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SEDGWICK, WILLIAM HENRY, III. Can I Go with You? Short Stories.  
(1970) Directed by: Mr. Fred Chappell. pp. 64.

This thesis consists of four short stories, the titles of which are: "A Cat Named Frankenstein," "May Flies," "A Fool with a Gun" and "Never Enough People." I will not try here to draw parallels among stories, for I do not believe a central theme is available. Each one must be considered separately. Likewise, I had no schema in mind when arranging them. The stories are in the order they were written and all were written in my period of graduate study at University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

The stories do share a style and a philosophy, but I am not sure that these qualities are, by me, definable, or that they need be explained outside the fiction. The epigraph (y.) expresses my feelings toward these short stories as well as I could ever hope to express them, and, I am happy to say, it is in the same creative genre.

CAN I GO WITH YOU?  
" SHORT STORIES

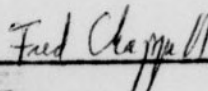
by

William Henry Sedgwick III

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
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in Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by

  
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APPROVAL SHEET

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Right outside the writer's window, poison ivy grows, climbing the downspout. A mulberry tree full of catbirds and mockingbirds chattering is not far away, and the street in the distance is empty. It is a hot dry yellow day.

The writer sits by the window today, like every day, writing about people so ghastly and graspproof. His characters seem always to be disappearing before he can get to know them. The writer rests his back and takes a sip of water. Thinking about his people, he remembers an old joke:

Two old friends met on a street corner. Moe was leaning against a lamppole, doing nothing. He was not waiting for a bus. Joe was passing.

Where are you going? asked Moe.

Nowhere, answered Joe.

Can I go with you?

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A CAT NAMED FRANKENSTEIN

I

Somebody shook him.

It was the charge-of-quarters. The man on charge of quarters shined a flashlight in his eyes and shook him by one shoulder. He sat up. He looked around in the dark and tried to figure it out. He stopped and rested his back against the crossbar of the bunk above. Then he remembered.

You awake, Hendrix?

Yeah, I'm awake. What time is it? he asked and turned his head away from the circle of light.

Five thirty. You told me to get you up at five thirty, the CQ said.

Okay.

Hendrix ducked his head and got out of the bunk. He moved to his footlocker, sat down and began to dress. A little at a time. Pulling on his fatigue trousers and boot socks. Rubbing his eyes to stop the itch. Hendrix felt like stretching a long way. There was a drowsy yearning inside, but he kept quiet so the others could sleep.

He slipped his feet into the older pair of boots and laced them. He threw his shirt over his shoulder and went out and down the corridor toward the latrine. In the hallway there was dim light and the light reflected off the floor and the copper colored fire extinguisher. He was momentarily drunk with the light and leaned against the wall and felt his way as he walked.



Damn, he said.

In the latrine there was a prominent smell of vomit. On the weekends, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, somebody was sure to puke on the floor because of drinking. Not making it to the commodes or the big sink. Hendrix checked the floor ahead to make sure he wouldn't step in it.

Still not awake, he stood before a porcelain trough and pissed. Then he turned on the cold water in a sink and splashed it on his face and ran his fingers through his brown blond hair. He wanted to go back to his bunk and go back to sleep. He would like to forget it.

He went to the screened window to get some air in his eyes. He rubbed his freckled cheeks and eyes with the water. Below, in the company parking lot, he saw a gray and black cat slip from beneath a parked car and trot across a lot of thin damp grass towards the PX.

A cat? he said and smiled.

He buttoned up his shirt. Hendrix went back to the bay and got his cigarettes and car keys and his wallet from under the pillow on his cot. Then he went out and down the steps.

On the landing he looked and saw that there was no light in the mess hall. It wasn't open yet. It was still pretty dark. Someone sat on the steps. Hendrix's eyes adjusted to the dark and he saw it was Finnegan.

Hello, Paul.

Hi. I didn't know you had KP too.

Yeah. Thought I'd get down here early so I'd get a good job.

Me too. But there ain't no good jobs on KP, Finnegan said.

Yeah.

Finnegan turned on a small portable radio. He held it to his ear and turned it to get the right direction. With these little radios you have to have the right direction.

What's the frequency of that station in Temple?

Thirteen hundred something, he answered. You plan to take that to KP with you?

Un huh. They don't care. The young cook is a bastard, but you gotta talk about baseball to him. He's from Boston. You talk about Ted Williams.

Ted Williams? He's retired.

I know, Finnegan replied.

Hendrix nodded. He knew what the other meant; Finnegan meant that you had to talk the cook's talk.

Finnegan got the station in Temple. He took so long because it was still too dark to see the numbers on the knob. A song popular then, one that was played a lot, came through the crackling static:

I had a fellow tell me  
He had a sister who looked just fine.  
Instead of bein' my remembrance,  
She had a strange resemblance  
To a cat named Frankenstein.

Finnegan hummed along.

Hendrix lit a cigarette and took a long drag off. He felt the hurt and blew the smoke out quickly. It felt bad to smoke before breakfast, but there was not really anything to say between them, so he smoked. Sometimes they went places together, but there was nothing between them.

The first sunlight started a gray light on the edges of the sky. It came into the darkness like something moving behind a curtain.

A man came up without speaking and opened the lock on the mess hall door. He was fat, the kind of fat you see on a cook on his second or third hitch. The young cook wore white trousers, a t-shirt and a white paper hat.

Why are you guys here so early?

We just like to get up.

Okay, said the cook, you can just rush right in there and mop the floor.

That's all right. We don't have to go on duty till six.

Come on in. It's six now, the cook said and looked at his wrist as though a watch were there.

Hendrix stretched. He dropped his cigarette into a butt can tied to the railing of the stoop. It hissed out. The two men walked to the door and went in the mess hall.

The fat little cook had turned the overheads on and sat at a table with a pad and pencil.

I was just kidding, the young cook said. We can't get started till the sergeant gets here. What do you want to do?

I guess I'd like to wash trays. That's about as good as the jobs get around here.

Me too, Hendrix said.

Sign under, 'trays,' the cook said and pointed.

They wrote: Paul Finnegan, Bill Hendrix. Some others came through the double swinging doors, passed the serving line and signed

the sheet. One had not yet buttoned his shirt. He buttoned it. The other two shifted about and blew to catch their breath. Then they found chairs and sat down.

The cook leaned back to straighten the rolls of his stomach under his t-shirt and asked, Wher's the other guy?

I don't know. Who is he?

D-A-N-E-R. Day-ner I guess it is, Sylvester Daner.

Oh, he lives off post, Bill Hendrix said.

Well, that don't give him no excuse. He's gonna get pots and pans anyway because he's last, the young cook said and smiled.

Finnegan said something about Daner's pretty wife. Hendrix nodded and said that he and Daner had been in Japan together just before coming to Fort Hood.

The head cook, a staff sergeant, could now be heard in the kitchen. He must have come in the back way. The XPs in the dining room turned to see him at the griddles. He had a cup of coffee in one hand and with the other he broke eggs and opened them onto the greasy black surface. They watched him break the eggs and open them onto the grill with one hand. The sergeant's deep brown skin, the color of the coffee in his cup, contrasted with his cook's whites.

Come on and eat, you animals! the sergeant yelled.

The young cook went behind the counter and put bread into a toaster that worked like an escalator. The men got trays and cups and silverware and filed by for the eggs and bacon, passed on to the toast and pats of margarine laid on ice and took half pint cartons of milk from wire containers at the end of the serving line. They all sat at

tables near the windows.

It was light outside now. It would be a good day for anything but work in the kitchen. The big Texas sky was high and clear.

Bill Hendrix sat and watched as Daner drove up in an old green Chevy. Daner turned the car without haste into the parking lot and got out. He closed the door once, then again, harder. Daner walked easily across the street and ran his hands through his corn yellow hair and looked from side to side. Then he went out of sight around the corner of the building and came in half a minute later.

Well, Sleeping Beauty finally got here, the young cook said.

Finnegan laughed. Nobody else laughed.

You know you got pots and pans.

Yes. It's all good time, Daner said and shrugged.

I got a life to spend here, said the cook from Boston. We're gonna have a lot of pans today.

I'm not in any hurry.

Daner got himself some toast and a cup of coffee and sat down.

In a moment, the building seemed to move above their heads. The MPs heard the movement of feet and the slamming of locker doors. They could hear noncoms yelling orders. Saturday was a half day of Troop Information and Education, learning about how to operate radios and transmitters and other signal equipment, for the rest of the company.

All right, you animals, get to your posts! You can't sit out there bullshitting all morning! the head cook yelled.

All of them got up and hurried to the kitchen except Daner, who stayed and finished his coffee. He was in no hurry.



## II

The day seemed longer than it was.

Wherever you worked, your sweat made you stink. You got wet from steam or dishwater or mopwater. Your boots got soaked and your feet were wet. They would smell. In a little while you were so tired and the strain made a sort of drug so you could keep going. Only a hot shower, more water, would take it out.

Finnegan and Hendrix stood and waited to wash trays; the others got it first. Two of them stood with the mess sergeant and the young cook in the serving line and gave out equal portions of the food. Another man worked as dining room orderly in the section reserved for officers and noncoms, demarcated with short wooden barriers decorated with tacked on red and white and blue crepe paper. Sylvester Daer leaned against a stainless steel sink piled high with collanders, strainers, pots and long spoons, long flat pans with handles at each end and deep kettles, his glasses fogged with steam so that he had to look above them to see. Outside, on the stoop, a teenager named Miller sat on an overturned pot and cut eyes from potatoes; later, before supper, he shucked the outer skins off onions and quartered them into a potful of water; for Sunday's breakfast, Miller shredded more potatoes.

