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Exile Vol. XXXII No. 1

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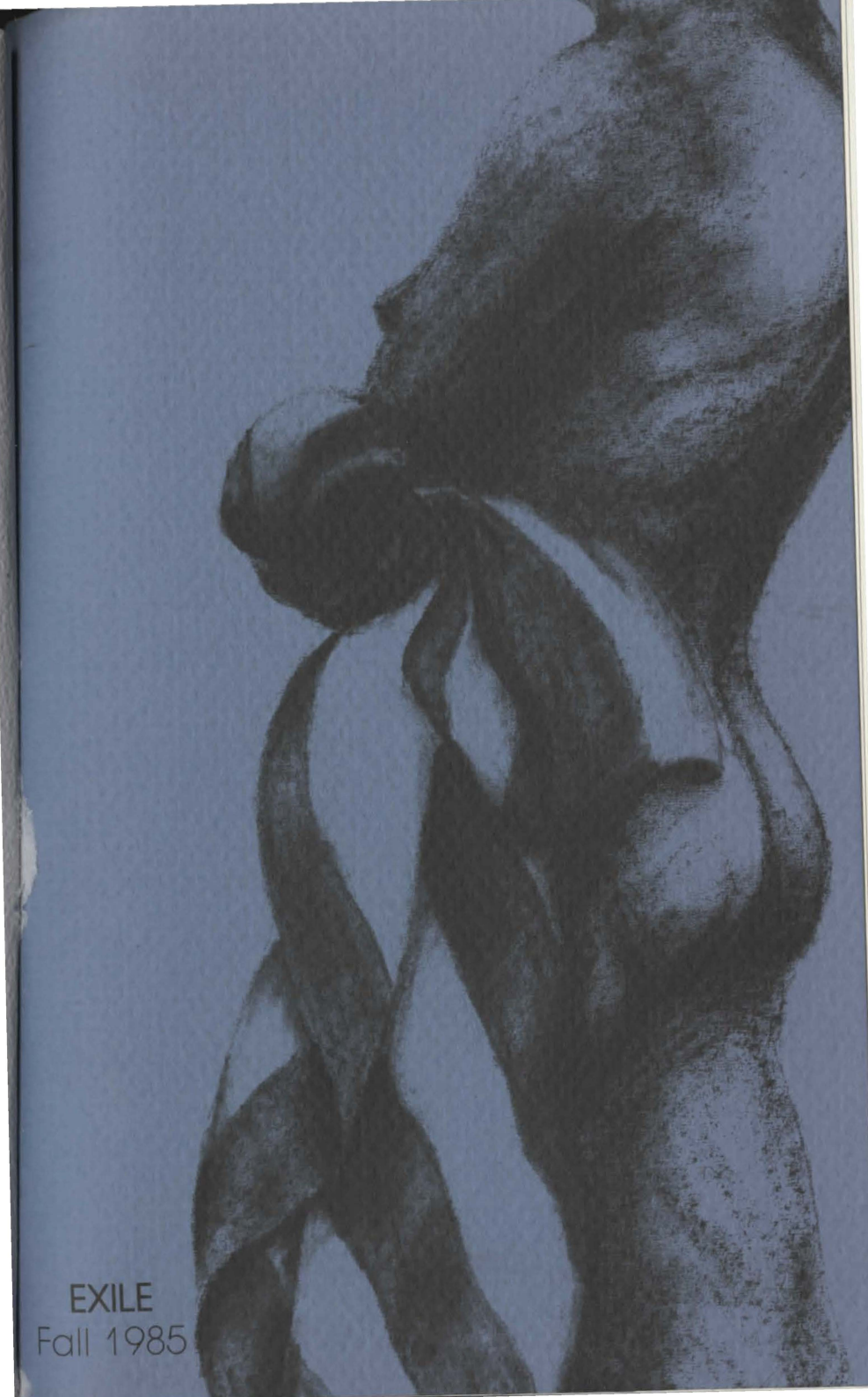
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Exile Vol. XXXII No. 1

Authors

Theresa Copeland, Susan Hanlon, Joan R. DeWitt, Jeff Masten, Karen J. Hall, Jennifer Miller, Betsy Oster, Reid Benes, Debra Benko, and Judson B. Curry



EXILE
Fall 1985

EXILE
Denison University's
Literary Magazine

You of the finer sense,
Broken against false knowledge,
You who can not know at first hand,
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought:
I have weathered the storm,
I have beaten out my exile.

Ezra Pound

Fall 1985

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Editors share equally all editorial decisions.

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Special thanks to Susan Moran and Elizabeth Wright

Table of Contents

ARTWORK

Red and White Karen Koch	Cover
Vicissitudes I Claudia H. Donegan	1
Untitled ('84) Kok Fooi Yong	11
Lines Don Jacobs	15
Vicissitudes II Claudia H. Donegan	19
Waltham, Boston, Winter of '84 Kok Fooi Yong	25
Statue You Claudia H. Donegan	29
Museum Sketch Deanna Lynne Bridgeforth	41

FICTION

Sheba Theresa Copeland	4
Was There Really Someone in the Kitchen With Dinah? Susan Hanlon	21
What Do You Say Liza Blue? Joan R. DeWitt	32

POETRY

Ode Jeff Masten	3
Misdemeanor Karen J. Hall	10
Aimee and Kate Jennifer Miller	13
Bound Betsy Oster	14
Drawing Reid Benes	17
Great-Grandfather Debra Benko	18
Grammy Hayes and the Infamous Beaver Jennifer Miller	27
Seabed Judson B. Curry	28
Gentleman's Quarterly anonymous	31

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES	43
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THE HISTORY OF THE

REPUBLIC OF THE UNITED STATES

OF AMERICA

FROM 1776 TO 1876

BY JAMES M. SMITH

NEW YORK: 1876

THE HISTORY OF THE

REPUBLIC OF THE UNITED STATES

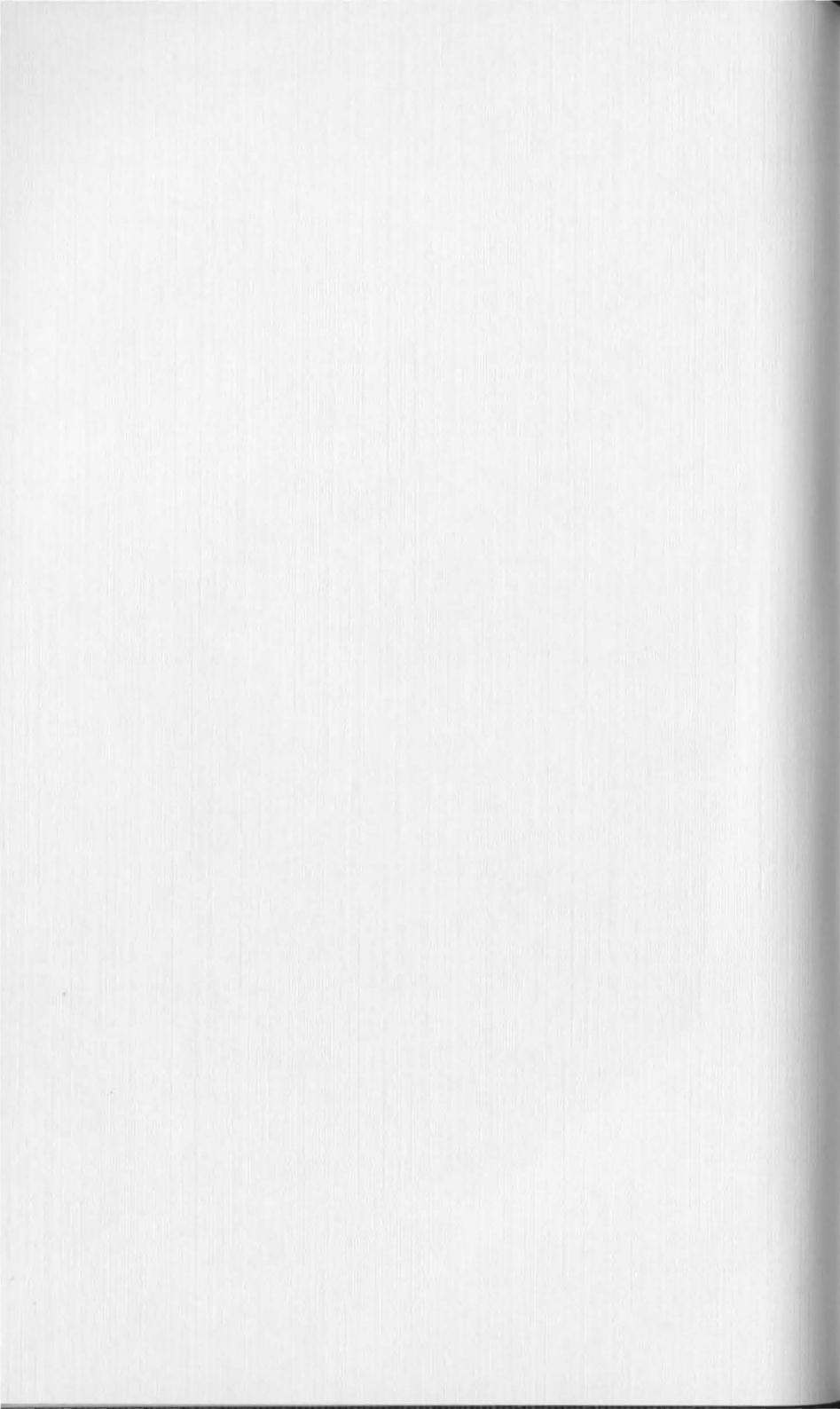
OF AMERICA

FROM 1776 TO 1876

BY JAMES M. SMITH

NEW YORK: 1876





Ode

O for a chair
that swallows me
whole
and lets me sleep
in its warm
stomach.

Jeff Masten

Sheba

"This is a time for action!" shouted Sheba.

I glanced around the crowd that Sheba's intoxicating voice held in its command. Her hands were moving rhythmically as she spoke, beating the podium every once and awhile for effect and her words were beginning to run together, taking on a chant. Whenever she started this I knew she was coming to the end of her talk. The lyrical portion of Sheba's speeches never failed to produce an emotional outburst from the audience. People shouting, "Tell it like it is sister" or "Amen, little sister." Hands clapping, feet stomping, men and women yelling "Black solidarity" and "We need a change!" It was truly a sight to behold.

"I just want to leave you with this one thought," Sheba shouted, "White is *not* always right, but Black is *always* beautiful!" The screams of praise were deafening but they had little effect on Sheba.

Sheba took her final bow, then descended the platform steps and strolled through the crowd back to where I was standing, shaking a few hands on the way.

"How was I?"

"Great, as usual, but you knew that."

