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knows where—but East perhaps, sailing to the edge of the world. In East Chicago we clandestinely snapped photos of pretty girls leaning against mailboxes; we shot photos of old Mexican fruit vendors, their faces weathered by a different sun. We shot pictures of vacant lots that were neither here nor there, but seemed to exist only so telephone wires, railroad bridges, and algae-choked canals could pass through them. We continued south, snapping pictures of bowling alleys, funeral homes, old fashioned cake shops. When we were in Hegwish we thought, by virtue of the signs on the buildings, that we were in Cal City and when we were finally in Cal City, we thought we were in Hegwish. To set ourselves straight we made a brief stop at a hot dog stand that leaned precariously into the middle of a forked road. We met two old timers with green pickle relish dribbling down the corners of their mouths. We queried them for directions, and received the following definitive instructions: “You mean, Sin Strip and all that jazz?” We



GROUND ZERO, USA

Where is the end of the world? I once opened a fortune cookie that said (I kid you not): “The end of the world is everywhere.” When my friend Anthony Berkley and I set out to snap a few photos for his piece “The Poet of Calumet City”—we weren’t searching for the end of the world. Instead we were searching for the real place Calumet “Cal” City just south of Lake Calumet on the southeast border of Chicago. We were hoping that by finding Cal City, we’d also find the ruins of a modern day ghost town. In fact, it was the idea of what an evacuated urban center might look like (A bombed-out Sarajevo? A crumbling Rome?) that led us to search for Cal City in the first place. We expected to find closed down schools, boarded up libraries, and huge weed-choked, vault-like fissures running up and down the asphalt on Main Street. We also hoped, that like all good sojourns through the abyss, we might find a guide (a happy Virgil, or a blinded Oedipus) to show us the town and tell us the tale of the glory, the decline, the evacuation, and now—the ghosts of a once great town. So, armed with a camera, a vague direction (south) and the notion that we would know Cal City once we got there, we were off. We drove along highway 41 past the South Shore Country Club, and into East Chicago, where we saw Calumet Harbor and the huge Great Lakes ships, pulling out of port, loaded down with scrap metal, and headed—who

shook our heads yes. With fleshy fingers, pointed south, they said: “One mile down that way.” Sure enough, a mile by the compass of their fat fingers, and we were there: Mecca for the downtrodden, the Sin Strip of Cal City. For those of you who’ve never been there, Sin Strip consists of about 15 strip joints and bars. It occupies a half-mile section of State Street in downtown Cal City. The evening we arrived, the street was dusty, the sun was blood-red in the west, and I could swear I saw tumbleweed piling up against the red rusted fire hydrants that had corroded underneath the storm



of a thousand passing hounds. Sin Strip, as it’s called, had, according to legend, been all the rage in Al Capone’s day. But today it’s a street of sadness and despair, of drunks and last hour prostitutes. With a few minutes of light left in the sky, we tried to capture as much of Sin Strip as we could. We laid down on

our backs, and shot pictures of old bank buildings that had been converted into strip clubs. We shot photos of broken neon signs that said: Girls, Girls, Girls. We snapped photos of cars, their windows smashed, their hubcaps gone, rust rotting in gravel lots. We took pictures of each other, grinning a grin that said we were here: Ground Zero USA. Finally the sun set, and we slipped into a dimly lit bar called Loren’s. Loren’s had fallen on hard times and was closing it’s doors for the last time at 2 a.m. that morning. In the bar, the ceiling tiles, which had been signed by patrons of years past, were on sale, two bucks a pop for good old times sake. A. B. and I shot a game of pool, had a few beers, and finally just before we gave up hope on discovering our happy Virgil, a toothless, but merry drunk by the name of Marty ambled in for a drink. He looked like he was about 75 years old, but he was only 53. He started by telling us all about war, Korea, Viet Nam. He’d never seen war, but he’d seen guys who’d seen it, and he told how they spoke about their experience with a tremble in their voices. We bought Marty a few beers, gave him a couple of dollars, then he smiled that toothless smile, and commenced to accommodate us with tales of the past glory that was once Cal City. He spoke reverently of the quiet neighborhoods, and pretty lawns that once brought people here to raise children. He spoke without regret when he said: “All that is gone now.” We had one last drink, said farewell to Loren, then stumbled out of the bar for a grand tour of State Street. It was dark that night. The sky was clear above,



criss crossed by wires. I remember the moon, bright and white as a tombstone with all the dates and names worn off of it. I wondered if Cal City had once been etched into it. We swayed down the street, singing songs, being drunk, acting young. Marty told us about gangsters, about movies being filmed at the Zig Zag club. He told us about visiting celebrities, and yes, he remembered the Geraldo Rivera crew with their cameras and dynamite searching for Al Capone’s last treasure. He told us that the whole street had a secret network of tunnels built under it, an escape route perhaps for Marty, the Last Patron Saint of Cal City. “Armageddon hasn’t struck yet,” he warned us with all the mystery and foreboding of a modern day Tiresias, “but it might!” Then, abruptly, he

turned around and with a limp, disappeared through a vacant lot, and around an abandoned building, the moon glow shining like a cape down his back. A. B. and I stood there a moment, stunned, searching for our own conclusions. Where is Cal City? Open a fortune cookie sometime. I bet it’ll say Cal City is everywhere. If it doesn’t, then perhaps you ought to look elsewhere for your fortunes.

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ANTHONY BERKLEY'S
†
**The Poet
Laureate of
Calumet
City**

for
J.P.

Faulkner had his Yoknapatawpha County and Tolkien his Middle Earth. Slacker Kill Shark did not like to think of himself as the Poet Laureate of Calumet City and the facts supported him. Neither did he actually live there, nor did he know anyone really well who did. He preferred to pay the extra hundred a month and stay in the environs of Wicked Park where common sense suggested the greater chance of meeting girls his own age. However, he made weekly pilgrimages out to Calumet City, arriving at the end of the line and disembarking from a city bus on the trampled main

boulevard, his shaven head and large pink whale tattoo conferring an obscure sense of mission, a purpose, however negligible, being conjured in his feeling gloriously out of place. The fact he was experimenting with on these voyages consisted in that no one in Calumet, and not even really himself, could recognize the bond they shared, the essential destiny and commonality which united them all. He felt strongly that this was to be the true subject of his literature. The mysterious way one could become ejected from the world like a spent cartridge out of the loading breach of a rifle.



Suspicious passersby would glare at him as if he was up to no good and what else could he have been up to on that boulevard full of hook and juice joints? After strutting for a while he would enter one of the iron-grated liquor stores and ask the tired, hopeless man behind the bullet proof glass some question he had no expectation of being answered. Often the question might be simple and straightforward, geographical, like who lived next door or how long the main boulevard actually was and did it end in an industrial park or a forest preserve or maybe jog to the left or the right at the county line continuing under a different name, a more respectable alias. Nobody ever knew. Maybe it was his city accent. The encounter would prolong itself as they glared at each other like two fighting fish in adjacent aquariums and

then, at the last possible moment, out of a kind of humanitarian instinct, Slacker would buy a pack of Swisher Sweets or a bag of popcorn or something else along those lines. He never left before saying Thank You, sometimes waiting an extra minute or two before regaining the clerk's attention.

"Whaddya want now?"

"Thank you."

Feeling elated, he would walk some more and then enter one of the many seedy bars and spend the couple dollars in his pockets hoping to over hear a story or an interesting way with words, something he could carry home with himself on the bus. Takeout was the way he thought about it. The Calumet City Literary Drive Thru.

This was his creative routine which consisted in almost

The Swimmer

by Joe Peterson

Naked I swim
through blue water
my arms carving the
placid surface
like a pair of scissors
moving
through blue gift wrap.

I swim into deeper blue
finding my rhythm,
skating across
cold depths.

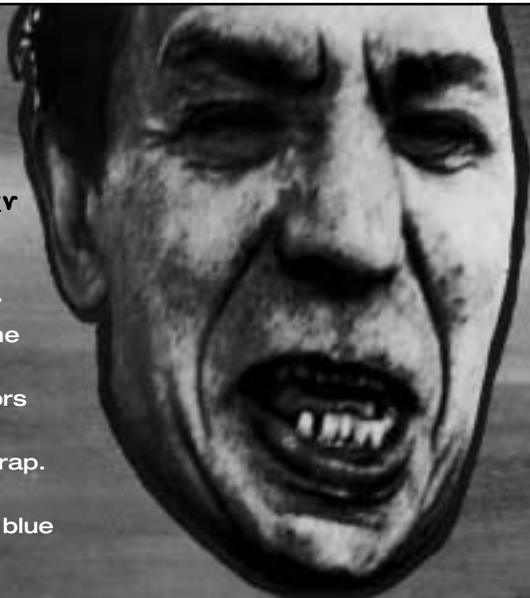
The kick, the breath, the pull
and again, the kick.
Miraculously I swim ahead
far from the pebbled beach.

I move through calm evening
waters
making splashing sounds.

The long hours spent behind the
constricting desk,
the meetings that follow meeting

without reprieve,
the strange sad thoughts
that this small office
and these daily wars is life--
one by one they drop away

until peace settles in,
out here in Lake Michigan
where I'm bald and naked with
gooseflesh,
and swimming for my life.



nothing, but precisely in that, and at night he would sit down in his couch and turn off the volume on the TV and write poems about sex and catastrophe while bathed in TV light, the only sound his scratching pen. Sometimes he even smoked the Swisher Sweets which gave him headaches and about as often he would read his work at one of the city's many late night Poetry Slams. Life was good like this until his gifted and superior friend Anthony convinced him to enter the Water Tower Short Story Contest. It was to be a career move, plain and simple, plotted out in the various coffee shops and cheap Greek restaurants they haunted with their conversations.

They argued endlessly about where to meet for coffee, the city being a kind of immense coffee machine where water

boiled on every block and some of the most unlikely places served up the best Java. Slacker preferred the old delis and sandwich places, greasy spoons with their second-generation fry cooks and formidable career waitresses who served coffee American-style in a white cup on a saucer lined by creamers and placed a huge jar of sugar down on the table which poured out of its square jaw like lava. Anthony argued for the new coffee houses continuously sprouting up about town and just as continuously disappearing, places that you had better visit quickly because they might not be there the next time you pass by. It was this sense of urgency which led Anthony into Zoot Suit Up, Omnivibe, The Caged Canary, Love, Coffee Not Sleep, Hot & Natural, Mama Smithies, Our Baby MaryJane's Type O' Place, with their under-deco-

JOE PETERSON

RITA'S

LAST CRAZY IDEA



We didn't know what to expect once we tethered our boat to the concrete rock of the giant pumping station two miles out into Lake Michigan and jumped into the cold water because we've never dived here before or anywhere else for that matter, and though Rita claims there was a time in her life when she had a passing interest in diving and therefore read everything about diving she could get her hands on, yet I'm dubious, especially since most of that reading was done in a suburban public library miles from any significant body of water. So we're surprised when we

rated interiors; exposed pipes; and fake graffiti; their hundred types of coffee which offered variety in everything but price; expensive and dull sweets; cheese, avocado and cashew sandwiches which took 20 minutes to prepare; but most of all their gorgeous, fragile, coffee girls, "women" as he had to constantly remind himself, looking right into your eyes as they took your order, speaking to you like a brother or a lover while it appeared as if a squadron of Botticelli angels were continuously descending from the sky, their unstyled hairdos and confused clothing whispering the word "futon" to Slacker's over-heated imagination, and some of whom Anthony actually succeeded in dating, if not for any great length of time or in the way he might have intended.

