

Bird

By Craig Werner

First Movement

--"The face in the mirror won't stop."
--Jim Morrison

Vanguard

You cross the bridge and stop by the compound, watch the truck following you over. On its back, a cage, bars gridded to restrain the prisoners, young men in thin coats. The wind whips laughter at the sun, you pull up your collar. You get out of your car and walk across the gravel. It scrapes your leathered heels. You might notice the compound, walls of adobe, styled after a Spanish mission. You might even look at the prisoners.

“Hey brothuh, what’s happenin?”

“You one a us, man?”

“Muhfuggin’ honkey.”

“Hey, take this and give it to my woman.”

“I shouldn’t be here, I’m innocent, innocent.”

“Hey man

hey man hey man hey man

bruthah bruthah bruthah

what you

innocent innocent innocent

brother...

BROTHER!

Brother?

You listen to the voices dying as the fathers herd the men past the walls. You get back in your car and drive back across the bridge, your job well done.

Albino Diamonds

Joey carried the canteens, Fred carried the hotdogs and beans and they headed for Rattlesnake Bluff with Nicki the dog running ahead. Joey walked on the railroad track while Fred chased Nicki along the road. Joey jumped down and caught up.

"Wonder how many lizards we'll get." He balanced on the rail. "I broke my record the other day and didn't fall of the track for 200 steps. Oughtta be a good day for 'em, they like it when it's hot. Hey, do you think we'll be able to find that rock with the hole through it again? Sure made it easy to cook. Kinda like a stove and chimney just for us."

"Yeah, I know where it is." Fred ran ahead, then waited for Joey. "I just wanna get another horny toad to go with Puffball. Yesterday I was lettin' him slide down the roof of the rabbit hutch onto the grass but he slid down the wrong side and landed in the crawdaddy pool. He was lyin there on his back." Fred stopped, bent over and closed his eyes. "And one of the crawdaddies sees him and goes after him. Puffball sees the crawdaddy and puffs up real big."

Fred puffed out his cheeks, crossed his eyes and rocked from side to side. Joey bent his fingers into claws, extended his arms, bared his teeth and circled Fred with jerky monster movie steps.

"Ol Puffball's down there puffed up big and the crawdaddy's getting closer all the time. Puffball's goin..." Fred contorted his face and raised his voice. "Yeep yeep, help me, help me and the crawdaddy's about that far away." Joey's touched the side of Fred's head. "When I reach in and save the star of the zoo."

Fred paused, looked around and yelled. "Hey, look! Some dog's gonna get hit by a car!" Brakes squealed. The car stopped, just short. "Hey, that's my dog! Come here, ya stupid animal. Whadda ya think you're doin? You coulda got killed." Nicki ran back and Fred kicked her, sending her yapping on ahead. "Stupid mutt, teach you."

Joey laughed. "You shoulda seen your face when you said, 'Hey, that's *my* dog."

"Yeah, but that car coulda killed her. I guess it was kinda funny, but I really hate cars." Fred made a face and kicked the dust as he walked ahead.

"Hey, did Robbie tell ya about what they did last night? Joey hopped back off the rail and threw a stick for Nicki to chase. "You know that car that was parked down by the crossing? Well they decided to see what was goin on. They waited til it got real dark and snuck up next to the window to see what was inside. Robbie lit a match and stuck it up when this guy pops up and looks right at him through the window. I was down there throwin matches at the train and asked them what was goin on. We decided that the guy couldn't do anything so we went back and all took matches and lit em and marched in a circle around the car. The guy got out of his car, real mad, but we ditched him easy."

They rounded a curve on the tracks and stopped short. "Gee, look at that," Fred said. "A dead car. It's a dead car."

"What it doin' out here? Maybe it's stolen or somethin'."

“Aw, who cares?” Fred jumped down the slope to the rusted out Ford. “Let’s see if there’s anything in it.”

Joey followed and poked his head through a broken window into the back seat while Fred pried the trunk cover open with an old stick. Inside, a battered suitcase. When he picked it up, it fell open. Empty.

“Ain’t no sticker or license or anything on it.” Fred checked the glove compartment. “Maybe we oughtta call the cops.”

“Maybe. Hey, the glass from the broken window’s really cool.” Joey climbed into the backseat. “Hold it up to the light and it looks like diamonds. Yeah, that’s what it is, diamonds.”

Fred picked up a handful and held them to the sun.

“Yeah, they’re diamonds and now we control the entire world supply.” Joey’s eyes glittered. “We’ve got the only mine there is and now we’ll make ‘em into money and take control of the whole world!”

“Yeah, we start with the school and work up.” Fred sat in a pile of diamonds, running them through his fingers. “They look better than money anyway.”

“We’ll get a castle and buy a VW bus.”

“I can get all the old Fantastic Fours.”

“We can eat hamburgers every day.”

“Nah, stupid. My brother in New Jersey’s rich and he never eats hamburgers. He eats steak and lives in a real big house.”

“Yeah, well I like hamburgers and I’m gonna have ‘em sometimes.”

“I don’t care. We gotta find somethin to carry em in.”

“Here.” Joey lifted up a six pack of empty beer bottles. “These’ll work. You take these and get the diamonds out of that side and I’ll get the ones over here.”

“We’re the world’s first diamond millionaires,” Fred announced, filling his bottles.

While the afternoon sun burned down on the Colorado plains, Nicki barked at a lizard.

They walked home, past the construction sites marking the latest edge of the city, up Fred’s driveway and into the kitchen where his mother yelled at them for carrying beer bottles and his father told them to throw away the dirty glass before someone got cut and that evening Puffball escaped and got eaten by Nicki and some big kids stripped the car and someone called the cops, who had it towed away.

Mathematician

Slow steps, relaxed, sixty year steps without worry. Slow eyes, smiling at the students, the spring afternoon, a young girl. Slow voice, speaking in rolling accented words. "You probably all think mathematics is a science, something to make automobiles and atom bombs." Smiling at a girl arriving late. Waiting for her to arrange herself on the floor. "You think mathematics is a science. You maybe don't think that everything is numbers. There have been great men who did believe everything is numbers. You touch your arm and say, wait a minute, this is part of everything and I don't think....You boys think about your girlfriends. Of course, you're right. Everything is not numbers. But you are just as wrong to think that numbers have anything at all to do with things. Mathematics is not a science, mathematics is a game." Stopping, smiling at a wrinkled brow. "Yes, mathematics is a game. And there are no rules you must play by. You can make up your own rules anytime you want. Your teachers have always told you that you have to do certain things in mathematics or else you will be wrong. But I tell you now that if you don't like a piece of mathematics, you can throw it away. You can say, 'I don't like two plus two equals four, I want two plus two to be three.'" Settling back. "You can throw out any piece of mathematics as long as you can replace it. That is the only requirement. You don't have to polish up to the mathematics establishment. I have quite polishing up to the establishment because I don't need to any more. I guess if I still needed to, I would polish. But I'm too old for that now." Thinking, looking just to the side of the girl's eyes. Focusing on a tree in the background, the sky. "We all grow older, unfortunately. My best days were when I was young, shiftless. I guess I eventually settled down." Remembering.. "My mother was a beautiful woman who died all too young. My father was a blackguard. He drove my mother to her death and drove me away from home by the time I was fifteen. Later he became a leading Nazi. But by then I was wandering in France, walking the beaches. My real ambition is still to be a beach walker. Ever since my wife died, I have spent every summer walking beaches. You can find almost anything on a beach." Slowing, looking at the youthful faces. "But we were talking about our game." Almost sighing. "In mathematics we have only three requirements for a complete system. First, we must have a set of elements. Second, we must have one or more defined operations. Now, let's make up our own system." Turning to the chalkboard. "I'll introduce x, y and z as the elements of our system. You may say 'who are you to introduce the elements?' and I will answer, 'right now I am the director of this game.' Our only operation will be squiggling and the property of squiggling will be that any element squiggled by any other element gives the result of z. And we have a perfectly contained mathematical system. Now I have just one question: 'Who wants to know?'" Erasing the blackboard, turning back to a field of grins. "Nobody, probably. But we have made a system, and if anybody asks 'what good does this do me?' the beauty of the game is that we answer 'None, who cares?' In mathematics we have operations to undo what other operations do. These operations are called inverses. So I will now introduce an unsquiggle into our system. Ah! I have erased our system." Contemplating the empty chalkboard. "In mathematics we also have an