All the men in the company had eaten breakfast and after they came back from TI and E most of them had dinner, roast beef and gravy, mashed potatoes, creamed peas and carrots, and bricks of neapolitan ice cream for dessert. The dinner made a mess on the utensils and at the tables, but there wouldn't be many for supper because it was Saturday. Saturday for supper they would have cold cuts and everything would be easy to clean.

Finnegan's radio, which he had put in the window behind the tray rinser could barely be heard above the din of the kitchen. It played the song again:

It's hard on a fellow  
When he don't know his way around.  
If I don't find a little honey  
To help me spend my money,  
I'm afraid I'll have to blow this town.

Finnegan sang the chorus. He had done some of the singing in college, madrigals he called it. He told Hendrix about it most of the day, how he'd gone most of the way through sophomore year and nearly flunked, then dropped out and joined the army.

What're you gonna do when you get out?

I don't know. If I go to school, it might be for drama or something, Hendrix said.

That's no way to have fun. Better make it business--you just get the routine and stick with it.

No, the army's bad enough.

You know what I think?

No, what?

I think you might stay in. You found a home, Finnegan said and smiled big.

The younger man took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. Finnegan's nose was big and pointed and full of hair at the end and he smiled big when he laughed and showed all of his teeth.

The song ended and the announcer began to introduce another. Paul put his handkerchief away and turned to Bill Hendrix.

You know, I went to see that bastard one time.



Who?

Sam Cooke, Finnegan said.

That right?

Yeah. When I was in high school. I had this little fifty-seven Chevy, sharp, you know. I always went to see them, Chubby Checker or somebody. One time I saw that Sam Cooke was coming to Louisville, so I bought a pint of lime flavored gin and drove down. I parked out in back of the ballfield and slugged some of the gin, waitin for the show. While I was sittin there in my car, Sam Cooke comes rollin up with half a dozen other coons in a Buick station wagon, so drunk he can't stand up and barfin all over the place. So the manager of the show goes up and tells the audience some story about how he took sick at the last minute.

Yeah?

Un huh, Paul said.

The first supper tray flopped down on the sill of the opening in front of them and Finnegan scraped it with a plastic spatula and handed it to Bill. Hendrix dipped it in hot soapy water and wiped it with a brush, a toilet bowl brush, and put it into one of the metal drainers to go into the rinsing machine.

The trays came in a sort of flow for a while and the two had to move quickly before the trays could stack up. But it was supper and there weren't many.

Paul told him to slow down.

You have KP a lot, do you? Bill asked and looked hard at Paul.

See that one stripe? Most of this company is people returning from overseas—us PFCs don't have a chance.

Is that right?

Yeah. I finished second in my class at Fort Devens and then they send me to a dump like this.

Hendrix didn't say anything more. It was not good for him to talk to the new guys, especially the ones like Finnegan who had come down during the Cuban Missile Crisis because the company was understrength. They all complained about their pay and no promotions. They figured they'd been cheated out of their overseas tour.

Hendrix stood on one foot and raised the other and exercised his toes inside the wet boot and sock. Then he did it with the other foot. His throat was a little sore.

What you gonna do after you get off?

I don't know. Think I might go and get some suds somewhere. Wash the crap out of my throat, Hendrix said.

Paul handed him a tray.

Can I come along?

Yeah, I guess so.

Hendrix took the silverware in a rectangular wire basket back to the sink where Daner was and shook it up and down and from side to side in the dishwater. Then he took it out and went back.

After the trays were rinsed and the silverware was drained, Hendrix took them to the tray rack in the dining room. The dining room man helped him put the utensils away. When he returned to the kitchen, Paul Finnegan was at the rinsing machine, pretending to work.

You're workin too fast.

What?

Slow down. If you go too fast and do too good a job, that young cook'll try to invent work for us.

Well, you know more about KP than I do, Hendrix said and turned away quickly.

Bill was a little pissed with this new guy. Finnegan had just buttered up that young cook all damn day, talking about Schilling and Buddin. The Red Sox are in ninth place, he said to himself.

Finnegan had the angle, anyway. Bill had mopped floors twice already and helped cut the eyes from potatoes because he hadn't gone at the Boston cook's speed. He had painted the bins in the storeroom and disinfected the moldings all around the floor of the kitchen.

The young cook brought some mops in a bucket with a wringer on top and motioned for Paul and Bill to mop the tile floor. Finnegan glared at Bill as they mopped.

They went around opposite sides of a wooden topped table, used for cutting meat and backed into Daner's cubicle, the big u-shaped sink area. Hendrix stopped and smiled. Daner was soaked with water and grease.

How is it, man?

All right, I guess.

Not like Japan, huh? Hendrix joked.

No. Cold in the winter.

I mean the work.

I know, Daner said and raised his eyebrows high above his glasses.

Hendrix turned at the signal and the mess sergeant pushed his wide flat brown nose into their conversation. He was in Bill's face. The

sergeant's jaundiced eyes bulged and his lips were tight together.

What you animals doin'?

Hendrix looked at him and looked away at Paul, who pretended to mop a particularly dirty spot. The young cook must have sicked him on them. It was all Hendrix could do to keep from laughing at the head cook, the black stripes of grime on the sergeant's t-shirt, rubbed on by the rolls of fat, now rubbing Hendrix.

Well, I got somethin for you to do. You can bullshit all you want to on the garbage run. Hey! he bellowed at the young cook, I got a coupla volunteers here for the garbage run. Them and the outside man.

The cook from Boston came back. He waved his hand at the coatrack, where their fatigue shirts hung and they went out the back door. The outside man, Miller, was told to join them.

They loaded a three-quarter ton Dodge truck with garbage barrels full of rotten food saved for several days.

The cook raised the tailgate and went around and got in the canvas top cab. Sylvester Daner pulled down the bench from the side and they sat down in the back.

Guess you just don't know how to stay out of trouble, do you? the young cook asked Hendrix.

Guess not, he answered.

Daner smiled and shivered. His damp clothing made him cold, though it was a mild spring day. Hendrix and Daner exchanged smiles.

Inside the truck it began to stink and the three soldiers moved back by the tailgate to get some air. Miller, the teenager, grimaced and puffed.

What's a matter? You sick?

Not yet. Whew, it stinks so much.

Hendrix nodded. He lit a cigarette and offered them one but they shook their heads no. It was the first whole smoke he'd had since morning and it tasted pretty good. He looked at his hands, all wrinkled and showed them to the others.

Dishpan hands, huh? You both got dishpan hands, Miller said.

Sylvester smiled and leaned forward and huddled down to keep warm. Hendrix rested his head against the siderails of the truck.

How do you like working with Finnegan?

He's all right.

I don't like him. He thinks he's a hot shit. He can read a lot of code, that's all.

It's all right with me, Bill said.

It don't make him a hot shit.

The road went away behind them. The truck seemed to be in a steady climb, headed toward the hills south of the post. It was a part of the post none of them had ever seen. They rose up and up. In a moment the landscape was nearly bare. Scrubby bushes stood here and there and you could see an armadillo once in a while. They always looked funny, with their little heads and feet and pointed tail and all went inside when they were afraid.

The Dodge wound along a ridge in four wheel drive. It was narrow enough that the truck could slip off the side. Then it stopped and backed down a finger of the ridge. It smelled like an open sewer. They were in a small bowl-like dammed-up valley, partly filled with rubbish.



Leafless trees stood, charred just above the ground and on exposed roots.

Sylvester said, Binjo, the Japanese word for toilet and Hendrix smiled and looked at him. The cook got out and lowered the tailgate. Hendrix and Miller held the sides of the barrels and Sylvester Daner tipped them. The sour food came out in lumps and seemed to come to life with maggots. On the second one Miller made a face and leaned out the side of the truck. He had seen the maggots in the garbage. He held the side rail and leaned out and heaved. It made Miller pale.

You okay?

I uh don uh know. I thought I was gonna puke, he said and heaved again.

Miller sat down. Hendrix and Daner went on with the work and the young cook laughed at Miller.

Can't you take it? the cook said and laughed. Look, if you can't take it, you better sit down back then.

The cook laughed some more and sat down shaking with laughter on the truck's running board. Hendrix and Daner finished and stood waiting. They watched another soldier across the way in a gas mask and heavy clothing spray the garbage with a flamethrower. Not much of it burned.

They went back and down. As the Dodge went around the ridge again, Hendrix noticed a chocolate brown short haired cat that stood in the shadow of a partly burned tree. It sat and picked at a chicken bone. It held the drumstick with one paw and cradled it with the other and pulled the meat off with its teeth.

It was getting dark. The mess hall was locked when they got there, so the cook told them they could go. He had not stopped the laughing

at Miller all the way back, and kept it up still. His eyes were wet.

Daner went to the parking lot and got into his car. Bill Hendrix waved goodbye. Then he and Miller went in the barracks.

### III

They went to a bar in Temple.

It was a bar Hendrix went to often, a small place, plain concrete blocks on the outside with a small lighted sign hanging above the door. The bartender smiled and greeted Hendrix.

