SHELNUTT, EVE B. Performance and Other Stories. (1973) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 91.

It was the purpose of this study to manipulate the language and the form of the short story in order to share with the reader ideas, moods, sensations, and a sense of place and character which seemed impossible to share by other means.

PERFORMANCE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Eve B. Shelnutt

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1973

Approved by

Fred Chappell
Fred Chappell

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Thesis Adviser Fred Chappell

Oral Examination Committee Members Fred Chappell

J. Kelly-Smith

Michael H. Riley

March 1, 1973
Date of Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERFORMANCE

She set the table for him, never forgetting the bread. She bought Gills Hotel Special coffee. She changed his sheets when she changed her own. And even: when he talked or moved, her body twitched, so much movement in the spine, the neck, the mouth she didn't feel wasted.

They went on expeditions. In the stores, ladies selling material or lampshades thought of them as man and wife. But who cared in the country? She and her father had similar scavenger-hands and mobile lips, actor-like when the sellers hedged. He only bought at cost.

Now his house had a washer and dryer, a stainless steel sink. It had two velveteen cushions to go on the Danish chair, one cushion of yellow stripes, a motion-color; the other: brown flowers and brown leaves and black stems.

At one end of the L-shape, the house inside was panelled ash-gray, and at the other, chocolate brown. A black china bank in the shape of a pig sat on the window ledge in one room, to go with the ties which drew the curtains back. Yellow straw flowers were in the window where the sun hit first. His rooms more or less went together.

Here, she unbraided her hair. Time passed, and they waited for the electricity lines to make it down the road so he could hook up the machines and finish the house.

Four miles away, where the lines stopped, a seamstress sewed cushion covers, with welting and zippers and tassels. No plump couch to sit on and no unnatural light to read by, they slept a lot.

In the daytime, she embroidered. He envisioned one tapestry chair to sit beside the fireplace when it came time to unhinge the pots above the grate and put them on the Hotpoint. And he fingered the hems of the curtains she was to get to after the chair. What he saw were Chinese figures in a procession of legend. To her, they all looked alike: herself, her father, Chinese emperors, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Their only relative who visited drove down from Tryon with a basketful of violet-colored plastic flowers, and bud vases with fluted tops, and revelations: "The Disciples married. Finally. They got confused, of course. But happy. They married men."

"Which of your sisters is she?" she would ask him when Estelle drove off again, because he had two or three he hadn't mentioned enough for her to place.

"Shit. Get the whisk broom and get the hair off the back of the chair. And throw the junk away. Bury it."

It was long red hair, hair that had never been cut, glorious hair left flowing around a wizened face.

"You didn't marry?" he asked. He had, "Yes, indeed, I did it twice."

"No, no: I might marry," she said.

"Linda has the leaf to my dining room table, you know."

She should have married, but the oldest daughter and the youngest daughter had rushed, and once the succession was broken, it didn't matter when. She was trying to get ready. She wrote this man she might love secret letters, nothing in them: "The sun here is beautiful. I walk a lot--I had almost forgotten what it was like to be barefooted."

He would be amazed to see her like this, not very dressed. Only dressed when it was time to buy. He might not recognize her in wash dresses, her hair let down, the holes where the pierced earrings went dried shut. No makeup, a slight belly which might seem indecent to him unless it was seen after he made love to her, a shaking body loosed.

What sense she was after: being under him with not one thought available. Then she could talk in grocery stores. Then she wouldn't feel either naked in front of other people, the unsatisfied look always showing in tiny lines around the mouth, or too dressed, like a padding of fat, so anyone could wonder if she ever undressed all the way. How to like other women and the men who went with them

and not on seeing think: house-play, and: I am ashamed.

He might ask What are you doing down there? So she kept him quiet, like putting a wet finger on his lips, with these words about sand and the plumage of crows. Not very often; he wouldn't believe it very often.

So she was there for the summer routine. Her father taught it to her, and, if she forgot, he taught it to her again. Three times a week they ate eggs, two times a week oatmeal from Ireland because the grain was intact, one other morning nothing at all, to flush the system out, and on Sundays: anything they wanted. There were six kinds of vitamin bottles, one much larger containing vitamin C, to put on the tiny table. He didn't want ridges forming on his gums, and he didn't want the walls of his arteries to lose their give. Meat for dinners, and always the salad, with no skins removed from the carrots, radishes, or tomatoes.

He looked her age. When she saw him for the first time in years, he said, "Well: why not?" She wanted to unroll, and then to stop flat.

He did get the newspaper, on Thursdays when the buys were advertised and he could look from the back sections to his rooms and

see what they had on sale he needed. Supposedly, the house would be done at once--a combustion, irreducibly complete when the last thing he wanted for it was advertised and slid from their hands to his hands and into place: the last variation finding its theme, or like a swan when the last feather's raised. And sometimes he forgot; he had her make notes. "A watch. A gold watch, not one of those Timex jobs. That ought to complete my jewelry needs."

Then, Fridays, they dressed. The kind of clothes to make a career in: cardigan jackets with silk blouses and gold-plated bracelets and virgin wool skirts and stacked heels and the limpest hose; or three-piece suits and shirts with cuffs and ties with matching handkerchiefs and hats of houndstooth plaids. He saw every stitch; they told each other when a button was loose. And they liked how each other looked. In heels, she was his height. But he moved faster. He never paused.

She might write in a secret letter: "Love, we come home with big and little bags--thread or a mixer or three-quarter nails--and we dump them on the double bed in the room that's out of use, and we check them off the list, and all this time the sun is going down, flattening the sky, and is finally out except at the edges, like a plate, rimmed. I go look out the window, dressed like this (you would remember), and then, in this expanse, withstanding the twilight

composed, I might be invincible. I might promise."

Except he would be afraid, as she was afraid of orchids, to read the extraneous.

"Look," her father said to a woman selling drapery at a department store, "I know there's been a man like me before who conceived of reversible drapes: this brown for the summer and this beige for the winter." And since the woman sent them both to the home office of the Armco stations where the woman thought she remembered seeing reversible drapes, it was very appropriate they were dressed like this, in the lounging area looking up at the tiny folds made in the German fashion with string. "Do you think you understand that?" he asked.

Finally the team from the electric company strung the house up. That night, they baked bread and broiled a steak. He got out the picture of Linda and put it on the wall where the inset light was. They didn't think to read.

"I might not want her back, you know," he said. "One night--we were living in Washington--she said to me, 'John, I've been thinking,' and I rolled my eyes and I said, 'Yes,' and she said, 'Maybe I haven't done the right thing.' So I had her call him up--ass--and she said, 'Could you at least go out when he comes?' and I said, 'If I'm out, I'm out, if I'm not, I'm in.' So he came and

we moved the furniture over to his place."

"What about the little girl?"

"Well, sure, it was confusing to her. Linda would come over and bring her and she'd run up and say, 'Daddy, do you love us?' and I'd say, 'Sure, honey, but your mother can't make up her mind what she wants.'"

"She's pretty. They're both very pretty. Mother was pretty too."

"Your mother talked too God-damn much."

The morning after the electricity lines had been attached, he took out his skill saw, to even the beams which stuck out irregularly from the tin roof. She got her little sewing machine from her car and put it on the table, and soon there was a double hum, inside and out, his long drone and her short rasps as she tried to remember how to make the drapes with a string hidden inside. She could see his legs from where she sat, or, rather, his jeans of the heavy 16-ounce denim which stayed stiff in the absence of a breeze, only lifting slightly when he moved across the scaffold. Then she looked up later and saw he must have moved.

But he was at the door; he said, "O.K." through the screen, and when he opened it, she saw first how white his face was, then how red and dripping the handkerchief was wound around his hand.

"What you do--listen carefully--is go out and look for it. I've cut a thumb off, and I want it sewn back on, and while I drive to the doctor's, you have to find it, you have to wrap it in ice, and bring it over to the doctor's at the corner near Frank's. Do you have that?" His teeth were barely moving, his jaw twitched. But, otherwise, she could see: it was a job.

"Wrap it up tight," he said, and after she had put a t-shirt around the handkerchief and tied it with string, he said, "Now you do exactly what I said."

But even in the sun, she couldn't find the piece of his hand in the sawdust and shavings. She got sick looking, especially sick when she realized he hadn't cried out. And besides, they had not remembered to connect the refrigerator, and the ice in the chest was gone. It was done. She walked to the spring at the edge of his property and stuck her own fingers in the cold water.

And he saw it was done, too. When he came back bandaged, at dusk--a wasted day--he said, "All right. It was my fault. But I hate it. I hate it."

With his hand useless for construction, he went off for two weeks to do piece work with his typewriter, the hunt and peck system,

writing speeches for politicians who needed dedicative oratory for libraries and country fairs. He had connections; the jobs had beginnings and ends and no one remembered him unless he came around again.

In his absence, she sewed. She pretended to be away when Estelle came the first Saturday, banging on the door and calling out, "Johnny! Oh Johnny, are you home?" Then, back a dozen paces from the door, among the first row of bushes, she squatted and, in tongue, blessed the house, or cursed it, or simply received a sign.

It rained, and sometimes lightning accompanied the rain, so she stopped sewing. She sat cross-legged on the twin bed, flinching with the light and the roll of thunder. He seemed to be missing--the way he lived. A stylist. And she counted her own practical talents. Really, she thought, they must be separate--the sewing and cleaning and rocking--or: what is the point, bedding down? She might write: I <u>want</u> to be faithful. Except what she meant was no lover's concern.

She felt sleepy when he got back, and ashamed at how little work she had done to pay for her meals and bed and the quiet. He brought the couch covers back with him, and when she got the foam stuffed in, they took turns flopping down. For whatever reason, the covers were bright red and the welting gray and the loose cushions brown. But it was a very soft couch. He slept there the first night, and when she got up to make breakfast, she saw the bandage was off

and the wound rounded with skin.

First, the table-leaf came by postal express, in a narrow crate, so on the expanse of the table, he put new candles.

"Did she write?"

"I gave her ten dollars for her trouble, if that's what you mean," he said. "Besides, we're satisfied, aren't we?"

"I thought . . . "

"Don't think," he said laughing. "Eat up."

Then Estelle's two boys drove down. They thought Estelle was the one coming, the sound of her pickup on the ruts in the road, and them parking the same place she parked, at the edge of the creek he hadn't bothered to bridge, it was so shallow and only bothered her.

The boys walked up saying, "God! Some crazy pad!" and let the screen door slam behind them. Her father came out dressed for them, in a wool sarape and a turtle-neck shirt and corduroy pants. But Raymond and Jesse didn't seem to notice, to appreciate. They went around picking up the red glass rooster on the mantle and the bottle in the shape of a violin and the brass tray, whistling between their lips, and when they got tired, they started strumming on the red-painted guitars they carried with them. "Uncle Johnny, what'll it be?"

"Your preference, boys," he said, then, "no, I know--play a little Dylan. I heard the kids went wild over him; let's hear what for."

Raymond flipped the hair off his forehead and picked out a tune, talking while he played, the words to the song, then, "You heard the kids liked it, huh? You think maybe it wasn't your sweet little bride? and oh, how the times, they is all gone to hell. . . . "

Jesse, the little polite one, said, "Serious, where'd you get all this stuff?"

"More to the point," said Raymond, "is when do you work. Work?"

She was stiff; suddenly she liked Estelle. But he wasn't mad, he sat tapping his foot.

"Tell you what, boys," he said. "I'll take you on a little ride, I'll show you a little bit of Americana. I'll--no, look at it this way: which of you does what? Jesse?"

"Work on the line, down at Fork Shoals."

"Raymond?"

"Truck-driving man, why you say?"

He wouldn't wait for her to dress, so she went in the same dress, and sat up front in the Hudson next to him, the boys in the back, snickering and punching each other in the ribs until he pulled over to the side of the road and asked, "Well, do you or don't you:

want to learn something? Make up your minds."

"We do," they said, "we do."

When they got to 175, he pulled off the median and made them all get out and start collecting all the bottles along the strip. He opened the trunk and told the boys to put them there. It was getting dark; cars were infrequent, but when one came by he stopped, and with the bottles stuck on his fingers, nine where there might have been ten, he watched the car go by, and it was a flapping silhouette, with color from the bottles and the yellow flash of the headlights. Little Jesse inched the car forward so they wouldn't have to walk so far. And in an hour, they had the trunk full and the car floor full, and Jesse and Raymond had to sit with their feet on the bottles while he drove to the A and P to cash them in.