Slacker's last relationship, which was still continuing in

an odd and unpredictable way, was with a very dark-haired girl who had heard him read one night mostly because she was a waitress at one of the clubs he read at and there was almost no one but her there. They hardly ever speak. Slacker found it impossible to ask her anything, even her name, Jessica, which he confirmed by glimpsing at the addressed envelope of one of the letters in the prodigious correspondence she piled on her reading table and taped haphazardly on the walls of the bedroom she rented from a Polish family, them playing their TV at the decibel level of a rock concert in the next room as if to drown out something which might or might not be happening somewhere nearby. He never called her by her name or posed a question to her because he seemed to understand that this would disturb her, and she



jump into the water and feel the almost immediate sucking sensation from the giant pump below, surprised, of course, but not too surprised, after all this is an adventure and we take our risks, but inside, underneath everything, I'm frightened as hell and wish I had thought twice about this.

It was her suggestion somewhere on the beaches two miles inland several hours ago at Rick's annual fourth of July party, that we try this crazy stunt. Do you think we can do it, she asks in her sweet way. There was the row boat that looked like it'd been run aground one too many times, and those oars which seemed splintered and shattered by ten thousand storms, and brooding Lake Michigan which rose from its own depths and spilled itself with reckless waves upon the beach, but finally, there was that question of hers, of whether it would be possible if not outright crazy to make a voyage to those pumping stations and go for a swim. She kicks sand at me and laughs. Who knows, she says, resting her fingertips on my

pectoral, but I bet they'd think we'd be crazy to try. She's one hundred and five pounds maximum, barefoot in the sand, wearing a bikini, when she asks it. Mixed up in her words and those eyes which look directly into mine and the skin of the woman underneath the bikini I hear the question she really asks: not whether we can do it, but whether I have enough lust for her to row her out there and since she's obviously in no condition to do anything but sit in the bow of the boat acting beautiful and naked, the whole argument becomes a question of whether I'll allow myself, like a jackass, to be led around by the proverbial carrot. The waves crash against the beach, the wind slashes in gusts from the southeast, and she's right we'd really be crazy

never spoke to him in anything more than the simplest way, never more than a word or two at one go, as if she nursed a bird in her bosom, a rare species that would escape if she left her mouth open for too long, fly out and become lost or damaged in the city streets.

They met by chance on a corner after his almost completely unattended reading and by chance they were walking in the same direction and so he followed her up to her room past the blaring TV and the kitchen that smelled like greasy meat dinner. After that night they made no plans but would occasionally meet again, by chance, after closing in the dark street and would commence to follow their original routine. Although Slacker liked what she showed him when they were alone, he felt it would be an imposition if he were to start

planning to meet her after work, calculating her trajectory and strategizing to intersect her. That would be the breaking of an unstated promise which consisted in their mutual recognition that all they had to offer each other is the pure chance of an unarranged encounter, and if that occurred then the certainty of an unspoken intimacy emerged. Maybe she wanted something more than that but she never said anything and Slacker never asked so it was just left as it was.

Anthony was sitting at a back table in the Marijuana Leaflet poring over one of his xeroxed articles when Slacker sat down opposite him and without looking up slid over the Story Contest Application Form for Slacker's perusal. Slacker read it dreamily, not really concentrating, still preoccupied

to try it. But I'm not thinking about that. All I can do is stand there with my eyes focused on her and if I'm going to take this risk, I may as well get as liberal a view of her as I please. So I look up and down her legs, focusing my eyes on the downy hair near the inside of her upper thighs, and I look at the little patch of bathing suit that covers her pubic hair and see the faint outline of her vagina and then I spend some time smiling at her firm happy breasts and all the while I contemplate whether or not I'm as crazy as she is, for suddenly the idea of going down with her in rough seas—playing the hero as we go—becomes strangely appealing to me. If we survive, and chances are in our favor, I might even get laid and this idea makes me more and more happy as I look at her beautiful body. OK, I smile, I'll prepare the boat. Oh, she said, terse, sweet, you're wonderful. She comes close to me and hugs me up and down my body. Later, much later, when I was deep in that water with her and sinking fast, even then, her kiss, which was incredibly tender, burned warm and fierce against my neck.

After that, word passes around the beach party faster than five in the sky, partly because Rita spreads the word, partly because all people have a vicarious interest in the daredevil risks other people will take, and suddenly we've taken center stage at this party which is its own type of circus. One by one they come until the volleyball game is put on hold and the grill is abandoned and even Rick the owner of the beach house which is in decrepit condition descends by rope from the balcony of his house where he'd been overseeing things, long-stem wineglass in his hand, to the beach and walks over to the crowd that has gathered, watching me clean the boat and Rita oil her already well tanned body. These people, on the surface, are our friends, although I'd question more than a few men on this very point because I believe they'd rather it



with working out the ending to one of his poems, giving the language a go-over in his mind's eye.

"I think you should enter this Slacker," Anthony said, still not looking up. "It would be a good chance for you to expand your range, work in a different genre, and if you win, it could be a career move, get you out of the poetry slams and into the published journals."

The notion of publishing had spontaneously occurred to Slacker too but since he didn't know anyone in the industry, no editors, no real writers, nor was he in a writing program or any kind of workshop, he just sort of figured it was impossible—like trying to get on MTV after learning to play guitar in the basement with your friends. Not that there weren't hundreds of Zines and City Papers distributed through

bookstores and coffee shops, but these all seemed amateurish and ugly to him, and he felt sure they were dominated by unattractive cliques of which he was not a member. He had a paradoxical relationship to publishing his work, which had grown into a substantial body of 50 or 60 poems, most no longer than a page or two, but all word-processed and spell-checked and stacked safely in a wooden wine box next to his bed. If his work wasn't good enough then he didn't really want to bother anyone with it and if it was good enough, then it was probably too good and none of them deserved to read it.

"This is for short stories. I've never written a story," Slacker replied and tossed the sheet back at Anthony, land-

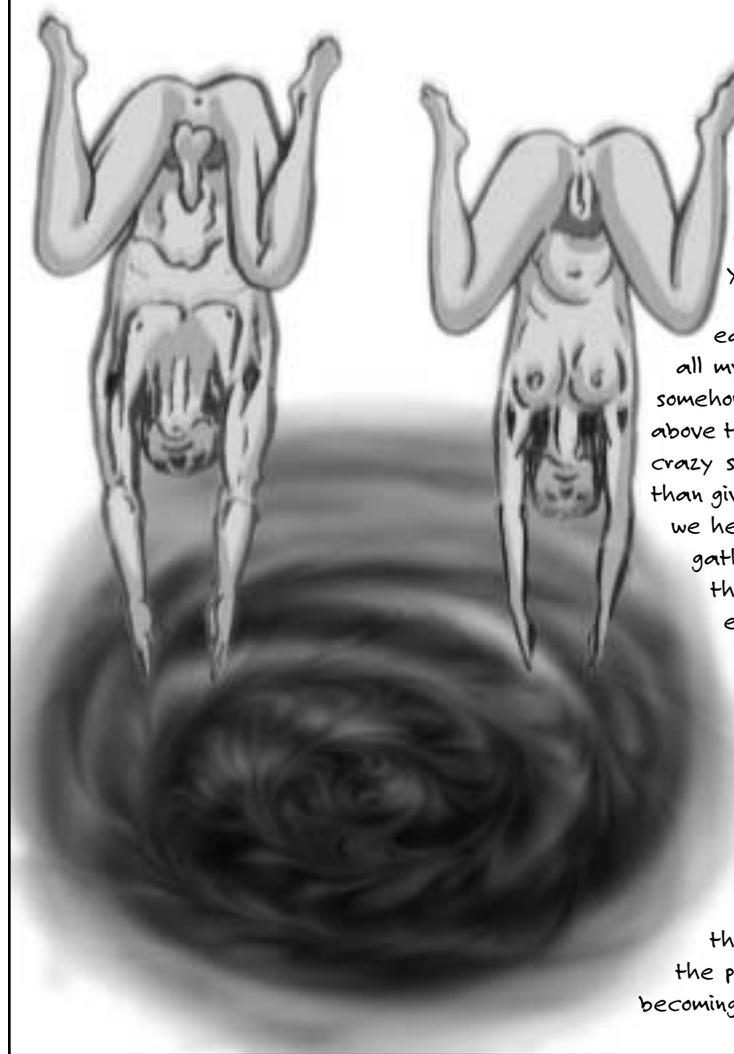


was them than me playing the hero rowing Rita beyond the brink of her last crazy idea. I sense they've come to feel me out—whether I'll really be the hero to do it, or whether I'll waver on my word at the last moment and say something about the waves being too high for such a stunt—I've backed down before, it'd be no surprise to these people, my friends, if I backed down again. I listen carefully, trying to locate their feelings towards Rita and sense that they in turn desperately want to know what Rita's feelings are towards them because Rita is beautiful and what she feels is often indecipherable and yet somehow important; all these men looking for the clue that'll give them the key to her tightly closed heart. What I also sense is that some people here really wish the best for us, and in my moment of anxiety I'm touched: Here, says somebody, a hand darting out of the group, wrap this electrical tape around the oars, you'll get more pull. From another place in the crowd comes a familiar voice, it's Rick, the man throwing this party:

The way you work the boat in these waves, he says full of concern, is very important. Now what you gotta do is follow the curve of the beach until you clear the bay. You won't be bothered by as many waves, see. Then what you do, is crisscross back and forth, cutting the waves at forty five-degree angles. With these kind of waves you may never make it. And yet another voice, a woman's drunken voice: It all reminds me of a trip I took to Bermuda, she says screamingly, can I come?

After the oars are taped and the draining hole is tightly plugged I'm prepared to shove off. I stand to face them, touching Rita's hip gently with my hand. The expectation has collected in the corners of their eyes; a child comes running from the house with binoculars in her hand. Their voices are fractured and giddy, someone hands me a first aid kit, Rita snatches a beer out of somebody's hand. Alright, she says, smashing the bottle against the bow of the rowboat. Let's go!

So that's what we do: Go. Shoving the rowboat off the sand into the water glistening with the superreality of yellowing sun we are immediately kicked backpeddling onto the beaches by the force of the waves and this of course makes everyone gathered around us on the beach laugh. Everyone but the owner who seems a little nervous, whose very face leaks the doubt that we'll ever return alive, he's the inside man, these are his waters, he should know. Recovering with shouts about the frigid water which like the oars that'll rip my hands soon enough is something I get used to, we shove off once again, me in the stern, Rita in the bow, and with my solemn efforts we surge forward against waves that seem not one or two feet high but several dozen feet high pitching us up into the sky where we crash hard with a sudden thud facing hell in



the guise of water below. As the boat rears up on another wave I realize Rita is not only crazy but probably suicidal for asking me to demonstrate to her just how far I'll go, suicidal because she must have known I'd go to the edge of the rim of the surface of the planet for her love and if the abyss was staring back at me and she yelled jump I'd probably...

Once we've cleared the beach we look at each other; I'm hauling back on the oars with all my strength, hoping my efforts will bring me somehow closer to her idea of me. Hey, she screams above the roar of the water around us, you're one crazy sonofabitch, Abe! You should know better than give a girl everything she asks for! Suddenly we hear the laughter and shouts of the people gathered on the beach and before I know it they disappear entirely as if they have never existed. I get down to this business of rowing the boat. I lean into the oars and pull and already my hands are ripped apart. After a while I'm fairly certain I can detail and catalog every jerk and bend of Rita's spinal column as it tries to cushion her and her brainstem from the blows of the waves. There is her long brown hair which falls down past her shoulder blades and not only changes colors, sometimes becoming the aquamarine of the water below us and the pure white of crested sea froth, but also becoming wet and glistening and raven black. Her

ing it as he hoped, partially obscuring the open page Anthony was reading.