"You're right." She laughed confidently and appraised the mass confusion that she had caused. "Lord Jesus, they are wild tonight. We better get the fuck outta here 'fore somebody goes and calls the cops on me for disturbing their precious peace. I want something to drink. Wanna go to Wally's for a beer?"

"Sure, why not."

"Got any money?"

"Well how else did you plan to get the beer? God knows you ain't got nothing green in your pocket."

"You got that right."

Wally's was a bar on the East side of town. It was around 10:00 p.m. when we got there but the place was still fairly quiet. There were a few brothers in the back shooting craps and a couple of hookers stationed in the front trying to get a jump on their competitors. Wally was in his usual place behind the bar. He was a large man, weighing in at about 255 pounds of pure muscle. He stood about 6 feet 6 inches high. His afro was always neatly trimmed and well-groomed. I always felt deep down, that if given a little help, Wally and I could have a love affair.

There was only one semi-clean table in the bar and it was occupied by Exodus Jones, who hadn't seen a sober day since his son stepped on a land mine in the Viet Nam War. Sheba walked over to

the table and gripped the back of his chair. She coolly tipped the chair to the side and watched Exodus slide into a crumpled heap on the floor.

"Was that necessary, Sheba?" I asked after we were seated.

"Nothing in life is necessary or important 'cause in the end we're all gonna die anyways."

"Your optimism astounds me."

Wally's enormous frame swaggered toward the table with our beers; he spilled some on the floor but didn't seem to notice.

"Here ya go ladies. So, how you two sexy things doin' this evening?"

"We're women, not things, and if you weren't so busy lustin' after the women that come in your bar you probably could have gotten our fuckin' beers out here earlier. I can't stand you men, y'all always runnin' around with your tongues hangin' outta your mouths just like a pack of dogs. Just the other day I..."

"We're just fine Wally," I broke in. "Thanks for bringing out our drinks."

"My pleasure." He smiled down at me with those strong, white, overlapping teeth that I have grown so fond of. "I'll be back later to see if y'all need anything else." He picked up his serving tray and slipped it under his arm. He gave me a little wink, then turned to salute Sheba and strutted back to the front, providing me with a long look at his big, tight, rearend.

"He wants you," Sheba said, looking at me slyly over the frothy head of her upturned beer.

"No he doesn't. Why would you say that?"

"Oh God, don't be so naive. Anybody four blocks away could tell how hard he was."

"You are so crude."

"Fuck you."

"I'm going to let that pass. Anyway, how do you know he wasn't getting, uhm — excited over you?"

"Me? Lord have mercy, he knows I'm too much of a woman for him. I'd bring him to his knees."

"Well, thanks a lot!"

"You know what I mean."

I did know what she meant. I always seem to know what Sheba means. I guess it's from being around her for so many years. Sheba and I had grown up together. The first time I ever set eyes on Sheba was on the rooftop playground of our apartment building. She didn't notice me at first because she was too busy kicking sand at the other kids playing in the sandbox. I was new in the building and in a peak of loneliness I decided to come up to the playground to try and make friends. This was the first time I had ever seen a playground with no grass. My family and I had just moved to Brooklyn from a small town in Indiana. My father had been laid off from his job at the fiberglass

company for almost a year when he finally got wind of a job opportunity in the big city.

After Sheba had successfully run all the kids out of the sandbox and to the other side of the playground, she turned to stare at me. She started walking toward me. I was so scared I almost ran. She stood directly in front of me and just stared. Her big green eyes searched every inch of my body, and then she started talking.

"Watcha name?"

"Marla."

"Well I'm going to call you Marly 'cause I like that better. Ya know what, Marly? I can tell just by lookin' at a person whether or not they're going to be my friend, and I've decided that you are going to be my friend." We were five years old then and we've been friends now for almost twenty years. Sheba taught me how to survive in the city. She taught me how to dress, how to hustle, how to talk like I knew what I was talking about, even when I didn't, and how to fight when it was necessary.

"Watcha think' 'bout so hard, Marly?"

"Nothing."

"Don't do that! You know how I hate that. I can't stand it when you stare into space for 15 minutes and then you tell me you ain't thinking 'bout nothin'. You must be thinkin' something bad about me."

"Don't be so paranoid. Do you realize that I am probably the only person in this entire city that knows just how insecure you can be at times? To everybody else you're a tiny, overconfident, intimidating, strong-willed, crude mouthed, intelligent black woman."

Strangely enough, as intimidating and crass as Sheba was at times, she never failed to attract a crowd. At this very moment there was a table of men across the room trying to get up enough guts to come over and talk to her. It's not really surprising though, because Sheba was an incredibly beautiful woman. Her skin was a rich yellow-brown color and as smooth as a baby's behind. She kept her light brown curls cut very close to her scalp.

One of the men from the table across the room finally got up enough gumption or either, he finally got drunk enough, to make a move on Sheba. He strutted over to our table and looked down at Sheba, tilting his head a little to the side, trying to look nonchalant.

"Hey babe, uhm uhm uhm, you look good enough to eat." Sheba just glared at him out of the corner of her eye and went back to drumming her bright red fingernails on the table top, which is what she had been doing ever since he opened his mouth.

"Oh come on Mama, cut me some slack. A good looking little girl like you shouldn't be sitting here without male companionship."

Sheba's nails stopped in midbeat. She turned completely around

in her seat until she was staring directly up into the man's face. She gave him a look that would have made Satan grab for his coat. When I saw Sheba's index finger raise up off the table I knew all hell was about to cut loose.

"Let me tell you, motherfucker, I've been living in this world for twenty-five years. I've been drinkin' since I was old enough to open the bottle and I gave my virginity away 'fore I even knew what it was. So you can believe me when I tell you that I ain't nobody's 'little girl.'" By this time the man had backed up so far away from Sheba that she had to shout for him to hear her. "And furthermore," Sheba's whole upperbody was twisting and bouncing but her index finger held steady, "as ugly and scrawny lookin' as you are, if I was your mama I sure as hell wouldn't claim ya."

Now the whole club was getting involved. They were hooting and yelling. A handful of men were even taking bets as to whether Sheba was going to end the whole episode by slapping the man in the face. All of this attention was what Sheba needed to bring her scene to a climax.

"Now I suggest you take your ugly, no-account self and climb back into the hole you crawled out of . . . Cause if you don't get the hell outta my face I'm goin' take this beer bottle and shove it where the sun don't shine." The crowd went wild as the young man cowered back to his table. He downed the remainder of his beer and ran out the front door.

"Did you have to be so hard on him, Sheba? After all, in his way he was trying to pay you a compliment."

"Bullshit. He was trying to get a little play, that's all, and that ain't no compliment, it's exploitation."

Sheba bumped her glass of beer and spilled a drop or two on her skirt.

"Damn, hand me a napkin, Marly."

To say Sheba was a flashy dresser could not even begin to describe her way with fashion. She loved mini skirts. I swear she must have one in every texture and color imaginable. Of course, if I had legs like Sheba, firm, smooth and meaty, I'd want to show them off too.

Tonight she was wearing a sapphire blue mini skirt with a little split in the back; just high enough to be sexy but not sleazy. Her blouse was made of white chiffon lace — see-through for the most part. She had a silver chain draped across her midsection. Sheba topped all this off with a black leather jacket. Silver hoops adorned her ear lobes and her silver bangle bracelets that she never took off gleamed in the dim glow of Wally's ceiling lights. She claimed that her father sent her the bracelets from Nigeria while he was serving in the Peace Corps. I know this is not true though, because one night when we were sixteen, after splitting a gallon jug of Wild Irish Rose, she confessed to me that she

had no idea who her father was and neither did her mother. She told me it didn't matter because she didn't need any hard-headed black man telling her how to live her life, but I could tell it did matter. We never talked about her father again.

Sheba and her mother got along alright, mostly because they had never sat down and talked to each other. Her mother had been one of Cicero's girls. She worked the corner of 122nd and Locust. I remember the night she was killed. It was the October when Sheba and I were nine. The police met us at my front door. We thought they were after us for breaking windows and spray painting nasty words on the side of the Washington Square Apartments. The police told Sheba that they had found her mother strangled in a hotel room. Evidently one of her customers had not been completely satisfied with the service. When they told Sheba, she sat down in one of our worn red velvet chairs close to the window. She sat there for two days. She didn't talk, she didn't eat, and didn't cry — she just sat staring out the window. On the third day she got up, washed her face, brushed her teeth, and then asked me if I wanted to go to the mall and practice shoplifting.

"Damit, there you go again."

"What?"

"Starin' off into space. By the way, what was that shit you was sayin' about me havin' a crude mouth?"

"Crude, C-R-U-D-E. Your mouth is like a sewer. I don't know how you ever expect to get into politics using language like that."

"I speak for my people and if those conservative motherfu..."

"Save it. I know what you are going to say and I agree with you to a certain extent. But what I'm trying to tell you is that in order for you to help the people you have got to get your foot in the door, and if that means toning down your language a little bit, then so be it."

"OK, OK, I'll work on it. I want another drink."

"You've already had four."

"You ain't my mama."

"You're right, I'm not your mother and it's not going to be your mother carrying you out of here when you get stinking drunk."

"Bullshit, oops I mean uhm — baloney! You'll see, when we get ready to leave I am going to walk outta here as sober as a preacher."

"Yeah, sober as a preacher on a two day drunk."

Sometime later I looked up to see Wally walking toward our table with a broom in his hand.

"Well ladies, I'm going to have to close up shop. Do you want me to call you a taxi?"

"O-oh noo Warlly. We'd raather warlk and let the cold night air rum-ru-rush through our hair and freeeeze our tonsils. After arll it's only twenty blocks. Ya big dummy!"

"Yes, thanks Wally that would be very kind of you." I paused momentarily to watch Wally's beautiful body glide up to the front of the bar, then I went back to looking for Sheba's shoes.

"Heey, Heey, Marly, watcha doin' under the table?"

"Looking for your shoes."

I finally got Sheba's shoes on her feet and got her into an upright position. We headed for the door, tripping over Exodus on the way out. Once we were outside I turned to take one last look at Wally. To my surprise he was standing right behind us helping me hold Sheba up. He reached over me to open the cab door. He smiled down at me, his overlapping teeth gleaming under the fluorescent glow of the street lamp. I could tell by looking at him that he was thinking the same thing I was thinking.

We slid Sheba into the backseat, her silver bracelets clanging together musically. I told the driver where to take Sheba and gave him some money. Wally shut the door and looped his big brown arm around my waist. We watched the taxi drive off and turned to walk back inside the bar.

Theresa Copeland

Misdemeanor

for Radclyffe Hall (1886-1943)

Long after I have died
misunderstood and alone,
long after my work
has gone out of print,
long after my body
has fallen in on itself,
my writing will live
on a shelf, forgotten.
A young woman
hiding in study
will find a dust-covered
book with the last due date
thirty-eight years old.
Intrigued by the title,
by my picture on the frontispiece
and by the story I have left for her,
she will sign it out,
take it home to share
with her lover, her friends.
And though she may be
an honest young woman,
let this be the first book she steals.