operation called goofing, so I apply the inverse and ungoof myself.” Writing on the chalkboard, reflecting. “That reminds me of the time I was teaching a modern mathematics class on television in Boston. I was showing a group of youngsters how to multiply easily and I was demonstrating with 12×18 . I showed them that you could take 10×18 equals 180 and add it to 2×18 equals 36 and get 216. Or else, if you didn’t like that, you could take 10×12 equal 120 and add it to 8×12 equals 96 and still get 216. I finished demonstrating and I noticed that one beautiful little girl at the back of the class, she was wearing a pink dress with a white ribbon and had long black hair, her name was Theresa, was frowning. So I went to her and asked ‘what is the matter, Theresa? Don’t you like our multiplication?’ She looked up at me and said “What about nines?” And of course, through the entire demonstration, I had overlooked the easiest way of all to do the example. Which is the beauty of mathematics, that little Theresa can find things that the famous mathematician may overlook.” Looking at the clock, scanning the class, the beautiful young girls, the muscular boys. “But mathematics can be very complex also. There are systems which rely on the reduction of all symbolic language to whole numbers. This leads to things such as mathematical induction which is a sub-nightmare all its own. But even it is a small nightmare when compared to the kinds of things scientists do when they get ahold of mathematics and use it to build machines. That is not mathematics, that is technology. And technology is the real nightmare. When first I came to this country, I was teaching at Harvard and knew another young mathematician who was also a refugee. He was married to a beautiful woman who was also a gifted pianist. I remember sitting listening to her playing for hours. It was very beautiful. She was also a very earthy woman and she became involved in an affair with another young man. Which is not as unusual as some people would have you believe. Her husband, who was a very jealous man, was told of this and reacted with great violence. He kept her almost locked in her room and watched her constantly. She at first became very quiet and then lost her health and grew thin and began to have nightmares and wake up screaming. Her husband who was very obviously more bothered by his concept of morality than by his wife’s nightmares, used this as an excuse to put her under psychiatric care. This was in the early days of electro-therapy, something I believe to be absolutely despicable. The husband signed the papers allowing them to use it on his wife. The treatments worked in that the nightmares stopped and she was a very conventionally good wife from then on. But she never touched a piano again in her life, she had no memory whatsoever of music. That, to me, is the greatest of tragedies.” Looking at the faces, at the clock. “But that was technology and not mathematics. And now we are out of time.”

The students filed out of the classroom. The old man gazed out the window at the blue spring sky and murmured, “It’s beautiful.”

A Working Girl

Every night after work they went out too the same club and sat at the same table and ordered the same drinks and finally went back to the same small apartment and rolled back the same sheets on the same bed and dreamed a new and different love until the sound of the garbage trucks clattering down the alley at four in the morning called her home where she slept until noon and rose to return to work.

She had been beautiful once. She'd imagined herself living a life different than the one she heard was the only one. So she married her first lover and lived in his world and gave birth to a child, a son. But she grew bored and went to work to find something that seemed more real. And her job kept her out til midnight and her home was miles away.

He was a soldier. He found himself in the army once day after escaping the prison of the university, giving up on his past. One day he gave up on his future. And he went to work to fill time and he had no home.

They had spoken many times about the weather, the books they'd read, the place they'd been and wanted to go. One day, they touched.

The same work, the same life, the same drinks, the same apartment, the same bed, the same sheets, the dream of a different love. A love that would let them feel each other warm, vibrating with the night. One day they realized no one lived in the apartment. It was leased in his name, but he had no home. Hers was miles away.

Every night, they returned to work.

She Said She Said

The chair creaked under his weight. She scraped thick red tomato paste into a pot on the gas stove. She said: I'm sure my affairs are a rebellion against Ron. I do them to hurt him. I'm sure of that. She smiled, her blouse tightening over the side of her breast. She said: I have to do them. To prove that I'm myself, not just a part of him. She looked at the clock. She said: Do you want to go out with me and get him when he gets off work? No, it blew my mind when you told me Sharon was doing that thing last summer. He replied:

*She said I know what it's like to be dead
I know what it is to be sad*

You can't restrain a woman, not without having a whole lot of things build up inside. Mental tension are going to come out. But it hurts. I don't know, I don't know. She stirred the pot with a wooden spoon, he shifted his weight. She smoothed the blouse, pale yellow with flowers. He looked up the hall at the light scraping the dirty bedroom window. She said: I don't think it would hurt me if Ron did a thing. He replied:

*Who put all those things in your head
Things that make me feel like I'm mad*

Are you sure? Do you really believe that? She said: I know he loves me, that's all I need. He replied:

She said you don't understand what I said

But it still hurts, it always hurts. She touched his face, smiled into his eyes. He replied:

*I said no no no you're wrong
When I was a boy, everything was right*

Women, pain. She closed her eyes. He replied:

*Even though you know what you know
I know that I'm ready to leave*

Shit, women scare me. She let her arms drop, looked away. She said: Me too, and I'm one of them. He replied:

*And she's making me feel
Like I've never been born*

It's getting dark, where's the switch? She flipped on the light, the pot bubbled in the background.

Nairobi

They drove from boredom, to fill their time. They drove the streets talking obscene code at old ladies, GIs, teenage girls, doing jumping jacks at stoplights, laughing, always laughing. Sometimes, tonight, they drove into the mountains. Backroads, frontroads, they all looked pretty much the same once they left the highways. They decided they were all lowways anyway and barreled down one that pointed to the mountaintop, ignoring the enter at your own risk sign. They screeched around a cutback, suddenly descending to a parking lot. A long line of traffic closed in behind them.

what the hell?

dunno.

what's the building?

didn't think there was anything up here.

i don't like it.

chickenshit, let's go

Through doors, through a turnstile, into a room with walls of maps. A room filled with a lecturer's voice...inevitability...proletariat...crisis...Asia...Mao...inevitability. ..MUST...America...food...food...foodfoodfood...Lights blink on the maps. Yellow, red, one or two white. The room tilts, they tumble in a crowd through a door and emerge on a hill. They crawl, clinging to tufts of a short grass, their knuckles scraped, their ears frozen. The stubble comes off in their hands. The hill tilts sharper still.

The voice booms: THIS IS YOUR WHEAT?

with laughter

Their solace

as they

fall.

Christmas

The white shook the hair out of his eyes, grimaced at the black, stared into the fog. The black tossed his newspaper onto the floor and murmured, "Been gone too long." The bus cut through the December fog. They rode on in silence.

The white, rock-faced, was already there when the black ambled up the aisle and slid into the seat, his monologue already in progress. "Hey man, where ya headed i'm on my way back to harrisburg, that's where i'm from goin' back to see my ma for christmas yeah i've missed home been workin' in the oil fields bad work man real bad but now i'm headed home where ya headed oh yeah lotta cats goin' home i spent a couple of years there no room in chicago man no room to move couldn't stay there had to move don't know where i'll go next i been learnin' spanish down there ya work with a lotta spanish brothers don't know much yet but i'm tryin' you know any spanish oh yeah hey you may be able to help with this paper it's spanish from new york got it from a puerto rican cat on the last bus i have a little trouble but i can read enough to know what it's about..."

The white looked at his watch, grimaced as the bus lurched ahead into the fog. the black unfolded the paper. "hey man to you know what that word is for more flavor that's what it means that's one's gotta be smoke smoke camel yeah you can pick up most of it here's an article about a spanish brother who helped with the moon shot i guess he was part of the crew down on the ground helpin direct things luna moon that one's easy hey man want a ciggie yeah i wish i didn't smoke but i' stuck on it runs into some bread harrisburg ain't much for action nothin' goes down there had to leave but i like goin' back man what's this word mean...."

The white stared into the fog, leaned forward trying to get a better angle on the road signs, glancing at his watch, fidgeting in his set. The black thumbed through the pages. "shit i can't read any of this part don't have a clue what it's about the ads are pretty simple you can figure out what they mean even if you don't know a couple of words hey there's a picture of roberto clemente see what they have to say the great star estrella of baseball's pittsburgh pirates lots of words look just like english i should know that one oh yeah presents hey can you help me with this one?"

The white turned, spitting words. "Hey man do you think you could leave me alone, I'd like to get some sleep." The black squinted at him. "All right man, don't get hot." The white turned to the window, muttering "*Chinga tu madre man chinga tu madre*" and went back to staring at road signs. The black let it ride, folded the newspaper. "just wish i was home, that's all man, just wish I was home."

Blue Hill

Twenty years later the mornings still smelled the same, the dust still settled on the streets, the boards still creaked on the sidewalk in front of the tavern and grocery store. Most of the same people, grown older and slower, waved to him, asked about the city, his sick father. The old schoolhouse stood at the same place, only now the few children remaining in town took the bus to a consolidated county school, so the windows were broken, the ground tangled with weeds. Byron Blau stepped over the ditch around the yard, sat down on the metal frame of a dilapidated hand-pushed merry-go-round.

Byron and his twin brother Oliver had abandoned the town for the war, college, jobs in cities. Sometimes they returned for a few days during the summer. Three years ago their mother died, a thin old woman confused by change. Now Aunt Pearl had called them back for their father. She told them he was tired. Tired of the nursing home, tired of weakness, almost, of life. The doctor called it pneumonia with complications arising from decreased resistance.

So Byron had come to see his father and wait for his brother, who he hadn't seen since their mother's funeral. Christmas cards passed for keeping in touch. Byron rose from the merry-go-round and walked toward Main Street, stopping in front of the tavern. His father owned it. Byron remembered nights spent with his father and uncles who gave them nickels for the mechanical bowling machine. Oliver always won. Byron waved to Mrs. Brunjak. She never married but they called her Mrs. anyway. She never liked Byron and Oliver, but she'd never complained when they stole apples from the tree by the shed in her back yard. He remembered the hot summer nights following hotter days when the sheet lightning covered the horizon and the sheets stuck to the bed, when he and Oliver and Carl Brunjak, Mrs. Brunjak's brother's son, and Roy Gunther snuck out and went swimming in the slow creeks, even though one of Roy's older brothers had drowned. Byron shook his head to clear the nostalgia, walked up the street to Uncle's Jeff's and the smell of Aunt Hilda's waiting supper.

