CHIEFFET, GEORGE LAWERENCE. Three Stories. (1968)
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This thesis consists of three short stories, the titles of which are: "Nothing Like It In The World," "Looking Up To The Dead," and "Who U R." These stories are about people who are pressed into becoming heroes or scapegoats, and who deal with the vastness, apparent chaos and infinite forces of the world in different ways. Sometimes they have confronted God, and usually the action is violent because these people are moved to respond out of terror. They are not thinking people and their actions emanate from the most visceral, primeval base of their intellect.

# THREE STORIES

by

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## INTRODUCTION

The stories contained here represent most of what I have learned of the craft while a student at the University of North Carolina. Although they are presented in a finished form, I do not preclude the possibility that they may yet undergo another series of revisions. Although in shaping and structure these pieces do not always adhere to traditional form, their basic structure is formal rather than experimental. If there is any goal that I aim for other than excellence, it is to make sense out of experience, and therefore what is depicted here, hopefully resolves into a meaningful whole. As an apprentice writer, I have concentrated primarily on craftsmanship, the very basic obligation of a writer, to learn how to write sentences.

# NOTHING LIKE IT IN THE WORLD

## I

When he was a boy his father once said, "They writ that what you do to the least of these you do to me." Then he said, "What we done to ourselves we done to him."

"Who said that?" the boy asked.

The Father snorted, and screwed his face down so that it leaned over the boy's face. "The Lord said the first part and I said the second," he said.

## II

Years later soon after returning from Maine, Denny's old man Tom Cleaver, converted the run-down stable to a chicken coop, and although it took only a day's work - new tarpaper on the roof, some hammering and sawing for roosts, it wasn't a good idea because the giant Long Island Expressway now ran behind their property. Twelve wheelers roared by before dawn each day and their loud, terrible deisel engines made the chickens half crazy. They didn't lay. They didn't feed, and each morning when Old Cleaver came home from work he went down to the coop and sorted the dead from the pile up, hung them by their feet on the wire

fence that divided the fragment of pasture from the gravel road bed the expressway had been built on. Being a practical man, old Cleaver would pluck the feathers, saving them in feed sacks to sell to the old Shinnecock Indian who made them into headdresses to sell to tourists on Fire Island.

Denny Cleaver woke each morning at dawn to work at the gas station, and every morning the first thing he saw out his window were the chickens hanging by their legs, and the old man squatting on an egg basket wearing an old battered ten-gallon stetson set grimly over his brow, a leather vest and rawhide britches, as he clipped chicken feathers with a pair of wool shears. Unlike everyone else, Denny Cleaver believed there was a God. He believed in Him because he had once seen Him, and He didn't look at all like his father said.

Nothing had changed this morning. Out the window Denny saw a thick gray cloud blot the sun, and every so often as if the sun gathered strength, a bolt of light rammed through the cloud, and for an instant gravel, fence wire, gutter drains, beads of raw dew on the grass and the window itself turned orange gold. A steady rumble of Long Island Expressway traffic died in his head, and then the sun went in again. As the traffic began, Denny's mysterious headache started somewhere at the top of his head and shot downward through the brain into the neck vertabrae and the base of his skull.

He thought it had something to do with what he'd seen. The eye-doctor called it a symptom.

When the headache subsided, he rolled from bed and zipped on his garage coveralls over his underwear. It was too hot to put clothes on under them. They smelled enough like the garage to make him think he was already there.

When he got outside, his father was piling the plucked chickens into a wheelbarrow to dump them into the pit he'd dug. A clot of sunlight burnt through a strip of full-leafed dogwood that stood in a thin row beside the coop. On the tallest one roosted fat gray pigeons - their hooded beaks and scaley claws like reptilian predators, as they waited to steal corn from the chicken feeders. Denny recognized them at once as being Benson Bardazak's.

The old man swung the sack of feathers over his shoulder. "Those birds are gonna spread the New York disease," he said. "I'm shooten them in the afternoon, or before."

Denny stepped around the wheelbarrow and headed for the Ford parked behind the house in a space reserved for it beside the coop. As he started to go, the old man snorted and spat. "You can't take the car today," he said.

Denny stopped and turned to face the old man directly. He was hardly a shadow's length away if there had been a shadow, and he stared into the top of his wide hat, expecting

a quick movement from the old man who might do anything. The old man just looked at him soberly. "I got a job as the Sheriff at Nunley's Playland," he said, "And momma's gonna drive me down, but you keep to yourself walking with those rapists on the loose."

III

Denny's old man had once been a rodeo cowboy. Now he was a grill man at Meridian Diner - an old quonset dome place on the turnpike which served truckmen a blue plate special for ninety-five cents. Working the late shift there, he said, gave him time to take care of his three horses. Then he sold the horses. When he had the stable, he used to make Denny shovel the manure until Denny got big and stopped doing what he was told. After selling the horses, a year ago, the old man had packed his family, Denny, his younger brother Bo, and the girls, Texas, Abilene and Cory, to Maine, where they lived for almost a year. Denny hated living there so much, maybe worse than shovelling horse manure, that he ran away from home and came back to the Long Island, where he had grown up.

Coming back, he saw the change. The Long Island Expressway had been cut through his backyard through the cabbage and

potato fields like a big break in the world. Standing on top of Benson Bardazak's pigeon coop, he could see the asphalt funneled into the haze; it reminded him of the great wall of China. That was when he got the idea to turn the old house into a filling station. The single idea stuck like a lone thorn in the roof of his skull. He couldn't get rid of it - all those cars, their headlights strung like six string bracelets and necklaces of pearl and ruby in the night.

His old man came back nine months later and sold feathers, and took back the house. He came back in April still wearing a mackinaw in the Long Island spring because change came slowly to him, and he told Denny to get a job. At seventeen Denny didn't want to do anything but find girls. That was the reason he'd left Maine. The girls he met there had thick ankles and square shoulders. They made him sick. Getting back to the island meant a lot to him; he figured it was about the third most important thing that he ever did.

The most important thing was his weight-lifting. He had been doing it since the old man broke his nose. The old man had been big and tough then, with a scowl for everyone. He had a big brushwire mustache and he wore a buckskin shirt left over from his rodeo days. In those days when something went wrong, he'd take it out on Denny. He hadn't yet got used to the idea that his mistakes were his own. He had

been a man for a long time before his mistakes caught up with him. So he beat Denny at least twice a week and sometimes more than that. He'd beat him in the living room with his mother and sisters crying, in the bathroom with the door locked, in the front yard with the neighborhood boys, including Bo, watching and snickering behind the hedge. For Denny it wasn't the beatings that got to him as much as the humiliation, and one day he hit the old man back - a well-aimed punch in the groin. Of course, the old man just got madder, and goaded by the fence-watchers, he kicked Denny down the steps and broke his nose.

Although Denny feared his old man then, there was nothing quite like seeing him dressed in his cowboy clothes, his ten gallon hat, which had been white and was now gray, and with his two sixguns shoot out the centers of playing cards he tacked on the trees. Or on Sunday afternoons ride his big bay stallion Juan down the center of the road with Denny on his lap. Riding down the center as if to challenge traffic coming both ways. Riding with him, the boy thought it was better than appearing in ten rodeos. There was nothing like it in the world.

When Denny got out of the hospital, he worked with weights every day. His basement was an armory of dumb-bells and bar-bells and Indian pins. Solid muscle was good to have

tight on the bone. Strength was courage, he thought, using his old man as the example - the more strength, the more courage. Power and speed would make him. Each day, lathering in a grim sweat, he took his workout in the musky basement. Pull-ups, chin-ups and weights. Each day doing the tension exercise that Hitler's Storm Troopers had done, he felt the blood beat through his heart. Dreaming as he worked out in the half-sartori of shut eyes and pain, he built a man - jackboots and leather, pistols and chrome - the Storm Trooper he would resemble - perhaps in his inaccurate imagination more like a State Cop, but a military trooper nevertheless. Yet even as he created this vision, the driving blood told him that one day he would, he must, be able to destroy his image. In some way he knew that was what God was all about.

Bozeman, his younger brother, named after the town in which his father won his last rodeo in 1948, liked science better than God. He had an arsenal of rockets made from $CO_2$ cartridges and talked about the H bomb. If Denny bullied him, he threatened him with a squadron of rockets. But one day beside the cistern, Denny got his chance to fight him man for man. On the slick, loose gravel that was poor footing, Bo slipped or Denny pushed him, Denny was never sure which. The brother fell in the deep basin, trapped in the jagged stones and the black radiant water, and screamed for

help. Denny wouldn't or couldn't jump to save him. Let's see science help him now, he thought. But he was going to save him, except that George Melrose, the local hero just happened by, heard the screams and made the rescue before Denny even took off his shoes.

Looking down into that forbidding pit, Denny saw something like he thought heaven might be - a flash on the water. The brother had fallen straight down the precipice, into the dark narrow strait. The roar of water was like an infinite wind, like the screaming wind on the Long Island Expressway. Denny saw the brother's breath being sucked away, his gasps echoing painfully up to where he watched. Numb, he watched George Melrose, merely a white head, a pearl on the heavenly flash, pull the boy up, hoist him to one shoulder and climb therocks. The people who had come from nowhere were cheering. The roar like the roar of wind filled his head. George Melrose brought the boy out into the glare of daylight; and the boy, whiter than chalk, and naked, looked like an infant again. Although his brother was safe, Denny Cleaver did not stop looking at the bottom of the cistern. His mind blotted out all shapes but one - the one pinpoint in a swirling pool, the silver vision at the bottom of the well where he had seen the face of God.

V

He just had to tell them about his old man's new job whether they believed him or not. It never mattered whether the crowd at Durfee's gas station believed him as long as they listened. It never mattered whether he told the truth.

When he got there, he began telling everybody about his old man becoming a kiddy-park cowboy. Eddie the mechanic couldn't give a damn. He changed into his rubber gloves that he kept on the shelf beside tins of crankcase oil, and began to work on the timing of his candy-blue Corvette. He never looked up except to spit. The others, however, three skinny fifteen year old gas pump attendants, listened because they knew Denny'd get on their backs if they didn't.

Denny was big. The weight-lifting had proportioned his shoulders, and his tough face with the flat, twice-broken nose made him look mean. Sitting outside in front of the tiny office in canvas beach chairs, their combat boots up on ten gallon cans, they listened or pretended to listen, smoked and ate their lunch. It was lunch for them since they'd been on since four A.M., so they sat back, sweat drenched, moons of sweat on the armpits of their coveralls, black flies buzzing the chewed ends of their liverwurst sandwiches. The heat coming off the grit and macadam would go through the thick crepe soles of their boots.

Nobody wanted to work the pumps. They'd rather listen to Denny's story then take what seemed a mile walk to those pumps.

"My old man's a screw," Denny said. "He thinks it's the same thing being a rodeo cowboy and being a kiddy-cowboy. That beats everything. That takes the cake."

"We saw a duce-coop that a guy had dropped a '58 Chrysler mill in and a Paxton blower on top," Mace, the skinniest said. "Sweet damn."

"Sweet damn," Mullin said. He scratched the front of his undershirt.

"You hear about those rapists?" Bidetti said. "My old lady wouldn't even let my sister out until they're caught."

"You want to hear the rest of the story?" Denny asked.

"Sure," Bidetti said, "Is George Melrose going to switch to halfback this year? They say he's the best high-school runner in the state."

"Sweet damn," Mace said. "He's like a hopped up sweet fuggen fifty-five T-bird at the track."