Karen J. Hall

Radclyffe Hall, English novelist and author of *THE WELL OF LONELINESS*, wrote to give insight into the experiences of lesbian women and to justify the lives of "those pitiful thousands who must stand forever outside [God's] blessing." Her novel, however, was banned after an infamous obscenity trial.





Aimee and Kate

A dotwork mass of garden
Enclosed by an iron gate,
Sunburst and leaf
Brush strokes
Appear uncalculated
But the spectator steps away
And the strokes unfold
Strategically,
Two gowned children wearing bonnets
Pose on brick steps
And smother three beagles
In their laps,
High button shoes
Are planted in caked dirt,
Laced to stop the blood flow
And polished like fine silver.

Jennifer Miller

Bound

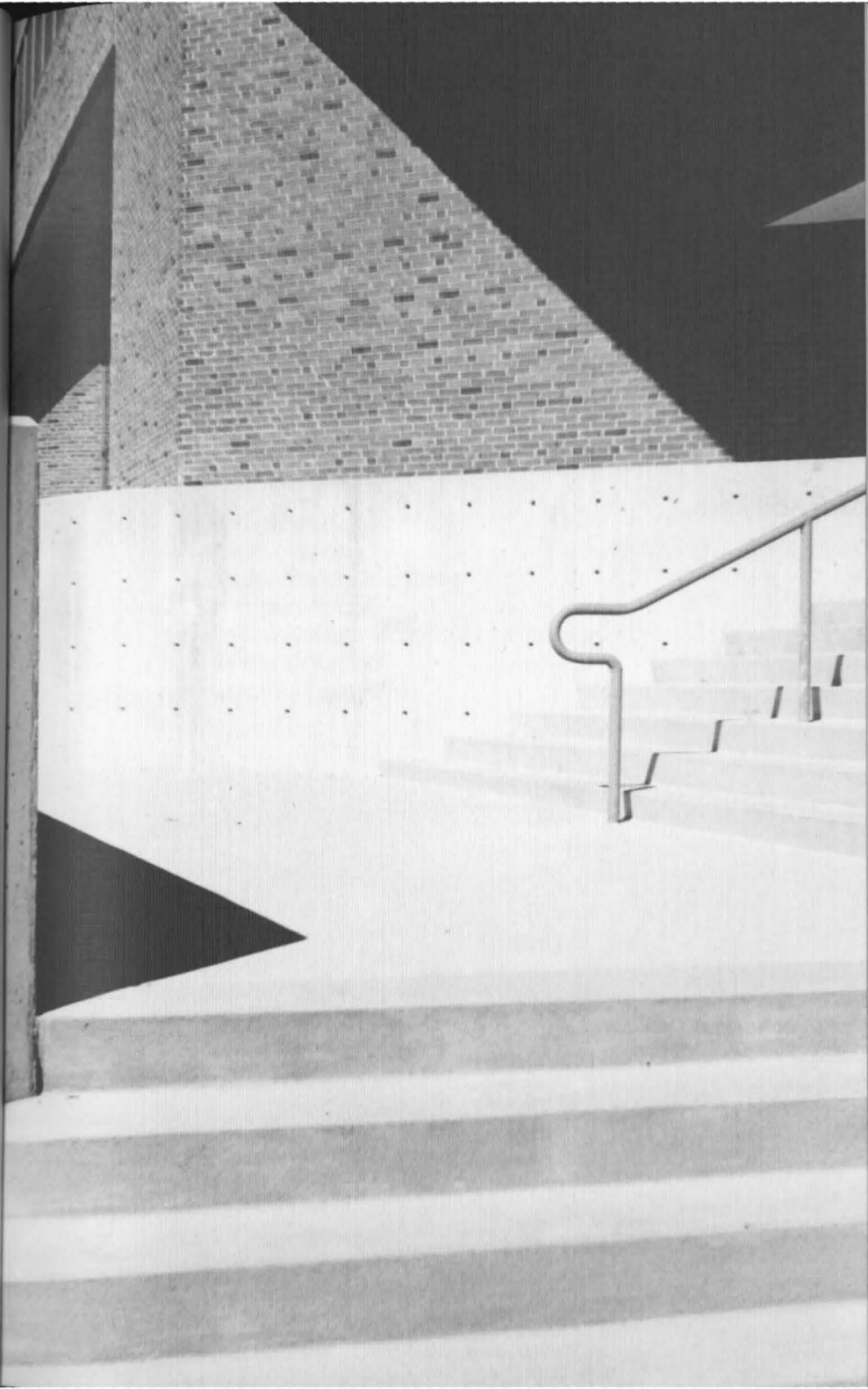
My dear,
Your arms wrapped around me
cannot hold me here.
I am drawn down the years by
Another man.
I was his girl also, once.

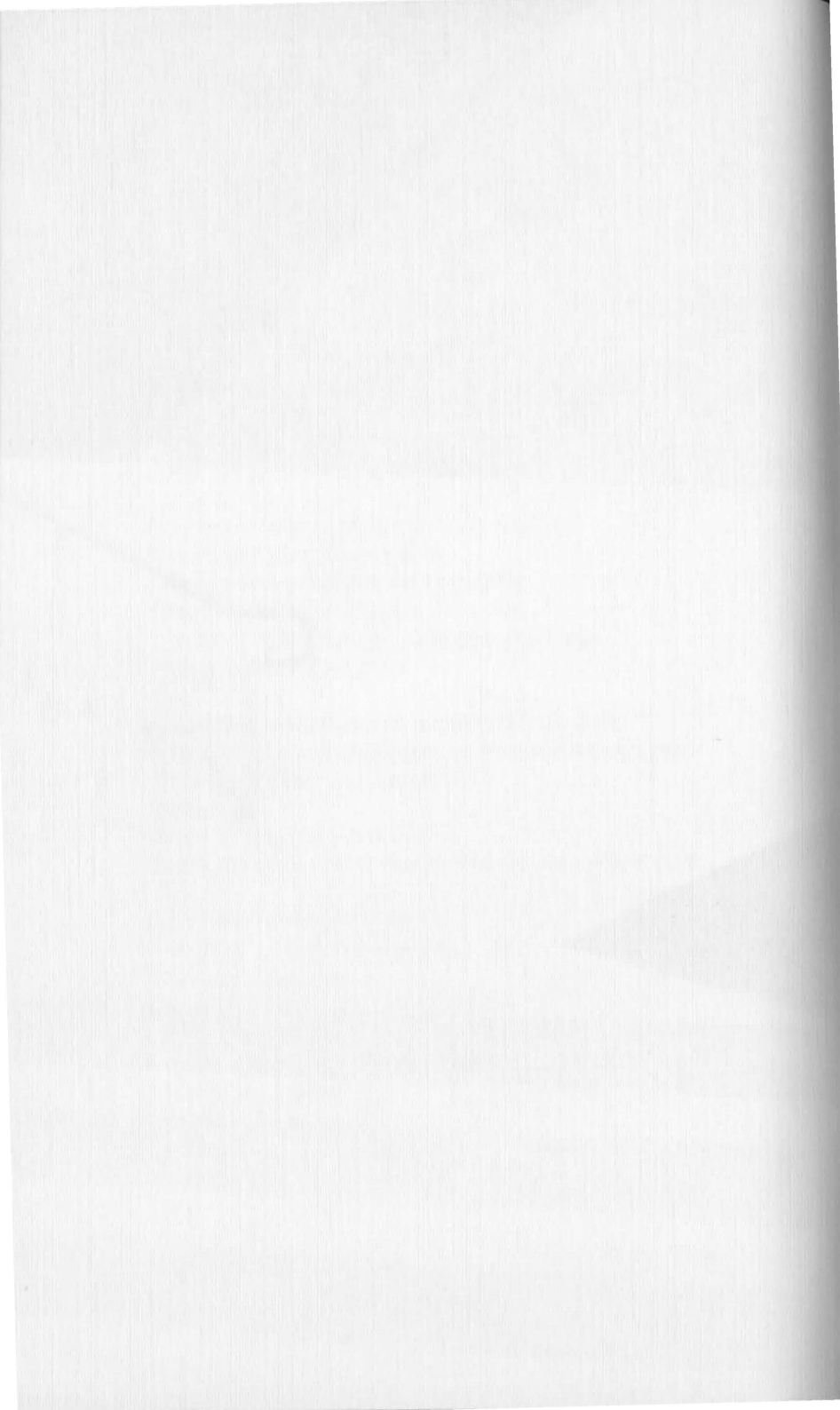
He had designs upon me from my birth
When he appraised me as
my mother held me in her arms,
When he laid out his plans for me,
in his mind building walls around mine:
blueprint of filial love.

His tight-lipped dreams sucked at me until,
emptied of my-almost-self, with bloodless fingers
I tore the lifeless cord and
Stared
As my father, like a spider,
Swung insanely from the strands of his broken love.

And now I smother myself
in the deadening weight of you,
And you think that
I will become your vision of me.
No, love, it is not your arms that hold me,
but the fragile strands that bind more sure than rope.
And more twisted.

Betsy Oster





Drawing

Ten green tigers
Were cooking
Three orange explorers
In a purple pot.
Yellow daisies watched contentedly
As my daughter
Colored her world.

Reid Benes

Great-Grandfather

When you died, you left memories for me.
I find them in this lakewater,
In the shifting mud,
The images too faint on my canvas.

I do not see the clear blue eyes
That saw turn of century, two Wars, and Depression,
The eyes whose center my elders eagerly sought,
The eyes closed in the coffin.

