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FEELING GOOD
BECAUSE ONE OF THESE DAYS
IT'S GOING TO BE SPRING

And of you then
I'll sing
of me
I'll sing then you
on the front porch
me then on the porch be-
side you: me sing words
the bodies of which
shall be re-
appearing O sweet
the sweet juice rising, O
snowdrift flower-
ing crab
apple
how your firm frame
wears its buds
so color-
ful red (say crimson) to
blue (say purple) you
on the front porch
me then on the porch be-
side you: me our song
the song of the card-
inal you: me you
me youme youme I'll
take your hand and chree-
ist! strike me
you: me youme youme
dumb blind if ever I (are
you with me dear
god say you are your
hand taking equally
my hand): you
let go
PROVE IT

I see Bubba Barnes
sneak a comic book
from the rack in
the Rexall drug-
store, and the next
day at recess
I tell him. He
says Prove it.

I even saw the
name of the comic,
I tell him. Sub
mariner. Isn't
that right? He
says Prove it.

I don't have to
prove it, I say.
I know you did it
and you know you
did it. So, he
says, prove it, ass-
eyes. Just prove it.

You can go to
hell for swearing,
I say. Bubba says
Prove it. And for
stealing, I say,
and for not tell-
ing the truth. Bub-
ba says Prove it.
Prove it, you
little peckerhead,
he says. Prove it
prove it prove
it prove it
prove it.
THE BURNING

In front of the Champlin station
I stand with my friend Bullard
to watch the picture show
burn down. It is around midnight.
It is like watching a cut from
*Gone with the Wind,*
all of the main-street intersection
in technicolor. And such a grand
production. The fire department
with its hose like a glandular
garden hose full of leaks,
watering the pavement, and people
of all sizes and ages moving
onto the screen, then off it,
the hiss and pop of rafter and stud,
the roof, the projection room
collapsing, the eventual flatland
of char and of steam, and someone
saying You can bet your bottom dollar
it was a Southern Baptist did it.

Each year I enjoy the burning
more than the year before.
It is what happens between
Thanksgiving and Christmas.
It is what provides
the ghost of waste that lingers
winter. It is what spring
works to leave behind,
board to board becoming again
something out of nothing.

Letters from the marquee
curl into a language
only the memory understands:
*Guadalcanal Diary.* Bullard,
a sorry tenor if there ever
was one, sings anyway:
William Kloefkorn

O beneath the starry flag
one poor soldier lost his bag,
and he'll never Yankee Doodle any more!
Suspended from a high wire stretched
from the Rexall drugstore
on one side of the street
to Moulton's grocery on the other
a thick silver rope spells out NOEL.
We stay to watch until the last dog
dies. Though Bullard and I
are the best of friends.
he doesn't go to my church,
or to any. Mother says Which
is just as well.
EDNA

She wants me to
take some pictures
of her dead husband,
that large old scoffer
who loved his coffee
scalded and his trans-
gressions trophies
in bronze.

She grabs a white
teatowel to make
a small joke of
it: shoos family
and friends from
the living-room
as if so many con-
vivial houseflies.

Alone with the dead
man I study the
possibilities. My
new camera works
to steady itself
in my hands: I
want more than any-
thing to do this job
right. Sir: I
cannot imagine you
not swearing
hotly into the
teeth of all
this posing.

The face emerges
wonderfully calm,
sharply defined.
Edna, who cooks at
my father’s cafe,
William Kloefkorn

beams. She is up to her elbows in bread-dough. No doubt whatsoever in her own mind: he had been baptized in a farm pond when he was thirteen.

She wants all of the negatives. Because it is week's end, and the weather is clearing, she expects a heavy dinner run. When she slaps the dough it is the face of all of us who posture uncommitted, coming around.
SEEING THROUGH CATARACTS

A white sheet is thrown
against the sun
I find spots on my hands
but no hands
Bodies float on sidewalks
faces missing
though Mother's face
everywhere
stares through death
eyes steady as a cat's
I dream forests in Kentucky
where fallen leaves
gather overhead
clouds collect at my feet
I hold to a banister
without stairs
SO LITTLE TIME

for Tim Pennypacker

A man on the beach reeled in a flounder
while his wife looked on.
Two old sisters hurried over
to watch the fish flapping in sand
Their green cotton dresses flapped
exactly like curtains, or dying fish.
A finger of smoke pushed a freighter out to sea,
dividing the eye-blue horizon in halves.

All this happened one afternoon in late September,
and there was more:
the roar of the autumn Atlantic,
two Irish setters bounding through bathers,
a smell of hot lotions and sweat.
And there were sanderlings
tracking the tideline for mollusks;
gulls, vagrant and mean,
rinsing their beaks in the surf.

