bent into a clicking engine. Philip stood there until he raised up with the lamp.

"What the hell's wrong with my car?"

Jeff was wiry, his bony face and small red ears moving strong and deliberate as he chewed, his hard arms disappearing from his black hands and fingernails into the worn khaki coveralls. He talked in a slow, almost whining drawl. "You got a crack in the block."

Philip glared at him for a second, and then into the dark, blowing engine.

"I figured to wait and see what you wanted to do." Jeff punched off the wire-screen lamp and hung it on the hood, scraped at a round black magnet with a screwdriver, and Philip stared at his black hands, dozens

of little scabbed nicks, scars between the brown callouses, thick fingernails. "I can use a short block and keep the rest of the engine. Save you a little."

"Are you sure it's cracked? Goddamnit, how'd it get cracked?"

"You're lucky you didn't throw a rod. Like I said, three-fifty, four hundred bucks, if I can use your cylinders. If they're not--"

"Keep the goddamn thing." Philip bounced the heel of his boot into the steel garage door runner. "Fucking sell it for all I care, the whole goddamn car isn't worth that much. I can't fucking afford that."

Philip stood with his hands on his belt, digging into his hips with his fingers, staring around the garage, refusing to look at or even acknowledge Jeff. He shook his head tensely, slowly, clenching his teeth, at the dusty black tires stacked in columns along the metal sliding, at the rusted iron wheels, at the solid heavy bench piled with oil filters, oil white-crusted batteries, socket wrenches, old black shocks, cardboard boxes splitting full with dead spark plugs. He turned and looked at Jeff hard and then turned slowly back again: screwdrivers and hammers with handles worn black and smooth, rows of new black belts and hoses, old license plates, and down finally at the oil-stained

cement floor and a lopsided metal pan half-full with ugly slick black oil. "I'm just not fucking going to do that," he said to himself, through his teeth. "Goddamnit!" He turned to Jeff for an instant, clenching one white fist against his thigh.

He stopped outside in the sunlight and tilted his head back, walked back into the garage and down the row of cars to his station wagon, watching Jeff; he jerked open the stiff door against its hinges and dug his large brown-bone pocketknife and the screwdrivers from the creased maps and aspirin tins and a doorhandle in the open glovebox. "I'm serious--the goddamn thing is yours," he nodded across the wrinkled blue sheet to Jeff, past the steering whell and the open driver's side window. "I'm tired of fucking with it. You're a goddamn mechanic, fix it up and make a goddamn fucking bundle on it, I don't care. I'm just fucking through with it."

Jeff raised up calmly, looked across the luggage rack of the station wagon at Philip stomping through the garage door. "Hey, I don't want that car sitting here, son. You take it or I'll have the cops haul it."

Philip never looked around, kicked at his motorcycle several times furiously until it started, and then only turned to look back down the street for traffic.

He stepped from the alley between brick buildings,

opened the door under the block-lettered sign and walked into the music and the cool dark, down the dirty red carpet stairs patched with duck tape and under the neon glass tubes advertising beers. A shaggy cowboy with a huge straw hat and open shirt was crouched over the edge of the green pooltable, in the glow of the hanging lamp, the long cue stick sliding back and forth; across the scatter of balls a thin boy with frizzy red hair leaned on his stick. Between the bar and barstools and the rows of mirrors and hanging glasses a large bearded face turned from the color television toward Philip and then back again, to a glowing soap opera. Except for one corner booth, where two earnest, trim lawyers in three-piece suits sat with their mugs of beer, the tables and booths of the dark room were empty.

The basement of the downtown hotel was cool below the heat that was building on the alleys and streets and brick buildings above. Philip waited for his bottle of beer from the man behind the bar and recognized the female shape of faint smudges that dancers had left on the wall mirror behind a small wooden stage. He slide behind a square table across the room from the lawyers, near the blinking jukebox, still tense, still breathing hard. He watched the thin boy clear his last two clicking balls and the black eight-ball from the green felt

table, its edges scarred with the black marks of cigarettes, and then walk to the bar and take long, thirsty swallows from a mug while the cowboy racked. The jukebox wailed through songs and when the two lawyers walked up the stairs and out of sight Philip went to the bar and paid for a pitcher of beer.

It was two-fifty before he left. He walked up the stairs and into the alley, so bright he had to close his eyes and so hot it made him dizzy for a second. He walked down the alley past a dumpster to the street, where he leaned against the brick wall before walking out onto the sidewalk to his motorcycle, watching from the shade two old women in their cloth sunbonnets helping each other down the almost unbearably bright curb. His shoulder scraped forward against the wall.

Cars went by, Philip concentrated desperately on the unfamiliar streets and drove carefully, his spread arms stiff on the handlebar grips. He focused his eyes on clean brick houses with sprinklers moving back and forth over green lawns, trimmed hedges and huge white-barked cottonwoods and young thin mimosas and sycamores, cast iron porchchairs and richly polished walnut doors; he slowed almost to a complete stop at every streetcorner, gearing down and then shifting back up again and again. By the time he reached the

edge of town and the schoolbuilding he was hot and sick and still clenching his jaws, his head pounding.

Philip was in his closet, still drunk, peeling the plastic from a fresh dustmop head that smelled like polish, and then snapping it onto the wire frame of the wooden handle when he heard Mac's footsteps close outside the door. He looked around dully just as the square-faced old man stopped in the doorway, his stomach beneath his shirt hanging over his canvas trousers. Philip looked back down at the dustmop in his hands and said nothing.

Mac watched for several seconds through his glasses but Philip still wound not look up or speak.

"You been drinking?"

Philip turned his head up to Mac, squinting into the bright light of the hall. "None of your goddamn business. I'll get everything done." He spoke slowly and stared into Mac's pale eyes, eyes weak even behind the lenses, stared too long and didn't flinch.

The old man glanced down at the dustmop still in his hands and then back up. "Don't be late again."

"Oh fuck you." Philip turned back to the concrete closet wall and propped the dustmop against the corner. "What are you going to do, fire me? Shit." He turned back toward Mac. "Go ahead, see what the fuck I care."

"Don't come in drunk again," Mac said, louder,

ugly, from a dry throat.

"Oh fuck you man!" Philip banged the iron mopbucket angrily from beneath the iron sink and wedged it beneath the faucet. "Go ahead and do it, goddamnit, you'll just have to do my shit till you get somebody else." The hot steam poured up from the bucket, it was nauseating to breathe but Philip stared into the water. "I'm serious. I'll get my shit done." Finally he turned to Mac again. "You going to fire T.W. too?"

Mac didn't answer, his short forearms stuck into his pockets, the lumps of his thick hands in his huge trousers.

"I'm serous," Philip nodded fiercely at Mac, "go ahead." He turned the hot metal faucet knob, lifted the heavy mopbucket out of the sink, from under the section of cut garden hose and down hard onto the concrete floor, raised back up in the cramped, steamy closet. "I'll get it done."

Philip was bent over the bucket, pouring floor soap from a plastic jug into the hot water. "Don't do it again," he heard Mac say above him in the doorway, the old man holding onto the last word for a few pitiful moments, as if he would answer anything else Philip could say with the same words, the same tone of his old, gravelly voice. And then Philip heard him leave the doorway and his shoes on the linoleum hall outside the

closet, and Philip screwed the cap onto the plastic jug and tossed it hard onto the floor against the concrete wall. It was quiet in the closet. Philip stood motionless for a minute with his eyes closed, breathing deliberately, the blood in his head, leaning against the huge dirty old sink, and then he picked up the heavy bucket of water and felt the ache in his back, moved his tongue and tasted beer in his dry mouth. At the other end of the silent hallway, past closed lockers and faint fluorescent lights from the acoustic ceiling, Mac's black trashcan sat on its rollers at an open classroom door, the old dustpan hanging from its rim. Philip stared at it for a long time.

He turned the key in the center of the handlebars and it was suddenly dark and quiet there on the lot between trailers. He unlocked the aluminum door and stepped into the trailer quietly. The dim light over the kitchen sink was still on, as always. He looked into the bedroom and could see Laura's eyes in the faint kitchen light. She was watching him, and he wondered if she had seen him carefully, gently pull the door locked. He looked at her and tried to smile, then went to the refrigerator and stood in the brighter light of the open white door and drank from the water bottle, the back of his untucked shirt to Laura.

After he had closed the refrigerator and clicked off the sink light, after he had undressed and laid on top of the sheets next to Laura, she was still lying as she was, expressionless, looking at his face beside hers, and finally above his eyes at his forehead. Philip reached up to her cheek and pushed her fresh black hair behind her ear. And again he tried to smile at her, but could finally only raise his eyebrows. "I'm losing my shit," he whispered.

Laura moved her hand from the pillow, her smooth arm across the white sheet, to Philip's chest. Neither of them spoke again, they lay there on their sides looking at each other, Philip tired and naked and pale and Laura beneath the warm sheet, until they faded into sleep, one after the other. Laura left cinammon rolls on top of the oven in the kitchen when she left for work.

Philip mowed the weeds on the large trailer lot before work, his face and neck and chest and underarms slick with sweat in the hot sun and muddy with the brown dust that billowed up from the dented lawnmower in the loud, still air, his blue jeans legs heavy with dust, his wet socks bunching inside the leather workboots. He pushed the mower into the thick dry weeds behind the trailer, step by step, thrust by thrust, slowly, to keep from clogging and stalling, stopping frequently

to wipe the salty sweat from his eyebrows, to rub it out of his eyes. In front, small gravel shot from the side of the mower and cracked against the flat aluminum sides of the trailers, in back occasionally the metal blade would grind against larger rocks solid in the ground and hidden beneath the weeds. He mowed across the open, charred circle where he'd burned the antbed. And when he was finally finished, tired and hot but surprised at how good he felt, the lot was smooth and clean and even, all around the trailer; the hard spot beneath the bedroom window where they parked their cars was no longer so evident, and the lots on either side looked conspicuously shaggy.

Philip went inside the trailer, dim and cooler with its curtains closed, and took the cold water bottle from the refrigerator and sat on the linoleum floor in front of the fan, cool air drying his wet skin. He took a quick shower, the dirt and grass washing down his legs onto the bottom of the bathtub where he sloshed it with his feet down the drain. He lost his temper for a minute, kicking the motorcycle and started sweating again, but when he pulled into the gravel lane and away from the trailer he felt good, awake and alert and still strong in his arms and his shoulders and his legs and his back, and he turned to look back at the cut yard, small clumps and trails

of drying shredded grass lined evenly across the smooth rectangular lot.

Philip opened the heavy wooden door and walked into the pizza parlor, stood at the edge of the plate glass window and watched Laura in the bright kitchen. She slapped a flat pizza dough into the cornmeal on her board and peeled back the wax paper, scooped grainy red pizza sauce from the stainless steel container with her brush and swirled it across the pale dough, and then broke and sprinkled and spread grated yellow and white cheese. She pushed the wooden board down the stainless steel counter to the boy beside her and hurried across the kitchen in her tennis shoes to the laminated clip-board beside the cash register and plucked two more tinfoil orders. It was loud and crowded on Philip's side of the plate glass windows, where two small pre-school girls with elaborate hairdos watched pizzas being made, shouts and laughs and motion at the wooden dining tables, in the haze under the dim lights; and the kitchen was loud too, Philip could tell, with the bells of the cash register and the heavy iron oven doors slamming and thuds of the cutting knives and pick-up orders shouted over the PA system. Laura spread cornmeal over another board.

Philip heard someone shout his name and looked

into the crowd near the bar. It was David, with Clare. Philip waved and walked past the plate glass window toward them and Laura saw him. He smiled and she shook her head.

Philip spoke to David and Clare, who were both drunk, and then walked back up to the kitchen, to the formica pick-up counter. Laura was at the stainless steel counter across the kitchen with her back to him.

"Family bullfighter, double pepperoni and sausage," he heard her call to the boy beside her as she pushed him the board.

"Go home, assholes," the boy muttered too loud.

Another high school boy, sweating, holding a long aluminum scoop shoulder-high, cursed as he dropped open a carbon-crusted oven door and slid the scoop inside the low oven and lifted out a brown, bubbling pizza. He swung the scoop over the wooden cutting table and let the pizza slide off and then turned back to slam the iron door closed and bent to open another one.

The boy beside Laura dripped jalepenos over a large pizza and then grabbed up his board from the counter scattered with bits of cheese and meat and smears of sauce. "Hole!" he shouted and moved toward the ovens. Philip heard a glass pitcher break outside the kitchen, and then the blinking jukebox beyond the tables started again, loud over the noise of customers

and heavy wooden chairs scraping against the floor. Laura started toward the clipboard and the cash register and saw him.