Oliver burned his finger on the coffee pot and swore. He'd driven a solid 24 hours from Pennsylvania, blown a tire, and gotten a speeding ticket from a senile sheriff in some godforsaken Iowa town. Oliver wished Byron would shut up, but he knew it was hopeless. Unending questions, unending answers.

"The kids are all right. Mike will be graduating from high school next year. Shirley has her problems, but that's the stage of life." What else? "When are we going to see him?"

Byron lit a cigarette and tapped his foot. "Tomorrow morning. Visiting hours start at 8, but dad always wakes up earlier. He has trouble sleeping. They'll let us in any time after 6:30."

"How long does he have?"

"They don't know. Depends a lot on his morale. He's been really low, Oliver. Maybe seeing you will help. There's really nothing that serious about pneumonia except for his age. If he can find some strength, he'll pull through."

"Right." Oliver poured a cup of coffee and drank it, black. Recited. "Our diagnosis shows that Mr. Blau's internal organs are still sound, his circulation steady, his mental faculties present and his goddam health has been terrible for five years, maybe longer. The doctors around here couldn't diagnose a serious case if the patient was brought in dead. Who is it now? Still the old quack?"

Byron nodded. "Dr. Brundage hasn't changed. Oliver, try to cheer him up. Please? He probably doesn't have long, but let him know you love him."

Oliver stood and walked to the door. "I'll try."

The days, long after sleeplessness, the walls, white, unadorned. Thomas Blau woke before the sun, feeling no pain, breathing with effort. He lay quietly, hoping the night attendant would leave him alone and not bring the pills that plunged him into a sleep without rest.

The boys visited him, Dora's children, back now to witness his weakness. When they were young, he had been a boxer, the fighting bartender. There were clippings from the Lincoln and Omaha and even Kansas City newspapers in an old chest somewhere. He had shown the boys strength, but it hadn't stopped them from leaving or staying away after the war. They sat with him for an hour, talked about the town, friends, a distant cousin who'd died in a car accident. Maybe that was the best way. His own grandfather, murdered as an old man his first week in America. The boys left, promised to return in the afternoon.

Their mother could never bear to question them. She embroidered a motto and hung it on the wall of the room they slept in when they visited. "Only one life, it soon is passed, only what's done in Christ will last."

He breathed heavily, looked at the morning sun painting the flowers in the window box, felt no pain.

Five Points

The concert ended. They left the arena with their dates clinging to their arms. They bought coffee, cokes, sweet rolls. They got lost trying to find the highway. And then the car blew a tire. It was summer, which might have been good anywhere else, but the tire blew in the middle of the ghetto. A circle of dull bars, car part stores, barbeque restaurants. Summer was bad.

"Damn it, I know the jack's around here somewhere. I've been keeping it in one place."

"It's probably still in one place. Problem is, what place?"

"Very funny."

"Maybe I should tell the chicks that if we get any heart, the first thing we're going to do is offer the kind gentlemen their bodies?"

Weak giggles.

"Hell, just today I heard there were Negro warnings out. It was on the weather report. Huricoons."

Silence.

The street, softly noisy. Doors, closed. Windows, open. Gutters, empty. The sidewalk, living with a shape, closing in. A black body, slowing, stopping. Grey hairs mingled with black, lines furrowing the face, sharp mouth neutralizing dull eyes.

"Where you kids been?"

"Uh, we were at a concert and it just got over."

"Oh yeah? I used to play some. Maybe you heard. The Ravens Blew sax."

"Yeah, I think maybe I saw you once. At the Arena, when James Brown played with the Byrds?"

"I do recollect working there."

"Hey, I'm playing guitar, trying to break in. How do you do it up here?"

"You don't. Nobody. Little girls sure look foxy."

'Yeah."

They'd finished fixing the tire. Minor problem. They said goodbye and left.

Hideaway

Inch by inch, the big kid raised his bee bee gun. Slowly he aimed. Randy heard the shot from his hiding place near the frozen pond. Some birds took off, thing wings fluttering loudly against the grey February sky.

Randy peered over the rise, breathing smoky rings. He wished the big kid would go away. He didn't have any business at the pond. Randy had been checking his treasure when he heard the big kid and he hadn't had time to cover it up again. No one every came to the pond during the winter.

The big kid watched the birds vanish and said a cuss word.

Randy moved to see better and knocked some snow down the front of the rise. The big kid pivoted. "What's that?" Randy scrunched back down. "I see ya, come on out."

Shaking, Randy stood, trying to think of what he could do with his treasure, his pirate chest full of two hundred and six pennies.

"Come on. What's that ya got?" The big kid pulled Randy's arm and he stumbled, dropping the chest as he tried to break his fall. The big kid bent over and picked it up. Randy wished he'd at least hidden the key, but he felt its shape right there in the pocket of his jeans.

"What's in it? Feels like money." Randy bit his lip. "Yeah, must be. Come on. Where's the key." Randy trembled, made up his mind to say nothing. "Come on kid." The big kid's voice was rough. "Give me the key or else I'll just break it open." Randy sniffled. He had a runny nose.

Suddenly the big kid closed his hand hard on Randy's shoulder, sending him sprawling on the ice. The big kid pulled him back to his feet. "Tell me, kid." Randy turned around and tried to run, but he slipped and the big kid was right on top of him. The big kid raised his bee bee gun and pressed it to Randy's temple. "Okay. I can kill you right here if you don't give me the key. Your mommy won't like that. All I have to do is break the ice and sink your body and nobody'll ever know. Tell me." Randy shook his head. "Come on," hissed the big kid. Randy closed his eyes and felt the gun slide to his forehead. "Hell, I'll just break it." The big kid dropped the barrel of the bee bee gun, jerked Randy back to his feet and shoved him into a snow bank.

Randy shivered and watched as the big kid found a rock and splintered the chest, sending coins flying. "Hell, it's just a bunch of lousy pennies." The big kid ground the chest under the heel of his boot, broke a hole in the ice, and dropped the pennies through.

He watched as the big kid aimed, listened to the sound of the bee bee gun, watched the winter birds fly away.

Never Seem

The Miller High Life sign glowed above the television next to the cash register at the end of the bar. Light refracted on rows of bottles and his eyes kept wandering away from the old movie, a Western with John Wayne. Behind him, a dancer moved mechanically. The owner scrutinized the customers and a jukebox cluttered the smoke.

He poured a glass of beer from a smoky bottle, rubbed an itch on the back of his neck, discovered it had spread to his forehead, his elbows, his balls. He scratched harder. Didn't do any good. Nothin ever did. He remembered bartending. Didn't pay as well as the hotel job, not at the dive he'd been at. But it was sure as hell more interesting. Sickening sometimes, but still. Watching the parade of GIs ogling the dancers. The dancers too stupid to use the pill getting knocked up by the GIs and the GIs murdering the dancers and each other out of, far as he could tell, boredom. All of them getting thrown in jail for drugs and half of them running their used cars into semis, padding the docket at the traffic court. Once he'd picked up one of the dancers. She sat on a bar stool during her breaks asking him senseless questions just to hear a voice that wasn't trying to pick her up. The result was the same. He'd taken her home and had her. She was one of the unusual ones, she felt it. He didn't know where she'd gone. Who gave a damn about cunts anyway? Bar cunts, hotel cunts, didn't make any difference. Some old broad at the hotel where he'd worked the desk for a few months, rick, stacked, drunk, had pressed the key to her room into his hand, winked, retreated, swinging her hips. He'd waited until the shift was over and gone home. Maybe he was getting old. Getting old in the same place. He'd ridden his bike in front of these same bars when he was a kid. Part of his life. The city. He could have left. Some old man wanted him as a companion a few years back. Home in LA, nice car, good bread. That one felt even worse than the old broad. Once he visited the coast and lined up a job but hesitated and came back because of a chick who split pretty soon anyway. His sister kept him posted on work in Denver, but he never took her up on it. Ten years back, he'd played in a rock band. An agent offered to put them on the road, opening for B list bands playing dumps out on the plains. They refused. It seemed like he was always going to leave, but her never seemed to end up leaving.

He crumpled a napkin, draped it over the top of the beer bottle. Reminded him of a cowl. Something like the pictures of the saints on the walls of his Catholic grad school. The television flickered, Our Lady of Coors smiled.

Second Movement

--"It's 3 a.m., there's too much noise,
don't you people ever want to go to sleep?"
--The Stones

White Music I

"Time ain't real anyway, so boogaloo and dance away."

Skeletal witches' fingers, sifting the evening wind. They drove, jarred by the railroad track, hidden by the dusk. "Ghost train a'comin'." "Crash." "Nah." "Oh, it missed us?" "Nah." "It just hurts ghosts?" "Nah." "Then what?" Leaving the tracks behind, floating along the pavement. "Transcends modern technology." "What?" "Car has an aura. Makes the trains go around." "All cars?" "Nah, depends on." "On?" "If." "On?" "Up." "On?" "In?" "What?" "Play the game." "I." "Nope. Buzzzzzz. I win!" "Why?" "Words all have to have two letters." "I wish you'd tell me the rules sometime." "That's no fun. What's the point in playing if you can't win?" Scowling and grinning, ignoring the witches, they drive.