The painting is of your hands in prayer, reaching for the sea —

Wrinkled hands with brown spots
And crevices carved by weeding flowers
You showed me but never picked,

Hands holding mine on the way to Lion's Park
Where we stood at the edge of the cliff,
And saw Sandusky Bay fight the rocks,

Hands shaky as willow boughs
Pointing out nests in the cottonwood trees
To unfold the story of the water cranes,

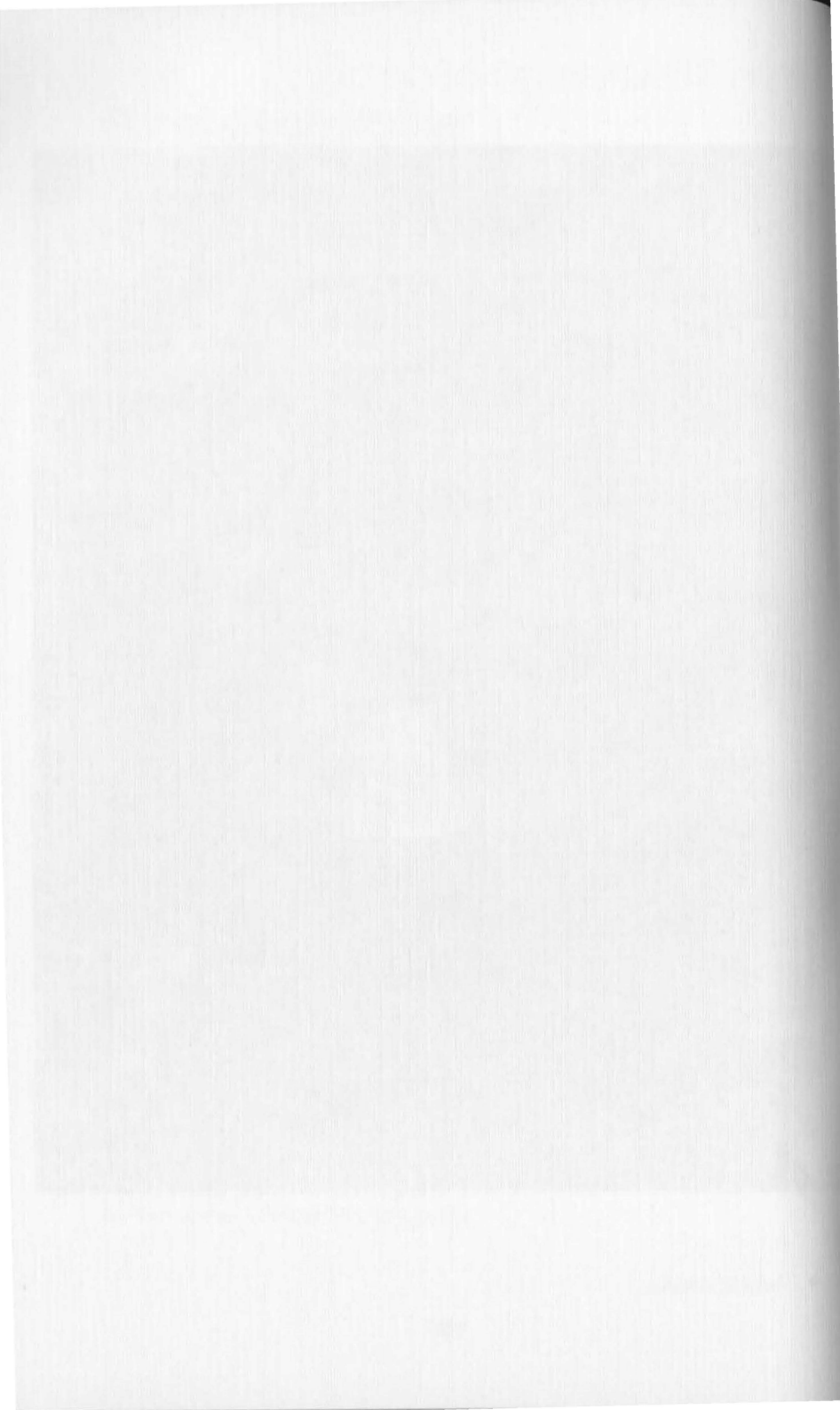
Hands teaching me how to skip stones across ripples,
Scraping gypsum against limestone to spell my name,
Hands washed in water and formed of clay like sediments.

But I grew out of the water, away from your hands
As I grew out of white anklets and patent leather flats
And went out to play with my cousins.
My father and uncles conversed with you —
Too soon content, confined to your green recliner,
Your hands resting on the plastic arms.

Now I clasp your hands again
As the water wrinkles my fingertips.

Debra Benko





Was There Really Someone in the Kitchen With Dinah?

"So what you're saying, Mr. Farley, is that there is absolutely no proof of the fact that you were ever in the kitchen with Dinah?"

"Yes, that's right. But I didn't mean to say . . ."

"You don't mean to say what, Mr. Farley? That the only truth in your alibi is that you weren't in an actual kitchen, per se, but rather in what is referred to as a kitchenette?"

"Um, Ah, I suppose you could say that."

"You suppose do you? And would you like to tell us a little something about the banjo you and Dinah were allegedly strumming?"

"Well, it wasn't really a banjo, by the standard definition, it was more of a-a viola. We said banjo to make it fit into the song."

"So what you really mean is that you were introducing Dinah to the viola for the first time?"

"Not really, she'd seen one before. She didn't act surprised when I showed it to her."

"But Mr. Farley, Dinah's lack of surprise does not necessarily indicate that she'd seen a viola before. Perhaps she thought it was a banjo. Is that at all possible Mr. Farley?"

"I-I suppose so. But I know she's been in contact with . . ."

"Now about this business of strumming. It wasn't exactly strumming now was it Mr. Farley?"

"Actually, no."

"Tell the court what it was if you please."

"It was picking a six-beat arpeggio with an A-string lead."

"Picking! Members of the jury, not only have we established that this action did not take place in the kitchen, and the alleged banjo was in reality a viola! But, now it has been determined that the two in question weren't even strumming the old viola, they were picking a six-beat arpeggio with an A-string lead! It is becoming very clear that some sort of fraud has taken place here. It will be your task, trusted members of the jury, to decide the seriousness of their actions in regard to the listening public, and just how they will be punished. I thank you very much. Your Honor, the prosecution rests."

Dinah sat at the defendant's table rubbing her index finger and thumb together rapidly. She looked at Myron Farley seated in the witness' stand. They had left his name out of the tune because Myron didn't really fit anywhere. (They had tried it between fee fie and fiddle dee aye oh, but it just hadn't meshed properly.) Myron glared back at her from his elevated chair with great disgust, and Dinah knew why.

The banjo was her idea.

She and Myron met at a rummage sale in the basement of the First Congregational Church of Cooper's Creek. They bumped into each other in the section reserved for broken tools and small appliances. Myron dropped the combination electric-toothbrush-waterpik he had bought. Dinah nearly let her metal viola fall to the floor. Dinah insisted on reimbursing Myron for his dental tools, but he had politely refused, saying he already had three waterpiks just like it, and had picked this one up because they couldn't be found just anywhere. She had immediately adored his reasoning, and he fell in love with her viola. For the first time in his life Myron let spontaneity be his guide, and he asked Dinah if he could play a few notes on her shiny instrument. She consented only because she'd been the cause of his combination electric-toothbrush-waterpik damage. The two left the rummage sale together leaving behind bluehaired, old ladies talking about pie and peach preserves recipes.

The only bench at the park had the distinction of being the only bench right next to the train tracks. Trains ran by every fifteen minutes. The bench sported a large accumulation of bird droppings. Before they sat down, Dinah took some moist towlettes from her shoulder bag, gave one to Myron, and they wiped off the sticky manure.

When he finally put his hands on the neck of the viola and tenderly let it rest against his shoulders, Myron felt a rush of pleasure throughout his body. He hadn't experienced this sensation since he'd received tickets from his uncle in Hollywood to see Hollywood Squares. He took the bow into his right hand and played a scale. He felt himself drift into a viola rendition of "My Darling Clementine" followed by "Eddystone Light," and in a final, ecstatic moment he burst into the muzac version of the Rolling Stones' "Get Off My Cloud." He stopped playing and realized that during his mini-concert Dinah had been staring at him, mesmerized by the music. Myron felt an embarrassing warmth rise in his face, and he timidly pushed the viola to Dinah.

"Do you know 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot'?" she asked, pushing the gleaming viola back toward him. "I'd love to hear it if you do."

"I do know it, but I think maybe I've played my share," he replied over the loud rattle of the passing train.

"No, please, I do appreciate a good violist so much," she raised her voice to be heard over the banging of the boxcars on the tracks.

"What?" he yelled, "A good piolist?"

"No, violist!" she cried.

"Oh, crayolist. What's a crayolist?"

"Violist! V-I-O-L-I-S-T! Violist!" she was now screaming at the top of her lungs. Unfortunately such volume was not needed, for the train's end had gone by as she spelled the final letters. "Violist" ripped through

the quiet air. She looked at her feet, completely embarrassed, and he flinched, hoping the word would fly over his head and cause no external damage. She apologized and he asked for her phone number.

Dinah and Myron were married for two years when they decided to collaborate on their most famous work, "I've Been Working On the Railroad." They'd seen the success of "This Train" and "Railroad Bill" and the failures of "My Home in the Hills" and "Sweet Apple Dew." When they began "Railroad" they had just come off the high of "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain," and their creative juices were flowing. Perhaps poetic license got the best of them.

They rented a small cottage at the foot of the Smokey Mountains hoping to take a breather from the hectic life of Cooper's Creek. It was a simple place: bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette, and a middle-sized living area with a fireplace. The two settled in for a vacation, not knowing they were on the road to ruin.

Inspiration struck them at the corner store while they decided, as an afternoon refresher, to buy the grape Nehi over the Welch's Sparkling Strawberry Soda. A huge, muscular man came in with a pick-axe in his hand. He looked left than right and said to the storekeeper,

"Jake, I've been working on the railroad all day long, fix me a cold lemonade will ya?"

Myron flashed a glance at Dinah and she at him. They hooked arms and scurried out of the store, leaving behind their grape Nehi. They broke into a trot rounding the first corner, and hit a full gallop in the straightaway leading to the cottage door.

Myron reached the viola first and picked out the melody he had conjured in his head. Dinah joined him on the French horn she bought at a wholesale band instrument store. The two sounds blended and Myron sang the words as they came to him:

I've been workin' on the railroad,
all the live-long day.
I've been workin' on the railroad,
just to pass the time away.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing,
rise up so early in the morn.
Can't you hear the captain shouting . . .

At this moment Dinah stopped playing—the rest is history. They finished the tune in the wee hours of the morning because they tried to fit Myron's name in, but it wouldn't go. They caught a few winks and left mid-morning for their agent in Cooper's Creek.

Guy Finch assured them that this time they had a classic. They recorded it the next day. The following week it hit the mall festivals, county fairs, and campgrounds. Royalties rolled in. Myron and Dinah

couldn't answer all the fan mail. They rode this emotional high for about three months. It all came to an end one day while they were lying in the sun by Cooper Creek. Guy called them on the port-o-phone—
creekside.

"Farley?"

"Yeah, Guy is that you? You sound far away."

"I'm in Nashville. Seems we got us some trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I'd like to tell you in person. Be up here tomorrow morning."

They hung up. Myron Farley felt nauseated as he relayed the message to Dinah. She began rubbing her index finger and thumb together. They drove to Nashville that night. In the morning they found themselves on trial for fraud and deception of the public.

Dinah took the stand and Conrad Applebee drilled her with questions so fast she couldn't answer them all. He dredged up the "My Home in the Hills" fiasco and the problems surrounding "Sweet Apple Dew." Dinah could only agree with him. Myron's temper rose with each question until he could contain himself no longer. He jumped out of his chair and protested too much. Applebee had them right where he wanted them. He concluded his questioning of Dinah and called Myron to the stand.