"Don't let that stop you Slacker. It won't be that hard. I'll advise you, give you some ideas, read the first drafts. You might have to write a couple of them before you get it right."

Slacker couldn't think of another objection right off the bat so he fell silent, not really contemplating anything, his poem having fallen off the clean slate of his brain. When the coffee woman came up to take his order Anthony seemed to know her and Slacker demanded an American style trying not to stare. There was a month before the deadline and so he quitted the table a half hour later and went straight home and started trying to think up stories. Nothing really came to him right away. Several days elapsed while he grew frustrat-

ed trying to work within the confines of punctuation and paragraphs on ideas that would have required a novel or even a full career to properly develop.

It was really quite late one night when Anthony called him, Anthony's phone calls seeming to always come later and later, never regressing in time of day so that if he called one night at ten, the next time he called it would be 10:15, the next time ten minutes later. Now whenever the phone rang after eleven Slacker knew who it was and would let it go five or six rings while preparing himself for the upcoming bout of persuasion and agreement which, especially if he had eaten a big dinner or watched a lot of TV, eventually exhausted him. It was Anthony, wondering how Slacker was proceeding with the story. I am going nowhere with it, Slacker said

and geared himself up for the onset of a long monologue which Anthony confidently delivered.

"But I don't even know enough about anyone or anything to right a short story," Slacker interjected at one point.

"How about Calumet City?" Anthony queried. "You've been making weekly pilgrimages out there for most of a year. Couldn't you set a little 250 word story in that place. I mean we are talking about one single, white page of writing, not a whole social history."

Although the idea seemed reasonable, Slacker hesitated. Writing about a place like Calumet conferred certain responsibilities, or at least he speculated that if he were going to start writing about it some sort of difficult to understand burden would naturally rise up and plop down on his skinny

shoulders. And he felt sure this burden would not be of the ordinary variety but something different, more difficult to bear because of its amorphousness.

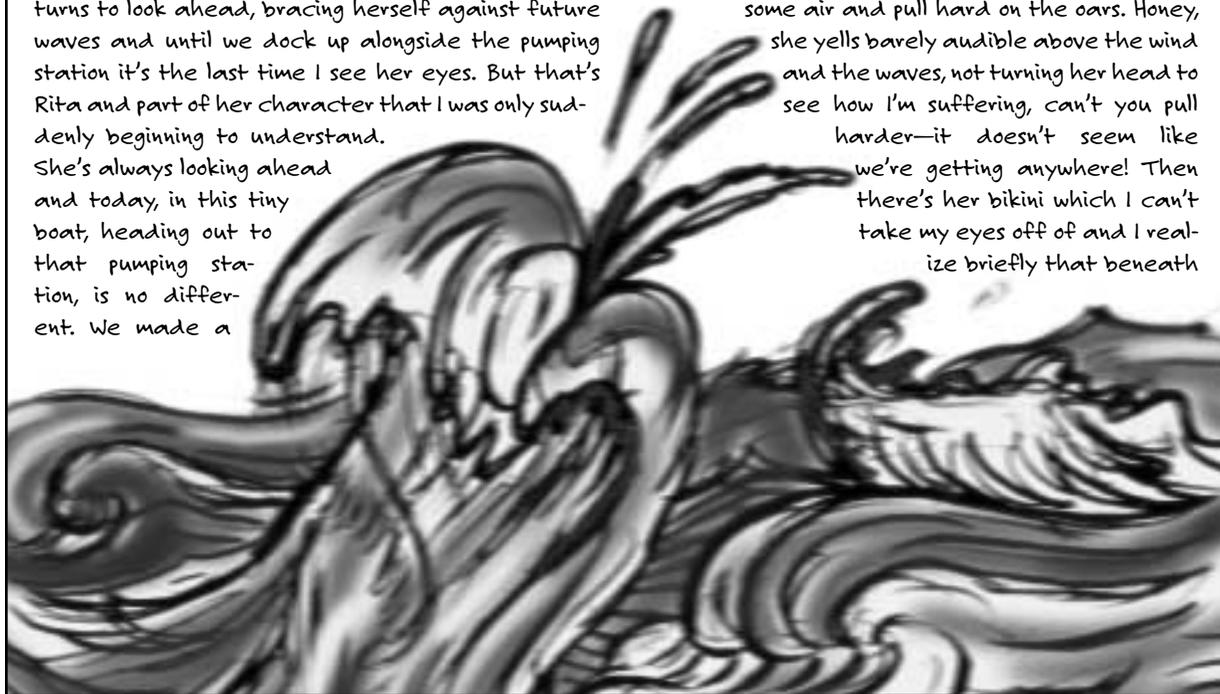
"Now what if this place, CC, had a golf course," Anthony continued, "had a dingy little nine hole which the locals dubbed The Links. Couldn't you write a story about three guys out there on The Links, having skipped out on an afternoon at the shop or left the wife with the kids. What would these kind of guys say to themselves? What kind of golf game would they have, this trio? Would they cheat or just give up on the fifth hole and go have a beer in the restaurant next to the Pro Shop."

Slacker had never seen a golf course anywhere near Calumet, had difficulty even imagining one there, but didn't

hands cling to the gunwales with a tenacity of grip revealed by her reddening knuckles and the bleached white pressure spots of her finger nails. We rise and fall and catch a gale blowing off the land.

After one giant wave crashes against the boat rolling us off course Rita turns her head to look at me, to see if I'm in control; she smiles with the excitement of what we're doing, she's in her element—the element of pure risk, something I don't completely understand. Another wave crashes over the bow of the boat practically knocking Rita into the lake. She turns to look ahead, bracing herself against future waves and until we dock up alongside the pumping station it's the last time I see her eyes. But that's Rita and part of her character that I was only suddenly beginning to understand. She's always looking ahead and today, in this tiny boat, heading out to that pumping station, is no different. We made a

bet to go out there for a swim under these conditions, and that being done, we do it; she never looks back, all eyes ahead towards that pumping station. All eyes ahead. But my eyes are different than Rita's eyes. I have the type of eyes that have never been able to look anywhere but behind. And as I'm pulling away at the oars in the stern of the boat, fighting against hope, swell after swell, I ask myself, and I can remember distinctly phrasing it like this: Is it possible that with her looking ahead and me looking behind we'll ever exchange eye contact again? I suck in some air and pull hard on the oars. Honey, she yells barely audible above the wind and the waves, not turning her head to see how I'm suffering, can't you pull harder—it doesn't seem like we're getting anywhere! Then there's her bikini which I can't take my eyes off of and I realize briefly that beneath



both mentioning this because he knew it wasn't the point to make with Anthony.

"Now what if someone from CC were to go on a trip, let us say a vacation, or even just a road trip to gamble on the Mississippi. How would you conjure up that experience? Would there be a whole bunch of them crammed into some American beater littered with potato chip bags and bottle caps? Would they stop for fast food or pack a lunch, bring a cooler of cold beer with them? Or would it be a single person running from something, an alienated lone driver, experiencing the vast wasteland of signs and traffic lines, an endless experience of getting there, stretched out in long ribbons of asphalt connecting one nowhere with another nowhere?"

Cars and Calumet was an unnatural connection for

Slacker to make because he always took the bus there and associated getting to know a place, the real life of a place with being on foot, with walking, so he remained silent, listening and just as intently trying not to listen.

"Or maybe you could write a story about a day in the life of one of CC's residents, someone with a painful past, a broken but still beating heart idling away the meaningless afternoon daylight, or doing something eccentric, something easily describable, in a doomed effort to forgive, forget, escape."

Slacker objected that he didn't really know anyone in Calumet but Anthony was implacable, unimpeachable, and so eventually they agreed to meet in two days at The Sandwich Place and go over what ever Slacker had come up with.

"And it doesn't have to be good, Slacker, don't worry

her bikini she's naked, yet beneath her nakedness she's clothed, like we're all clothed, even in our most naked moments. And I felt like I wanted to get at that more than I ever wanted to get to any pumping station: The nakedness beneath Rita's nakedness but I didn't quite know how to do that except maybe go with her out to those pumping stations or beyond those pumping stations to that point beyond where her eyes stared, and I felt like a fool for wanting such an abstract thing so intensely. I dropped my head so that I wouldn't see her and just pulled harder at the oars.

Who knows how long we were gone? In my imagination we were gone forever. Sometimes, looking back on my past that's all I see—that massive body of blue water and all my days rowing upon it: Rita in the bow looking forward, hands gripping the gunwales, singing. I don't know what she sings, but it's rock and roll and for a brief moment I feel happier than I've ever been; her singing makes me that crazy with joy. When we get there I'm giddy. I'm holding her in my arms. I can't let her go. We haul the boat up onto the giant rocks and strip naked. I'm holding her close in my arms and gasping for breath; I'm tired but ready for anything. Hey, she says, lets dive in. So that's what we do: Her hand in my bloody hand we jump feet first into the waves. The first time we come up for air she's gripping me around the waist with her legs. This place is very dangerous, she says, looking deeply and concernedly into my eyes. But her eyes, which say something entirely different than her words, tell me that it's my turn to take a gamble, to decide what to do next, and no matter what I say, she'll follow me, like I followed her—rowing the boat to this pumping station. That's when I make the move, despite the wind, the waves, and the sucking sensation from the pumps—the crazy irresponsible move: I pull



about getting it right the first time or coming up with a slam bang finish. We've got plenty of time for that, to work on that, just get something down on paper that we can start with."

Slacker was relieved to finally put the phone down and promptly went straight to sleep without even getting off the couch. Throughout the night he had nightmares about unprintable conversations, being denounced by gray-faced bag ladies as a phony and laughed at by his friends for trying to be something he wasn't. However, the next morning when Slacker awoke, and it was pretty early, about the time the morning sun started coming through the blinds and illuminating the couch, there was an idea, almost a whole story sitting prettily on the clean slate of his mind, just waiting like a trained dog for the right command to coming leaping for-

ward out of his mind's eye and land squarely with an audible thump onto the blank page. The story followed Anthony's idea of golfing in Calumet City and consisted of a drunken dialogue at the ninth hole between three beer buddies—it was called The Ninth Hole—while their oppressed and greedy caddie watched them, the smiling butt of their stupid jokes, calculating with drunken fervor the likely amount of his tip.