"What happened?" he called to her.

"That new kid quit." She stopped at the clipboard to look out the order window at the crowd and then looked at Philip. "High school football sucks," she said.

They were out of the kitchen, Philip and Laura and two of the boys, leaning on the pick-up counter. "Look at that." The boy who watched ovens held the backs of his hands out for them to see. Small red splotches and several grey blisters spotted the skin of his hands and forearms. "I thought I was through watching ovens."

"Don't worry, Ken'll hire somebody else next week," Laura said. "He better." She took a long drink of coke and the ice rattled in her plastic glass. Several of the long wooden tables were still full, but the parlor was quieter now, emptying. Behind the bar a plump man with short hair and no sideburns splashed pitchers and glasses in and out of the stainless steel sinks. A high school girl in her disposable plastic apron moved under the dim lights from table to table, gathering the dented aluminum trays and wadded napkins

and empty glasses and cold scraps of pizza and crust and tin ashtrays. Occasionally a group of people laughed suddenly together, but then they quickly talked again in lower voices. It was dark outside, the large neon sign glowing beyond the kitchen windows.

"Feel like a couple of steaks?" Philip asked Laura. "I picked up a couple on the way home from work, I thought you'd be at the trailer."

"So did I," Laura said. "It's pretty late. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. I just felt like grilling some steaks."

Laura looked at him. "Why don't we do it tomorrow. I'm beat. I've been here since nine this morning."

"Come on, it's Friday night. You can sleep late."

Laura nodded behind him, toward the tables. Philip looked around and saw David bending over his table, beer dripping onto the tile floor. "He's wasted. Bobby had a hundred-thousand-mile party for his car," she said.

"That's what they said." Philip looked back at her. "The reason he's so drunk, he gave blood down at the plasma center today. Clare said they went straight out and bought a case." They both grinned and shook their heads.

"I thought you were thinking about doing that, selling blood."

"Thinking about it and doing it are two different things," Philip said. "I'll think about it all day, but I'm not about to sell my blood. That's when I'll know I've hit rock bottom."

"You better check those in one," Laura said, looking into the kitchen. One of the boys walked sullenly back toward the ovens. "And go ahead and turn off three and four."

"He's sunburned as shit," the other boy said. "Those ovens are killing him."

"You want to start washing up trays?" Laura asked him.

"Not really."

"I'll do them if you'll close the front."

"No, I'm joking," the boy said. "I'd rather do trays anyway and get it over with." He carried his glass to the bar and disappeared into the back prep room.

"I think I'm going to go ahead and put mine on tonight," Philip said. "Why don't you let me cook you one? Just think, a juicy, medium rare steak waiting when you get home, and then right into bed and sleep as late as you want to."

Philip sat with David and Clare and watched Laura. She leaned against the greasy pick-up counter, chewing ice, until two customers came in the front door, a young

couple with their arms around each other's waist, looking from the dim parlor through the kitchen windows at the bright counters and tables and ovens, motioning to each other. Laura waited at the order window, beside the cash register, while they whispered to each other about the menu card they held between them. The boy in the kitchen rocked a heavy steel cutting knife back and forth around a pizza on the cutting table.

Later Laura lifted the heavy wire basket from the fryer, the warm, slick grease on her hands, and set it on a pizza tray while she drained the dark brown grease from the fryer and scrubbed the slick insides, the burnt chicken and fried batter. Only two small groups of high school boys were left at the wooden tables, smoking cigarettes and watching faint silent movies on the front wall while the jukebox played too loud in the large room, and David and Clare. The boy in the kitchen worked the long-handled wire brush in and out of an iron oven. "You want to get that," Laura said to the boy when the phone over the cash register rang. "Tell them we're closed." She bent into the fryer again and scooped up handfuls of grease and soft crust, scraped it from her palm into the large metal can below the fryer drain.

Philip stayed at the counter for several minutes after David and Clare left, and finally the last group

of boys pushed their chairs back and left, and Laura gathered their trays and glasses and napkins. The middle-aged little bartender, an airman, was already slamming chairs onto the tables in the dim lights, and now that the music was over there was the clank of pizza trays being washed in the back room. Laura stood leaning at a table by a window, slowly wiping a rag around an ashtray, and gazed out across the dark, empty parking lot for a moment at the interstate, where Philip could see the steady progression of white headlights and red taillights rising to the expressway overpass, and then the tops of cars sliding along above the guardrails, faster or slower, one after another beneath the lightpoles.

"I'm putting one on for you," Philip said to her from the door. She nodded tiredly to him and he left.

Philip stopped on the wooden steps when Laura pulled onto the lot, her headlights making shadows of the clumps of dry grass lining the yard. The yellow bulb on the side of the trailer above the door was on; white smoke was rising from the small iron grill beside the steps. It was warm and quiet outside, and the trailer was hot when they came inside. Philip, shirtless, started shaking pepper onto two red steaks. He turned and wiped the sweat in his hair at his

temples and along his nose beneath his eyes.

"Lay down and cool off," he grinned at her, his tongue playing over the back of his broken tooth.

"What are you cooking?"

"Potatoes."

She stepped closer, in front of the fan on the kitchen table that turned back and forth.

"There's beer in the refrigerator. It'll help you unwind." Philip handed her the steaks on a soft paper plate. "If you'll take those out. . . ."

Philip brought the cold beer bottles outside and they sat on the wooden steps, looking down into the coals, the steaks beginning to sizzle, the heat rising with the smoke. "I'll have you know this is my first beer of the day," Philip said, and raised his bottle to her. "And no smoke." Laura commented on the mowed lot, and then looked at the flat white side of the next trailer and the dark curtains over the square windows.

"You might turn that porchlight off," she said.

In the quiet dark, with only the kitchen light from the open window falling outside, the coals glowed red and shadowy, puffs of bright yellow flame where grease dropped. They talked quietly, Laura tiredly, about work, about the yard, about Philip's car, and they heard a train drone through in the distance, and

neighborhood dogs howling, almost human, at a siren. It wasn't worth fixing, Philip said, so he would just pour oil into it until it wouldn't hold it; or maybe he could sell it before it got too bad, throw dirt or sand up under it to cover the oil, and just ride the motorcycle for a while. The steaks were dropping more grease now, the yellow fire from the coals was beginning to scorch the meat and throw the motions of primitive shadows on the steps and the hard ground and the ribbed siding of the trailer. Philip turned the steaks, the flames jumped higher and louder for a second and then died, and he and Laura gazed into the fire for a while without talking.

"Jan wants me to move in for a while." Laura said it softly, maybe sadly, and then it was quiet again. Philip waited.

"So what's that supposed to mean?" He bent down from where he was sitting on the steps into the heat, to adjust the steaks with the fork in his hand and to flick beer onto the coals to stop the flames.

"I don't know. I'm just to tired to think. I'm just telling you what she said."

Philip sat up, his elbows on his knees, and looked into the coals, scratched his bare stomach.

"I was thinking about going to college next spring."

"That's great. That's really great." He turned

to look at her. "What can I say? You do whatever you want to."

Laura looked back at him in the face, a sympathetic look, and tilted her head. "Don't be like that." He watched her rolling her black hair between her thumb and fingers at her shoulder, and then she looked back down onto the dark wooden step between her knees. The flames beneath the grill were popping brightly now, constant, too hot. Philip watched them, rearranged the steaks on the grills, and then tilted one up with the fork. "Looks good enough for me."

The turning fan on the kitchen table only moved the hot air, and when he opened the oven for the potatoes the heat burned Philip's cheeks. They sat on the old vinyl couch, by the open windows with the fan on them, Philip's back slick against the cushion, and ate the steaks on paper plates on their laps, grease and butter soaking through onto folded sections of newspaper, their sweating beers on the patterned floor at their feet.

"It sound like you've already decided. I don't know, you want me to beg you or something?" Philip tilted his head back with the dark bottle against his lips and drank slowly. Laura watched his throat tighten above his bare chest, looked down, shook her head.

"That's not what I said."

Philip set the bottle carefully on the linoleum.

"Neither one of us can wait around to be begged. I told you I wasn't going to borrow any money for the car." He said the words deliberately, as if he had nothing more to say. Later she told him it was just for a while, she wasn't even sure about school.

"It's not like it's your fault," she said sharply from the couch while he ran hot water into the sink filling with white, sparkling suds, the steam rising toward the cabinets. "I just think it would be good for us."

"You watch too much fucking TV," he said, without turning around. The new cold bottle of beer on the kitchen counter beside him in a puddle of water.

Almost two hours later, after Philip had ended by saying there was no point in waiting--they might as well move her out tomorrow while they were both available--Laura downshifted the Volkswagen at a stoplight and closed her eyes. Philip startled her back awake when he said "Go." They sputtered down the deserted street, past a middle-aged woman in the light of a gas station phone booth, past carlots where strings of bright lightbulbs swayed back and forth, playing wild reflections over the beautifully polished hoods and chrome bumpers of identical new cars, all without hubcaps, strings of plastic pennants slapping, pieces of trash cartwheeling

across the street in front of them. A police car rushed silently past, the young policeman inside the dark car, his shotgun braced against the dashboard, and sped ahead down the empty highway and turned on its revolving blue lights as it neared an intersection and then off again when it was past.

They drove toward the trailer, past the dark abandoned miniature golf course overgrown with weeds, and Philip had her pull into an all-night grocery store, the vast parking lot empty beneath the rows of fluorescent parking lot lights, for toilet paper. She sat in the little car in front of the huge plate glass windows, sleepy and still, Philip watching her while he waited patiently at the counter, still shirtless, until one of the stockboys in cloth aprons slicing open cardboard boxes and stocking the shelves of deserted, blocked aisles noticed him and walked over to the cash register. Philip looked at her again walking in front of the curved hood and then got into the torn bucket seat beside her.

Philip didn't sleep well, the skirting of the trailer banged most of the night, the fresh wind hissing through the windowscreen and the small metal hoops at the top of the curtains clicking frantically on the curtainrod. When the cool rain came Philip pulled the window down and listened to the loud rain on the

hollow tin roof and the whir of the fan in the darkness, pulling the air over his back and legs on the sheets. They both got up before eight o'clock. Jan drove onto the lot around ten, and they all were pleasant and comfortable with each other now, carrying clumps of winter clothes from the back bedroom to the two cars, laying them carefully out in piles in the trunks or draping them over bucket seats, filling the floorboards with shoes and the few pans and plastic plates that were Laura's.

Jan pulled her metallic blue sportscar off the lot and down the gravel drive toward the street. Philip walked up the wooden steps through the open aluminum door and sat back into the couch, waiting, looking outside through the open door, listening to the clinks and rattles from the bathroom where Laura gathered her bottles of perfume and powder and lotion and plastic hair barrettes and everything else from the rickety tin medicine cabinet. He glanced at the little alarm clock on the floor aginst the bedroom door and reached for the radio on the plastic table beside the couch, turned the tiny dial across static to a familiar station and sat there, the radio in his lap. Laura came out of the narrow hall with a bootbox piled with bottles. They raised eyebrows at each other without smiling as she passed the couch and she walked outside

into the sunlight.

The radio news reported a hotel fire in Hungary, and Philip remembered Stefan: second grade, short, stocky, a broad, flat face, something about his eyes, a refugee boy his father's little church had kept for a while. He and Stefan stole things from a store once, silly things, sunglasses and a golfball and a duckcall, just to steal them, and brought them home to Philip's to hide, in the storeroom, above the slender, tapered fiberglass rods, above the wooden shelves crowded with tools and tackleboxes, above even the pegboard hung with dozens of yellow and green and silver and sparkling lures, all dangling silver treble hooks, tiny silver spinners. Philip remembered the dusty rafters, the stale, hot air, Stefan handing up the sunglasses and duckcall to hide and then himself feeling something as he pushed them back into the dark, touching it carefully with his fingers and then pulling out the small paperback book, and then another one, and a third. And he remembered Stefan from below, with his sad accent, asking what it was.

They brought them out and read them, incredulously, laughing until their faces hurt, reading each other paragraphs and whole pages, nervous, unable to stop, until finally they each read to themselves, thrilled and stunned by the stories of women, women with men

or other women or dogs. Finally Philip pulled himself back up into the rafters and slid the books back into the dark, tossed down the sunglasses and duckcall, and they hid them somewhere else, he didn't remember where. Philip crawled up into the rafters again, later, by himself, how much later he couldn't remember, and the books were gone. Philip turned the music on the little radio off and sat it back on the plastic endtable.