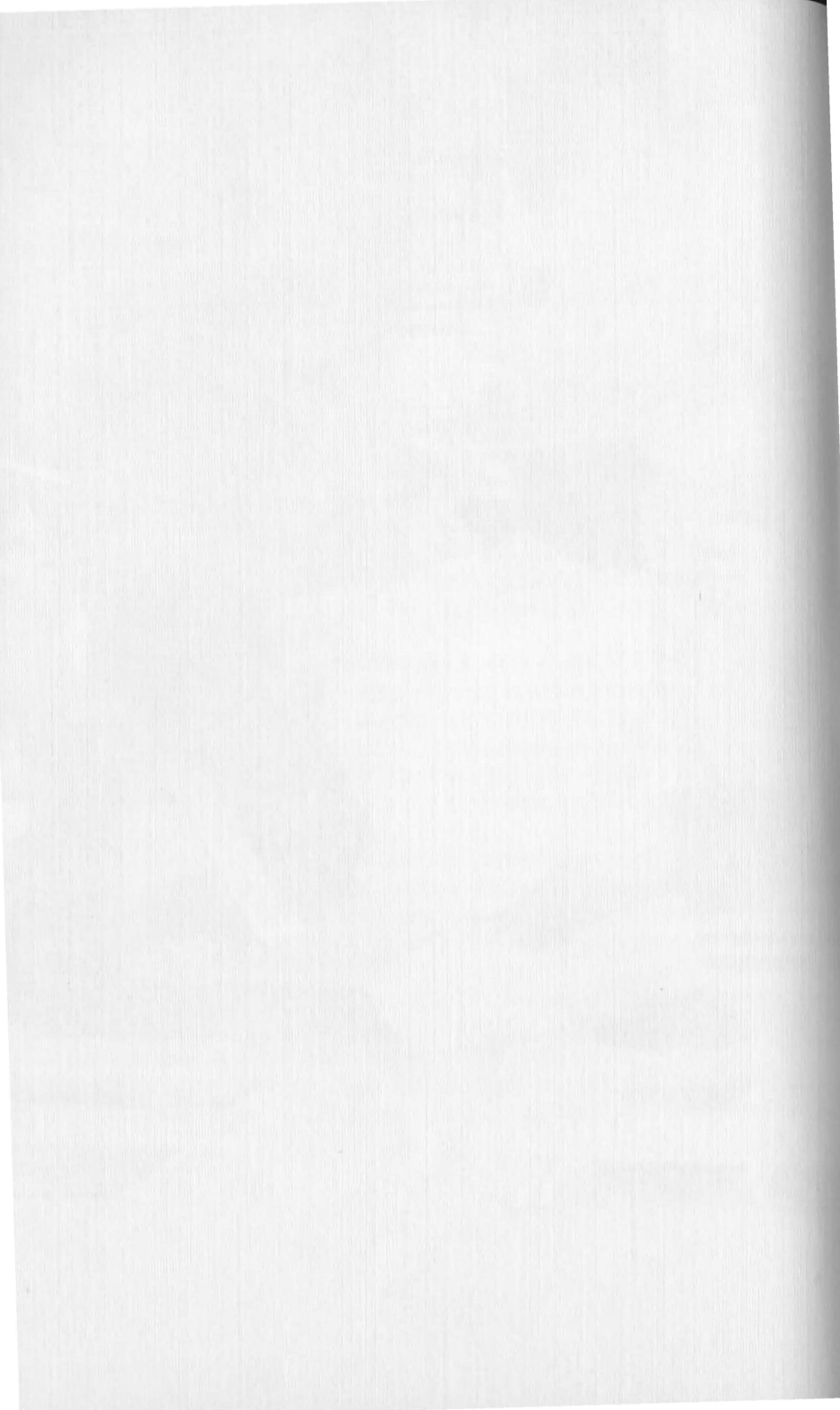
His questions cut like a razor, clean and quick, into the reputation the two had spent years building. With each interrogation he tore them down until all Myron could do was admit fault. It was true they hadn't ever rented a cabin in the Smokies. They'd never seen a huge, muscular railroad man, who worked all the live-long day. Dinah never sang in the kitchen and she most certainly never strummed on an old banjo. They were beyond redemption.

The jury found them both guilty of fabricating truths and allowing a viola to impersonate a banjo. Myron received three years workin' on the chain gang in Mississippi. Dinah got three years replanting all the flowers that had been gone a long time passing from the Cooper's Creek town square.

Today Myron and Dinah run a used sheet music, antique felt coaster shop and delicatessen on highway 93 just outside Pebble Junction. The viola was confiscated as exhibit A and is locked up in the Cooper's Creek police station with Marylou Carlyse's twenty-two she used to blast her husband. The whereabouts of Dinah's horn is unknown.

Susan Hanlon





Grammy Hayes and the Infamous Beaver

Grammy Hayes
Used to run in from work
Whip off her coat
Replace it
With a housedress
And start dinner.
Mommie would laugh
Aunt Helen too
When they told her
Half an hour later
She was still wearing
The detachable fur collar
And beaver clashed with her apron.