Later, I watched the husband and wife
shake sand from the towels
of another depleted vacation;
pictured the elderly ladies
with their imaginary life together,
like a shared closet
in a room full of knickknacks and chairs;
and the birds,
the way their feathers sprung once from scales,
like our hair, how it happened
when the planet was warmer, and different,
before there were witnesses.
There is so little time,
so much struggle and change,
that being and breathing and death
are only a part of its quantities:
when a fish is hauled up from the sea
a man falls down on the sidewalk somewhere
a tree trunk splits, two cars collide
on opposite sides of the continent.
Everywhere water smashes land,
wood rips, bent engines hiss;
everything's bucking and breaking,
odies and houses and boats,
all the debris of adjustment and memory
gone like a wave no one watched or
sucked into smells and old sadness;
as suddenly as a ship disappears
the piers melt away,
a footprint's wiped smooth by the tide,
nothing survives
and there's so little time.
TSUNAMI

Something of the tall, dark-eyed people
stays with us.

For life
They threw their bodies into the slurping
snarling ocean
to the sharks

For life
Hangers abort the children of rapists
in Chile’s bloody and grey jail cells

Bones settled deep
in aged layers
of sedimentary rock

Yet we are nearly all dead in L.A.
Death in the bloody and grey jail cells
_y en los barrios._

Death acids through veins, lye through hair.
Death with a mad look in the eye, or the
three-piece uniform of mercenaries
that paw and snarl at murmurings
of proud mothers and fathers
—that lunge—despite blood money and maggots
in the eyes—at murmurings of life.

Take me
Take me to the water to be baptized.
We’re going to move the ocean this time, gotta live.
We the ocean
    the ocean shifting its legs, balling its fist.
Mass water, miles high
rolling toward shore.
TROUBLE

Near flocks of pansies on my drapes, a tabloid
is opened to your ragged face and satchel,
your patched sweater and six sheep twisted like rapid-
ograph squiggles in the grass.
It says a taxi breezed through them. Eduardo Ramos,
12-year-old shepherd, I have to tell
myself those patches are not ornamental.

Once my friends got stoned and sketched their notions
of sheep. Steve doodled a supermarket chop,
and Jon, a lamb begging like a spaniel. I laughed.
At 12, I'd spent four weeks in a posh camp caring
for Trouble, a pet ewe. I thought myself an expert
on things ovine. I though I knew something
about sheep. And I did know

their foreign smell, their density
of lanolin and dust, better than you, Eduardo,
for whom it is the indiscernible
residue in clothes, in food, in the mud-
out you share with grandparents, sister, mother.
You wizen in the dim light of U.P.I.
as I sit subsidized beneath a white
fluorescent wand. I'm afraid

your trouble will always be
a ransack machine that hits and runs
off with what you need to live
while mine will be a manageable
beast, full of sad
bleats I can take or leave. But that's complacency

speaking from the land of backyards marred
by barbeques, where charred lamb bastes the air
with a bouquet crueler, lovelier than the law allows
and I am not powerful and I am not absolved.
Untitled pen and ink drawing by Patricia Nafe
THE NIGHT'S ALFRED

Alfred, and a lively, fluid Alfred, raced up to his mother and kissed her apple, filling the heart of mother, something like a small nut, with heat diffusion: uncorking, unbending, unwinding, unravelling, a lovely moment of chance.

It was halloween night and Alfred lay on the couch, his mother's couch, his mother's house, his mother's room and the landlady's domain, her purse, in a dream until the dream was over and she there waiting for it to be over. Are you finished with it?

Alfred lifted his lids and saw her, his own face, my mother. Alfred was fifteen, a fifteen with the long legs of a lasting summer: pirates, gumballs, cedar chips, military aspirations, chosen beasts and some quietness. She and he in the room quadrangle and the familiar sight of her oversoftened cotton dress with its sprig of house flowers here and there and evenly spaced. This was the field he saw, not only this, but the yellow one with stripes going up and down and one around the waist, the purple one with its diamonds and all the pairs of shoes, especially the blue shoes with the pointed toes and the handkerchief pockets and hankies, some with a pink embroidery and some with a floppy lace edge. This would be mother.

They lay on each other's necks, mother and son, son and mother in a soft and slow attempt to pry Alfred from the grasp of the dream, a dream of no recollection but a dream no less attached and trying to leave its trace or deposit. Finally, the old mother pushed away the soft and sleepy boy making a damp patch on her morning dress and spoke:

"Be alert, my son."