They hung their coats on hooks by a booth in the back and sat down in the red naugahyde seats. The waitress came up, wiping her right hand on the small ruffled apron she wore and holding a little round tray in her left hand. She was free with her smiles.

What's yours? she asked.

Falstaff.

She turned to Paul.

I'll...uh...a Bud.

She looked down her nose at him and tilted her head to one side.

What? How old are you?

Paul looked at her with a weak smile. He looked at her eyes.

I'm twenty.

You want a coke?

Yeah. That's what I was gonna say.

Hendrix laughed. The waitress went away and stood at the bar. She leaned on one elbow and looked back at their booth and smiled. She said something to the bartender and smiled and tilted her head to one side. The bartender looked at them.



Well, what the hell? What does it matter to her? Paul said and made a face.

Hendrix shrugged.

The waitress brought their drinks and Bill paid. He slugged the foam off his beer and drank a bit of it. They didn't say anything for a while. Paul was slumped in his corner of the booth and Bill Hendrix looked at a revolving beer advertiser on the bar.

It was mostly dark in the room. There was a small lamp with a lampshade with a picture of a cottage with a smoking chimney and a big thick tree beside it above each of the booths. There was a selector for the jukebox under the lamp and napkins and salt to knock the bitterness out of beer.

You gonna go to Mexico on your leave?

Nah, Hendrix answered. Think I'll visit my Aunt Mary in Alabama. She lives immobile.

Hendrix laughed, but Finnegan had missed it. Why should he explain it, especially when there was two parts and he wouldn't get either one. He just hoped he could find his Aunt Mary.

You can get laid in Mexico.

There's a lotta ass. I've had enough of the whores, anyway. I had enough of them in Japan.

Un huh. You see any more of that girl works in the restaurant near the post, one with the tits?

No, she's not interested in me. She goes with a corporal in the Third Corps now.

Un huh. Hey, you know what some sergeant up at Fort Devens told me?

No, what? Hendrix said and took a long pull off his beer.

He said he was in Korea and he says the girls over there got their thing on sideways. You know, like their eyes.

Yeah?

Is that true? Do they?

Could be. You can't tell unless you look.

Finnegan turned away and snorted. Hendrix smiled and signalled for another beer. The waitress brought it and he paid. With his change Bill played a couple of tunes on the jukebox. Then he lit a cigarette and looked back at the other soldier. Paul Finnegan began to talk, but Hendrix made a motion with his hand and pointed at two women at a booth across the room and towards the front.

The one with her back towards them could not be seen too well. You could see the sheepskin lining the collar of her coat and the green head scarf with a small bunch of blond hair outside in the front. The other wore a tattered old mahair sweater, thin at the elbows, ruffled and sparse like cat hair, and pedal pushers. She did the talking. She had brown blond hair that lay around and in her hands, her hands under her chin holding up her head, but it was hard to hold still; it wanted to slip away.

What the older one said could not be heard above the jukebox. She cried a bit, enough to make her cheeks red and rough and her nose swell. She would pick up one of the balled up kleenexes from the table and rub the tears away from her eyes and blow her nose. She would drink a gulp of her beer and talk.

Hendrix smiled and looked away when she saw him. He stroked his chin.

as though he had said something to the man with him, but she had seen them watching. The second tune he'd played came on the jukebox and Hendrix drummed his fingers on the table to the time. It was Sam Cooke:

Another Saturday night and I ain't got nobody,  
I got some money 'cause I just got paid.  
Now, how I wish I had someone to talk to,  
I'm in an awful way.

It was the chorus. Paul hummed and tried to look away when the two women looked hateful looks at them. The song played on:

I had a fellow tell me  
He had a sister who looked just fine.  
Instead of bein' my remembrance,  
She had a strange resemblance  
To a cat named Frankenstein.

Then the chorus again.

You bout ready to go? I'm not enjoying this coke a lot.

I guess so, Hendrix said and cut his eyes to one side to avoid the look of the woman who was crying.

They got up and put on their coats. On the way out the woman in the sheepskin lined coat yelled, Fuck you! at them. Bill thanked her and bit his lower lip and went out behind Paul.

Wallows washed in the gravel parking lot caused them to nearly fall a couple of times. Bill got in his Studebaker and backed it out and headed back for Fort Hood.

It was dark along the highway. They saw only a few cars.

Both of them shivered a little from the cold that rushed in under the dash. The heater leaked and the ill-fitting doors rattled.

Bill lit a cigarette.

Radio work?

No, it's busted.

The heater's broke and the radio's busted. Does the horn work?

No, Bill said and smiled.

They climbed a steady rise and leveled off. Lights from the town, Killeen, and the camp beyond silhouetted tall pines at the sides of the highway.

The car shifted into overdrive and picked up speed. Hendrix brought it around a gradual bend and straightened the wheel again.

Then there was a white blurr that ran across in front of them. Bill swerved the wheel to miss it but it was too late. He slowed and looked back. In the headlights of another car he saw a white cat flop up and down in the highway; the Studebaker's tires had run over the rear of the cat and pinned it, mashed it into the asphalt. The cat tried to raise itself up but was stuck. Another car would get the cat's head and that would be all.

Finnegan laughed, What's a matter with you?

Nothing, he said almost shouting.

It was only a fucking cat. Nothing but a goddam fucking cat. It don't hurt you.

How do you know anything, man?

What? Finnegan said.

How do you know anything? You never been dead.

There was a lot of traffic in Killeen. They stopped at a light and several drunken soldiers crossed in front of the Studebaker. They joked and yelled to tell Hendrix to wait a minute. Then Bill and Paul went on, past the post housing duplexes and the small vacant golf course.

## MAY FLIES

The young man squatted and lifted the baby to his chest. He stood and carried his child across and down the length of the narrow hall to a tiny room and placed her in a rickety bed. Pulling up the bedrail, he started out of the room, then noticed the decal on the side toward him and smiled at it, a lamb there, with a light blue bow collar and butterflies around its head.

He sat down on a worn imitation leather couch and began again to study a book on the history of myth. The book rested in his lap and an unlined white card, for notes, was just above it on his knee. Occasionally he would scribble a few words as a page reference on the card and mark the margins of the book with asterisks to show important passages.

The house was very still with the baby in bed. The only sound was now and then the rattle of the wooden bed in the child's room. She had not settled to sleep yet. Outside a car could sometimes be heard, turning.

The dim light from a swivel lamp barely kept him awake. His head would droop to his chest, catch and rise again. He would wake confused. He had been up late the night before, drinking with some of his friends from school. He shook his head and said, Tut tut! to himself. Last night he had known he had to study for the quiz on the myth text. He had to finish it tonight.

He stopped reading and sat straight up and rubbed his eyes. He thought he would like to go out for a walk. The cool damp air would



surely waken him. But his wife didn't like him to leave the baby alone in the house, even for a short while. He stood and parted the curtains and looked out at the street. It curved in a circle at the end of the street, making a sort of keyhole shape before his small yard and the yards of neighbors. It had rained. Water stood in a low place at the entry to his driveway, and around the square hillock where his wife had planted daffodils last year. A quartz iodine street lamp played on the wet asphalt making it shine. He studied the power pole, its alternating rows of splinters in outline, gouged out, like thorns on a huge rose stalk. He counted the porcelain insulators on its crossbar, where the lamp was.

He let go the curtains and walked to the kitchen and took a small pan from the dish drainer. He filled it half full of water and turned on the range, waiting till the pilot light caught and the gas exploded in a blue and yellow six sided star, and rested the pan on the front burner. The stove made a flickering light on the wall. He returned to the living room.

A sketch pad lay open, half on the thin dusty rug and half on the entranceway tile near the side door. With one slippered foot he turned the pad and laughed at what was there. It was a detail in nude female figures, redded about the crotch, turning a softer pink of breast and nipple, to pure white where their faces vanished into the grain of the paper.

But, I can't get the navels right, he said to himself.

For a long time he had sat and looked at his own navel, but it was small, not deep and sensual like he wanted on the figures.

He went back to the stove. The water was hissing steam from the pan. He spooned some coffee powder into a short white mug, put in water and added half the cup of milk, the way he had learned to drink it up north, when he was in the army. Coffee regular, it was called. He set the cup down on the sink counter and waited for it to cool.

Leaning against the sill of the kitchen window, he looked above the yellow cafe curtains at the dark. He still wanted to walk outside. The light from the living room faded into the backyard to the ditch and waist-high weeds beyond it. A wire fence stood most of the way erect, despite the stream of the ditch that washed its posts. At the edge of the yard was a pyramid of stones the department of sanitation workers had raked to clear the drainage. Little squares of light from another subdivision a little way away could be seen. He scratched the grisly beard of his chin and seemed to return to the room when he saw his reflection, his hair and the gray eyes fogged in the glass by water condensed from his breath. He turned and took up his cup of coffee, then stopped and puckered his lips, thinking, then went back to the divan.

Staring at his drawing pad sideways, he drank coffee. It woke him a little and he decided not to study for a while.

I can't say that it's important to me, anyway, he said aloud.

With an inch-long piece of chalk he touched up the rose tint around the crotch on one of the figures and brushed it lightly with a tissue. The red flared like an open flame. He turned away, not wanting to look at the erasure-smudged navels, and lit a smoke. A newspaper on the homemade table in front of him caught his eye. There was a



photograph on the front page of a politician behind a podium with several microphones, making a brushing away motion with one hand. The article quoted the candidate as having said that the bombing should be halted immediately.

