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Fragile glass

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Fragile Glass

(TITLE)

BY

Christopher Robison

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

M.A. in Literary Studies with Creative Writing Emphasis

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2013

YEAR

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Abstract

Fragile Glass is creative nonfiction. It is autobiographical and I tell my story in a series of vignettes. The vignettes begin when I was a child, around eight or nine years old, and then progress through adolescence, until early high school. I not only write about my family and friends, but also the people with whom I grew up. Also, I have written about what it is like to live in rural, blue collar, Illinois during the mid-1970s to the early-1980s.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr. Makelis for working extensively with me. Her advice and encouragement pushed me to become a better writer. *Fragile Glass* became a better work due to her influence.

I also want to thank Drs. Knight and Loudon for their always helpful advice. Their suggestions concerning revisions were invaluable. Revising can be a tedious process, but following their advice also made *Fragile Glass* a better story to read.

I would also like to thank the E.I.U English department for giving me the opportunity to write something that otherwise may not have ever seen the page.

Critical Essay

When I first read Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street,* years ago, I thought the telling of a story in a series of very small chapters was odd, and I wasn't sure if I liked it. But then I read Raymond Carver's poetry collection *All of Us* and realized there was a strong stylistic connection between the two works. I had no idea that those little chapters in *Mango Street* were actually called vignettes; I thought of them as story poems, or prose poems. I began to see that Raymond Carver's poems are akin to very short stories: they're just broken into lines. I kept these two influences—Cisneros and Carver—in mind while I wrote *Fragile Glass* and tried to maintain both a sense of poetry and a strong narrative thread.

Although Cisneros and Carver both wrote fiction and poetry their work is largely autobiographical. In *Fragile Glass*, I draw from their example, but I tell my story in the creative nonfiction genre using a series of vignettes. I chose this genre because I wanted to write about my childhood and teenage years; I felt that fiction would have led me away from the actual people with whom I grew up. Creative nonfiction gave me an anchor—it kept me fixed in a place that no longer exists.

Phillip Lopate, in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay,* states "... the essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it, while leaving the greater part of his story available for later milking" (xxix). The same can be said of vignettes. The notion of "circling around one particular autobiographical piece" fits the vignette form well and allows the writer to tell his/her story in very specific small moments. Lopate also

mentions the "aesthetic impulse to control a smaller frame" (xxix). That "smaller frame" is precisely what one finds in a vignette. One can think of it as finding on old photo in box. One stares into the photo trying to recall the moment, or the "smaller frame," until the story, or the memory, reveals itself. It's an "aha" moment from which the writer "squeezes" all he/she can.

Though my work is creative non-fiction, poets have been a major influence on my writing. Phillip Levine's *What Work Is* has many attributes that I find compelling. Like Carver's poems, many of Levine's poems are vignette-like in character. An example of this occurs in the poem *Growth*: "In the soap factory where I worked/ when I was fourteen, I spoke to/ no one and only one man spoke/ to me and then to command me to wheel little cars of damp chips/ into the ovens" (10). That could easily be the opening sentence for a short story or a vignette. Also, Levine writes about blue collar workers, which is something I want to continue to build on in my future writing. My family and so many of the people I grew up around were also blue collar, and I want to give them a voice that they might not otherwise have. Many of them were drinkers, construction, and factory workers. They weren't all necessarily poor but they did live pay check to pay check. When I was a child I didn't think much of it at all; now that I'm older, I think about it constantly.

Since poetry is not my strong suit, I turned to the vignette. It became a challenge to see if I could tell a compelling story within a page or two. As is evident in *Fragile Glass,* sometimes I'm able to accomplish that goal, and other times it simply takes more pages. Nevertheless, the challenge of writing a very short story is still something I

regularly use to hone my craft: to rid my writing of excess words, to keep to the heart of the story, and to bring the characters to the fore.

The impetus for *Fragile Glass* began in Dr. Markelis' Creative Non-Fiction class. In that class I wrote the initial vignettes and knew immediately that I wanted to pursue the form in further detail. My writing, for whatever reason, tends to come to me in sections, or fragments, and I had no idea what to do with them. *Fragile Glass* has allowed me to find a place where they fit together and form a narrative. Also, writing poetry for both Dr. Abella and Dr. Martone helped prepare me for writing the vignettes. In those classes I wrote about many of the same topics, although they were much more fictional than the vignettes that I wrote for *Fragile Glass.*

While writing these initial vignettes for *Fragile Glass* I looked back over Cisneros' book as a guideline, and I noticed immediately that the direction and style of my book would be very different. I strove to find my own voice and I culled from many of my literary influences for stylistic choices. I reread writers such as Hemmingway, Carver, Dennis Johnson, and Colum McCann, all of whom lent me an aspect of their voices that I could synthesize into my own. The resulting writing experience was at times confusing and frustrating; it led to much cussing and banging down of books upon the floor, which I'm sure my downstairs neighbors did not appreciate. At other times it was bliss and I didn't want to throw anything at all.

In writing *Fragile Glass* I wanted to convey to the reader a sense of place—rural Illinois--and what it was like to grow up there. As I wrote, I became aware that so much of my childhood (in the days long before the internet) took place outside, and so nature as it dictates place was much more important than I had first realized. I wanted to give the

reader a glimpse into the Midwest in the same manner that Carver gives the reader a glimpse into the Northwest. Consider this passage from Carver's poem *This Morning*: "This morning was something. A little snow/lay on the ground. The sun floated in the clear/ blue sky. The sea was blue, and blue green, as far as the eye could see. (141). One gets a sense of place immediately from the very simple descriptions that Carver gives. The reader is there walking along the snowy ground looking at the sea. Thus, a sense of place is of the utmost importance in helping to flesh out the story for the reader. Also, people tend to think of the Midwest with its corn fields, bean fields, and working class environment as a dull place; in my work I hope to change that opinion. Small towns have their share of heroes and villains as much as big cities do.

As I wrote, I realized that nature itself was beginning to evolve as another character. At times I tried to use personification to give it an identity that would fit a particular vignette, like this example from "Leaves:"

> Soon the wind really starts to blow. The sky gets dark and it starts pouring. On each side of the sidewalk that leads to our porch are two tall Elm trees. Guards with beautiful red helmets. The red leaves fall like weeping in the wind and the rain and soon hundreds lay wet on the ground. (*Fragile Glass* 38-39)

Personification of nature is an idea that I want to develop further as I write and revise more vignettes. Nature is a haunting and wonderful place replete with both the grotesque and beautiful. It is a motif that I want continue to develop because it adds a sense of poetry to my writing.

Technique weighed heavily on my mind while I was writing, and one of the major struggles I had concerned punctuation. Indeed, one of the key challenges in creative

writing is thinking about when and where it is appropriate to break the rules. Writing an academic paper such as "Hughes and the Female Voice Singing of Heartache in the Blues," which I wrote under Dr. Loudon's guidance, was a great experience in how to write formally, and I learned much from it. However, in *Fragile Glass* I struggled with ideas such as sentence fragments and when to use a comma. As I wrote, those decisions became of paramount importance because they dictated the tone of my writing. Short sentences, sentence fragments, and long, perhaps grammatically incorrect, sentences all add to the overall effect that the piece has the reader. I admire writers such as Faulkner who use long sentences, and I also admire the "Hemmingway" style of writing in which the writer uses shorter sentences. As such, there was a bit of conflict over comma usage. I feel that my main strength as a writer lies in shorter sentences. However, I also realize that the reader can find one short sentence after another to be monotonous. Also, a writer needs to push himself/herself beyond the comfort zone and experiment with both style and technique.

As I wrote I noticed a pattern was emerging that I thought might be predictable and might cause the reader to get bored. In my vignettes "Grain Bins" and "Deer Hunting," I tried to use a more stream of consciousness style, and I was able to write both of those stories in one sitting. I revised them both because I was unsure about the longer sentences, but I did feel that they had something innate that might get lost if I revised them too extensively. I enjoyed experimenting with styles because in seeing what works and what doesn't I was able to grow as a writer.

Concerning experimentation, I also tried to include a few poems in *Fragile Glass*—they didn't work. While the poems followed the themes of the vignettes, they

were incongruent; I felt as if something had been left out of the story. Whatever the reason, the poems didn't work in the context in which they were presented. I do enjoy the challenge of trying to capture a moment in as few words as possible, but I realized the poems would work much better by themselves.