He tossed the dream aside, a man, and placed each foot bottom on the flat floor, floor and carpet, and up they stood together, arms around each other's waist and into the kitchen to see the captain, there and waiting on a chair with his knees under the table, and his arms on the table cuffed and coated, and spoke.

"Alfred."

It was halloween night and the table full of the things of fragrance, of the late season, something of spice and fruit and
Jean McGarry

the color of the ripe season and almost over. They sat, the three, Alfred, Mother, and Captian, and fed from the season until they ate what was there and smelled what was there, gazing at each other and the light dimming, this fourth, and dropping its last light into the window and onto them, and then gone immediately following its fullest flush.

They tucked Alfred abed, the two, and left him there to lift one by one the corners and edges of the night's dream and pull it over his head, left him alone to dream for dream is like a disappearance and just the way the light disappeared, a moment for fullest love turning into mourning.

And what was left but the dark night, and the lamps and what they could do, the ball of yarn, the two, and the long, weaving night. At last, the night began and all in bed and something always missing, and all the eyes flapped open, while the spirit of night, old kings and thrice-born queens, barnyard fowl and twigs, flattened cows, ladies with walking sticks, flowers and peaches, lanterns and horses, ancients and new, traveled in their slow way across and around the lovely space of sky, dark sky and almost invisible, just a tone or line here and there. This is what the night was, not just for the dropping of apples onto the taut summery earth, the waking of a little bird in a hazel tree, the baby upstairs in its night gloom; it was for this long, sad, slow, earthly walk, a last walk.

A boy was at his window watching. This was what this night was for, the bed grown cool and mother and captain now a silent patch. Who are you that we should, who are you? he heard if hear can be another, softer mode. He spoke to spirits, this night boy, and in the morning, mother fierce and white, startled as forewarned, placed her own note among them to bring him back, the long, low-pitched note of mother and captain with his small violin, but boy was gone, lively, racing and kissing the face of a pink and new-born sky in its curved airiness.
IT WILL WAIT

My brother lifts his tenth cup
of coffee into the haze
of WRGB favorite old time hits
and the maze of smoke from one
of his three packs of cigarettes,
says "Good morning" as though
he'd thought about it. "Good morning,"
I say back and look out the window
to snow that has piled to more
than three feet and it's time now
for the two of us to clear it. "Good
morning," he says again, and I repeat it,
then throw gloves, scarf and jacket
after him, see him as he leapt
from the airplane door, fingering the metal
clasps, the fine silken chute that would soon
Mae West in the blue,
bring him four, five times
faster home than he should go.
"Good morning," he says again and I say
"Shit." "No, it's a good morning,"
he repeats and I say, "Let's go, that snow's
not going to wait." But he sits
still, pours my coffee steaming
into the heavy white cup, adds the one spoon
of sugar, the quick spurt of cream,
says. "Here, have your cup of coffee.
The snow will wait."
Pariah  drawing by Adriana Kulczycky
I WANTA GO BACK, GROWN UP

Mom and I went through Macys
top to bottom, not buying
Daddy made friends with two
fellow bill-posters from Queens
Mom and I toured the museums
saw Chinatown, the Bowery and Harlem
from a bus
Daddy went drinking with a guy
he met flipping pizzas
in a restaurant window
Mom and I went to the top of
the Empire State Building
we saw the Statue of Liberty
from a boat
Daddy palled around with a guy
he met sitting on the curb
changing his socks
While Mom and I watched
the Seven Wonders of the World
in Cinerama
Daddy was watching a lady dance
who could pick up bills and coins
with her twat
SCHIZOGONY

there is a woman
alive in this house
nuts
I can’t keep up with her
I can’t catch up with her
nasty
piles of dirty clothes
in my bedroom corner
new bought, never worn clothes
careless
a hundred bottles of cologne
a thousand pieces jewelry
scattered
two wine glasses
half full on night table, slut woman
sticky sheets
sour odors, slob woman
I want to get my hands on her
I want to put my hands on her
and choke
the wiley, cunny bitch
evades me
she left food on the counter
all night
she was never
the girl next door
BIG RED CHRONOLOGY

1945: Toledo, Ohio, Toledo Hospital, the hospital with a star on top.

1945-1966: Sylvania, Ohio, big white frame house built by Daddy, surrounded by Dogpatch (poor), Sylvania Country Club and Corey Woods (rich), Algiers Rd. (Hispanic), State Line Rd. (Black), Skunk Hollow (lower middle class), no. 9 of 9 children, bicycle club president, tomboy, spoiled cute little girl, movie star dreamer, Halloween party show-off, chubby homely teenager, big legs, woman at sixteen, head in the sand, duck-walk, mediocre student, opposite sex pursuer, rebellious, bar-frequenter, twit.