Later, crowded into the little seat of Laura's Volkswagen on the way to Jeff's, crowded by Laura's things, they passed an old farmer leaning against his pickup beside the road, the tailgate and a cardtable lined with plastic wicker buckets of peaches, and Philip could see the close-cropped heads of children in the pickup cab and wondered about Stefan, now. At the garage, before he got out, Laura rocked the clutch pedal slowly, thanked him for helping her move her things. "You going to play cards tonight?" she asked; and Philip, a little surprised, told her she was still invited to play, whenever.

"Sorry if I did something," he told her, and then closed the door and walked toward the shade of the garage.

The card game was at David's, a tiny panelled garage apartment behind a huge old wooden house with

smooth wooden columns across its long front porch, the cars parked on both sides of the sleepy street, beneath sycamore trees. Philip parked the station wagon against the high curb in front of the house next door sometime after nine o'clock and sat there listening to the radio, finishing a joint. Laura's white Volkswagen was parked across the street, between two other empty cars, almost blocking a concrete driveway. The houses were quiet along the street, a car drove slowly past now and then, and Philip could see between houses the porchlight of David's apartment and could hear the music coming through the screen door when he finally turned off the car radio. He lifted the grocery sack of beer and walked up the driveway past the dark, still windows of the old house.

From the screen door he saw Laura, in white, her hair fluffy and long, and looked away before she saw him. The fold-out cardtable was circled with people in various chairs in the cramped living room on a green scrap of carpet; others sat on the bedspread-draped couch, talking loud against the vibrating music that pulsed from huge walnut cabinet speakers, glancing now and then from their seats at the artificial colors of the television picture. "Hey, Philip." On a blanket close in front of the television slept a little soft-haired girl, the knuckle of her thumb in her wet mouth, her eyelids and cheeks smooth and white, and scattered

around her tiny metal cars and a plastic doll and bunched doll clothes. Philip squeezed between the couch and Gary's chair, squeezed past an older, bearded man, Richard, in the kitchen to the refrigerator and set his beer inside. He came back to the table and stood behind Laura's lawnchair, one hand on the webbed tubing of the chair and one hand holding his dark bottle of beer, watched the plastic chips slide or roll into the middle of the table and another round of cards dealt over one at a time, exclamations or mutterings following each card. Decker eventually won it with a king-high flush.

"There going to be a chair open any time soon?" Plastic antes were tossed into the middle and Gary shuffled the deck.

"We can trade off," David said.

So Philip stepped over the little girl to the couch and Sherry and Richard and the girl's mother made room for him. Philip enjoyed himself more than usual, talking on the couch, occasionally reaching to pass a joint to or from the card table, the people at the table moving from the card game to the couch in no particular order or schedule, drinking beers or sliching cheese to go with the glasses of wine. Philip moved to the table and bought five dollars worth of chips from John, who went into the kitchen, played for nearly

an hour and a half and won two dollars, then gave up his chair again and stood up, counting his plastic chips to cash in with David, turning once and meeting Laura's eyes from the couch. He sat next to her and they talked between themselves and with the others, relaxed, laughing, and once, when she put her hand on his shoulder to pass him a joint she left it there longer than Philip expected. He grinned at her, showed her his tooth, and she smiled back.

"I did my first acid sixteen years ago," they listened to Richard say. His eyes were wrinkled, he was balding in front, and when he blushed now and then, looking around him, it spread across his forehead and back to his hairline. "It changed my life. I don't care what they say. There's something holy about it." Richard nodded. "But you've got to be careful. You've got to respect it, you don't just use it."

By the time Philip went to the table for the second time he was wasted. It took an effort to read the cards grouped around the table, and finally he had to get up quickly and wait for his chips to be counted before he nodded several times around the room and walked intently out through the screen door into the cool backyard of the old house, quiet even with the music from inside David's almost unnaturally bright beneath a white moon shining through the tangle of

pecan trees and leaving sharp shadows on the driveway. Philip drove the station wagon carefully, the radio rattling loud in the dashboard, trying hard to stay awake until he rolled onto the lot and bounced to a sudden stop, stumbled out and up the wooden steps, and finally collapsed on his bed in his clothes.

The phone woke him up. He let it ring several times before rolling out of the bed, his unbuttoned shirt wrinkled around him, and moving groggily to the vinyl couch.

"Hey, did I wake you up? This is Lee."

"Oh, how you doing, Lee. No, not really, I was just laying there." Philip settled his head onto the phone in his hand, his arm braced against his knee, and closed his eyes.

"Hey, this is such a nice day out I thought I'd try to get someone to run down to the lake, get a little fishing in. We haven't been in a while." Philip realized how warm the room was, the hot curtains behind him, how uncomfortable he was in his clothes, how bright the trailer was even with his eyes closed. "We take my truck, and I'd have to shell out for the boat anyway."

"I don't know. I partied too hard last night."

"Oh, that's right. How'd you do?"

"I lost about four. I just got too fucked up."

"Yeah, I wanted to make it, but it was Jeffrey's birthday. We took him into the city, to the aquariums. He had a blast."

"That's a good idea." Philip sank onto his back on the vinyl cushions, draped a forearm over his eyes.

"So what time do you want me to come by?"

"Man, I don't know. . . ."

"Come on. It'll be a good time. I tell you what, you bring some smoke and I'll get the beer, we'll get some serious fishing done, that's the best thing if you've got a hangover."

"I don't know. . . ." Philip thought about Laura at the game, her hand on his shoulder, at times playing cards and laughing at the rickety card table while he was on the couch. Lee's voice in the phone was telling him it was perfect, there was no wind, they could stay till dark.

"I don't know, I don't know if I could handle staying that long."

"We'll come in when you want to then. I just feel like getting out."

"Alright," Philip said. "Come on over, that'll keep me from taking a shower." Philip lay there with the phone in his hand until the dial tone changed to the warning beep, struggled up and put the receiver back.

The little alarm clock showed ten o'clock. He dropped his shirt from his shoulders onto the couch and took off his socks. At the refrigerator he drank and drank from the water bottle, set it back onto the wire rack and pulled a bottle of beer from the refrigerator door.

When Lee drove up, Philip was in the back bedroom, among the boxes of clothes and books and tools and newspapers that had been disarranged to get to Laura's things, pulling tow fiberglass rods by their tips from a tangle of his father's other rods, and long-sleeved flannel shirts and corduroy carcoats and denim jackets hanging over them, finally jerking them free angrily. "Come on in," he shouted through the trailer when he heard and felt the heavy knock on the aluminum door.

"This must be the place." Philip nodded through the dirty windshield toward the stretch of barbed wire fence where a hard dirt road intersected the two-lane blacktop, toward a new bright red stop sign. The top strand of wire was lined with dried black catfish heads, some as big footballs, others smaller, some simply clean white skulls. Lee bounced the rattling little pickup off the highway onto the road. "Can't miss it," he said. "Maybe we can give the old lady a head on the way out."

"I wouldn't mind running a trotline sometime,"

Philip said.

They drove down the narrow rutted road and around a muddy backhoe rolling slowly along, the Mexican nodding from his seat, past cicadas clicking from huge hot cottonwoods and finally through the mesquites scratching the truck and into a clearing, a wide white-gravelled lot, on each side three small square dusty green and white wooden cabins, deserted, and the old filling station-baithouse next to the dirt road, at the edge of the gravel, its plate glass windows stacked with white styrofoam icechests. The gravel crunched under the tires when Lee ground to a stop, and the hot red dust from the road caught up to the little truck and sifted in the open windows. They got out and Lee looked into the bed of the truck, checking the scattered rods and reels and tackleboxes while Philip leaned on the top of his open door and looked around the fishing camp. Beyond the small tin-roofed cabins a rought concrete ramp slanted into the lapping brown water beside the bleached wooden dock lashed with black tires; and there was the familiar feel of the warm lake, the heavy air and the dank smell of fish and mud and algae and reeds and driftwood and slow water.

They walked in the gravel toward the baithouse, Lee in his cutoffs and tennis shoes, and then inside out of the sun. Philip browsed down the aisles of

lead sinkers and gold swivels and wire crappie rigs and hooks, along counters of colored lures in their plastic boxes, looking at everything, rows of tall shiny fiberglass and new graphite rods wound at the silver eyelets with bright varnished thread. He selected a fishing cap from those hanging from twine stretched above the room, and Lee bought cheese crackers and beef jerky and cigarette papers.

And they followed the stiff old woman back outside into the carport ringing with thousands of crickets and to the rectangular cement tanks foaming with air bubbles. She swept her large brown cotton net through the dark water, through the hundreds of dark green backs and the scattered upturned white bellies and open eyes, and suddenly the dripping soft net was shimmering with slick, silver-sided minnows, the old woman scooping them up by handfuls and dropping them into Lee's rusting minnow bucket.

Philip filled the two gallon gas can at an ancient glass-topped pump while Lee pulled the pickup through the gravel in front of a cabin. They walked down to the lake, Lee lugging the small, heavy outboard motor to aluminum flat-bottomed boats pulled up on the mud between the dock and cattails. They shoved their boat through the brown suds rocking at the edge of the lake and Philip held it from shore while Lee bolted on

the grimy motor, his tennis shoes sloshing inside the dented boat, luscious green moss matted flat and wiry and dripping against the round dock pilings just above the water.

Finally they dropped their rods and tackle and Lee's plastic icechest loudly into the bottom of the metal boat. Philip held the front of the boat while Lee pulled hard a dozen times at the cord until the motor shivered alive with white, oily smoke and then revved it for a minute. Philip shoved the little boat backwards into the brown lake and pulled his bare feet out of the muck, pulled himself into the boat, his muddy feet and heavy, wet jeans legs dragging slowly in the warm water. Lee turned the boat and they headed out into the open lake.

"Keep a lookout," Lee said from the back of the boat, his arm cocked behind him on the throttle handle. "Hate to shear a pin." Philip sat in the front of the boat, his beer on his knee, entranced by the ridges of waves sliding smoothly beneath the aluminum. They crept into a dead forest of stumps and dark water. Occasionally Philip could see the shadowy form of a log or a stump beneath the surface glide past, the air warm and still and quiet except for the motor and gurgle of water behind it.

And then Lee killed the motor and it was lonely

and hushed, the sensation of motion without sound or vibration, until the aluminum boat bumped a large dead tree rising from the deep water, and then the loud clanks of metal in the bottom of the boat as they scrambled and stretched to loop ropes around the huge smooth trunk. But soon it was quiet again, except for an uneven lapping of small waves beneath the boat and an occasional dull bump against the tree, and far away on shore the steady thumps of an oil pump. Lee lifted the gushing inner minnow bucket and lowered it into the lake, tugged on the dirty cord that tied it to the outer bucket half-full of water in the boat there they would keep a few minnows. "My old man didn't fish with live bait much," Philip said. "He couldn't sit still."

Finally they had their lines baited and in the water at different depths, their rods propped against the sides of the boat and out over the water, and the red plastic ice chest in the bottom of the hot bright boat between them. For long stretches of time they were quiet, thinking or napping beneath the shade of their caps, the tiny gnats spinning around their faces, sometimes submerging a bright empty can just beneath the surface, watching it bubble and sink slowly out of sight. Philip shifted positions often on the seat. His back hurt.

"I sure had a good time with Jeffrey yesterday," Lee said once. Philip's eyew were squinted, his lips tight against the short joint that was trailing smoke upward. He finished inhaling and held his breath, raised his eyebrows and nodded at Lee. Lee sat straddled on the aluminum seat, elbows on his knees, his bare brown back humped moist with sweat against the sun, his brown hair dangling hot and thick from around his neck, staring into the water where his clear line disappeared. Philip waited then exhaled the hot smoke.

"Here you go."

Lee stretched an arm toward him.

"What'd you do?"

"He had a Little League game and then we went to the city to the aquariums." Lee inhaled on the joint.

"Oh, that's right. He any good?"

Lee shrugged his round shoulders, holding his breath. Then he exhaled. "Not really. He's okay, he just doesn't play enough. He got up to bat a couple of times, he's afraid of getting hit, I think." He offered the joint to Philip who shook his head. "He plays right field when he plays." There was a small hiss when the joint hit the water. "I don't know, I ought to spend more time with him. I know I should."

"You never can tell," Philip said.

Lee lifted his rod slowly, tested the line, then

set it back against the boat gently. The sun was burning Philip's bare feet. "You want to throw me your shirt, I'm blistering the tops of my feet," Philip said. Lee tossed him the wadded T-shirt, wet and muddy from the bottom of the boat.

"Although I'm sure I won't."