While experimenting can free one from the constraints of conformity, too much experimentation can also detract from a piece of writing. The Russian writer Issac Babel, in his short story "Guy de Maupassant," said, "No iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place" (*The Collected Stories.* 331-332). That idea of knowing when to "put a period in at the right place" was, and still is, a major driving force in my writing.

A technique that I also employed in *Fragile Glass* was the use of sentence fragments. I love sentence fragments, not because they "break the rules," but rather, when they are used correctly, they can function as small poems within a text. Thus, sentence fragments serve to illuminate the text in a way that a more conventional sentence can't. The fragments themselves become an essential aspect of the craft—remove them and the text feels lessened. Colum McCann, in his brilliant novel *Let the Great World Spin,* is a master at using sentence fragments. He uses them sparingly, and in his work they do serve as small poems. In this passage a man enters an apartment in a squalid neighborhood inn New York: "I ran down the slick steps of the apartment building. Huge swirls of fat graffiti on the walls. The drift of hashsmoke. Broken glass on the bottom steps. Smells of piss and puke" (40). One could easily break those fragments into the lines of a poem. The result makes for stunning literature, and I can only hope to find such

poignant brevity in my own work. In the hands of a master like McCann, fragments give a piece of literature ragged beauty that are a joy to read.

The word ragged is an apt one to describe the feeling I wanted to convey with my vignettes. They are memories that feel as if they have been ripped from larger ones because I'm much more interested in telling a story that happens within ten minutes or so than I am in telling one that takes place over a few hours or days. I am interested in those stories as well, but so much of life happens in small increments, and it is those increments that I want to capture. I think of my vignettes as home movies that never existed—memories become bright flashes of scenes that are over nearly as soon as one starts watching them.

Writing in the first person helped me to recall poignant details. It might sound obvious, because how else can one write a creative memoir if it isn't in first person, but writing from that point of view did help to conjure memories that I thought I had forgotten. I also wrote in the present tense. Initially, this was not a conscious decision. In the early writing stage I felt it best to get the words on paper. I just began that way and I wrote using that tense because it felt correct to do so. But in retrospect I believe that the present tense helped put me in a position where I could immediately experience events that happened some thirty years ago. Indeed, I did write a few of my vignettes in the past tense, and while they worked, Dr. Markelis suggested that I rewrite them in the present. To paraphrase Fortunato in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," I had my doubts. However, rewriting them actually made them better because I was able to cut out excess material that I had not noticed before, and in using the present tense, I was able to see the

situations from a different point of view—I was there writing as someone who was seeing things first-hand, rather than as someone who was looking back.

Although writing in the first person and in the present tense did help bring back certain memories, it was still challenging to recall how things actually happened. Due to the passage of time, sticking to an absolute truth was not always possible. Lopate writes, "The personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator, we must trust his or her core of sincerity" (xxvi). While my project isn't a personal essay, I tried very hard to be honest to the situations I wrote about. However, there were times when I felt it best to embellish to get at a larger truth. Cisneros, in her introduction to *The House on Mango Street* titled "A House of My Own," says, "The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then, but sometimes three people would be braided into one made-up person" (xxii). Though Cisneros uses the "braiding" technique, I was still unsure about using it myself. I discussed it with Dr. Markelis, and she assured me that writers such as David Sedaris and Frank McCourt use it in their writings.

With Dr. Markelis' approval, I used that method as well. In my "Camping" vignettes the characters of Brian and Johnny were culled from childhood friends and "braided" to make the characters more appealing. Putting in a whole group of friends would have made the stories confusing and would be more fitting to a novel than either a vignette or short story. I took traits both good and bad in order to make the characters believable. There's even a bit of myself in those characters, which helps to establish a connective thread; it also, to a certain extent, helped me get inside of them, to help me flesh them out as much as I could. I do feel as if both Brian and Johnny need to be developed further and I want to revisit them in the future. It is interesting that after I

wrote them I realized I did have friends named Brian and John. Those two names were not intentional but I do feel I should change them. Actual names, even though the characters are an amalgam, might keep things too anchored in reality and they could pull my writing in a direction that is less than creative.

Also with my vignettes, I wanted to convey a sense of realism. The idea of creative nonfiction is often paradoxical if not outright problematic—writers "braid" characters, and use images to create a world that is both real and not real. My world is real in the sense that all of the events happened, but I can no longer reach out and take hold of them. Again, Raymond Carver's influence rises to the fore. Most of his poems and short stories have a very domestic setting and involve only two or three characters. I wanted to take Carver's idea of realism and minimalism and use them in my vignettes.

Both Carver and Cisneros wrote about family, which provides the fuel for their writing. Writing about family is difficult for me to do. Many of the people have passed on, and I had dredge up feelings that had been tucked away like those old photos in the attic. My uncle's death was something that I felt compelled to write. I have no idea why. It pushed me into thinking about the potential consequences of writing about someone who was very close to me. If they should ever read it, what would his family think? I decided that I would write about it anyway. Again, the form of the vignette serves my writing well because one does not want to dwell too long in the past where death is concerned. The vignette allows one to get in and out without being emotionally drained.

Emotions can have a strong influence on my writing, probably more so than the authors that I've read. When I began writing the material for *Fragile Glass* I believed I knew the precise direction in which I wanted them to go. However, something happened

that change and affected me greatly. My father passed away in May, and I needed to come to terms with our troubled relationship when I was a kid. I don't think I've been able to sufficiently do that, and it is a topic that I want to further explore. In fact, most of the vignettes that happen as a teenager are a result of how I had to pull away from writing about my childhood. I need to let that the family aspect lie still for a while. When I return to it, I believe I'll be stronger and more ready to write and fill in the gaps in the narrative.

However, in moving away from my family, I was able to broaden my scope to include my life involving my friends and the things we did as adolescents. I had not intended to write about them at all. But in doing so, I think I have grown as writer because I was able to use a more mature voice, one that shows growth in the character. In writing about my friends I was able to interject some humor (I hope) into my writing. Writing for Dr. Knight's 4764 Play Writing class, helped me to develop skills at writing better dialogue. Therefore, I was better able to capture the way teenage boys talk. Such talk, at least as I knew it, was often filled with profanity and insults. This passage from "Beanfield," is a good example of what I am referring to:

> As we watch him drive off down the gravel road and disappear in the early-morning fog, Johnny pushes his hair back and sticks out his stomach and says, "Don't you boys go jerking off." The imitation of old man Thompson is spot on and we all laugh. Johnny even makes his voice rough like a man who's smoked cigarettes for thirty years. Johnny then takes his weed hook, strokes the wooden pole, and says, "Jerk this off, you fat asshole." (40)

Teenage boys are funny because they act so dumb, and my friends and I were no exception. It was a pleasure to revisit those moments, and I worked hard at making my friends behave in a manner that was believable.

One aspect of concern for *Fragile Glass* is the target audience. Though the book details the life of a child and then tells the story of a teenager, I don't think *Fragile Glass* is necessarily appropriate for a young audience. My subject matter is on the dark side and I talk about my family as it was—messy, sometimes angry, and I certainly feel the main audience would be more adult. However, I do think that older teenagers, due to maturity, might be able to enjoy it. When I write I don't think "Whom can I sell this to?" I do see the importance of marketing, but I know next to nothing about it. It is another area in which I can grow in order to get published.

Writing *Fragile Glass* has been both a challenge and a joy. In writing it, I was able to grow by leaps and bounds in terms of craft. I pushed myself and I am simply a better writer because of it. Through Dr. Markelis' guidance, I have developed a better eye for what works and what doesn't. I do plan on revising what I have written to make it as good as I can. I want to add more pieces to help fill in some of the blanks in the narrative. The goal is to get it published and in doing this creative thesis, I was able to take several significant steps towards that end.

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Table of Contents

Fragile Glass

Security

Dad, who had been in the yard raking the grass he had just mowed, comes storming in. "Keep the kids inside," he tells my mom. She, like me and my sister, wants to know what's going on, but dad throws silence over us like a security blanket and hurries outside without saying. We crowd the living room window, pull back the yellow curtain, and watch him hurry to the road where he stoops and lifts something that looks heavy. He carries it into the yard and lays it in the shade of the tall tree beside the driveway.

"Oh, no. That's Ollie," my mom says. That's all it takes. We're all tears and disbelief. Mom holds us. I feel her arms tighten around us. It takes strength to keep us from rushing outside.

Dad is pissed when he comes in.

"Son of a bitch just kept on going. Didn't even slow down." Dad's face is red and dripping with sweat.

"The man driving the car just kept going," I say it as if repeating it will help it make sense. "I guess he had somewhere he needed to be."