1966-1971: Maumee, Ohio, Marriage no. 1, small dreary dark green tract house, two sons, bowling leagues, bleach, Sesame Street, piss and shit, crayon marks, toyboxes, depression, homemade candy, rose of Sharon, dirty dishes, beer cans on the floor, barmaid job.

1971-1973: Maumee, Ohio, Divorce no. 1, typing job, babysitters, $150 car, pancake suppers, typing, filing, lecherous bosses, scotch, dirt, lecherous neighbors, bar-hopping, weirdos.

1973-1975: Maumee, Ohio, Marriage no. 2, muscles, long hair, motorcycles, colors, parties, strong perspiration, waterbed, hairy chests, police, hopped-up cars, motorcycle clubs, typing, filing, rough-house kids, drag races, bar brawls, jealousy, home brawls, doper-Dave, hanger’s-on.


1976-1977: Maumee, Ohio, Marriage no. 3 to husband no. 2, wallpaper, paint, venereal disease, new screens, bleach, Ajax, typing, Pine Sol, filing, bathroom tile, the pig sisters, caulkking, penicillin.

1977-1981: Toledo, Ohio, Divorce no. 3, conservative condo, nosy neighbors, complaints, college, difficult children, baseball, nasty neighbors, messes, basketball, weirdos, football, creative writing, younger men, typing, older men, 3-year engagement, married men, filing, break-ups, bankruptcy, term papers, seminars, messes, poetry, scotch, homework, vodka, bankrupt morals, graduation, scotch, honors.

1981-1983: Toledo, Ohio, dump apartment, poetry, poverty, cockroaches, typing, graduate work, filing, generic wine, suicidal friends, teaching freshmen, writing, homework, grading, suicidal tendencies, beer, popcorn, scumbag neighbors, wall holes, holey carpeting, torn screens, weirdos, love.

1983: Toledo, Ohio, big white frame house, poetry, school, typing, filing, teenage kids, room, roommates, writing, reading, Yugoslavian wine, near poverty, beer, love, peonies, occasional scotch, broken things, companionship, ex-convicts, vegetable garden, poetry, cycles.
YOU WOULDN'T KNOW

You wouldn't know love even if it jumped up and bit you on the ass, even if it sent you a telegram saying This is it Buddy, and the messenger read it personally to you while he was standing dripping rain on your new hall rug, you still wouldn't know it, or even if mysteriously you awoke tattooed with a secret code that made you the human rosetta stone of romance, so what, or if, as you unrolled toilet paper the truth magically appeared, inscribed square by square which you simply and blithely would tear off and flush down the toilet; you know who you are, snug and smug in your bachelor pad, surrounded by female bookends who prop you up in your loneliness, and your female cereal boxes sweet but empty, something to distract you at meals but not a prize in the bottom any more, please pay attention, I'm talking to you, even if it was a newspaper story with your name and address as the victim, even if you saw it on TV in a half-hour special report, even if it was a computer printout with all the exact particulars, or a blueprint with all the details, even if you were cooking red snapper for your latest conquest and you found it where the recipe used to be, even if it was spelled out in lipstick across your bathroom mirror, even if your mother called long distance and said after 100 years she's finally giving you permission to like another woman better than her, even if all your women conspired to disappear and leave you alone with me, even if you got a $10 sheet of postage stamps each bearing my name, even if your car automatically drove to my house every night after work, even if all the lights in your house stayed dim until I got there, even if you were kidnapped and held hostage and I walked in to save you from execution, even if it was a movie script and you were the star with all the right lines playing opposite Jane Fonda, even if we were on a desert island without food or water, even if the lyrics to your favorite opera suddenly screamed it out at you, even if I became young and beautiful and busty and conventional and suddenly sold all my old furniture and got Danish modern formica, even if every fortune cookie you ate bombarded you with the same message, even if the Bible told you so, even if all the billboards and all the country western songs in the world kept reminding you, even if it made you do 100 nonstop pushups, even if it was the 11th commandment or the 8th wonder or the FBI interrogated you or the CIA brainwashed you,
not even then, even if it corrected the minor physical defects that annoy you, even if it struck you dumb and sent you candy and flowers and made you speak in cliches and made you hear singing when there's no one there and made you dizzy and lose your appetite, even if you were given nectar and ambrosia of the gods, even if it lit bamboo splints under your fingernails, even if you were tickled with peacock feathers and whipped with vine leaves and rubbed with fragrant oils and attended by pliant and yielding nubile maidens or at least a Playboy Bunny, even if a genie in a bottle granted your three wishes, even if you won the Lottery, even if I did become a man whatever that means, even if all your defenses got crumbled by termites, even if you were bound and gagged and tortured and ransomed and sold to the highest bidder at a charity auction, even if it cured cancer and the common cold and bad breath and herpes and terminal ugliness, even if it bled all over your favorite white shirt, even if it made you laugh more than any Jewish American Princess joke, even if it wrote the Great American Novel and dedicated it to you, even if it cleaned the tiles in your bathroom and fixed your trash compactor and perfected the elusive art of social conversation at tricky junctures between courses, even if it protected you from muggers while you ran after dark by the river, even if it prevented dead air and public humiliation, even if it was an amulet against the evil eye, even if it recited 'let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments' from memory in seven languages, even if it was prepared by Escoffier and served at Lutece, even if you were shaked, baked, drugged, bugged, and mugged, even if you had a heart transplant, even if these weren't the nocturnal ravings of a jealous woman, what else can I say to you, I have no more words left, there is no theory or logic, potion or pain to persuade you, and now I know this.
Rod Kessler