"One more guy opens his mouth," Denny growled, "and I ain't gonna tell my story. I ain't gonna say another word."

They got up one by one and went over to the pumps. Denny watched them. They knocked off in an hour, and Denny had nobody to talk to. He sat alone, his head propped

against the display cabinet of Bardol, his grubby black hair rubbing a spot of grease on the glass. He tipped back his chair and dangled his legs. The sun cut a bright sharp glaze on the macadam coming over the strip of trees behind the potato field in back of the station, and he could spend the whole afternoon snoozing and watching the highway for slick cars, watching them as they zoomed down the purple band of roadway, threading the white slotted line that bent to the left before the old stucco Catholic church and the laminated plastic factory. He would have spent the entire afternoon guessing what kind of people drove what kind of car, if Eddie hadn't come out from under the hood, like a groundhog, blinking his wet gray eyes at the sunlight as he took up a smoke and asked about George Melrose. "I heard George pulled your brother out of a cistern. Said he would a drownt if George hadn't been there. He's some damn ballplayer too. Bet someday he's going to be doing those hair oil commercials on television. Had to jump fifty feet down to get him, they said."

"It wasn't even thirty feet," Denny said. "Anybody could of did it. He just got there first. He's kind of a show off, you know."

He keeps his mouth shut when he comes down here," Eddie said.

Denny, having his fill of guys telling him about George,

only grunted. If he could shake loose of Eddie, he'd do push ups on the floor of the ladies room. But if he got Eddie irritable then he'd set Denny to work sweeping down the carports or the garage, or scraping down something rusty or cleaning parts soaked in gasoline.

Denny's tongue itched against the roof of his mouth as he offered Eddie a stick of chewing gum. Eddie started back inside, then stopped, took the piece, and said that the other gas attendents wouldn't be in today, and Durfee, the boss, was probably screwing the dame who came in last week for a valve job. Visoring his eyes, he surveyed the road as if he could assess by glancing at the gravel the kind of business they'd do today.

"Going to be slow," he said.

"Because it's hot," Denny said.

"Ray Durfee gets riled when he does lousy business," Eddie said. He threw the wadded gum wrapper onto the hot macadam. "He wants to cut down on the help."

"Let him fire me," Denny said. "It's a good day for the beach."

"I wouldn't go to the beach, kid, not with those maddog rapists. They got three girls at knife point, and they almost killed a sailor who tried to stop 'em. Bad customers. You looking for it?"

"I can find my way through," Denny said.

Eddie smiled. "You're a tough man." He reached over and dug his fingers into the thick flesh of Denny's shoulder. Through the thick fabric of his coveralls, Denny felt the long sharp fingernails cut into his skin. "Baby fat," Eddie said.

"Get your hands off," Denny said, and with a snap of his shoulder he knocked the mechanic's hand away, or maybe the mechanic jerked his hand away. It was hard to tell, but Denny knew he'd made a mistake. Eddie's face soured, his eyes retreating into slots on each side of his big red nose. Reaching over behind the coke machine, he pulled out a bucket and a string mop which he gave to Denny. "I been looking for them," he said.

Denny's mouth itched. He'd hidden the mop and pail three days ago, but he kept on forgetting to dump them somewhere on the road after work. Now he was paying for this mistake. "Get off my back, Eddie," he said.

But Eddie, a big strapping old goat who always carried a black-jack in his pocket, didn't even break the rhythm of his gum chewing.

"Why don't you hose down the restrooms?" he said. "Mop them good so that Ray Durfee's pigs can use 'em. And then

clean up the papers around here. Them gum wrappers."

It was only after Denny hosed and swabbed the floors that he decided. The bathrooms were cool. Beads of moisture stippled the green tile blocks, and cool air came through the ventilation grate. When he soaked his head under the hose, he forgot how mad he was. Stepping outside into the heat again, he remembered. The bucket clattered when he dropped it. He flung the mop through the telephone wires where it hung upside down, the strings draggled in the air like a woman's hair. From a distance the mop could be mistaken for the severed head of a woman that had been piked and thrown into the wires. The maniac-nutso rapists might have done it, he thought. The comparison bothered him, and made him proud of himself, too. Hitching his pants, he walked a straight line up to Eddie. Going into the dark garage made him blind. He knew Eddie was somewhere on the other side of the darkness, bent under the hood of his car with a black jack in his hip pocket. Behind him the sky was as bright as silver. "Hey, Eddie," he hollered, "you blow-hole pig-job, I quit!"

At lunchtime he went to the blue plate diner. Some quirk made him go. Feeling like a bum down on his luck, he would panhandle a meal. He knew he'd get one if he told them who he was. His old man had always asked him to come see him and have lunch on him. He said it was a very clean diner.

Denny took that to mean it was a dump with flies on the cake and a restroom no better than the gas station's. He had learned a long while ago, that the old man liked to make things seem better than they were.

When he got there, he saw it was a very clean place with a clean tile floor and a shiny aluminum ceiling. The counter was bright cherry-red formica, and the ceiling lights were blue. After one surprised look around, he told the counterman his name. His old man worked here, he said. Looking over his dirty coveralls as if he might steal the tips off the counter, the counterman cocked one eye. "Never heard of your old man," he said.

"Never heard of him," the boss said.

"He works the night shift, now," Denny said.

"We bena closed at night since last Abril," the boss said. "You no fool me and nobody either."

When the three men and the young woman looked up to see what the stir was about, Denny glared back at them. Staring into the plate glass windows that reflected a chunk of the hot sun in each, he ordered a coffee and cocoa fudge doughnut. The counterman asked for the money in advance. While drinking his coffee, his anger, like a pebble, rattled in his head. Then he thought of the young manicurist's well-turned calves. Dangling her legs two stools away, she toyed with a plate of

french-fries, and read a hairstyle magazine. When Denny gave her the wolf whistle, she put her face behind the magazine, and tucked her legs against the counter. Pretending to read, she eavesdropped on the two bakerymen's conversation. The two of them in fresh white uniforms talked about the rapists in loud concerned voices as they drank coffee and ate buttered rolls. The short man claimed he had seen them yesterday while driving the morning route; he had reported it immediately to the police, he said. The big man only nodded, pushed back his cap to expose a wedge of black curls, and mopped his forehead with a big cloth handkerchief. "You did," he said in a tone which suggested that the small man might have seen anything, even a flying saucer, but not the renegades. He made it quite clear that he was more concerned about the heat. The manicurist lowered her magazine.

"Say fellas," she said, snapping a wad of gum in her cheek, "Could you pass the catsup?"

The big man, who was closer to her but further from the catsup, reached across his partner for the bottle. He reached for it gallantly, and when he passed it to her, he smiled. She returned his smile with her own, and then shaking the catsup bottle twice, and realizing it was empty, she asked the elderly man to her left for the bottle in front of Denny.

"Why, of course, young lady," he said, and then turned

to Denny, who was at his elbow. "Hand over that catsup," he said. There was no smile.

Denny looked straight into the man's eye. He had a long boney nose and his weak blue eyes avoided looking at him directly. They seemed to be buried in the flesh on either side of the nose, as if they were watching Denny from behind a corner. Denny was close enough to smell the man's stale breath and see the spots on his teeth. His tie knot had unravelled, and he began to jerk the knot tight. Denny hated the sight of him.

"Get it yourself," he said, and the man's face to his hairline, went pale. When the man took the catsup bottle, his hands were shaking. Then carrying his plate of soup to the far end of the counter, he squeezed in at the corner beside the two bakery men. Straightening his tie, he made an attempt to strike up a conversation.

"Lived on the Island for thirty years," he said, "and ever since they've put up those cheap half acre houses, the good people aren't safe."

"I live in one of those houses," the smaller bakery man said.

"You do," the elderly man said. "You don't look like the type." He paused, retracing his ground, and trying to gauge the bakery man's bland face. The bakery man bit into his hamburger and split a pickle with a fork.

Denny stretched across the bright red counter and smiled at the girl. She didn't smile at him, she frowned, jumped off her stool, as if bitten by a snake, folded her magazine into a beaded purse and walked out of the diner.

The elderly man had started up again. "It's actually the No York City immigrants who bring the neighborhood down," he said to the short man, pronouncing the city name with a measured disgust.

"That might be so," the small baker man said. "I'm from Illinois, myself."

"I'm from Massachusetts originally," the elderly man said. He straightened his tie again. "But since I've retired, I live with my youngest daughter in Westbury."

"I deliver a lot of breakfast cakes and sweetrolls in Westbury," the smaller bakery man said.

The big baker man leaned his elbow on the counter, and swivelled a half turn so that he could look at the elderly man. "I'm from New York City," he said.

The elderly man took up a spoonful of soup, and sipped the spoon dry. "Don't misunderstand me," he said. "It's only a certain type from New York City." This time, for the big bakery man's benefit, he was careful not to slur over the city's name. "There are always good people and bad ones. I'm talking about those lawless thugs who drive around throwing garbage on the side of the road."

He shot a glance at Denny, whose only reply was to cock his head, take good aim over the rim of the counter, and with a motion of his head spit dead center into the ashtray. Denny was satisfied with the elderly man's look of complete revulsion.

"The bad ones," he mumbled half to himself and half to the bakery men.

"We were just saying the same thing," the smaller bakery man said. "One of them tore down Alec's post box just the other night.

Alec, the big man, scratched the back of his thick sunburnt neck. "They were just kids," he said. "A bran new five-buck maibox that my wife painted."

"That's really awful," the elderly man said in a tone of convivial sympathy. "All the good people in the community are paying the price," he said, "There's a world of difference between them and us, and we all suffer."

"Sure," the big baker man said without enthusiasm.

"We pay taxes," the elderly man said, picking up steam. His heavy sad jowls were flushed with excitement, and his eyes had narrowed into slits so that when they turned on Denny there seemed to be a painful recognition glittering in their force. Condemning Denny with a terrible brutal glare, he said, "That's the kind who tore down your postbox." The two bakery men leaned over the counter and looked; all three

solidly united against the devil in their midst.

Across the counter, Denny licked the sticky chocolate doughnut crust from his fingers. He wished the girl were there to see him, to never forget him. Standing, he swept his cup to his lips - the flourish of a toast - drained the cup, smacked his lips, and raised the cup high over his head so that a quick swing of his eyes caught on its edge the flash of blue overhead lights. He let it fly, pitching it without windup toward the cluster of three heads which did not see it coming until, like a bolt out of the blue, it struck and broke on the wall.

They were amazed. They marked the invader's half-turned profile, the nose with two broken ridges, the brazen swing of his arm as he barged down the aisle, not running, not turning his back because he wanted to see every last detail of what he had done.

The big man gave a look he had reserved for flying saucers, perhaps not yet believing Denny had done it, or even that it had happened. The little bakery man looked like a pigmy bull, and the elderly man, wiping a soup stain from his tie, had a look less startled and more pleased, like a lawyer who had proved his case. "Call the police," he said. "Someone call the police."

The boss, as if protecting an infant, came tearing out from the kitchen screaming and waving a butcher knife.

But it was too late for him to do anything but scream - the boy dancing on his toes like the fullback he was, pushed out through the revolving doors, lept from the steps as if wings were hidden under his coveralls and landing on his heels, he sprinted - a mere mortal escaping now, running hard across the sun browned road, down the embankment and out into the hot dry straw of the small field. He was hot, and he was going to the beach.