"Shit, you can't tell. My grandfather, he was always taking off, never around, never wanted to work. That's what a real cowboy was, not this shit you see on TV. When my old man was a kid he must have hated his guts--he never talked about him much, but when he did I never heard him say one good thing about him. Anyway, shit, sometimes I wished my old man had taken off." Philip laughed through his nose once and nodded. "Sometimes nothing. All the time. He was fucking always around, strict as hell, I finally just took off. That's why I got out of school. Shit, you can't tell. Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

"I guess." Lee nodded. "But hell, everybody thinks that, I used to get sick of my old man when I was around him. Nobody likes to be told what to do."

Philip pried the plastic lid from the icebox and pulled out two more dripping cans of beer, tossed one to Lee, and they popped them open. "Goddamn it's hot," Philip said after several swallows, and pressed the cold can to his neck.

"Why don't you take off your shirt? You get sunburned?"

"Yeah."

"I got some lotion in my tackle box."

"Nah, that doesn't help, out like this. That's alright, I just got a little too much sun the other day."

"Let me know when you want to head in."

"Hell, no, this is fine. This is fucking cooler than that trailer." They drank at their cold beers. Lee re-baited one of his lines.

"So you think you'll ever get back together?" Philip asked.

"I don't think so," Lee said, concentrating on the black iron hook in one hand and the minnow in the other, tiny silver scales glittering on his fingers. "It's not worth it. No point getting hooked up now just for your old age."

"I know what you mean." Philip let his hand dangle in the cool water and watched it. "It gets old, being out somewhere with a girl, having a great time, thinking you're on top of the world, and then you catch a glimpse of yourself in a mirror or a window or something, suddenly bam, seeing how everybody else sees you. There goes your buzz."

And later, just before sundown, with the bright

sun low in their faces and glinting off the water, hot on Philip's cheeks and burning in their eyes, Lee talked about Jeffrey again. "I could see he was a real asshole about it," he said. "Hell, I wasn't a great Little Leaguer either, but by God I handled it better. He's a real little asshole about it."

"Sounds like you're really itching to spend more time with him."

"Shit," Lee said and shook his head. "I'd bust his ass."

They moved slowly through the cooling dark, the water sparkling with reflections of the moon, through shadows of stumps above and below water and Philip leaning on the front of the aluminum boat with his outstretched arm holding a swaying gas lantern, flicked now and then by a tiny cool wave and watching the eerie yellow water beneath the lantern. When they cleared the trees Lee opened the throttle of the little motor and they slid through the dark water, peering at single lights along the shore and groups of lights, the occasional car lights flickering through the trees and houses, several times following the slow patterns of the green and red and white running lights of other boats across the sparkling water, while Philip sat with the hot lantern on one thigh, enjoying the relief of

the moving air over his face. Now and then one of the flat, scaled crappie would flop frantically, rattling the metal stringer on the bottom of the boat. They followed a shining bass boat with steering wheel and padded swivel seats, followed it in the dark around the point and toward the dock and cabins until they passed it, slowing for the dock, and cut the motor, grounded the aluminum boat on the mud. Philip stepped onto the mud and heaved the boat up the bank, and then Lee began unbolting the motor. Philip leaned on the front of the boat, steadying himself. "That last number was a killer," he said, looking down.

"No kidding. Where'd you get that stuff?"

"Gary."

Lee struggled with the motor up the ramp while Philip gathered rods and reels from the bottom of the boat. He carried all five rods in one hand, their hooks tangled in their lines, and carried both tackle boxes, one in his other hand and the other one under that arm. He clattered the rods into the back of the little pickup and swung the tackleboxes in beside them. Lee laid the motor against the wooden front of the bait shop and straightened up carefully. Philip walked back down to the yellow lantern and the boat, gathered Lee's wet shirt and tennis shoes from the back of the boat and dropped them into the ice and beers and water

in the icechest. He looked at the stringer of fish lying limp and still in the bottom of the boat, thought for a minute and then lifted the plastic icechest out of the boat and walked back up the bank.

"You want to keep those fish?" Philip called across the grave lot.

"I don't. Go ahead if you want to," Lee called back. He turned back to the screened double doors beneath the bare porchlight bulb and knocked again impatiently.

Philip unhooked the jaws of each slick crappie from the metal stringer and flipped them out of the lamplight into the dark water, listened to the splash. When he was finished he stood in the boat and raised the lantern and stringer in one hand out over the boat and looked across the shallow water, and could see the white forms of at least two of the fish floating on their sides in the black-green water. He climbed onto the mud bank and then squatted in front of the boat, the lantern on the front aluminum seat, turned a black knob and gazed, motionless, into the hot glass while the two dainty white mantles dimmed into hot white and then yellow and then faint blue flames like eyes in the dark and then disappeared. Philip kneeled in the dark, suddenly lonely, and then looked up at the docklights and lifted the lantern stiffly from the

boat.

When he topped the rise he saw the motor in the porchlight against the wall of the baitshop, and then he looked quickly to the first dark cabin, where Lee stood at the screen door. Finally the porchlight went on and the old woman came out in a housecoat, annoyed, barefooted, and Lee lifted the motor from the porch and followed her around to the back of the baithouse. Philip leaned against the hood of the pickup and watched a girl about his own age back an old clicking jeep and and a clean trailer down the ramp and into the water beside the dock, watched the figure in the bass boat run it all the way onto the trailer. Lee came stepping back across the gravel, barefooted. "Goddamn, I'm letting her carry it next time."

They drove through the dark mesquites and back onto the blacktop and sped up, the headlights across the road following weed-filled ditches and barbed-wire fences on either side. Lee asked about the fish. "I saw two floating. But shit, they could have been just getting their strength back, you know how they are." Ahead of them in the dark a small burst of orange cigarette sparks skidded after the car ahead.

Philip climbed out wearily at his trailer and tugged at the tangled rods for a minute before dropping them back into the pickup bed. He carried

his tacklebox to the open window of the truck. "Fuck it, I'll just get those lines tomorrow, I don't feel like fucking with it." He walked in front of the bright headlights and glanced at the flat, ragged grasshoppers on the bright grill before Lee backed out and left down the lane between trailers. Philip climbed the wooden steps in the dark and tiredly searched his pocket for his keys, his face and his eyes still hot.

Philip went outside Monday, on the hard schoolyard, to watch the weather. It was one of those days, it was that time of day, toward sunset, and Philip felt a new energy, a new sensation in the touch of air against his arms after the burning hot of the afternoon, a faint smell of coolness in his nostrils, and beyond the houses and trees and power lines were rolling dark blue thunderheads, massed and slow and beautifully deep, the sun hidden, but the sky was lit by clouds blazing so hot, so brilliant that it hurt his eyes to look at them, as if the sun had exploded behind the horizon into streaks and splinters across the sky, the way it looked. He watched until almost dark, watched a plane overhead for a while, a tiny black speck moving slowly across the huge bright backdrop of pillars of thunderheads, and finally went back inside the school

building.

After work he drove into the city, to the bus station to meet his sister. It was past midnight when he parked his station wagon in the parking lot and went inside, through the bright breezeway past puddles of water and several metal carts lined against the far brick wall, one stacked with assorted brown cardboard packages. He sat on one of the hard woodgrain and aluminum benches and waited, stoned, watched the round black and white clock on the wall above a row of silver and blue pay phones, and hanging beneath them a row of black vinyl-backed phone books. He watched a thin young cowboy at one of the square woodgrain tables in the snack bar, long oily hair beneath a large grey low-brimmed hat with a wide band, black western shirt stitched with green and yellow flowers, bellbottom blue jeans over his cowboy boots, a glossy bolo tie, a large silver watch and several silver and turquoise rings. His eyes were watering, his face flushed red and tight. He wouldn't look up from his cinammon roll. At another table two old women were eating, not talking; the one nearest Philip wore loafers and dark pants too short. He could see the brown hose rolled just above her old veined ankles. And outside into the breezeway pulled a glistening silver and white and red-trimmed bus, huge and

rectangular with its green tinted windows and black lug-nut studded wheels. A loud voice from hidden speakers filled the almost empty bus station, naming cities. Philip listened, but it was not his sister's bus.

Later, he went into the snack bar and waited in line behind two Mexican women and their children speaking in Spanish. The lanky man with black frame glasses behind the counter asked one of the women what she wanted on her hamburger. "It doesn't matter," she answered in English. "Go all the way."

Philip was sipping his scalding black coffee when the little man stopped beside his table, looking up at the fluorescent menu behind the snack bar. "By god I'm gonna stay outta that rain--it's goddamn raining out there, and raining harder."

"Yeah it is," Philip mumbled.

The old man went to the snack bar and came back with a paper cup of coffee, sat down at Philip's square woodgrain table, laid his limp red diesel cap on the table beside his coffee. "A man ain't got nothing, he's just junk." His chin and cheeks were bristling with several days' greying whiskers. He pulled a cigarette from the crumpled pack in his green cloth jacket, and a lime green plastic butane lighter.

He was just released from city jail, he said,

because police suspected he set a fire. "That goddamn fire was burning when I got there." The police confiscated his things, his medicine and his lighter. He looked at the green plastic lighter. "This one's just as good, but I want mine back."

Philip asked the old man brief questions, listened to announcements over the loudspeakers, waited for his sister. His name was Woodrow Wilson Dunlap, the old man said--he usually slept at a used car lot nearby, but tonight he was going to stay at the bus station. "Hell, I got to," he said, "I ain't got no cover or nothin. The goddamn law's got it." He repeatedly brushed ashes from the table, emptied the ashtray into his empty paper cup. "This world is going to goddamn hell. You got to have a key to get in the goddamn can."

His father was born in 1870, he said, in Arkansas, "while the Union Army was in there dictatin'," then moved with three sisters to Texas. "There's a Dunlap, New Mexico," he said proudly. "That's me. Yessir. That's my old man's brother, or uncle, or something. I bet he don't remember now what kin he was to me. But he was goddamn close kin to me."

Philip looked around the bus station, at the young Mexican children sitting watching the black pay televisions near the phones while their mothers sat

talking quietly, at the young cowboy who had composed himself now and sat with a cigarette between his fingers, at a large man with a black name tag and a huge clump of keys dangling heavily from his belt.

"I used to carry a bus ticket all the time," the old man was saying. "The goddamn law in Houston would come in and arrest you if you didn't have one. They even made me get on the bus, made me use the goddamn ticket." His brother in Chicago was a ballplayer and a professional prizefighter, "a goddamn good one, too," and another brother in California married a Russian and a Jew and died a multimillionaire. "I been on every kind of job that moves," he jabbed his tobacco-stained finger at Philip. "I get sick of something here, I got a ticket to California. I'm paid up there, they'll goddamn treat me right."

He talked about the grass under prickly pears in New Mexico that makes cattle weigh more and have better meat, about men who could estimate within a single pound what a calf weighed, just by looking. "All people are about the same smarts. Some of them are a little slow waking up, but you give them time and they get the same smarts." He offered Philip a short filterless cigarette from his wrinkled nearly-empty pack. "You'll grow up," he said, smoke coming out of his mouth with the words. "You'll see what a goddamn

mess it is."

Philip went out to his car in the parking lot, rolled another joint and smoked it while he looked out through the swimming windshield, then stood beneath the bus station canopy watching the rain fall and stop and the old cabs waiting at the curb, leaving now and then; he heard the echoes of a car stereo against the flat brick walls of downtown buildings, watched down the empty, fluorescent street as the traffic signals in a row of intersections blinked red and green and yellow, over and over. When he came back inside the bus station, past the fluorescent glass showing the breezeway and No Loitering signs, he browsed through the religious pamphlets tiered in a wire rack near the door: The Inspiration of the Bible, Does God Love and Punish Too?, Authority in Religion. Philip lifted one out, Justification by Faith, and sat back down in the hard benches spaced with metal armrests to make lying down impossible. On the cover, below a sketch of a man's upturned face, the pamphlet was printed with an italicized scripture--Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

Philip closed his eyes, sleepy and angry, until another voice came loud over the speakers. He went to the ticket counter, waited by the foot-thick book laid open to one of its tens of thousands of pages, waited

by the framed rainbow-veined map of the United States until an attendant told him again that his sister's bus was late. He looked into glass display cases, at cans of shaving cream and deodorant, toothpaste and hair oil and disposable razors, at small fuzzy stuffed animals and toy busses, and cardboard and plastic boxes elegantly printed with "Your Souvenir," at spoons and shot glasses and cups and plates and ashtrays and pennants and coin purses, all colorfully stencilled with cowboys or the shape of Texas, at imitation silver and turquoise rings and bracelets and necklaces with crosses or the Indiean phoenix or etched with marijuana leaves or a bunny emblem, waiting.