"Bullshit. He's an asshole. He's goddamned lucky I don't chase his ass down."

Dad strides over to the table beside his chair. He grabs his pack of cigarettes, shakes one out, lit it, and tosses the pack down. He only takes two or three puffs before he jabs the cigarette out in the ashtray.

"Goddamn him." He lights another cigarette and stands staring out the window.

After Dad calms down, Mom gets an old blanket from the hall closet. The blanket is faded red and thread bare. It has white horses and yellow cowboys on it. It had been my blanket, my favorite, but I had outgrown it and Mom had banished it to the bottom of the closet. After she hands the blanket to my dad, he walks out to where Ollie lies in the driveway. I think about white horses, yellow cowboys, and dogs that cross the road when they shouldn't. All things I would never see again.

Outside, we stand beside the grave Dad had dug in the back yard near the fence where Ollie liked to lay to keep cool. The sun is setting and a cool breeze brings the scent of coming rain. Dad lowers Ollie in and covers him with dirt. My sister says a prayer. Then she and my mom went go the garage to look for scrap lumber to build a cross.

At the grave, Dad pats the dirt with the back of the shovel blade. He pats it several times. My dad. Tearless. Stoic as hell. Doing all he can to make the mound of dirt look perfect.

Muffler

Winter mornings, five 0' clock, black, cold, not yet any sun. The sound of our car, its muffler loud with a hole in it, like a slap to the ears, wakes me up as my dad starts the car to warm it before leaving for work. The car is crap—rust-spotted, the heater doesn't work well, and when it's cold it spits and sputters like an old man coughing from too many cigarettes. When I wipe the frost away from the bedroom window and look out, I see my dad sitting in his cold car, his breath fogging the windshield. He guns the sputtering engine, trying to warm it up so he can leave for work. When the car is ready, he backs back out the driveway, the cold gravel cracking and popping under the Buick's weight. And then the loud muffler grows faint as he heads down the road towards a job he hates, working outside in the shitty weather, with the cold wind cutting through his coveralls. Sometimes he's laid off and instead of work he goes to the unemployment line. A shitty job or the unemployment line. Reality is loud like a muffler with a hole in it. It's cold, too, like the icy wind cutting through to your heart.

Fantasy

Sometimes on a dull afternoon, we'll take a drive through a car lot, to where the new and used cars gleam like a dream in the sun. Dad says it's something fun to do. He says there's no harm.

Since it's Sunday, there's no salesman to come over and pester you. There's no one else either. It's like a ghost town, and we're the last people on Earth, and we can have our pick of whatever car we want. My mom and sister spot a white Volkswagon Beatle and head over to it. They laugh because it's so small.

"It'd be good on gas, though," Mom says. "Gas gets higher all the time."

Next to the Beatle is a tan station wagon. Mom stares into the windshield, sees her reflection that makes it look like she's inside. I don't care about little cars or station wagons.

I see a Green mustang with black-tinted windows. I walk around it gently kicking the tires, though I have no idea why.

While we explore, Dad cups his hands against the window of a red Chevy pick-up and looks in.

"The upholstery is nice," he says. Then he cranes his head to the side so he can get a good look at the odometer. "It only has thirty thousand miles." He gets down on his knees and looks under. "It's clean like a showroom floor under there."

He rises, brushes the dust from his knees, moves on to where the next one sits with its paint looking scrubbed and its tires so black you wonder if they've ever seen dirt.

Mom

I've said before that the car was spotted with rust, like dots, and no matter how you connect those dots they spell to the neighborhood that we are poor and are on food stamps and unemployment benefits. As we rumble through town, I see some kids out playing and I duck down in the seat so they can't see me. Mom though, driving, has nowhere to hide. She has to sit behind the steering wheel where people can see her. I sometimes think she's braver than the super heroes in the comics I read. I think about courage and what it means to have it while I hide in the back seat with nowhere else to go.

Breath

The heater finally dies in the Buick and on trips to town, mom, wearing a black stocking cap, long blue coat and brown leather boots, covers herself with a blanket. Dad stays home because he doesn't want anybody to see him use food stamps. My sister and I, wearing our winter coats that our grandparents bought us for Christmas, ride in the back seat.

With her gloved hand, mom wipes the fog from the windshield. A hole through the white big enough to see through. Mom backs the car out and its tires crunch over the frozen gravel in the driveway. She pulls out onto the street. The breath from the three us fogs the windshield. Mom wipes it clean, and, with her left hand, she steadies the car on the icy street as we head to the grocery store.

Charley

His name is Charley and when he was a pup he was funny and kinda stupid with a black spot under his nose and it looks like he has a black moustache so I named him after Charley Chaplin. He's big—part of him is Saint Bernard and the other part is German Shepherd. He's not a bad dog but he did kill a cat once, but that's only because he didn't know what a cat was.

Some times in the evenings after school, or on the weekend, I'll get my pellet gun and take Charley off to the woods with me. I'll shoot at birds or crab apples while Charley runs through the woods and pisses on the trees. Dad says dogs do that to mark their territory. It's a wasted effort though because we don't own these woods. We don't even own the house we live in. But I don't think of that when Charley is with me. It's easy to pretend I'm someone else, and somewhere else too, when it's just me and Charley, alone, hunting in the woods.

Bobby from Down the Street

My cousin Bobby has a rebel flag duct-taped in the back window of his pick-up. The flag, a bright red emblazon. Stars behind bars. Like the time he was busted for dealing crystal meth.

Who knows what he's rebelling against? He's twenty-one with an underage girlfriend he says is always on his ass. Their baby a red letter against her breast. Her white T-shirt with Kermy the Frog stretched tight over her new baby bump.

Baby bump.

Ain't we real cool?

Maybe Bobby's just trying to fit in. The way things are around here.

Maybe it's in how Bobby wears that black T-shirt so we can see his Tat. Professional ink he says cost seventy-five dollars. It's jagged blue barbed wire. It snakes like pride around his bicep. Might as well be a noose around his neck. It flexes. Constricts like nerves. But, like anger, doesn't release. Like that time he got drunk and cops had to come and even they had a hard time pulling him off his own father.

A few days ago he came over, sat on the sofa and said, "I ain't nobody to fuck with" and told us how he was fired last week from Royal Tires because he told the manager to shove the schedule up his ass. Who wants to work weekends anyway when nobody else has to?

I ain't nobody to fuck with.

He repeats it like a mantra, as if saying it makes it true.

It's not that we're that close, families being what they are. He only came over to bum money for diapers. Mom remembers when he was little and how she used to baby sit for him. How she used to smooth his dark wavy hair while he was sleeping.

How could she say no?

Granddad

Granddad is a storyteller. He never writes his stories down, but he talks a lot, using words spiced with cussing. My favorite stories are the ones he tells me about the war he was in fighting the Germans and how terrible it was. Some weekends, I'll spend the night and Granddad will tells me those stories when we're sitting at the kitchen table.

Usually, we don't talk about anything important, and sometimes he'll tell a dirty joke, like the one about the guy that has a big nose and sells expensive nuts and how people made fun of him calling his big nose his penis because his nuts were high. But then there are those moments when granddad gets serious, and he'll sit quietly for a moment and whatever we had been talking about will slip from the here and the now and I'll know he's taking a walk into the past. He'll take a sip from his can of beer and start talking about the war.

"We had a German prisoner one time, and we were all in this barn trying to interrogate him, and I was standing pretty close to him when a sniper shot him in his head. We all just stood there for a moment watching the goddamn chickens scratch and pick at the German's brains in the dirt."

I've never asked him how could someone in a barn could get shot by a sniper, or why the sniper would shoot one of his own men and not one of the enemy. I've never asked why nobody ducked for cover after the German prisoner was killed. I believe that the German soldier died and that the chickens picked his brains. But I'm not sure I believe the story about who pulled the trigger. Some things, I think, are best left unspoken. Some things, I think, are best left as enemies of the past.

Uncle

He plays guitar while singing in my granddad's kitchen. He's had a few, and instead of plugging in to the amplifier, he plugs it into his ear. Very funny. I listen to him play "If the ocean was whiskey and I was a duck I'd dive to the bottom and never come up." I'm sitting close and I can smell the vodka on his breath. When he's finished, he tosses back a beer and a shot of vodka. Then he takes a drag off his cigarette and jabs it out in the ashtray. He lights another. It's winter and so the windows are all shut and cigarette smoke swirls, stinks, and fills the small kitchen.