It came out smooth and quick like a good shit in that one day and he delivered it to Anthony at the appointed cheap restaurant on the following day. It began like this:

By the time the three men reached the ninth hole, they were sloppy, happy and mean. Guido, their caddie, drank too much Galiano and had

her close and kiss her. In that moment we both understood that the stakes had been raised. I was playing off her love of risk: if this kills us, at least we'll die riding the edge. She's not laughing, neither am I, we're struggling to be closer to one another. Her mouth is in my mouth, and she's taking as much of my tongue as I'll give her. I feel her wriggle next to me and her legs spread apart. We break free, make a few adjustments. A wave washes over her and then over me; I see the pumping station fading in the distance as we float out into the lake. We pop up again, serious and laughing. Who cares what becomes of us? What the fuck are we put on earth for in the first place, and who ever grows old anyways who knows how to live life? So we come together more fiercely than before and we hold each other and I penetrate deep inside her, the giant waves crashing over our heads, and we're quiet because we're involved in this kissing, but on the inside we're laughing because we know that in the next moment we'll be drowning. We're laughing because it's hilarious to be fucking like mayflies that swap existence for one brief, intense sexual encounter; in another moment we'll become the dross we spew: useless and dead in the water. Sing! she says. I bellow. It's the most beautiful song I've ever heard, she screams. We laugh some more. I close my eyes and concentrate on putting as much of myself as possible inside her and after that I don't know what happens. I feel an incredible sense of peace surge through me. All sorts of beautiful things explode like watercolors on the inside of my eyelids; I'm holding my breath, giving her as much of myself as I can. In the next moment, I remember saying to myself: This can't be happening, we're sinking fast, down to the base of that pumping station. I feel the sucking sensation grow stronger. I relax, holding Rita in my arms, letting myself be pulled closer to that iron grate outside its vent. Suddenly I realize Rita has been struggling to break free of me and I don't remember how long she's been struggling to separate but I remember feeling ashamed of myself for holding her close to me despite her efforts to break free. Even so, I hold on another moment: this time it's my gamble and her turn to abide by the rules of that gamble. I thrust myself up into her one more time and consider if I should hold onto her

until I black out, but finally let go. I feel her kick free and the next thing I know we bob back to the surface where the waves crash over our heads. We're gasping for breath. When I open my eyes I see almost immediately that Rita is changed. She's not the same woman that went down into the water with me. She's terrified and crying. We drag our naked bodies up to the rock of the pumping station. You asshole! she yells from a thousand miles away as I try to bring air back into my lungs. You could have killed us! What the fuck were you thinking? Are you crazy . . .



passed out on the fifth hole but was revived with threats. He had left the cart high up on the fairway. As they passed the famous bog, Jack threw down his five-iron and pulled out a portable fishing pole.

“Bet ten bucks I hook a fish,” Jack said.

It continues for another 200 words. Anthony helped him come up with the ending which consists in Jones thinking that Jack has hooked into a log and raising the bet up to twenty bucks but almost dying of laughter when Jack pulls up an old carp, “its thick lips wrapped around a golf ball, its orange tail wriggling in the sun.” Slacker found himself enjoying the creative process more and more and was disappointed he didn't have another page to work with so he could

render the drunken debate in the clubhouse over whether the carp should really be classified as a fish, or was actually more like a reptile, or a distant cousin of the tree or an amphibian or something prehistoric like that. Anthony was satisfied but not really and said that he should write another, more sad this time, especially since they seemed to understand each other so well, to be working so efficiently together.

“Don't let this opportunity pass Slacker. It could be important for your career.”

“But what is the use of writing another if entries are limited to one per aspirant?” Slacker had asked.

“There are ways around that,” he assured him in his most professional, insider's tone.

So Slacker went home and watched a lot of TV while



The beach house grows larger and Rita's not talking to me. My back, my elbows, my knees—the whole world is suddenly a painful sensation. I'm nervous and ashamed. There are fires on the beach. A few people are knee-deep in the water, waiting for our boat to come in. I hear their shouts. It's dark. When we're five hundred yards from shore Rita dives into the water and swims towards them. She has a nice athletic stroke. I watch her disappear in the waves and dark water. When she reaches the beach she becomes surrounded by the others. I hear her voice echo from the land. It's shrill and devastated. She's crying. I pull back a few times on the oars, but set them aside. I close my eyes and imagine spinning around until my bearings are lost. The only needle left on my compass is desire. I listen to the wind: that I understand, and the waves, they'll crash on long beyond midnight, then they'll grow calm. I lower my head to the rocking of the boat and for a while, just let things drift.

drinking beer and two days later another story sprang forth, almost in its entirety, just like the first one. The only thing he had to wait for was his pen to catch up and spell the words right, or at least get them legibly on the page. After that he was too excited to go out to Calumet by himself so he went over to a friend's house and drank more beer, eventually getting quite drunk and talking excitedly about this story contest none of them had heard of. The following day he met Anthony at Fiskbine's Head and this time read the story out loud, gathering a little bit of attention from the other coffee drinkers, his voice sounding metallic as it reverberated off of the exposed piping.

When he pulled up to the toll-booth and asked if a voice had ever come to her, her eyes began to

glow but then she became sad as she told him what it said.

You will find love

Anthony helped him with the ending on this one too but just a little bit, suggesting a minor change in wording and a deletion. After the cars honk and he drives off the woman looks down into her hand and realizes that he gave exact change: “He didn't have to come into this lane, she thought. He had exact change. He could have used the automatic.” Slacker imagines her looking over her shoulder at the tail lights fading into the distance, though he didn't write that into the ending because he had reached the 250 word limit.

“This is good, really good Slacker,” Anthony said and Slacker could feel himself accepting this compliment as

Kevin Riordan **The Grapes of DIRT**

The phone at the Del Monte Hotel was not unlisted but the hotel was. No one went there intentionally, no cabs trawled its bay unless they were lost (not just pretending).

The desk clerk, who could have been replaced by a potted palm, collected a dime from Kid Carton and resumed his doze. Carton spun the dial crisply with his index, leaning all ninety pounds into the maneuver. Being a belt and suspenders kind of guy, he had the number right in front of him on the back of a Zimmerman's receipt although it was memorized, a mantra that had segued into a background wash over his day of scheming.

The number played out like that old Jolson song - six is for the cans of beer I bought you, two is for you chumps I'm gonna skin, five is for the G-notes I will treasure when I reel this one big mackerel in. Eight is for the lies I'll manufacture, four the little words you're gonna hear, zero for the number of times you'll ever trust another older guy who says he'll



gladly help you young squirts cop some beer.

"Good evening."

"Yeah, Jimmy dere?"

"I'll see if he's in, sir." It was like air-conditioning coming over the wire, the frost on Jeeve's voice.

"Ten G's!" Carton breathed in wonder.

"What's that? Who's there?" The original gold-plated pipsqueek.

"I got the screenplay."

"Mr. Carton! That's incredible - one day! What's it called?"

"Blood of Frankula -pretty sexy, huh?" Carton had gone right to the Parkway Theater after meeting the two rich kids that afternoon and digested six straight hours of schlock horror fare, then rearranged it coming home on the Clark Street bus.

"That sounds like an American International reject. We want your life story, you know: Hugo, Celine, Farrell, real, dirty, low-brow, alive, no offense I don't mean dirty."

"Hey, you want dirty, I'll give you dirty, what am I, a monk?"

"The way the French cinema has embraced the saga of the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the diseased..."

"Save yer breath, kid, I get the idea. Look, gimme till tomorrow and I'll give the saga of a lifetime."

"Actually, I'm grounded until Monday."

"That gives me time to spit polish it. You dealin wid a pro, pal."

Actually, the only screenplay Carton had ever been involved in was for "Venereal Follies of 1958," a military training film that depicted the pitfalls of easy virtue.

The most meat on Carton was in the brain-box, and this analog processor was snapping through scams, looking for an angle to bowl over, not only his young portages, but Hollywood itself. The door blew open admitting the awesome bulk of Twitch Tarbell, reeking of popcorn and Good'N'Plenty. He was an addicted but erratic film buff, who thought nothing of coming in at the middle of one picture and leaving at the climax of the next.

Carton soon established that he had taken in parts of Beach Blanket Bongos, Man with the Golden Arm, The Grapes

of Death and Dr. No, all that afternoon. Twitch was anxious not to miss the Joe Pine Show, but let himself be persuaded to join Carton for a nightcap at the Stop & Drink, where the Hamm's flowed as turgidly as a Wisconsin stream choked with roadkill wannabes.

They took a booth near the rear, both as a precaution against raids on the B-girls and to catch the air from an open alley door which made the sour air marginally breathable. Against a chorus of alleycats, Carton picked his brain for the corrupted scraps of plot hinge that churned therein. By midnight, they had hammered out a surefire hit.

A nun-by-day brain surgeon, a billionaire news vendor, an artist with one hand, and a Nazi with a heart of gold become reincarnated as killer alley cats out to avenge the seacaptain who accidentally washed them overboard, but get on the wrong plane and end up in Paris, where they uncover a network of vampire dog-nappers who are streetsweepers by day and



entrap them in an elaborate sting operation that involves twenty fake life-size eiffel towers (Dollars on the screen!) and a dog who's inhabiting the body of the President, who's a hustler by night. He steals a loaf of bread that's really a tape recorder from the future that tells who wins the world series and the heavyweight championship, but it's accidentally erased by microscopic viral critters who then become superintelligent (and rich) and start a war to rid earth of stupid humans, but at the last minute they fall in with a cult of tree-worshipping architects who pack six-shooters, and they all fall into the sewers of Paris and the sewage turns them into the downtrodden, wine-guzzling urban zeroes that the movie is really about. They emerged from the tavern cock-sure that this script was just 35 millimeters away from celluloid reality. Carton meticulously flattened the soggy, note-covered cocktail napkins against his shirt pocket and stole himself for the next step - raising the jack to get a typewriter out of hock.

something almost inevitable and desiring not to stop but wanting to begin writing the sequel in which the man returns or the women sets out after him along the desolate roads of America. He could see it, touch it, feel it, that is how close he was feeling to the story in that coffee shop at the moment they finished it.

"No, no don't get obsessed," Anthony counseled and interrupted him. "The thing to do now is to concentrate on the task at hand which is limited to 250 words—there is no way around that. What you need to do is write another one, just one more, you can do that can't you Slacker? But this time stretch yourself out, really go for it, write one from the woman's point of view, first person, some damaged woman fretting or coming to grips with life in CC."

"But I already have two I like. What is the use of writing a third if I can only submit one of them?"

"Slacker, Slacker, you are a writer—where is your imagination? You can only submit one under the nom de plume of Slacker Kill Shark, but what is to stop you from submitting another under my name, or the name of one of your friends or to simply make up a name and give it a real address and collect your check that way?"

It was true. Slacker had never even considered this stratagem. He had already invented one name for himself which he felt was good enough, at least for all practical purposes right now, so the issue never arose for him in daily life. But this idea of Anthony's, of writing stories and then inventing the names of their authors, unaccountably but insistently

worried him. What good would it do him, Slacker Kill Shark, to win a story contest under the name of another, Joe Peterson, for instance? Wasn't this supposed to be about his, Slacker's career, not populating the world with apocryphal short story contest winners. It would be like ghost writing a book in which the real ghost was the actual person the true story was supposed to be about. There was something disturbing about this vision in which the names of real persons and places were invented by hidden creators who never stepped forth to collect their awards but had to create more names, other persons to accept the checks they themselves were actually intending to spend.

"Not to worry Slacker. There is nothing irregular about this sort of practice. It would only serve to confirm the most

advanced ideas in literary theory which consider the author of the text to be the greatest invention of the text, the name signed to the book as the least believable character in the narrative."

"But then the real author of the story would have to write another story just to explain how the first story and author were invented. . ." Slacker felt this idea sort of crackling and crunching in his brain as if it wanted to come out but also actually didn't want to come out.

"And then another story to explain how that second story was written, and then another to explain that third story, or was it the fourth? Until one became accustomed to the image of a world of inventions without inventors, creations without a creator."