When he got to Nunley's Playland, he thought the ticket man at the gate was going to make him pay a quarter. He wore a green straw hat, and a striped suit which made him look like a barber pole. When he saw Denny, he grinned, thinking he had come to repair the skateboard, and let him go by.

The place was teeming with little brats, tugging their mothers' skirts, shorts, and leading them around. The mothers sagging in the heat, studiously avoided brushing shoulders with Denny or looking at him. The fathers sweated in bathing trunks, endured everything, and stepped aside to let Denny pass. They took pictures of their children riding the merry-go-round, or the firetruck, or feeding sawdust to the monkey. The monkey, tethered to a chain, did cartwheels, climbed the bars of his cage, jabbered and ate anything children threw to him. Ponies and lambs stayed in the shade of their flyblown cages, chewed straw and blinked lackadaisically out at the

shapes of people swarming in the heat. A blast of hot air burned Denny's neck. In the background, a kaliope played row-row-row-your-boat without stopping.

It was easy to find the marshal's office because all the signs pointed the way. Attached to green flags strung across the center arcade, they hung against the white blue sky - lifeless and still in the dead air. He followed them without thinking where he was going. The girl or the beach did not seem important. Some force inside his mind had driven him to come here, had made one foot follow the other's lead, as if his body had been severed from his will. It wasn't until he saw the signs that he realized what he had come for. He was going to see his old man as a western marshal.

There was a crowd when he got there, and he could recognize his old man on the stage decked out in a bright yellow vest, chaps, two sixguns, a big ten gallon stetson, and a big silver star pinned to his chest. He was kissing babies and signing autographs. The sun came down hot and bright, flashed on the blotched rows of heads in front of Denny. From this distance the old man seemed young, Denny thought. The old man stood above them all, impervious to the heat, to the noise and the dust. Bigger boys asked to see his guns. They flocked to the edge of the platform for autographs and a better look at the guns. The biggest boy in the

crowd vaulted to the platform and told the marshal that he wasn't real because he didn't have a horse. But the marshal, who seemed almost a giant in his costume, patted him affectionately on the head, and told him he would have a horse by next Thursday at the latest, and to come back then. The boy was filled with awe, and the marshal shook his hand. A few people cheered, and the fat bot beside Denny spilled popcorn and began to cry. The crying made Denny move away, but when the marshal heard the cry, he became very grave, and surveyed the audience, a hand shading his eyes, like an Indian scout in search of danger. When he called the boy up, the crowd cheered again. Denny felt God beginning to rise up in his stomach.

The fat boy had a sad mutton round face, and he wore a sailor hat and a tee shirt so stretched that it dragged like a smock at his knees. He elbowed his way through the crowd sullenly, as if he enjoyed bumping people. At the edge of the platform, the marshal made a valiant effort to lift the boy. Too heavy for him, the boy sagged to the dust, and Denny hoped the marshal knew what a fool he was. But the crowd deceived him. They were cheering the great marshal. The animate creature climbing Denny's throat jumped. When the boy climbed the ladder and stood beside the marshal, he blinked and looked back at the crowd watching him, and as if realizing suddenly where he was, he began to cry furiously, so furiously that he began to choke. The crowd hushed. The marshal looked sadly on - Denny detected a gloom creeping into his old man's face,

a gray pallor because he was helpless. He knew that fat boy had God caught in his throat also.

The old man took off his hat and put it on the fat boy's head, and the hat which fell over his ears looked like a huge mushroom. The boy took it off, his face flushed, two red stars shined on his cheeks from crying. When the marshall stooped, the boy gave his mustache a hard tug, so hard that his face got as red as the boy's. He would have looked angry except he was smiling.

When Denny saw the barehead for the first time, he thought the old man's toupee, black, slick and parted in the middle, made him look like a girl-movie star. He was so startled by the old man's hatless appearance, he let God's sound gasp from his mouth, and craning his neck around him to see if anyone had heard him, he, like the boy before him, suddenly realized where he was, that he was one of many sweating faces, hypnotized like the other glazed faces around, drawn in by the old man, the fake. He wanted to leave, but his legs wouldn't let him, and like the boy, he could only blink and stare fitfully at the distance face of the idol.

The marshal, who steered the petulant boy into the crowd with a great display of fondness, and then waving a hand megaphone, announced it was time for the pistol demonstration. The crowd, as if of one mind, pressed forward to get a

better look, and some fathers put their little children on their shoulders and some gave them binoculars.

When his old man took out his sixguns, Denny felt sparks fly through the dark spaces of his mind. He closed his eyes against something he remembered and something he had wished to obliterate all traces of. He knew his old man would not be struck down, even though he wanted him to. His old man was such a damn good shot.

He opened his eyes in time to see the old man squint, take dead aim at two clay targets shaped like men, and shoot their ears away. The crack of his pistol shots rang in Denny's head as if the old man had shot his ears. He covered his ears with his hands to block out the loud ring of applause the crowd gave his old man. He didn't want to hear or see. When the old man put a bullet between each of the clay men's eyes, the clay men fell backward on their mechanical trollies as if they were dead. Denny could not have been more furious. It was if all his anger had come together in a burning God in the center of his head. He knew there was no one but he who knew that the whole show had been rigged.

The audience applauded and hollered for more. "Nice shooten, pardner," cried a six year old dressed in a cowboy costume identical to the marshal's own. Denny knew he looked like the old man's twin in miniature, and in him Denny saw his

old man's living flesh. The six year old took out his cap gun, twirled it on his finger, and pretended he was the marshal.

"Hey kid," Denny said. "It's all a fake. His hair ain't real and he don't even shoot real people." The little boy was first frightened and then sad, and then looking down over his belly at the points of his western boots, he wiggled his toes and walked away. "Hey kid! It's a fake," Denny told himself.

"What is he going to do now, mommy?" said a little blonde. She looked to her mother for an answer. The mother, who wore a neckerchief tied through rubber curlers, and sunglasses with green heart-shaped lenses, didn't answer.

"What's he doing?" the girl asked.

"He's going beddy-beddy," the mother finally said, pulling her child away, but the girl would not budge. She held herself to the spot as if she were anchored there. "I want to see his office," she said. "I want to see where the marshal goes to the bathroom."

Denny followed the little girl out past the stage, and onto the sawdust path that led to the games and rides and circled behind the zoo. When he got to the parking lot, the sight of all those cars, irridescent chrome and silver in their own reflections, made him stare. He stared until his eyes got blind from glare, and then the headache flared up in the back

of his neck and drove up through the top of his skull so that he thought his hair might stand straight on end. More than anything, more than the six year old like him, more than the phony show itself, the fake toupee made him hate his old man more than he had ever hated anyone in his life.

He thought he was going to the beach, but his legs wouldn't go. He didn't know where he was going until he got there, but as he came to the edge of the expressway, he could see the sunlight splashed in the windows of the two story shingled house where George Melrose lived.

George, hunkered down on the backstoop, was sawing a two-by-four that he would use as a plank for a bookcase. Denny waited respectfully until George had finished cutting, set the plank on end against the house, swept up the sawdust and dumped the pile of wood shavings into the trash. Then he asked for a beer.

Staring into the bright field, they sat side by side, identical in their sloping postures - Denny, smelly scruffy dirty, crouching while scratching the armpits of his coveralls; George - taller and broader, though only slightly so, blonde and clean and wearing white trousers and athletic shirt that made him seem almost angelic.

George went for beer. Ashamed because his mother, too weak to do housework, hadn't straightened the kitchen in a month, he didn't ask Denny in. If he had, it wouldn't have

mattered. Denny's house had never been straight, and his mother wasn't dying of cancer.

When George returned with beer, Denny drank and stared at the stoop, scratching out a paint blister with his heel. In the background he heard the dull, steady hiss of expressway traffic, the sound of rubber against hot asphalt. In the thick air clay dust rose in dark orange plumes above the slanted rooftops, the smattering of trees, the water towers and factories.

"Let's play ball," George said. "We can go over to the high school and work out the reverse pass."

"No, Moose, not today," Denny answered.

"Are you sick?" George said. "You look kind of sick."

"I'm not sick," Denny said. "I feel strange, that's all."

"You are strange," George Said. "What's up?"

"Nothings up," Denny said. "It's all down."

"Are you drunk or something? You look drunk," George said.

"Forget it. I'm not drunk," Denny said.

A few bright pidgeons flew behind them, swooping against the air, and trailing long distorted shapes across the stubble of dry grass that seemed to Denny like the wings of dead chickens.

"Will you tell me?" George asked.

"Just forget I said anything," Denny said.

"Don't tell me then," George replied. "Get lost. I'm not interested anyway."

"Okay," Denny said. "I'll tell you." He grabbed for air, feeling as if something would burst in his chest if he could not get it. He thought he knew a disease that ate up hearts. He had seen it once in a science fiction movie at the drive-in. He took a deep breath, tasting dust that stuck to the inside of his mouth, that made it burn. "The whole world stinks!" he said. "The whole friggen world!" He waited for George's astonishment, some sigh of disbelief, or recognition, but nothing came. Watching something beyond the cabbage field, the sun maybe, or maybe the cars, or maybe not watching at all, but remembering a football game he had starred in last year, George had a distant gleam in his vague blue eyes. His expression did not change.

"My old man got a job as Nunley's Playland cowboy -"

George, snapping his massive head to face him, had lost the placid look.

"That's great," he said. "He's had a hard time. He's no bum. It's a damn nice thing to see he's got a decent job."

"It ain't decent," Denny said.

Words evaporated on his tongue, while he sat in the

sweltering heat, glum, quiet as if he had been muzzled sipping warm beer and watching George watching whatever he watched so far away. He watched for a weakness in George because George was the storm trooper. He watched to find something that was strong and like himself. Yellow jackets and honey bees buzzed the rotten stoop at his knees. Through a crack in a plank, Denny could look down into a small well of darkness, and looking down he saw a flash of the darkness he had seen that day at the cistern. He knew he was lost in an empty mind which listened to sounds, without hearing them. He saw the pidgeons swoop again, and then it struck him - an inspiration that flashed dagger-like and brilliant across his blank mind. Then he knew.

"George," he said. "George! I know what I'm going to do. I know what's going to happen. I'm going to go home and get my old man's gun and then we, you and me, are going out to hunt the rapists!"

"Sorry," George said. "I'm not going in with you on something as stupid as that. Besides, I'm not in the mood. I'm going to build a bookshelf and then I'm going to the library to steal some books. You've got to be in the mood to do something big like that, or you don't do it right."

"I'm going to do it right," Denny said. "I'm going to use my old man's guns."

"The police should do it," George said. "That's what they're paid to do. Hiding the beer can in trash, he started up the steps towards the kitchen door. It wasn't until the screen door closed softly behind him, and Denny had been waiting alone for George to come back out, that he realized George wasn't going to help him, that George wasn't even coming back outside to tell him he would have to investigate the neighborhood alone.

Taking a shortcut through backyards, he covered the neighborhood, following his spirit, the bi-plane a speck at ten thousand feet scripting a COLA design. The blue sky was as clear as a diamond. Ducking his head, he trotted through flowerbeds, purposefully and determinedly kicking at the colors into a bright destruction - startling the aproned women hanging wash who stuck their weathered faces out from behind folds of drying clothes, wincing as if they had seen a jungle python uncoil from kitchen garbage, slide into the patio, and unfurl to gobble their little red children piece by piece. He might have been a rapist making a breakneck escape, he might have been the shadow of the low flying planes, but a second hard look, and they recognized him - the stiff black hair, the charcoal eyes, and the rag ends of his grease colored overalls - it could only be Denver Cleaver who'd been ruining their backyards for seventeen years.