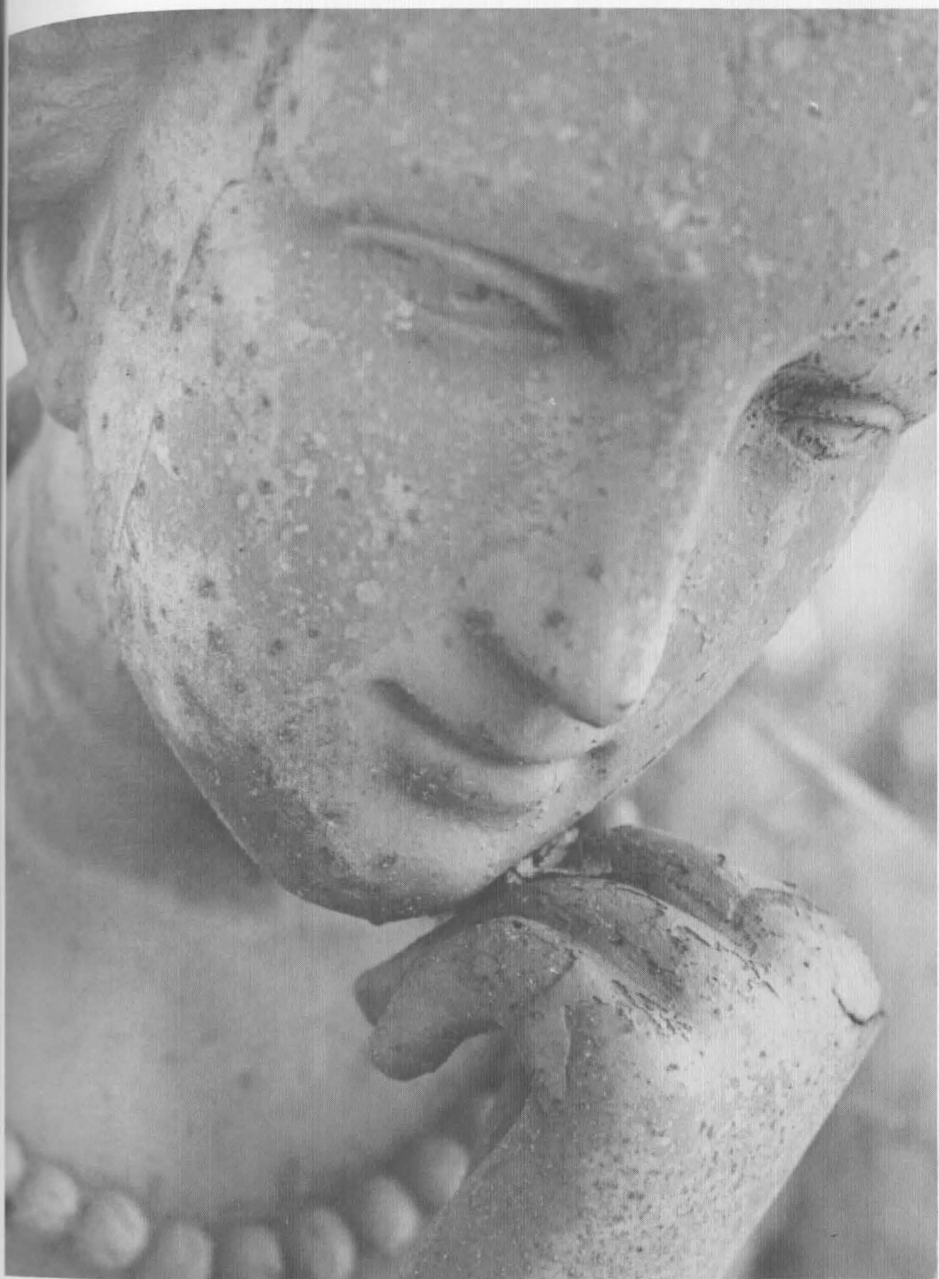
Jennifer Miller

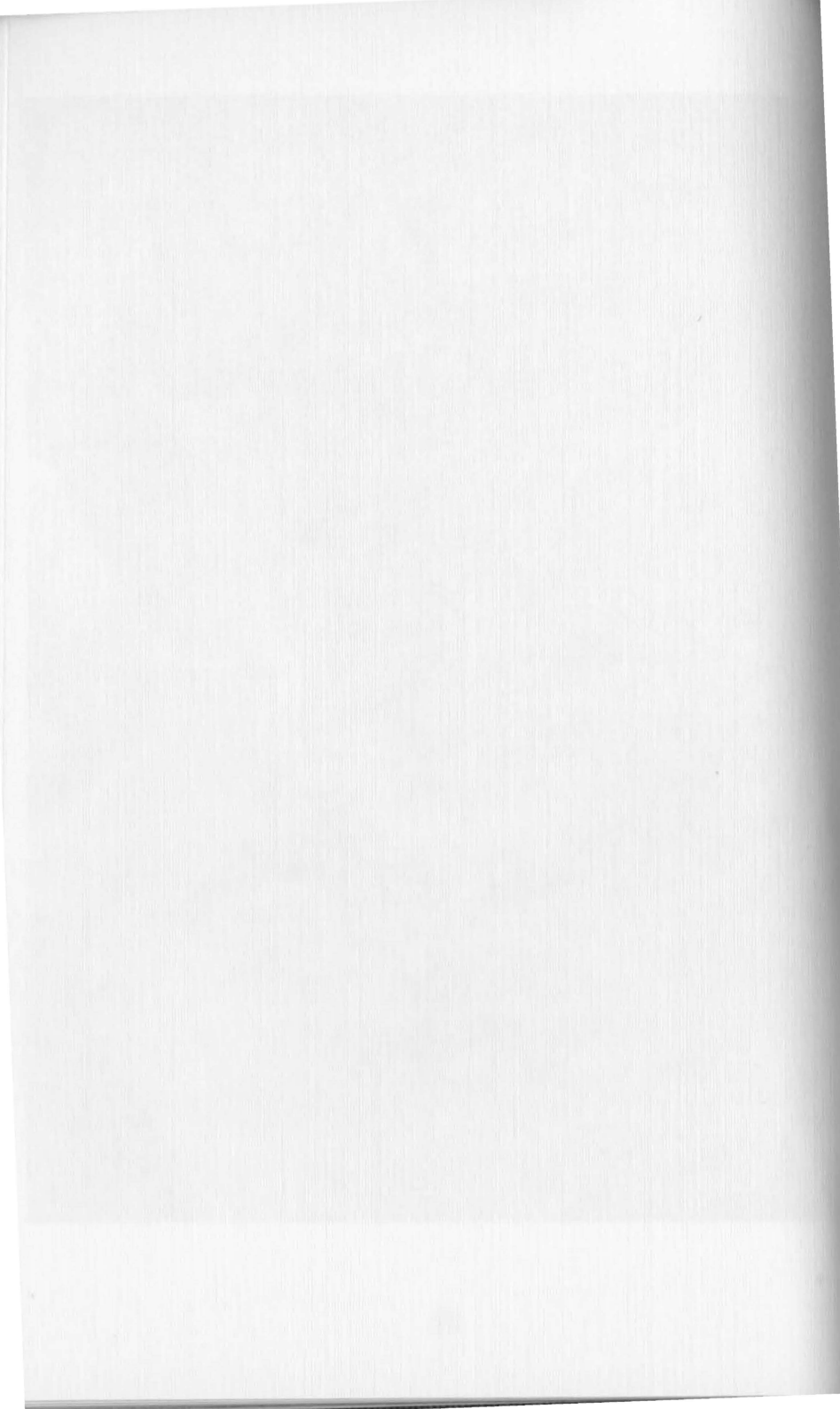
Seabed

I walk on water, like he did,
but he knew that below the stormy surface
fish rested on the bottom.
My world is waves and foam
and Neptune's mythic storms.
I can only plumb the depths
in thoughtful submarines
filled full of air.

In the next aeon
I will cease to choke on air
and sink below the surface,
as deep as the world's foundation,
to find that
I am a fish.

Judson B. Curry





Gentleman's Quarterly

After thirty years looking for you,
my one hundred per cent
blond and cotton pretty boy,
I am convinced that you are
the falsest advertisement.

They dress you up and
prop you up, my virile cut-out;
a few photos then back
in your box til next month
while outside I age, carefully.

anonymous

What Do You Say Liza Blue?

Four months ago yesterday my beautiful blond King of Cups kicked back, reevaluated his life and kicked me out. Meaning: Clayton Lee Taylor found someone else.

Yesterday was a Sunday. Now it is Monday and it is raining and it is about two-thirty in the morning. Check out my Timex battery-run alarm clock. I must raise my head, turn my head and focus my eyes on the green hands. They read 2:32 a.m. Close enough. I can get about three hours of sleep without waking. I'm depressed.

Most people can sleep for hours on end when they are depressed. I know, I've read about it.

When I was seven I read a story in *Reader's Digest* at my grandmother's house about a man who slept for close to ten years straight when some business deal fell through. My grandmother saves all of her magazines in cardboard boxes in her basement. *The Reader's Digest* was in a box with *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Look*, *Ideals* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The box was marked April 1966, the same year and the same month I was born. The story was long and I was so proud that I could read that I told everyone about the sleeping businessman at dinner, and then my mother and I went back to our house and I told my father about it and he said he didn't think the story was true. I believed it then and I believe it now. The man owned some company that did something with steel and he had already lost a lot of money the year before and then he lost some big deal with a U.S. car company (Chrysler makes sense here, but I can't remember the exact company) so he told his secretary that he was leaving for the day. He got into his Mercedes (blue if I remember) drove home and went to sleep. His wife could not wake him the next day so she took him to the hospital and after a while he could sit up and feed himself etc. . . . etc. . . . but he basically just slept for ten years. He could not talk or read or watch television or anything. Just stare and sleep. He woke up ten years later like nothing had happened. Another day, another morning. What a surprise he had. That's beside the point. He was depressed and he slept.

My best friend Michelle said she sometimes slept twenty hours a day when she was depressed. She said she had dreams of getting into her mother's station wagon and driving out to Omaha, Nebraska. Why in the hell she picked Omaha I don't know. It's far away from Madison I guess. A destination. Well anyways she didn't do it, only thought about it because she said she was just too damned tired to mess with gas stations and credit cards and restaurants and what would happen when she got caught because she had just turned fifteen and wasn't legal. When she was down all she could do was sleep and eat. I sent

her Joni Mitchell's "Ladies of the Canyon" and a giant bag of M & M's. In between sleeping and eating she called me and told me thank you and that she was writing down all of her dreams but that she couldn't remember much of them. And what she could remember wasn't very good anyways, she said.

One morning when things were still fine between my Clayton and me, he told me that dreams cleaned out his soul. He picked me up at about five in the morning and I made a thermos of coffee and we went to this old field to watch the sun come up. That was all he said. "Dreams clean out my soul. That's why I love to sleep." He doesn't talk much in the mornings. It was so comfortable just hanging out in that field.

Oh the luxury. Sleeping and eating. I can do neither. Don't ask me why, I really don't know. I'm depressed is all. Bluer than blue. Down, down, down. I really should be able to sleep. I really should. I'm off of caffeine. I exercise at least two hours a day. I walk the dog. Go to the grocery store for my mother. Wash the car. Go to movies. Read. I don't know. I mean I still do things. I consider myself active.

Today, for example, I went to aerobics with my mother. She goes twice a week. At first I told her I would go with her so she would stop bothering me about it. She wants me to meet some new people since I'm home. Since I paroled myself from college for a while. She doesn't understand why I like to do things alone right now. Why I do things like go to movies by myself. Why I don't visit some of my friends at school. Why I don't have lunch with my friends that are still at home. "Be patient with them," she says. "Go to Mary's party. She called three times." On and on and on. "No car until you return the call. Why don't you go see Brian?"

I brought Brian home for Thanksgiving before I even met Clayton. A mistake. My mother loved him. More like adored him — underline, underline. My father, "He's a fine young man. Knows his politics. Business smarts too. A fine pick." Brian's about as fine of a pick as Spiro Agnew was. Extremely right wing. A mama's little baby. And boring, boring, boring. I brought him home only because his parents were in Europe. I felt sorry for him. He wore patches on the elbows of big baggy sweat-ers. I liked that. I wanted one of those sweaters. So I brought him home. A mistake. I have not heard the end of him, but I did get a sweater. It's on my chair on top of *The Phantom Tollbooth* which I have been reading just about everyday. I always put that sweater on that chair. I like it there. I love the brown. And the patches. Pretty classy.

So at first, when I was driving with my mother to aerobics, I thought I was going pretty much just to shut her up. But after we got there and I saw how much she concentrated on the dances, I realized I went with her to be nice to her. She's been mellow lately. And I've been thinking about telling her about this whole situation with Clayton. She's been

making a sincere effort to control her periodic hyper, spastic fits lately (e.g., not stressing about the house because I smoked a cigarette in the living room). And I've been pushing her. I smoked two cigarettes in there the day before yesterday to see what she would do. I was comfortable. I was in front of the window. There's this great view of this bus stop from that window. The whole connect the suburbs to the city deal. It was about five-thirty and people were coming home from work. They looked like little kids coming home from school. Only they had mustaches and hairsprayed hair and briefcases and crumpled newspapers instead of lunchboxes and math and spelling tests. A couple of people were smoking. That made me want a cigarette. So I just did it. I lit one and smoked it. And then another. I had a great view. I was comfortable. I didn't want to go outside. No big deal. My mother didn't do anything other than open the windows and vacuum twice. No confrontation. I appreciate that. So I ended up going to aerobics with her.

We went to aerobics and I had a pretty good time. Those women are fat. They wear lipstick while they dance around. This lipstick sticks out because most of the women turn pale when they exercise. It was pretty funny. We were doing what they call the Thriller to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" no less (two kicks with the right leg, two with the left, turn around, repeat; the whole time waving the arms in front like a windmill) and some little kid unplugged the box that was playing the tape. Tripped them all up. They were on a right kick, arms flapping, really into the whole thing. Then silence. They looked embarrassed and awkward like they were lost in a parking lot or something. It was funny. They've been doing this dance stuff for the last two months with the same women and the same leader and the same dances and the music stops and they all get so uptight and self-conscious like they just met the women around them. All participants in the faux pas of the century. It was funny. Little chickens with their heads cut off.

I did the whole hour with them and then I came home and walked our dog whose name is Sunshine. Sunshine and I walked around the block twice and I told her about what happened at aerobics. I didn't care if anyone saw me talking to her or not because I really felt like hearing what I had to say about those women and my mother dancing on that racquetball court. I was feeling pretty good about the whole afternoon and then I imagined Clayton shooting a whole roll of black and white on those women. That wasn't too bad, but then I had this clear vision of Clayton sitting at his desk and coloring in each woman's lips with real lipstick and I felt sick at my stomach. He was always doing cool things like that. I took Sunshine home and then I jogged for about three miles. I should be tired. Right? I should be sleeping like a babe. Three-thirty, I bet. Check it out. (Procedure) 3:23 a.m. Not bad. I'm getting pretty good at this time deal.

My sister Trish is nine now, but when she was six I taught her how to tell time. It didn't make sense to her. She is a great little kid and does great in school but when she was in the first grade she just figured that you do what you do when you want to, or when your mother tells you to or when your father tells you to. Sometimes she makes more sense than a lot of people who are a lot older than she is. My mother had to pick her up from school early one day because the nurse called and said that Trish had hives all over her body. When I got home from school Trish told me that she had to list into a tape recorder at the allergist's everything that she had eaten for the past two days and that she had to come home from school early because she couldn't tell the class when it was ten-thirty and that they should go out to the bookmobile. "I got hives instead," she said. For some reason this made me really sad then. We sat at the dining room table and learned how to tell time with one of those little kid records—"Mr. Greenjeans Tells Time"—with one of those little books. She was wearing a plaid skirt and red shoes and my mother gave me twenty dollars for teaching her.

Now she has her own alarm clock and I've got me a white Timex battery-run glow in the dark alarm clock. Sweet. Clayton Lee Taylor's responsible for giving me that clock. We had some good times together.