Finally, when he heard the electronic beeps and voices of a two-way radio in the quiet behind him, a policeman walkling slowly through the bus station, Philip walked back out into the drizzle and the wet parking lot and drove the old station wagon out of the city, home to the dark trailer where he laid in bed and fell asleep watching raindrops splattering and sticking to the windowscreen, trickling down and leaving trails of silver bubbles stretched across the tiny wire squares that quickly burst into nothing.

Tuesday morning Philip's sister called just after dawn and he drove back into the city to pick her up.

They ate breakfast at an all-night restaurant and talked. She scolded him about his tooth and they both said their hair was thinning, and then they drove to the trailer and tried to sleep. Philip got up first, from the couch, and washed dishes at the kitchen sink. When he turned off the faucet the trailer was quiet except for the buzz of the wire screen on the fan in the bedroom where his sister was. He perked coffee and sat at the woodgrain kitchen table, waiting--once he opened the pantry door beside the refrigerator and looked at the plastic baggie rolled around marijuana and an orange pack of cigarette papers he had wedged there, behind a shelf. But he closed the pantry door and sat back down at the table again.

When his sister got up, they talked while she sipped at her coffee. She wanted to drive to their hometown and see their father's and their grandparents' graves.

"I'd like to, I just can't," Philip said.

"You couldn't take off one day?"

"I hate to. Especially without notice. I could, but I hate to push them any farther than I have to." Philip took her cup and rinsed it at the sink, the cold water feeling good on his hand. "You're more than welcome to take the station wagon if you want to. I don't think there would be any problem. Just keep

pouring the oil in."

They got up from the table and she took a shower, then sat on the couch in front of the fan and held a white plastic blow dryer on her short hair, brushing straight back with her other hand. "Hey, if you don't mind," Philip called to her above the noise, "if you don't mind I think I'll defrost the refrigerator while you've got that thing around."

He brought the styrofoam icechest from the back of his station wagon and filled it with bottles of salad dressing and ketchup and pot pies and milk, and when she was through with the blow dryer he stood in front of the open refrigerator, pointing the hot air into the thick-frosted freezer while water dripped into the vegetable crisper below. His sister brought dirty towels from the bathroom and pushed them against the bottom vents on the linoleum floor, and they stood and held the blow dryer up and talked, occasionally prying a chunk of wet ice from the freezer walls. She asked him once if he ever went to church.

"Every once in a while. Not much."

She told him about her church in Colorado. "They're wonderful people. I really do believe God directs our lives, that he answers prayer," she said, standing beside him. "if we'll just let Him." Philip pried with his fingernails at ice that wouldn't budge. "I've seen

Him do things in my life I never thought would happen." She waited for Philip to look at her, and he tried to ignore his own embarrassment at what she was saying. "Jesus can bring forgiveness to anybody who'll let Him."

"I know," Philip answered.

"I don't mean just to you, or whoever asks Him. Once you've been forgiven, then you can forgive other people too. It's just natural." She held the blow dryer for him while he pulled at a sheet of ice and then carried it hurriedly to the sink. She looked at Philip when he cameback.

"I know."

"I held a lot of bad things inside about Daddy. He hurt a lot of people. He never did grow up. But it's not good to keep those feelings, it doesn't matter now, you can't change what he was like. But you <u>can</u> change what <u>you're</u> like. And I know I never could have been happy with all the resentment I had inside. It's like they say, forgive and forget. You've got to forgive before you can forget. And I know I've only found one way, that's by asking Jesus to help. That's all you have to do is ask. He'll do the rest. You can't do it by yourself, nobody can."

Philip switched off the blow dryer and the trailer was quiet again, with only the drops of water falling and

the thumps of music from another trailer. It was warm inside, but the air around the melting ice was cool. "If you'll hold that," Philip said, still without looking at his sister, and handed her the blow dryer, stepping over the cord, "I'll dump this water." He lifted out the heavy crisper and carried it to the sink, poured the cold water over chunks and plates of ice there.

"I don't mean to be so preachy," his sister said from behind him. "But I just hate for you to judge all churches on the ones Daddy took us to. They might have been alright for him and Grandmom and people like that. But it's a shame you got your ideas of God from him. God's not like that, Philip." She stopped. "You don't remember much about Mother, do you."

"Not really," Philip said. He gazed into the freezer, busy with his hands. "Just kind of a pleasant, comforting. . . , and the pictures of her, I guess."

"She was," his sister said to him.

"You ever hear from her?"

"No I don't," she said. "Which is probably better. And I don't blame her a bit."

Philip didn't want to talk anymore. "Well I'm glad you seem so happy. You deserve to be." He asked her about her church and she seemed to recognize what he was doing and talked about prayer breakfasts again, and then about him. "I'll probably start going again

someday," he told her. "We'll see," he answered finally and clicked on the blow dryer again, relieved at the noise.

He put the plastic bag into his boot while his sister was in the bathroom, and soon afterwards they left the trailer in his station wagon. At the school Philip took his car keys off his key ring and let his sister drive away, across the parking lot and down the street toward the highway, to shop in the old brick stores downtown and the mall on the other side.

Just before eleven he tilted his head back in his closet and touched eyedrops to his eyelashes, then closed the heavy closet door and wiped his eyes. Mac was in his office and Philip tried to chat pleasantly for several minutes, apologized again for Thursday, until he punched out and left the old man and walked down the hall. His sister was waiting in the parking lot and they drove into town and ate a late dinner at Philip's favorite steakhouse. He was feeling good, visiting, and his sister sipped at one glass of dark wine with the meal and Philip refilled his own glass several times from the bottle sitting in ice on a stand beside them. She didn't seem to mind.

They avoided talking about their father or about church, but told each other about jobs and romances

and plans, the glass covered candles flickering on the rough cedar walls hung with wooden wagon wheels and displays of barbed wire and old brown photographs and mounted steer and deer heads. Philip learned for the first time that her ex-husband had hit her--slapped her on the cheek, she said, and more than once--when they were married and she described without repeating his language how he had talked to her in front of their friends. Philip watched her, one arm politelty beneath the covered table in her lap, the delicate glass almost untouched, the lines beneath her eyes and the faint edge of pink makeup at her ears and beneath her jaw, listened to her voice as girlish as he remembered, and with the wine taking effect he also felt very sorry they had known each other so little, that he had missed so much.

Laura called him when they got home to the trailer, just to talk, she said. She didn't want to interrupt when she found out his sister was there, but before she hung up Philip asked if he could come to the apartment after work tomorrow. She said yes.

"Looks like you're not totally rejected," his sister said when he hung up the phone.

"Yeah, maybe she'll come crawling back after all," Philip said to her and grinned.

Wednesday, Philip shoved the plastic laundry basket off the tailgate of his station wagon, in beside the brown paper grocery sacks stuffed with his sister's clothes. They visited as they drove. Philip told her about going fishing, and about Laura. "I knew it wouldn't go on forever, but I just didn't expect it so quick," he told her. They commented at a fat kid with a mohawk haircut and black canvas tennis shoes crossing the street in front of them. The landromat was already busy, warm with the moist smell of detergent, young and middle-aged women in sandals and sleeveless shirts reaching down into tubs or reading magazines or shaking loud, restless children by their tiny arms or separating tangled wire hangers. Philip and his sister dropped their clothes into different washers, pushed them down and dropped in more.

"Well, I wish you could stay another day."

"I do too," she answered.

"What time do you leave?"

"Four-ten." They pressed quarters and dimes into the open slots and pushed in the trays, five in a row, the hisses of water immediately from each closed machine. "Maybe I'll get back on time, if I'm lucky."

"You should have taken a plane."

"Sure."

"I'll be glad to go in late if you don't want to wait," Philip said. They sat down on the molded plastic chairs beside the windows that were out of the sun.

"No, I know how you hate to miss work."

"I'm sorry about that. I guess I should have thought about it sooner, I could have gotten off, no problem."

"No, I'm playing." She tipped her clear glass bottle of coke to her mouth. "It'll be good to get out of all this heat."

They watched the white-haired woman in her cloth smock move down the row of dryers, wiping her rag over the round glass windows, scowling at two dirty-faced girls who squealed by her and down a row of washers until their huge flabby-armed mother shouted from a table near the coin and soap machines where she was folding clothes.

"If I ever have kids they're going to behave," Philip's sister said, watching the two girls.

Philip watched the attendant, bent at the dryers, her face lined and aged, behind her a row of smeared glass windows.

"Why don't you make it up sometime?"

"Maybe I will," Philip said, in the noise of the machines.

"No you won't and you know it."

"You're right. I've got everything I want here." Philip grinned.

"You ought to," his sister said seriously, motherly. "You could work at one of the lodges, easy."

"Yeah, I guess they need janitors, too."

"No, I meant as a waiter or something--" She looked at Philip. "You smart aleck." She smiled. "It's your life, you do what you want. I'm sure you will anyway."

"I will, don't worry." Philip grinned at her.

"At least get that tooth fixed though."

When their washing machines shut off and spun to a stop, one after the other, they lifted the heavy wet clothes out across the chipped enamel tops into a wire cart with a hanger rack and rolled them to the large dryers in the wall, slid in the coins and watched them tumble around and around, dizzying, falling, rolling out of sight. Later they pulled the hot clothes out and folded the jeans, tossed underwear and socks and T-shirts into the basket, hung blouses and shirts from the rack.

"I'd forgotten what it was like, going to the laundry," she said once.

Philip wiped his forehead and saw her watching him. "I've been sure sweating a lot lately. All the beer, I guess." They carried everything outside. "Boy it's humid," Philip said, slammed the tailgate of the station wagon. "I nearly wish it wouldn't rain."

It was cloudy again when Philip drove to the city and carried one of his sister's suitcases into the bus station, past a longhaired bearded man playing his guitar on the street. Philip followed his sister to one of the hard benches near the ticket counter. "I wish I didn't have to work," he said, both of them standing.

"I don't think thirty minutes is going to kill me," she said. "You waited a lot longer than that."

"More than thirty, you know that, even if it's on schedule." He checked to make sure she had his telephone number at the school, in case something happened, the bus never showed. The bus station looked different now, livelier, brighter. The snack bar tables were scattered with a dozen couples and families, waiting, talking and gesturing with their hands, laughing before a bus departed or arrived.

"Really, come up when you can," his sister said, tilting her head, holding his hands, smiling. "It's good seeing you."

"I hope you got everything with Mark taken care of."

"I think we did. He knows I'll take him to court."

"Whatever difference that makes."

"Yeah, right." They looked at each other, nervous standing there, and Philip kissed her quickly on the cheek. "I want you to be happy," she said. "I hope things with you and your girlfriend work out."

"They will," Philip said.

"Thanks again for a place to stay," she said as they separated hands, as she sat down and Philip adjusted her suitcases against the benchlegs with his workboot.

"Next time we'll make it home for a day or two." Philip grinned at her and she smiled. "I promise."

"Smart aleck."

"I know."

Philip left through the glass doors, waved once before he walked around the corner of the brick building, and then got into his old station wagon, a little sad, but relieved to be alone again, to be alone again on the drive back to work, with the car radio muffled by the loud, open windows.

Philip borrowed the keys from Mac and called Laura from the school office, drove his station wagon to Jan's apartment afterwork and climbed the cement steps to the second level, walked along the iron railing above the swimming pool with its blue lights glowing from beneath the water, trying to remember which apartment door was Jan's. Jan was out and Laura showed him the cool apartment, the electric range and dishwasher, the reel-to-reel stereo system, the large bedrooms, the clean chrome and porcelain enamel bathroom, and they visited quietly in the air-conditioned apartment, at the glasstop table near the

At the open door, before he stepped off the carpet and outside, they paused for a moment and kissed formally. Philip pushed the thick black hair away from her face.

"I still love you," Laura said while they looked at each other. "I hope you know I do." Philip nodded. "I can understand you wanting to party for a while, I don't mind you being a janitor." Philip raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "I don't. I don't want you to think I do."

"You just think I ought to pay my own way." Philip shrugged his shoulders and patted her bare brown arm while she frowned at him. "Which is right." They stood there until he stepped onto the concrete landing, and he walked along the iron railing after the apartment door shut snugly, looking down into the blue swimming pool.

And Thursday night Laura called Philip again at the trailer, after work. She thought Jan was getting tired of her staying in the apartment. "She's just used to living by herself," Philip said into the phone.

Friday, Philip jabbed his timecard into the grey timepunch box hanging on the cinderblock wall of Mac's office and walked outside into the night parking lot and drove off. He turned the dial of the dashboard radio, looking for music, but there was only the loud voices and

static cheers of local football games. He parked in the crowded lot of an old mansion decorated to look like a pub.

"Hey, look who's here."