Another time they would have screamed, threatening arrest; today they only released belly-deep sighs, thanking their eyes that it was only Denny, the awful but rather harmless boy down the block. Old Mrs. Kosky, crocheting on her porch, thought he was the lawnmower repairman. Mrs. Iunuzzi ushered her fifteen year old daughter into the house.

He covered the residential area in fifteen minutes and then went into what was left of the woods. He would leave the factories and stores to last, get his pistols before he searched that area, figuring that it would be more likely to find them lurking around the laminated plastic factory than anywhere else.

The clear sun had traveled three quarters of the sky, and the bright light flickered through the dull hush of heavy air, and leaf weighted branches rattled as he moved through them. Across the two hills cleft by the expressway the sunlight flashed on the slanted aluminum roof of his father's chicken coop, and the drab brown ranch house the old man had built himself. Watching them from this distance, they seemed to belong to another world, or to be lived in by strangers, like the houses he glimpsed in passing, seeing a shadow move at the window and wondering if it was a doll. As he thought of it, he laughed to himself, a wicked lustful laugh, not his

own.

Watching the traffic stream on the expressway, he sat crouched down, peering his big-jawed face through scrub bush, pretending he was a stone age spy on the modern world. His beaknose shone with scars, and jug-handled ears stuck out under his black grubby hair. His face framed with a wreath-like winding of leaves and his ears, pointed a trifle, made him appear gnome-like, until he moved like a cat, on his heels, through the red weed and honeysuckle. He sucked a wad of gum into his cheek, and blew a pink bubble that cracked on his mouth. He had turned up the collar of his coveralls and stuffed the pants legs into his black boots to give a stream-lined look like a TV sleuth. He was seventeen years old, and he was ready for anything, not anything, but at lease more than anyone he knew, even George Melrose.

He walked to the duck pond where he'd fished until he lost interest in fishing and got interested in girls. He didn't expect to find them there, but he was curious to see if there were any necking couples in parked cars. When he got there he found the pond had dried up and flies and mosquitoes droned, thick nets of them above beer cans that shone in the slabs of mud. He lit a cigarette and followed an old path he had beaten into dirt years ago. The path, leading to

a strip of wood just off the expressway exit ramp, had once been an escape route from his father and had once gone into what had been then the darkest and thickest part of a small pine forest. Now he could see the road from both sides.

He crushed his cigarette out and sat down, beginning to daydream and to get hungry, too. He imagined meeting the young girl he'd seen at the diner, sneaking up on her, killing her boyfriend, and swatting her plump butt to send it wagging like a hound dog's tail. He imagined her nipples, breasts, hips, saw the burst of white warm milk to suck. Moaning for her, he dropped off into the drugged air of a dry-heavy sleep.

He was still asleep when the blue Oldsmobile turned off the exit ramp, and drove up the dirt path through the shadows, stopping when the road got too narrow and the underbrush got too thick, close enough to him so that when he woke he saw the three of them through the windshield, and then the three of them getting out of the car, and walking - breaking through clusters of goldenrod which waved through the still dusk air like clusters of fire. He saw them leap down from the soft shoulder, skidding into the blank air one by one, and kicking jets of dirt as they struck bottom. When he heard their boots and stuck his face out through the leaf cover to

see them, he thought about who they were, and knew immediately. They passed close to him, traipsing in a single file of three, and when they passed near him, he heard their heavy breathing, a snort, the crackling of dry pine underfoot, and the leader stepped into a patch of light. Denny saw his pink tropical shirt glowing against the green background and the blue slacks which he hitched up as he walked, trying at once to keep the crease in his trouser legs and to shake the cockle burrs off his cuffs. In the light he glimpsed the face - the one blue, thorny eye, the open hole like a dry star fish where the other eye should have been. He saw the gun handle flash white in the trouser pocket. Then he was gone, sucking in one cheek and saying something inaudible to the other men, who nodded and followed. One ate the last chunk of a hero sandwich and carried a shovel; the other carried a wad of clothes rolled up under his arm. They were both small and fat, naked to the waist. They whispered and then they were gone, too.

He watched them, diminished figures through the waving leaves, stopping, the big man taking the wad of clothes - a suit - folding it neatly, shoes, a straw brim hat, which he discarded because it didn't fit, like a man trying clothes on in the casual department of a haberdashery. All the while his gun, silver blue and white glittered in his trousers. The gun made Denny's pulse run. The gun.

He waited without stirring until the man with the shovel took his own revolver, hidden at his side, and sat it down on the ground - the long blue gun flashing also in the sunlight. Denny could feel the rim of sweat break out on his forehead. He would give anything to have either or both of his old man's pistols now. He'd shoot them all without them ever knowing. Against his will, he dug slowly into his pockets, pretending, half hoping to find something, a weapon that couldn't be there. He moved so as not even to crack a leaf, stir a leaf; he found nothing. Lint. He could see them stiff and dead, red bullets in their foreheads. Cursing at God who had delivered them into his hands, he shut his eyes. He could be famous. Then opening his eyes again, facing his enemy through layers of leaf and branch, seeing the bare torso, the trouser legs, and the shovel moving. He heard its muffled bite through the dirt. He saw the man rest one foot on the shovel and stop, scratch his ear, and breathe hard. He could imagine killing now. Then the pink shirt came up behind the man with the rolled up clothes who squatted and dropped them into the hole. The shirtless man began to cover the hole with dirt. The squatting man took a portable radio from his hip and put it to his ear. Static carried through the hot air, interrupting Denny's steady observation. He knew he could shoot them all if he only had a gun.

When the hole was filled, the leader inspected it, and patted it down with his foot. Ruffled by something, even at a distance Denny saw his face flush scarlet, raise above the leaves and then dip out of sight behind them, and through the small spaces between branches, Denny saw him pick cockleburrs out of his socks and smooth the crease out of his trousers, and pick the revolver of the shirtless man from the ground, heft it, and stick it into his belt. His voice carried, loud and angry. "Jes keep your mouth tied, Al! Or I'm going to drop you before we gets to Florida."

The terrible flaw dawned in Denny Cleaver's mind. He didn't want to kill them. He would like to go to Florida with them. Maybe he'd step up to them and introduce himself. He heard the music.

Holding the radio to his ear, the second fat man started for the car, leaving the one-eyed man alone with the shirtless man. When the one-eyed man took out his gun, the fat man swung his shovel, the blade flashed in the sun so that Denny with his eyes slits saw the beautiful face of God in the glint of metal, smiling. Then the shot rang like a bolt of thunder through every tree limb in the woods, through Denny, and Denny who was not dead, not even grazed, gave a tiny yelp as he saw the shirtless man sit down, his jaw drop open as if to proclaim his innocence, and then roll over on

his stomach, dead.

The one-eyed man slipped down the path. Denny watching with his jaw dropped open like the dead man's, watched as he went back to the car, climbing the steep embankment - the sun shimmering on the front of his shirt making him appear huge and glowing pink like a paper icon, carrying the gun pointed down, spitting as if to wash his mouth of a sour taste. Then he got in the car.

Through the yellow grass and the fringe top of scarlet pine, Denny saw the car, the one-eyed man against the last raw edges of sunlight that struck the hood. Why wasn't he going to Florida with them. Denny couldn't remember though he wanted to, though he wanted to hold on to everything. Absolutely certain that if he ever did meet that man they would like each other right away, he watched the car turning, straining to glimpse the man again to fix him forever in his mind. He saw only the car like a speck or fly, skim over the dust, and spin around and in a screen of glare disappear.

In Denny's mind, the man named Al, died over and over. He walked the shoulder of the Long Island Expressway swept by piping deisel smoke until he came to the brown house behind the strip of trees. A torch of sunlight wavered on the chimney.

Once inside he forgot everything he wanted to do. He

went to the closet, put one gun in his sagging pocket and watched the sun go down behind the chicken coop, and the pidgeons roosting in the trees. He knew the old man would never shoot them. So he would.

It was dark before his mother came home with the three girls from grocery shopping. While she was preparing dinner, brother Bo drove up with the old man, who was half crocked. He carried his chaps and sheriff costume in an overnight bag under his arm. Bo had to help him up the steps, steer him through the kitchen into the living room, where they both sat on the davenport and watched the news report. They watched the news report religiously every evening, the old man ignoring the news and reading snatches of the Bible, and Bob following each headline item on TV with the newspaper in his lap. It made Denny angry to think that when he had been growing up people had compared him to his old man. Actually it was his brother that was like the old geezer, he thought.

Denny stayed in the kitchen. His mother, a leather-faced housewife, cooked up a meat loaf that looked like her face, pretending as she always did, that her husband in the next room didn't exist. The kitchen smelled of sizzling fat and the juices of broiling meat. The mother chatted with the three girls about the cost of groceries.

"Texas," she said, "Don't you think Mr. Snelling gave

me the bargain on the ground? Don't you?"

Texas, a quiet brunette of nine, said she'd rather have her mother buy Cocoa-pop-flakes because of the offers on the back.

The mother stretched her face into a look of absolute abhorrence. "You can't eat cereal box tops," she said.

Abilene and Cory, the twins, tore up a slice of white bread, pretending to feed the ducks embossed on the linoleum floor. The mother chased them out of the kitchen and warned them that if they didn't set the table they wouldn't eat.

"Oh, goodness, my God," the mother said, speaking to Denny standing at the door. She sliced up an onion. It was a good excuse to cry. "Why don't you bring a girl home to dinner sometime?" she asked.

Denny went into the living room and sat down on the rocker, putting his feet up on the low table in the center of the room. Sitting in the rocker made him feel like the old man. He got up and paced. He stared through the window into a chill darkness that seemed to isolate the house from everything around it.

Bozeman ate peanuts from a small brown sack he kept protected from the old man. The old man shuffled his feet nervously because he wanted a drink bad. The Bible had slipped down behind the sofa cushion, and he hadn't bothered to re-

trieve it. The picture on the television was distorted and flipped up and down. They discussed the news about the rapists. The police had discovered the body of one right in the neighborhood, Bo said, excited by the proximity of excitement. The old man, scarcely affected by the news, grabbed for a peanut. In his day, he said, he would have strapped on his guns and hunted them down himself. He scratched through his bald head, as if protecting the last few gray strands. Bo said the Governor ought to call out the National Guard. They argued for a long time as to who should fix the television. Before something was decided, Denny went outside.

Tucking the pistol on his hip as the one-eyed man had done, he swaggered across the dark yard, through the line of trees, up the grading to the place where car headlights flashed, swerved and gleamed on the asphalt of the expressway. The expressway that went on forever, he thought. Only the God he knew was more vast. He watched the lights play on the string of trees, the flat shrubs and the starched blades of grass that stood picket on the shoulder. Each car came out of a shadow, honing a dual blade of light through the vacuum of space. Sometimes in the light he saw a face that might have the face of his God. The brutal headlight glare burned his eyes then, and he looked to the sky. The stars were bright, cold and isolated. The full moon was remote.

Sure of fortune, he walked on the edge of the expressway, hunting pigeons, knowing the gun on his hip made everything right.

## LOOKING UP TO THE DEAD

The day of the fight the Long Island Expressway which bordered the backyard of George Melrose's house became so jammed that the little kids hid in the trees and threw stones at the stopped cars. Benson watched the drivers raging behind their windshields as he went up the steps to George Melrose's kitchen. The sunlight had just broken through George's bedroom window, and Benson could see George take a deep breath by the windowsill before he came down the steps in his underwear to unlock the screen door. Then George put on his trousers and shirt, and they both sat down in big straight back chairs at the kitchen table, George staring into the green linen tablecloth to see if there were any new stains since he had last looked, and Benson staring for no reason except to imitate George.