He finished his coffee and put the cup down. From the side of his mouth he blew cigarette ashes off the sleeve of his gray sweater. He put on his glasses and straightened them with an index finger and again took up the book. There were a hundred or so pages yet to be read, he noticed, having memorized the number of the last page. The text related a lot of mythological figures from different cultures.

He eased back in the cushion of the divan and began reading:

After this time the emperor was no longer thought of as a deity, rather he is more like a divine earthling whose every movement is a performance of rites. He sits at the head of a pantheon of justice, his people are the followers of his faith, he is all powerful. He has the power over what men do, he tells them how it must be done. He is both king and papacy. And very seldom did a religious patriarch challenge his word.

He crossed his legs and noted on his index card that there was a change in the attitude toward the monarch. But his mind was so clouded with mingling names and dates that he had to check back over the preceding pages to see what empire and time the quotation referred to.

He made a face and shook his head. A car's tires squealed, making the dead end circle of the street out front.

The telephone rang. He looked at it and thought he might not answer. It had been out of order the last few days: when answered, it just buzzed the dial tone. It rang again. On the third ring he got up and took the receiver off the hook and put it slowly to his ear.

Hello?

Hello. Is that you? Do you know who this is?

Yes, he said.

He recognized the voice by the inflection of the question. In the short silence he asked himself, What does she want?

How are you? she said, using the same declination as before.

Okay. I guess.

Do you want to talk to me? I mean, is your wife going to hear what you say?

No. She's not here. She's working tonight.

He shifted his feet.

Well, what I called you about is this: d'you remember the girl I used to hang around with at the library, in high school?

The fat one or the short one with the bumps all over her face?

The short one, she answered. A couple of days ago she was in an accident. Now she's in the hospital. Her husband was nearly killed. She needs somebody to take care of the children.

Huh? Is that what you called me about?

There was no voice but that of a television announcer at the other end.

We have our hands full with ours, he said.

Do you have a child? I didn't know that. How old is he...or is it she?

She's about six months, I guess.

Umm, that's when they're at the best age. Quiet, I mean, and you can play with them.

He didn't answer. In a moment he could hear the kids at her end. They were apparently running in and out of the room, one chasing the

other and making the sound of a siren. The children went away and came back with a little clatter of feet.

Are you sure...I'm surprised you knew me, knew my voice, I mean.

Yeah, un huh. I don't have any friends with that accent. Not since I was in the army, anyway.

You were always talking about my accent! she said, laughing.

In his mind he could see the smile on her face and knew he did not want her too happy and talkative.

What do you do now?

Do?

I mean, where do you work? she asked.

I go to school.

You're in college? What is it, chemistry?

No. I'm an art student. You know, painting.

Oh, she said. I remember you liked chemistry before, that's all.

He switched the telephone to his left ear. He twirled the umbrella, left open to dry on the floor.

Well..., tell me about school, she said.

Nothing to tell. I just go to school.

It must be hard on you. And your wife. If she has to work and everything, I mean.

Oh, I get the GI Bill. It's not bad.

Do you? Oh. Uh..., wait a minute.

He heard a little boy's voice in the background. The child kept saying, Oh, mama, I don't wanna go 'a bed. She fussed at her child, told him to lie still, and the little boy repeated, No! No!

He let the receiver hang down against the wall and went to the couch for his smokes. He walked back with one between his lips, patting his pockets for a match. He picked the phone up by the coiled cord and she was still not there. Then he went to the corner cupboard and got a book of paper matches. He lit his cigarette and blew smoke out and up from the edge of his mouth, and took up the receiver again.

Hello? Hello?

I'm back, he said, I went for a cigarette.

I thought you had gone. I had to put the kids to bed.

He took a long drag off his cigarette and looked for a place to put his ashes. Finally, he tapped them into the open umbrella and they spread into the dampness.

Well, what do you paint?

Huh?

I said, what pictures do you paint?

Different things, you know.

I'd like to see them, sometime.

There's a show at the library at the college. Of mine and some others, he said.

He pushed his glasses up against the bridge of his nose.

Well, she said and sighed, I guess there's not much to talk about.

No. I don't like to talk on the phone, anyway.

Yes, I remember that, now, she said hesitantly. I want to ask you something.

Okay. Shoot.

Can I come and visit you, some time?

Yeah. If you want.

He turned and edged up against the door, bracing himself with his hand on the knob. He took a puff off his cigarette.

Well, I'll see you, then, she said. I mean, good bye.

Okay. So long.

He took the receiver from his ear, looked at it questioningly for a second, then hung it up.

He went to the couch and sat. He took one last drag off his cigarette and rubbed it around in the ash tray till it came apart in little black and light brown flakes, some smoldering. He pushed up his sweater sleeves and rubbed the insides of his forearms.

His mouth was quite dry. He felt as though he were out of breath.

We haven't talked in, let's see.., five years. I haven't seen her since I got back from overseas. Or maybe I have. I could have seen her, and she wouldn't say anything. I probably wouldn't have known it, he whispered.

He laughed through his nose. His wife had almost decided to get an unlisted number, to stop the calls from salesmen. But then the phone had gone haywire. Had it?

He put his glasses back in place and spat lightly several times, then picked a grain of tobacco off his upper lip. Rolling it between his thumb and first finger, he pursed his lips and tilted his head to one side. He looked at the drawing vacantly, and tried to draw a deep sensual navel, this time in the corner of the page. First he made an omega shape, then rubbed its ends with a wetted finger till they faded.

Huh? Huh? he grunted.



Then he drew a bowed line, which would express a welt of fat on the lower belly, and gently rosed the bow, barely touching the paper. He opened his eyes wide and lowered his glasses to the flares at the end of his nose.

He looked at it in the corner of the page, then moved his eyes ever so slowly to the place where the navel would be on the foreground figure.

That's it, he said, that's the way I want it!

He had a tight feeling inside. It was good, to him.

He twisted up his lips and scratched himself around the adam's apple. From the room at the other end of the house he heard the rattle of the siderails of the baby's bed, and hoped she would not waken.

Going to the kitchen again, he fixed some more coffee and milk. He sipped some off, swallowed and stood chewing his upper lip, tasting the drink clinging to his moustache. He nodded. He felt as though he had won something, thinking about the drawing. Then he gulped down most of the cup and cast his eyes quickly, blankly, back and forth across the dark kitchen at the dining table and folding chairs, the yellow curtains with red bric-a-brac and the round shouldered refrigerator.

He finished his coffee and put the mug in the sink, running some water in it so it would be easy to wash. He went to check on his child.

Her blanket had slipped down and he moved it slowly back into place and smoothed out the wrinkles. The room was drafty and the thin drapes moved slightly with gusts of wind. Fans of grime along the frame showed leaks. He bent and stroked the baby's soft fragile hair. It felt thin and airy. He gave the child a light kiss on her cheek and hesitated over her, watching. It was quiet in the room, the baby

breathed silently, only her little chest moved.

Now he felt he could study all night, if need be. He lifted the book to his knee and bent it open till the binding crackled. Taking the end cap off a blue ball point pen and placing his note card on his knee, he began once more to read.

What he was reading began to matter. He thought harder and it was clearer. He read quickly, crossing and recrossing his legs and only occasionally looking up at the sound of an automobile rounding the keyhole shaped curve outside. If his attention drifted from the textbook, he might see the unframed canvas on the wall above the day bed, or the television and wonder what was on. He wrote very little on the note card now.

He heard another car round the circle. This one seemed to overshoot the turn, for he heard gravel from his driveway clatter against the inside of a fender.

He looked up at the curtain and shrugged. It was funny to think that people would still try to shortcut through a subdivision street, as long as subdivisions have been around.

In a moment there was a clunking on the window of the front door. He looked up, but did not go to the door. If there was someone there, he would have used the bell. It was probably those kids again. He thought of the many times the neighborhood kids had knocked on the door or thrown stones up on the roof, then run to the street and held grass to their cheeks in imitation of his beard.

Then it was quiet again for a while.

The second time the knocking came, he got up and strode on tiptoes



to the door and jerked it open and saw her there. They were separated still by the aluminum storm door. He thought a moment, looking at her. He looked at her, seeing in the glass the reflection of furniture in the room, and her, quite motionless, bundled in a cranberry colored synthetic fur coat. She breathed in and out slowly, anxiously watching him, making a fog with her breaths. He held the door open and she came in, her eyes turned intently toward the floor.

He closed the door. Seeing her more closely, he saw what he remembered, her high cheekbones, the sallow complexion and the circles of shadow in hollows under her eyes. Her hair was longer than before, and dull from bleaching. It waved forward and down, covering her ears completely.

He stepped back and she said, Hello.

He nodded and motioned with his hand toward the day bed. She sat down against the wall, under the frameless canvas.

I didn't think you'd come, not right away.

That's why I called, she said still with her eyes cast down.

He took the old leatherette chair, a match for the couch, leaned back and propped his feet on the ottoman. Then he got up and took a cigarette from the pack on the table and lit it.

Smoke? he asked.

No. I'm trying to quit.

He sat down. Noticing her downcast eyes, he looked at his hands in his lap. When she spoke, he raised his head only slightly, seeing her with just his right eye.

I didn't expect you to have a beard.

Yeah, he said. For about six months now.

She took her hands from her pockets and rubbed them together. The cold air had paled them and they were pink only around the knuckles. He realized that she had stood outside for some time before knocking.