Ice frosted the streets, cars skated aimlessly. But he still took it up when a friend dared him to run across the tracks right in front of the train. He jumped over the track, slipped, banged his knee on the rail. Rolled away just in time. Lady in a car saw him and reported him to the school and, as usual, they sent him home and he got a note from his mother saying he promised to be good.

He founded the back-to-the-garden movement when he was a high school sophomore. He'd camped since he was little, killed a bear, navigated by the stars. So he asked friends to go with him, showed them the best campsites, taught them respect. When he was a junior, he took a girl, led her through an old beaver village, sat with her in the open meadow as she learned awe. When he was a senior, the old man of the mountains at 17, his boots leaked on a winter trip, the temperature fell to 30 below and a friend carried him out.

When you enter his room, you move fast to keep from getting hit by the 7:47. You tiptoe over the tracks criss-crossing the floor, climbing ramps and running along the walls. Mainly, you listen while he talks about the new German-made engine with the little man who shovels coal to keep the train from slowing down.

I remember driving across Missouri with a friend one summer midnight. We pulled over in some small town to check the map and a carload of drunk farmboys roared past yelling hey hippies, want a date? We took off toward KC but their Camero shut my VW down and they rode my tail. So, fingering a coke bottle, ready to fight, I swerved into a farmyard while they shot past on the main highway and didn't come back. Then I remember watching TV. A commercial blaring *you are alive you are alive* and I looked up from my crossword puzzle and yelled back *shut up shut up shut up*. Finally I remember hearing a siren droning past in the night and solacing myself with my woman. Thinking, princess I hope you are dead.

The reporter earned his PhD in train history, filled the Sunday supplement with the last ride of the Albuquerque and Western, the driving of the golden spike, the building of the Monarch Line. The reporter chewed gum. Sometimes twice. One day, a copyboy looked up from his obscene sketch of two comic book characters and informed the world that, the next time the reporter left his gum on the hook next to his typewriter, he was going to spray it with deodorant. The copyboy took a job with a refrigerator repair company. The reporter wrote a feature on the narrow gauge.

Cotton candy fields shimmering on a shadowy breeze. They drove, cradled by grass. "Hey, look!" "What?" "Dinosaurs." "What?" "Dinosaurs, right there." "Those are horses silly." "Horses? There won't be any horses for a thousand million years and then they'll only be six inches tall." They stopped at a red light, looked again. "Hmmm, maybe they are horses, maybe now it's all changed." "No, I think you're right, they're dinosaurs." Frowning and smiling, they drove.

"How come no one writes on these walls?"

"You blew it buster."

Stained Glass Blues

Little Randy. Huddled in his father's shadow. Legs dangling over the edge of the pew, toes pointing down, not quite reaching the floor. Miniature suit disordered. The preacher talked about the atom bomb. Randy's eyes wandered to the stained glass window, the fractured picture of Mary and her baby. It didn't look like little Jesus to Randy. Little Jesus was like the picture in his Bible. A smiling baby. Stained glass Jesus was blue and crooked. The preacher talked in a soft voice. He talked about the Russians and the Cold War and the atom bomb. Randy already knew about the Russians and the Cold War and the atom bomb from TV. But the preacher talked about dying and hell and heaven. Randy fingered the leather hymn book, bent his neck backwards, tried to see the point of the spire. From outside, it was easy, but inside he could never quite tell where the spire ended. It had to, Randy thought. The preacher yelled something. Randy thought it was about the atom bomb. He was scared. His father patted his shoulder and Randy sat still.

A bigger, smarter Randy. Slouched on the couch in the basement of another church with a friend whose parents still made him go. They went all right. They went and sat in the basement and talked, stealing cookies and punch. They tried to get girls to stay down there with them, but they never had any luck. "Proof God hates me," laughed his friend. Sometimes they turned on the intercom and listened to the sermon from upstairs. This time, the minister was talked about the Book of Revelations. Something about the common market and a beast with ten heads. Randy moaned, "Shee-it. God garbage. Why would I want to go to heaven anyway? All my friends are gonna be in hell." "Not me," said his friend. The minister was done with the common market and was starting in on Jerusalem. No more beasts and plagues. As far as Randy was concerned, the Christers deserved all the beasts and plagues they could dream up for themselves. "Not me," repeated his friend, switching off the intercom. "I'm not going to hell. I can't. The church won't let me because I took Jesus into my heart when I was eight." "Big damn deal. You've done plenty to blow the contract since then." "Nope. My mother told me that if you ever sincerely take Jesus into your heart, you can't be lost. And I took him in, so I'm home free." "Shee-it. That's the stupidest thing I ever heard." "Could be, but I got it made either way." "Go to hell." Randy flipped him the bird. "Just go to hell."

Some interim Randy. Not going to church, not sure he wouldn't be forced to go back. Gripping a random evangelist pamphlet. "Where will you be in a hundred years?" Randy threw it away before he finished the first page. But that night, alone in his room, light out, wind banging a tree branch against his window, he thought about a hundred years. Dying came back to him. He wanted to go sleep in the guest room near his parents' bedroom, but he didn't want to be smiled at and comforted. Troubled, asleep.

A confident Randy. Intellectual Randy. Reading a poem he'd discovered to an English class. "Christ don't do nothin'. He dead." For a few seconds, silence. Then a friend clapped to break the silence. The teacher's eyes, empty. After class, a girl,

thin and white with long blonde hair--one he'd like to fuck--comes up, says, "You really don't believe that, do you? You can't really believe that." She blinked back a tear at his sneer.

Little Randy. Little recurring Randy. Building a Christmas tree ornament, a string sphere coated with glitter and sequins. The preacher calls the children together for a short prayer. The preacher talks of cheer, gives each of them a small candle, lights it. As they leave, the preacher says, "That candle is the flame of faith. Carry it from the church to your home and light another candle with it. It's the true spirit of Christmas." Randy ran to his parents' car and cradled the candle in his palm. As he got out of the car in front of his house, a wind come up, slithered between his tiny fingers and extinguished the flame. Randy threw down the candle, ran inside to his room, slammed the door and cried.

Room

Her breasts rise and fall, her breath soothes his arm. He looks at her sleeping, shifts his weight on the second-hand mattress. Try to go to sleep, he tells himself. You try, he replies. She smiles. He wonders what she's dreaming. The human condition. Lying with your eyes open while someone sleeps beside you. He rolls over, scratches his neck. He tells himself itches are psychological, tries not to scratch. Feels the overheated room around him, feels its past, its private ghosts. Sees a cameo, a white-haired shape sitting down to supper, talking softly and seriously, someone dying. Sees the servants who pissed their lives away while the white hair dreamed. Sees a small boy hiding. Scared. Of what? He doesn't know. When had the house become an apartment building? Who cared. A parade of floating lives. Drifters, students. If the room was lucky, a prostitute. She sighs beside him, The ghost of a whore sleeps on her breast, lights a fire under her nipple. Quietly calls him quickly. He rapes her in love, swimming through the blackness of the ones who came before.

White Music II

"I feel more now than I did next week."

We're sitting around listening to the police radio, it's way after deadline, and the dispatcher puts out a call. Okay now, he's talking in his usual voice, like he's either three quarters asleep or half dead and he says "District 13, there's some guy down on 322 East Cimarron called in, said something about a three-legged squirrel. How about going down there and checking it out?" Okay now, we're all sitting there just staring at the radio. I mean it sounds like the guy's out of his mind. What the hell, I'm as paranoid as the next guy, but a three-legged squirrel? Now if it had a machine gun or something, okay. But they don't say nothing else. Anyway, about five minutes later the car calls back, says "We're down here on Cimarron and I don't think there's any problem." The radio goes dead for a few seconds and the car comes back on, kind of like an afterthought, and the cop says, "Anyway, the squirrel has four legs." Goddam we laughed. Anyway the squirrel has four legs.

He looks at the telephone, holds the colored wires in his hand, listens hopelessly for a dial tone, mumbles, "Fuckin ma bell. Tear this thing apart with my bare fuckin hands," kicks the wall, drops the wires in a coiling heap, walks away before they can strike.

He had been 17. Leaning against the window, watching for her, wrinkling the glass with his brow, dreaming her driving up, stopping. She didn't. So he gave up and descended to his basement room, lay there the rest of the day straining his ears for a phone that never rang.

Earlier he had been nine. Discovered the dictionary. Finished dirty words, started on funny words. Under topsy turvy, he found "see higgledy piggledy." Under higgledy piggledy, "See willy nilly." Under willy nilly, "see topsy turvy."

I remember driving through southwest Colorado one rainy night, car full of watermelon seeds and sleep-drunk friends. We climbed some obscure pass with some car tailgating us, refusing to pass, brights knifing me in the rear view mirror. A drizzle painted the night, pinning my eyes to the slickness. One of the guys in the back yelled, "Wait, don't do it. What if they've got a gun?" Another, "Goddam it, I don't want to be part of an Easy Rider script." A third, "Sorry, I gotta do it." So I glance back and the damn fool has his pants down around his knees with his ass up against the back window. "Just thought they'd like a little pressed ham." I remember another time, after a fifth of vodka and a couple of beers, watching a guy crawl across the floor to the TV, muttering something about a communist conspiracy and changing channels. But he passed out before he reached the dial.