A GOOD, DECENT MAN

"Why doesn’t anyone write about a good, decent man?” she asked, looking up at the shimmering leaves. “You find plenty of good women in fiction.”

“Write about one? It’s hard enough just trying to be one,” he replied.

They were walking down a path of soft yellow dirt beside an old acequia, still draining muddy water from the Rio Grande to irrigate the surrounding fields. As they strolled through the shade of giant cottonwoods, their conversation was interrupted only by unseen birds or river rats darting from the thick grass along the banks into the flow. The two had hiked more than a mile from Corrales Road, and at the mid-evening hour, Albuquerque, the summer-baked city, with its carne adovada and its Coors beer, its sopapillas and its green chili peppers, seemed hundreds of miles away. They were the only ones left in the world.

Her name was Elizabeth Alice Anderson, a fine fitting name, he thought, with its cascade of flowing sounds. Elizabeth Alice Anderson. Her hair was as blond as anything in the state of New Mexico—as blond and as effervescent. If her hair was her happiest feature, her eyes were her most troubled. They made him think of panes of glass that had shattered, shattered without collapsing. Blue glass. She didn’t let her eyes meet his. He thought she was hungry for something calm. The evening was calm.

His name was Edison Smith. He had always told people that he had been named after a lightbulb. He had always said, when he revealed his name, that his mother had wanted to compensate for the plainness of Smith. But now he had stopped saying anything about it. He had grown tired of being engaging. He had grown tired of saying charming things. He was ready to accept his own plainness, his plain-looking hands, his fragile reading glasses, his first hairs showing up white.

He and Elizabeth Alice had been speaking of books. They liked the same authors. She once was a poet—at least had tried. He had been teaching at a branch of the community college in Tucson, but then he’d come here. They had both been born in the same summer, twenty-eight years before.

“Why don’t you write about a good, sensitive man?” she asked.

He enjoyed the picture of himself as someone who might sit down and write a novel, just like that.

“What would I write about?” he asked. “What would I do for a plot? Something has to happen. And, besides, there’s something about the idea of a decent man that almost requires him to be the victim of something—you know, like Billy Budd or Preacher Casey.”

“It doesn’t have to be fiction. It could be a journal.”

They had been talking of May Sarton’s _Journal of a Solitude._

“You could publish your journal,” she continued, judging that Edison kept a journal.

“Are you so sure it would be about a good, decent man?” he asked.

“I don’t really know that, do I?”

They had met only ten days earlier, in the waiting room of Bernalillo County
Community Mental Health Center. They had been sitting on adjacent couches in the waiting room, a tiny yellow room covered with ash trays and potted plants, a room with a single window looking out on the distant heaps of the Sandia Mountains. A painting of a peaceful river hung from the wall, the thick stream meandering through a sleepy village where smoke curled from chimneys and where Rip Van Winkle-like men and women went about the quaint business of their lives. The waiting room, like the world of the painting, was peaceful and protected, and Edison let his gaze drop from the painting to his book, May Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude*. He was planning to become a solitary, and as he read he felt a satisfying sense of isolation, as if he were invisible and not exposed to everyone who cared to see him in the waiting room of a psychotherapy clinic. He had never been to a therapist before.

Edison noticed the blond woman sitting on the other couch. She was lost in a book as well. It was a small book, like his, and nearly lost in her fingers. He couldn’t make out the title until she shifted in her seat and put it down for a moment. It too was May Sarton’s *Journal*.

He couldn’t resist the impulse to make a comment to her, but before she could answer, the receptionist called both their names, and they arose, agitated, and were directed into different offices.