Anthony was clearly excited, his words spilling out, piling on top of each other as his eyes gleamed and he toyed nervously with the pen which never left his hand. Slacker was nervously looking around himself, desperately searching his mind for an objection to hold onto, to grasp with his hands and stop the downward or upward pull of this idea which was flooding him with something or nothing which had and then didn't have a name. He felt like all these vistas were opening up and just as quickly slamming shut, like new coffee houses, and he, Slacker Kill Shark, was in mortal danger of falling into one of them and suffering an irreparable but difficult to state damage.

"But I don't have any other names to use," Slacker said hopelessly, lying actually. "And I only have one address."

Anthony hadn't heard him and was looking around the room, his eyes resting upon the coffee house sign, its neon letters reflected upside down through the window on the gleaming parquet floor.

"We will call one of our authors Fiskbeine. That probably means fisherman or something in German. Oscar Fiskbeine, perfectly appropriate for the golf story."

"Oscar Fiskbeine," Slacker repeated without enthusiasm, feeling the name roll around on his tongue like some kind of food he hadn't wanted to eat because he didn't know what it was and was getting no closer to figuring out its ingredients by chewing it and was soon to run out of all options except swallowing.



"And for this toll booth story, something less anomalous, more ordinary and everyday, believable, all American. . ."

"How about Joe Peterson," Slacker suggested almost despite himself, aiding the enemy as it were. That is perfect, that is fine, Anthony had said and drained his coffee mug down to the dregs. But then Slacker wondered why couldn't he use his own name for one of the stories, he was the author after all?

"No. Too unbelievable, unlikely, your name is too weird, too obviously invented for a literary purpose. It would dim your chances of actually winning and that is what all this work is aiming at. Be strong Slacker, be strong and remember this is literature Slacker. And literature is not love it is war."

Slacker went home that evening disturbed, unsure of himself in a way he never thought he even needed to be sure of himself. Unfortunately or fortunately, he couldn't have decided at the time, another raging one-pager popped up into his brain the following day. Sure enough it followed the sad meditations of a single woman, written in her voice as she sat in church examining the intimate disaster her life had become. He didn't even bother showing it to Anthony but just reported its successful completion over the phone, receiving Anthony's call shortly after midnight during one of those highlights-in-sports video clip shows.

There was church too of course. I started going to St. Joseph the worker after my first beating mostly because it was the only place

The Enchanting Rooms of Middle Age

by Nina Marks
for John Marks

I went to eat at Thai 55
And suddenly, I was an old woman.
I hunched over, eccentric
I did not take off my coat.
Heard rhythm and meter
In glasses and silver.
My ears hummed with them.

I was old alright.
When I'd sit up my back would ache,
My tendons, creak
Maybe I would burp. Have gas.
Forget to hold my gut in.
No longer seeing the world
From the perspective of trying to get laid,
Only caring about writing,
The tension in my hands as I searched
The word, knowing
It was good
With the constitution of age.

The waiter asked me what I wanted.
I had known. Without even looking at the menu.
All the particulars.
And so, he did not forget my water,
Knew me then to be a real bird.
And I thought of Bukowsky.
Heard him reading.
Saw his dog-eared face and
Monkey muzzle
In front of a group of university students
In France. Young men, bit long on women,
All looking stylish, respectably awed.

Reading,
Filmed. never
Looked up not once.
The voice of an old man,
A young man inside an old story.
Who can't quite believe it, really.
Who doesn't give a damn,
He knows this gives him a kind of warmth.

What is this relationship to public?
What is behavior?
What does eating alone mean?
Always. In restaurants.
Writing. Accepting the habits of writing,
Old Marrieds.
Long past self-consciousness,
Muttering, and
Sometimes, sadly, flinching.
Not crazy, intellectual.

Everyone is married.
Za, Stel.
Maria, Alex.
Their pictures are lovely.
Already pictures to ache for.
Joy filled. Days past.

I think of someone once.
And realize, with a gush,
He made the mistake. I mean
I know he didn't want it
But I'd've been one hundred percent.

And so there are sisters and mothers
and dead friends and pets. Bukowsky.
He wanted to be so
Sad. But he never believed it,

So he kept trying, sadder and sadder,
Until, much later, he saw,
It had been alright.
And it affected his voice.
Affected his bluntness, as
Poetry is innocence
Which is after all absorption
The best of which is selfless
And that all is obvious and,
Well. What I am trying to say here is,
I came here one girl,
Leave me another
At last, shameless,
Though full of ghosts.
And empty plates.

where I was safe from him, but also I think because the large space replaced my sense of dignity. In fact I thought that if there were any justice in the world it was the fact that you could sit in church however long you wanted and think whatever thoughts you wanted without fear of anyone knowing what you were thinking.

In the last line she has returned to her seat in the pews after communion but can't even see the persons sitting around her because of the tears which have filled her eyes and clouded her vision.

"Her name is Cat," Slacker said without even being asked, Anthony uncharacteristically haven fallen silent at the story's completion. "The author's name I mean."

And after what felt like an eternity of silence on the phone line, Anthony's voice rose up, uprising from somewhere deep inside as if he was just now learning how to talk or was saying something for the first time, something he had never had a chance to say in his life up to this point but had always been waiting to say.

"You can use my sister's address, 4829 N. Rockwell, #1. Slacker I need to tell you that I was deeply affected by your story. I think it is the best thing you have ever written and I wouldn't have believed you capable of it. Never would I have believed that if I hadn't heard it. We got ourselves a winner here. And it doesn't surprise me that the story which was farthest from you, from your own voice and experience, from Slacker the punk poet, is the most powerful, most convinc-

ing, most authentic thing you've ever written. Pardon me, but if you win that contest with this story—what is it called? Cathedral. If Cathedral wins that contest it will prove all my theories. Thank you Slacker, thank you."

Well the days passed two weeks gone by and he hadn't even thought of Calumet City, nor mentioned it to his friends. Nor did they mention it to him, but that was the way it always was. He reflected bitterly that they seemed to have no sense for the changes he was suffering through, that they seemed to be systematically blind to them in fact. Slacker spell-checked and printed out the stories, properly and apocryphally attributing them, faking signatures and even adding the little copyright sign. He addressed them and placed them in the letter box but he wasn't enjoying himself, he felt shak-

en, disturbed, haunted by identities he had rushed to construct and then haphazardly delivered to the world, to the board of editors and writers at Water Tower. He was having nightmares, two or three a night and he remembered them all because they woke him up so he took to sleeping on the couch, bathed in TV light and would sometimes watch a late night program if sleep seemed just too horrible.

Several months passed, Slacker getting worse not better, becoming more and more paranoid as his dreadful certainty that he was indeed going to win that contest and have to step forward as Cat or Oskar Fiskbeine or Joe Peterson and claim that awards check grew around his feet like weeds, changing the pallor of his pallid skin, marking him more than his pink whale tattoo which now seemed hardly a part of his body,

She said spring was her favorite season because she could walk out her door and feel a power which frightened her. She found it cleansing when the wind blew, twisting the trees and the shriveled newly formed leaves, pressing her clothes to her skin. The clouds would roll across the sky, blue then dark boiling gray, then blue and it smacked of promise and power. It made her think of her father. When she was still in grade school, he used to come by without warning and take her on long rides on his motor-

Lightning Storm

by Michael Backus

cycle. She loved the wind on her face and she loved to press her nose into his back and smell him. He always smelled the same - thick and earthy, it was an earned smell. It made her think of hard work and sweet exhaustion, even though she really had very little idea of what the rest of his life was like. He smelled like a man and that was still unique for her. She would let her mind wander to the future. She'd imagine that each man she would be with would have a different smell, that seemed right to her. She was a



child who saw the world clearly, though she couldn't imagine how her other men might smell. But she liked to think of it. It made her life and her future seem complex and infinitely varied, full of promise and countless yet to be discovered treasures.

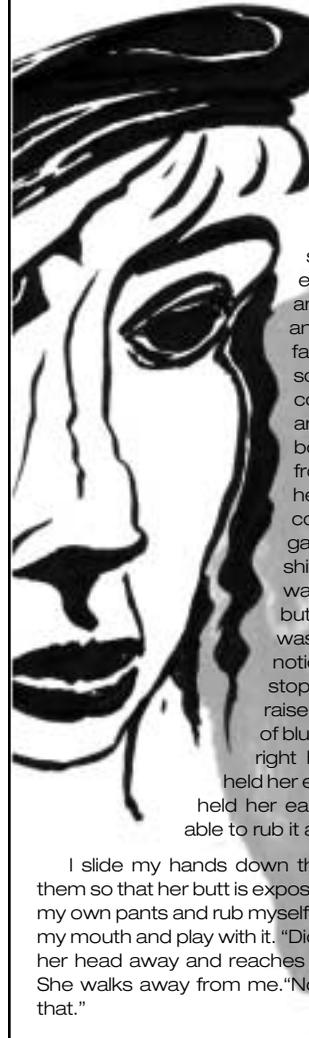
Her father loved the stars and he knew them, he would take her far out into the country where the houses are separated by huge corn fields and he'd pick a dip in the road, where no light could reach and he'd turn off his bike and point out the stars. He'd show her how to tell if it was a star or a planet, he showed her Orion and the nebula in its sword, he showed her the binary star in the handle of the big dipper, he showed her Betelgeuse and explained why it is orange. He showed her Sirius and told her how close it is and told her how long it would take to reach, even at the speed of light. And she'd feel herself being pulled away from him, drawn into the vastness above her. It was like tumbling out of control and she felt free and frightened at the same time.

One night - her last night out with him - she heard a siren somewhere far in the distance, it seemed to come from the darkness above her and the ground underneath her. It got louder and louder, it pulled her back to earth, her body vibrated with the force of it. She smiled to herself because she knew the siren was for her, she knew something



was looking for her, searching the heavens and the earth and she knew it would find her or she would find it. Everything was ahead. That made her feel weightless, like she might fly. Her father took her shoulder and looked around, the siren seemed to come from every direction and suddenly a sheriff's car exploded over the hill, all noise and red and blue lights splashing the fields and the motorcycle and her father's hands and she wanted to scream. She grabbed his belt and connected her hands together around it because she wanted to bolt, she wanted to run away from the explosion of panic inside her. She pressed her face into his cotton pants, they smelled of gasoline. She watched his hands shift colors, she watched them, waiting for the noise to die down, but before she realized the siren was louder than ever, before she noticed the sheriff's car had stopped, she watched his left hand raise slowly in the air through layers of blue and red and white. He kept his right hand on her cheek, he gently held her earlobe between two fingers. He held her ear and rubbed it until he wasn't able to rub it any longer.

I slide my hands down the backs of her pants and pull them so that her butt is exposed to the dense moist air. I unzip my own pants and rub myself against her, I take her earlobe in my mouth and play with it. "Did it feel like this?" I say. She turns her head away and reaches around and pulls up her pants. She walks away from me. "Nothing like that. No, nothing like that."



Look, I say and she turns too late to see the city across the river lit up from behind by the coming storm. We're standing on the top of the parking garage drinking champagne out of the bottle. She lives at the bottom of the garage. For the six months it took to build it, we'd lay in her bedroom, naked and sweaty and listen to the machines driving the pills deep into the ground. She liked to read out-loud to the rhythm of the machines and I would listen. She has a natural sense of where to put the emphasis and her voice darts and dives around a moment like a school of fish reacting to a predator. She gets tired of reading faster than I do of listening. She'd read stories out of books, poems, newspaper articles and sometimes from handwritten text. She'd refuse to say whose writing it was, just that she had collected it over the years. The story she read the most was a story about a farm girl. She called it a children's story.