She sat at the desk, talking to an irate mother on one line, asking her to hold, taking a call for the dean of housing on another line, asking that caller to hold, punching the wrong button, back to the mother, punching off again without holding cutting her off

entirely, answering the intercom discovering she'd leaned on the button herself, missing the third caller completely, which is when she decided to give up and not try again.

Yeah, the police radio's good for some laughs. It's always going. This one time, the dispatcher's talking about basketball practice and telling all the cars how everybody's better be there and warning them someone's going to put a frog down O'Malley's shirt because he rubbed heat in someone else's jock and some other car cuts in yelling something about some code twos, which is polite talk for spades ever since some fool had the bad taste to call one a nigger with an NAACP rep monitoring the frequency. After all, the NAACP has to do something. Anyway it seems this spade's managed to get his car up on the grass and he's running down trees and flower beds and anything else that may or may not move. He's in a green VW and the patrol car calls in and says the guy's trying to get away down Costilla and another car says he can cut him off at Sawatch and they both take off. Well just as the VW shoots by Sawatch on Costilla, some little nigger kid runs out in the road and the car on Sawatch has to swerve to keep from hitting him and its ass end swings out into Costilla and sideswipes the first car. After a few seconds and some static, the first car hits the radio button and mutters, "Goddam it anyway" and the second one kicks in "Goddam code twos" and the green VW gets away.

"Anyone who has time to write on these walls must really be full of shit."

At the Half Moon...

It's still early but the Moon's already dark. Smoke drifts over the faces around me and I hear some cat sayin', "Hey man, I hear you been sayin' bad things about my sister." Cat looks like a biker. Not a good biker. One that scored maybe 63 on the biker test where a hundred's a Hell's Angel and 80's a Reaper. But a biker anyway. Bigger than me. Lots. I'm sure as hell glad it isn't me he's after. "My sister's not a whore man and she's not a pig." He glares at a cat who as far as I can't tell hasn't done anything but sit there drinkin' his beer. I don't think he ever said anything about the biker's sister. I don't even think the biker's got a sister. Hang around the Moon long enough, you learn. "What you got to say man?" The biker leans forward. The other cat shrugs. "I like you're sister. She's a good dancer." The biker grins. "Hey you know somethin'? You're chicken shit. Come on, say it. You're chicken shit." The guy smiles back, kind of weak. "Anything you say. You're chicken shit." It's a good thing bottles don't break easy. If they did, every fight at the Moon would end up with cats lyin' all over the place with their faces cut off. As it is, I go watch the pool game while Tiny the Bouncer straightens things out. The Rhesus Monkey, reigning champ of the Moon pool players, is cleanin' some skinny black cat off the table. The Rhesus Monkey wears a stovepipe hat and has tattoos all up and down his arms. Back on the other side of the Moon, the biker's given up on starting his fight. He settled for pouring a pitcher of beer on the other cat's head. Cat just sits there. Quick learner. Ricki, one of the old dancers who got knocked up and had to quit, wanders by. I look at her. "You know that was a really shitty thing to do," I say to her. Ricki laughs. I like her. "It isn't shitty, it's life," she says. "Come on and you can buy me a beer."

Humpty Dumpty 1...

There are people all over the field but I'm sittin way up in the stands with Cindy. They play the first notes and I recognize the song right away and cheer along with everyone else. The music's beautiful, the guitar's super pure and clear. All the people down below are holdin hands and singin and dancin in circles. You can't hear em but you can tell they're singin. Some freaky dude in a cape's throwin bags of grass to the crowd and I pull Cindy closer and ask her if she wants me to score some. But she says somethin about not wantin any fuzzy green babies so we just listen and watch the circles circlin when all of a sudden some dude sittin just over from us on top of the wall around the top of the seats yells. We look over and see him slip off and vanish over the back so we run up and look over the edge, everybody's doin the same thing, and some dudes have gathered around him down below and there's nothin anyone can do. So we go on back and listen to the music and pretty soon a siren comes and takes him away.

Prelim

So all these mexicans is up there yellin' "pay-roo, pay-roo" in the two buck seats but it don't make no difference cuz their lousy south american champ ain't no match for Williams any way you look at it. Big Cat's an old guy now and maybe he wasn't ever the same after he got shot that time but he still useta be one of the best and he still got a lotta savvy and there ain't no lousy wetback gonna show him anything he can't handle. There's always a lotta niggers at the fights but ya gotta expect that and they're not that bad anyhow, not like the mexicans yellin' "pay-roo, pay-roo" and drivin' ya crazy. They oughta get thrown out so fast. My buddy elbows me and points to a stacked broad in a bikini marchin' around the ring with the round one sign and gives me a wink. The Big Cat's jumpin' up and down in his corner and the pay-roo-vian's just standin' there and ya can tell he's already had it. My buddy catches the beer vendor and buys a couple. The fight starts kinda slow but that's the Cat's style now that he ain't quite so quick that he useta be. He gets in a couple good ones and the pay-roo-vian's flat footed and ya can tell he never had to fight anyone who knew an uppercut from a hook. It keeps goin' like that but ya can tell the Big Cat's just waitin' for the pay-roo-vian to open up and try somethin' cute. The mexicans keep right on yellin' "pay-roo, pay-roo" right up to the end like their guy had a chance. Big Cat just about gets him in the ninth but just when he's got him goin' he covers up and bends over on the ropes and the ref won't make him come out and fight. So it goes to a decision and the Cat wins it split. But the judge don't know what he's talkin' about and he was probably a mexican anyway.

...with the Rhesus Monkey

Some damn how I wind up at the pool table. I like to play now and then but I don't win, or care, very much. I won the table when Jimmy scratched the eight. So I set stakes at nickel a ball and get ready to lose what I made. Who should appear but the Rhesus Monkey, stove pipe hat and all. Doesn't like to play low stakes but he wants to get back on a table and i'm the surest match around. He puts his cue together and smiles. "Luck running good?" I hate cats who have their own cue. I can't even tell whether or not the ones on the wall are balanced. I shake my head. "Hell, man, I'm no good at this." He laughs. I hate his laugh. Just like a Rhesus Monkey. If you've never heard one, you're lucky. He's a benevolent cat, so he lets me break. I sink one right off. Pure luck. He leans against the wall, talking to his check, nice lookin' red-head, not payin' much attention. I make the obligatory easy shot and blow a bank. He pats the chick on the ass, walks up and clears five before he misses. I finish a glass of beer, chalk my cue tip even though I don't really know what good it does, and run three. So we're even. He puts on of his in but the other one's hiding behind mine on the rail and he didn't quite leave the cue where he wanted it. So he misses. I miss. He misses one he should have had. He doesn't much care. I down another beer. I'm a little lopsided. That's probably why my next shot sinks both of my balls and leaves me a clear path to the eight. I sink it. I smile at the Rhesus Monkey and say, "Man, I'm almost ashamed to win that. Guess god loves drunks." The Rhesus Monkey laughs. I give him the table and go to watch the dancers and buy another beer.

Main Event

So Ron runs outta the dressin room and into the ring while everybody but for the mexicans gets up and yells for him and the mexicans are yellin' "brah-zil, brah-zil." It's really stupid to put two a those south americans on the same card cuz it fucks up the crowd. But Ron's gonna make this guy wish he never left the jungle. My buddy's already yellin' for the right cuz he's got a bet that Ron's gonna put him away with the right. It ain't a bad bet but it ain't a good one either cuz Ron can do it either way and it just depends on what he feels like. They announce Ron and everybody stands up again and yells. Ron useta be a con and everybody knows it but he's gone right since they let him out and he's gonna win the crown from Frazier or the mooselem or whoever's got it when they give him his shot. Everyone's scared to fight him after the way he took care a Mathis. Like Foster just ran. A real smart move cuz Ron woulda put him out inside a three. There are some niggers up around the mexicans and it looks like they'd start world war III but for the bell rings to start the fight. Ron just stalks him early and nothin' much happens in the first round cuz that's what Bobby Lewis tells Ron. My buddy's yellin' for the right and the mexicans are yellin' for "brah-zil" and the niggers're just yellin' and the broad's swingin' her butt around with the round three sign. No quicker she gets outta the ring than Ron puts him away but it's a left that does it but nobody cares but for the mexicans who finally shut up awhile everyone else yells for Ron who's a sure thing to be the next champ.

Sly 0

The festival turned out to be a real bummer. Everyone said Sly was gonna show up but he didn't and then the spics took it all over and their shitty neighborhood bands got up on stage and sang their shitty revolutionary songs. Cactus was supposed to play but it was too late and the fuckin marshal got up and said something about curfew and shut the festival down. There were a million people and the busses were crammed and we saw one that looked empty but when we went up to it some fucker with a bull horn says "We don't want any dirty long-haired freaks on this bus," and then laughs this shitty chicago cop laugh. By the time we finally get to the main station, the other busses have quite runnin for the night and we have to just sit there and breathe the bus fumes and try to sleep.