Fifty minutes later they were simultaneously disgorged into the waiting room. She looked as though she had been crying, he thought, but she braved a smile and said, “Yes, every encounter is a collision.” Edison nodded. That line from the book had struck him too.

They left the cool building together, Edison noting the repetitive pattern in the tile floor, and walked to the parking lot. Her car was a faded, light-blue Volkswagen bug, shining under a blazing sun. He asked her if he’d see her next week, same time, same place. He had been given an appointment for the next week, same time. But she said no, she wasn’t going back.

A few days later he was in the Living Batch, the new-and-used bookstore just off Central, where he found a copy of George Erlich Hileck’s *Feisty Breakfast*. He brought it to the counter and the woman working the register said, “It’s quite good. I just read it.” and then, looking up, “Oh, it’s you.” It was she, the blond from the waiting room.

It was easier to strike up a conversation here, in the cool, musty store, surrounded by books. Edison told her he had just moved to Albuquerque where he knew no one. He thought he might have a teaching job lined up in the fall down in Dos Serpentines, but it wasn’t definite. He could take solitude. He preferred it, actually. But, yes, he occasionally did miss having someone to talk to, someone besides a therapist.

She invited him out to the North Valley, where she lived in a tiny rented house just off Corrales Road, and when he had come out there on Thursday they had gone walking beside the irrigation canal.

“Do you really think you’re not a good person?” she asked, breaking the silence that had grown between them.

Edison said nothing.

They heard a splash in the wide ditch.

“What do you suppose that was?” she asked.

“A blue heron,” said Edison with authority. “Did you see it?”

“No, but neither did you.”

“That’s the confirmation. Everyone knows you never see blue herons.”
Rod Kessler

Elizabeth Alice stopped walking and put her hand to her hip. “Blue herons! And what are those? Flamingos?” She pointed to a flock of small black birds winging urgently toward the lazy river beyond.

“Don’t you recognize them? Those are Portents. Definite Portents—Inarticulo mortis—common to these parts.”

“I have my doubts,” she said.

“Not at all. Doubts are grayer on the wings. These are Portents.”

The birds were already out of sight but they could hear warbles and peeps nearby. Edison realized he was acting cute again. He would have to watch that.

“You’re okay, you know that?” said Elizabeth Alice. “You have kind eyes. I can tell about people. I can tel: from your eyes.”

“I don’t have the eyes of a killer?” he asked.

She laughed.

But Edison wasn’t sure that he wasn’t a killer. A woman in his life had died. She had even used the fine blade of the delicate clay knife he had once given her, carving a rough and jagged X through the blue streams in her wrist. Other people had found her, already stiff on the floor of the bathroom of the tiny place she had rented when she had left her family. He had tried to talk her out of leaving them. He had known all along that he wouldn’t be there for her, not the way that she had wanted.

And on the bed of that tiny apartment she had left two notes, two sealed letters, one for her husband and one for Edison.

The husband had read them both, Edison learned, and at last: could no longer deny what he should have known all along. Edison didn’t know what she had written to her husband, and he didn’t like to think about it. She had written in the letter to him that it wasn’t his fault. That it wasn’t a question of fault. Edison didn’t like to think about that either.

Her husband was a senior faculty member at the community college. He was not someone Edison called a friend, but there was no question about Edison’s leaving his post. There was no question of his leaving Tucson altogether.

Everyone had blamed him. The husband blamed him. When he found Edison sitting alone at a back table of the Thirtieth Street Cafe, the husband tossed him the last letter, making no effort to conceal its having been opened, making no apologies. “You bastard,” he had said. “Unthinking bastard.” Only Larry, the owner of the bar, showed him any sympathy, and even Larry never asked him to explain what had happened. No one at the college had ever asked him to explain. But there had been plenty of talk. Edison avoided the funeral and made plans to start life anew somewhere else.

It was true that Edison hadn’t loved her, this gentle, passionate woman. The therapist at the mental health center had taken a stab at putting it all in perspective for him. When Edison’s own marriage had broken up, he had undergone an entirely natural and not at all uncommon period of self-doubt and loss of self-esteem. It wasn’t surprising that he would get involved with an older, married woman. He wasn’t ready for a serious attachment—that would take much time—but he had needed someone to reassure him that he was still attractive, still young, still engaging.

Sitting in the therapist’s office, Edison realized that she had made him feel all those things. He remembered how she liked to stare at him, just inches away from his eyes, lying on his chest. He remembered the way the light went
soft in the afternoons when she would come to his apartment and unbutton her blouse, as though everything were understood.

Then at five she would leave. She had a husband to feed, two teenagers to feed. Edison would go back to grading papers. When she was gone, he had rarely thought of her.