"There was a girl and there was a farm and there was a motel just down the road from the farm. And there was a large straight oak tree with a spreading canopy and sturdy branches close enough to the ground to climb easily. Her father and his sister called it the Peter Pan tree when they were growing up. That's what the girl's mother told her.

So the girl would climb, every day; she'd climb barefoot because she hated shoes and because the tree was strong with tight bark that felt good when she curled her toes around a branch. She would climb so high she would sway with the wind. In one direction, she could see the road approaching her farm go straight off into the distance. In the other, a motel and gas station with a bright red and blue neon sign in front and several wire cages with animals in back. There were racoons and rattlesnakes and one large bear. At first she'd climb to a branch that put her head above the roof of her house and she'd watch the road. Every day she'd watch the road and with each car, she'd draw in a breath and hold it until the car passed. The car always passed. She rarely turned to the motel except at night she'd squint her eyes and let the rich colors blur together, sometimes she'd shake her head until the sign was just a swath of color in the night before her.

permanent as it was he felt like it belonged to another life, another person and he would one day just step out of it into the skin of one of his hastily created authors, inhabiting their fictitiously attributed stories, living them once again, inventing other stories anew in their wake. His literary production was spreading out before him in a way he could never have anticipated and which he didn't dare to understand because it frightened him so, raising up images of the surf, pounding relentlessly and senselessly on an idle rock, or the jungle hopelessly tangled back upon itself and audibly laughing at the pathetic machete in his tiny hand connected by his undeveloped muscles to his skinny frame. He didn't even have a reputation but he was already in danger of losing it, or having it damaged, dissolved, being cuffed by the Art Police,

dragged through the corridors of institutions and humiliated in broad daylight, by just whom he was not sure.

And so he began drinking beer, a lot of beer—what else was there? Hard drugs? He could wait for that, and in his condition it wouldn't be a long wait. With the deadline for submissions passed—his having been mailed well in advance—and the waiting period interminably unwinding, he was writing less and less, until he wasn't writing at all, feeling repelled by the process. He took to gazing at his stack of collected poetry on the bottom of which he had placed the three fictitiously authored short stories. He didn't actually read the poems—it was already too late for that—but he counted the number of words in each and wrote that figure at the top crossing out the title. He took to imagining authors

for them, arranging them in partial collections which seemed to reflect the personality of someone he had only to invent a name for. Then the world would have just what it needed: another poet. Some of these poets seemed like precursors of the others and he was startled to realize that the reading of a later poem altered the experience of reading an earlier one, although these readings were all remembered ones, nostalgic ones, because he wasn't getting into that anymore. He hadn't seen the very dark-haired girl in months and wasn't reading his poetry so had no chance of happening upon her after work, but he thought about her a lot, her habit of silence, her single, semi-secret name which she declined to reveal, to speak, and the way she seemed to be both sad and happy and

never begged him for anything, never bothered telling him no or yes.

With no writing to absorb him, the beer he was drinking led him inevitably down the street to his friend's pad, beer drinkers all who liked to humiliate and challenge each other, Slacker having a hard time accepting this verbal combat in his fragile state.

They were all guys and at the point in their lives when they were telling each other stories about where they had been and where they were going, although of course they hadn't arrived there yet. It was like they were preparing the ground for the success stories they would eventually be telling each other, that they could see coming on the horizon, and these stories being told now were the ones that came



But more and more she went up to feel a cool clean breeze and she found herself watching the motel, especially the bear. The bear paced and paced, in all the hours she watched him, he never stopped pacing. She could hear the rough scrape scrape of his fur against the wire cage. Some days, she'd watch and watch him, then she'd shut her eyes and with the tree swaying, she'd dream she was flying out across the landscape. First she'd circle and circle the cage and make the bear look at her, just make him stop and look at her, then she'd fly back over her tree and stick low to the road until it curved around a sloping hill and she'd go straight across the patchy scrub brush in anticipation of going over the hill and seeing what was on the other side. Then one magical day when she opened her eyes, the bear had stopped and was looking at her, just standing and looking and it made her look away in embarrassment, like he knew her dreams. When she turned back, the bear was pacing again.

That night all night her heart beat in her ears keeping her awake, she was sure she had ruined something. But the next day, the bear was waiting for her, standing and looking and waiting. From then on, he continued to pace but sometimes he stopped and sometimes when he was stopped, he'd look. She would take food up and sit for hours, she'd count telephone poles on the ridge of the hill, she'd toss rocks at the shell of her father's motorcycle leaning against the shed. And she'd do things for the bear. She'd throw tennis balls high into the air and the bear's eyes would follow them. She brought out a bright flowered cloth from India and hung it straight in the wind and left it there. Many nights she could hear the cloth snapping in the

wind and she knew the bear could hear it too. She always fell asleep fast and hard on windy nights. Once she took a pack of sparklers up and lit them all, two at a time - she'd swing and twirl them, she'd toss them high into the air and let them stream back to earth, like lightning bolts, they imprinted on the inside of her eyelids when she shut her eyes. She imagined that the fuzziness of the sparkler stream was somehow calming to the bear.

She had to get closer, she slipped over to the motel, paid her \$2 and went back to see the bear. She stayed back out of sight because there was a man poking a stick at the rattlesnakes. Tired and beaten, the snakes couldn't muster enough energy to even rattle. Then the man saw her and left and she showed herself to the bear. The bear stood and looked at her for a long moment, then he growled deeply and lunged at her through the cage, it frightened her and she ran home. For 2 weeks, she didn't climb the tree. She rode her bike into town. She walked along dry creek bottoms. She felt earthbound. Then one night in a dream, she



heard the bear roaring and roaring across the dark land like a train whistle and in her dream, the roaring turned into the train whistle; the whistle of a train taking and returning people from a place she didn't understand.

She went up the next day, the bear was lying down watching for her. She threw a day-glow orange ball in the air for him and he watched it to the ground, he watched it bounce, then he watched her. It went this way for days, weeks. Until she fell.

This one day she slipped and fell, caught herself for a moment halfway down, then hit the ground hard and the bear saw it all. He threw his weight on the top of the cage and collapsed it around him. When he reached her, he smelled her, he licked her bare feet; in her forced sleep,

his coarse tongue on the bottom of her feet felt like the tree's branches and she thought she was climbing again, just feeling the expectation of that.

Then she caught her breath hard with pain, sucking deeply, her leg, her leg throbbed. Her leg was broken but she was breathing and the bear just walked away without looking back. Her hip was broken but for a moment just after she caught that first breath,

right before, almost casually fertilizing the soil for the later, hard fought for stories about compromise, difficult choices decided by raw belief, practical solutions to intractable problems. Also they were beginning to buy things, mostly for themselves, arming themselves with cars, video machines, CD players, suits, expensive vacations, while he borrowed their old tapes and took the bus. Slacker reflected somewhat bitterly that everything in their mutual interactions pointed to the fact that he was more like them than they were like him, that he was where they had been and they knew that and treated him that way, as a younger, less experienced and more imperfect version of themselves.

This was paradoxical for Slacker because he felt like he was becoming less and less like himself and definitely no

more like them. He couldn't convince any of them to drive out to Calumet with him. As much as they joked about it they didn't really understand this special place nor his relationship to it, nor seem capable or interested in trying to understand it. The one time he convinced Anthony they got lost while driving mostly because he hadn't bothered to memorize the streets on his many bus trips and Anthony had problems with the local dialect while asking directions. But as they soon discovered this didn't really matter. Those people who said they weren't in Calumet City had never heard of it and had no idea where it was, while those who knew where Calumet City was, always said they were already in it and there was nowhere else to go, nowhere to give directions to. And so Calumet became this almost private, personal

place for Slacker which could only be arrived at or departed from by bus, and which he could never pin point on a map nor find in a car, that he had mostly given up on ever returning to because it seemed to belong to someone else he knew but who forbid him, a place he had written about but under multiple, assumed identities, ghost writers created out of the necessity of the difficult conditions we live under, invented voices for a real place that no one could find and whose inhabitants didn't know he existed.

When the award check finally arrived, being mailed to Anthony's sister's apartment, for the winning story, "Cathedral," Anthony delivered it to Slacker himself, beaming triumphantly but, for the first time, having little to say. Slacker accepted it with a shrug and a sigh of the inevitable. The

amount was 230\$, twenty less than advertised, the word-processed letter of congratulations saying something about a processing fee. With his birthday a week away his friends convinced him to invest in a big party to be held at their place and to which they would invite all their friends. Slacker went by the very dark-haired girl's work and invited her but she didn't respond, just heard him out and went and got another beer for a customer. He felt like he was coming in sight of the danger of being recognized on the street, of suffering from an over-quick fame grasping at him with its greedy, heavily-ringed fingers which couldn't, which just wouldn't wait for their subject's permission, his submission to outside processes, so he began entering the public domain only in disguise, with sunglasses and a hat, or in a circle of his



she had the sensation of fur across her cheek and it helped calm her because the pain made her feel out of control. It was the last time she saw the bear, the last time anyone in the area saw him though she often imagined him running across the landscape, running up a gentle slope and finally cresting the ridge, with the whole world spread out into the distance in front of him." I never talked to her much about the story, something about it made me nervous and I was afraid to learn I was missing

something. With her, I was, am always afraid I'm missing something.

The storm is close, dense blasts of wet hot air are being pushed forward, condensed by its approach but there are now veins of cooler air mixed in. She stands at the highest part of the garage with her arms out above her, letting the air dry her, the lightning has an intensity that frightens me but it's still across the river. The wind has begun to really take hold of the trees, twisting the large branches and curling the leaves inside out, folding them knife-edge thin and for a moment, all the trees look bare and I have a flash of a winter scene, as if the storm had the power to change the seasons. It unsettles me. This just before the rain starts.

She says her father wrote her about once seeing a tornado cut through a town. I make her get up and go inside the stairwell, she pulls free of my hand but she comes. We sit in this high glass stairwell while the lightning passes. Once at the storm's peak, when we both jump at lightning and thunder together very close, she touches my face and takes my hand and I know this is more for me than for her. I am a large man but feel wafer thin. Then it's past and we both step out into the rain and the cool, cool air like a cool we haven't felt in weeks. We sit in the rain and let ourselves get used to being this wet.

She says her father stood on the hood of his car at a drive-in theatre and watched a tornado cross the city half a mile away, with each new flash of lightning he'd see it for a moment. There was a whirlwind of debris surrounding it but he tracked it by watching the electric blue sparks as the tornado slashed through power lines. She says this while we watch the storm move away from us, with each flash, I search the horizon but I'm always left with the feeling that I'm missing something, some dark shape in the corner of my eye more sensed than seen, if the flash would only last a split second longer, I know I'd see something special.

When the rain begins to let up, I ask about her father. She stands up stiff, the storm lights the sky behind us but the night is still unstable, all around us we can see flashes. Back across the river, lightning illuminates pink a whole mountain of clouds,

so far away the thunder spreads out thin, only the lowest rumblings reach us - like little foothills of sound. She says she wants to go home and make love; fuck, she usually says fuck and I notice this and decide it is important but I can't figure out if it is a good or bad thing.

Why won't you talk to me about your father, I say like she is not being straight with me. The truth is, it is not important to me and I believe she's been as straight as she can, but I still say it. And wait for her answer.