...and the Morning After Blues

Chugging contest did it. Six pitchers between me and Ricki and Pete in twenty, twenty-five minutes. Happens on down night all the time. Should know better by my age. John door swings open. Cat usin the urinal, cat bent over the pot. Cat pissin in the sink. I stumble out the back door. Cat standin beside me yellin, "What good's life if you can't take a piss outside now and then?" I lean against a wall, spray the concrete. Shouldn't have had that last pitcher. Never do it again. Shake off the last drops. Sit down. Ricki lifts me half up. Leads me to her car. She thinks I'm funny when I'm blitzed. She's right. I laugh and lie back on the bouncing seat. Lights spin on the roof. She leads me up some stairs. Unlocks a door. Goes to make coffee. I crawl to the bathroom. Sit down in the shower. Turn on the cold. Ricki. In front of me. Smiling. I manage to say, "Wish th' groanin' would stop." Ricki shakes her head. "It's you, darlin'." She leads me off to bed.

White Music III

"Malthus was sterile."

"Who the hell was Malthus?"

Together, lightning touches. They learn over the capsule, pour out the powder, divide it carefully. Magic gelatin dust entwines their tongues and they wait for the corners to soften, the ceiling to breathe, wait for tiny mountains, atomic spirals. Together, he leans toward her, rests his head on her stomach, feels the pulse of time, tomorrow, the meaning of life in her ribs.

The brilliant idea presented itself the morning after he packed his tent and slept out on the plains wondering whether there were really tarantulas and scorpions circling his sleeping bag. It was the morning before he had to have his term paper finished. The angel of inspiration landed on his shoulder and whispered. So the next morning he bought a mirror, cracked it, signed the frame, and turned it in to his professor, who looked at it, laughed, and flunked him.

When we were little kids we decided that if a Martian came to Earth, he'd think cars were the main animal. We looked around at all the streets and said they were really sidewalks and garages were really houses and people's houses were refrigerators where the cars stored their food until they had to move. Or maybe houses for pets. We decided the Martins would think that cars just had weird habits. Once we saw a giant flying creature like a pteranadon. We know about pteranadons because there were plastic ones in our dinosaur sets. We were standing around outside the bowling alley when we saw this giant shadow. We looked up and there it was, a giant flying creature with an enormous set of wings. The big kids told us it was a bird or bat, but we knew better.

It's New Year's Eve and the Sugar Bowl's at halftime. The score's way out of reach and the commercials are mostly over and the band's marching out onto the field. He grabs another beer and lies back on the couch. People dance between him and the TV and there's either a radio or a record player playing "Crocodile Rock" and one of Jackie's toasting next year *i remember when rock was young* or maybe this year and he watches the parade the giant marching band *never had me a better time* crosses the 50 yard line and the caravan strikes deeper into the orient the band's mascot is a purple dragon with about a hundred feet *but the biggest kick I ever got* and two of the feet get tangled up and the dragon tumbles down into a pit where sold back *and i guess i never will* to the man with the beer.

Hell, I didn't really believe cars were the dominant form of life on the planet even though the concept holds a certain rustic charm. What I did believe was that my car was my best leverage with my mom. After my dad died, she got pretty tight about my bringin' chicks home with me. She told me it was a bad example for my little sister. Hell, my little sister was just a year younger than me and she was takin' it

before I was gettin' it and if my old lady didn't know she was the only one around. But I just yelled back at her and told her if she didn't want me takin' the chicks to my room I'd be glad to drive them somewhere and fuck them in the backseat of my car, which I'd bought with the bread I made workin' for the city mowin' parks over the summer. I'm not sure whether it was the language or the idea that bothered her most, but it always shut her up.

Jack thumbtacked a pin-up to the conspicuously labeled "Ugly Girl Board" and stood back. "Yep," he told Mel with a satisfied nod, "the ugliest chick of all time. Worst tits, flabbiest stomach, ugliest face." He bowed to the board and walked to the bathroom for a drink of water. Wiping his moustache on his shirt tail, he turned to the mirror, smiled crookedly, and kissed the glass. "You on the other hand..." He bowed again. "...are one hot stud."

He told himself he was through with purple midnight after the speedie comedowns kept him awake for two days. So he swallowed a tab of orange sunshine and sat down to play cards with the guys. Time stopped. He shoved someone out of the way, cracks his elbow against a wavering glass door, walked through the sands of eternity, dunes drift in the street concentric and cool and he may feel cramps and looked down at his side where there will have been skin, his neck which has been solid even in the furnace, clung to the grass and feels the hurricane blew past the truck treading water and he thinks hard hard hard and all he will hear was the word wallet reverberates in his mind a word unheard unthought unspoken and broken and finally his flesh decayed in strips, the maggots pour from his nose and giggling over his bile he stumbled, six hours from the start, to a suburban porch and lay there til a dog barking in the dawn woke him up.

"I'm not drunk as long as I can hold onto a blade of grass to keep from falling off the face of the earth."

Overparked

We couldn't remember where we'd parked. We remembered a building and we thought we remembered an underground lot. We were pretty sure we remembered the city and we were all but certain we remembered the car. So we found elevators. Three of them, side by side in the lobby. We pushed all of the buttons. One of the doors opened and we stepped in beside a chicano bellboy. We pressed the button for the basement. He pressed for the second floor. We rode to the second floor and he got off. We pressed for the basement again and the elevator went to the fourth floor. When it got there, whoever rang was gone. So we rode back to the second floor. The chicano bellboy got back on and we road to the sixth floor, then back to the lobby again. The elevator stopped. We got off and decided to try another one. We pressed the buttons and another door opened. We got on and rode to the sixth floor and picked up the bellboy. He went back to the second floor and the elevator went back to the fourth floor and we decided to try the stairs. The chicano bellboy, his name was Carlos, passed us going down. Down one flight (closer to the car) we found a locked fire exit. Down another flight (even with the car), another locked exit. Down a third flight (the car now in ascension) we found a brown brick wall. Brownly, the bellboy smiled.

Manifesto

"I am the Mad Emperor of Colorado Springs. I am the milky way. My arms spiral away from the galactic core near my heart. Some of the stars are at my fingertips near the skin but most are in my chest. Earth is a bone at my elbow, a tiny tiny bone. The cosmic egg theory explains it all. We're on the edge of my art heading out. There's no limit to where the stars can be. There's just a limit to where they are."

Someone enters the room. Someone who drives a black volkswagen with a white fender. Evil.

You don't have a wonderbug. Your bug can't be a wonderbug because mine was the only true wonderbug and it died and has gone to the grand wizard of parts. My wonderbug transcended individuality on the glorious day of the immaculate redistribution. Its essence passed on to thousands of bugs throughout the world and each of them will die for redistribution and through their parts will imbue more generations of bugs without end with the essence of the one grand original wonderbug. Your bug is chained to individuality. A victim of miscegenation. Spade with a honky's knee.

Someone says it's perfect and someone shouts that wasn't the question. Good.

You ask about the dwarves. Without dwarves there would have been no revolutions. When Joseph went down into Egypt, he found the court in the control of Pharaoh's advisors, the dwarves who plotted slavery and freedom and finally overthrew the old gods. The young Luther and his friends killed a dwarf and froze him as a joke. But when Luther was thrown from his horse by a bolt of lightning he saw the dwarf's face exhorting him to redeem his sins by reforming the church. The Latin revolutionaries fathered countless children by dwarves. Most glorious of all was the yellow regiment of Bolshevik dwarves who won the decisive battle in 1917. And now we have the Harlem Dwarf Panthers. After them, there will be no more.

"Come dwarves, sweep up my cape, the Emperor must sleep."

White Music IV

"What's a piece of pussy as opposed to cosmic death?"

Virginpure, guiding his goddess over the interstate. Pale light, not quite fire, smoothing the curves, the cart. She drapes herself over him, he talks about the moon, soft vampires, strange messengers in reflected light. Throbbing, he drives, she sleeps.

My road, he dreams, narrowing behind the mountains, beside the rivers. My road dropping back past the decaying gardens into unmapped forests. My road vanishing like a boulder left behind by the last glacier. My road, he dreams, as a glow rises over the horizon. My city, destroyed.

When we were in junior high, we spent a lot of time dialing random numbers on the phone. Or we'd call up a fat kid, ask him what his favorite cereal was. He said rice krispies, we said fat flakes. Got some old lady and sang *i wish i was an oscar mayer wiener that is what i'd truly like to beee---eee---eee cuz if i was an oscar mayer wiener everyone would be in love with me*. She actually laughed. Called up mr. pigg, asked him if he felt like a cannibal at breakfast. He said "officer, it's another one." Held a survey at 2 in the morning, called people and asked if their phone had rung. Most of them said yes.

Dead of winter. Monarch Pass. 11,000 feet, most of it straight down. A sign. "Beware of trucks out of control." Rock spires, blood-stained at sunset. A patch of ice spins his VW, he thinks of his nightclub gig, Carol, the long way down, see the sign go still beyond his circles. Pulls out of the skid and swears.

You know there's only one road in the world. You know somebody has to hustle to keep it in front of you, but you're positive there's only one. Anyway, if you don't have a picture of it, it isn't real. A picture captures the essence. You aren't really really without a picture, but a picture shows you you've lost your soul. So drive real careful, pal, drive real slow.

Windy autumn ghosts blow screaming over the highway. Gravel hills torture the wind. Jet streams buffet the cars. He clinches his fingers on the steering wheel, hears the shadow of the semi closing in, strains to control the path, sweats to frustrate the wind.

One of the last times I was ever a little kid. Riding my bicycle around a corner, barefoot. Cutting it low, you got more speed that way, but my toe caught between the pedal and the asphalt, shattering the nail. The next day, sleepless from the throbbing, my toe an egg in a broken shell, I sat in the doctor's office and watched a hot needle bore into my toe, releasing a spout of cold blood.