"Hey, hot shot. Looks like you're doing a business." Philip reached across the polished wooden bar and shook hands hard with the bartender, a huge-armed boy who threaded his hand between two gleaming chrome beer taps. Philip looked at the beer-brand mirrors and trays and hanging lamps and clocks, the rows of assorted mugs hanging by their handles from hooks above the bar, the private mugs of afternoon regulars. "Just thought I'd come in and see what's happening."

"Alright, it's been a while. What do you want?"

"Whatever you've got," Philip said, patting his shirt pocket and grinning. "Likewise I'm sure."

"Alright," the boy said, grinned and clenched his fist. "Nice surprise." He walked away from Philip, down the bar past silver taps and beneath lights, opened the huge freezer and bent inside. Philip turned and leaned on the bar, gazed out through the slow grey smoke, the loud music and the roar of conversation and laughter, the gold beer and brown tables, gazed at the people crowded around huge round wooden tables, at a waitress weaving her way between chairs with a tray of frost-white mugs on one arm, at another waitress standing at the bar beneath a

microphone dangling from a coiled cord, drawing on a cigarette and wiping plastic ashtrays with a filthy blue cloth, at the tired, expressionless faces of other bartenders.

The boy brought a frosted mug of beer to Philip and set it on the bar, on a cardboard coaster, the foam sliding down the cold glass. "Nothing like a little head."

"That's what I always tell the girls," Philip said, and they both grinned. "Thanks." Philip took a drink of the cold beer and wiped the foam with his lower lip. "Goddamn that's good."

"So what's been happening, stranger?" the bartender asked, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Not much," Philip grinned again. "Staying out of trouble."

"Too bad." They both nodded. "Man, you caught me on a good night. One of the waitresses brought me a little present earlier, I been washing about a glass an hour."

"You look like you're feeling no pain," Philip said. "You ought to be primed for this little baby then."

"Damn right." The boy looked out, around the bar. "Finish your beer, I'll get caught up and we'll step out back."

"Sounds good." Philip took another swallow, the

boy walked slowly down to the end of the bar where the waitresses stood, and Philip turned away from the long mirror behind the bar to look out into the dim room, into the smoke rising into the open rafters, writhing slowly beneath the barlights.

Soon the boy came from behind the bar and they walked out a bolted back door into a lighted alleyway lined with fat aluminum beer kegs and plastic trashcans against a wooden fence. Philip lifted a twisted joint from his shirt pocket and handed it to the boy. "Fire it up."

It was quieter in the alleyway, warmer than inside, and they passed the joint back and forth between them beneath the alleylights, the open windows of a house and grey television screen glowing between slats of the fence. "This is good stuff," the boy said once. Several times the amplified voice of a waitress came through the wooden door and the boy went inside, the noise flooding the alley for a moment until he closed the door behind him. Finally they finished and Philip walked back around to his place at the bar, where a new, white mug of beer was sitting.

"Thanks."

"You still living with that Mexican girl?"

"She moved out last week, in fact," Philip said. "I'm starting to get a little antsy."

"It's like that joke, two guys are standing at the bar, one of them asks the other one how often he screws his wife. 'Oh, about five or six times a week,' the other one says, 'how often do you screw your wife?' First guy says, 'Oh, about once a month.' 'Once a month! Shit, that must be terrible!' The first guy looks at him, 'Nah, it's not that bad. Tonight's the night.'" They both laughed and shook their heads.

Philip muttered "really." The boy walked to stainless steel sinks at the end of the bar and ran steaming hot water from a faucet, turned on the brushes and dipped mug after mug slowly into the soap suds and then into the two rinse sinks and lined them on trays stacked one on another, the glasses still steaming. Then the boy washed clear glass pitchers and lined them along the bar on folded towels, steaming, draining upside down. Philip watched the other bartenders open the large box freezers behind the bar beneath the mirrors, freezers piled with glass pitchers and mugs and thick along the sides with white frost, watched the cold vapors drop from the pitchers and mugs that frosted white when they hit the warm bar air, saw beneath the sinks the chipped mugs that would have to be sandpapered on slow nights.

"Let's crank up a little music," the boy said, "utilize that antenna." He walked to the stereo and then came back. "Just don't let me forget to turn it

down," he said to another bartender.

They talked off and on, whenever the boy wasn't busy tilting heavy pitchers beneath the taps or punching and ringing the old cash register or talking to the waitresses. Both of them drank beer after beer. The boy slid Philip a tiny chalky white tablet once, and later they walked into the alleyway again and smoked another joint. "I'm twenty-eight and still thinking like a fucking kid," Philip said outside.

"Nothing wrong with that."

They talked slowly, almost inaudibly now. "I wouldn't mind being a bartender."

"You hear the same shit over and over," the boy said. "It gets old quick."

As the room began to empty, as people pushed out through the swinging double doors, the music over the radio grew louder. For a while Philip watched a blind man with pouting lips drink beer and sway with his blank eyes tilted toward the dim lights and occasionally tap his fiberglass cane on the floor for a waitress to lead him to the bathroom.

Philip leaned motionless on the bar, his hands cupped around the bottom of his glass mug, his head slowly, endlessly nodding to the radio. Everything seemed to move slowly. The boy loaded glasses into the freezers, wiped down taps, counted bills and rolled quarters and dimes

and nickels and pennies at the cash register. The other bartenders were gone. The last waitress wiped tabletops and chair seats. When the music suddenly went off and the room grew bright with lights, Philip tilted his empty mug up and waited for the last thin foam to slip into his mouth.

"Getting ready to close?"

The boy was swirling the same blue dishtowel over the tops of the freezers. "Yeah, about that time," he said, without looking up or interrupting his slow swipes.

"I'd be glad to pay for one last one," Philip said. The boy dropped his rag across the cash register, his back still to Philip, and lifted the lid of the freezer. "You already close the taps?"

"No problem," the boy said without emotion, twisted the cap of one of the silver taps and let the stream of beer slide down the inside of the round mug. Philip offered him a dollar bill but he simply waved his hand and turned back to his rag and the freezer. Philip folded the bill and wedged it inside the narrow neck of a tip jar.

He sipped on the beer and moved down to chat with the slender waitress who stood in tight jeans at the other end of the bar, counting her coins into neat stacks on her tray. It was only the three of them in the bar when the

boy turned the music back on, driving and loud. "Don't let me forget to turn that down," he said to the girl, and went back to counting money at the cash register, licking his thumb periodically. Philip nodded and drank and flirted with the girl while the boy lifted the chairs onto the tables and swept the tile floors, watched the boy back across the floor, swaying with a mop, leaving the dull tiles dark and wet and shining behind him.

"You want to get something to eat?" he asked the girl. She said she was tired and moved to put ashtrays on the tables. Philip asked the boy if he wanted to do something when he got out, but the boy said he was going home, so Philip thanked him for the beer and walked out carefully, through the doors and heard them lock again behind him, across the deserted street to his station wagon.

He hadn't realized how drunk he was until he was unable to keep the old car between the white highway stripes. He drove slowly, almost asleep, weaving. But after he bounced to a stop on the lot and pulled himself out of the car, after he got inside the trailer and turned on the bare bulb over the kitchen table, he woke up some. He pulled a cellophane bag of bread from the refrigerator and wolfed down several slices, one in the bathroom, and then collapsed back onto the couch and pulled the phone to him. He clicked the dial clumsily

and listened, eyes closed, until he heard Jan's slow voice. He asked for Laura.

"She's not here," Jan said thickly. Philip asked where she was.

"Go to hell," Jan slurred into the phone, and hung up. Philip hit the receiver down hard onto the cradle, but then sat back and rested, let his head drop against the vinyl back cushion. He fell asleep and slid down onto the cushions and stayed there until he woke up sweating in his clothes, the hot sun radiating through the curtains.

Philip called the pizza parlor Saturday morning just before noon, but Laura wasn't scheduled, they said. After he had listened to the radio newscast and eaten a bowl of dry cereal, cold and good with the milk, and taken several aspirin, he called Jan's apartment. No one was home.

He pulled the kitchen table to the couch, brilliant orange streaks of clouds high in the sky through the open window, and crowded folding chairs and lawn chairs around it, filled his styrofoam icechest with his beer bottles and ice cubes from the refrigerator freezer and tossed an unopened cellophane-wrapped deck of cards onto the table. By ten o'clock the game was full and the little radio's music was often lost in the loud, eager

voices. Philip told about leaving his eyedrops on the dashboard in his car, in the sun, and scalding his eyes, and everyone laughed. They played with coins. Philip didn't have plastic chips, and the clinks against the table and against other coins sounded like real poker, Gary said.

Someone mentioned two boys in the high school band who'd died in an accident the night before. "That's a shame," Richard said, looking at no one. "I guess it's different in a two-car wreck. But like those kids, you always think of them doing it for thrills, driving a little too fast, a little too drunk. Like race car drivers that wipe out. Telling themselves shit, go ahead. Everybody does that." His forehead blushed red when he realized no one else was talking. "It's still a shame. At least they didn't hit somebody else."

"Hey, did you hear that?" Lee said later. "It's supposed to get down into the low sixties tonight." Several people cheered.

"It's about time," Philip said. "You've got to do without air conditioning to know. I'm tired of this goddamn hot weather shit."

Until after midnight the trailer was warm and still. Smoke hung in layers like cobwebs around the bare kitchen lightbulb and in the corners, out of the reach of the small fan that turned back and forth across the crowded

table. But almost at once, in the time of one hand, a breeze so cool and steady across the table that it was sobering, almost thrilling to Philip, began moving through the window, ballooning the curtains like sails and then flattening them against the windowscreens, clearing the air, and frequent sighs and exclamations passed around the table.

Philip lost over twenty dollars, wrote a twelve-dollar IOU for one hand and told David coldly to pull out another joint. "Shit, if I'm going to lose my ass and trash up this fucking trailer, I'm going to make it worthwhile. Fuck it." David waited, motioned for his next card and looked at his full hand, then took a tightly rolled joint from the baggie behind his stacks of quarters and dimes and flipped it across the table. Philip grabbed it up and lighted it and took the first four hits, holding it defiantly until he was ready to smoke it again. Finally he passed it to Sherry, looked at another card and slapped his cards down disgustedly across the table. "And tell your brother if he's looking for a place, to come over," Philip said to David. "Just so long as he doesn't tear the fucking place up. I'm going to my fucking sister's for a couple of weeks."

"You get off work?" Gary asked carefully.

"Fuck'em." Philip went into the bedroom and closed

the door. He pulled off his boots hard and let them hit the linoleum floor, undressed and crawled onto the squeaking bed, feeling the wind and listening to the voices and laughs at the table and the aluminum skirting banging. As angry and tired as he was, Philip slept lusciously that night in front of the windowscreen, with the fan blowing cool air over him after everyone left, until he even curled his legs against his stomach beneath the single sheet to keep warm. Just before dawn, but when the darkness outside was greying, he woke up in the fresh smell of rain, the sound of water dripping on the aluminum roof, fine cool mist puffing through the screen, and he trudged sleepily, naked through the dark trailer, around the clusters of beer bottles and cans and the table, sliding windows down almost closed against the wet woodstrip windowsills. He went back to sleep, the fan still on him, but missing the full outside breezes, hearing now only the rain harder on the hollow trailer roof and thinking about autumn and winter.

He slept late and cleaned up the trailer when he got up, pouring the remains of bottles and cans down the sink drain, diluted with running tap water, stuffed them into cardboard sixpacks and two paper sacks, covered them with ashes and strong-smelling cigarette butts after he picked the short burnt roaches out of the ash-trays with his fingers, and wedged in paper plates of

chip crumbs.

And then he couldn't start the motorcycle, after working up a sweat in the still, humid air, his jeans wet from the water his hand couldn't brush from the split black seat. He felt better, later, swishing through the mist in his old station wagon, dry and comfortable, and drove on the highway past the pizza parlor, just to look, and saw Laura's white Volkswagen parked beside the brick building near the metal dumpster and flat overgrown field. On the way back to the trailer he saw ahead of him someone in a parka, a plastic parka, beneath a concrete overpass, sitting on the guardrail by a concrete pillar, his elbows on his knees, one forearm extended to show his thumb, and without thinking Philip had already slowed down when he passed the long-blonde-haired kid, saw the scraggly whiskers on his face, and realized his brakelights had already flashed.

He slowed gradually on the rough shoulder, stopped the car and waited and watched in his rear view mirror while the hitchhiker heaved a huge canvas Army dufflebag over one shoulder by its tie-cords and turned and jerked his arm behind him. Philip thought it was a rabbit at first, then realized it was a tiny dog running frantically through the drizzle to catch up. "I didn't know you had a dog," Philip said when the hitchhiker opened the

back door and wrestled to get the wet canvas dufflebag onto the seat. The hitchhiker slammed the back door and opened the passenger door at the same time, bounced onto the front seat, wiped the rain from his forehead, from the cloth scarf covering his head beneath the plastic hood.