She snapped open the clasp of her calfskin purse and took out a small flower printed handkerchief and blew her nose lightly.

I'm getting a cold, she said and smiled a little. I was out in the rain.

He could see her eyes going all about the room, but there was no sign of the impression the run down furniture and clutter of drawing materials and books made on her. Just the nervous quick movement of her eyes. Then she slid to the edge of the day bed and looked at the pad on the floor, upside down to her. She turned her head a little.

Is that some of your work?

Un huh, he said and wetted his lips.

What do you call it?

It's not anything now, he said with a slight laugh. It's just part of a bigger thing I'm working on.

Huh?

I haven't got this part right yet, so I haven't put it in the canvas.

Oh, I get it. Can I see the canvas?

I don't show them to anybody till I'm finished. It's in the other room.

She nodded and looked empty at her kneecap, just out of her coat.

He thought, Her legs are still slim and pretty, at least.

He blew some ashes off the roll of sweater on his chest. He stroked his beard. He crushed the cigarette into an ash tray on an end table by the window. Easing back into the chair, he sniffed in and out a couple of times.

That one, there, is one of mine, he said and pointed to the canvas above her head.

She moved forward to the end of the studio couch and turned to look at it. The painting was done with its foremost features in thick paint, a hard edge relief. Before you was a wall and door frame, very light gray, and through the doorway an easel and scraps of paper on the floor were seen bordered in sharp reds and yellows, acid colors, and another door beyond, leading to what appeared to be a kitchen, with a sink and white cabinets on opposite sides of a small window. Outside the window were loden green leaves on a vine.

She sat up and shrugged.

It's nice.

A grin flitted across his face. He might have explained that the painting was a study in depth, and if you looked straight at it, then stepped to one side, you would feel you were in the room.

Would you like to take off your coat?

No, thank you.

He blinked hurriedly, waiting.

Did you really...Do you want me to leave?

No. Not particularly. It's just hard to talk to you.

Yes, she said, I guess it is, after so long. What does your wife

do?

She works in a plant. A dispensary nurse, he answered.

He looked her in the eyes and she turned her head away. She cleared her throat.

Well, what are we going to talk about?

I don't know, he answered.

Her face was turned down and drawn. She wrung her hands.

I hoped it wouldn't be like this, that's all. There's so much sadness between us, I mean.

Yeah, I knew.

She nodded and picked a piece of fluff from her sleeve and dropped it into the glass ash tray on the floor by her feet.

Could...could we just go somewhere? she asked.

Where?

I don't know, I just want to get away.

She looked up and her eyes were wet. He could see the beginnings of tears spread on her lashes.

If you want. I'll have to take the baby.

Would you do it?

Yeah, I guess.

He got up and went to the bedroom, took off his house slippers and pulled on a pair of run down loafers. The jacket he put on was red nylon with a cotton pile lining. Then he stepped before the mirror of his wife's dresser and combed his hair a bit.

He went out and down the hall to the baby's room and slowly lifted the child from bed, gathering the two blankets around her. He pulled the blankets up to cover the little girl's head. As he went back he

checked his pockets for keys and found them.

She had gone. He switched off all the lamps but the one above the divan where he'd been reading, then went out the side door and down alongside the house, walking on the edge of the driveway.

He got into the car, letting the heavy door close itself. The window was open an inch or so and he closed it with a switch on the armrest. She began to back the sedan out, letting it move in gear at idle speed. A little cry came from beneath the blankets when the car shifted forward.

It's all right, hon, he said and patted the child gently.

He held the little girl's forehead to his neck and her breathing eased.

Lights were on in all his neighbors' houses except one, and the television colored that front window green. They were watching tv in the dark.

They went out by the curb market and down a road between deep ditches. They crossed a bridge and, at the signal from the light, turned onto a dark suburban road. The big sedan rose and fell easily on the wallows in the road. He pointed with his hand to give directions.

Where are we going?

I don't know. Let's just drive out toward the country.

Where? she repeated.

Let's go out toward where my parents live, out in the country.

Oh, okay, if you know a place.

After a minute she said, I don't know how to get there. From here,

I mean.



I'll show you. Keep on this road till it ends.

He latched the door and leaned against the armrest.

Do you want me to take the baby somewhere?

We don't have time. My husband will be off at eleven.

He looked away from her, to the front, and saw two men walking on opposite sides of the road ahead. They were carrying burlap sacks. The men paid no attention to the traffic going by. They looked into the ditches along the sides.

What're they doing?

Looking for empty bottles. I see them all the time along here.

The car jarred over a railroad track with a gate, then passed a wood yard. At a light he pointed to a saloon, an old double deck dance hall building, battered and dirty, sitting on a muddy oiled gravel lot.

That's where they get the beer, and throw the bottles out on the way. Those guys with the gunney sacks are always walking along here.

She smiled and nodded.

Your husband work at night? he said.

No. They're on strike. He's walking the picket line. He's a shop foreman, she said with a sharp nod and an expression of avarice.

Yeah?

Un huh, they got a strong union.

Where do you all live? he asked.

In the east end.

He pointed left and she turned.

They passed a ramshackle vegetable stand and he said, Turn left.



Are we near that old grocery store?

Yeah, it's right up here.

Well, I can find my way now. I came out here some times just before you got out of the service, she said.

I know, mother told me. She said she saw your marriage license in the paper. It was two weeks to the day after I got out.

Is that right?

She rounded a curve by an old grocery with two gas pumps, the kind with gauge faces like clocks, and a hand operated kerosene pump in front of the porch entry. There were signs for home made sorghum in the window. Then she drove more quickly along a narrow straightaway through marshy country. It dropped away from the road, a waste of winter dead reeds and high white grass. This part had been cleared but never planted, and was bordered by a stream and groves of gaunt locust that thickened to a swamp.

He looked at her features in profile, clear, concentrating on her driving. She was trying to hurry. There was not much time. He could tell she was used to driving the big sedan, her movements seemed so effortless.

The car began to strain as it went up the first of the hills that form a wide bow around the southern borders of the city. It shifted automatically into a lower gear and she negotiated several quick turns and began the long ascent that put the hills between them and the city. They had not seen another automobile for a long time and only occasionally did they pass a house.

Are we going to the lake?

No, it's too cold. Besides, we'd never make it in the dark.

Yes, I know. I just wondered, she said. Do you remember the last time we saw each other, we went there?

Yeah, he said and looked down.

He was thinking: that time she had refused him as she always had. He had wanted it to be another way, just honest, them together in the sweet warm sunshine. He had wanted to make love to her on the old burgundy sateen comforter on the thick soft grass by the lake. She had said she was changing religions. Taking instructions, she called it.

And do you remember those insects you showed me in the water?

Insects?

They were in the water, in sacks like jelly, like frog eggs or something. The fish ate at them. They hatched in the sun, and when they hatched, the ducks, you remember, the big white ducks you had, got some of them, and once they were in the air and could fly, the birds dodged around them and tried to eat them.

May flies, he said and nodded.

Now they were in thick woods, the county forest. Trees stood crowded tightly together and from time to time one could be seen fallen partway down against another, rent by storm. Narrow dirt paths, hardly big enough for cars, sloped off from the main road.

Turn, up here, he said.

She slowed the car to a stop before an opening in the forest.

There?

Yeah. It's a hunting lane. You can pull in just under that beech tree, there, and no one will bother us.

She did as he had said. The car grunted as it cut over a rotted fallen limb and rolled it a little way caught on the rear axle. The beech, leaning against some other trees, made a thin grating noise above their heads.

It won't fall on us, will it?

I don't think so, he said.

Now from the darkness and quiet around them, he and she felt alone together. Outside the car was a mottle of shadow. The headlight glare was still in their eyes. They said nothing for a long time. Both tried to appear at ease in the breathless quiet, with only the high twisting noise coming with the wind in the trees.

He removed the pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, then decided not to smoke. After a while she looked down at the child asleep under the wool blankets on the seat between them. She stirred, but did not waken. He raised the baby girl, kneeled on the seat and placed her as gently as he could on the back cushion, then watched as the little girl rolled to one side faced away from them and rested.

She looks a lot like you.

Yeah. But she looks more like my wife--red hair, he said.

I couldn't tell the color, she said.

He moved back and closer to her still at the wheel. He saw her eyes cast down, nearly closed in the dim light.

Their faces were close enough now that he could smell her musty breath. He felt that he wanted to taste her lipstick dry lips and wet them. He touched her shoulder under her coat. He knew somewhere inside she wanted him. He kissed her gently and then moved back. She resisted

a little. He surged forward again to her mouth and began licking. Leaving his lips parted, he glided lightly down her cheek to a spot of jasmine just below her ear. He touched the spot of perfume with the tip of his tongue and she gave a soft grunt. She sighed with a long hush of breath.

Oh, please, she said and for once he was sure he did not know what she meant.

He could picture her making him promise not to hurt her, something stupid. But when she raised her face, he could see her eyes closed tight.

He licked her neck again and again and began caressing her breasts with one hand, then both breasts with both hands. He ran his fingertips back down along the last ribs, almost tickling.

Buttons in the back, in the back, she whispered.

She sat part way up and took off her coat and folded it into a pillow. He reached behind her and separated the long row of buttons and the fastening of her brassiere. She sighed at the touch of his fingers and he kissed her again, this time slowly mashing her lips.