"This grafitti isn't bad."

"Could be better."

"Learn to spell graffitti."

Third Movement

--"And I dreamed I was flying."
--Paul Simon

Vacantation

So there you are driving toward the beginning of the road. Even though your mind realizes the beginning is too far away and even though your mind realizes that even if you could reach the beginning it would do you no good, you drive. You know it's a highway to nowhere. But today's Tuesday. You never listen to reason on Tuesday. You only drive.

The cause of it all. I'm not sure why you want to know. *They*, yeah the same cats *you* mean when you say they, abolished cause a long time ago. Or at least they will. Though if this works out right there will be causes again. Then where will we stop the car?

Before you can know the cause, even admitting there is such a thing you've got to discover what you think was caused. Oh, you could be told, but we, both of us, know better. Don't we? Hey man, don't we?

James James Douglas (and now we really start) who had long since stopped hating his mother for his name, went down to the edge of the town with anyone else but me. Which was strictly against orders. But that was part for the course (45 if you shoot nine). And when he was down at the edge of the town with anyone else but me, he discovered rhythm. (I think.) Which upset things back at the base to no end.

For instance, I can remember, don't argue four or five years ago The dishes were supposed to be done for the feast of fools. (We have a lot of clever officers, but they feed us well.) The only way to get the dishes done was for the dishwasher to do them. (You at least have the comfort of knowing some things are more or less the same. Which also leaves them more or less different. What the hell, ignore that.) But the dishwasher had found another amusement. He sat on a lot in the middle of the compound, a spoon in each hand, beating out a pattern and grunting inarticulately from time to time. Thanks a lot, James James Douglas.

That was a long time before yesterday. (When James James Douglas went down to the edge of the town with anyone else but me.) It just goes to show you what kind of things happen. Always.

And now James James Douglas has escaped. That's why you're driving toward the beginning of the road. I promise. If we can get back far enough that way we can just kind of ride the storm and make sure he isn't stuck somewhere between then and now. If he's meandered off in the other direction, we're sure to spot him anyway in the normal course of getting from there to here. Which you can't do. Or something like that.

You want to know about the edge of the town? She always said that was the main thing. How could we expect you to understand?

Yeah, except you know everything we do.

My mother (or was she his?) haunted us with the edge of the town. We knew she was only reading.

One night, I think maybe tomorrow, I did nothing but cry.

James James Douglas is already there. I saw him go by the end of the town and start vanishing slowly. Don't tell anyone I know. If you do they'll know I broke the dishwasher's spoons. James James Douglas is already there.

It was his mother. She strokes his hair.

And now I can never go down to the edge of the town, never. I can never go down with anyone else but me. I can hear her voice reading. I'm already there?

TKO

He stood on the corner watchin the cars pass by and spat against the side of the building before entering the bar. "Sons of bitches. All of them. Every fucking one." He motioned to the bartender. "Give a whiskey, whatever's in the well, straight.." The bartender hurried the shot glass to him and scooped up the pile of coins. He downed the drink in one swallow and tilted his head back to feel the liquid burning his throat. "Yeah, at least there's whiskey. Bastards." He broke back into the night and walked down the street, taking in the pawn shop windows before stopping in front of a run-down cinema showing 16 millimeter stag flicks.

He turned into an alley, dark and straight and dangerous, and stopped in the back entrance of a closed barber shop advertising afro styles. He studied the posters, then rammed his fist into the door, spat again and smeared the saliva with his sleeve. He walked on down the alley and came out in front of a nightclub.

There were ten or fifteen men, black, milling about, leaning on the walls. One of the moved toward him slowly.

"What you doin?"

He glowered and spat against the wall, saying nothing.

"I said what you doin, white boy."

"Fuck it, man."

"I don't think I understood you. Want to repeat that?"

"Fuck you man."

"That ain't healthy. You want to say you're sorry?"

"I said fuck you. Now leave me alone."

The black, about his height and weight, grabbed him by the shirt collar and pushed him against the wall. The white's arm whipped out, catching the black across the face. The black recoiled a step, smiled, laughed.

"That's how it's going to be?"

They squared off and a few of the watchers made motions toward the white, but the black held up his hand. "I got him brothers."

The black's hand darted out and struck the white, who stood his ground. The white countered with a pair of jabs off the black's protecting arms. For a few minutes, closer to thirty seconds, the two parried until the black caught the white hard, staggering him back.

"Nigger."

"Now you know better." An expectant murmur ran through the watchers.

The black smiled, struck. The white dropped his defenses. The black hit, the white fell. The black pulled him up, pinned his arms against the wall.

"Now. You want to apologize?"

"Fuck you nigger."

Another fist. The white crumpled. The black leaned close and repeated, "You want to apologize. No question. Fact. There ain't no white boy coming round here talking impolite." Thoughtfully, "no, you want to apologize."

"The man." A voice from the side of the crowd. The watchers melted away. A police car screeched around the corner and came to a stop. The blacks, inscrutable, watched.

When the Rains Come

City thunderstorms batter the sky every afternoon. Torrents of rain dampen the smoke, sink through the smog. By the 22nd floor they vanish, dissolved by the heat, absorbed by the dust.

Gene yawns, sits on the stoop blowing his harmonic, hitting most of the right notes. Sixteen, he has always lived on the 19th floor. Sometimes he sells ice cream. Today he sweats and blows the blues. Up above, the sun has gone behind a cloud, but the heat still clings to the sidewalks. A radio blares 102 degrees. Gene grimaces. His harmonica crawls over an old lady struggling with her shopping bag.

While the largest storm in many years rages overhead.

A girl wanders down the street, hears his harmonica. She gives up on finding the club that was advertising for dancers. She can wait another day. Dancing is the only steady work left. She brushes her long hair back from her face, feels the strands sticking together in the heat, ensnaring the dust. She feels her thighs, thick with sweat. And his harmonica crawls over her, brings her eyes to his stoop.

While a downdraft catches stray raindrops, sweeps them towards earth, pounds them into unyielding smog.

She leans against the railing, meeting his eyes. Tired, he says only, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a town like this?" They laugh. Gene has fallen in love with cliches, is making them into an art form. She's just tired.

While the storm roars on, the final raindrops from the downdraft lose their momentum, float past the 21st floor, brush the brick walls and turn to steam.

Two days later: She will dance naked on the frayed felt of a pool table turned pedestal. He will blow a little slower, as entropy discovers harmonicas. Above, it will rain.

Spectator

Across the park (they sit on the empty bleachers next to the baseball diamond, the diamond empty because diamonds are always empty at night) a young man runs. He clutches a bag and runs through the light of a street lamp. Across the park (they watch because the diamond is always empty but the outfield is vast) shoots another form shouting something. On the street, a police car screeches to a stop, red light pulsing. Across the diamond (they watch because the young man is now positioned deep in the hole at shortstop, still holding the bag and they know he'll never be able to cover the bag on a steal) the cop sprints and shouts for the young man to stop. Across the diamond (they sit and think about the fact that the diamond's no longer empty, that the young man has neat sideburns, a pleasant face, looks like the captain of the team) the cop fires a shot. Across the park (they leave because the game's over, they can read the box score in tomorrow morning's paper) the bag fills with blood.

Vagabond

A reporter, I report. The press box so comfortable, but why am I strapping on goggles, climbing into a balloon, waving goodbye to a thick steak, a cool beer, a scent of tulips. A shadow play? A melodrama! I'm a balloon jockey, my banner sapphire on emerald, a blazon for the sun. The finish line a gust away. A giggle. I nod assent. We're off, glide, I've won! Big money, fame.

The Cosmodemonic Handicap Stakes. Having proven my rapport with the sky, I'm ready for the big time. No mistakes. A gaggle of shadows interview me and I explain how I mellowed the sun. Confident, I strap on my goggles. The Old Man of the Races laughs. "Didn't they tell you? Your glasses don't work at night. They're just glazes. You missed the classes, kid. This is the big time, the real big time, the night races. They give daytime races to rookies. But it's fine, the world looks a lot better when you can't see it too clearly. You won't make a cent, but you'll like it. Rookies always do." They're off, rip apart, he's won. The big monkey. Shame.

I float as sent, my foggy eyes pinned to a vagrant sky.

It

George wouldn't go back to his room. Bad enough right there. He also, ultimate sin, wouldn't let anybody in the dorm wing sleep. He just sat there in the hall caterwauling some drinking song about a student with a big wang and the duchess and god knows what else.

As usual, it was up to Jim to settle things into some relatively subdued form of chaos. He rolled over, got out of bed and pulled on his pants. George had moved on to the bloody big dingle dangle.

"Hey, what's with George," Jim asked the world at large. As usual, a few guys were hanging out in the hall around the floor lounge.

Someone answered, "think it's some yellow double dome, something like that. Took it six hours ago, but I'm pretty sure he was already drinking."

Jim nodded, George sang.

"George."

"Sahib, master, savior?"

"Come on, you're keeping everyone awake."

"His pants began to bulge a bit, his balls began to ache." Con gusto.

"How about coming into my room and having a shot of Johnny Walker Red and then going to bed?"