First encounter: the bus station on my way home for Spring Break. My mother was upset about the bus station deal ("Fly silly, you'll save time"). I was upset about going home for Spring Break. No choice. My godmother was getting remarried and my mother is particular about my attendance at functions of this sort. I was really into testing her back then so I told her that a bus ride takes a lot longer than a plane ride and that I needed as much time as I could get and that I would get home when I got home. I hate it now when I do stupid stubborn things like that, but that's how I first met Clayton—at the bus station. Sitting in a plastic chair and two to the left of me, there he was reading an old issue of *Newsweek*. Maybe reading. He kept looking over and smiling. Cool. It was cool then. I hoped that he was going to the same place I was. Finally he put the magazine down and said with an attempt at a John Wayne drawl, "Do you want a cigarette little cowgirl?" (Even cowgirls get the blues.) He was wearing an army jacket with the name Henderson over the right pocket. I said sure. A free cigarette is a free cigarette. So we sat and smoked and he said he had nothing better to do and that he would like to ride along with me to Madison. We bought a twelve of Michelob and sat in the back of the bus by the little latrines. After a while, maybe two beers, he said, "If those bastards end up plunging us into another war, I'm sticking a peace sign on the back of my army jacket and making some posters and standing by that bench right there." He pointed to a faded green bench in front of

a drug store. We were in Ohio I think. I don't know. It was dark. So he just comes up with this remark out of the blue, everything was quiet until he said that, and then a couple of people turned around or crossed and recrossed their legs etc. . . etc. . . So he said, "I'm letting people know how I feel about that shit." Pretty funny. Made those people squirm. Cats on hot tin rooves.

Where have you been all my life Superman? I wanted to ask him. I wanted to ask him that. I'm into melodrama sometimes. That's something I'm working on though. Elizabeth, my therapist, my analyst, my psychologist—whatever the hell you're supposed to call her—my shrink is having me make a conscious effort to separate between fantasy and reality. She puts a lot about Clayton into the fantasy category. I don't blame her. He was too good to be true. Oh don't you think Liza Blue?

She'll say something to me like, "Okay, let's pause for a couple of minutes, Nicole." She is really into relating to people by using their names before, after or during every single sentence that comes out of her mouth. Liza I know my name. I'll ask her to refrain from using my name so often—please—because it makes me feel as if I am being interrogated and she'll say, "Okay Nicole, we're pausing here, and we're going to make a separation between fact and fiction." In all reality, it is hard for me to look at that woman and make this conscious effort to separate fact and fiction. She's short, five one is pushing it. Perfect brown hair, green eyes, crystal clear complexion, white white teeth. The whole bit. A regular walking Barbie doll. I feel like telling her to wake up and smell her coffee. Twice I've almost shouted, Liza, YOU'RE not real. It is irritating and embarrassing when she does that fact and fiction crap. She thinks I'm really screwed in the head. What the hell? I'm depressed. I'm down for a while. Playing possum.

Elizabeth won't let me smoke in her office either. Not only can I not smoke in my own home without the risk of confrontation, but I can't smoke—not even one lonely little drag—at the place where I'm trying to work this whole troublesome affair out. Ridiculous. Here I am pouring my guts out to this woman, I mean talking personal, personal, personal and I cannot smoke even one single cigarette. Liza says I can't smoke in her office because the nicotine makes the body nervous which adds to stress which adds to anxiety which adds to depression. Hey Liza, I'm at the head of the class. It doesn't matter if I smoke. She doesn't want me to smoke in her office—really—because she's pregnant and she's afraid the smoke will hurt her unborn child. Prima donna mother wants a prima donna child. Makes sense. What good old Liza should think about though is that her precious unborn baby has to listen to human horror stories all day long. Now, let's talk trauma. It's no wonder that kid's in the fetal position. Sometimes I'm pretty funny at night.

Going to see Elizabeth is part of the deal I made with my school so they'll let me come back in the Fall, if I'm up for that. Intensive therapy. Pretty intense. Not too fun. I mean I'm a private person, I don't like the idea of making innards public. Jesus Christ play the violin. Me agreeing got me out of school for some time and mellowed my parents out a little too. They were really stressing about my grades and my health. I wasn't doing work or going to classes or eating properly etc. . . etc. . . the whole deal. What the hell? I was more down then than I am now. The crisis point, don't you say Liza Blue?

My immediate dismissal from school was part of that deal too. So my mother and father come to pick me up from school. I've got two bags packed and have my white Timex battery-run alarm clock in my pocket. Meredith, my mother, is wearing a gray wool skirt, navy blazer and of course pearls. Those pearls. Her hair is behind her ears and she's smiling a little too hard. She's fidgeting with the strap of her purse because she wants a cigarette. She doesn't smoke in front of me because she thinks smoking's unbecoming, especially for a mother. She knows I know, but she doesn't want Trish to find out. Trish is nine and could deal with it. Nevertheless, my mother has smoked for the last seven years in bathrooms with fans going. She can flush away the butt — the incriminating evidence — when she's finished. No problem. Good Lord the closet smoker. It's mid-October and she has a lovely tan.

Baxter, my father, too, is tan. He too is wearing a navy blazer. Ready for the office, minus briefcase. He is smiling like my mother. But his is an even more strange, strained smile. This smile makes his forehead wrinkle, like he's concentrating. It's the same look he gets when he reads the paper. We don't try to talk to him when he reads the paper.

"Ready kiddo?" he says. I nod my head. He picks up my bags.

"Honey, you look wonderful," my mother says. The typical. Yet I have not showered in four days. I'm wearing filthy levis and the brown baggy sweater with the patches that I got from Brian. My face is white. I'm too thin.

"Yes," I say. "Ain't life grand?"

She smiles again. My father gives a short, business lunch laugh. We get in the car. I stretch out in the backseat. My mother makes a comparison between a deer being blinded by headlights and running straight into a truck that's delivering milk and orange juice to Lawsons, and going through a semester of college and not feeling settled, not being comfortable with the environment yet. Consequently one can get blinded by those headlights, the brightness of it all and run straight into it and get hurt, she says. One does not know enough from experience to go to the side of the road or pause and let that truck pass. She applauds my decision to come home. My father agrees. They've prac-

ticed. It's a long drive. We should have flown.

I check some shrinks out around Madison and I pick Elizabeth. She has a nice smile. She picks me. I start going to therapy. I go alone. When I get home, my mother is usually making dinner. "Are you all better?" she asks.

Elizabeth thinks I should tell my parents everything about Clayton. I won't. I mean I might, but I don't want to. It's a long story. My my. You ain't heard the sorrows I've seen. I think my mother would cry.

Back to that bus ride. When I got to Madison for my godmother's wedding, Clayton was asleep. His head was on my shoulder. He had been sleeping for a couple of hours. Every now and then he would flinch in his sleep and smile. Bizarre. Cool though. I liked him. I picked up his head, picked up my bag and said something like, "Good-bye Henderson, it's been a hard day's night." Something profound. I gave him my school address and got off the bus. Pretty typical. A good time.

As far as I can tell, that is the beginning. I mean I'm depressed. Things are fuzzy. Maybe this thing started sooner. Maybe not. Who knows? My karma's off.

I go back to school. Everything's fine, fine, fine and then Clayton shows up out of nowhere. He says he's thought about it and he's going to take a couple of winter courses. He takes a class in Black American literature and one in Third World politics. We sit in the library and he reads me the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. He likes her soul, he says. She has a pure vision.

He gets a letter from his family every two weeks. They live in Texas. His brother is a great tennis player he tells me. Clayton cashes their checks, but rarely reads their letters. I wonder about this, but don't bother him about it. He says that his brother is ranked something like seventy-three in the world.

We get closer and closer. I'm really happy about being with him. I want him to meet my family. He won't. So I don't mention him to anyone back home. He doesn't like pressure. I can't imagine him having dinner with my family.

He says that Third World nations are more honest about poverty than the U.S. is, and he teaches me how to be radical (e.g., convinces me to stop shaving my legs) and I teach him how to tolerate small talk. We make plans to learn Spanish and go to Central America etc... etc... and I am really in-love.

Elizabeth questions this in-loveness part. Hell, I'm a kid. Fact or fantasy? She thinks that I was at a vulnerable point in my emotional growth cycle and just wanted someone to cling to. The whole replace the father concept. When she mentions Clayton with my father, I think of my father telling him that his photographs really aren't good enough to make any money to speak of. Man to man. I think of this and feel

kind of sick and that I could actually throw up in Elizabeth's trash can. She keeps tissues on her desk and when I feel that badly I just take one of these and cough into it a couple of times and then I feel okay. I was in-love, though. I'm still in-love. Hey, but so what? Liza Blue you wouldn't question it if you really knew you.

So Clayton and I are supposed to go to this radical bonfire one Friday where a bunch of people are going to burn an effigy of Reagan. Pretty cool. Pretty radical. He comes to my room. He's wearing his army pants and his beat-up levi jacket. He's smoking a Drum cigarette. He's holding the white Timex battery-run alarm clock. I'm really happy to see him. I love to see him. I'm in-love, right? I feel kind of high. I'm not. He's drunk. "Time flies," he says and gives me the clock. "Catch you around." Well, I stop smiling. I don't ask what-the-hell. Our relationship is based on mutual independence. I go to the fire alone. It is a real bad scene. I'm not into it at all.

Michelle tells me that when she was really down and going to therapy, intensive therapy, just like me, she slept a lot. I mean she claims that she sometimes slept for twenty hours some days. I might try to write that woman a letter tomorrow. If I feel like it. I don't have to do anything I don't want to now since I'm depressed, except go see Liza m'love and try to eat. I'm getting just a little bit bored. Some nights as I lie here I think I could go back to school the next day. And some mornings when I watch Trish getting ready for school or at night when I see her doing her homework, I think I could really get into that scene. What the hell?

A couple of days ago Trish and my father went to the library and checked out *The Little House Cookbook*. They made doughnuts. Trish was doing a project about pioneer women. That's so cool that my father made those doughnuts with her. He was so proud. He came up here wearing my mother's apron that says "BITCH BITCH BITCH" carrying two of those doughnuts. "For the princess of the pond," he said. The doughnuts were awful. But I was so happy he made them. I can't remember him making anything else ever, except money of course, and my crooked bookshelves that I left in my room at school. My roommate had all of her books in them when I left. I didn't feel like taking them out. Displacing them. Books have souls. They can feel. The whole picture. I love those bookshelves.

So Clayton out of the blue falls in-love with someone else and says he feels like he's married to me. The excitement is gone. Dwindling interest. Whooha. I'm stunned. I think I'm on a bad trip. I swallow any bit of pride I've ever had and sob and whine and beg to get him back. He shows me poems he's written to his new lover. He tells me I'm the closest person ever to him, but that he wants this new woman. A possession. I think he's selfish of course, and that he has a split personality. The

typical. I tell him not to call me or to come to my room or insist on private intense conversations. I go back to my room and get drunk for about a week. I love gin.

Part of my deal now is no booze. Thank you Liza Blue.