He moved back, kneeling on the hump of the floorboard and pulled her leg around till she was laying full out on the wide seat. She arched her knees. She smiled quietly, her eyes closed languidly. He kneaded the nipples of her bubs alternately and her chin twitched with each little squeeze. Her breath in his ear came more and more shallow.

With a long outrush of breath she said, Move me, please, move me!  
He felt her hand reaching under his sweater, groping with the

buckle of his belt. He felt cooler air on his legs when she pulled the zipper apart. She held him firmly.

Their faces were wet with sweat and saliva.

Taking her hand from across his shoulders, she clumsily removed her panties and forced them a little way under her buttocks.

Now, she said as though to signal a start.

He laid his palm flat on her abdomen and slowly, forcefully moved his fingers lower and stroked her, hesitating in movement, going back and forth across where the tightly bunched fine hair grew then between her thighs. She was warm and silky wet there. He pulled the hair a bit. In a moment he spread his fingers on his lips and traced the bottom of his moustache, leaving a musty paste there to be savored.

She raised her eyebrows in question, she wondered what he was doing.

He mounted her, the dryness of skin scraping, brilliantly hurting, hard and rough. He lunged in from the start, and there was silken warmth in layers folding around. It hurt her and she jerked up. He held her head by a few strands of hair to make the pain more intense.

She hardly responded. With each thrust he levelled all his weight against her. Their pelvis bones slammed together. She must not have liked the pain and the heat so intense. He felt inside as though there were no more than the two of them, flailing in the sweet warmth, but she lay quite still.

He bear-hugged her and she said, Bite me!

It'll show.

Do it! she said desperately.

Now she was getting into it. He teased with a few light nips near



her collarbone, then began a sucking and clamping. She really got into it. The pain was like a stimulant. In a part of a minute she was writhing, moving from side to side to heighten the friction, or kicking with her heels the backs of his legs, hurting.

His calves felt numb with pain. She moved so fast.

The warmth finally seemed to flow from her and he basked in it.

She sent her nails into his back, grabbing and pulling at the slack muscles along his sides. He ground her ear lobe with his back teeth. She began to scratch his back like a dog digging a hole. The scratching sent an idea fleeting through his brain. He forced her hand between them and said, Twist it! She extruded him in her.

With her sharply pointed witch's fingernails she flicked quick agony to the ridge of skin coming up from his scrotum.

Again, he said and she did it.

Again!

In a hurried final thrust he flung himself inside her and raised, feeling many pinpricks on his forehead, looking directly into her startled lustrous eyes. He exhaled full into her face three or four times, holding her by the shoulders, claspng meanly and grinding his teeth as though he wanted to break her back.

He was through before she had made it. He wanted her to make it, a part of him did. She still buckled against him, but she could not make it.

He was still hurting her. At last she stopped and he fell at rest against her, exhausted.

She shuddered.



When he raised again he saw dampness glistening on her face and bent to kiss some of it away. She still puffed as though she'd been running hard. She turned and buried her face in the seat back, saying something, the cushion muffling her words.

Huh?

Your beard is rough, she said.

He pushed himself up a bit and closed his eyes and rubbed them roughly with a circular motion. In a moment he got his breathing right and the air tasted cool and clear again.

He sat fully up in the seat, his head hanging back lolling on the headrest. He sniffed. Feebly he closed his fly and smoothed his clothing. He looked at her, her legs folded against the seat, an expression of hurt on her face, she oozed wetness onto the material of the seat. He forced himself to look away, out the window, when she began mopping herself with the wadded lace panties.

A car went by on the road behind them and he watched its lights fade. He let his eyes come back a little at a time, looking out at the dark woods, the path going back to the pavement, the meagre light of the moon reflecting off the trunk of the sedan, and then at his child asleep.

The broken tree rustled above their heads. The wind blew easily, barely sounding in the branches of the other trees.

He turned back to her when she made an uncomfortable grunt, stuffing the drawers back under her.

She sat up and switched on a courtesy lamp. She looked at the clock on the dash and exclaimed, It's ten o'clock!

You can be a little late.

But, I'll have to stop somewhere. At a filling station, I mean.

She started the car, pulled the shift lever down one notch on the quadrant and backed the sedan out onto the asphalt. The car would move on its own and she would hit the brake. It was quite a way to back up. She straightened and drew her coat around her shoulders. She started the car forward.

Again he watched her, hurrying, cutting from one side of the narrow country road to the other, this time slipping off occasionally and throwing dirt and small stones from the tires. She found her way back, not stopping at cross streets, hardly slowing down. Her driving did not lose its tension until they had passed beyond the last low hill into the suburbs.

He took his child from the back seat, holding her close and gently patting her back. She might waken. When the baby was settled he put a cigarette in one corner of his mouth and lit it with the lighter from the dashboard. He licked his dry lips and spat bits of tobacco from them.

Go this way, he said and she turned.

He motioned toward a service station and she turned off onto the lot, making bells ring inside as they passed the gas pumps. She brought the sedan around to the side.

A sign on the door of the ladies' room read, Door Locked See Attendant For Key. She looked at him expectantly.

I'll get it, he said.

He put the baby down carefully and got out. He went up the side-

walk and in through the door. A guy in a light blue uniform and cap was sprinkling sweeping compound from a tin can and rolling it and the dirt from the floor with a long handled push broom. The attendant bent and picked up a tire iron and a rubber end mallet and placed them on a rack on the wall. He looked up from the oil black floor.

Help you?

Can I have the key, the rest room key?

The rest rooms ain't locked.

Okay, he said.

I don't lock 'em after dark, the man said. But you better hurry up, it's time for me to close.

He went back.

You can go on, it's not locked.

He sat down and watched her go to the door, carrying her coat across her arm. He noticed a spot of dampness on the back of her skirt and wondered if she would see it. In a moment his breath fog clouded the side windows.

In the quavering light of the arc lamps he looked at his nicotined fingers. He felt fully drained out. He tried to keep from sinking into thought, but felt anxious watching the rest room door. She was always watching the last thing we did, he said to himself, she can't see what's happening now. The child by his leg squirmed and he took her up again.

In a moment she came out. She had straightened herself, and looked much the same as when he had seen her at his home. Now she wore her coat. Her hair was smoothed in place and she had bathed her face. She took mincing little steps to the car. Once inside, she reached

between her legs, then studied her hand and nodded.

She backed the car out.

He caught a look from her. He was to himself in thought, biting his lower lip. He turned and their eyes met.

I take the pills, she said. I mean, you don't have to worry.

He cleared his throat.

The black sedan wafted over washboard rolls in the street. Its tires pronounced soft hush-hushes of water splashing. Again they crossed the railroad tracks. He looked up to see the familiar bright lights of the cement plant. Farther on they saw two mastiffs standing guard on a fenced-in plot where fiberglass boats and marine engines were sold. He rubbed a patch clean in the steamed window to get a better look.

She switched on the defroster just as they entered the subdivision. They drove on silently. The tires squeeling was the only sound. She cut the circle in front of where he lived and stopped, not going into the driveway.

He sat and looked at her a minute or so. Her eyes blinked with an easy regularity, peering straight ahead where the headlights shone. Then she rocked irritably on her haunches. He got out, lifting and holding his child in his arms and pushed the door closed with his leg.

The car moved away trailing oil smoke. He wondered if she would show some sign, but could not see her face from behind.

## A FOOL WITH A GUN

Here comes a fool with a gun.  
Watch out for him. --the call  
of the blue jay.

KANTUNG.      LONG.      BISCUIT.

George was lazing in a wallow in the oiled cinder lot before the filling station. His eyes were closed and all of him that moved was his ears, flicking at gnats or perking up at the sound of squirrels chattering in their leaf nests high above the station and at cars passing.

George's hole was over by the soft drink advertising sign. Everybody was gone Sunday morning.

His felt-like skin was rust red and from one wattle hung a sack; he had goiter trouble. He shook his head, and the sack shook, to get some bugs away. He looked up for a moment at the asphalt road that ran up and turned behind some woods to the right to the mountain. You couldn't see the mountain from here. He yawned and lay his head back down, cradling it between his legs, his long u-shaped chin on his paws. It was about time for the man who took care of the gas and sold things from the little store inside to come back.

A car was coming down the road, from the right, backfiring a little.

KANTUNG.      LONG.      BISCUIT.

A tired green and yellow Chevrolet sedan pushing for all it was worth hurried along the narrow pavement. The driver cut it into the lot and stopped on the side opposite the dog. He jumped out and ran



to the door, grabbing a rough hewn post and swinging up on the porch. In one more movement he had unlocked the door and pulled the screen door to, so that it would cool off inside.

Behind the short counter and cash register he found his khaki uniform folded neatly with the cap on top. He changed out of his Sunday clothes into the uniform quickly and hung up his coat and trousers and white shirt, putting the tie around the hook of the hanger. He ran his hand over his nappy hair and put on the cap.

The clock over the cooler read twelve o'clock and he thought, Soon, now; the benediction is probably about finished. Everybody will be shaking hands. That was the way he worked it. He sat at the back with the rest of them and got the ushers at the doors to open them just at the last of the service and he got out and went to the station in time for the regular Sabbath customers.

He checked the ledger hanging by a string near the cash register, noticing that the little filled cakes by the door were low. He checked the items needed on an order pad, and, with some pride, wrote in, George's Place, where the blank said establishment at the top of the bill.