"How do you feel today, kiddo," George asked.

"Okay," Benson said, "except for my stomach."

"Don't worry about your stomach," George said. "That's the way it should feel when you're ready to do your best. When it's like that all the blood is out of it and circulating."

"Maybe I'm just hungry," Benson said. "I didn't eat no breakfast."

"I'll make you something but go easy," George said, "and don't worry about your stomach. I used to feel that way before every game."

"You did," Benson said.

"You ain't afraid," George asked.

"No, I don't think so," Benson said.

"Good," George said.

"You never showed it, George," Benson said.

"You're a pretty cool kiddo, yourself," George said.

Benson, who thought he was an artist, drew a naked girl on a paper napkin with the red crayon he always carried in his pocket. He outlined the body with short lines, then drew a circle for the face and scratched two eyes in it. When he finished he held the picture up to show George who was at the oven preparing bread. He grinned at George, who brushed back the fringe of blond hair matted to his forehead and told Benson that he didn't even know what a girl looked like.

"Doesn't it look right?" Benson asked. He had only drawn the picture to please George, and without waiting for an answer he got up out of his chair and went to the mirror over the washbasin. He held the picture up to it to see if the proportions were right. Of course they weren't. The girl resembled a turkey and her breasts were like wing stumps. Losing all interest, he crumpled the napkin and threw

it into the drain. Looking at his own face in the mirror, he examined the progress of the red-blond hairs that were growing over his cheek. One day soon they would be sideburns.

When Benson moved, it was with the deliberateness of someone who had frequently tripped over himself. He revolved his face toward the mirror, fascinated by the plump ruddy circle staring back at him. He was almost a runt, the mirror cut him off at the chin, except when he stood on his toes. He had a face like an apple with two small eyes drilled wide above his cheek bones, and a wedge of brass hair that hung in shingles over his forehead and ears. His almost angelic face was why he had been popular with the girls back in eighth grade. He was wearing a wilted powder black shirt and trousers that were as green as the diner split-pea soup which had given him a stomach ache the day before. He touched his face with his hand, running it down his soft cheek and luxuriating in the soft gold down that grew there. Then his eyes drifted to his hand, the script on his forearm that said, "DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR." He read it backwards in the mirror, pleased that there was some kind of unlikeness between him and the man in the mirror who otherwise matched him perfectly. When he tried to stop looking, he found the eyes in the mirror sucking him in, drawing him into the deep violet hollows that split his eyeballs,

the hollows that flared when George Melrose laughed. When he got mad he could do anything. He hated his ugly stunted body, his stubby limbs, and when he thought about them and not his face, he got so mad he could kill. He had been like that when he got in trouble with Denny Cleaver who he was going to fight today behind Durfee's gas station in the field so that everyone could watch.

Denny Cleaver spent every day at work at the station taking yellow-jackets and green pills, and sitting around on the oil cans pitching nickels and calling Benson names when he lost his money. C---- They called him and hum-job. He called Benson names until his ears became warm and stuck out on his head like cave-bat wings, and when he looked at the sky to forget, he saw a blue strip of field which extended out to the blazing highway, and beyond that into the canopy of white cloud which hung on the asphalt sky like deflated canvas. When Denny knocked him down the first time, he had seen the splintered glass in the soft hot tar, like the stars grained in purple sky that he watched on his bedroom ceiling at night when he thought about California. "I'm getting away from here," he said. Then the tall one had taken off his pants, and poured gasoline on them, and burned them in the middle of the expressway so that he had to walk home with his shirt tied around his legs, remembering how the short one

had tied up his arms and made him watch. Remembering how his trousers had become black and brittle like torched paper, and crawled orange with flames like fur caterpillars the little kids killed with lighter fluid. It was like the time he ran away from the hospital, Pilgrim State, with a thousand sprawling acres of scrub pine, a huge bleak stone building, and a chain link fence that belted the scrub land. He had climbed the electric fence even as his limbs hummed with current, had got home and on the front lawn with Denny watching, he soaked his gray uniform coveralls in gasoline and burned them. The flaming swath flashed blue orange against the night. Denny Cleaver laughed. Denny would not fight him then, or the other day at the gas station either. He slouched against the gas pump and pointed to his swollen eyes. He was high on Amphetamine, he said. He didn't want to fight Benson because he knew George wouldn't like it, he said. So Benson got a tire iron and said he would meet him in the field today. He could still smell the sharp iron smell of gasoline on his trousers.

While Benson leaned back in his chair, George was up at the stove trying to put out the flames of the scorched bread which he had forgotten to take from the oven.

"Damn," George said. A thick carbon smoke twisted from the mouth of the stove and smelled up the entire kitchen.

Benson sat unperturbed in the chair with his feet up on George's empty seat watching George stamp out the flames with a potholder and throw the charred squares of bread into the garbage bag.

"Why don't you open the door and let out the smoke," Benson said. It was the kind of suggestion that he always made, and that nobody paid attention to, but this time George snapped his head around and screwed up his face.

"The smoke can get out through the screen," he said.

"I forgot about the screen," Benson said. He turned away to watch the smoke ruffle out through the screen and fade into the bright green sun that hung behind the trees that hid the Expressway from the backyard. It seemed as if every time he tried to be smart something like that always happened. He put his elbows up on the table and watched George put up another batch of bread.

"You're a swell guy," Benson said.

"I'm not a swell guy," George said. He came away from the stove with a platter of toast and slid into his chair. "I just don't like to see a guy go into a fight with nobody behind him."

"Most guys wouldn't think of it like that," Benson said.

"That don't make me a swell guy," George said. "I just don't wanna see a guy get hurt without nobody there to fix

him up."

"Then you'd fix me up if I got it bad," Benson asked.

"I'd fix Denny up too," George said. He went to the oven and lit his cigarette on the gas burner. When Benson asked for a smoke, he wouldn't let him have one. Then he went into the refrigerator for a bottle of beer, slugged it down and set the empty red bottle on the table with a thump. Benson watched George shove down three pieces of toast as he went into the bathroom to comb his hair and shave.

"Don't drink no beer," George said.

Through the half-open door of the bathroom, Benson watched George as he shaved. After he had lathered half his face, he took a snapshot from his wallet and put it into a corner of the medicine chest so that he could look at it. The picture was of his girl Ellen, and he would look at it after each stroke of the raxor. Even with lather on his face, Benson throught George was handsome. He kept an old snapshot himself, one of George and him at the beach to show to everyone how long they had been friends. George hadn't changed much since then; his eyes set close to the bridge of his nose looked like brass screws set on either side of a polished doornob. On a table napkin, Benson sketched George's profile in red crayon like he used to when they went to high school together. George had been one of

the four heroes of the football team, the gold-dust-quartet they called them. Denny Cleaver had been a football hero also, and Benson had gone out with all the eighth-grade girls because he knew George and because he was small and cute. In fact, Benson talked so much about George to the eighth grade girls that they started a fan club for him. When Benson tried to sketch George, he wound up drawing a face that looked more like Denny Cleaver, a face with a hawk nose, long and gaunt and viscious like a doberman. He tore the napkin into strips and tucked them under the tablecloth. He watched George shaving for a time, waiting until he finished and came back inside to eat his toast to tell him what he wanted only George to know. Benson never talked very much but he thought what he had to say was important enough to tell George who was the only one who'd listen anyway. Sometimes they went camping together in woods that had not yet been chopped for houses. There was a lean-to there that they had built from saplings of spruce and maple when they were twelve years old. George would squat at the fire he had made, and listen to Benson talk of his plans to go to California and see the love people. George would listen, nod, and chew a wad of yellow grass until Benson talked himself out and went to collect firewood. Benson always tried to prolong these talks by filling in the empty spaces

with old stores about football games that George had scored touchdowns in, because he knew George liked to hear them, he liked to remember the old times as much as Benson did. Benson talked fast because he knew that after he returned with firewood, George would talk for hours about all the girls he liked. "Remember the time coach forgot your name at the South Hampton pep rally, and the next day you scored two touchdowns. They all said you played your best that day."

"I played better against Greenport," George said. "I was good on defense but nobody said much about it." He scraped a branch across the bark of the lean-to roof, and poked the crevices checking for leaks. Then he sat back down and took off his trousers and rolled them into the bottom of his sleeping bag. "The fire's getting low," he said.

Benson looked into the fire's prism crystal shape. It was the brightest light, and the one he liked best. "When I get to Frisco I'm going to let my hair grow and live in a psychedelic house," he said.

"Don't say Frisco," George said. "The people who live there always say San Francisco because it's the name of a saint. Everyone will know that you haven't lived there very long."

"They'll know it anyway," Benson said, "it wouldn't matter."

"It will matter," George said, "because Frisco's slang and it's not respectful to use slang on a Saint."

Benson rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and moved closer to his friend. "George," he said, "I'd like you to come with me to California. It would be really great to have somebody like you along."

"I'll think about it," George said, "while you get some wood for the fire."

Of course, George never said yes, but Benson thought he could sell George on the idea, so he talked on and on about his dream. He talked until he said everything he had to say, and then repeated himself if he could get away with it, without George reminding to get some wood. After Benson got the wood, and George talked himself out, Benson drew naked girls which George gave names to, so that they could both crawl into their sleeping bags, and in the hidden dark of their private sleep, dream them into life or watch their vine bodies crawling and dancing in the wind-flapped shadow of the wood.

In San Francisco Benson was going to try all the drugs that they only talked about at the gas station. He wanted to meet a girl with long gold hair that he had seen on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post. Without the awful burden of his reputation he was sure that life would be different.

He got his tag when they locked him up in Pilgrim State after a locker search in high school. They had found a bottle of raw Amphetamine under his coat. They might have put him into reform school for that, but they also found that he had pasted his nude drawing to the inside of the locker. The school psychiatrist said he was disturbed, but after three months Benson ran away from the hospital, and the school psychiatrist decided he would cause less trouble in his parents' custody. Since he had been in the hospital, everyone called him Benson the idiot, a tag he had put up with ever since.

When George got out of the bathroom he took the snapshot of Ellen off the mirror and brought it in and set it down on the table for Benson to look at. Since George had been seeing her, Benson detected a bag of fat around George's middle. He had turned down a scholarship to be with her. He couldn't be a star, he said, so it wasn't worth it. Benson had begun to wonder if George didn't care any more.

"Isn't she good looking?" George asked.

Benson looked over the brunette in the snapshot. She was sleek all right, but Benson knew you couldn't tell anything about a girl from her snapshot. Nevertheless, to please George he tried to appreciate her beauty. He fingered the photo and looked at the small figure posed seductively against a water fountain. The face was overexposed. "I can't make out her

face," he said.

George snatched up the picture and wiped the grease prints from the corners where Benson had put his thumbs. Then he folded it into the plastic case which he always carried (he had once kept a football medal in it) and stared across the table at Benson who was trying to muster the courage to speak, but before he could work his lips, George was talking.

"You don't think she's pretty," he said.

Benson said he couldn't see. Under George's scrutiny, he became so nervous that his hands found the napkin scraps he had put under the tablecloth, and without realizing, he stacked them into piles like folded bills. He wished it were money to go to California with.

"I guess you're too stupid to think anyone's beautiful," George said. "I guess you're too stupid to think anything."