"All right!" her father said. He counted out five dollars to Jesse and five dollars to Raymond and one-fifty for the glove compartment. "That's what I mean to tell you," he said. "Americans waste. And if you learn that simple basic principle, you're on your way."

In the lights of the parking lot, the boys folded their money and shuffled their feet, solemn, and when they got back to the creek, they jumped out, and Jesse went in to get their guitars, and they said, "Bye," and they drove off without wheel-spins or headlights to scare the rabbits stiff in the road.

She ached.

Then a time of good weather came, and the house was noisy with banging and sawing and boards bumping and wrenches knocking on pipes and him splashing his feet in Epsom salts. Every day or so he looked around and said, "Well!" It grew hotter, and she tied his work shirts around her like a halter. They went out buying less, using what he had, rushing because the heat was oppressive and because it was the last summer month.

She had no idea how to make the figures on the curtain hems. She used a lot of black thread and white dots for cheeks on what looked a little like women's faces, and many sprays of cherry blossoms. She sat with the material across her lap, on the cool stone steps, lifting up the material now and then to let a breeze hit where she sweated between the knees. The steps faced the road, far off and almost moving, the light playing tricks, and she knew that if she walked to the mailbox, black snakes would be asleep on the tar.

From where she sat, he was a shadow, and the ladder was another shadow, and the scaffolding another. Around her feet, the extension cord for the saw moved as he moved. She looked up at the road and down at the thread and sometimes to the shadows, as if <u>they</u>

were working and were not a semblance. And then: he fell.

She saw the fall in this semblance, a flash across the ground, and then the sound from around the corner, and the sound of the cord jerking out of the outlet inside the house. But she wouldn't move. No.

It was Estelle who made the procession come--all the children and their children and their children's children, and even Linda and the little girl, and even the Senator from their district who gave a speech he wrote himself, and even the oldest and the youngest daughters. Cars of all colors strung around the hills and down to the house, and the screen door slammed open and shut. And he looked almost the same, the broken parts covered with a paisley quilt they had bought together at J. M. Field's, the head a little raised on the newly covered couch where they put him, Estelle and the boys, and the partial thumb covered with other fingers, her part. It was a busy wake.

Except for Estelle and Raymond and Jesse, none of them had seen the house. And, with him gone, it looked a mess.

They took her, them coming in pairs and alone, into the corners of the house that day. And they whispered, over and over, "You were here with him: what was he trying to do?" But she shook her head.

Why talk?

THE APPRENTICE

She leaves him in a well-ordered room, with even the wilted daisies drawn from the vase of others still fresh. This order is a rule with her though she does not know there is a strictness about this other life beginning. Like a new baby, she is on a schedule. Someone feeds her; she thinks it is her husband. He is a good man. On schedule she stands at the door, on her way out for a package of cigarettes, and, looking at him bent over his papers, she thinks: "He is a good man. I married a good man." He has the kind of face which looks healthy in any light. She has refused for months to go into K-Mart with him to buy tools and car oil. She says the fluorescent lighting makes everyone appear dead-skinned. But not him. Sometimes she is able to see him at the check-out counter from where she waits in the car. At those times she imagines that his skin is growing even more healthy under the glare which is like that glare the police use to wear their suspects down unto confession. He is so good he will last forever.

Now, at the door, she says twice to herself, "Good, good," and this is part of the schedule. It is a self-adjusting schedule; it speeds up almost of its own accord, as new machines in factories do when their electronic devices detect that a worker is ready to supersede his quota. In those factory cases, it may be that the worker has merely had a happy thought, an exaltation in the fingers,

but the machine is not programmed to retreat when the thought is gone. The worker thinks he has suddenly grown more tired. Years ago Anne would never have considered making sentences of her feelings for him. Before the year is out, she will be able to talk about him in whole paragraphs. It is what feels like cause and effect that she is learning: how things work. A baby, once having discovered his mouth, uses it; it fills up--food, liquid, words. The mother would cry if the baby did not use his mouth; if he did not use his mouth, the doctors would attach wires and pieces of plastic to the skin, in and out. It would be an unholy thing.

"I'm going out for cigarettes," she says to him. "To Kroger's. I'll be right back."

He does not ask why she is always out of Winstons at eight-thirty at night. He may notice that the porch light behind her head makes her brown hair appear golden, that the sound of crickets in the bushes is like perfume, that she has become prettier: if there had been babies, she might appear weighted down, like a pear tree in season. As it may be to him, she is like a reed on which her hair blows. Her dress is wheat-colored, the color of the rug, the same color as sand on a Texas farm. It was a long time ago that he originated from any place, but it may have been a Texas farm. All the colors in their house are made from that sandy base color, as if they had added varying amounts of red clay, from another section of the country, to each fabric and texture. If either of them wore pure red, he would

be surprised; his eyes would jump. She should give up smoking. He has, in fact, never seen her smoke. But he doesn't think of this. In his hand is a sheath of papers filled with numbers which mean production is up or down or maintaining its own equilibrium. What is it his company makes? She asks him this sometimes, then she forgets his answer. And so she leaves him with his head bent over the table. It could be years ago; he could be an accountant in another country. It is an old, old profession. She married him because he did not do something newfangled.

But, of course, she has not <u>always</u> gone out at eight-thirty at night, and he was not always an accountant. But who, on an investigation of the neighborhood, would know? The maids who have finished serving dinner to their employers are lined up along the street, their dresses like muted lights which children need in their rooms if their dreams are of warlocks or horses--blue, yellow, occasionally crimson. They are waiting for men who come in cars blue, yellow, or crimson. Very little food is actually blue; it is against some natural law. She could herself get into one of those cars with big tires. She could go over to the East End tonight; there are possibilities. But she does not think of them in that way because she is busy in another motion, taking short steps. She is too tall, she feels hindered.

The cat woman is oh so much shorter. When Anne sees her this time, her own limbs feel overgrown, as if she were of the wrong species; this sensation is not unlike that which a woman feels when,

after having imagined a particular man, she finds herself next to him, fitting into the vacant spaces where all left out feels exposed, as if in danger.

It is almost the end of twilight, when the sky is the color of the old woman's shopping bag. The cat woman is finding flowers; she is like a litchi nut. The sweet inside pulp smells carnations, and they are in sight, sticking from a garbage can beside the florist shop. But this is not a matter for the brain; the nose is a double lens from which the sweet pulp sees. They are every odor, but not brown. Anne does not smoke. It would be harmful to her lungs. This older woman is preserved like candied ginger lying in her own box. She will be given to the mortuary, and they don't like ginger. The flowers are almost new, anyone would calculate 24 hours old, not old in some relation. The cat woman knows this. Anne sees she is no fool; some breathing is like a flower almost dead, a flower unworthy of a sick person or of a mother. Some breathing begins as if all air were old, used air, as in artificial respiration when mouth to mouth is the best available; and then, it seems that air will burst, like a country girl shown a good man.

The cat woman knows how to lift garbage cans as if the cans had rubber lids, lip-soft. She pulls out also an electric cord, the kind left exposed and hanging down, in movies about the gestapo, even when the year 1942 isn't mentioned. It is the kind of cord which sometimes drops from the ceiling into bath tubs and Peter Lorrie does

not look at the floating body with burned hair like shriveled nerves. He looks up at the ceiling and shakes his eyes. Anne knows fifty uses for this electric cord now. The cat woman is sharp; she would not paint her toe nails in the bath tub as Anne did once a week until now. There is a crust of dirt on the old woman's shoes, thick as a cat's paw. Anne wants to hear her talk. What sound?

The families in which all the members are deaf often choose not to make those sounds which are imitations of no one. Their hands become like leaves in the wind of a spongy brain when an idea steps it flat; wounds of hands, like ballet when the women are all virgins. But the cat woman has been under someone; Anne can see, as if the impression of teeth were still visible. Take a rabbit from the mouth of a snake, what her husband would know if he came from Texas. Cook it, even in wine, and the teeth marks are in the belly. On eating, they taste like salt, and, even if frozen, years later the taste of salt is still embedded in the flesh. Her color is puce; her legs have parted.

Anne buys herself a shopping bag with handles in the grocery store. There two men walk the aisles--one of them is a doll, the other a string bag which holds the doll and the cart and the food; the doll's baby fat has returned to the belly, but the string bag is taut and weighted down. He has done lifting, so it is to Anne funny who pushes the cart and who follows. They are prettier than she. If one threw the other out, nothing would come of either of them, no new

thing like this she sees, the inseparable men married to a motion all their own--a new species. Because there are things she has not noticed before, she thinks: and why not? if they learned how to fit after numberless adjustments. The doll's toes probably ached for months, he is so short and was not young enough for the new shoes they manufacture now to make feet stronger even in the toes. Coming out with her bag, she sees them get from a Porche their two dogs which do not go together so that they make their owners dance in self-made choreography around them. But the cat woman knew better, and when Anne goes to the corner where she can watch the bedding down of the cats and the woman, it is that her shoulders let loose, the grace of motion in the cats and the woman a massage. When the cats cry, she thinks it is herself.

The moonlight is honey. The old woman builds her pallet of cat fur and her own padding--why she is squat and on her fanny another padding deep as paw--against a fence, a comb to which the honey sticks. The shopkeepers probably know the woman with her cats sleeps here, but she is not sweet <u>outside</u>; and if Anne would hear her talk, she must make short steps and fold her body shorter, and carry her brown bag as if it held something--her husband's papers, that weight, so she imagines numbers on white pages until her arms sag. And why does he hold them to the light, until the paper itself is translucent, how a face can be when the man wants to see, and will touch her until she is inside a candle? If he has lit his own face with her, she has

forgotten. Her mouth tastes salt, and maybe when the old woman holds the largest cat against her belly, he tastes it too, because she has been bitten once. The old woman's fingers move across the fur, and then the cat bites. The scream is how bees must sound when the honey goes into a pail. Anne hears a sound which her husband makes with his tongue when he is asleep with one hand on her and another on himself. Then, even if she has been sleeping, she wakes and lies near his mouth, as if the sound would divine words. He could tell her what country he came from, what origin he had said before she forgot.

She walks up to the woman bent over her wound, and she says, as if to a child, "Let me see." Like a child the old woman holds her loose skin up. To Anne it is exposed in the way a patient's area of skin is open in the surrounding sterile cotton. The surgeons try to concentrate; it pays not to think of the patient's history, who might cry when the mortuary gets the box of ginger, and the mouth is bitter.

"I've seen you," the cat woman says.

"I've seen you too," Anne answers. If they were both children, they would share a string bag and the rag doll inside. The skin Anne holds is ridged like twine. "It's not bad," she says. "Do you sleep here all the time?" The fluorescent lights go off in the store to which the woman's fence is attached. Anne wants to smoke a cigarette and see the smoke catch the moonlight, as if she could talk if her fingers held smoke.

"I used not to," the old woman answers, "but I do. They wanted more rent. Then I moved and I couldn't take the cats. I love the cats. I have lots of cats, like babies."

To Anne they are not like babies; she wants to explain how not, to set her straight, if she knew hand language, to tell her how her husband made motions on her stomach, asking if she wanted a baby, as if his fingers dipping down into her skin would bring one out; yet, at the times he lifted his empty hands up above the sheet for her to see that they were empty, she would be glad that in fact his fingers held nothing, because in the light she would imagine shapes not human. How the woman held the cat, and why the cat had bitten her.

Her husband would wonder where she was. He might look out the door and imagine her running on the rail fence by their driveway, stoop and call, making clicking noises with his tongue. So she could not go back right now, because he might pick her up by the neck and place her near his neck where it was warm, since he was not only good, but capable of <u>extensions</u>: she had seen him go from one place to another, from where he started to where he was. She could now give recitations, if anyone asked, as if she had just remembered places. It would be nice to tell someone now, before she forgot. To be sociable, she sits beside the cat woman, where it is warm, and asks her what she has been doing all this time. The cats play among the garbage cans. The sound is like tin tea sets on a metal table under a tree when the girls are five and the parents are sleeping in the house.