When it turned into a fever, what could he do? He told her he didn't want her to leave her husband. He had told her to wait. He had tried to make her see.

The therapist had assured him that people who take their own lives have their own very serious problems. It's a sickness. It wasn't his fault. Edison thought it would be convenient to believe that. But she had been an artist. What do therapists know about artists?

"Edison," asked Elizabeth Alice. "What are you thinking about?"

"Therapists. How they don't understand artists."

"Don't forget poets. Even ex-poets."

"You mean you."

She walked to the edge of the canal and stood with her back to Edison. The water was barely moving and a coat of algae, green slime, floated on the surface and sweetened the air.

"Well, they didn't understand me."

She was so far away and pretty that it was easy to forget that she had problems of her own. She looked as if she hadn't had a problem in her life—at least, if you avoided her eyes you could think that. Edison knew that this was a mistake, that beauty didn't protect you. His wife had been beautiful and had always felt empty and frightened.

"How didn't they understand you?" he asked.

She reached out for a stalk of high grass growing beside the water. Then she turned and looked at him.

"I have a kind of cancer. I've had...Do you mind if I talk about this?"

"Go on."

"Part of my ovaries were removed this year. They think it's contained now. It's still too early to say."

"You must be frightened."

"They think I could still bear a child now, but if I need more surgery..."

Edison tried to imagine what it would feel like to maybe have cancer and not know. She seemed very alone to him. He wanted to reach out and enfold her, to protect her. But he kept his hands away from her. He reached for a stalk of the tall grass.

"What about the therapist?" Edison asked.

"He said that blaming Mark was pointless."

"Mark?"

"There had always been things wrong between us. He would lie."

Elizabeth Alice had paused before she said "lie," as though some could only come up with an approximation for what she was trying to say.

"Let's walk on," she said.

The sun was on the horizon and a bare-chested man jogged by, followed by an eager Irish setter, saliva dripping from its tongue.

"Even in the way we made love something was wrong. Part of me always held back, always knew about him. It was as if a part of me had been suffocating from being turned away from him. And the odd thing was, the surgeon had said to me exactly that—that part of my own tissue had been suffocated."

"So you blame him?"

"Him. Myself. That therapist said I was being irrational. Totally unreasoning. No one really understands the body though. I keep thinking that if
only he had been a good, decent man..."

Edison didn’t know what to say. He was sorry. He wondered if she thought that once she found someone she could trust, she would heal. She probably did think that.

They kept hiking. They heard cicadas in the trees. It was time to head back. Elizabeth Alice, who had taken up jogging lately, knew a short cut. But it was totally dark when they got to her place. They sat on the couch in the one big room and sipped wine. The cat made friends with Edison.

“Animals can sense your intentions.” Elizabeth Alice pointed out. She invited him to slip off his shoes. On one wall hung a well-framed, large Gauguin print, the Tahitian women brown and sturdy. Potted plants hanging in macrame slings gave the place a cozy feeling.

“Thanks for listening back there,” she said.

“It was a good walk.”

She stared at him now and didn’t look away.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m wondering if you are who you seem.”

“I’m not,” he said.

She touched his shoulder. “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

He shrugged.

“Look, I’m afraid too, sometimes. But it’s what you are besides afraid that matters. What are you besides afraid?”

She kept her hand on his shoulder. It had been months since anyone had touched his body. He didn’t know what he wanted.

“I was involved with a woman who died,” he said.

“Of cancer?”

Edison couldn’t miss the flash of panic in her eyes. He stood and cupped her head with his fingers. Her curls were soft.

“No,” he said.

Edison didn’t think it made sense for him to be touching her. Then she stood up too and let her hug him. She said once again that she could sense things about him, good things.

Edison said he had to use the bathroom. It was what he said when he didn’t know what to do. She had a poster for an old French movie on the wall beside the sink.

When he came out he said it was time he moved on. She walked him to his car, parked just beyond her flower garden.

“You avoid looking at me,” she said, leaning against his car.

He brought his eyes to her. Her hair, caught in the lights from her house, sparkled under the stars. “Why is it hard for you to look at me?”

Edison realized that looking at her filled him with desire. She asked him to hold her and he did. He put his hands into the starfield of her hair and kissed her forehead. She leaned into him and he sensed her wanting him, even as he stood there, ungiving and remote.

As she looked into his eyes, so close to him, he felt a moment of grace. It felt undeserved but he softened. He surrendered for a moment into safety and warmth. The cicadas sang in the night.

He pushed her back gently and slid into the seat of his car.

“Will you call me?” she asked.