He opened the lid of the cooler to see if there was enough Coca-cola and stuck his hand in the water. It was cool enough. People liked to drink a lot of dopes on a hot day like this.

Then he went outside, carrying a rack of cans of oil. He set the rack down by the gas pumps and stood for a moment looking at the weather-beaten unpainted gray clapboard building with its reddish tarpaper roof and low sagging stoop. In his mind he saw a wide metal sign with George's Place painted on it. Nice to have it, he thought.



Now he could not afford it.

George walked back to the porch and stood waiting, leaning against one of the knobby posts. He recognized the car approaching.

KANTUNG.      LONG.      BISCUIT.

The driver of a new Ford hardtop saw the attendant and waved and pulled into the lot in front of the pumps, throwing cinders. The red bone hound shied at the cinders splashing near him and trotted over to the shade of his little house, his wattles swinging from his neck like an amulet on a chain, not going in because of the cloud of fleas hopping up and down in the air just inside the house.

The attendant came quickly around to the driver's window and put his hand on the door button.

Yes, sir, Mr. George, fill it up?

The man turned and gave him a slow smile, his slowest smile, that made you look away and see something else of him, his pot belly, his gray tinged black hair.

Just two dollars' worth. And check the water and oil. It's about to boil.

The attendant put the nozzle in and latched its trigger at the second notch. Then he went around front and opened the hood. George and his wife argued in the car. He coughed several times and cleared his throat and spat a glob of phlegm onto the cinders. When the attendant came back they were still arguing.

And I want you to go to the doctor about that cough! she said.

George looked hard at her and pursed his lips and looked away.

He saw the negro with the dipstick in his hands.

It's two quarts low. Want me to put it in?

Yes, do, I want you to, George said.

He shook the dipstick and tilted his cap back. He went around and got two cans of oil from the rack and took the nozzle out of the gas filler.

At least get a cold drink to cut that cough for now! the woman said to her husband.

George got out of the car and went inside the store. The cooler was the chest kind; you put a dime or two nickels in a slot at the top, pulled the bottle over and out through a spring door, and opened it on the outside of the box. George stood on the porch and pulled on the bottle of Coke, watching the negro service his car.

How much is it?

Three-twenty. Three-twenty-two, if you take the bottle.

I'll just drink it, George said and took the long last pull off and handed the empty to the attendant with a five dollar bill.

In a minute he was back with the change. George got in his car and rolled up the window so the air conditioner would work. He nodded and drove away.

The attendant went to the porch and sat down. He wiped the motor oil off his hands onto the sweaty spot on a roll of fat formed above his belt. The work on the engine had made him hot. And he was a bit disappointed because quite a few of the people he considered regular customers had driven past without so much as a wave.

He sighed and squeezed an inch from his nose. He leaned forward

on his hands, his elbows on his knees. He got up slowly when he saw a taxicab coming toward the station.

KANTUNG. LONG. BISCUIT.

They came up the slight drag, trailing a wisp of Georgia red clay dust behind the taxi. They were coming up fast, with the light on top blinking to indicate a fare.

The station attendant came around, cautiously. Right away he thought something was wrong. Nobody ever took a cab out this far from town. Neither the man driving or the other one was dressed like a cab driver. Both of them wore denim pants and jackets with light blue poplin shirts. And they had burr haircuts, so you could see the pink of their scalps. The man on the passenger's side was smaller, and dumpily built, and had a tatoo, a little blue dot under his left eye. The two had the same pallid complexions.

Still he said, Fill 'er up?

The man at the wheel glanced up at him and laughed.

What can I do for you?

You hear that? the man with the tatoo said, What can he do for us?

The man opposite hadn't heard. He was too busy looking at the store and behind and in front, up and down the road.

What?

The boy says, what can he do for us, George.

Oh, said George.

He got out of the cab and, standing up with his arms above the roof, he pointed a gun at the negro. The pistol was recently blued and

clean; it looked like a police service revolver. When the man with it grinned, you noticed his teeth, rotted to points like dog's teeth and saw the thin lines running together into a vee just under his eyes.

Here's what you can do for us, George said. You can go inside with me and give me all the money in the cashbox. Get with it.

Don't throw lead around, now, the driver said.

He turned part way around in his seat, staring in the direction from which they'd come. George and the negro went in the store, latching the storm door with the brass slide bar latch.

Inside, George held his pistol on the attendant and waited, smiling, looking for a moment at his reflection in the glass at the top of the register. The sweating attendant rang up a No Sale, but held back from handing out the money. George reached around and pulled the bills from the first two compartments.

Keep the change, he said with a lisp.

Then he motioned the negro toward the door and folded the money and put it into the belly of his shirt. He had no pockets. He took down two cartons of Pall Mall cigarettes and a box of kitchen matches.

Go on, he said and waved the gun.

They came back out, sticking close together. A young boy watched them from alongside the outhouse, waiting for someone to come out. The convicts watched him carefully.

Hurry up, George!

George snickered and picked at his nose with one finger.

I was just thinkin, we ought to take him with us. For a hostage, you know.

What for? Who'd want him back?

Okay, George said, but listen, boy, don't you tell no-body, you hear? Cause we'll be back if you do.

Yes, sir.

George got in and they took off, going toward the Baptist church, up the camelback mountain road, showering the negro attendant with cinders. The hound got up from his shade and ran a little way after the stolen taxi, barking. His master put his hands over his eyes and rubbed.

KANTUNG.      LONG.      BISCUIT.

When the cab had disappeared behind the woods, the attendant ran back to the outhouse, looking back over his shoulder. He banged the railroad board door with his fist.

I'm going as fast as I can, the voice inside said.

You gotta go get the po-lice! Please!

Hunh?

The paper dispenser on the wall rattled and there was a light tearing noise. The man unlatched the hook inside and opened the door, buckling his belt. He pulled the fly of his pants closed and stepped out.

They just robbed me, the negro said and pointed up the road.

The other looked in the direction of the mountain. He flashed his blue eyes and looked away, showing the attendant the square pad of fat on the back of his neck. His redheaded son had a peashooter and plastic bag of navy beans; he blew some at the attendant and the negro waved his hands from side to side to protect his face.



Who was it?

Two men. They're in a taxicab. Please, go tell the police.

Okay, the man said. Stop that, George, jr.

The boy stopped blowing beans for a moment.

Don't know what to do exactly.

You got to do something, the negro said.

He was sweating heavily now. The perspiration had spread out on his poplin shirt in the shape of large chrysanthemums under his armpits.

I won't never get my money back! he cried.

The attendant turned heavily and stared up at the trees. The boy blew three or four dried beans at him and they just bounced off his breast.

Stop! the father shouted and put his hand over the end of the bamboo peashooter. Now, George, jr, you can go faster'n me. Run up home and tell mommer to call the police down here in a hurry. Go on.

The boy ran off, cutting across the asphalt and up the red bank of a ditch. He went through some broomsage and down the other side.

I just come up her for a dope, didn't know I'd get in on a robbery, he said and laughed.

The attendant bent his head forward looking at his feet. The other turned and went into the little store, leaving the negro standing in the hot sun. In a while he came back out with a soda in one hand. The negro locked the door.

In the time that passed before the patrol car came, the attendant walked about kicking the hot dusty black cinders with his brogans. He would turn his back in the direction of town and wait a minute,



listening for the sound of tires on the road, and when he heard nothing, would turn quickly, as though the police van had sneaked up on him. He opened and closed his hands in his front pockets.

Finally he saw the police coming in a black station wagon very plainly marked and pocked all over with dents made by rocks thrown and he walked to the edge of the road. He shaded his eyes with one hand.

KANTUNG.      LONG.      BISCUIT.

The wagon narrowly missed the attendant. One cop leaned out his window, his helmet and little plastic visor flashing the sun, and yelled, Which way?

That way, up towards the mountain.

They did? But there's no way out, that way, the cop said.

Yes, sir. I guess they didn't know that.

The policeman opened the back door and let him in. He could see by the negro's eyes, the size of half-dollars, that the man was afraid.

Don't worry, the cop said, I just want you to tell us the car when you see it.

The filling station man nodded and mopped his brow with a folded red handkerchief. He got in and they hurried away.

They started in to the climb up the mountain. They were being careful. They might meet the escaped convicts coming back down, since there was no other way out.

The car crossed a rusty iron bridge. The pavement was a little loose and split from freezing the winter before. Occasionally there was a chuck hole. Trees alongside were coloring up for spring; some

were pears and they had small white blossoms; once in a while they saw a plum tree with its pink and red buds. At a last turn left the road flattened and the police van shifted into high gear. The main dome of the mountain surged into view above the pavement like a huge animal from the sea, and the sergeant driving slowed the car to a crawl coming upon the taxicab.

The negro knelt in the well between the seats.

Good, there's no tourists up here anyway. You see them?

No, said the other. They'll be hard to spot with all these trees. Must of run down toward the knob.

Maybe so, George, I dunno.

They eased out of the wagon, keeping low and running from behind one tree to another. They went hesitantly, leap-frog fashion, until they were at the eastern side of the parking lot, before a reddish yellow sandstone boulder with the sign, Trail to Dome, and an arrow painted on it.

George, the more senior of the two, looked down the path that dropped neatly between trees from the back part of the camelback to the main knob, and then raised his eyebrows at the other cop. The young one shrugged and shook his head.

Look, over there.

George pointed in the direction of the gray painted stairs that went up the side of the mountain. The two convicts were just stepping onto the top platform. For a moment they crouched, then disappeared into the brush.