My granddad plays along on the harmonica. They play old country songs. Nameless to me, but the tunes are familiar. They play until around midnight and they're both pretty tight by then. Three sheets in the wind, they call it, but I've never understood why. It makes me think of just-washed of laundry hanging on the line with the windows open and the clean-smelling breeze blowing in.

When he's finished, my uncle is pretty drunk. He stands to leave and I can see that a dark stain on the front of his Levis. He's wet his pants a little. "If I were a duck," he sang. As he's leaving, I look close at him, trying to see any webbing between his fingers, trying to see any sign that his skin bears the soft down of feathers.

Kitty

My sister has a cat. Long-haired tuxedo that's more like a dog than a cat because she'll sit on your lap and let you pet her for hours. She'll sleep with you too, curling up on the pillow beside your head. She's a bird-killing fanatic though. I watch her in the back yard. She's ducking in the tall green grass with a squawking bird in her mouth. The other birds from the nest attack her, swooping and diving like bombers. My sister runs out to help. The birds attack her too, digging their claws in her hair, scratching her scalp. The cat, her name is Tabitha, runs with the bird under the porch. My sister, her hands in her hair, runs into the house screaming for my mom. I run in to see what's happening. My mom has my sister in the bathroom, looking into her hair by the light that's over the sink. My sister is crying. I don't see what the big deal is—she's bleeding, but only a little.

Dad in the Morning

He's yelling because he'll be late for work because he can't find his car keys because he, like my mom says, "doesn't know how to put them in the same place at night." Hanging on a nail on the kitchen wall is a holder that says KEYS in big gold letters. But it might as well say ONIONS for all the good it does. We're all up looking behind couch cushions, in shoes, on the floor, under the table. Finally, I find them in my brother's Millennium Falcon. It makes sense—how else are Han and Chewy supposed to fly away? My dad grabs the keys and is out the door. The Buick roars to life and he's off down the road. The sun is coming up and it's quiet in the house. It's time to get ready for school so nobody goes back to sleep.

Ignorance

My brother Jack and I are just dumb little kids, awake in the dark hearing our parents fighting.

We hear dad yell "Cunt." Jack doesn't know what it means either. Frightened, he crawls in bed with me, cradles his head in the crook of my arm.

We lie quiet, our parents yelling dark ugly words, full of meaning we want to understand.

"Why did you call me that?" mom asks.

"I'm soda pressed," dad says.

There's no pop or fizzle in my dad's words. No syrupy sweetness. How can you press soda, anyway? It's more confusion and when I figure it out, I explain it to my little brother,

"It's not soda pressed, it's so depressed."

But he doesn't care what it means as we hear dad back out of the driveway and head miles away from our lives.

White Birds

I know about death. It looks like an empty seat.

It's January. The school windows are frosted. The teacher wears a blue sweater because she's always cold. She's a good teacher and cries while she tells us. I turn in my seat, search the middle row, see the empty desk. Like the rest of the class, I want to make sure.

School can be a terrible place. He was very poor and the kids made fun of his shabby clothes.

I know about shame. It's me when I look in the mirror.

That night there's a picture of the wreck in the paper. It's dark out and beside the tracks the car lies crumpled like wadded tissue. I think I see something kid-sized covered in black in the snow. But maybe it's just all shadow, a cruel trick of the moonlight.

That kid I knew—I wonder if he saw the train's light, so bright, so close, like approaching sunlight? I wonder if he saw light after? I wonder if he followed it?

Months later, in the spring, my family and I pile in the car and head to Terre Haute. Dad takes the long and twisted road and we drive over the crossing where it happened. I look out the window and down the tracks. There's no coming train.

The wreck is all gone, hauled off to some junk yard somewhere. There's grass now, yellow wild flowers, and four white crosses. White birds ready to fly.

All around the world is full of life.

White crosses beside the track and I remember how we made fun of him.

The Flies

It's dark, getting ready to storm, and flies crawl on the screen door.

In the kitchen, mom and dad are fighting.

Bitch, cunt, asshole, nogoodlazymotherfucker, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, and so on, and so on.

Their words are like flies.

Nasty shit–bearing things. I wish I had a swatter so I could smash the ugly words mom and dad say to each other. But wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one gets filled first.

There's no place like home. Unless you're the one living there.

After the fight is over, mom calls us in for supper. Hamburger Helper. Yummy. I douse it with hot sauce.

Dad is not with us. Mom says he has a headache and has gone to lie down.

Mom is pretty. She wears a blue T shirt, white shorts, and her brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She takes a seat at the table.

As we eat, dad storms through the living room. Each heavy footstep rattles the dishes on the table. He's like a giant stomping and the whole place shakes as if from an earthquake. He slams the door on his way out. From outside, I hear the car start and back out of the driveway.

Dad's leaving again. Mom doesn't say anything.

We eat in silence.

It's dark, getting ready to storm. Flies crawl on the screen door.

Ghosts

My great grandma says spirits come to her at night. They stand at the foot of her bed and smile at her. They tell her who is soon to die.

She talks about it at Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays, Easter, or when I go over to her house to say hi. She tells how one of them grinned at her and lifted her sister-in-law's picture from the top of the cedar chest then carried it across the room and set it on the table beside her bed. I've heard that one a dozen times. I don't believe it, but when I ride my bike home at night past the cemetery, I ride as fast as I can.

The spirit reveals but does the person die? Yes. But then those people are old. Themselves just pulse ridden ghosts. Fading heartbeats counting down the clock.

"Well, goddamn," my dad says. "She's so old that everybody she knows is dying off like flies."

Since she lives alone, we only have her word for it. We've never heard her scream as she jumps from her bed, throws on the light, hurriedly finds her shoes so she can escape those white-faced horrors and their premonitions leading to and from the grave. She runs out of her house, down the dark street, her nightgown flapping, making her look like a ghost. As fast as her short legs and swollen arthritic knees will carry her, she runs with tears streaming down her face, down to her son's, my grandpa, house where she bangs on the door and calls his name until he gets out of bed to let her in.

Of course, we don't believe that she sees anything. We tell each other that it's just an old woman's nightmares.

"She's just lonely and wants attention," my mom says. "That's all."

No, we don't believe any of it. Not really.

"They say seeing ghosts and spirits is hereditary," my mom adds. "And it skips a couple generations."

Mom looks at me when she says it.

She's just kidding. I know that.

But that still doesn't keep me from not sleeping with the lights on.

The Story Teller

"What's that goofy son of a bitch doin'?" my uncle asks, looking out the kitchen window. My grandma and me crowd in. We look out but don't see anything.

"Hell, it's Carl. He's out there by his garage playing pocket pool," my uncle says.

It takes me a few seconds to get what he means. I can't help but laugh.

"Robert," my grandma says. "You're terrible."

"Well, look at him out there. Now he's walkin' around, pickin' his ass. And there's old Mary in the garden, bar-assed naked, actin' like a scarecrow. What the hell's the matter with them anyway?"

"Robert, she is not. Now, she's a good person. Why do you say such things?"

"Uh oh," Uncle Robert says. "There's the sheriff. Yep. He's takin' them both in. Goddamn, if that ain't a pitiful sight."

My grandma says. "I don't know about you. I just don't know."

Grandma walks out of the kitchen and into the living room where she clicks on the TV. I hear the creak and fawp of leather as she sits in her recliner. My uncle calls into the living room, "Bye mom. Gotta take the kids in town for shoes."

He looks at me, gives me a wink and says, "See ya later, bud."

"See ya."

I watch my uncle get in his rusty blue pick-up and drive away. I stay at the window, looking out on nothing, wanting to see the things that aren't there.

At Night We Shine the Roosting Sparrows

We arrive at the church with pellet rifles, flashlights, and a bag to put the dead birds in. The tree is a maple and it stands in front of the church near the cracked sidewalk. Around the base of the tree, the fading yellow grass is speckled white with bird shit. The new kid, Kevin, he's from Ohio, and I forget the name of the town, doesn't understand any of it.

"This is weird," he says. "This is what you do for fun?"

"It's something to do," Brian says, shining his light into the tree. "Fuck. This tree's loaded with them."

The sparrows, feeling safe hidden among the leaves, doing what their bird brains tell them to do, just sit there in the flashlight's thin beam.

"Keep it on him," he says, hiding me the flashlight. He takes aim at a bird sitting on a low branch, pulls the trigger. The bird shits a little as it falls dead with a thump to the ground. Except it isn't dead and we can hear it flapping like a confused mind in the dark on the ground.