"Think I can't recognize a ploy? An insidious ploy. See them a mile away."

One of those nights. Great. Last time he'd gotten George back to his room by dragging out a mirror and getting him interested in walking around looking at the ceiling instead of the floor. He'd walked him right into the room. Wouldn't work again.

"Hey!" Jim pointed at the floor. "My god, look at that!"

George stared. "Yeah, wow."

"What do you think it is? There it goes. Let's follow it."

"Okay, okay, where do you think it's going?"

"Only one way to find out." Jim took a few steps and motioned for George to follow.

A door opened and Pete peered out. "What's the deal?"

"Quiet," said Jim, pointing. "George and me are following it."

"Ah," Pete withdrew, nodding.

They turned the corner and started down the stairs. "There it goes, man, it's really taking the stairs fast." Jim sped up. "God, I've never seen anything like it."

"Me either, man, me either."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, hesitated and took off for the main lobby where some guys from 3 West were sitting around a table playing bridge.

"Watch it, George, don't let it get away."

"What's goin' on?" asked North.

"Probably just the arbiter of morals making his rounds," replied West. South and East grinned.

Jim and George circled the room and headed back up the stairs. "It's speeding up," shouted Jim as they exited back into the hallway. "There it is. Get it!"

Jim leapt towards a door, and opened it. "Get it, it's right over there!"
George took a few more steps, into his room. Jim shut the door.
"Good night, George. Good night, It."

Saffron

Vacation over, he dropped his pack on the dorm floor, saying:

("I have discovered the real people and we are not them.")

She was a morning that had lost its way.

"For we are not the people god created on the sixth day, the people god created on the fifth day, the people god created on the fourth third second first day. We are the people god created on the seventh day, in his sleep, the people who live as they were created, part of the divine dream."

Retrospect says she was a statue.

"But the divine dream can be better than the human dream because god is neither a tragic poet nor a comic poet, god is no poet at all, his is unconcerned with rhyme or meter and he maintains only a rough semblance of rhythm, just enough to maintain our breath nowhere near enough to maintain a fire or even to feed a flame."

She was a melody, minor keyed and melting.

"I have discovered the real people and we are not them.")

Saying: "What say we buy some beer?"

Vestibule

Statue of the Virgin Mary guardian of graves, even then you devoured my prayers.
We knelt in your sight, running our hands through the tattered money, green ink
staining our fingers, soft as spit. Our leaders shouting, "Take fives and tens. The
government supports fives and tens. Fives and tens only, fives and tens." My hands,
disciplined, grabbing. My mind opaque to your eyes.

Virgin Mother of God, you knew. We craved the other bills, knew the tatters faded to
insignificance behind the government seal. While the leaders cried "Fives! Tens!"
our hands whispered "Sevens, threes."

I love you sweet Virgin, sister of the Spirit. I loved you then. When Jose and
Ramirez, berets swept off in a spiral wind, stumbled bareheaded into the cavern.

Repetitious,
a voice

"Go within.

"For Jesus.

"For me."

They did not return. You smiled.

O stone Virgin, chaste beyond love. O you who cause the moon to pass through its
sweet cycle while I stand unblinking. The others have entered, the cause is lost.
Atrophied, I stand before the shield, gazing, gazing, ever gazing. Seeking God's
untainted orgy, watching my comrades breathe.

Tumbling Dice

It's 3:15 here at KOLD, the middle of what we call deepest night. On the down side now so all you night people be headin home soon. Want you make sure and drive real careful.

Merciless. He brakes on rain-drenched pavement. She sits beside him, staring straight ahead. The last whiskey sour presses down on his tongue.

When I get weary, I go down gamblin'

Tryin to get...

He pulls over, rolls down the window. Fresh pine smell.

Mick Jagger leers in London.

Don't you know the deuces are wild

Baby, I'll sing

You got to rooo--oh--oll me

Roll me the tumblin dice

He glances over. Her eyelids, closed. On her lip, a speck. It would be sweet, like thick tea. Or blood. He laughs at himself. A speck. Useless, adhesive. He shakes her shoulder.

You can be my partner in crime

Call me the tumblin dice

"Where would you like to go?" Words. She shifts, pulls her sweater over her head, lets it drop to the floor, leading his eyes, hiding, unsmiling.

Call me the tumblin dice

You got to call me the tumblin dice

Roll me the tumblin dice

His palms sweat in his pockets. She looks at him quickly, too quickly for him to catch her eyes.

You got to roll me

You got to roll me

You got to roll me

No more words. Only she avoids his eyes. Mick Jagger laughs three times and goes to sleep.

Virulens

Feathered robe awhirl, he dances. Maraccas rattle his black and red mask, probably his face. With anarchists the distinctions don't matter. He's been dancing all night, ever since the mushroom bombing of the Chinese. He lacks the ability to distinguish the guilty from the powerless, so he dances here. Morning breaks unchanged. He holds a figuring, a tiny doll, feathered, masked. From the kitchen, a summons. The water faucet dry. Black and red laughter. A mushroom constricts the hose, drinks its dryness. Poison! It must be poison or I couldn't touch it. My throat parched, my tongue distended. Rattling laughter. Only the doll remains, perched motionless, wise, ancient. Laughter, laughter. I dive, catching a whirlwind. Vice-like, my fingers crush its head. It is an anachronism, no, an anarchist. An arch angel come for our water. Steel springs exploded, its skull expands. Poised on the ground where the angel danced, I pray. "The poison?" "There is none, there never was. A kachina, nothing more." And nothing more.

No Dream

You prop your feet against your suitcase, sit on the bench in the bus station, hearing. Two old negroes, bent, sit in the station, talking.

"Did that, that thing you was tellin me about ever work out?" Stained finger, a cigarette.

"What thing that, man?" White bristle on a cracked brown face.

"You know, you said you seed somethin, a premonition, like that."

"Oh yeah, my dream. Can't tell yet. Works like that."

"Well I was wondering cuz this other cat I know out California, he had this dream where he see a whole lotta money, like about 80 thousand dollars. Well for a long time, he didn't have no idea." Tongue wetting the cigarette paper. Tobacco flakes. "But he had this house right out by that new airport they been talkin about and they buy up all the land, he got 100 thousand for it." Match flare, thumb to mouth. "That's what his dream mean."

"Yeah? Well mine ain't done nothin' yet."

"You know that Stratmoor cat they name everything round here for? Heard he was up in the mountains, long time back, and he ain't had no luck. He was lookin for gold and he been up there a few years and didn't have no kinda luck. Then one night he dream where the gold was and he didn't tell nobody nothin till he went on up there next day and got it all."

"You ever know that cat?"

"No, but my pappy know Penrose. Followed him around and took him home when he got drunk. He was suppose to leave pappy and two other cats somethin but he died and they didn't get nothin."

"I guess that was before your time."

"Yeah, yeah." Grey smoke.

"Hear em say there still gold up there."

"Yeah, hear they may start diggin it out again. Hell, all I know's I never had no dream about no money. But this other cat back in St. Looey..."

They make the call for Lincoln. You get up, grab your suitcase, leave the two old negroes talking.

Vorlesung

Late now in the day, alone, looking for a place to build a bar beside the river. The fuckin river which keeps ruining all my sites. I had it planned once, had my spot picked out. Had it all figured out. I forgot about the river. Wiped out the foundation. Zap. Blotto.

My father, there, sits looking across the river. Thinks he sees open spaces, places we could forget about our bar and build a baseball diamond. He's been sitting there a hell of a long time. I think the only time I sat that long in one place was when I was a little kid looking for pictures in the clouds. How's that for symbolism? The old man's gone senile.

But probably not as senile as his father, I guess that'd be my gramp, over there on the other side. He doesn't speak English so good, still pronounces everything German. I've never really been sure what he was saying, but it's the same thing over and over. Someone threw the switch and went to lunch. He's stuck on a side track.

Behind my gramp over there, there's a real passel of even older men. Ancestors no doubt. I forget whether they get larger or smaller. Perspective never meant much to me. Anyway, there's a lot of them. I don't even try to understand their fuckin gibberish.

My father takes a step on the straw bridge above the river. That bridge is probably fuckin up another one of my bar sites. My old man walks slowly to midstream and jumps to the other side. I guess he made it. Maybe.

I guess I had to try. This sure as hell isn't a surprise. Each strand of straw groans under me, shrinks into the current. My feet are soaked. Hell, I expected that. No real point in doing this anyway. I slip off into the stream and begin to sink, but their hands pull me in.

The other side of the river. They should be speaking German here, things should be different.

I smile, unvoiced, in a distant land.

Coda

Bird Lives

Their footsteps follow them down the tunnel, echoing not quite in unison. They'd come here many times before. They might not come again.

"Take care." The white one stops, scrapes his heel on broken glass and grime. "I'll miss you."

They usually didn't talk much. Tonight's almost special.

"Yeah, well..." The black one's voice trails away. He looks at the light shadowing the far end of the tunnel. "Yeah. I just wish I could leave this place somethin to remember me by."

A car rattles past overhead. The white half-smiles. "Write somethin. Back in the fifties, they had trouble with cats scribblin 'bird lives' on walls. Jazz cat."

No smile answers. "Yeah but if you write on walls, the city comes and scrapes it away."

He pulls his knife. His friend watching, he carves his words in stone.

Colorado Springs, 1973