She scratches the polish off her nails while she listens, and she feels herself close in--she will be shorter when she gets home, and the dampness makes her hair come loose so that it hangs on her dress like a rag and sops the moonlight up. She is a different color. Of course the old woman's story is something like she has imagined after watching her for weeks, because the man who had married her, who had split her belly and put a baby there, who had breathed his old air into her mouth and made her mend until the belly swelled and broke--he went crazy, in the country. Everywhere there was sand, the color of the beach if you remember being taken there, and if you remember that the color is hot and it is easy to think of the color and the heat as one, until it seems you will suffocate. Her husband began sitting in the barn and looking out, perched high like a hawk, in the shade of the eaves of the barn. If it rained, he laughed, and he would draw a finger up to where the sun was being held by clouds, and he would make a sound like a machine gun. Nothing grew but the baby he pulled out of her, and that baby grew until he was big enough to set in the yard like a rooster. The husband made the boy cackle for him sometimes, after he dug the boy a tiny hole big enough for his bottom. One day the husband got the boy to cackle long enough for him to climb back up to the loft of the barn, and then he took his finger out. He attached his finger to a metal piece, and then, rat tat, he shot the boy, and the boy fell over like a rooster. The husband flew down from the barn, and the cat woman said

it made her sick, going out to pick them up. She told Anne that if she had a baby, she better get more than one, how men were, making stories come out like that. Cats multiply fast.

But Anne is sick already, as if her stomach were swollen and it were already morning when women pull themselves out of covers to hang their mouths over commodes and retch, because the baby doesn't like putridness inside its home. When she gets up, the cat woman is asleep, and her mouth appears hammered shut by tiny nails; there were experiments with nails during the war, and when the people came out, they moved differently, but enough of them moved the same that they told a lie. They allowed the watchers to imagine each story was something alike, and it could be this old woman lied. It could be Anne is not good at reading motion which goes with words. Then, it appears that the old woman's skin, while Anne turns to look backwards, is growing more healthy, and only Anne is brownish purple.

When she is home and her shopping bag stuffed beside the refrigerator where all the grocery bags are stored, she goes over to him and lifts his head up, and he wakes up, but she has timing he can't have, just having awakened. She raises a finger to her lips and she smiles, she smiles the way he likes from another time he can't remember in preciseness while he is just waking. But Anne puts his fingers on his face, then she puts one finger on her thigh. The skin is a single area arranged inside the cotton of her skirt. She does not let him press his finger on her skin until she leads him to

another room. There it is darker, the light from the street lamp comes through the blinds at points, scattered light, in particles. She takes a finger and puts it on a leg. When he presses down, what he remembers shows in his face as surprise. Her skin hardly gives, it is tight, as if she were very, very young. He looks up at her in amazement because it does not feel that his hands would go in and bring nothing out.

So he does not hold his hands up empty in the light for her to see. He burrows himself in her, finally, with a sound, leaving something in her so that, for the first time since she can remember, he is not lazy and slow. He looks at her as if he were in sunlight, and he can't recall that the heat often becomes too hot. He forgets to calculate, and finally Anne's head bends over his, as if she were counting.

She begins to wait, on schedule. Before she sleeps, there are shapes to notice: The cat woman turns in her sleep exactly as Anne's husband turns. Anne, herself, moves as if fitting with a particular man she has imagined for years. Something which can be seen from high up, as a hawk sees, is exposed.

The night feels like a boat inside which these people are dreaming. It may rain for forty nights while they multiply in kind.

THE LOVE CHILD

Normally it would be dark outside when the girl began to brush her hair. She would loosen the braids, count the strokes to a hundred, and wait. If the hair were clean enough and shone, the mother would lean forward from her chair to where the girl sat before her on the floor, and run a hand across the crown of the girl's head. Then she would turn to smile at the father.

The hair color and texture were inherited from his side of the family. Since the girl's mother loved the father, the smile meant approval of at least that, the hair. But never their religion which involved spasms of the body, tongue-twisting, sweat, and exhaustion; nor the "accidental" shootings which were sometimes deadly to strangers at pool rooms and the side rooms of bars where men played poker on Saturday nights; nor any of the red milk glass they collected--"blood-red," the mother said, "Christ-blood-red;" nor any photographs, in any pose, the family separate or apart, because, the mother said, when you died they took those pictures closer to the window-light than they had been before, and, looking, they made up lies about the face and the posture and the amount of sin in the bowels.

The mother did not talk this way to the father. With him she became stubborn--the mouth made an "o" and the tongue could be seen flicking up, and the word "no" would come out like no other word.

And that was why the father loved the mother: with her he might die clean--clean the way china is clean, and glassware from Italy, and sterling silver, and the insides of Packard cars.

But now the mother had gone down the road with the woven pocketbook he had brought her from a trip near Mexico. The pocketbook had been stuffed with crackers, three pairs of hose, two of see-through nylon panties, and a diploma from a woman's college which required its girls to wear navy blue and to play at least one musical instrument. She had been gone long enough for the crackers to have been eaten, long enough for the girl to have sewn nineteen pieces of different-colored material into a shape almost square.

It was the girl's idea that if she made a quilt for her mother, her mother would come back, and more than that, she would return on the day the quilt was finished. The girl sewed during all the daylight hours, and the day before, she had gone into the kitchen of the Barnard sisters on the adjoining property and had stolen a candle. In the sisters' oven had been three biscuits and a slab of cornbread. While looking in at the bread, the girl remembered what she had read about the religious act of fasting. The act meant the body was an instrument of power if it looked a certain way and if others could see it would look worse unless that thing you wanted changed was changed. She had shut the oven door and had begun a fast, and

although she had been hungry for days, her hunger was suffusive now.

It would have been normal, too, for the girl to think very little. Instead, she would run in the woods alone, and pretend stories from books, and jump over rails which she built from fallen limbs, and sing loudly.

Now she had thoughts. They came slowly, and they came in sentences that seemed to belong to a person who was stupid. Inside the house, she felt as if she knew exactly what she were doing with each minute, but a sense of other time was lost.

Lately, too, she had begun to make up love songs, trying to imitate a record she had heard before the radio went bad. Slurring her words as she thought Kitty Kallen might, she imagined a man was in the control room adjusting the whispers up or down. In death, she thought, the eyes could talk, and so they put pennies on the eyes to keep the voice down with the body.

The house faced West, so the bedrooms darkened first, after the trees. At the time the woods darkened, the girl would come in and see the father sitting where she had left him, in the one armchair, of blue material, sitting near the picture window. At this hour he would appear aflame from the sun going down. The starched

collar of his shirt would appear pink, and the ruby eyes of the tiny snakes which were on the cuff links would blaze orange. His navy suit would look purple, the color of dragon-fly wings. And his eyes, changed from pale blue to brown, would appear enormous.

He had given up talking altogether. When she stepped past him it was like going past a painting. Yet she had been told by her mother that the purpose of stories was to keep alive what people wanted to forget, and that what seemed dead was actually in a waiting-state, like, she said, a man who wanted to love a woman, or like a baby, in a womb with a face no one had seen, anxious to surprise. The man contained stories precisely because he explained nothing, and his face seemed new.

He looked out the picture window as she brushed and held the hair up in the sun until the strands were amber. As the sun moved across the room, she moved with it, near him by the eightieth stroke. It was August; the sun would move faster now.

"I'm hungry," she whined, and he turned to see her holding strands of hair in her mouth. When she had seen that he saw, she turned a somersault on the linoleum. "My stomach is <u>flat</u>," she said, pressing both hands on it. "When I roll, it's a plate, a tiny empty plate. It may break."

"You're too big to do that," he answered. "Go do something else."

The girl bit her lips: he was not only talking but looking. She held her bottom lip with her teeth until he turned away. "She may die, you know." She brushed and counted, "Eighty-one, eighty-two," and dropped the brush on the floor. "Robbers may come along, and since she hasn't any money--except she may get pennies for some Coke bottles if she thinks of it while she walks--they'll take her back to where they live in a cabin and make her cook for them. And they won't mind her eating too, when they're done, but they won't get done, so it won't be like here, where there's nothing. It will be like: there's a lot but no time to eat, so, so her own skin could fall into the pot, you know."

She waited. The sun was past them, his eyes were blue again like satin-weight. At last she went to the bedroom and sewed by the leavings of light, and she tried to think.

The bedroom was the width of three twin beds, but since they needed only one for themselves and one for the girl, the man had suspended a rod above the space where the third might have gone, and on this rod he had hung his suits, with the mother's washdresses at one end, and the girl's Sunday dress at the other end, near the window, to keep it bleached white, and to keep the sun off his suits.

His suits were heavy, and when the mother had been home to make noise in the bedroom, the suits muffled the sounds. If the girl

wanted to hear more, she lifted the arms of the suits, and gathered them in her hands and held on to them.

The beds were handmade, by the father. He liked what he owned to be either good or handmade. He had built each bed of six oak planks, two solid planks for the sides and four cut into narrow strips to go on top to hold the mattress. The beds were heavy, silent, and, underneath, dark.

On this night he talked, she took her scraps, her candle, and herself, and put them all in the corner, where the bed met the wall. After wrapping the bottom of the candle in a scrap of cloth, she put the candle between the big and second toe of one foot. While sewing, she tried to let only her fingers move. When she finished sewing the twentieth piece on the quilt, she scraped the wax from the material. Peeling off the wax made her think of sealing wax she had seen in stationery stores one summer they had visited stores. Finally, this wax made her think of the letters which were in boxes underneath the mother's and the father's bed. With what was left of the candle, she looked beneath the bed. The mother had shoved the boxes near the head of the bed, very far back, so the girl blew out the candle, and crawled.

It was smelly; dust covered the floor, but the boxes were clean inside plastic bags. The girl opened the bags, then the shoe boxes emptied of his shoes, and fingered the ribbons wrapped around the bundles of letters. She imagined the colors of the ribbons:

soft-yellow, blue, satin-brown, and pink. She tilted a box close to her nose, breathing in the mixture of perfumes. Then, although she didn't want to, she fell asleep.

In a dream, he and she were in her grandfather's house where the sunlight made everything of wood appear soft. She went from room to room with her hands out, as if the autumn colors and smells were like wheat to be scooped up. When she was in the smallest room, off the kitchen porch, she saw a man in a cape heading around the back of the house to the front. She began tightening the locks on all the windows and closing those open, running and calling to the father, "I'm closing them, but he's coming around there!" She didn't see the father; rather, he felt present, until she came to the last small room. There, inside the room, in the only dark corner, the man sat with his knees pulled toward his chest.

His body appeared small. She sat beside him as if he were her size. Her shoulder touched the cape, and beneath the cape, she felt the bones move. His eyes were dark, and in the half-light, they appeared sad to the girl. She reached out to touch his arm which he held next to his stomach, between his chest and the legs pulled close. When she touched the arm, it seemed that hours had passed, and when he spoke, it was as if she knew his voice. "Love," he said, turning to pull out his arm, "you have made me love," and he held up his palm

to show her the hole and the blood.

In the morning, she woke with the dream still present, and in her confusion, she reached out to wipe the hand. Instead, she touched the boxes, and pulled two toward her chest. She inched out, trying to be soundless. She saw as she passed him that he was awake, in the same position in which she had left him. A thought, that she ought to wave, came to her; instead, she let the door slam while she ran to the Packard.

The Packard was sitting on concrete blocks because the tires were still good, and he had visions one day of their having gas with which to run the car again. He had talked at the beginning of summer of taking them to a museum; often then he went out to check the tires, to dust the hood and its silver eagle.

The girl balanced herself on one block and leaned forward to open the back door. Then she jumped down and threw the boxes up on the grey wool-covered seat. The heat from inside the car hit her face, and she climbed in to it and the boxes, locking all the doors and tightening the windows. She read until afternoon.

The lady she liked best was named Nina. Three years before, Nina had written to the father every day for two weeks. Nina did

not sprinkle her letters with perfume, nor enclose a photograph, nor ask him for one, nor invite him to her house. In the fourteen letters, she wrote the same thing, in many different ways: "I do not normally write letters to strangers. In fact, I rarely listen to the radio. I had not expected to find myself in this beggar's position as a woman. I say "beggar's" not because I want anything which I can define. I ask only that you allow me to write to you without your thinking of me as desperate. Perhaps it will help my cause if I tell you that, after listening to you for many weeks, I do not believe you like reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning poetry to the strains of "Ebb Tide" in the background. I suspect you despise the style of the Melanchrino Strings. In fact, I think all that you like about your program is that you do it well, what you do. I suspect you can be cruel. Nina."