I search with the flashlight and find the bird near the sidewalk.

"Well, I've had enough," Kevin says and gets on his bike.

'Fuck him," Brian says. He loads a pellet into his rifle. Aims at the bird and pulls the trigger.

Guitar Pick

"How ya doin', Hotrod?" he asks. He's lying in his bed, under the white sheet, and his legs are bent so that the white sheet is raised and looks like a tent. He has his left arm folded under his head, resting on the pillow and he's smiling that happy grin that he reminds me of a movie star.

In his right arm there's an I.V and a large bruise that looks like someone has smacked him with a fist. I look at him and even though I know who he is I don't really recognize what I saw except for the grin. His receding hair needs washed and sticks up in thin little spikes and his skin is sallow and looks like hamburger that has been left out of the fridge overnight. He's thin like an old man and looks dry as if he were seventy or eighty instead of forty. But his face is smooth because it doesn't have any wrinkles.

"I'm doing fine," I say. I don't want to be rude but I can't stay in the same room with him. Besides, my mom and dad and granddad are with him. As I leave, I shut the door. I feel as if I haveseen something I shouldn't have. Sickness is something private that I can't bear watching.

"Cirrhosis of the liver," my mom had said. "From the drinking."

In the waiting room down the hall, I get a Coke from the machine and sit in one of the thin uncomfortable chairs. I sleep until my mom comes in and tells me.

In my pocket, I have a guitar pick he had given me. It's red and says Fender in gold cursive letters. Later at home, I sit on my bed and hold the pick the way he had shown me. I play air guitar—a song I believe only the dead can hear.

Voice in the Snow

An 8-track is in the player and we drive to mandolins up the snow-clotted Vermilion road. At the intersection, Granddad brakes and the pick-up slides to a stop on the slick pavement. The wipers swish and scrape and we head across 150 northward while the snow thumps off-time on the windshield.

"I hope it snows ass deep tonight," he says with a cigarette dangling from his lip. I watch the red tip dance in the dark as he talks. Before we left the house, he had a couple of sips of Mogen David wine—to keep warm he says. He's happy driving through the snow, out for the adventure of it. When the tape is over he turns on the radio, and we listen to Christmas music. "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," he sings. "I do not want to go to work tomorrow. Piss on that." His cussing makes me laugh.

Between us on the brown vinyl seat is half of my Christmas present—a walkie-talkie. Through the hiss, we listen for the voice. A voice that had been thin and far away, calling out from the cold and the dark. But there's no one there, only the hissing. It's as if the voice had been a ghost, and I wonder if hearing it had been my imagination.

As we drive, I wipe away the frost from the window with the side of my hand. Across the fields I can see the lights from homes shining through the falling snow. Christmas tree lights and angels, beacons in the cold December night. As my breath fogs the window I quickly wipe it clean.

"I wonder what they're doing?"

"Who?" he says.

"Those people in that house across the field."

"Same as everybody else. Watching T.V. Taking a shit. People are the same no matter what."

"They look rich over there."

"Maybe. But they're just like everybody else. Some are nice. Some are assholes. They live. They die. Just like everybody."

After we pass the houses, we reach the old church that has the big cemetery beside it. The church looks haunted in the snow.

"We'd better turn around," granddad says. "It's starting to really pile up."

"Grandad?"

"Yeah?"

"You think there was anybody calling for help?"

"Maybe. Who knows?"

I reach over and click off the walkie-talkie. Ahead is the entrance to the old cemetery. Granddad pulls in and I can see the many tombstones and the snow falling thick on the graves, covering them, like clumps of white flowers from trees of a frozen heaven all aglow in the yellow beam of the headlights. Watching the snow fall I think of ghosts dancing in the cold air. Swirl and promenade. The dead have their night and it's a cold one.

As he backs up, the truck slides on the slick road towards a ditch.

"Whoa, goddamn." He laughs and regains control. "That'd be the damndest thing, wouldn't it?" he says.

Ahead of us, as we head back, I can see that the tracks we made are already filled with snow. I feel like that voice. Gone. I marvel at how there's no trace of our passing. No sign of how we went searching. And I wonder if we've been there at all.

Army Men

By the road, I rake the leaves into a large pile and set fire to them. I pretend the pile of burning leaves is an island and there's no escape. A thick cloud of smoke rises and the fire spreads from the center and soon engulfs the plastic army men I have stationed there. Poor bastards trapped and dying. They melt in the flames and the leaves turn to ashes.

I'm raking more leaves when my dad comes out of the house. He's wearing a red flannel shirt and he's carrying a football.

"Here, catch," he says and throws the ball to me.

I catch the ball, but just barely. I'm not good at this. The ball always hits my glasses or something and I end up feeling like a fool.

We toss the football. After a few passes, my dad moves farther back across the yard to make it more challenging. He throws. I keep fumbling. My hands are cold and stinging.

Maybe twenty minutes pass.

"I'm done," I say.

"Oh. Well, okay," he says and goes inside.

Soon, I get another pile of leaves burning and set up more army men. I stare into the smoke and the fire. And I wonder if the plastic army men believe me when I say that help is one the way.

Saturday Morning

On the grass is a paper grocery bag half full of empty beer cans. Already Granddad's eyes are red-rimmed and watery. He cracks open another beer, sprinkles the can's lip with salt, takes a sip. The radio beside his lawn chair plays country music. A song about a man's cheating ways.

From down the street, comes a loud ripping sound. It's Mr. Russell on his mower. The mower needs a tune-up and it spews blue smoke. The smoke rides the breeze. It stinks of gasoline and burning oil.

Mr. Russell wears a tan ball cap, white T-shirt, faded denim overalls, and black dress shoes. His overalls ride up above his ankles and I can see his white socks. He waves and grins as he passes.

"I feel sorry for him," my granddad says.

"How come?" I ask.

"Well, his wife Sarah died a few months ago."

"Oh. I hadn't heard."

"Goddamndest funeral I was ever at. Russell was so drunk he could hardly stand and greet people. I guess I might get like that too, if anything ever happened to your grandma. I hope I go before she does. I don't know if I could stand it."

I don't know what to say so I don't say anything.

Granddad takes another sip of his beer. Silence spills across the yard as he turns off the radio and goes inside.

Grain Silos

They keep the white rock in tall piles for road work. White dust. And the dryers deafening and me Johnny and Brian all standing on the piles picking up the rocks and throwing them at the silos. And it's dark with the street light casting yellow light, white light, thin light and the dryers deafening but we throw the rocks anyway and then we're yelling and laughing because why not?

Our bikes are in the dirt beside the piles of white rocks. We're sweating and laughing. The dryers running, sounding like an electric whirlwind. Throw the rock, white rock. God, those silos must be a hundred feet tall. It's like being in a cathedral. Those silos like the pipes of an organ, tall, rising up through the grain dust. White and gray. Reverberating. And we're laughing throwing the white rocks and it's all lit by the thin yellow light of the street light. It gets late but who wants to leave? And why not? Those people in that small house over there. That's why.

And that man sticking his head out the window, yelling, telling us to get the hell out he's got to get up and go to work. And then Johnny telling him to blow it out his ass and us getting our bikes from the dirt and riding over the tall piles of rock and instead of heading straight up the road and out we go up the small hill and pass the tall silos and the deafening whirr whirr whirr and they're so goddamned tall and so goddamned loud but who cares anyway?

Then we ride over the tracks. Fast over the incline and wouldn't it be great to be airborne like in the movies? And Johnny tries it lifting the front wheel of his bike and he rides it because he's good at that shit, showing off, then he pulls too much and goes over

backwards and he's on his back on the street and the bike skidding scraping metal against pavement and him saying fuck because as he fell he rolled and landed on his elbow and now he's bleeding and the skin peeled and black with pavement and dirt.

We help Johnny up and wheel his bike over to the grass. Blood is dark in the thin yellow light. Johnny takes off his shirt, wraps it around his bleeding elbow, walks to his bike, and the handle bars are bent and there's the sound of wrenching metal as he straightens them and says he's gotta get home and it's late.

And the air is cool at midnight and then this car, its headlights shining like the eyes of a dragon, pulls up and the driver rolls down his window. It's Johnny's brother. He's alone and the inside of his car is smoky and stinking.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing," Johnny says. Then smiles and says, "Bleeding," and shows him his elbow. "That's fucked up. You better get home."

Then his taillights, red lights cast against the dark street filled with that thin yellow light. He goes over the tracks his engine purring because that's what he spends all his money on, that car black as hell and the engine all chrome and sounding like something you'd like to fuck.