"I couldn't see," Benson said.

"If you wasn't so stupid you wouldn't be getting into so much trouble and getting yourself killed this afternoon," George said.

As if contemplating the emptiness of his own death, Benson stared out into the vacant sky that loomed behind the screen door. Then he turned back. "I'm going to California in the afternoon," he said, "and you've gotta come too."

He might as well have just come from collecting firewood when he said that because George ignored it, and kept right on talking. "There ain't much I can do about Denny except talk to him, and then maybe he wouldn't like that much either because he'll think I'm not behind him." George sat heavy in his chair, and rolled up his sleeves so that Benson saw the long pink scar that spiralled up his thick bicep like a viper. George looked at the scar the way he looked at Ellen's snapshot, a deep serious involvement hardening on his face. Benson might as well have been sitting alone.

"I took my eighty-three dollars out of the bank, and I'm going to California after the fight, whether you come along or not," Benson said, "but it sure would be swell to have you along."

George shook his head slowly and sucked in his breath to let Benson know that he had heard. "I'll tell Denny to come over now," he said. Then, leaving Benson to watch the plate of toast crumbs that were set out in front of him, he left the kitchen and went into the living room to call. After George called Denny, he closed the living room door and called his girl.

Benson began to sense that George wasn't coming along, by the way he whispered on the phone, but his friend wouldn't let him down, Benson knew that. He would make sure Denny

would come early so that Benson could get an early start. George was always doing great things. As Benson listened to the whispering, he thought of the scars George got when he rescued Denny Cleaver's little brother from the cistern behind the house. George used to always do brave things. Benson remembered that somebody had told him to call the police, but he had called an ambulance instead, and they all got mad, except George, who said that he had done the right thing for once, even though nobody thought so. He said the police would have searched everyone like they always did. "Smart move," George had said, and when George said that, the glow in Benson's heart was like a bright warm file filling his chest, it was as if he had been part of the jump into the ice-cold cistern, immersing his eyes in the murky shale-colored water, searching out the lean blue figure of the little boy among the jagged and shiny stones like George had done. They all said that George must have had eyes like searchlights, but now Benson knew that it wasn't his eyes but his heart where the light was, and he remembered George breaking the surface of the water, and climbing the rampart with the little wretched boy slung in towels over his shoulder while the others cheered into the pit at the man ascending the ladder into the bright face of the day. Benson would never forget how George had looked when he climbed that ladder - it was like he was climbing out of stopped time bring-

ing life back to the dead.

George's voice murmured behind the closed door of the living room; it was a long conversation with George doing all the talking. For the first time in his life Benson was able to understand how it was to be somebody big like George, to be a hero. He would have all that in California. California - even the name sung out to him - San Francisco, California. He sketched a picture of George talking on the phone, crouched on the sofa with his forearms bulging, and then he sketched a picture of Ellen talking on the phone and wearing a bikini, conjuring them both from the recesses of his memory where their faces burned vivid and bright on polished silver mirrors. He felt he had captured their likenesses.

When George got off the phone and came inside, he rolled his sleeve back down and went into the cupboard for a can of soup which he opened and heated on the gas burner. Then he made a slow prowl around the kitchen, taking each step as if he were stalking the shadow flung across the black and white linoleum blocks. "I can't find the salt," he said. "Did you touch it?"

"No, I didn't," Benson said.

"Goddam it," George said, "she wanted to come."

"She can come if you want her too," Benson said.

"It's no good," George said. "When girls are around

to watch it's always hard to get going." He slid a cigarette into the long sad droop of his mouth and turned to look out the screen. "I told her you were a friend of mine or I'd let her go."

Benson had never seen George make an excuse before. When he looked up at George's face, the gaze was far away. "If you're in a jam because of that then let her come."

"I'm not in a jam," George said.

A car screeched into the driveway. Benson saw George's eyes quiver when he heard it. He felt like a man trapped on the third story of a burning building, and only he could save himself by jumping. He knew fear in that one instant as he watched the door fill with lean blue shadows that had come for him; he sank down on his rubbery legs which wilted under him as he fell into the chair and waited for his certain mutilation.

There were three of them, the tall one, the short one, and Denny. When Denny came in, George stepped aside to let him pass.

"Is he here, Moose?"he asked.

"Yes," George said.

"When did you stop him?" Denny said.

"Just before," George said.

"Then he's a punk," Denny said.

"Yes," George said.

Denny was not quite as big as George, but he was big. When he folded his arms, his muscles jerked like taught leather straps. He chewed the inside of his lip and smoked a cigar with a long white ash. His eyes looking down at the trembling Benson were like two cigar burns in a paper plate. "So tough boy, you tried to run out," he said.

"No," Benson said.

"Don't lie," George said.

When they took Benson to the car, they held his arms behind his back. Benson tried to shake them off but they were too strong for him. The tall one put on leather gloves, and clenched and unclenched his fists. The short one carried a guitar case slung through his arm as if it were a rifle, nodded and dug his heels into the gravel. When they put Benson into the car, they tied his hands with a guitar wire that the short one took from the case. They made Benson sit between them in the back seat so that he couldn't jump out the door. George sat in the front listening to the radio, as Denny drove out to the field behind Durfee's gas station.

When they got there, they searched him. They made him bend down, and when they did the tall one punched his stomach. Then they went through his pockets and found his wallet - which George asked them to give back - and a knife Benson had

tied to his leg. When they found the wallet, they were going to keep it, but George told Denny about California and convinced him to let Benson have it back. "It's no good to take traveler's checks," he said. They had to unzip Benson's fly to get the knife, and then the tall one and the short one began arguing about whose it was. The tall one got it, though, because the short one didn't want to press him too far. Then they made Benson go down on his knees again, and the short one held the knife to his throat and ran the point into his neck. It was only a scratch, but Benson screamed and George came over and gave Benson a handkerchief to stop the bleeding. The brown razor grass hovered at Benson's chin as he knelt in the field with the handkerchief. George leaned down to his ear, and said, "I had to tell them that you tried to run, or otherwise they wouldn't have come early." Benson was glad that George was smart like that. He knew George wouldn't let him down. "But they got pretty damn mad about it," George said, "so don't go down or they'll kick you." Benson nodded when George gave him that smart tip.

"It ain't gonna be a fair one then, is it George?" Benson said.

"Hell," George said.

When Denny came over, the short one untied Benson's hands and made him stand. He was wobbly at first, and he kept

away from Denny who was slow getting started because he had come from car washing, and his hands were soft. But when he got going, he swung from the hip, hand over hand, so that Benson couldn't tell the blows apart. At first he backed away, but then he tried to tie up Denny's hands and fall in a crouch the way they did on TV. Then blood came into his eyes and he stopped trying to be like they were on television; he put his hands up to protect his face, and then he put them down to protect his crotch. All the while Denny's fists hummed in the air, a barrage of knuckles sighted down from his gunbarrel shoulders. The rings on his knuckles were like shrapnel.

They were all surprised how much punishment he took, but when he went down he didn't get up like they thought he would. He rolled over on his belly, and when they kicked him, he protected his ribs. Then he couldn't see anything except the sun which looked like a small sugar pancake on a blue plate. While looking at the sun he squealed once, and then he heard George ask Denny to please stop, and he knew Denny wouldn't hit him again, until the boot punctured his wind, and a dark flash phased across his mind.

When he came to, George helped him to his feet. "Good going," George said, and patted his rump like a football coach does after his player makes a hard tackle. That meant

a lot to Benson who shook his head to clear his vision, which blurred on the edges into a murky shadow like cistern water. When he said he lost his wallet, George had to comb through the grass to find it, but then Benson found it in his own pocket. When they took him back to the car, the tall one decided to put him into the trunk filled with jack handles and snow chains, that they had stolen from the garage. The tall one held his legs, and the short one shouldered him into the trunk. Someone slammed the lid down so hard that Benson's head range against the darkness. Cramped under the trunk door with his legs tucked into his belly, Benson felt something like an unborn child in his mother's gut, and as they drove up the washboard road, he could see it racing underneath the drill holes of the tire well. Each time they struck a rut, Benson's shoulders jarred against the tire-jack until he passed out.

They let him out in a ditch beside the unfinished part of the expressway. When they opened the trunk, they watched the rise and fall of his chest to make sure he was breathing. Although Benson came to, he didn't open his eyes right away. It was safe playing dead, and he played possum until they carried him out of the trunk and laid him flat out on the shoulder of the unfinished road. While they watched him come to, the tall one tried to stick the knife into a broken

tree. He couldn't make it stick, but one he almost did, and once he stuck it into his own foot. He said a hunting knife was not as good to throw as a switch-blade.

"You all right, kiddo?" George asked as Benson opened his eyes.

"Is it over now?" Benson said.

"It's almost over," George said, "and then you can go to California."

"You don't want to come, do you?" Benson said.

"I'd like to," George said, "I really would."

"No you wouldn't," Benson said, "but things are different with me now." He squinted up at the car beside the road some distance away. Denny and the others were waiting beside it. "You've been a swell friend," Benson said.

"No I'm not," George said, "I should have helped you."

Then Benson took out the picture, a torn and cracked snapshot of two blond smiling boys standing with rail thin legs spread and bathing suits dropped around their ankles. When George saw the picture he remembered the joke.

"I want you to have it," Benson said.

"I wouldn't want Ellen to find it in my wallet," George said.

As he folded the snapshot into Benson's shirt pocket, he got Denny's signal. He looked worried and wavered for an

instant, his tall frame blocking a swath of cloud wedged into the gray blue sky. "Sure your head's all right, kiddo?" he said. Then he went over to Denny and said something and Denny came over, took off Benson's boots and threw them into the ditch. "Try to get to Frisco barefoot," he said. Then all of them but George urinated over the edge on them, standing in a circle on the rocks and spiralling their water into the ravine. Then they all left in the car.

Benson lay flat on his back with his arms spread in the hard brown clay, and watched the sun burning across the pale silver sky into the skeleton of stripped trees that the earth movers had bulldozed and left to rot bare beside the road grading so that their black shapes had become crusted with the grit of construction dust, like the spines of prehistoric animals Benson had once seen on a museum trip. It didn't matter to him what had happened now that it was over and he still had his money. He lay there thinking that he was going to get up soon and start walking, following the ditch until he came to an open entrance on the expressway that would lead him West. He would hitch a ride there. All the way he would stare into the bright glare ball of the sun, and when he got there he hoped it would be noon so that the sun would be directly overhead, and the city would look as golden as it did in the Saturday Evening Post. He rested his head again and shut his eyes so that he saw light

flashing, and then he closed his swollen eyes tighter, clenching them, and shuddered, pretending he was really dead. He saw himself transformed to smoke on the concave of his eyeballs, and while lying very still he listened to the growls of the earth, felt himself become transparent, weightless, rise up free from his heavy lifeless body and sift through the blue gray space, like smoke he watched sifting from the dirt, rising as if from a fire until he disappeared in front of the orange gold sun that whirled in the sky.