“Yes,” Edison said.

He didn’t call her.

For the next week he tried to forget her. He was sorry not to have explained things better about himself. He would have to watch out for that next time, if there were a next time.

Edison rehearsed in his mind what he
would say to his therapist. “I met a woman...” But when he sat down in the brown, studded armchair in the therapist's office, the therapist's kindly eyes fixed upon him, Edison didn't talk about her at all. It was too personal somehow.

Of course, that didn't make good sense to him. What was he there for? It began to seem as pointless as anything else.

But several weeks later he asked the therapist, “Will I ever be able to love again?”

“You are afraid you won’t?”

“I think I'm afraid I will.”

“We have a lot of work to do,” said the therapist. “You will have to give yourself time.”

“How much time? Months? Years?”

The therapist patted his own knee. “You have experienced some bad learning. What you are feeling is understandable. Now you will need to experience some new learning.”

New learning. It sounded grand to Edison, grand and remote. It all seemed far off to him, far off and remote. He would just have to be more careful around people.

The therapist indicated that their time was up for the day. They could continue the topic next time.

Walking out of the building he saw Elizabeth Alice waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“I'm not going to die,” she said. She was dressed for jogging in a T-shirt and shiny purple shorts. Her shoes were blue and yellow Nikes. “That's what you're afraid of, isn't it?”

It took Edison a moment to think through her thinking: “Is that what you think?” he asked.

“What else would I think? I wanted to see you again.”

Edison leaned against the bannister rail. He thought she looked very beautiful.

“I didn’t want to see you,” he said.

“What are you afraid of?”

“I'm not the person you think I am,” he said.

“No,” she said. “You’re not the person you think you are.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me.”

Edison was afraid to trust anything. “There are things about me that you don’t know,” he said.

“Listen, Edison, there are things about you that you don’t know either.”

He looked into her eyes and they were, for once, serene. She came close to him, and he felt her like a tide, like something pulling at him.

“Can I hold you a moment?” she asked.

He held her and she leaned into him, her T-shirt wet in his hands. It was all right. He felt safe.

At that moment his therapist emerged from the building and passed him embracing Elizabeth Alice on the steps. What must he be thinking, Edison wondered. But it was all right. He didn’t care what his therapist thought.

Elizabeth Alice stepped out of the embrace and touched Edison’s arm. “Let’s go to Corrales,” she said. “You can tell me all the things that you don’t want to tell me.”

Edison could see taking a walk along the waterway. He could see trying to tell her everything. His life weighed heavy on him. What had happened was not going to be changed. He had always tried to follow his feelings, and what had it come to? But he could already see that avoiding his feelings was going to be a mess too.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s go. But this is going to be tenuous. I want you to know it’s going to be tenuous.”
TAIL OF THE ROMANCE

That was it, the last straw.
Her elbows were bright red.
Other men told her her eyes danced,
they shone like sapphires, and now her elbows were bright as a monkey's penis.
(They went to the zoo on a smouldering day in summer, arms draped around each other, kissing each other's warm necks. And then, in front of the monkey house they were momentarily stopped, staring at these skinny African primates whose sexual organs glared like sirens, shaming them. They had to shade their eyes.)
It was from the sheets, she knew. The hotel must use industrial detergent. In the bed her body couldn't glide, as it would have on cool cotton, but felt scratched, as if she lay on a fine grade of sandpaper.
In front of the bathroom mirror, she sloshes moisturizer on her arms. She was tired of this hotel. And the way he led her, by the wrist, nodding to the clerk at the desk, usually late in the evening after their dinner, but sometimes, when he felt beleagured, at noontime, when often they would have to ask the maid, with her wheeled cart filled with tissue boxes and tiny bars of individually wrapped soaps, to come back later.
—I feel like slime.
—You kiss like velvet.
And she was beginning to find his impatient passion a bit pathetic. It embarrassed her. She was beginning to feel lethargic and unwilling to respond to his desperate, hungry mouth.
—I need you so much, you know I do.
She listens to this and lights a cigarette, and stares at it, a prop, and leans back against the pillows, blowing smoke in fancy patterns.
—Name that animal—she orders, pointing to the strands of grey as they float to the ceiling.
—Animal?—he wraps his arms around her waist and nestles his head between her breasts.
She was sure it was a giraffe with an elegant neck.

She stands in the bathroom, pushing her heavy hair back from her face, admiring her complexion and brushing an eyelash from her cheek.
He has left to rush home.
There is a stain in the middle of the bed, a shapeless blot, a watering hole.
She will take the long train ride to her apartment even though it's late. She will not sleep on these sheets. They mar her, turn her skin scarlet.