"I gotta get going," Johnny says.

Brian follows Johnny home because they live next door to each other. I head home alone back over the tracks while the dryers drone and grain silos rise tall through the dust.

Deer Hunting

Out in the cold morning and we're layered in long underwear, thick socks, boots, gloves, stocking caps, coats, walking through the woods, the snow ankle deep and the woods all quiet except for the crunch of our feet in the snow. It's so cold and our breath is a thin fog and our faces already numb and our noses dripping snuffing and the sky dark and gray with cold and the clouds like a pall cast over the sun.

Johnny with his shotgun and Brian and I shivering and I'm thinking about bed warm at home and not getting up until noon then playing in the snow. We crouch behind brush and shiver in the cold and it's snowing again and Johnny clicks the shotgun's safety off keeping it at the ready, poised to kill, and we wait for over an hour, and then the deer tall and beautiful steps from the brush across the field and his breath a thin fog like ours.

And it's so quiet. I imagine I can hear his heartbeat and the thrum of his blood with the sky so gray with cold. And then Johnny removes his right hand glove, raises the gun, holds his breath, his bare index finger on the cold trigger, and then the blast and the gun lurches upward, jerking with flame. I hear the yards-away splat of the slug striking the deer near the heart and then the thump of the deer on the snow and his blood dark red against the white and we're rushing from the brush. The deer its breath a thin fog in the cold slows and its heartbeat slows and its eyes black filled wide with fear and its legs twitch. And its heart is slowing slowing slowing. The splotches of warm blood looking cold against the clean white snow and the cold gray sky overhead and the clouds rolling across heaven.

And the deer the thrum of his heart in his thin chest slowing, then stopping as do the hind legs, as does the blood. The three of us take hold of his antlers and drag him through the snow and through the brush and out to the road to where Brian's truck sits cold beside the road.

We load the deer in the back. Behind us, the wind filling our tracks in the woods, covering the blood with clean snow and the truck's wipers beating against the thumping snow on the windshield as we head for Johnny's house through the cold and the gray clouds overhead looking like a pall over the sun.

Sitting on the Porch

The car's an old Chevy Nova from the seventies. No paint, just black primer. No muffler, either. The windows are down and we can hear the radio blaring AC/DC's "Back in Black." We all know the driver. He's Bobby from down the street. He's always in trouble for stealing, or dealing, and I'm surprised the police aren't chasing him. As he passes, he smiles, waves, and like an imbecile, he honks his horn.

"Idiot." My dad waves back at him. In this town, even if you can't stand somebody you wave at them anyway.

While the car rattles down the street, Mary says she hears me playing my guitar at night. She says she likes it.

"I can sing some Janis," she says. "Want to hear it?"

"Sure."

The song is about asking the Lord for many things. Apparently, a fine singing voice is not one of them.

When she's done, she laughs and says, "I always wanted to be a singer in a rock band. Make a few million and tell people to kiss my ass."

When it gets late, Mary says she has to go. Before she leaves, she asks my mom if she can borrow ten dollars.

"I need it for gas to get to my mom's place. I get my unemployment check Friday. I can give it back to you then."

Mom says "Sure," but I can tell by the subtle dark cloud that passes over her face that she doesn't want to.

She gets up and her legs push against the porch swing. Empty, it sways on thin rusty chains. The chains pop and creak then settle into silence. It's a sound we only hear in the summer.

When mom goes inside, she lets the screen door bang shut. Something she tells us not to do. I imagine her going over to the jewelry box that sits on her dresser where she keeps a few extra bucks. I imagine her taking out a ten. I wonder if she notices a five missing? A five that I stole a few days ago for a pack of cigarettes. The rest I used to chip in on some beer for this weekend when my friends and I go camping.

Mom returns and hands Mary the ten. Mary takes it, folds it, and puts it in her pocket.

"Thanks. I sure need it. I can only go as far as the gas will let me, ya know? At least it's enough get me down the road."

Mary goes home, but she's only inside her house a few minutes, long enough to gather her kids and come hauling ass outside. She carries the baby wrapped in a blanket and straps him in the back in a car seat. She loads the twins in the back too. Mary gets in and honks her horn at us as she drives away into the night.

Even in the dark we all wave goodbye.

At Mary's

When Mary invites me over I sit on her couch and we listen to records—Frank Zappa, The Grateful Dead—older stuff I have not heard before. We keep it turned low because her kids are in the back room sleeping. The couch is hard and the tan fabric is frayed at the bottom as if over the years a cat had been clawing at it. In the middle of the couch is a yellow stain. The stain looks like a dead water lily. I make sure not to sit near the stain. I make sure not to think what could have caused it.

Mary sits across from me in a blue recliner. She doesn't recline in it, though, because the wooden handle on the side of the chair is snapped off.

"I hate this chair," Mary says. "But my mom gave it to me because I needed it. She gave me the couch too. They're ugly, but it beats sitting on the floor."

While the music plays, Mary gets comfy and puts her feet on the coffee table. She's barefoot and has a rose tattooed on her right ankle. She was just out of the shower and her blond hair is wet and combed back out of her face. She wears gray sweat pants and a white terry cloth robe. The robe is open and the matching belt dangles at her side from the loops. Beneath the robe Mary wears a faded black T-shirt that has Mick Jagger's big red lips on the front.

"Do you like the music?"

"Yeah," I say. "It's pretty cool."

Mary gives me a big smile. She's not pretty but I still get an erection and I cross my legs to hide it.

On the coffee table sits a black and white photo of a large German Shepherd. The dog is looking right at me, like he's protecting her, daring me to make a move, so he can jump out of the picture and tear my throat out. Mary sees me looking at it.

"That was my dog, Wes," Mary says. "I got him when he was a pup. He cost five hundred dollars. I had him for five years. He was like a baby. Then he got cancer and died. I didn't know dogs could get cancer. Did you?"

"No. I didn't know that," I say.

"Just my luck. I pay that much for a dog and he dies of cancer. Doggy cancer, who woulda guessed it?"

"I bet he didn't even smoke."

Mary gives me that look that says what the fuck are you talking about. Then she gets it and laughs.

"That's' weird," she says. "Funny, but weird."

In the middle of one of Jerry Garcia's stoner guitar solos, the baby starts crying.

"She needs her bottle and eye medicine," Mary says and hurries out of her chair and stomps into the back bedroom. The floor and walls rattle from the force of her footsteps. The place feels like it's about to fall down. I'm a little surprised it doesn't.

I get bored while she's gone. To give myself something to do I take a look at Mary's decor. The living room lights are dim, but Mary has candles lit. There's not much to see anyway. Most of the furniture in Mary's living room has the same shabby quality as her couch and recliner. Mary does have a nice TV. A Curtis Mathis. It's a monster that has the stereo in it and speakers on each side and probably weighs about five

hundred pounds. The TV is all wood, glass, and metal. The kind of thing you know will last forever. It's expensive as hell and I wonder where she got it.

There are framed photos on the dark-paneled wall beside the TV. There's one photo with an old couple smiling. They both wear big glasses. The man is bald and wears a blue suit and dark tie. The woman has dark hair piled high. She wears a white blouse and a red vest. The man has an open-mouthed smile showing his big teeth. I don't know why but those teeth creep me out. I picture him taking big bites out of sandwiches that you have to hold with both hands. Then he goes around smiling telling everybody how good it was. Either that or he enjoys gnawing on wood. The lady's smile is not much better. It's one of those weird half smiles. It looks like she's trying to suppress a fart. Who knows? Maybe she is.

There's a small table by the couch where an incense cone sits burning in an aluminum pie pan. The place stinks like bug spray, incense, and pot fumes. The heady fumes make my head hurt. The bug spray creeps me out, too, and I try not to think of the roaches crawling around in the dark.

When Mary comes back from the bedroom, I ask how the baby is.

"Oh, he's doing better," she says sitting back in her chair. "He's got some nasty eye infection. I had to borrow money for medicine from my mom. Pissed me off to ask her for it. She's always on my ass for one thing or another and now she thinks I can't take care of my kids."

"Have you tried prayer?"

She looks at me again and says, "Chris, I never knew you were such a smart ass."

"The power of Christ compels me."

"Think about getting struck by lightning much?"

"No. I'm only kidding."

"Well, I hope so."

Mary puts on a Lou Reed album. We listen and she reaches beneath her chair and pulls out a chipped plate that has a small pile of pot on it. She has papers and rolls a joint. She lights it with a red lighter and offers me some.