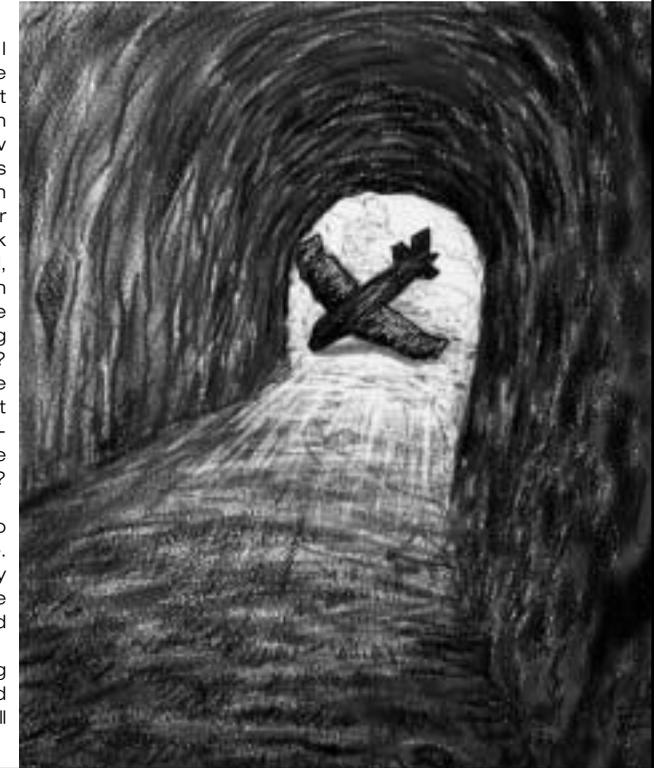
It's only your business if I choose to tell you about it, she says. You know that. You know that. And then we went downstairs and still wet, we lost ourselves in the one thing between us that still had its edges.

Two months after we split, I think about her more than I did a day after. I sometimes catch myself thinking of my life as what I live between her calls; waiting, I won't use that word but it still hangs. I am OK, she's OK. I resist the notion that her OK is better than mine. This isn't hard since I know very little about what her life is like now. Only what she tells me over the phone and she's careful about my feelings. I'm grateful but at the same time, I can feel whole chunks of her that are completely hidden to me. What does she think about now? Is she learning new ways to look at the world, ways that have nothing at all to do with me? Do I appear in her dreams (I believe yes, but I often imagine myself in the chorus or a large crowd. Or maybe I appear as a passing sensation, like a smell that reminds you of another time)? And what does she think about me when she wakes in the morning after one of these dreams? Are there people out there capable of really knowing her or are all men (my theory) basically helpless and open before her? And if there are, what are the chances she'll meet such a person? These are the things I spend each night thinking about.

Three months after we split, she calls and asks if I will go with her to a family reunion, she doesn't want to go alone. She doesn't like to answer alone questions and her family has heard my name, I've talked to her mother over the phone. There's no one else she wants to ask. I hem and haw. But I'm going, of course I'm going.

I begin to think we should get together for an evening sometime before the reunion, to get used to being around each other again. I have some questions I'm hoping she will

answer without me actually having to ask any of them. But I can't bring myself to suggest doing something over the phone and when I see her, she is distracted and pleasant and I think sometimes she's forgotten about the reunion. I begin to feel embarrassed for thinking about it so much. At night, I slide around the wood floors in my socks with my eyes shut, sometimes to music, just moving to feel movement, sliding close to an edge I imagine is there, some sort of internal precipice that if I get close enough to, I might just go over and understand something deeper about myself, some hidden truth that dances just beyond the far reaches of my perception. All this



friends, passing unnoticed over city blocks surrounded by these unwitting bodyguards. Also he became elaborately solicitous of service employees, waiting in absurd lines with only an enigmatic smile to show for the inconvenience, or generously tipping a battalion of hen-pecked, foot-weary waitresses. And all this when all he really wanted to be was a punk poet, unknown and heroically shabby.

But more than anything else he was waiting in a rising state of nervousness for the knock on the door, the moment when the authorities would come and claim him as their own proper prisoner for the obscure crimes he had committed. When the knock on the door finally came at his friend's place during the celebration for his birthday it was deeply ironic, and therefore revealed the intelligence of a single creator, a

hidden storyteller. Slacker might have predicted the night and been better prepared for it if he hadn't been so sure it would happen on all the preceding nights and so had practically given up, resigned himself to an inevitable state of victimization, worrying only about who the mastermind actually was and what his punishment would materially consist in. All the invitees had showed up, except for the very dark-haired girl, and even a few random guests as well, and the beer was well underway disappearing and reappearing and then disappearing again, when the door bell rang. Slacker happened to be in the front room and he knew like they all knew that no one they knew would ring the bell because of its famously loud and obnoxious tone and the fact that it often got stuck and would continue ringing until someone went

downstairs to the basement and removed the fuse. Anyone they knew would just come around the gate out back and enter through the porch. The bell rang once and stopped and then rang twice and didn't stop, like whoever was there wasn't sure they were at the right place but were determined to find out before trying another.

It was the determination in that second ring of the bell which made Slacker react like a rabbit frozen in headlights, like he had been expecting it all the time and had even practiced the pose of intense, immobilizing, instinctual terror. With the Art Police at the door and the ink from his check bleeding culprit red in his sweaty palm, with his friends determined to save their skin and give him up or denounce him, he decided in the instant, the way a rabbit would

decide, to get out at the last, fleeing on foot through the city's alley ways, desperately looking for an exit. Before the door could be opened and with the bell ringing in his ears like a siren he rushed up the stairs and climbed out onto the second floor balcony. In an athletic leap he cleared the porch railing while executing in mid-flight a front roll-over, a somersault he had never even tried before. As his chin cleared the far side of the railing and his madly opened eyes followed hopelessly down the rapidly rotating horizon, from the sky full of the soft eyes of Botticelli angels, around the building tops, but before the grassy expanse of his landing space entered his falling vision, he thought, might even have screamed it as he fell accelerating toward the hard earth, This Will Not Forget.



dancing out of my reach, she'd say there's way too much shit just out of my reach. Besides, she'd say, understanding is easy, it's the doing that requires courage and passion.

On the drive to her family, I tell her about a dream I had. The atmosphere is a little thick in the car, I'm constantly searching under her words, looking for changes and she feels this, it pisses her off a little but she deals with it. She says to herself, this is a man I've trusted completely at one point in my life. She listens to him but mostly feels the exhilaration of the flat green landscape - just to be out in the open, to follow a river at 60 mph for a few miles, to parallel a train in the distance, to pass dirt roads with tall corn right up to the edges, a straight brown slash through the rich texture of the fields. This is what makes this trip to her family tolerable.

He tells her about a dream he had, she must resist the urge to be irritated because more than anything she wants to quit listening to other people, she wants to just see, to lose herself in the richness of the land, to come upon a gradual upsloping hill and to imagine what she'll see when she reaches the top, to shut her eyes and think of an ocean, the outline of distant mountains, the crisp shadow of a grain elevator, just

to imagine - those sweet moments of expectation when the car moves up that hill. She craves clean air in her face blowing her hair back. She wants to know about things she knows nothing about. She believes that all her life, various forces - family, institutions, her friends - have discouraged her from approaching a real understanding of how people are, how the world works. Only recently has she even realized she was missing something. She has so much to learn, so many things she'd like to do. In her entire life, she's never felt more ready to learn. She feels alive and conscious for the first time. This is what she wants more than anything but still she listens to him.

He says he dreamed of living with a singer who could only show emotion when she sang. He loved this woman in those moments, it wasn't much, he said, but it was enough. For both of them. And even as he tells her, she thinks he made it all up. Maybe not every aspect but the core is false, it is a message being sent. I get it, she thinks, I really get it. In a flashing moment, she feels sorry for him. she comprehends the weight of her responsibility. she understands it's all up to her.

Then she watches the power lines along the highway rise and fall and she lets the silence build until it's so awkward, neither of them can say anything. She closes her eyes and daydreams flying. Her father rides the power lines on his motorcycle, up and down, jumping gaps in the lines, taking a hard right down to a farmhouse and back until he's caught up again, his face so clear, rimmed by the black helmet, a man's face, like so many other men's faces, she knows men's faces. If you've known enough men well, you can look into any man's face and see what he is about. Her father's face - blank - her father's face the last time she saw him, just staring at her, like a stranger giving a hard stare to another stranger. And the man next to her, she knows what is coming, she knows now partly what this trip is about. It's for him. He is smart, he'll see in her eyes how she's reacting and in that moment, he'll know what she knows about them, that she understands something he doesn't. Maybe he already knows, he's just not facing it. And when he's forced to, it will piss him off. Or he'll refuse and force her to confront him. Either way, things will become bitter and ugly. She stares at his face to just stare, his face beautiful against the flowing green backdrop. So beautiful she tries to remember it, to burn this image of him into her because she knows very soon, she won't be able to look at him the same.

And so passed Slacker Kill Shark, punk poet and story contest winner, from the land of the living, of daylight, passing down to a fugitive underworld that those of us with jobs, steady love and health insurance can only speculate upon, and we did. Would it really have mattered to Slacker in his incomprehensible state of mind that the fateful bell-ringer was not the Art Police but was actually the very dark-haired girl, who, after the door had been opened, asked in a surprisingly strong voice if this was Slacker's birthday party, stringing together more words than Slacker had ever received from her in one sitting, and was told by one of his friends present there in the front room that she had indeed found the right place? Anthony, his editor, confidant and promoter had the last word at the not too badly attended

wake in one of the city's coffee houses, the site chosen by Anthony mainly out of consideration for his desire to get to know one of the coffee-stained Botticelli angels on the payroll there. He called Slacker an example for all of them, a true hero in the most obscure and hence most authentic sense of the word, a man for all ages, and with his voice raised an octave for emphasis and a soft, white hand also raised, apparently to thump the table as a final exclamation point, The Last of the Punk Poets. At this some of the coffee women even brought tears to their eyes, probably imagining that they had known Slacker, the real Slacker, had served him coffee and now he was gone, nowhere.



GOOFY GAMETES



James F. Cleary, B.F.A.



Fertile Myrtle. Not one to **go with the flow**, Myrtle patiently waits for 'Mr. Right' to **come** along... and how do you like that, it's none other than our good friend **Squirmin' Herman!** It seems that the pint-size playboy has managed to charm his way into Myrtle's heart... er, nucleus — whatever! Though no beauty, surprisingly Myrtle is quite popular with **the boys**. "It must be my **fight genes**," she reasons with a giggle. Explaining her brief courtship with Herman, Myrtle sighs, "He was just so forceful he finally got under my skin... I mean, cell wall. I really wanted a traditional wedding, but we ended up just **elopin' in the fallopian**... tube, that is!" Now that Myrtle has found her mate, we figure she won't be needing her '**golgi apparatus**' anymore!

GOOFY GAMETES



Squirmin' Herman. Justifiably proud, this **cocky customer** has just successfully swum the sexual equivalent of the English Channel! "I prefer to think of it as the **Chunnel of Love**," winks the wee wriggler. Reliving his voyage, the lilliputian lothario brags, "Halfway across I could feel the **nucleotide** turn in my favor!" What is the secret of Herman's success? "It's my **D.N.A. — Delightfully Natty Attire!**" Though some of his competitors have accused him of avoiding the whole **affair** by having himself artificially inseminated, in our opinion this lewd dude has **passed the testicles** with flying colors!

**Erica
Remembers
Germany
to Her
Daughter**

by Nina Marks

You are angry, how I eat out the fridge how
you say when I spoon sour cream
from container to mouth my spit makes it turn,
how I pick chicken before its cooked,
spread butter on my hand, smash chocolates
and almonds and know.