We got them now! the blond private said.

The policemen ran down alongside the trail staying in the cover of the freshly green trees. The trail was filled with brown pine needles which rilled over some few rocks and exposed roots in a flow like water in a stream. The men moved as quickly as they could, sometimes getting hung in briars they hadn't seen, their eyes fixed on the rocky dome of the mountain.

The cover thinned at the bottom of the wooden stairs and the two stopped. A shot rang out and cut through the uppermost branches of a tree nearby.

How we gonna get up those stairs?

I don't know.

George turned back in the direction of the parking lot on the back hump. He had heard gravel slide. It was another police van.

Go back and find out what they know. Tell them to draw fire from different spots and we'll try to get up.

Okay, the private said.

He stood and ran, just barely in the edge of the trail this time. A slug struck near his foot and he flung himself into a small bush and tumbled over till he was behind it. Then he scabbled up on hands and knees and stayed to the woods coming up by the side and lifting himself up over a stone wall that bounded the parking lot.

Don't shoot! he yelled to the other policemen.

He ran to the back of their cars and sat, leaning against one rear tire.

The sarge sent me back, he said, puffing.

Yeah?

Yeah, the private said, stopping to get his breath. Uh! Cut my hand when I fell.

He picked some dirt from the red cut, then rubbed his sore knee.

What do you guys know?

Them two escaped from the pen early this morning. Only got one gun. Wonder why they come out this way? No way out. Anyway, they took a service weapon off a guard, a thirty-eight, so that's all they got.

George says for you to stay here, spread out and get them to shoot at you and we'll try to get up the steps.

They nodded. There were some shots. The men looked over at the dome. George had taken the first flight of the twisted wooden stairs.

That's four shots, a corporal said.

Who's the nigger?

Huh?

Who's that in the wagon? he repeated.

Oh, he said, that's the one they robbed. Took his money. I better go back to George.

Okay.

The blond cop went back the way he'd come. He hid behind a supporting barricade at the base of the stairs, but could get no closer without exposing himself.

Just then there was a double open burst of shotguns, and pellets struck the leaves of the tall red maple trees at the near side of the crest. The policemen back at the lot had each fired a riot shell.

The convicts returned one shot.

George fired up towards the top landing from his position behind

a jutting stone and the criminals fired their last shot. It ricocheted off the stone sending little shards of rock into the fallen leaves at the foot of the stairs.

That's all his ammo, George.

Let's go! George yelled.

The blond cop grasped the hand rail and pulled himself up the steps worn bare of gray paint in the middle by many climbers. He met George and the two of them hid for a moment behind the jutting rock, bracing their feet against cross boards put there for traction in wet weather. They went up quickly. There was some wind, and the old wooden staircase moved a little of its own weight. Rusted twisted cables held the stairs by two iron spikes driven in the stone at the top.

The convicts were nowhere to be seen. The two cops lay down behind some small bushes next to locust trees and one saw the pistol taken from the guard at the prison, laying on some pine needles by the trail. The policemen advanced crouching to a place where the trail went narrowly between two boulders, a fatman's misery, and knelt and listened. There was no sound except for the wind in the trees. They looked at one another questioningly.

Okay, George spoke out, give yourselfs up. You ain't got a chanst.

Still no sound. Leaves rustled in the breeze.

The two cops stood full up and looked out into the exposed rock of the dome, fifty feet or so away. They moved slowly to the edge of the little woods before them, but still did not see the escapees.

The thought, They might have jumped, crossed both their minds and



the cops crept to the sheer edge and peeped out over it. Nothing but crumbled stone at the bottom of a drop of about a hundred yards, and then the woods shaded by the mountain.

Go back and check, George said waving his revolver.

The private ran to the stairs, dodging through the trees.

Nope, nothing here, he said.

He came back and they checked on around the dome, going by where the rock becomes a rounded point you can see for miles. No sign. George showed the private a metal plate marking the elevation of the highest point of the double hump mountain. But they could find no trace of the desperadoes.

May be they are in the trees.

## NEVER ENOUGH PEOPLE

I let the car coast to a stop on the curb and set the handbrake. I opened the door and got part way out, then stuck my head back in.

What did you say you wanted?

Just get me a regular box, like we always get. I'll give him some of mine, she said, gesturing in the direction of the child in the back seat.

Okay.

I closed the door and went across the lot towards the painted brick building. Cracked scaly mud, dried by the hot sun splashed from under the soles of my black workboots and powdered them. I cut over to the sidewalk and strode up close to the little building, staying in the shade. Out front on the side next to the street was a short rail made of four inch pipe to protect the restaurant. You could tell the pipe had been welded with gas, and poorly, the welds were rough and barbed puddles of metal. I went in the farther door; there were not so many people standing around it.

Inside were six or seven customers. I waited for two women in front of me to place their orders. They were dressed for a hot day, in bermuda shorts and white blouses and thonged sandals.

We wanted separate checks, the thick nosed one said.

You didn't tell me that. I thought, since you came together.

The dumpy little woman behind the counter rewrote the orders and handed the women the little strips off the bottoms of their sales checks.

They stepped back against the wall to wait. The cashier raked the sweat off her brow with one finger and turned to me. I could see the name Lil embroidered on her uniform dress above her right breast.

Yes, sir?

Two economy boxes, two cokes and a small milk.

You want 'ny cole slaw? she asked.

Yes, two slaws.

Lil pushed back a few strands of hennaed hair that had fallen from under the small white cap on top of her head. She handed me the bottom part of my saleslip. I moved back a few steps and leaned against the sill of the big window between doors. The sun beat on my back.

There was very little talk. Across the room at the end of the counter a guy leaned on his elbow and stared impatiently at the cashier. He looked in my direction. His eyes went back to Lil. Then he looked away. He stared at her and looked away. A fan in the attic above our heads made a slow whistling drone and nearly drove out the crashing sounds of the women who prepared chicken in the kitchen. They took the sales checks from clips on a turntable and laid them down on the sill of the low opening opposite the counter and, when the orders were finished, put the chicken dinners in flimsy paper boxes atop the slips.

Beside me was a cigarette machine. I rested my right arm on it. The chromed keys that worked the thing were hot from the sun and I moved my hand away to the painted part.

All the customers were impatient. That was the way it was, there were never enough people to wait orders. I had gotten chicken there several times and there were never enough people to take your order

and fill it.

Two negro teenagers in blue denim overalls with galluses came in and stood at the counter waiting for the cashier to come to them. They looked like construction workers, too. Probably hod carriers. Both had thick upper arms and shoulders and broad full chests.

I need some help out here!

O-kay. Just a min-nit, said one of the cooks.

I looked out the window. Cars were going by in a steady stream, leaving town in a rush to get home Friday evening. The traffic was bad here. There were so many lights, and the street was four lanes and ramps run to and from the superhighway. The work of the road crew on a sewer line left a sharp dropping cleft across the pavement and each thing that crossed it jolted the buildings. All along the road were small restaurants, carry-outs with specialty menus like this one. Directly across was a camping trailer franchise. One of the salesmen was closing shop for the day, folding down the canvas tent walls of the campers, then folding the metal bays over and locking them with a bar latch on top, one at a time.

The two women in shorts left and the guy moved from his place at the end of the counter nearer the cash register. He bit his thumbnail then pretended to study it. I looked at the stub of my order. The number on it was 060330.

The waitress called out, Twenty-nine!

The nail biter sidled up to the cash box. He took his wallet from a hind pocket of his pants.

Three-oh-nine, with tax.

What about the drinks? he said. I ordered two drinks.

You'll have to get them in the machine, she answered, waving her hand in the direction of an upright cooler just outside the door.

He paid her from a five dollar bill and put his change away, holding out a quarter and a nickel for the drinks.

Two more cars pulled up outside. One was a light green Chrysler station wagon, a fairly new car with just the driver, and behind him a small coupe with the yellow bumper lights on. The woman in the little German automobile came in first. Apparently she had called in her order. She went right to the register and called out the name Murphy to the girl who had come from the kitchen to give Lil a hand.

Could you add two pints of whipped potatoes to that?

What? the cook asked.

I want two pints of potatoes, too. Please.

The girl slammed the thin little boxes down on the counter, three high, trying to be rude, then opened the door on the stainless steel humidior and got the extras for the lady. She rang up the sale.

A tall burly man with red hair and a sallow complexion was placing his order with Lil.

I looked at my watch without really noticing the time. The burly man backed up and stood next to me. He was wearing a yellow lightweight shirt with an open collar and pin striped summer slacks and muckluks on his feet. I looked at his sales slip and discovered that he was just after me, number 060331. There was something about his hands. He was losing the pigment off them the way a negro does when he gets old. The outer skin was peeled off his palms and two inches or so up the



insides of his wrists. When he saw me looking at his hands for a long time, he crossed them and laced the fingers together against his belt so I could not see.

The cashier called out my number. I went to the counter, taking out my wallet.

Two-fifty-eight, with the tax, Lil said.

I gave her three ones.

You get your cokes in cans from the machine over there.

I nodded and took my change. I went to the door and started out. The hot still air met my face. Holding the door with my left foot, I turned to the guy with the mottled hands.

How'd you do that?

It's the chemicals, he said, the chemicals at the plant. I don't know why. It's just the chemicals.

I blinked and nodded once as if I knew what he meant. Then I went on out and joined my family.