"He can sit in my lap, he won't get anything dirty," the hitchhiker said quickly while the little dog scrambled onto his lap and then pranced and circled excitedly. "Thanks."

Philip said nothing, pulled the blue sheet up where it had fallen behind the hitchhiker, and accelerated the clicking station wagon along the shoulder and then out onto the highway behind a moving van leaving tracks through the shimmering water. They drove without talking for several minutes, the dog leaning against the hitchhiker's stomach, blank-eyed and greying around his tiny muzzle, sniffing the air toward Philip. The small red taillights ahead were surprisingly bright through the dense grey mist whipped up and drifting across the glossy lane, and Philip cracked his window to relieve the sour smell of the hitchhiker's clothes.

"Kinda wet out there," the hitchhiker said, scratching his head through the black scarf.

"Yeah it is," Philip answered over the radio. Then,

"At least you got under that overpass."

"That don't matter," the hitchhiker said, almost proudly, "those fucking trucks suck it all in behind them."

"I guess so." Philip glanced down at his open ashtray beneath the dashboard, an alligator clip and half a joint inside, and then down into the wet floorboard at the hitchhiker's soaked black zipper ankle boots. "Where you headed?"

"Houston, I guess." He wiped his nose between his thumb and finger. "I got an old lady down there, visit here for a while."

"Where you coming from?"

"California. Oregon, actually."

"Well, you're almost there."

Philip drove on the highway through town, toward the trailer park on the other side. He asked the hitchhiker if he wanted a smoke, and they finished off the joint. The hitchhiker was trying to get back on the interstate in the city, he said, and if he could do that he'd be alright. "These state highways suck."

"You missed the loop, back there by that pizza parlor." The hitchhiker tried to remember. "There's where I get off," Philip nodded ahead at a huge green and white sign, watched it against the grey sky as it passed overhead.

"Could I get you to take me to the interstate in the

city." The hitchhiker didn't ask it, he simply said it. "I'd sure appreciate it."

Philip stared ahead into the drizzle and the shiny highway. "Nah, the city is off that way," he said, motioning with his head out his window across the flat, soft brown fields. "I've driven there three times lately, it's a good twenty-five miles. I'm fucking broke." He saw the exit lane ahead, and the glowing sign of the gas station at the top of the overpass. "You follow this, it'll take you to the interstate south of the city. That'll be just as good if you're going to Houston." Philip moved the station wagon to the right, eased onto his brake. The rain was harder now, splattering against the windshield, the wipers leaving arcs of water, and the hitchhiker said nothing. "I'll let you out up here."

Philip pulled into the gas station lot and stopped beside the road, below them the highway and beyond in the mist the town's three-legged water tower. "Wish I could take you farther."

"That's okay," the boy said, surprisingly pleasant, scratching hard at the long, sparse whiskers on his chin. "Thanks for the ride. And the smoke--that ought to help." He opened the door and shoved the dog out of his lap, down into the rain, waited for an instant, and then pulled himself out into the rain and closed the door. He opened the back door, water already dripping from the clumped

ends of his hair and off the edge of his plastic parka hood, leaned in and dragged the bulging dufflebag through the door. "Thanks again." He closed the door to the sound of the rain outside.

Philip waited and watched through the swimming windows. The hitchhiker lifed the bag over his shoulder and instead of walking down the grassy hill to the highway beneath the overpass he walked unhurriedly through the rain and puddles of water toward the gas station, and the little dog bounced close to his feet. Philip turned the steering wheel and eased out the clutch, drove the station wagon slowly toward the building, the blue and purple and pink swirls of oil running across the parking lot. The hitchhiker walked beneath the corrugated canopy, dropped his bag beside the glass panes and turned around halfway through the glass door when Philip reached him, the car suddenly quiet beneath the canopy, out of the rain, the sour-faced attendant watching them. Philip rolled down his window halfway and the hitchhiker stepped back outside, felt of his hip pocket.

"I tell you what," Philip said, "I got a trailer, you're welcome to rest up, take a shower or whatever." Philip looked at the hitchhiker while he talked, paused for a moment for a reaction, spoke again with a voice to show what he meant. "I got nothing to do--drink a few

beers, smoke another one. Nothing special." Again he waited. The hitchhiker had kneeled and was scratching the wet little dog's chest. "I don't care, you do what you want to, but you're welcome."

"Yeah, sure, thanks," the hitchhiker said and straightened up, the dog in his arm, against the parka. "Maybe this fucking rain will stop." He lifted the dufflebag and carried it swinging heavily from his bent arm in front of the car, bumping against his leg. They drove back out into the rain, circled out of the lot and toward the trailer, across the overpass, brakelights in front of them and headlights below them reflected on the highway. "Everyone on the road is starting to head down this way," the hitchhiker said once.

Both of them tapped their fingers, Philip on the large old steering wheel and the hitchhiker on his wet knee, to the distorted loud rhythm of the station wagon's radio and its one dashboard speaker. "Cars hiss by my window like waves upon the beach," the singer said. Philip pulled out of the puddled gravel drive onto his hard, almost slick lot and hurried up the dark wooden steps to unlock the aluminum trailer door while the hitchhiker lugged his Army dufflebag toward him and the dog stopped quickly to sniff the skirting corner before prancing after him. Philip was wiping his wet boots on the carpet doormat, left clusters of grassblades

and was tossing his wet cap onto the couch when the hitchhiker clambered up the squeaking steps. Philip reached behind the hitchhiker and pulled the door closed after the little dog, and was about to ask him to step back onto the carpet square and wipe his zipper boots off when the hitchhiker looked up above him and said, "Man, these things are really small."

Philip stopped and watched the hitchhiker stare at the same spot on the ceiling, put his hand up to brush it. "There's not a lot of air up there, is there," he said, with his scraggly young face within a foot of the fiberboard ceiling panels and sunflower brads, and suddenly Philip realized again how low the ceiling really was, how close the hollow walls were, within steps, and he remembered his first impressions of the small trailer two and a half years ago. He had forgotten.

They sat down, the hitchhiker took off his wet plastic parka and sat on the couch and Philip sat on a folding chair at the kitchen table. The hitchhiker pulled a globe-shaped bottle of mescal from his dufflebag and they sipped the terrible stuff and smoked. Philip turned the little portable radio on and they talked easily to each other over the music, total strangers. "Yeah, I went down on a trucker yesterday morning," the hitchhiker said nonchalantly once. "Hell, it was a breakfast and a pack of cigarettes. I don't give a shit." The wet

dog lay obediently against the dufflebag on the linoleum floor, fell asleep and twitched his tiny paws.

"How do you get money?" Philip asked. "You carry it along?"

"Sometimes you don't get it," the hitchhiker said, and took a large swallow of mescal. Then he nodded toward the dufflebag. "The best way is taking up collections. I got some pamphlets in there, a little painted cup, all you have to do is stand at some light for a while handing them out to cars, asking for donations. Hell, you can pick up the pamphlets free anywhere."

Later the rain slowed. Philip had stopped drinking. "I used to love getting loaded," he said. "Goddamn I did. But I don't know, it's just not the same anymore. It's getting a little grim."

"I'm an alcoholic when I got the money," the hitchhiker said. "I like to move around, but I don't stay away from the towns very long." He talked about hitchhiking, about bars and girls in different states. Philip tried to place his accent. "My folks think I can't cut it, I probably can't. But shit, I just don't want to. No interest, man." He tilted his head back and took two swallows. "The best job I ever had was in Nebraska, I worked for a cemetery." He hissed loud through his nose, staring blankly and scratching his chin. "All we did was work a backhoe and put up the

tarp, put down the pipes to hold the casket, and then we'd just go off a ways and drink beer on the dumptruck while the funeral was going on. The only bad thing, we had to keep it quiet. And then, as soon as everybody left," the hitchhiker motioned with his arm, back again and fill in the dirt."

By the evening newscast on the radio they were quiet for long intervals, listening and thinking between rushes of enthusiastic narratives and slurred conversations. Philip told him about Laura, that she cried in the car the night before she moved out.

"That's too bad," the hitchhiker said. "Chicks are like that."

"Shit, they cry a lot easier, but they get over it a lot easier, too," Philip snapped. "There's not many things I can do, but I can sure as fuck hold a grudge."

"That's what I couldn't take," the hitchhiker nodded unsteadily, "all the fucking games. It's for the kids, man. It's for the kids. That's all." He looked around the trailer, trying to steady himself. Philip realized how drunk the boy was.

"You okay? You going to be sick?"

"That's what I couldn't take. It's like getting baptized, getting away from all that shit. You get tired as fucking hell, but it's better than putting up with all that shit."

"No joke." The little dog groaned in its sleep. "It's like being the fastest gun in the West, that's what I was thinking the other day. You never fucking are, there's always somebody faster, whatever it is. Except now there's millions faster, everywhere." He was almost talking to himself now. "I think I'm getting ready for a nervous breakdown or something. I don't know, maybe it's flashbacks or something. I'll just be going along and start getting scared, like I'm fucking drunk or loaded or something, but I'm not. Disoriented. Like I can't think straight, even if I want to." Philip looked at the hitchhiker again, slowly and clumsily tracing a blue and purple tatoo on his forearm. "My fucking body's getting old. I fucking hurt all the time. My back."

Later the hitchhiker sobered up some and told about his junior high school. "There was this old man lived next door to us," he said. "His wife died. They'd been married like fifty-eight years. And right after, he married another old lady, everybody thought it was kind of shitty. Anyhow, before his wife died, he'd had some kind of operation. On his intestines or something. On his colon. They had to go up his asshole, for some reason when they cut that muscle it wouldn't heal back again." The hitchhiker concentrated, looked blankly at the linoleum floor.

"Operation," Philip said.

"My folks made me go over after school, the old man had newspapers spread everywhere. On his carpet, in his halls. In his kitchen. He'd just shit whenever it hit him. He couldn't hold it back. I had to wad up the papers and put more down. His old wife couldn't hardly get out of bed, and then she died. What it was, he married that other old lady to help each other, whenever they would forget things or blank out or something. They were keeping each other from going senile. They were the only ones around. And then she died, the second one, and the old man just started losing it. He was standing in the kitchen once, about a week after the funeral. Getting me some orange juice or something. And all the sudden he just forgot where he was. And then later he just shit and looked at me and started crying." The hitchhiker was clawing at one of his fingernails. "I tell you, man, that's a hell of a way to go."

The hitchhiker closed himself in the bathroom and took a shower and Philip fell onto the couch and passed out. He was vaguely aware when the hitchhiker came out of the bathroom and through the narrow hall, and Philip mumbled about his bed and then fell asleep again.

The light was dimming when Philip woke up, the trailer was quiet, and the little dog was awake, still against the dufflebag leaning beside the door. Philip stepped quietly, looked into the bedroom through the open

door at the boy in his same damp pants spread on his stomach on the wrinkled sheets, the purple and green tatoos beneath both shoulders. Philip looked outside through the window in the aluminum door, looked at the red cloudline just above the next trailer and at the dark grey sky everywhere else. He decided to walk, kissed his lips quietly at the little dog who straightened his ears at him and then hurried stiffly out the door and down the wooden steps. Philip closed the door quietly behind them.

He walked off his lot and onto the wet gravel drive and to the paved road, the winds dying as they did almost every day at dusk, until when the west was just a faint broad rainbow above the rugged trees there were only occasional soft breaths of air. He walked for blocks in the new smell of oaks and vines and molding weeds, breathing as full and as slow as possible, long shallow puddles of water nestled against the cement curbs, tiny rippled deltas and sandbars and snaking steep-cut trickles of runoff water through the mud, limp grass curled around rocks or sticks, and long fat milky-white earthworms drowned here and there.

The little dog sniffed at trashcans and shrubs, trotted cockily across the street with the clicks of his tiny feet on the pavement. They walked down backstreets with their large dark oval stains spreading toward the

curb where pickups and old dying cars had changed oil, beneath trees where large drops of water continued to fall from leaves moved by the rare breezes. As soon as it was dark the scattered rhythms of frogs began from lawns and hedges like squeaks of leather, and bits of glass sparkled from the street as they walked, sparkled with that same soft white light as streetlamps that far ahead dropped bands of light across the dark road below. Philip walked beneath the streetlamps buzzing like crickets, his shadow growing longer in front of him and then fading, appearing behind him, and watched the little dog, watched a white cat crouch low and motionless on a lawn until they passed, and listened to dogs barking from behind fences. He stopped at a huge, twisted thorny grey mesquite surrounded on the hard wet ground by its own bark and sharp broken twigs, impressive in the thickness of its trunk for a mesquite, and not a leaf on it or on the ground beneath it, dead for years. Philip put his hand on the bark, stroked the splotches of lichens, and the little dog came and sat next to his feet until he left.