He had moved, and she missed his voice. Or he had moved and she continued to write without his voice. Or he sometimes went where she was, or something had happened to her, or to him. Any of this was possible, she thought.

It was possible, too, that he would come to the car. Now it seemed to the girl that she had waited for him the whole day, to appear at one window or another, to look in, and with the car on blocks, his head would come just to the window, and he might have to jump up to see her lying on the seat.

The sun began to light the picture window. It began to glow red--she thought of how paper underneath a prism's light burned. But the house did not burn, he did not come out, it got cold in the car. She let loose her hair. Holding it around her shoulders, she half-slept, to make more waiting easier.

Later, in a state of dreaminess, she went inside the house, when the moon was up, the crickets asleep in a quiet they had let happen. The screen door scraped on the stone steps, and he turned to look at her. She walked past him, to the bedroom door. He watched, and when she looked quickly at him to make certain he was watching still, she smoothed down her dress. She understood now that the lack of food had made her smaller; the dress moved under her fingers.

"I feel like Nina," she said.

When she turned and threw herself on the bed and covered herself with the sheet, she heard him get up. He came to the bed, he reached down, and shook her shoulders, but she wouldn't move. They were like that in the room for what seemed to the girl to be a long time. When he turned away, she heard him opening cabinet doors in the kitchen, and she listened until she was too tired to listen.

It was very dark inside the room when she heard him call her name twice, then the name "Nina." She turned to see his shape at the doorway, his gun in one hand, a back pack in the other. She got up slowly, and when she was even with him at the doorway, she saw from the living room light that he had washed his face, straightened his tie, and put on his hunting boots of soft red leather. "Hey," he said, "we're going to hunt us a rabbit, and eat. I promise."

She found her shoes and a sweater and followed him out the front, to the side, past the car, and into the woods. He carried a lantern, and she followed, not the light but the shape of his head above the pack on his back. Nothing seemed to move but their feet. No rabbit would come out for this.

She followed him to a clearing where she had beaten a path once while trying to jump over the rails she had made. In the softest grass, he pushed on her shoulders until she sat. She watched how he built the fire carefully, first digging a hole in the earth for safety. When the clearing seemed bright with fire, he went into the trees. She watched the fire and listened for the one shot. Before that shot, the woods were more still than she remembered they could be, as if the breath of every animal held. Then the shot, the sound of his feet going away, and returning. He came to the clearing with the rabbit limp in his hands, bloodless.

He cooked in a pot he had brought, and he spread a cloth in front of her, and on the cloth he put two china plates, and beside

the plates their silver initialed with his letters. He shined two silver goblets on the tail of his shirt, and poured into each the wine they had made when there was sugar in the house.

Often he turned from the cooking meat to smile at her. He spread the empty knapsack on the ground before he sat to carve the rabbit with their carving knife. Handing her the plate, he said, "Eat, eat."

At first, when she picked up the fork, it was as if she had forgotten how. She said, "She won't be eating."

"Women always eat, always. Don't you know that by now? They find a way to eat."

When she began to eat, it was as if she might never stop. She ate what he had put on her plate, letting the juice drip down on her dress, and some blood because he had cooked it too fast, and then she reached to take meat from his plate. He laughed, and leaned over to put a hand on her head. He rubbed her hair, saying, "Lady, you lady."

Then, suddenly, she stood and began to vomit, near her plate and almost splashing him. But he jumped when it seemed she might fall. He came to her and held her, with one hand on her stomach, pressing down, until she was empty again. He lifted her and laid her near the fire, and took off his jacket and spread it around her,

tucking it in, smoothing down her dress, her hair.

She dozed while he carried her, going slowly so that she felt a rocking against her ribs, the coldness of his shirt, the wool of his jacket across her back, nothing between him and her but the shirt, its buttons rubbing on her dress as he walked. She thought she could not waken all the way again.

When he put her on the bed, she imagined herself talking to him. She kept her eyes closed, but moving her face upward so that she might talk if she decided. When her head was turned, he began stroking her face, the eyebrows, the line of her nose, her ears. It was almost the way her mother stroked, but the girl noticed she was becoming more awake behind her eyes, as if she <u>were</u> looking at him, while her arms and legs seemed to sleep separately, sinking deeper into the mattress, apart and adrift.

He pulled the sheet from these arms and legs, and he found the stomach between, and he began feeling the bones, the space between the bones, the ribs, the neck, a humming coming from his chest while he rubbed, the humming going out when he touched the flatness of her chest, and found the nipples without fat.

Later, without knowing why, she sat up and rocked his head in her lap. When it began to brighten above her head, he went out, and before she slept, she heard him slide into his chair, and soon after, his snoring.

Finally, the mother was walking down the road. The girl heard a car-door slam, the engine start up again, the flats of her shoes on the gravel, with silence where the red dust was. The mother began calling; she called five times, then the girl heard her running, and at the porch, the sound of bags dropping. The mother threw open the screen and looked.

They were like this: the father in the chair, looking out the window almost as he had been when the mother took off walking. The girl was sitting near the chair but to the left, with her back against the wall so the only thing visible of the father from where the girl sat was his head showing above the blue of the chair. The girl was looking at his head, and only on either side of his head at the sky outside.

The mother's face appeared large, her nose sniffing. She looked at them, from one to the other again and again. The girl saw her mother shake, and then it must have been that the mother caught hold of that motion on purpose. She shook herself again, her whole head, then she turned and stepped out again. The girl heard the mother walk off, then the sound of her steps, returning.

"I'm home!" she called. "And look what Ive got!"

And the mother came bursting into the room. She went to the girl and opened the bag and showed her: bacon, cheese, bread, lettuce, tomatoes, butter, canned meat, coffee, and two packages of Kool-Aid. "And more in the other bag!" she said. "Now help me in the kitchen, and we'll cook up a feast."

She pulled the father's arm until he sat down beside the girl, across from the mother. "We'll skip the blessing this time," she said, "so dig in." She passed them food, again and again, while she talked very fast of the relatives of hers she had seen, and the job she might have, and how it was to go to the curb market. She made the girl eat until the girl's face began to move in a way the mother was accustomed to. "Ha!" she said, reaching across to poke the girl's stomach. "We'll get you fat again, and roses in those cheeks," and she tickled the girl's ribs until the girl laughed. After the girl and the mother had cleared the table, the mother noticed the piece of quilting which the girl had spread on the table, and the mother touched it and said, "Pretty. We like things pretty, don't we?"

Now the mother grew silent. After the dinner, she never talked of having been gone. She never asked how they had been. The father asked for salt at meals, and if there was no bread on the table, he

pushed back his chair loudly and said, "Shit-Christ, can't you remember the bread to push with?"

And they couldn't get the father to move, to help carry the furniture to the U-Haul she rented. So they carried it themselves, only the mother didn't ask for the chair, even though she could have carried it alone.

When they pulled out, the mother stopped the truck on the road by the metal mailbox, to leave a note for the carrier. Together they turned to look at the house, so the way they remembered him best was encased, and waiting, and with a face which would surprise.

IN THE ABSENCE OF STRANGERS

I saw a man I knew once in the Melody Restaurant today. I go in there about once every two weeks, for their vegetables. You get two with any dinner, and they're fresh, so it's worth the one sixty-five, plus tip. I wanted to ask him if he came in for the vegetables too, but I didn't remember in time. I eat there and always wonder why the others come. It's spacious the way cheap restaurants are, and the waitresses are seventeen year old girls who look happy. They try to please. The salt and pepper shakers don't match, and, often as not, the waitress will say of at least one of the three eating utensils she brings, "I better get another one. This isn't too clean." One time my neighbor came with me to eat but left instead because of a fork. Later she thought to discuss with me the superior attributes of dishwashing by automation, but I don't worry about the degree of heat necessary for cleanliness. I merely wonder if the waitress ever lets that thought pass through her mind.

I was surprised, then, on this particular evening, not to have that question on my mind. In the next booth was a face I knew I should remember from somewhere. We looked at each other in half glances, to deny interest, sharing the denial and uneasy about what to do next, so that the thought of eating became secondary but self-conscious. An intrusion, really, because I had, spontaneously, remembered <u>him</u>, but his place and my place as well remained hidden,

like a body before the river. I suppose now, thinking back, I could have said, "Hey, where do I know you from?" I've done that before.

I tried smoking while I waited for the main course. The salad is brought first, as if it were a good place, and you can tell no one finds it ironic to observe this better-restaurant ritual while also eating on formica-topped tables with the juke box selector hanging over the ketchup and mustard dispensers. I ate the salad slowly, hoping to remember where I'd seen him, but nothing happened. I was grateful I had the habit of leaving the restaurant immediately after eating, probably because it isn't the place to linger over coffee, but also because I feel like an intruder; I see the same faces every time and am sure all the customers except for me are regulars. And now the man opposite me was an intruder also and probably didn't realize it.

I fumbled for the cigarette. I wear skirts with pockets because I despise handbags. When I carry one I am constantly checking the latch to see if anyone has picked it while I was waiting for a Don't Walk sign. It is much easier, therefore, to keep my change and keys, folding money and cigarettes close enough to my body to be able to feel them. I've never had a cent stolen from me although I still fear theft.

By the time I got the package of Winstons out of the pocket, one had fallen halfway out and was broken. I pulled it out and added it to the shredded napkin in the metal ashtray. I noticed my

hands were shaking when I struck the match. He was watching me and probably had remembered me. I always feel unprotected when someone remembers me first. It gives them a chance to match images before you can compensate by trying to act however it was the last time they saw you. I have found people get uneasy if you behave differently very often.

By the time I had finished the cigarette, he had finished his salad, and we were both fingering our water glasses, having nowhere to look but at each other or down. That must be why I usually eat at drive-ins where either you watch the car hops, read the menu on the board, or, if you have to face the other cars, at least feel you can look because of the windshield.

The coffee waitress came by his table to ask if he wanted a refill before she realized he hadn't gotten his dinner yet. He said No, he was a tea-drinker, and she asked did that mean he didn't want coffee. He said Yes, and while she poured him coffee he looked at her face with startled eyes I remembered. I half smiled at him, because of the waitress, but also because he couldn't know how close to remembering him I got when seeing eyes that went with a place.

Suddenly he called out, the sound of his voice startling me. I had watched his mouth begin to move before the words sifted through. "Where's your bible?"

"Oh," came my voice, from the distance of that place. I rubbed my neck, trying to erase the creeping redness. I looked back

up and raised my head higher than necessary. "I did that already. And ha! I see you didn't kill yourself either."

He smiled, more relaxed than me, I thought. "No, I'm selling spinners now."

"What are spinners?" I asked, sorry to have been drawn in by interest, but the mind, as I had discovered some years before, has its own life and goes right on.

"Ah!" He jumped up and reached across the table to the bench opposite him and brought to the table top a large briefcase. He snapped the hinges and began pulling out a long rope, metallic, of red and silver which made a wind sound as it dropped on the floor. "That," he said, "is a spinner. You string them up at used car lots and when the manager turns on the lights at night, they shine. Makes people notice. Wind, rain, sleet, heat of day, chill of night, nothing destroys them and they keep on shining. Makes people notice. They buy more cars that way." He drew the red and silver spinner into his hands and stuffed it back into the briefcase.

The waitress brought my plate first, and I resented the fact that his was on the same large tray. "Yours was chopped sirloin and crispy onion rings, right?" I wanted to ask her if she believed the crispy onion rings, but I caught myself. I have tried to stop doing things like that. It didn't get me anywhere. She asked him if his was chopped sirloin and crispy onion rings too, and he winked at me.

When she left, I held my fork in my hand, poised over the plate, and said, "Leave me alone, please."

He leaned over his plate, moving forward so that over the partition all I saw was his face too big, and whispered, "All you had to do that day was come in, just come in, and it would have been over. Kid." He raised his hands above the level of the booth and mimicked my hands clutched around the Bible, then slowly, in slow motion with grace, let his fingers move out and apart. His eyes followed the imaginary descent of the book to the floor. "Too bad," he said. "In fact, that's precisely why I didn't do it. I sat down on the sofa and said to myself, 'When the suicide squad sends out someone like you to save me, I got a mission in life.'"