When he finally got up, the dusk sky had darkened, and the clouds were crabs walking. After he found his boots in the ditch, he wavered in his decision. Shame hung on his stooped shoulders, an oppressive and heavy garment. It was shame and hate for his own stubby disproportionate body, his runt body walking, the dull insensitive way his thoughts lumbered through his head. The question he asked himself was could he, Benson the idiot, make it to California and live there without doing it all wrong again. He picked up a cluster of gravel and sped the pebbles across the flat grade so that they sparked and clicked. Then he glared. Across the face of the road bed in the tangle of gutted trees which were stacked beside it, the heavy shadow of broken limbs was moving, stumbling through the drugged mists of dark air, a double vision crouched, staggered and became fleet as it moved out of thick scrub bush and fallen trees. It was

George with black paint on his cheekbones, bulling and twisting his way for a first down against the tough Southhampton line. Benson felt a pang and a thrill at once; he hurried down the long road through the briar and underbrush until he came to the spot where there was nothing but still branches. He sat for a moment, and watched the heavy dusk sky and the light dying on the road so that the last tar-silver reeds of sun glanced off the wet ruts. He staggered up one edge of the road and then the other, shaking himself out of the rushing waves of numbness. He wanted to throw away the snapshot and just remember George as that run, but he didn't go into his wallet at all except to try to count his money. He didn't want to touch the snapshot because he didn't want to look at it, but it was there - he knew it - pressed between two flat cards through the sides of the wallet against his rump. In his mind he dashed the photograph against the cliff dunes of Big Sur where it was washed into the swirling alabaster peaks of sand and lost forever. It was easy not to think of æ long as he kept it where it was.

When his temples stopped beating, he could almost walk straight. His head began to clear as a fresh wind came across the open field cooling his face. As his step quickened, he moved down the road and began to talk out loud to himself of his plans to get to California. Talking as he walked on

the unfinished highway, he made his way toward the silver wings of light that inspired the sky, watched the sun dying behind the horizon of rooftops and the football moon reborn on a bank of cloud over his shoulder. How good it made him feel that there was someone like George in this world.

WHO-U-R

The Mother, a thick dark woman wearing a tangerine shaped hat, bought Jola an orange-aid, and all during the train ride, the child drank it and played with the paper carton and let the sugar syrup dribble down her lips so she could taste it later when she licked her tongue to her chin. It had been dark when her mother woke and dressed her, and packed her clothes into a suitcase. The suitcase had a painted giraffe on the side and a tear across the fabric, and Jola put her hand into the tear as if it were a pocket, hoping to find something secret. Then her mother tied up the child's brushwire braids and sent her to the kitchen for toothpowder. After the little girl brushed her teeth, the mother came into the kitchen dressed in a white cotton dress and a tall blue straw hat that looked like a school bell. The mother changed her hat three times, deciding finally on the tangerine one, and then they took the bus to the train station.

Although she was eight, Jola had never been to the train station, before, and the rumble of the trains made her want to see what went on under the wheels, but before

she could look they had walked up the steps of the train, and her mother squeezed into a seat beside the window. Jola put her suitcase on the seat and sat on it, staring out the window, although it was still too dark to see anything except her own reflection -- a purple chunk of coal with diamonds for eyes. They were going to Wyandanch, her mother said. She was a big and perspiring, and although sitting close to the window, she took up most of the seat. When she got angry, she slapped Jola's hand and told her to stop licking her chin, or to stop gawking at the white people who sat across the aisle from them with fishing rods and a canvas picnic basket. Jola tried not to look up from the folded wax container on her knees; she stared into the bright orange sunshine label, saying "Wyandanch, Wyandanch." Not ever being out of Jamaica before, most of the white faces she had seen had been on television, and she wanted to compare them with the train riders. When the car started to fill up, she looked down the rows at the mosaic of heads, and like necklace beads, she counted them until she lost her place and fell asleep.

## II

Mother said, "Get up," and shook Jola awake and yanked

her down the aisle and hoisted her onto the platform beside the suitcase. "We in a hurry," she said, taking Jola's hand in her own and sitting her down on a bench with the suitcase across her knees. A green bus came and then a white one, but they didn't get on. "Where is that man," the mother said. "It's just like him to forget we here." She gave Jola the suitcase to hold while she went into the telephone booth. Jola watched her crowd into the booth and catch her hat in the door as she stapped out. "Aunt Cynthy say he be right on down, but it sounded like he hadn't left the house yet." She spoke with indignation and to nobody especially except perhaps herself.

While they waited, the mother held the suitcase, and the little girl sat back and swung her feet. She saw a red bird hop across the telephone wires and swoop down onto the platform. She had never seen a bird like that before, and she watched the redbird carefully until it flew to a tree. Then she pointed it out to her mother who didn't look, but grunted that there were lots of colored birds, including Uncle Edward, looked at the broken station clock and straightened her hat.

After a second green bus came, a black car pulled up, and the big brown man behind the steering wheel waved to them. The mother said that was Uncle Edward, and Uncle Edward

got out of the car and kissed her, and gave Jola a stick of chewing gum.

"Oh Edward," the Mother said, "It's so good to see you," and threw her arms around him.

There were two little boys in the back seat, identical with big eyes and white teeth, like the dots on the dominoes they were playing with. Uncle Edward told Jola to sit in the back with them, and put the suitcase in the front seat. But Jola couldn't do that because the Mother took up too much room. Then Uncle Edward said he had his golf clubs in the trunk so that the girl would have to squeeze the suitcase in with her. Jola was pleased about that, and for most of the ride she sat with it on her knees, and when she got tired of doing that she put the suitcase on the seat and sat on it, high enough that way to see out the window and take in the green woods and lawns in front of the houses. She also watched Uncle Edward and her Mother talking in the front seat. Uncle Edward pointed a big cigar and her mother nodded and mopped her forehead. They talked about money first. "It sure is hard to get along on the shoe string I got," the Mother said. "But I cain thank the Lord for sendin' prosperity down to my brother."

"I donn have so much," Uncle Edward said. "I've got

my own debts to pay, as well as worryen about yours."

The Mother snorted and mopped her perspiring forehead again. Jola chewed her gum softly and sat against the door so that she could be as far away from the two boys who were making faces.

"The thing about little one is she keep it all to herself," the Mother said, "and she don't give none to me."

"I guess she figures she can save up her love that way," Uncle Edward said. He swivelled half around to Jola. "Is that what you think, honey girl?"

Jola didn't turn from the window. "Tell em to stop making faces," she said.

"Oh she cain be as sweet as cider pie when she wants somethin, and then when she gets it, she gets cold as water, and I give her a good scolding but I ain't a man to keep her in line."

"Come now honey girl," Uncle Edward began flicking his cigar ash on a big tray on the dashboard,"Vernon and Carlie just trying to be friendly. You goin to be nice when you visit with your Uncle Edward, aren't you?"

"Only if you tell em to stop making those stupid faces," Jola said.

They came to a yellow house that looked like the others except Uncle Edward's name was on the mailbox. When the car

pulled into the driveway, the two boys threw the dominoes out the window onto the lawn, and climbed out the window after them. When Uncle Edward took up the Mother's elbow and escorted her onto the screen porch to meet Aunt Cynthy, the boys chased each other across the lawn. Jola followed her mother, dragging the suitcase, staring at her mother's big swishing rear end, and ignoring the shouting boys scrabbling and rolling on the lawn -- she would not look at them, the way they acted even if they were her cousins.

Her mother did not take her hat off on the porch. She waited until she was well inside the living room before she took it off and folded it on her lap, for Aunt Cynthy to take it. Jola put the suitcase down on the living room rug and watched it carefully so that the two boys would not steal it. Then Aunt Cynthy came in from the porch. She was slender coffee-colored woman wearing a blue silk dress. When she hugged Jola's mother she could only fit her arm half-way around her waist. When she saw Jola, she bent over, kissed her forehead, and smiled so wide that the corners of her mouth pushed back a crease in her neck. "You haven't hardly grown," she said. She took up the suitcase and carried it to the closet. The little girl's pudding brown eyes watched where she put it, and made sure she didn't try to open it. I have so, Jola thought.

At dinner, Uncle Edward sat at the head of the table,

and Aunt Cynthy, when she wasn't serving, sat at the other end. The Mother and Jola sat across from the two boys who kept rolling their tongues against their glasses and scraping their feet under the table until their father made them stop. They stuck their tongues at Jola, then, when Uncle Edward wasn't looking. Pretending to ignore them, Jola sat erect, with her wrists balanced on the edge of the table with one hand holding a fork and the other hand holding her knife -- as regal as a queen with her orb and sceptor she took small bites of the brown fried beef, chewing slowly and spearing her stringbeans with her fork. As she ate, she stared into the napkin on her lap. She'd fix those two little boys if she was big enough. If she was their big sister, they'd mind her all right.

After dinner, Mother and Aunt Cynthy cleared the dishes, and Uncle Edward brought Jola into the kitchen to see the dishwasher. It was a big white box like a refrigerator cut in half, and when Uncle Edward opened the door, Jola saw a stacked row of dishes in a wire basket. "You wouldn't have to dry no dishes stayen in our house," Uncle Edward assured her.

"I wouldn't anyway," Jola said.

"Don't be fresh," Uncle Edward said.

The Mother was more impressed by the dishwasher, but she tried to wash the dinner dishes in the sink before put-

ting them into the dishwasher. Aunt Cynthy wouldn't let her do it though. She made her sit down in the living room with the two boys who had changed into pajamas and were watching a western on television, and lying on their stomachs and reading comic books while they watched. When Jola came into the living room, she sat on the wicker chair in the corner and gazed at the pictures of white houses in the snow hanging in bright gold frames, and Uncle Edward's head against a sofa pillow. He left and came back wearing his policeman's uniform. "Good night," he said. Jola watched his shoulders brush the doorway as he left. Then she stared at the pictures again. She liked the pictures better than the television because she had seen television before. (Her mother had one in the living room), but she had never seen pictures. The house had pointed roofs with a thick layer of snow hanging on the shingles, and the lawns and stone fences glittered with a white freeze. Out each chimney rose a tentacle of smoke, and Jola imagined she could see the bright orange fire burning in the stone hearth, like the incinerator of grandmother's house, but without a stove pipe. Then Aunt Cynthy gave her an orange-yellow lollipop and turned out all the lights so that they could watch the television. Jola saw only a shiny glaze where the picture was, and as she sat in

the dark watching the fuzzed heads of the two boys which were angled in such a way that the heads made it impossible for her to see the TV screen. She watched her mother and counted how many times she picked up a sugar candy from the tray on the coffee table and then put it down again. She counted six times and then her mother took a handful of candy and ate without waiting to swallow one before chewing the next. She counted ten candies, and Aunt Cynthy said it was bedtime and took her up to her room.

The room had circus ribbon wallpaper that matched the bedspread, and a pink nighttable with a straight back chair that wore a skirt. When Jola put on her pajamas she watched herself in the mirror so that when she ducked her head and pulled the pajama top over she wouldn't lose herself in the dark tunnel. She crawled into the fresh sheets, after that, waiting for the Mother to come in and pat her head. When the Mother came in, she was dressed to go to the station. She said goodbye and warned Jola not to talk to strangers. "Goodnight," Jola said as the Mother turned off the light and left the room. "Goodbye," the Mother repeated as she descended heavily on the hallway steps.

Jola wouldn't close her eyes although she felt the night pressing in on them. The night was empty and could suck her eyes out like a rubber lizard in the dime store. To protect herself, she rolled the cool sheets up to her chin and watched

the shadows of the tree limbs as they waved goodbye against the ceiling, like her mother's hands or the wings or big birds. Then she went to sleep.

## III

In the morning the two boys were dressed and running through the halls hollering and shooting cap pistols. Aunt Cynthy had lain out a pair of white shorts to go with Jola's white shoes and white shirt. Jola dressed quickly because the two boys were peeking into the keyhole at her. They wouldn't leave her alone.

"She fat sausage," Vernon said.