The pot is strong, the kinda shit I imagine Willy Nelson smokes and it makes me cough.

After a couple of hits, I ask her where she got the TV.

"Oh, that. Mom and dad again. They got a new one and gave me that one. Took my dad and two other guys to get it in here. The TV doesn't work, though. Just the stereo. So I just listen to music. There's not much on anyway."

"How do you know what's on if your TV doesn't work?"

She laughs and says, "Fuck you. I've seen TV. Not much changes."

While Lou Reed sings about taking a walk on the wild side Mary says, "I wonder what New York is like?"

"I dunno. Probably pretty cool. Lou Reed can't sing worth a shit, can he?'

"No," Mary says. "He can't."

After we listen to a couple of tunes, Mary says she still has her husband's guitar and she wants to sell it and would I be interested?

"I dunno. Maybe." I have a few bucks saved up from mowing yards all summer. If the price is right, who knows?

Mary takes the guitar out of the closet, sets it on the floor in front of the couch, and opens the case. While she's kneeling on the floor, I start thinking lascivious thoughts. I get hard again and I try to keep my hand over my crotch.

"It's a twelve string," she says, and hands it to me.

The guitar has a string missing and it's out of tune. I tune it the best I can and play a Chuck-Berry rhythm. The strings are rusty and I worry about tetanus. They rattle against the fret board, but otherwise the guitar sounds okay.

"Well whatya think? Interested?"

"Um…well it's ok. How much?"

"I was thinkin' a hundred."

"Oh. I don't have that much. And it needs works. The neck is a little bowed."

I hand Mary the guitar. She takes it and looks at it.

"Figures," she says. "The only thing Gerald leaves behind that was worth anything and it's warped."

"I'm sorry."

When Mary puts the guitar away, I stand from the couch and tell her I need to get going.

"I have to get up early. I have school tomorrow."

"School?" she says. "Oh, I forgot. How old are you?'

"Sixteen."

"You look older. Bet you could get served if you tried."

"Yeah. Maybe."

That night in bed I think about Mary and pull off into a wad of tissues.

In the morning, while I'm outside waiting on the bus, I see Mary looking out her front window. She's watching her kids get on the bus. She sees me, smiles and waves. I try not to get an erection as I step on the bus and head for the back seat.

Leaves

I don't have any real purpose for being here. I just want to be gone. My dog Charley follows me. He roams the cemetery, hiking his leg, pissing on stones. What difference does it make. Besides, I don't hear anyone complaining.

The cemetery is small and a gravel road runs through the middle. I don't walk the road. It doesn't go anywhere but back out. I cut through the middle and look at the graves. I try to put faces to the names of people I don't know but might someday. Names etched in stone. I try to think what it means. But things are covered with dirt and there's no way around it.

Some of the graves have tall markers pointing straight up to Heaven. Others, stone angels lead the way. A few markers are very old. All that remains, the weather-eroded shape of white stone, like mints dissolving in someone's mouth. If Brian were here he would say something corny like "We are all being dissolved in the mouth of time." But he's in Terre Haute visiting his grandma. Anyway, I'm glad to be alone here among the dead

Since it's early November, the leaves are falling like flames. Pale and bright yellow. Burnt orange. Purple and fire red. Like the colors in movie. Very beautiful. Leaves are better than flowers. There's something ugly and unnatural about flowers on a grave. The leaves at least make it all seem real.

A tire-worn path points like a finger off to the right from the gravel road. There a marker reads, Thomas Scott January 18 1940-April 5 1980. It's a small stone that has a guitar engraved on it. It's my uncle's grave. He had liver cancer. Luckily, the cancer took him quickly.

There are leaves on his grave. My imagination gives me super powers and I can see through dirt. I look down into the grave, but I stop when I reach the coffin. I'm not a brave person. I can't look further, knowing what's down there.

Overhead, the sky is getting dark. When the wind blows it scatters the leaves and makes a rustling. It sounds like footsteps. I quickly look around, but no one is here. It creeps me out so I decide to get going.

Before I leave the cemetery, I say a prayer for Thomas Scott, even though I'm not sure I believe in God. Then I call for Charley, get on my bike, and ride home.

By the time I get home it's raining. I lift my bike onto the front porch and I sit in the porch swing. I don't want to go inside because Mom and Dad are fighting again and I can't stand the sight of either of them. Charley jumps up and sits beside me.

Soon the wind really starts to blow. The sky gets dark and it starts pouring. One each side of the sidewalk that leads to our porch are two tall elm trees. Guards with beautiful red helmets. The red leaves fall like weeping in the wind and the rain and soon hundreds lay wet on the ground.

Swinging slowly, I stroke Charley's ears. He's wet but even wet dogs need petting. Inside, Mom and Dad are at it again. For the rest of the day it keeps raining. The wind blows and the leaves fall.

Bean Field

When Bob Thompson drops us off at the field, he leans his head out the window and says, "See you boys around 12:30." He's chewing tobacco and spits in the dirt and wipes his mouth on his sleeve. "Don't you boys go jerking each other off." He laughs at his own stupid joke, throws his truck into gear, and drives away.

As we watch him drive off down the gravel road and disappear in the early-morning fog, Johnny pushes his hair back and sticks out his stomach and says, "Don't you boys go jerking off." The imitation of old man Thompson is spot on and we all laugh. Johnny even makes his voice rough like a man who's smoked cigarettes for thirty years. Johnny then takes his weed hook and strokes the wooden pole. "Jerk this off, you fat asshole."

"I hope he's not late like he usually is," Brian says and already he's acting bored, goofing off, balancing the handle of his hook on the toe of his sneaker. "It's going to be hotter than hell today."

"Yeah, we better get to it," Johnny says and walks towards the field where the rows stretch a mile and the beans droop like shoulders beneath the weight of water from last night's rain. We all grumble. It's a hot and dirty job and somebody always gets the shits, but we make good money, and we look forward to doing it every summer, not only for Bob Thompson, but for other farmers as well. Besides, we'll get paid on Friday when the job is done. Saturday we plan on camping and getting drunk in the woods.

We each have our own row. Brian's a row over from me and Johnny's on the other side and we're cutting milkweeds and elephant ears and any other fucking weed

that grows within the beans. With the sun rising, the field turns to steam in the July heat. The field is wet with rain and dew and soon our jeans are soaked to the waist and our sneakers are squishing and are heavy with mud.

About an hour in Brian says, "Oh man, I gotta shit." And he's running, climbing over the fence and into the cornfield and we're laughing and throwing mud clods at him and the mud splattering on the corn and Brain yelling at us to "Stop it, motherfuckers!" And we're still laughing when Brian comes out of the corn with his face wet with sweat and his shirt soaked through and his face red with heat from being in the corn and the bottom of his white T-shirt shirt ripped away because he needed something to wipe his ass on.

"Just you guys wait," he says. "Just you wait."

We laugh because we know he won't do anything. He never does.

After that, we continue up the row of waist-high beans cutting weeds and at end of it we shift a row over and cut weeds down to the other end where we sit in the wet grass and drink water from our jugs. Dirty hands with blisters from pulling the hook cutting the weeds in Bob Thomson's bean field. Rich famer but he's an ok guy to work for.

"I hate doing this," Brian says. And he's jabbing his hook into the mud, digging out big chunks of it.

"Just think of the pay check, though." Johnny says. He sneezes and blows his nose on a blue handkerchief and stuffs it into his back pocket.

"Fuckin' allergies," he says.

Johnny's eyes are red and swollen.

"I took a couple of pills before I left this morning. I feel kinda woozy"

"Be careful with your hook," I say.

"Yeah," Brian says. "Or else you'll be singing soprano."

"What does that mean?"

"It means don't cut your ball off."

"Why would I do that?"

"Oh, fuck. Never mind."

And the July sun glares down as if looking at us through a glass and out in the field the steam rises. Brian removes his cap, wipes the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve.

"It's already getting hot. I don't wanna have a heat stroke," he says. "Can't spend money if I'm dead."

"Don't be such a pussy," Johnny says.

"Eat this pussy."

"Yeah, whatever."

Johnny sneezes again.

An old barbed-wire fence runs the length of the field. Johnny steps over to it. He pisses and a rabbit darts from the brush. A streak of gray fur blurring into the wide wet field.

"Look at that fucking rabbit go," Brian says.

"You'd run too," I say, "If someone came along and pissed in your bed."

"What about your mom?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe it does, and maybe it doesn't."