I pushed back my plate, releasing the fork last, letting it twirl apart from the plate in the gravy of the sirloin. He was busy stirring another packet of sugar into the tea the waitress had silently eased onto his table. The ice cubes must have melted because I don't remember the clink. I would have heard it. I watched him until he sipped the tea. "Spinners!" I cried. I stood, pushing my cigarette package into my pocket. My legs were bent at the knees because I hadn't moved away from the booth. "Listen," I asked, "did you ever just once stop to ask just one salesman . . . " I stepped out into the aisle between the booths and tables-for-four. He didn't look surprised to see me moving toward him.

"What?" he asked.

My sandals felt tight, and I leaned over to loosen the buckles. He must have been watching me. "Christ. Never mind. Listen." I put

my pointing finger on his table. "Listen, will you give me one of those spinners?" I reached into my pocket and brought out some change. "I'll pay you." I showed him the money and threw on the floor the silver paper torn from the cigarette package. The lady at the table next to the booth looked at me. I can always feel it when someone looks at me because I can feel my back get warm. I used to turn around when I felt my back get warm, but that way I found I never got to see the face, only the head ducking down, so now I wait and turn a little later. It's funny how their eyes stay the same, as if I had seen them immediately after. I forgot to look at her, but I know anyway what she looks like.

The man watched the silver paper fly to the linoleum. "It's a demonstration model," he said. "If I let you have it, I'd have to tell my boss what happened. We only get one demonstration model a month. The rest we have to order."

"Aren't you going to ask why I want it?" I could have asked it in my mind except for the way words don't obey and come out too fast. I can remember how my mind asked that first and then knew it wasn't purposeful because it could see, the way I could see, that he wasn't going to ask exactly because he was interested. Maybe the mind likes a little order in spite of itself, or a justice of its own I don't trust. I dropped the money back into my pocket and held it there with my left hand. "OK. It's really OK. Spinners! You tell me who wants spinners, really wants them shining around their light

bulbs. And besides, I don't know about you. But I don't have to, you know. Today was a fluke. One rare thing. I won't see you again. Let it drop I say."

I walked toward the register. I had to wait while the waitress came forward to tell the cashier what I had bought. "Wasn't the dinner to your liking?" she asked. They don't like strangers in the Melody; at least I know that now. Remember that, I said to myself. She wore a black, shiny apron, and her dress was dingy nylon white. She was too thin and wasn't trying to please. If you work in a restaurant, I thought, food is what you stake it all on.

The register was in the center of the room, with booths lined on each wall and tables down the middle. I passed him as I left. He called out, "The faces stay the same, honey. Only the names and occupations change."

He didn't follow me home, which was probably just as well. I stopped first at the Hobby Shop for some hemp thread, orange-colored with silver threads running through. I wanted the spinner. I took the thread and put it in my pocket and drove home being glad he wasn't following. My neighbor snoops and wouldn't be able to imagine him being there.

When I first talked to her about writing him a letter, she thought it wouldn't work. One morning when I wanted to write a letter and couldn't think who to, I heard from the man on the radio. He called up on one of those interest shows which allows the listeners

to discuss the topic of the day. The topic that day was suicide. He said he had been thinking about doing it. The ladies called after he talked, saying Pray and We love you, but I doubted it. Nobody sounded loving, and they talked about Christ, sounding mean.

My neighbor, when I told her, said Who'd believe that, your letter, because it's easy to do. I don't know what she meant about easy to do. She has two prints of ballerina dancers on the longest wall in her dining room, and that seemed easy to do, or else very hard; I never figured. She moved the prints once and put them back a week later. I thought maybe she had washed the wall, but she said No, she hated washing walls. But I didn't write him, because of what she said; she spoiled it. She said I didn't know what he looked like, and I couldn't write him a personal letter if I couldn't know what he looked like. Things she says like that, in combination with the ballerina prints, is why I invite her over.

I knew what he looked like before she mentioned it. Five feet tall, skinny, thinning hair the way that's ugly, and nobody thought he was sexy but himself and now it was hard to believe alone. One of the ladies who called to answer him said he should call the suicide squad at night if he thought about it, because the early morning hours were the hardest since Christ had the hardest time then.

He must have called, because I called them and they said Yes, I could go over if I first came down and took their training course. For a week. I asked them how they knew he wouldn't do it in a week,

and they said the particular one didn't matter. I was in training for whoever called.

He called one day at three forty-five in the afternoon, and when I got there, he didn't look like anything.

He kept the chain on the door, peeking through, and I saw him. When he closed the door to unchain it, I tried to peek through the spy hole, but the picture gets smaller on the wrong side of the door. He opened it, but I couldn't go in. He didn't argue, so I left. I told the mission people about it and they let me go, with the Bible for a momento.

He wouldn't like it here anyway. It bothers me, too, sometimes, with all the things around, scraps I collect. It gets too messy and other times isn't messy enough. My neighbor doesn't mind anymore, but the landlord asks me what if my husband came back to that, what would he think, but I don't think he's coming back. I keep the window open sometimes anyway, and with only the screen and no glass, he wouldn't mind too much. He knew I was trying to make something with the scraps. I pay the bills on time, so no one should worry.

I got some bottle caps last week and painted them with nail polish. They're the color of the hemp thread, almost. The biggest scrap is a piece of glass I had cut at the Pittsburgh Glass Company, Inc. I think I may try to glue the bottle caps onto the glass, or tie them to the thread, or maybe make a case for all the metal and

mica bits I got on a visit to my sister's in Georgia and have the Glass Company bore holes in the glass for them to be tied through with the string.

I found an overcoat at Goodwill last week, and I may have to cut it up. On Fifth Street downtown, there's a man who wears a coat like that and pretends to shoplift. I've seen him three times. The man walks by with his long coat on, slowly and keeping his eyes straight ahead. Then his arm reaches out like a mechanical dummy and grabs a pair of socks or hose the owner keeps outside on bins for the fast shopper. Then the owner runs out from his place in the store, letting his chair he keeps tilted against a counter bang down, while his knees knock away the card table he does his calculations on. He runs out yelling, and the man in the overcoat moves his mechanical hand again and puts the socks or hose back and walks on. I followed him one time, but I noticed my shoulders got stiff and it was hard to follow as slowly as he walked.

That has happened when I have to ride the Fifth Street bus. On the same street there's a sign in pink fluorescent which says FUNERALS BY LOWE and I always answer GLASS BY STEUBEN. But that isn't why, especially, I had the glass cut. Once, when my family--mother, sisters, me--was traveling around trying to find a living space, the trailer we carried came off the hitch. It was in the middle of Georgia. The sun was in the middle of the sky, and it happened right after we went over a railroad spar. Since the trailer

was made of wood and cost twenty-five dollars second-hand, it split apart. We stopped the car and my mother said My God, we could have been killed, and cried. She didn't move the car, but no one was coming in another car. The only ones coming were black men who had been sitting on reunion camp chairs leaning against the side of a feed store. They walked close to the car and Mother said Raise the windows, quick. But they didn't look at us. They walked around the trailer saying Lordy look a yonder, because the gold harp my mother had bought at an auction was shining in the sun and the Blue Willow china she had inherited with her grandmother's house crunched under their Navy surplus boots. The books had broken from their cases and there was no breeze to move the pages. It was a hot day. We watched them through the glass and no one opened a window to get help. When they finished looking, they opened the books that weren't thrown open and fingered the pages. One of the boys touched the harp, and we could hear it through the glass. Inside, we cried and watched them until they came to our car and watched us. My mother told me one time she and I were almost killed in a train when a passer-by at the station threw a rock against the train window where we were sitting and broke glass on us. I wasn't born yet, only a bulge in her belly, and yet I remember the glass.

We must have been looking at the rock-thrower before he threw it. I would never go into one of those elevators on the outside of buildings made of glass so you can see your rise and descent. Lights

of cities are like flecks of mica in a river, but you can't sift your hands through them. The Indians sew bits of glass on their dresses for some reason I have read about in books, but I wonder if, first, before that reason, they didn't bathe naked in rivers with flowing sand and come out flecked with silver and gold. I have imagined being flecked with silver and gold, naked. That would make me smile.

I should have told the man in the Melody, if the faces don't change, the occupations will be the same. As for mine, I'm making something, and when I get it made, I'll give it to someone I care about, for a present.

ANGEL

It is a long ride up the mountain. The car is too small, as any car would be, because the mother and the cousin are larger than usual women. It is not grotesque cargo. Simply: these two women are oversized enough to be burdensome in a way not easily dismissed, as when a person sniffs an odor he can't place, and, suddenly, the nose is all the face knows of itself.

Then, there's the daughter, in the back with a box.

Inside the box is a dress, almost like another person--compact.

Lois, the mother, and Helen, the cousin, have been fussing over the dress for weeks. The second daughter, the person who is related because they know where to find her, and how her handwriting is, and what color her favorite underwear, is supposed to wear the dress in the afternoon. If they don't get the dress to the little college-room in time, she will have to wear a borrowed dress. Then, she would be less related. Already she is distant. Her distance is why they hurry to her. They must get the dress, which they have, on her, whom they haven't.

Of the daughter inside the car--she has thought too much. They don't like her because she thinks. She should hibernate; they need time off. As it is, they keep their eyes on the curves ahead,

like beasts taking courage from the feel of muscles inside.

She: she imagines the father they won't speak of is on the car carrier, windfilled. Up there, what does he think of her, quick! before sand fills the mouth? "Nevermind," he answers. So she settles for the possible: he wouldn't miss the recital. He, in some way, claims this other daughter more than they. He and she are lost together. This trio will suit him up when he dies and someone calls (for he has their address, not the other way around.) Yet, they might not know his size; they might have to wire his sister and ask.

And on the chiffon dress, it is the hem which they can't get straight. His are the owl-eyes. The whole head moves to a sight. He never over-ate.

Half-way, they stop at an Inn where fish oil is in the air, in the threads of the gingham curtains, in the fibers of the floor, and on the chrome napkin holder. They order fish.

"Amaze me," the daughter says, and she sits opposite to watch.

Really, they have ceased to look at one another when she says something, and this cessation makes her both more distant and more close, or a combination of the two, as in films with the long and the close-up shots.

Now she sees the down on the cousin's face. Helen is next to the window; sunlight is coming over her left shoulder and onto her left cheek where a thousand tiny hairs cover the acne scars. The

same down is on her lip-line and on her arms and, presumably, between her thighs. A soft yellow fur. She looks broader than she is, and nowhere does her dress stick flat on her skin, as if the fur held up the cloth. To go with this yellow, she wears oranges and browns. She puts ketchup on her fish, and her large fingers turn the hush puppies into the red on the plate.

"Pass the salt," they say to each other. They are very much at home here. This is where they stop on each trip to the other daughter, and now the owner of the Inn knows where they are headed.

The mother chews with one hand near her mouth. There are defects on all their bodies. But none of these defects are physical so much as rhythmical--the mother's hand is arrested at the mouth when the mouth chews, because once the mother had embarrassing tooth-trouble, and the palm which sought to hush the cracking sound the jaw made (a hollow nothing-crack with the open and shut) failed. And now the mouth condemns the hand by making it stay where it shouldn't when the rest of the body has moved on. And because the father left Lois, her stomach feels too large. She is continuously pressing down on it. When she stands, she feels her rib-cage first, as if to locate the last, and missing rib.

And they are fat, not very fat, but when they sit, their legs sprawl from the weight, and they are always trying to find a place to lie down for rests. Their feet are skinny, more like hands. They like to eat, since, afterwards, the smoking tastes better, and when

they smoke, it is the longest part of the meal, with coffee, until the taste of grease is gone, and the taste of smoke is more like it was when they began to smoke. When they smoke in the car, they first take out the thermos of coffee and pour themselves amounts almost measured, and then they light up. Now they pass each other a last shared cigarette. Its filter has two colors of lipstick because this cigarette is the final thing to do in the Inn, after the trip to the bathroom, and the long stretching behind the chairs to pull the muscles long before bending them short inside the car again.

"Oh my God," Lois says, "Look at the time!"

Pauline knows this isn't their lives. She is small, and when she is younger and first beginning to notice how the body can tell on a person, she imagines her very smallness will save her. She stands on the top of her dressing table, turns backwards, and looks at her face from between the backs of her knees, just to see how a face like hers might look upside down and backwards. She imagines, then, nothing will surprise her, not even a tiny mole such as the father grew after thirty-five years, on his left side and just above the pajama-line, a mole minty-brown and white-flecked.