Okay, so I maintain for a while. I see Clayton around every now and then rolling a Drum or throwing a frisbee or something. He looks sad. I look like hell, but I'm functional. I get up every morning and put on my endurance and go to my classes. Things are cool for about three weeks and then one night I freak. I saw Clayton earlier that day and he started a real personal conversation. I was sad. I ignored him and went to my room. Then I wanted to call him and then my body felt like it was going to explode and I felt like little lines of gunpowder were going off across my forehead and I was scared. I didn't feel sadness or anger or anything. My body was just going crazy on me. I needed something. So on and so forth. I got emergency counseling. I signed the papers and here I am. In bed, wide awake.

I kind of feel badly about not telling my parents what's going on in my head. What's to say? It's a long story. It kind of scares my mother when I forget how to pronounce certain words and when I sit and stare out the window and things. She wants to know what's wrong. Elizabeth thinks I'm selfish. I can tell. But how can she know what's going on? Oh happy day. She's pregnant. She has a practice. She's successful. Ain't life grand?

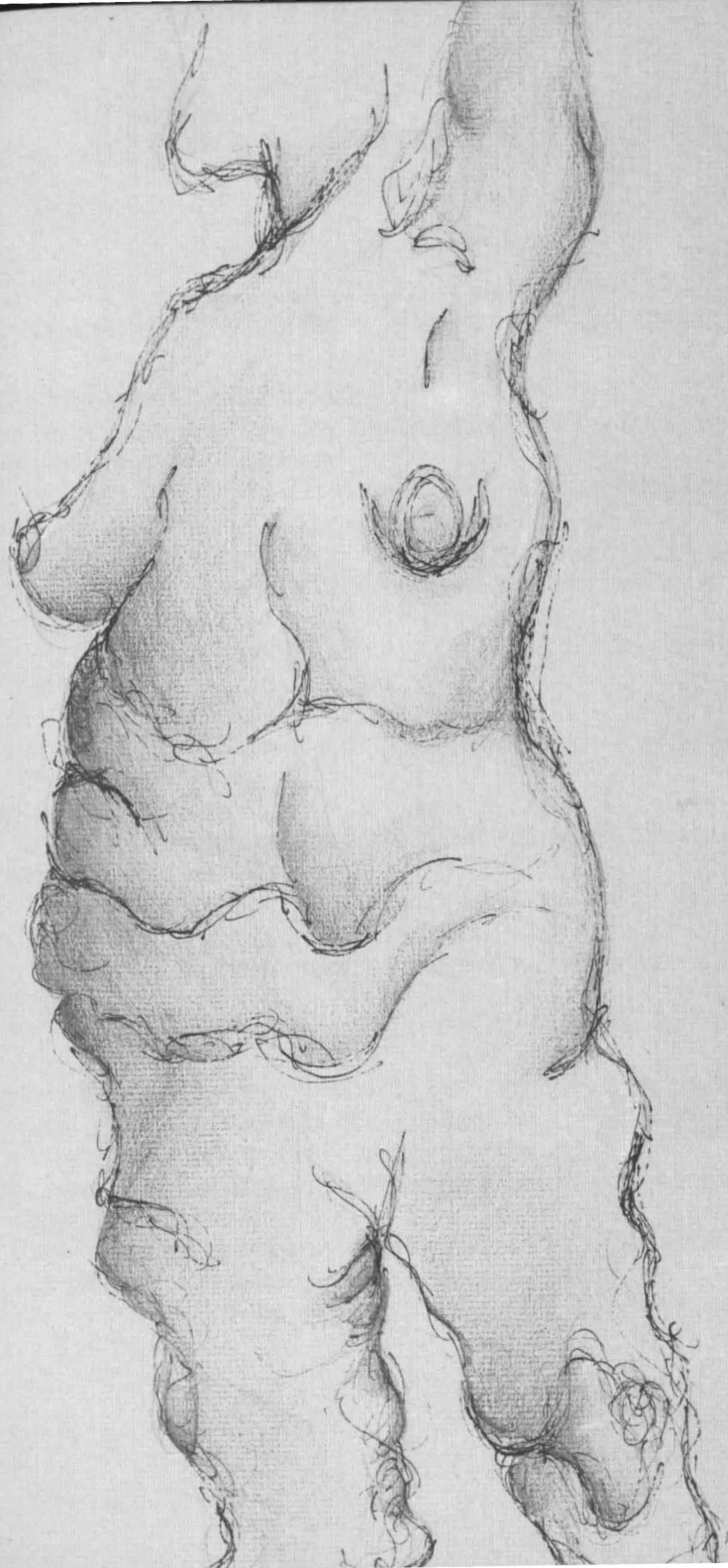
I thought about telling Elizabeth about this article I read in the paper about a week ago. It was about a little nine year old retarded girl that got raped, got pregnant. The fetus died in her womb and she carried it around dead inside for about two months. It started to poison her body and she was in intensive care for about seven weeks. Sadness. That would give her something to think about.

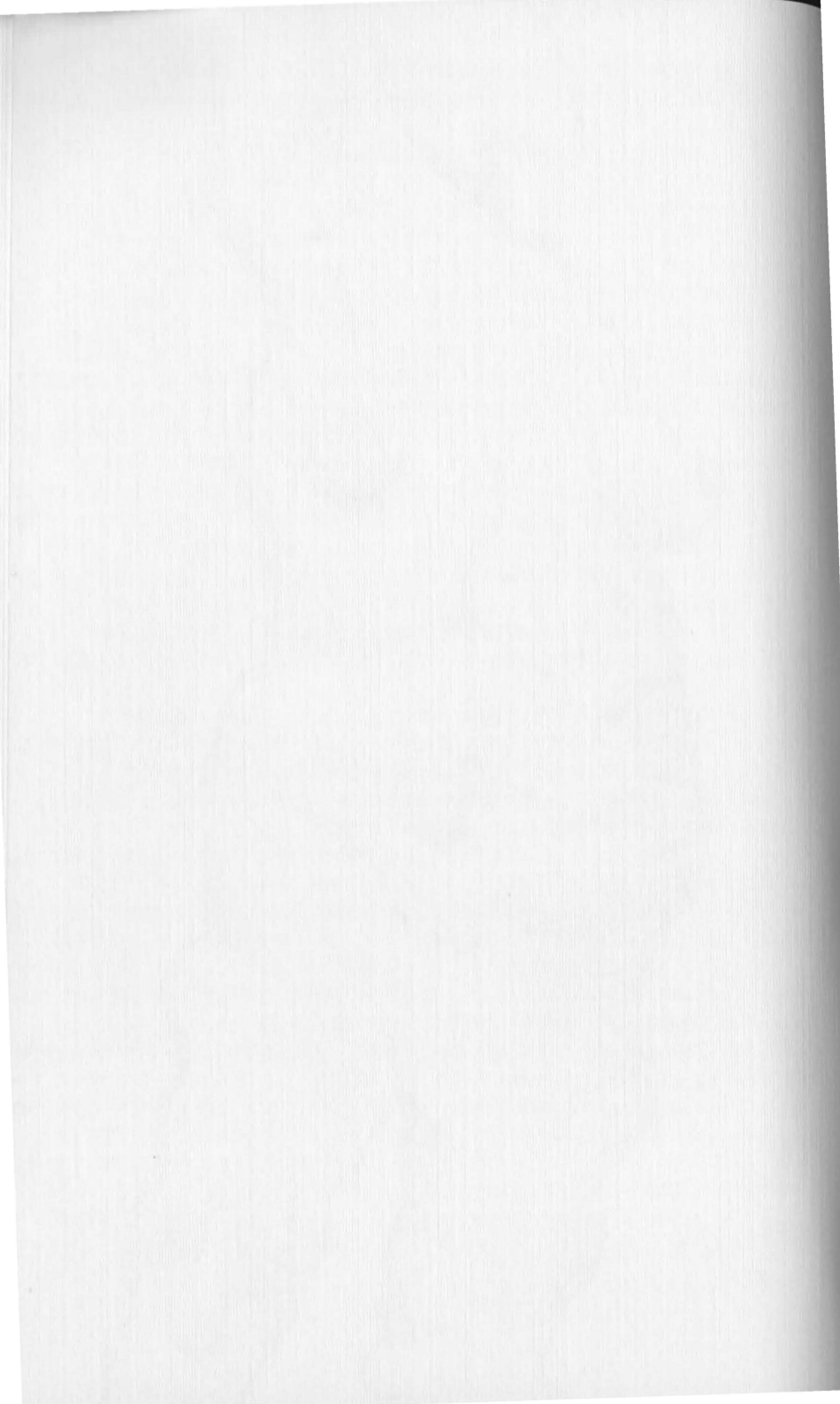
Liza Blue thinks I've been babying myself a little too long. Hell, I'm hurt. I can't sleep. I'm grouchy during the day. Six-twenty. The sun's coming up. 6:21 a.m. Pretty damn close. Ha. Morning has broken. Another day another pay. Whoo-ha. Life in the big city.

This isn't the first time I've been down this low. When I was seven my family stayed in a cabin in Southern Ohio for a month. Get back to nature. I got depressed. I was lonely. I wanted someone to swim with me and come to my cabin for lunch etc... etc... We were in the wilderness. I got lost in my mind. That depression lasted for about a month I guess. Hey when you're a kid, you grow fast. Ain't got no worries. So the story goes.

I have to venture forth to see my oracle today. Cleanse my mind. Work this thing out. Oh, what do you say Liza Blue?

Joan R. DeWitt





Contributor Notes

Reid Benes dates Cornelia Guest.

Debra Benko says, "Like my life, 'Great-grandfather' is in process and continues to be in process."

Deanna Lynne Bridgeforth is a sophomore from Southfield, Michigan, and is majoring in biology and studio art.

Theresa Copeland, senior writing major and communications minor, is a native of Newark, Ohio. She hopes to go into broadcast writing after graduation.

Judson B. Curry "... thinks he's full of good ideas, but isn't sure how to get them out."

Joan R. DeWitt is a senior writing major.

Claudia H. Donegan believes it is easier to tone down a wild idea than tone up a dull one.

Karen J. Hall is waiting.

"Hell for Susan Hanlon is cream puffs, brown corduroys, and Fruit Loop and batshit bombs."

Don Jacobs is a member of the class of 1989 and Phi Delta Theta.

Karen Koch is looking forward to January.

The man who wrote "Gentleman's Quarterly" wishes to remain anonymous.

Jeff Masten, a senior English major, thanks Anne Shaver for the use of her chair.

Jennifer Miller is a freshman with a double major in English and theater and a minor in cinema. She participated in a Poetry Apprenticeship program at the University of Pittsburgh.

Betsy Oster, a senior English major, enjoys healthy relationships with both her parents.

Kok Fooi Yong is an International Student from Malaysia who is a studio art major in the area of photography.