The hitchhiker was still sleeping when Philip got back to the trailer, but woke soon after, and Philip baked several potatoes in the oven and they scooped on margarine and sprinkled them with pepper. The hitchhiker offered to buy more beer, and they drove to the grocery

store and bought it, the sackboys in rubber raincoats and wet jeans beneath the neon lights of the dark parking lot, and Philip and the boy drank and smoked some more, talked until they turned out the lights and Philip undressed and lay down on the old bed after changing sheets and still breathed the smell of the hitchhiker on the mattress and the rainy night air and fell uncomfortably asleep in the closed bedroom, the hitchhiker on the couch.

The trailer was warm again when they got up, and after cereal, after mentally cataloguing the contents of the trailer, Philip drove the hitchhiker just south of the city, to the wide interstate and left him and his dog stepping gingerly down the muddy incline of the overpass with his dufflebag, a traffic helicopter from the city following the highway overhead. Philip drove back leisurely in the old station wagon, lighted billboards beside the road in the grey day, the white morning fog down in the basins of mesquites and Johnsongrass and section roads, hovering in misty bands close to the ground or stretching out into damp brown fields like white peninsulas. At the edge of the small towns on the way home low-roofed adobe motels sat deserted around scrawny courtyards, the square metal air conditioners braced into the peeling windows of tiny rooms. And back out in the open with a light rain falling and the wipers

clicking, Philip remembered rain at his uncle's lake cabin, swishing in the trees and grass, stalks of grass bouncing and shivering with every drop, and on the lake the millions of tiny one-ring circles, and the random swirls and splashes of fish, some nearby, others a hundred yards away, the white splash of the lead sinkers and red and white plastic floats, the clear nylon line floating down onto the water, and thunder surging like flash floods through the mazes of canyons and rock-walled lake bottoms.

At the trailer before work Philip looked for his cigarette papers and couldn't find them, smiled to himself at the thought of the hitchhiker. He was too tired and hungover from the mescal after he got to the school building that afternoon, worked for several hours until he'd finished his rooms and hall and finally asked T.W. to punch him out and went home, slept on his bed. Several times that night the phone rang from the living room but Philip listened to it each time until it stopped, feeling the fan brush warm, moist air back and forth over his body at the edge of the mattress. He woke once and looked outside, through the windowscreen, at the pale, clear sky and the scattered remaining stars. He got up early, groggy but no longer sore, and moved around the trailer, washed dishes and carried a trashsack outside and hung up clothes, trying to wake up and all

the time drinking water, first from the water bottle in the refrigerator and then when that was gone straight from the tap into a cartoon glass. He picked the little shadowy tufts of lint and dust and hair from the corners and table legs where they had gathered and dropped them into ashtrays.

He heard the gravel crunch in the lane outside, heard the unfamiliar racing of a car engine through the open windows before it stopped, and heard a car door slam. He started from the kitchen to the aluminum door to look outside and heard footsteps on the wooden steps and then there were hard knocks on the hollow door, not frantic knocks but angry, shaking that wall. He opened the door and Jan had to step backwards, down off the top wooden step.

"What's the problem?"

"Hey, you little prick. I tried to call. Don't you answer your goddamn phone?" Jan was strange, her face colorless, without makeup, and only when she realized she was looking up at Philip did she step back up onto the wooden step. "I just wanted you to know. Laura's been in the goddamn clinic in the city."

"What are you fucking talking about?"

"In the clinic, you hard of hearing? Getting an abortion, getting your goddamn baby sucked out." Jan forced herself to grin at him.

"You're full of shit."

"I just thought you ought to know, you goddamn little prick." Philip stood at the door, first aware that he had only his torn underwear on and that his hair must still be matted and uncombed, and then he simply listened, with no pockets for his hands, looking at her and shaking his head stubbornly and then angrily at her.

"You get your goddamn ass out of her," he finally said to her, reached out beside her with his arm and took hold of the doorknob.

"Oh I will," Jan said and dug her fingernails into his wrist and flung his hand back, pushed the flimsy door with her shoulder back against the flat trailer siding. "I just don't want you to think you're anything special, this isn't the first one she's had. I just wanted you to know that, I thought you might be interested. Prick."

In an instant Philip shoved his open palm against her other shoulder and watched her topple backwards, off the wooden steps, struggling without looking away from him, and catch herself with one arm behind her on the ground, and then he slammed the door closed without saying another word. He walked quickly into the kitchen for no reason, leaned with both hands against the sink beside the glasses and plastic bowls and silverware dripping in the dishrack, staring straight ahead at the woodgrain

panelling, dazed and angry, listening to the thud of Jan's car door and the gravel spraying against the bottom of her sportscar.

He was deliberate. He spun the telephone dial hard but no one answered at Jan's apartment. He dressed and kicked into his boots and slammed the station wagon door, backed out of the lot and bounced to a stop, drove down the gravel lane. He drove no faster than normal on the early streets, and then as fast as the old car would climb on the highway, and saw Laura's white Volkswagen across the asphalt lot next to the brick pizza parlor. The heavy stained glass door was still locked. Philip knocked until the manager opened it and he asked if he could talk to Laura. The manager let him in, curious, and Philip walked back toward the prep room, chairs still upside down on the tables, and he heard the hum of a machine and then heard Laura's voice, soft and clear and unhurried, saying something about ground beef, and then from somewhere else in the back room a boy answered her loudly.

Philip stopped, tasting the smell of pizzas in the place, and listened to them talk about meats in the walk-in freezer. He turned around. "I'll catch her some other time," he said flatly through the order window to the puzzled manager, who stopped counting at the cash register and rubbed his throat, watching him.

Philip walked back out into the warm lot, to the old station wagon and drove slowly across the lot to the highway.

There was no one Philip wanted to call or see, so he smoked and drank in the trailer and let the phone ring and by the time he left for work he had to steady himself down the steps and could barely drive.

He concentrated as he approached Mac's office in the empty school building until he reached it and saw that no one was there, fit his flat timecard clumsily into the clock and then stumbled against the vented lockers down the long halls to his closet, unlocked it and then pulled the heavy door behind him and eased onto the concrete floor inside, against the jugs of disinfectant, tired, slow, sorry he was drunk, and tried to steady himself.

After what seemed like a long time Philip began to feel sick. He struggled up, holding onto the metal sink. But when he got to T.W.'s closet to tell him he was leaving it was closed and locked. Philip focussed his eyes, tried the knob again. "Come on, T.W., open up." And then it took time for Philip to realize he heard something inside the closet, and unexpectedly he heard the heavy click of the door. Philip opened it and looked down, surprised, at the old black man sitting on a cardboard box of paper towels, easing his back carefully against

the cinderblock wall, and between his black lace-up shoes and black socks sat a brown paper sack twisted around a bottle. They looked at each other for an instant of recognition, Philip staring into the tired red eyes in the black face.

"Goin home again?" the old black man asked. Philip suddenly felt T.W. watching him and steadied himself against the doorway, said nothing. "Close the door."

Philip couldn't think, he wasn't sure the old man meant for him to step inside or leave. He looked at T.W., tried to decide, and then pulled the door closed behind him and stood beneath the bare lightbulb. "So this is where you are," Philip grinned. T.W. raised the bagged bottle and tilted his head back, stretched his rough black throat tight, took a swallow with his eyes closed and set the bottle down on the cardboard box between his skinny legs. "Mac ever find you here?" Philip asked.

"I keep it down," T.W. said in his low, hoarse voice.

Philip realized how loud he was. "Sorry." He sat down carefully on the cement floor, his back against the closed door, and waited. He took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, tiredly, to settle his stomach. "I'm fucking wasted." The breath and fumes of alcohol were thick and sour and sickening in the small, closed closet.

Philip told him about Laura, about the abortion. "I don't know, I swear to God I think you get to where the only way anything's any good is if you don't have a choice." Philip scratched hard against a chip in the concrete. "That's probably the only way I ever could have had a kid." He looked up at T.W., into his bony black face. "If you pick it, it'll be wrong. The only way it's any good is if you don't decide."

There was no change at all in the old red vacant eyes. "Shit, boy, that nearly everything."

And then Philip began trying to explain, about Laura, about his grandfather dying in a state hospital because he wouldn't work, and he told about his father by telling about the paperbacks.

The old man interrupted him, annoyed. "Shit, boy, so what?" and he straightened his old curved back and shook the bottle in the paper bag once toward Philip. "Think of everything he try to hide and you never found out. Shit, boy, he was trying to tell you something." T.W. nodded and eased back, the bottle on his cloth trousers. "Look at it, boy. You talking this shit to a old ridiculous nigger."

T.W. leaned back down, his bony elbows on his knees, and stared at the glass lip of the bottle above the sack. Neither of them spoke.

"Don't be talking that shit to me about Mac no more,"

T.W. finally said. "Don't want to hear it."

Philip stood up, waited for a moment while the blood rushed to his head and darkened the room, and then walked out into the quiet hall and turned with the door, met the old red eyes for a meaningless instant before the door closed.

Philip slept in his own closet. And later, in a classroom, moving slowly between the wooden desks with the wastebasket in one hand, Philip cursed and straightened up, eased sideways into a desk and gazed outside through the windows. There were no clouds. The sky was endless and blue, and only a pure orange light remained above the shingled housetops and trees across the brown schoolyard. He heard an airplane for a time, and then heard a trashcan wobble on its rollers somewhere far down the hall, and wondered what had made him turn around when he heard Laura's voice. She was desperate, to get rid of him, to shuck something that was growing in her, his baby. She wanted a family, that was the one thing of everything else that made her cry. And she was religious deep down, he thought, even if she never went to Mass. They never talked about it. But she never lied or covered up to him, she always did what she said she would, if she was supposed to meet him or pick him up somewhere she was there. He always got his way, she always let him. Except for this. Shit, boy, Philip

thought, she'd wanted away from him. He could take that. She knew he would have kept it. Philip thought for a moment she might even have known how much he would have kept it; but she couldn't have. Had he thought about it that much? He could take that. But then in the pizza parlor, when he heard her voice and he suddenly knew her again, no longer angry, he hadn't wanted to persuade her anymore. Of what?

Philip let his eyes follow a small girl who appeared from around the school building porch and walked past the flagpole, toward the windows of Philip's classroom. He watched, saw her tiny features become distinct, and saw her look behind her, out across the schoolyard to the street and houses beyond. She reached the hedges just below the windows and stopped, looked carefully out behind her again, and then pushed her way through the waxy green leaves and cracking branches, against the brick building.

He stood sluggishly from the desk and walked up the aisle and to the windows in front of the classroom where he could see the soft brown hair combed and parted neatly on top of her quick, alert head. He wanted to see her, wanted to see what she had hidden there, behind the shrubs, and he stood above her, waiting, smiling, until her little head finally turned and looked up through the glass at him. She froze, looking at him scared for a

second, and Philip thought it was over; and then she fought through the thick hedges and out across the schoolyard, her frantic little steps awkward across the uneven hard ground, with her tiny fists clutching and pulling at her little jeans. Philip realized what she had been doing, that she had squatted there hidden instead of looking for a restroom, and he pictured his grinning face to her and blushed, the blood hot in his face and ears, standing alone in the quiet, empty classroom watching through the glass the little girl run across the dry ground with the grasshoppers exploding up and floating slowly away from her, the click of their wings and their long hind leds trailing gracefully, watched her run beyond the mesquite tree and carelessly across the street and disappear between the houses and lawns and fences.

He sat there, in a desk by the windows, until dark, until the glass reflected the room, staring, unable to think, unable to concentrate, barely nodding his head now to music he remembered.

VITA

Russell Barlow Hill

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: THINGS HOPED FOR, THINGS UNSEEN

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Canyon, Texas, October 18, 1955, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Thomas B. Hill.

Education: Graduated from S.H. Rider High School, Wichita Falls, Texas, in May 1974; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Philosophy from Midwestern State University in 1977; enrolled in Master of Arts program at Oklahoma State University 1977-79; enrolled in University of Texas Law School, 1980; completed requirements for the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma State University in July, 1982.

Professional Experience: Graduate teaching assistant, English Department, Oklahoma State University, 1977-79; reporter-feature writer, Wichita Falls Times and Record-News, Wichita Falls, Texas, 1979-80; law clerk, Senate Jurisprudence Committee, State of Texas, 1981-2.