And there is less of herself to police, not more than five feet and three and one-quarter inches. When Helen and Lois turn to look back at the possum dead on the road, so newly dead his blood

marks the tires and the tires mark the road, they hardly see her, in the middle, between the backs of Helen, who never drives, and Lois, who drives. Too, she is quiet, like a string. Nothing moves inside her she doesn't know about. She would leave her address with anyone, her size sewn in any coat, her letters tied in blue ribbons, and everything she has owned laid out on the bed, on the white coverlet, as in wedding rituals and deaths.

What she thinks of the father: is that <u>when</u> he dies, it will be like a setting of sterling, burnt mellow with polish, light and dark, the head like a soup spoon lain across the upper part of a butter dish. Then she will come, a promise. And pull all the pieces into a bundle, and wrap it in navy-blue velvet, and put it very carefully back into the mahogany box. The rest of them will laugh, as at a great party where no one knows how to behave when the formal setting is laid.

"What if a tire blows?" the mother asks the cousin.

"I would hitch-hike," the cousin answers.

"You!" the mother laughs. "Light me up one."

When Helen moves, it is slowly, always. She's had three children, who surprise her. She doesn't like to stay home with them. She comes by bus to Lois' house where the child is not really a child and where the piano takes up so much of the living room she fits in with her slow movements. She has yet to break an ashtray. In a way, she is trying to catch up with her children--she pores over the picture album, of Lois and Lois' two girls, and the father--pictured in every kind of light with one hand on the car door and one hand at his necktie. In the album, Lois is last seen holding the girls when the girls are waist-high to Lois, and then, the girls begin to hate the camera; they look at it as if it were a man spying.

Pauline, herself, takes the album out secretly, and on Sundays, when Helen and Lois are in church, she shades the pictures with a lead pencil, very lightly, but over and over, at intervals. She leaves his face bright, because she forgets, almost, how it was.

How it was when he brought gifts: he <u>smiled</u>, into the money (I was sixteen, myself, he says, before <u>I</u> got the goods), and the money showing so that he begins to miss certain other sights that Pauline doesn't miss.

"What I thought of you then . . . " is how she wants to begin now, at this age, maybe over coffee at Howard Johnson's, since he thinks of Howard Johnson's as the place to eat, and she hasn't been able to tell him otherwise, about the color aqua.

He comes in without knocking, barely able to see over the presents, with the little, important boxes from jewelry shops sticking from his pockets. "Nevermind your hair," he says to Lois. "Look." He doesn't see the cracks in her lips, or the grey right behind the face-skin, or the fat unless he pinches her fanny.

He thinks the pale-blue satin gown from Atlanta or New York, with its rhinestone trim from the neck to the floor, and its fringed sash, looks fine.

Lois, of course, puts on the satin robe, and some time later, when he can't be found, as if he had forgotten his manners, she puts the robe on again, to hang herself in, up high, on the chandelier, and Pauline knows it will be something like this to tell him about the robe. It is a picture: the neck has creased because the head is to one side, and the neck is swollen, and the hand tucks just inside the rope for breathing space, and it is swollen, and the ankles sticking out from the satin robe are swollen. And the voice is froggish. "Well, HELP!"

He doesn't notice, either, their special body-odor, in their clothes and bed clothes--an awful gas, from eating beans, all varieties of beans in all varieties of sauce, with and without onions. He brings the present of a crate of oranges, a crate of grapefruit, tins of liver pate, and boxes of crackers, and cans of oysters, and cans of hams, and a brown mustard, and many kinds of cheese, and sometimes wine, and they eat on the floor, around the presents and

his suitcase where something forgotten, some littler present, might be found; and truly, he doesn't notice.

Lois stops the car so fast it's as if a tire has blown, and they are off the pavement into the gravel before Pauline sees the apple-stand. But Helen has seen it, maybe miles ahead, or smelled it, and she's got change jingling. She hops out, fast for her, and says, "Peck, red ones," and "Here," and then they eat, three each until the two mouths must taste acid, and the two stomachs must churn. In the car is the smell of apple juice, fine little sprays which catch some light, and fall, and the smell of smoke caught in sunlight, and their Prince Charles perfume, cologne, or powder.

Claire's room, in past-time, smells of the big blue box, on her side of the room, by the bed and under the window, and with no electricity, if Pauline wants to see what's new in the box, she sees it in this window-light--pictures from magazines, ladies, lovely ladies with fine hair, and long fingernails, and pink toes, and fine blond hair like Claire's when it is clean, and, sometimes, men standing behind these ladies, darker, with sunglasses in their hands, or wine glasses, or flowers. Or clippings about how to make a curl, or how to pull out the hair over the lip or the eyes. Or drawings of

stomachs in which parts of babies are penciled in lighter colors, looking like tadpoles, some with tails and some without. And lists, in Claire's fancy writing:

"Be kind.
Be kind anyway.
Smile at least once a day, to help face muscles.
Read less; think more.
Imagine: FUTURE.
Gain five pounds in the legs.
Learn to play the piano."

In the bottom of the box are two dried apples, studded with cloves and decorated with blue ribbon. And old candy-wrappers, and bobbie pins and lipsticks, a box of brazil nuts, unopened.

They don't talk, Claire and Pauline. Pauline, in the past, is afraid to talk to her, and Claire doesn't talk to anyone. But Claire leaves the top of the box open; it is the only mystery in the house, and the house is so small there is nowhere to be on days when it rains but in the room with the box, and nowhere to be when Claire is taking wash-ups but in the room, alone with the box.

"She <u>lies</u>," Lois says. "You know she lies--he isn't <u>fat</u>, no fatter than me, and you know I wouldn't marry a fat man, not after <u>him</u>, Oh God, he was a sexy man. He ruined me, you know that?" Helen chews on a red nail; she nods.

And it's true: Pauline lies, telling her version when she knows it isn't anything like theirs, feisty-Pauline, who gets Claire the piano by forging Claire's handwriting and making up a new sixteenth-birthday list with "PIANO" first, and second, and third, when Claire can't even imagine a real-live piano. But then, when it's crowded out two stuffed chairs and a bookcase, and she practices what she knew already and the tiny, tiny lessons just made her remember, Lois says, "Look! She has got the longest, the absolute longest fingers. And yellow hair, I swear it's yellow, and she's so skinny! What's that you're playing, dear?"

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

"God," says Helen, "the hair, I mean, she looks different."

It will happen, in future-time, that Claire and Pauline will go shopping together, when Claire has gotten married and had two beautiful children, one of each kind to make it explicit, and because Claire likes to, they will go into the ugly stores with bright lights and look at material and patterns and pots and pans, together, only, for a long time, Pauline won't like what Claire picks up to look at; she won't like that it's cheap stuff. Claire won't buy, Pauline right next to her elbow, looking on like a cat.

Lois and Helen will almost cry, saying, "How could she! She had what must have been the best figure God put on any one girl, and

look! Fat, fat, the arms, even!" They will say, "Look how she moves, like she doesn't know she's fat, not that fat, yet, but how could she is what I want to know?"

And Pauline will first get more and more sleepy-looking in the face, the figure curved in and out, the eyes the only thing absolutely awake, and she first believes one side of her face is growing bigger than the other side, because: of how things are.

One time, at a big party, a man will look at her, studying, and later, at night, when the houseguests are supposed to be asleep, this man will knock on her door, and when she goes to see who it is, he will have on a raincoat, and he will say, "Come on, I have something to tell you," and, half-asleep, she will follow him outside, in a drizzle, holding her nightgown close, and shivering, and when they are far from the house, this man will throw her on the ground and put his hands on her breasts, and when she is looking up at him, this time with eyes which seem stopped, he will take off his raincoat and show her he is naked and means to go into her, otherwise why is he so big?

What she will know is he was almost right, because, after she screams and runs, she knows he was just a little off, no words, no introduction to himself, or to her but what he got looking at her feline-like, and tense, both. So Pauline's shoulders will start to let loose, and the neck will move more easily, and she will begin to imagine herself keeping a box which is filled with how-to-do clippings. And she will notice Claire isn't fat like Helen and Lois, it

is a bouncy fatness; she sings a lot and still plays, to the children. So they will go shopping and this time, when Claire says, "You know how little money he gives me, don't you think these would look nice on the stove?" Pauline will say they really would. They will become almost sister-like, and, when they put the mother away, they will divide what was in the house evenly, and not once mention that they hate all the odds and ends. In fact, they won't say anything at all that is a lie or a truth. And Pauline will read Dr. Zhivago twice, trying to see why it is Claire's favorite book.

And in the future, when the recital is over, Helen and Lois will come back and lie on the sectional sofa with their legs up, and smoke, and their feet will be almost touching, their heads at opposite ends on the sofa so they can look at each other while they talk, and they will say, "My God, I am so tired, these things just wear you out."

But what do they know? is what Pauline asks.

Then, they get to the little college town, and go right to the dormitory, and up to the third floor, and into the room, and hug Claire two or three times, squashing her, and look around the room and see the bedspread with the lilac-colored leaves and fuchsia flowers is still on the single bed, and the roommate they never liked who has one hand, a stub so that it seems just curved under so they

think of her as sneaky, they will notice she is still the roommate, and that the other girl they don't like with the short haircut and jeans is still popping her head in the room to see how Claire is coming right before her concert.

There is the last of the sunlight in the room, on Claire's hair and making her cotton panties and bra look especially white.

"I have simply got to lie down," Lois says, from the bed where she is watching Claire take out the dress. "I am bushed."

"She is so skinny, will you look at that figure, will you?" says the girl with the short haircut, from the doorway.

"Yeah," answers Helen. "Let her get dressed."

Pauline now wants something to eat, before the music, but there isn't time; she bites her lip and helps lift the dress over, and pulls the long hair out of the neckline. She tries to keep the long skirt moving, flowing, instead of hanging down straight.

"It's pretty, Momma," says Claire. "I like it, I really do, and thank you." And, before the mirror, she fluffs out her hair, and smiles at herself: a picture. She leans over to Pauline and asks, "Isn't the hem crooked? Why couldn't they get it straight?" not meanly, curious.

"I don't know," Pauline whispers back, "the material, the material sags after it's made, I don't know for sure. I'm sorry, but don't say."

"No." She turns, she twirls out in the room, and they all clap and laugh, and Claire keeps turning until she is dizzy, and laughs, and then they have to hurry her over, across a street and into a building and they leave her rubbing her fingers, a frightened look on her face, the head nodding as they call, Helen and Lois together, "Do good, sugar."

Helen and Lois will get up together, in the middle of a piece by Chopin, and go out for a cigarette.

But now, in present-time, Claire walks in, not slowly--gracefully, with her shoulders back, and her head up but not looking out at the people seated below, the lights shining on the dress which she swishes with her hands so that it is never still. Then she sits and turns to the audience and smiles quickly, but Pauline sees the eyes don't really see; they are remembering, and then the fingers begin to flex. It gets very quiet, and Claire bows her head, and she plays: beautiful, and beautifully.

ROCK HOUSE

Before nine o'clock the woman had taken down her hair, and now, near eleven, was shaking it by the open fire. The man had smiled at her, saying she looked like Joleen, and she had turned to look at her daughter, then raised a finger to her lips. The girl was pretending again. The woman wondered if she ever really slept. Sometimes she thought, with meanness, that the girl was determined never to sleep so that she and her husband wouldn't be able to talk, to say anything significant. She had wanted to call out to the girl If you're going to pretend, at least stop kicking your legs so I can pretend too. But of course she knew the girl was in a trance, day-dreaming way past dark. Now still kicking.

The man was reading a Max Brand western, his left hand holding the book while his right hand lightly touched the autoharp which lay on the stool by the chair. She recognized he too was in a trance. She almost wanted to play the autoharp herself, a real song, but couldn't bring herself to lean forward and get it. He had bought it for her when there wasn't food in the house, and, instead of playing, she became hungry for pecan pie.

Family photographs, his, stared down at her from the bookcase. She noticed her hair looked like his grandmother's, but it seemed that no time had passed. Above the girl's cot, a baby, photographed in a long dress, watched. She was sure no one would remember the

baby if, full-grown, he walked into his family, but then she remembered he wouldn't ever walk in because he was in California where it was warm.

"What ever happened to Luke?" she called out.

"Huh?" her husband answered, putting a finger in the book and looking up but past her.

"Luke." She swished her hair around a finger. "I wondered what happened to him. Does your mother ever hear?"

His eyes focused. "Once in a while. He's fine, they say, in construction. Why?"