Let me tell you how food is wealth, how
hungry we were before the war, how
my sisters cooked outside over fire what little.
Sometimes a potato, cabbage, onion.
We caught bugs, we didn't know.
Roaches, we boiled them, I think now how
this was dirty, but I remember. They were good,
protein, made water tart broth. Food
is something frantic, insecure, to be grabbed
and shoved and swallowed. Only inside does it
fill trust.

You have learned from me my bad habits. I hear
you when you think I'm sleeping, cabinets
bang, packages rattle. You stuff yourself two
fisted and this is not cause you were hungry ever
but for consolation. You sniff, but still
slink wayward to my icebox, look to food for mothering.

I was smallest. Your aunts still know the tongue,
for me its gone 'cempt when it gets bad. Then words
are from the back of my throat, rain in a gutter
and they pour out the spout of my mouth. This is
when you say I'm drunk.

How have you learned from songs I gave you for sleep?
How do you know what I lost, and show no sign of learning?
Did you grow up in a language I've forgotten only
lately, because I've been so tired? When I
hear you call me Mutie I am swimming in Rhine
wine. It is time for me to go to work and you have made me
breakfast. There is fed up in your voice, there is
bored and sick but there is tender too. I sleep a little
longer just to hear you.

We were blonde, Protestant.

Dates say my kindergarten was youth camp,
you say my hate is brainwash.

Its not my right arm breaks left swing, old love
and hate. We pledge allegiance, we don't know
and later, snatches, strange oaths pop in rhetoric. But I
have reason. Its not I hate them, just people, I hate what they
own. Europe. New York. All the lending gold of melted teeth.
Red notices and no medicine and they won't lend.
You want college, clothes, spending I can't give.
So you rage and curse and hide my pills and I can't sleep
sleep late, loose jobs when jobs are old men's hair.

Who are you to judge me?

What boat did you get off that you come from such high ground?
That you look down on me and say, Loaded. Gutter. My boat was
packed with stink and filth and loss and sailors
called us dirty, dogs of war, Kraut. We built Europe. Burnt her
down. We changed our names to Smith and White, came to cities settled
Germantowns outside stockyards where we
slaughtered Texas cattle with long horns, sweat pigs for
chicken feed and in taverns spent it over pale thin brew,
drank piss mourning Munich barrels.

We kept our clocks and dogs and bratwurst,
our women kept our braided buns and breads and ironed
and worked vacant topsoil while our men poured iron,
molten steel, German spoils for American dream machinery.
We kept as best our own and you are angry. You disown me.

Because you are young and wild hair and guilty for our past,
guilty for my drunk and poor.

Yours, the bleeding heart for pigs and Jews, curs and dykes
and inner city. You don't know from blood.

Til you've caught and cut your cousin cutting chickens; yours,
til sirens and your town is sent heaven. Til you grow a baby and it grows and
snarls ashamed. You don't know close to guilt,
yet could I, would I spare you that.



When Pedro Alvarez left the small dusty border town of Ciudad Acuña behind him, he was carrying as a passport an old American coin that his great-grandfather Capitán Julio Alvarez had brought back with him nearly one hundred and twenty years ago.

Capitán Alvarez's brigade had been honored on the other side of the Río Grande in Del Rio, Texas by the veterans of General Worth's army on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Molina del Rey.

This coin, minted from Aztec silver under the orders of General Worth, had the head of Liberty stamped onto one side, and an engraving of the Aztec ruins stamped onto the other with these words: *Libere Redite* scripted in elaborate type. The coin had been awarded to the weary-faced and foot worn old Mexican veterans who had fought to defend the honor of President Santana, and their homeland, in the battles of Molina del Rey and Chapultepec in the week of September 7, 1847.

Although Worth and his army suffered huge losses in those battles, the Mexican Government fell shortly thereafter capitulating California and Texas to the U.S., but Worth never forgot the bravery of those Mexican soldiers nor the tenacity with which they had fought. The Memorial Ceremony that he had prepared in honor of the brave Mexican veterans had taken place in the dusty outback's of Del Rio, in front of a half dozen-army tents. On that bright sunny day nearly one hundred and twenty years ago, the Mexican soldiers sweated beneath their sombreros and humbly received their coins while General Worth delivered a speech (in broken Spanish) from horseback. In his speech, the General tried not only to mourn the valiant Mexican soldiers who had fallen (one score and five years ago) in what was otherwise a lopsided and ignominious war ("It wasn't my war, but Scott's"), but also

to absolve the American Army of any blame or imputed aggressive intent to the Mexican People.

When the General finished his remarks, he instructed his artillery to send cannon fire into the sky to honor the valiant Mexican warriors with a twenty-one gun salute. The American Bugle Corps, bedecked in Union Blue, and bangled with medals played a mournful rendition of Taps, followed by a rather rusty rendition of the Mexican National Anthem. When it was all over, General Worth saluted each one of the Mexican soldiers. Then he dispatched a small cavalry to escort the Mexicans out of town and towards the banks of the Río Grande.

For many of the Mexican soldiers it was the last time they would touch foot in Texas, their homeland. Eventually they would all die, exiles in their own country. With a heavy heart, the veterans crossed the Río Grande which was shallow, quick flowing, and muddy. By nightfall they had set up camp in México.

They lit huge camp fires

and settled down for the evening. Some of the men told stories, others got drunk on American moonshine. Some sang sad songs of Independence that made their hearts ache with a longing for their fallen comrades. Others yearned for the arid pastures of Texas, whose border they had once crossed freely. It was a night to remember and Capitán Julio Alvarez who grew blind and deaf and bedridden with age often recited the events of that day as if it were a miracle in time. When he died sixty years later, he slipped the large silver coin into the hand of his great-grandson and then bringing his mouth to the boy's ear, whispered with his last breath: *Partes de los Estados Unidos fueron parte de México*. They were words the boy never forgot

Maria Naira cried when her husband Pedro discovered the coin nearly fifty years later in a clay pot that he'd hidden in the tool shed behind their house. For all these years he'd thought that the coin had been lost, or worse still, stolen. And for each one of those years he'd grow melancholy and bitter when he thought of that afternoon in the summer memories of his childhood when his great-grandfather had entrusted him not only with the coin that he subsequently lost, but with the notion that los Estados Unidos, or parts thereof, had once been his rightful homeland. Texas, he'd often find himself dreaming as he hoed the rows of his garden, is just across the Río Grande, and so is the homeland of my forefathers. He used to watch the sparrows that flew from his fields, over the river, and into Texas as easily as a ghost might fly and he'd wonder if his great-grandfather's spirit wasn't also doing the same.

"Maria," he cried. "Come quick! Hurry!" Pedro was standing on the porch of his home when he called Maria Naira from the kitchen where she'd been butchering chickens. Her husband was growing old and frail, and she constantly worried that he might hurt himself in the tool shed. Instead, he stood before her, holding the large silver coin, tarnished with age. Then he tossed the coin in the air, and felt the heavy weight of it as he caught it in the palm of his hand. "See here," Maria,

he said squinting his eyes, and pointing to the Latin inscription. "It says, we may return freely. We shall return to our homeland at last!"

"But it is not our land anymore, Pedro. It is the Estados Unidos. You are crazy. They will stop you when you cross."

"But it is our land too Maria, and it always will be!" Pedro, held the coin up. "This coin is from their great General. They will be bound to honor it."

Maria Naira cursed Pedro for being so crazy. "They will laugh at you," she said, as venomously as possible. "Then they will take your silver coin. They will handcuff you and bring you back in a truck." She laughed at Pedro, for he was such a fool.

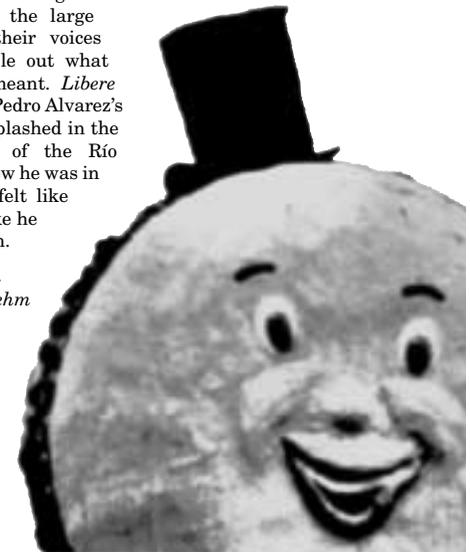
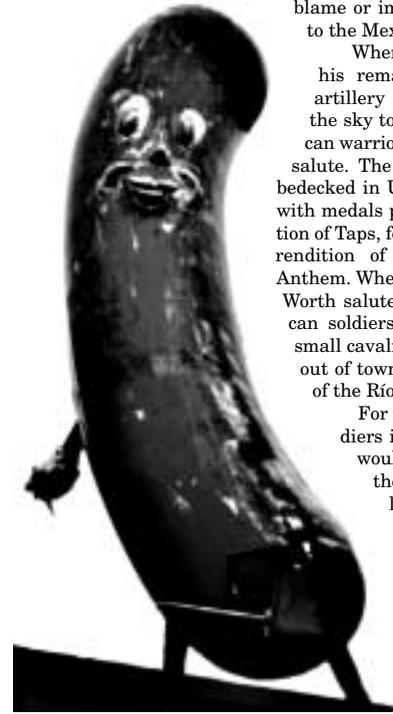
"Maria," he said. "You are a very naive woman. But I love you because you are my wife. If you will not come with me tonight to los Estados Unidos, then I shall go by myself." Pedro turned away from her and walked back to the tool shed. "Then you shall go by yourself," Maria said under her breath. As she turned to butcher her remaining chickens, she cursed Pedro for believing the words of an old crazy soldier who was blind and deaf and hadn't known anything. Then she cursed the Jesuits who had schooled Pedro years ago; she cursed them most of all for having taught him how to read Latin.

When Pedro Alvarez crossed the Río Grande that night, Maria Naira wrapped her shawl around her shoulder and cried. She cried because a flock of sparrows was flying south into México and back to Pedro's garden, but Pedro, with no more thought than a sparrow, was headed to los Estados Unidos, the silver coin clutched tightly in his hand. "Come back, Pedro," she screamed. But Pedro just kept running.

He ran through the small dusty streets of Ciudad Acuña. The hairless dogs that hung around the market place came running after him, barking. The town's women pointed at him from their doorways. "What's that," they said, "in Pedro's hand?" The men, looked up from their cards and said: "Why is Pedro Alvarez running so fast?" A little boy in a red shirt tried to follow him on his bicycle, but Pedro out ran the boy.

When he entered the tumble weed wilderness between Ciudad Acuña and the Río Grande, it was nightfall. The border police were flying overhead in helicopters, but Pedro Alvarez didn't notice. Instead he heard the sad guitars of old forgotten warriors being plucked from the thorns of cactus. He heard the throaty voices of old soldiers, drunk on American moonshine, singing songs of their fallen comrades. He saw their rough weather worn faces smile in the orange glow of their camp fires, their callused fingers curled around the large silver coins, their voices trying to puzzle out what those words meant. *Libere Redite*. When Pedro Alvarez's first footfalls splashed in the muddy water of the Río Grande, he knew he was in Texas, and it felt like being home, like he never felt again.

by Joe Peterson
art by Mike Brehm



THE WIND

*Something about the wind
The way it always blows*

*When it stops
It's not the wind*

*Something about my life
The way it always blows*

*And then it stops
Just like the wind*

JOHN HUSS

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