"Naw," Charlie said, "She baloney loaf."

"Scram," Jola said, and she would have said more if she hadn't been afraid they might catch her in the hall and beat her down the steps like two sixth grade boys had done to some girl who now carried a hatpin to protect herself. When she dressed and went into the hall, the boys jumped out from behind the door and stretched their faces like spooks. They called her domino and laughed until she kicked the big boy, Vernon, in the ankle. It was not a hard kick, but it kept both boys at a distance as they fired their cap pistols at her. "You just don't come neah me or I going to put a

hatpin in your wrist," she said, and as she went down the steps her black eyes patrolled behind her. With her back against the wall, she looked almost like a shadow, and never once did she turn her back on the two tormentors coming down the steps behind her.

At breakfast she sat across from them. They were already finishing their bowls of cereal before she got hers. They had shined, scrubbed faces like ginger fudge with eyes, like black beans that gleamed as they smiled over their cereal bowls and kicked her shins under the table. Wishing for that hatpin, she ignored them, and ate staring out the open window at Uncle Edward's car parked in the driveway. If they gave her a bad time, she would figure a way to get them back. She was figuring how they'd be with their arms pinned back like butterfly wings when Aunt Cynthy came in and told everyone to get ready for the drive to the community camp.

When they arrived at the community camp grounds, Jola counted the men lined up on the playground with silver whistles on lanyards and brush cut hair. They were all dressed in white, and Jola imagined they had all climbed out of the fresh snow in one of the pictures in Aunt Cynthy's living room. The sun was a brilliant phosphorescent ball against a cloud streaked sky. A slow wind brushed across the lawn and sifted through the tall elm turning their leaves like glazed gray paper. Jola sat in the car waiting and

watched a red bird skitter through the treetops and soar down and swoop in circles. The two boys had run out of the car as soon as they got there. Auny Cynthy had gone to talk. Jola, alone now except for the red bird and her lunchpail which was the same color counted her fingers. First she got eleven and then she got ten, and then she ate the baloney and cheese sandwich that was supposed to be her lunch.

When Aunt Cynthy came back to the car, she took the little girl by the hand and led her up the steps of the white house into a room with a desk where a man was sitting and talking on the phone. He had a baseball cap that was too small and it sat on his hair with the peak sticking up like a duckbill. The man's big square face had eyes that looked like peas floating in saucers of milk.

"Nunley's Funland is the alternate trip if it's too rainy to take the campers to the zoo. I don't like the zoo anyway, Victor, the girl counselors always have to get a park attendent to get the boy campers out of the bathroom, the park attendents make passes at them, and we're not well liked there because of it . . . They'll assemble on time only if we keep them away from the water fountain after two o'clock. Send a flyer out about that, and remind the parents to have the campers go to the bathroom before they board the bus. We can't have anymore confusion with the bathroom situation this year, Vic. We're already not well liked there."

He put the phone down on the receiver and squeezed out a grin and shook hands with Aunt Cynthy. When he winked at Jola, Jola picked her nose.

"She must be shy," he said. "Say little chicken," he said bending toward Jola suggesting he would kneel down to her, "Who do you like better the Mets or the Yanks?"

Jola looked down at her white pumps and said nothing.

"Her mother can't afford her," Aunt Cynthy said. "She's my niece and she's from Jamaica."

"That's a long trip," the man said. "What part of the island does she come from?"

"She come from Jamaica New York," Aunt Cynthy said.

Two sullen boys sat behind the desk in chairs facing the wall. The man turned his attention to them because the bigger boy had gotten the other boy in a head lock and was about to throw him off the chair. "Pick on someone your own size," squealed the smaller boy, and just as he said that, the man called Uncle Sonny came up to both of them and knocked their heads together so that both boys fell out of their chairs in a heap on the floor. Then he blew his whistle and made them stand at attention. He said if they didn't get quiet he would call their mothers. The big boy said he had no phone, but he got quiet when Uncle Sonny pulled his ear. The ear looked like a red turnip root sticking out of a bas-

ket. He made both boys face the wall standing, and just for good measure blew his whistle again. When he came back to the desk and sat down, he pulled the visor cap down to his brow and screwed up his face so that his forehead became creased with serious wrinkles. "Policy doesn't let us have late registrants. We want to give each camper a full camp experience, and it would be unfair to start your little girl this late in the year. She wouldn't catch up."

"What can I do with her all summer," Aunt Cynthy said. "I can't have her around the house."

Uncle Sonny thought for a moment and pulled on his cap-brim. "Since she comes such a long way, we can consider it extra ordinary circumstance. She can pinch hit in one of the groups where somebody's absent, but I'm afraid you'll have to pay a full summer's price."

"Then she can stay," Aunt Cynthy asked.

"Yes," Uncle Sonny said. He took out his whistle and swung it like a banker's watch chain. "Yes, she can stay all right," He said,"if she knows how to use a john."

When they brought her to the group, Jola sat down on the grass, and crossed her feet and looked down her knees at her underpants which is a safe place to stare without having to look at someone. There were so many girls, so many eyes to meet. The girls sat around on the grass, playing checkers, reading comic books, and throwing dirt, and

Jola sat around behind and watched. Everyone of them had on shorts and sneakers which had been white but had been soiled from playing, and when Jola saw how dirty they looked she decided she wouldn't play at all to keep her uniform clean. The counselor, Miss Lois, sat against a tree listening to a portable radio and reading one of the comics. A wisp of hair she toyed with stood out orange gold on her forehead. Taking Jola's hand, she jerked her up so she stood facing the others. "Attention people," she said and blew her whistle. The group moved back under the shade tree a few steps away. She introduced Jola who sat down on her skirt in the grass without ever once taking her eyes off her shoes. "Who wants to play Giraffe's and Zulu's," Miss Lois said. Everyone raised their hands except Jola. "You'll have fun, Jola," Miss Lois said to her, "and in this group everyone must play what everyone wants."

Jola put her finger in her mouth and continued to stare. "No," she said.

"Attention people," Miss Lois said, "Let's have a race to the tree across the street." When she said go the girls dashed across the lawn up the sidewalk across the street to the tree where they waited for Miss Lois and to begin the game. Miss Lois picked up her portable radio and lit a cigarette and walked after them, and Jola alone looked up, giving

Miss Lois a quick stare, watching a green bird that pecked at the grass and then flew away, and keeping track of the shadow that crept back slowly until she was sitting in the bright sun that stung her eyes. The brightness made it impossible to see anything until she saw him, coming up behind her suddenly as if he had risen from the spot in the grass.

He was fat. He had almost no eyebrows and his nose was like a bird beak sticking out of an unbaked piecrust, and his eyes were like black raisins set in the dough. When he smiled, two square teeth pushed out of his upper lip like chicklets. He wore a cowboy hat that had once been white and was now so beaten out of shape that it fell over his ears so that he had to keep taking it off and replugging it on his head. When he removed his hat, he seemed almost bald except for a blonde stubble that started high on his forehead, and divided down the middle and fell flat over each ear. A sheriff's star was pinned over the pocket of his dirty camp shirt and a bright western belt was looped through his shorts and his belly hung over it. Squatting beside Jola, his legs stuck out of his shorts like thick mutton bones that were tied into brown canvas shoes. The shoes were untied, however, and he was trying to push them into his mouth.

"There's hide-a-bug-a-boo," he said. "A-big-big-a-

roo-bug-a-boo."

Jola searched the spheres which were his eyes. He might look something like the kuala bear she wanted to play with, as dark and soft as sleep.

"Pillsberg panna-cake-pie-crush," he said.

He might be a TV cowboy who played across the phosphorescent tube at Uncle Edward's. But he didn't have a horse or gun, she saw that, and when she let him sit down beside her, he pulled out the grass and flung it straight up, so that it scattered like strings of confetti over his hat. She knew a cowboy would never do that. She knew he must be something else. But what?

"Big-boo," he said, almost crying. He forked his pink tongue through the space between his enormous teeth, burping like a small white fish; the burp so startled Jola that she pulled her own knees up against her chest and protected them with her arms. There was no telling what the cowboy would do next, but she wasn't going to let him scare her again, and when he took off his hat and swooped it around his head and sat it down on his hair again, she stayed perfectly calm. He gazed at her as if staring at a big chocolate cookie he was about to eat, slobbering as he tried to hug himself and then her, pushed his snout at her so that the nose was warm against her cheek -- the smooth big face not wild but strangely placid as if it had nothing whatsoever to do

with the body, and then the pudgy sluggish hands that were stronger than she imagined. Whatever game this was, Jola knew she didn't like it. She would have kicked or bit or scratched his eyes -- the slobbering drooling creature with his tongue lolling at his mouth, advancing with his eyes strangely like the soft eyes of a suckling infant. She called for her Mother, but nothing happened. She called and called to herself until the cowboy's big hat slipped down over his face and fell under his chin, hanging there like a feed bag attached to a string. Then she stopped calling because she saw the bug crawl out of the brim, a huge bright hornet, as green as Uncle Sonny's eyes. She saw the bug creep down the cowboy's ear to his neck and disappear into his shirt. The cowboy froze. His eyeballs sank back into his flesh.

"You've got a bug," Jola said. She suddenly understood, and she was no longer scared. She looked at him the way she had seen her Mother look at epidemic children on the street at home, and she inched away in case the bug saw her. The cowboy did not move at all until the bug dropped out of the bottom of his shirt and buzzed into the quivering grass. Then with a terrible revelatory light gathering in his eyes, he squealed. A black purple mark, the size of a berry, swelled on his throat, and his eyes contracted into empty

cannisters. Almost rigid, except for his belly breathing hard against his shirt, he reached out to his neck, began to dribble and then to cry very softly, and then to cry loud enough so that Jola watching his crying face -- his eyes turning and the purple blotch that was the color of her own skin -- was so horrified that she believed he was a nightmare, that he would turn all purple and black and become a goblin or villain and eat small children on the cartoon shows before lunch. When he stopped crying so loud, he wiped his mouth with his hat, leaving the imprint of a dark smeared lip that ran down the brim and that looked like the bird Jola had seen on the ceiling of her new bedroom. Then the whimpering cowboy fell back into the grass and screamed. Wasn't he laughable Jola thought. Wasn't he horrible and funny at the same time. It was then that she began to think for the first time that her vacation in the country with Uncle Edward's family might be a good time after all.

When the cowboy stopped screaming, Jola watched him over the crossed shadows on the grass. She had moved to a safe distance, and she watched him as if staring across a far space into the horizon and into his eyes that seemed like two black stars. She thought that his head looked like a big round stone sitting on top of a mountain. She believed he was absolutely stupid.

"Who U R?" he trumpeted through his nostrils, and as he spoke he lifted the cowboy hat, tipped it, and slapped it into the dust. "Who U R?" the voice boomed, demanded, and trailed off like the hum of a rubber band.

"I'm Jola," Jola said. She wanted the cowboy to like her, but the cowboy didn't seem to understand what she wanted. He began to chase a black bird that swooped low across the bright grass near his feet. He followed after it, crawling then running.

Although Jola was too proud to call after him, she watched him until he was gone. He wandered across the street and disappeared behind the camp house. She could hear the unseen bird which she guessed to be hiding in the black and green trees or behind the sun that was a pale circle burning through branches like an eye watching her through a keyhole. But who was watching her? She looked down at her shadow which had grown a long face, with a stiff twine of hair like a wooden doll. It was only Jola watching Jola. With her legs buttressed against her chest she made herself into a house, buried her face between her knees and cried.