The woman glanced again at the picture. She would recognize him because she wasn't a member of the family. He would look like her, the expression, and he would see it too, the way some men recognize some women at cocktail parties, and on street corners, and in neighborhoods where you walked the dog at night. "Nothing, just wondered." She watched him look past her to the newspaper stuffed under the door, trying to figure if the wind would tear it away before morning.

"Make some popcorn, will you?" He moved his hand from the words and began reading where he had left off, or before, or further on. The woman pulled her slippers from the hearth and slipped them on as if she were in a shoe store with the salesman watching her.

Before going into the kitchen, which was dark and shut off by a door curtain because the wood stove had gone out, the woman looked

at the girl, trying to decide if they should move her now that the legs had stopped. She hated taking her into the other room where the family bed was, the bed the girl's grandfather had died in. She didn't like not having even a hot water bottle with which to warm the bed for the girl. They said every night as they got in on either side of her, sharing her warmth, they could have heated rocks on the fireplace to wrap in towels and given her warmth to go into. But it was always something they said after the coals had been stirred down, too late.

The man looked up. "Funny. I thought I smelled the corn popping."

She got up, tucking her hair inside the collar of her blouse. "In a minute. White or yellow?" The corn came with the house, their house now that he was dead and her husband's mother was in the little house in Enon. He didn't answer, but while she was in the kitchen reaching up for the wire basket, she heard him call through the curtain, "Luke's son got shot in a poker game." She didn't answer, so that he called out, "White or yellow, you decide."

When she brought the basket back and was holding it over the fire, listening, she looked again at the picture. Not him, but someone who looked like him grown. The whole family looked alike. The mother in the Enon house counted heads. She had warts on her tongue. The woman wondered if her father-in-law had realized that living with her had made him watch people's tongues.

She looked away from the fire. "He died? His boy?"

The man tried to pull his eyes away from the book; she watched his head moving toward her voice, but it snapped back to the page. Of course he had died, she thought.

She wondered if her mother-in-law counted grandchildren heads, too.

"I wish you'd bring in Sheba."

He didn't look up. "Her fur'd stink."

She shivered. "That was last night, the rain. It's clear tonight, and dry, and almost Easter." There was a church over the hill, beyond the other house her husband's father had built of wood--one room with a dirt floor where the twelve children had waited while he carried rock down that year. The ladies at the church knew them but they didn't know her, because she had no family and only the girl.

"Bob," the woman asked softly, "are we going to get out of here soon?" She handed him the wire basket.

He stood, suddenly animated, putting the basket down on the autoharp which sounded discordant, vibrating underneath. She watched him pull on his boots and go out, then listened to him calling for Sheba.

She remembered the grape juice her father-in-law had made and put up to ferment. It wasn't done yet but she wasn't dressed for getting high. Those dresses were in the trailer by the shed, waiting for their move. But still she could have some. She tiptoed through

the kitchen, carrying the kerosene lamp high above her head, almost dropping it when she stepped down to the added-on screened porch. The cabinet shook as she opened it.

She wanted to laugh, as always, when she saw the crystal. The glasses were dusty from the wagon traffic going past into the woods where the stills were, carrying either ordinary farmers or angry women-haters, she never decided, to their fires on her father-in-law's property. She had never gotten to ask why he stood for it. She wished he had talked more. The glasses were theirs, not his, but he would have picked them up and fingered them, maybe breaking one with his calloused hands. Would he have known what a real wine glass was, unless his wife told him it was a fancy evil? She was a Holy Roller and had made the boys pray if they came in late. She kneeled first, made the first iteration of pain and lost innocence, from a reserve she only hinted at with her rolled tongue and gutteral noise. She frightened out of everyone the feeling of human sacredness.

But sometime, during the week of death, her prayers found God, and instead of answering them, He told her they were paltry. The woman held a wine glass to the moonlight and, looking through, smiled. Her father-in-law had turned from his wife as her eyes grew large with disbelief at his death inching up on her. By morning! she had hissed, now prayerless.

Her father-in-law had asked her, not even a member of the family, to sing "Abide With Me" as the only funeral song, and his

wife had said to him he should choose something they all knew, something she knew. He had answered her, "They'll maybe feel like they know it, if they listen. Everybody knows it."

On the porch the woman could hear where her husband had gone, near a still, and waited until she heard him coming down the road, the dog still barking far off.

"Bob, come have some wine with me," she called. She carried the two glasses, whose stems were shaped like women, his favorite because he had picked them out in some far off state, and the bottle into the house, setting them before the fire. He came in stomping the mud off his boots, reaching above the photographs for his gun.

"She's got a rabbit somewhere back of the grain barn. I'm going after it so we can eat in the morning." He kicked away the newspapers. "Stuff them back when I shut the door."

She half rose. "Wait. Let her have some fun chasing it. Stay with me and have some wine. And we can talk now. Will you?"

He noticed the bottle and stooped down. "I'll be darned. I'd forgotten this. He did love his own wine. Ha! Let's have some." He unscrewed the mason jar and sniffed. "Still not done. Wash the glasses."

"The bucket's empty. Here, give them to me." She wiped the glasses on the hem of her skirt while he watched her.

He sipped. "Good." He sat in his chair and picked up the book.

The woman touched her hair, tucking it behind her ears, spreading with her other hand her skirt over her legs drawn up toward her chest. "It's good. I liked your father too."

He moved a finger along the page. After a minute he looked up. "Howard ought to send a letter soon. I sent him some tapes of a broadcast I had made when you and Joleen were in Anderson. He should write soon. It's CBS. When the letter comes, I'll get your dresses out and you can have the emerald polished again and wear it when we go up."

"It's not scratched, it's chipped." She waited to hear more of his news. Finally she asked, "Are you really going to take us this time? Is it really a job or an interview?"

He put the book down. "Well, I'm not taking the one he mentioned, at his station. Peanuts stuff; you know I won't do that. They're crooks. In those small stations they want you to do the weather first, then they'll put you on the news. You know I won't do that. Sure, I'll take you if the network buys. If not, we can stay here. It's solid. We've got some potatoes, apples, that wine, and the corn meal. Momma's got the insurance, and one of the others can worry about her if something goes wrong. Shit-Christ."

"Hush," the woman hissed. "She may be awake. Here." She poured more wine into his glass, frightened by looking at his hands, white at the knuckles where he held the stem.

"Blood-sucker Jews, every god damn one of them. Remember when I did that promotion for WZYN? Kentucky?"

She had taken a handful of popcorn into her mouth at once and now shook her head. She tried to swallow, to get out the words, "We weren't with you that year, that trip."

"Yeah, right." He propped his feet against the stone fireplace. "You saw the pictures, though, and the letter. The Ames Brothers were coming to town. We were supposed to see who could put out the best promotion. They wrote me a letter, saying thank you, but I didn't win. They gave me a silk suit instead--from Hafferty's--because so many people stopped in front of their store where I'd put pictures of me along with pictures of them. I got fan mail on that, too. Good for the station and Jim Cromsky never even mentioned it."

The woman looked over the photographs on the bookcase, finally finding the one of him and the Ames Brothers, a composite he had had made up which looked real enough for the papers, in case he needed it. "You never hear about them anymore, six years ago. Can't we just move with you and not wait?"

He picked up the book and began moving a finger along the page. "That's the wrong one," she said. "You did that one last night." She giggled. "And I'm high."

"You can't be," he answered.

"And I hate Sheba too." She giggled again. "I hate her most of all. Last rabbit, I got the skin and put it on the ledge to dry. I was going to make a purse out of it. She ate it! She's got fur in her stomach. I hope it tickles. I was going to make a purse." She put on a pouty face and turned it toward him.

He dropped the glass, too hard so that it shattered, and walked over it. "Cheap."

As the door slammed, she called out, "You look silly going hunting in your silk suit and French cuffs." Suddenly she got up and ran to the door, grabbing the gun off the wall and calling out to him. He came back, his right hand extended, taking the gun from her at the stoop. She pulled her blouse close to her neck and watched her hand shake from the weight of the gun. She released it into his hand, then brushed her hair away from her face, trying to stand straight and tall. "Bob, can we go with you this time?"

"I don't know," he shouted, turning. "And get off my back about it. If Howard writes, maybe."

She stood at the door, watching him follow the dog's barking.

Inside the house she picked up the glass with her fingers, throwing each piece one at a time into the fire. She looked around the room, noticing they had forgotten to pull the days off the wall calendar, or at least she thought so because one of his sisters had brought down corn meal a few days before, and that must have been Wednesday, mill day. She walked to the calendar and tried to tell which day it was by fingering the pages.

Next to the calendar was a picture of Robert, the one in the Army, his head peeking through the breasts of a dummy woman, one of those joke stills they made up for boys like Robert. Robert! She giggled. Her mother-in-law had forgotten when Robert came along she

had already named one Robert because she had called him Bob for so long. Or the warts on her tongue made the names sound different by that time.

She pulled on a sweater and went to the cot where Joleen lay. Standing above the girl, she tried to tell if she was sleeping. She couldn't tell. If she were awake she'd ask her what day it was, maybe Saturday, but now past midnight.

She touched the girl's shoulder, feeling for tightness. She lay down beside her, held her body pressing into the wood frame of the cot. She listened to the clock ticking and to the sound of the papers moving about the floor. She remembered how his family had taken pictures of her father-in-law at his funeral, after she had sung, walking by with the lid of the casket open. Her husband had taken color pictures. They were on the mirror in the little house in Enon.

She missed him. She had watched him grow old, followed by his dog and sometimes herself in his pilgrimage behind the plow and horse to his fallow season. The land did not wear out; it grew weeds afterwards. And now, when she wanted, he wasn't here for her to ask what she had meant to ask, why he had built the house from stone when he was a carpenter. Didn't carpenters build with wood? At least old carpenters like him, before he quit to be a farmer?

But he wouldn't have known what to do with a question like that. He and she had been silent worshippers making a pact about

words, almost as if the pact were a covenant. He never asked her to write a letter for him, down by the spring where the bench was. Maybe because he thought she was too busy keeping up with his wife's letters to her sisters of the faith. Nearing sleep she smiled: and maybe he had known how she'd begun to write the letters out, the way she heard it, transcribed with funny spellings so the wart-spit words looked like things you could say at Holy Rollers and not be out of place. Maybe he didn't have anything to say except Abide With Me.

He had raised pumpkins, and she had watched him carve twelve faces once. Later, in a town where she was waiting for her husband to come back from some other town, she had stopped before a grocery store to look at the faceless pumpkins, trying to restore those faces. She remembered thinking then: I am identified and have gotten etched besides and I have more than a candle inside, and I glow more, or less.

The girl was warm beside her. She touched the girl's hair, soft hair. She began to hum, thinking, he won't know now, but I am bone inside. I have been touched and have not fallen through. More than bone. He had built the house on the hill of wood and this of rock, and outside, under the trees in their white clothes, or black, the brothers and sisters had argued about the funeral bill.

Sometime later, when she was half asleep, she thought she heard voices, and rested on one elbow to listen for her husband and barking dog. Nothing moved for minutes and she put her head down

again. The girl moaned. The woman listened to the wind and the clock, their breathing, and the sound of her hair under her ear. The kerosene lamp went out.

And then there were voices outside. She felt for her slippers under the cot, wondering where her husband was, if he were talking to someone out there, who? She tried to stir up the fire, not being able to believe they were children's voices, wanting light to look with. At the door she pulled her sweater tightly and leaned her head out the screen.

It was chilly. A few of the children had on sweaters. But their costumes were pastel, crepe paper, sleezy material, and long wash dresses which looked familiar. She counted, twelve. The girl came to the door, rubbing her eyes, her hands leaving reddened eyes which had been clear before, pretending again, the woman could tell. The colors excited her too, and she pulled at her mother's sweater. "Can I go? I want to go. Can we both go, us?"

The woman touched her sweater, pulling it away but not working at it because of the faces on the children--masks but without features. She imagined the features underneath--eyes, noses, mouths, cut-out like pumpkin faces except possibly, dimly in her mind, they were etched more clearly too. And their hands held Easter baskets, filled with marshmallow ducks and chickens, sugary and spotted with plastic grass. She was hungry and almost reached out to touch one. They all had eggs, candy eggs, and the girl almost reached out too, the woman could feel her hand loosening from her sweater.

There were no sounds, not from the dog or late crickets, no movement except from their feet, and she looked down. They were barefooted, boy feet, small feet, but one pair of shoes, Wing Tips like her husband wore. The girl reached out to touch an egg, and she slapped the girl's hand away. The boy closest to the doorway stepped back suddenly, frightened by the movement. The girl cried out, "Can we go?"

The boys were tall, and the woman had the idea they might be old enough to know what day it was. They wore crepe paper tunics, pastel. A flashlight the tallest girl carried showed color when the woman looked up from the tunics--pink, yellow, red. Red from their hands where the nail holes poured blood enough to make the holes appear large before drying. The children's hands couldn't have hurt. They held the baskets tightly, waiting for her to hand out Easter candy she didn't have.

"What do you want?" she whispered, holding onto the girl's arm.

"Trick or treat!" they screamed in unison, except for the tallest girl.

"What day is this!" She moved back, pulling the door close to her and the girl. "What day!"

"Easter trick or treat!" They held out their baskets, the tallest boy with the shoes pushing his, empty but for grass, into her face.

"I want to go!" screamed Joleen, shoving the door open.

"No, no," the woman began mumbling. "What kind of a thing . . ." She stopped because the tallest girl held the flashlight toward her face. And then she turned it on herself and slowly pushed down her mask. "Easter trick or treat," the girl whispered, but it wasn't a young girl. The woman could see the familiar eyes and mouth and tongue.

"You! Are supposed to be in the little house in Enon! You!" She pulled her daughter behind her. "Who's he!" she screamed, pointing to the tallest boy. "Let me see," she screamed. "Let me see. No!" She slammed the door behind her, pushing it, leaning down to stuff in the papers, throwing the girl on the cot.

She held her breath and waited for sound. They were leaving. The girl had fallen asleep on the cot, or was pretending. The clock ticked and the leaves moved under their retreating feet. She pulled the door open, holding onto the screen, and called out for an answer. "Is there a custom I don't understand? Is there a custom I haven't heard about?"

They were gone. She heard no noises. Sheba had gone too far too. She smelled the air and knew it smelled like nothing. She looked in at the girl, cast yellow by sudden moonlight, and saw her legs were not moving, now pretending. She closed the door behind her, feeling its weight on her as it enclosed the room, a door heavy as if it were made of stone. To herself, because there wasn't anyone else, she began to hum his song, which everyone, sooner or later, knew.

ALBUM

"Nobody can commit photography alone."
--M. McLuhan

Minutes before, the man had taken the last beautiful picture of the lady, although looking back in the album, the girl would be able to see details in the face less beautiful than she remembered. The lady had dark hair, very dark, and the women in the pictures the man had hidden in his trunk, the Cadillac trunk, had light hair. The girl was offering to help the man wash his car for the trip when she noticed him laying a blanket over the pictures. She looked at him and moved the blanket away. "They all look alike," she said. "In real life are they different?"

"You're a funny kid," the man answered before the lady came down the steps. "Hold still," he called while he covered the pictures and picked up the camera. The lady remained strained in a model's pose, smiling into the lens.

"I want to go too," the girl said. "I want to go. Where are you going?"

The lady called, "We'll bring you back some books, I promise."

"I want to <u>go</u>."

"Let her go," the lady asked.

"Look at her face," said the man. "She cries more than any child I've seen. Stop crying."

"She wants to go," said the lady. "She wants to go so she's crying."

"I don't like crying," the man answered. "At any time she might cry. I don't want to take her."

When the Cadillac pulled away from the trees, the girl jumped to pull down moss hanging above her head and screamed, "I'm not crying," and noticed that she wasn't.

But the picture of herself and them remained etched in her mind--an album picture, although she could hear their voices clearly, hers, seemingly one long yell, and the lady's and the man's quibbling in muted tones like radio static, persistent, coming through the walls of her brain the way radio static might come through the walls of a cheap duplex, the landlady living on one side wondering why the old man next door didn't tune the damn thing, not knowing he was slumped, finally, in his stuffed chair, dead, not listening at all, until the police came to take pictures because there had been, they said, attempts on his life, which was why, the landlady learned, he ran the radio day and night, listening to crime reports which might have been his.

She wore pigtails and didn't know she was pretty until the man owning the three-for-twenty-five-cents photo booth which was portable like an ice cream cart came to the park near her house one day and

took her picture. It was early on Saturday, when the man and the lady always slept late and liked her out of the house early, as if, she imagined, in their sleep a third person would invade the house, to fill what she emptied, and throw them together into a nightmare, motion and grayness and movie music. She didn't want to be there in person. She went to the park to watch the squirrels, and he had come early too, to eat donuts and drink coffee and ask her if she wanted her picture taken.

"I don't have a quarter," she explained.

"It's no problem atall, not a-tall. Smile pretty." So she tried to smile like the grown-up-lady pictures she had seen, except for those of the lady of the house, who was her mother, and whose face sagged lower on every page of the album.

"Want to watch?" he asked, disappearing into the room covered by the black curtain. But it wasn't a room, because when she went in to see, she was standing on cement of the sidewalk, so close to him working she had to touch him or the curtain.

"Don't let the light in! You'll ruin it!"

Then he turned with her pictures, holding up a tiny flashlight on a chain. She stood on tiptoe to see her face and he showed her how he could do it for free by reaching to hold her against him, saying "Please, please, touch me, here," pointing with the hand which held the pictures. She looked down to see where the pictures had gone, saw him, and ran. Not home. She ran to the gas station and

asked the owner to buy her a Pepsi, betting him she could drink the whole bottle. When she finished, he pointed at her stomach, swollen, until she laughed. Then she threw up, and he hosed off the concrete. The next day she went to see if the picture man were still there and found three pictures of herself lying face up on the concrete where his cart had been. She felt her face get red, and she grabbed the pictures to her, wondering who had seen her face like that, dark.

She noticed one day, while looking through the family album for her own face, one picture torn out of every page. The white tri-cornered holders remained secure against the black of the page. Inside the box there must have been a picture similar to the others on the page. So she took the others out, one by one, to look at them, trying to see the sequence of the poses, trying to imagine the fourth. Then, with the whole page empty, she could see there was no sequence. There was no order in them. And tore them all up because if one was missing, none mattered. The lady got mad and cried and moaned. She understood the sequence. It was supposed to be a family album, the girl complained, not out loud to her, but to the lady she saw in her head, who listened sometimes. "It was before you were born," the Invisible Lady said, explaining. "What was she like? Then, I mean?"

The man came back from a trip, washed his car, ate dinner with the lady, and sent the girl to the movies, with a fifty-cent piece to spend afterwards on a banana split. When she came back, full and dizzy, the man told her he and the lady were going to live together again so the lady wouldn't be nervous. He said she could come to the wedding, special--just her, Preacher Mabry, Cousin Mable, and them.

"I don't want you to marry her," she answered.

"Honey," he said, "You'll understand these things some day. It's something women want. Be nice and don't cry. I'll buy you a pretty dress to wear if you don't cry."

"I wouldn't cry," she answered.

She watched them come out of the church. Through the back window of Cousin Mable's car, framed in glass, they looked to her like a magazine cover. Cousin Mable used a roll of film. A week later they got the pictures back from the drugstore and looked at her mother and her father. They were vacationing at Niagara Falls, had both written on the post card, "Wish you were here." In the picture the man held his hand on the lady's fanny and her stomach looked caved in where the silk suit didn't catch the light.

On her twelfth birthday, her cousin home from Korea gave her a pair of aqua blue jeans and a yellow shirt and took her picture by the milk cow. That afternoon he lay beside her on the four poster bed and

told her about soldiering. He was twenty-five, and his beard never disappeared. There were things he wouldn't talk about. She lay very still beside him, listening to his words and the silence between the words, until he made the bed cave in in the middle. Enough to make her have to move not to roll into him. She touched him trying to get her balance beside the Saturday comics and felt her legs get stiff, her toes freeze. "Do you know," he asked, "we're sixth cousins removed?" "I know." "I don't know why I said that," he answered. She got up and went out. She knew he wouldn't take a nap, would look red-eyed after milking, under the bare bulb over the table, eating corn bread crumbled into sweet milk, set apart by tiredness from the war. He wouldn't recover, the girl said.

She found one of the torn-out pictures in the lady's drawer. It was a baby in a box, and when the lady came back from the store, the girl asked who the baby was. "Your twin brother," the lady said. "He died." "What did he look like alive?" "Like you. You were identical. I don't want to talk about it." In bed she imagined him and said to herself she had known all along she had had a brother. "They don't like to talk about him," the Invisible Lady reminded. "Your father especially." But she wasn't sure the Invisible Lady understood how things were, had gotten. She heard the lady yell during a fight that she was glad the boy hadn't lived, because, she

screamed to the man, "He would have been like you, you! God help him!" She realized now she was too old to be talking to an invisible lady, who was maybe sightless. Instead, she looked for her brother's face in crowds, imagining as she walked that he would almost pass by, that she would recognize him immediately when his face got to hers, shoulders apart. Twice she thought she saw him.

The man was off again, and the woman had taken to wearing house dresses that didn't fit. The girl thought she looked nice, and when she got a Brownie for her fifteenth birthday, she took a picture of the lady sitting in a canvas chair outside by the mulberry tree. When the pictures came back, she understood she was wrong. It wasn't softness she saw, but the nervous look of waiting. The lady got backaches and cried. The girl began to see the man wouldn't like her if he did come back. The lady began going out on Sunday nights with a fat man. But later she went on a diet herself and gave him back the ring. She said he had been loving and kind. She bleached her hair and got a job. When she came to visit the girl in college during Parent's Week, she brought a picture of herself to put in the double folder beside the man. When the girl's friends stopped to look up at the bureau, they said they thought they had seen him on television. Later they said maybe they had seen her, too.

The man wrote that he had met someone he loved. He sent her picture, and while the girl was reading about her, the picture fell from the manila folder. She looked down and didn't read any more, because it was a picture of a beautiful lady, one in the car trunk or like one in the car trunk. She put the wife's picture beside the picture of the lady and the man. Her friends said they had seen her on "The Edge of Night" or "As the World Turns."

They had reunions and weddings and funerals in the lady's family with such frequency that the girl wasn't able to make the journey to where they were, in the South where it was always at least a little warm. She lived with her man, married to him because women needed things like that, in a climate of snow five months a year. And although she didn't go, she knew what the weddings and reunions and funerals looked like. Even so, to remind her, the lady sent pictures, even of the dead, heads showing and made-up with the tints of color photographs. Somehow, still, it seemed different when the man she married began buying camera equipment and finally posed her, naked, for life studies. "Is that me? Do I look like that?" she asked him, over and over. So when, one day, their son was trailing behind her in a department store and was stopped by an old lady to be held out at arms' length and stared at, she knew what the old lady meant by the warning: "Don't you ever try to deny this child." Her

whole family had large eyes, except for the sixth cousin removed, who squinted, and began to twitch around the eyes, and finally went blind.

Then, later, she tried to tell the man she had married that when he began to try to explain things to her, as the Invisible Lady had done, she couldn't stand it. She eventually shut her ears altogether, and he, eventually, left her. She had wanted him to understand that the muted static in her head was enough to listen to, but mostly she was tired. She raised the boy and only sometimes thought she saw him walking toward her in a crowd. She sent pictures of him home in her stead. She never went home herself, afraid to see the lady now, and afraid.

The man and the wife had a baby. She never saw.

She waited. When she met a man she liked, she didn't talk much, but waited to laugh. The one who first made her laugh was not, even so, happy. One day he showed her a picture he had taken for a newspaper of a singer whose hands were pressed to a wall made of brick, fingers straining and making the brick look like flesh, and she had gotten frightened looking at the picture as he explained how he had posed her, for effect.

She met a man who made her feel her silences were shared, as if they held between them a family album of all their pictures combined, his filling in the lost pages. She forgot with him the touch of the man's belly in the picture booth, and if he held her, it was not in rooms so bright a picture could be taken, and she would never be on television, even if he wanted. It was understood.

One day she was lying with her head on his legs as he sat talking, low and for a long time, looking out across her to a place on the wall. Then he looked down at her. She felt him get still.

"What?"

"I don't know," he said. "I think, sometimes, I can see my face in your eyes." He peered down.

"I'm not crying!" she said. Then, when she reached to touch his face, looking up she saw that he was. In his eyes, herself. Mirrored. Still-shot.