Johnny zips up, drinks from his water jug. He takes a cigar from his shirt pocket and lights it with a red Bic lighter. He offers Brian one. He takes it.

"Thanks, man," Brian says. He squints doing his best Clint Eastwood. He lifts his hook from the toe of his shoe and hooks a tall thin weed.

"Fastest hook in the west," Brian says. "That weed never stood a chance.'

"Biggest dork in the world is more like it," Johnny says.

Out in the wet bean field I can see the steam rising from the July sun.

"You guys ready?" I look over to where Brian sits on his haunches jabbing his hook at the weed he has just cut. "Well?"

"Fuck yeah, I'm ready."

Brian stands with the hook in his right hand yelling like a warrior. He holds it over his head and throws it high in the air towards the field.

We all laugh watching the hook stick like a spear deep in the mud.

We work until 12:30, but Bob's not there. We sit in the grass at the field's entrance and wait until he shows up after 1:00. We're sweat-soaked and tired.

"That field's a son of a bitch, aint it?" he says as we walk up to his pick-up. He has a cigarette and he flicks it out the window and into the dirt.

"There's a lot of weeds that's for sure," I say.

We load up into the back of his truck. Instead of lowering the gate, we drop the hooks in over the side and they rattle against the truck's metal bed. I wince at the clamor and we climb over the gate. Johnny and I sit on the wheel wells, and Brian sits with his

head leaning against the back window. He goes to sleep like that, with his head bouncing against the glass, as we head down the gravel road towards home.

Camping

Since school starts on Monday, Saturday is the last real night of the summer, so my friends and I camp out and get drunk in the woods. We've chipped in five bucks apiece for a case of beer, plus another three for my cousin Raymond. He isn't old enough to buy beer either, but he's older by three years, and he knows a guy that knows a guy so it's alright.

Raymond arrives at our camp around five O' clock. He's driving that piece of shit Mustang that he says he's going to fix up but I know he never will. He comes up the dirt road swerving, gunning his engine, spinning his tires, throwing dirt all over hell. The other guys laugh and think it's cool but I just think what an asshole. Raymond has his radio blaring Black Sabbath, letting everybody know he listens to heavy metal. The speakers are shitty and the sound is distorted, fuzzy and tinny. When Raymond comes in, he turns the wheel, slides in the grass, and stops. I'm surprised he doesn't have a horn that plays Dixie.

When he gets out he says, "What's up, ladies?"

"We're waiting on your slow ass to get here."

He gives me a look, one that says don't give me any shit. We're cousins and all but that's as far as it goes.

We walk over to his car, to where Raymond stands in the back. He opens the trunk. Beside the beer, there's a rusty jack, old license plates, and jumper cables with both ends snipped off. He lifts the beer out and hands it to Brian.

"Hey, it's hot," Brian says. "Hotter than horse piss."

"Sorry. It was the best I could do."

"Well, shit. We thought it would at least be cold."

"Beggars can't be choosers. You got my three bucks?"

We give him his three bucks. He wads it and stuffs it down his jeans' pocket. He rubs his hands over his scruffy face. Raymond is tall, pudgy, and at eighteen his hair is already getting thin.

"Enjoy," he says. As he drives away, his car spews blue smoke.

"Well," Johnny says. "At least that smoky piece of shit killed a few mosquitos."

"Yeah," Brian says. "It's good for something. Wonder if he gets any pussy in it?"

"I think he does okay. I saw him riding around with Amy Green the other day."

"Really? Damn, I want to fuck her so bad."

"Yeah, right," Johnny says. "She wouldn't even let you sniff her panties."

"Hey, Fuck you."

Brian and Johnny are friends but that doesn't mean they like each other too much. "Hey," I say. "Let's have a beer. How hot can it be?"

We each grab a can. We crack them open and there's a loud hiss as the beer foams.

We all laugh and chug the beer as fast as we can. Brian's the slowest. He chokes coughs, and beer comes out his nose.

"This won't work," he says, wiping his nose and mouth on his shirt sleeve. "This shit is nothing but foam."

We have a black garbage bag for the empties. Brian and I put our cans in but Johnny holds onto to his.

"What do you want to do?" I ask.

"My dad has a freezer in his garage. He keeps ice out there. We can drive in and get some. There's a cooler there, too."

"We shoulda thought of this already," Johnny says.

"Well, we're thinkin' of it now. Come on let's go."

Johnny grunts and then crushes his can and tosses it to the ground.

"Dude," Brian says. "Pick that up. My dad finds a beer can he'll have a shit fit."

"You could ask instead of giving orders."

"Man, just put it into the bag. Okay?"

Of the three of us, Brian is the oldest and he has his license. He has a truck, too, a '73 Chevy that has rusty quarter panels. After Johnny relents and puts his empty beer can in the bag we pile in. I sit in the middle and have to move my legs out of the way of the gear shift.

"C'mon," I tell to Johnny. "Move over. Give me some room. I don't want Brian reaching between my legs when he needs to shift."

"Sure you don't," Johnny says and moves closer to the passenger door.

We head the five miles to town. I have a pack of Marlboros. I hand one to Brian, one to Johnny. We light them with the dashboard lighter and flick the ashes out the windows.

Camping Part II

At night we sit in front of the tent, cook hot dogs on sharpened sticks over the fire, drink beer, and listen to songs we taped from the radio, Styx, AC/DC, Reo Speedwagon, Led Zeppelin, and even though we usually argue about which band sucks and which band doesn't, we all agree that what we had was good to get drunk to. The jam box has a big crack in from where Johnny had dropped it on the pavement one night while riding his bike. He thought he had to be cool while he rode, one hand holding the jam box, the other holding the handle bars, and then he saw a girl, Julie, who's so pretty, and he let go the handlebars so he could wave at her. Imbecile. He had to drop the box to keep from crashing. Now we use duct tape to keep the batteries from falling out, but otherwise it works okay.

We have the case of beer in the cooler and we drink them down like water. By midnight we're pretty well hammered. When I look over at Brian, his eyes are closed and he's leaning back with his head resting against a tree.

"Look. He's passed out."

"He's a lightweight," Johnny says. And his face is lit by the glare of the fire. I guess he's handsome. A lot of girls like him. I can't figure it out though because he can be pretty dumb. He sits a moment not saying anything then he tips his head back, finishes his beer, crushes the can, and tosses it in the bag with the others. He opens the cooler and gets another beer out.

"I guess he's not used to it the way that you are," I say. "Maybe it's genetic."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"Bullshit. You opened your mouth. You talkin' about my dad?"

I don't want to go into it, and I'm sorry I had brought it up. But then I think about how Julie had said she had a crush on him, and I'm not really sorry.

"You're an asshole," Johnny says. "Why would you say something like that?"

I can't say anything. I can't even look up. I stare at the dark ground and watch the shadows move as the fire flickers.

"You think your family is better than mine is? Well I got news for ya. They're a bunch of losers too."

Johnny stands from the log he had been sitting on and goes inside the tent. He closes the flap and I hear a ripping sound as he zips it up from the inside. Even though Johnny had yelled, Brian doesn't wake up from where he sleeps beside the tree.

I sit at the fire and have another beer. Overhead, the trees arch like some sort of cathedral. But I don't feel safe or blessed in any way.

Around One 0' clock I begin to get sleepy. My sleeping bag is inside the tent so I make a bed on the cold hard ground and cover myself with my jacket. I lie awake hearing the fire crackle. Above me, the leaves wave and shimmer in the fire's rising smoke.

Camping III

The next morning I wake up sick to my stomach. My head hurts and while everybody is still asleep I sit on a folding stool and get the fire going. Though I feel like shit, I want another beer, and when I open the cooler I see that the ice has melted. The water is dirty and has a yellow cast to it. The beer float in it and I thought about that kid who drowned in the pond last summer because he had been drunk and had fallen out of the boat.

While I sip the hot beer, I want to hear some music. When I turn on cassette player the batteries are nearly dead and the tape drags and the music sounds warped, like something possessed that you might hear in a horror movie. Music to kill your sleeping friends by. I smile at the thought and turn the player off.

Though I'm sick, I'm hungry. There's s an opened pack of hot dogs floating in the cooler. I reach in, grab a hot dog, and shove a sharpened stick through its bottom. I cook that impaled hot dog until it's burnt black and delicious. I eat another the same way and have another beer before the others wake up. There are hot dogs and beer left if they want them.

After I eat, I urinate by the big tree where we carved our names with a pocket knife. I wonder how long it would take for the tree to grow bark over our names like new skin covers a wound. I think about the terrible thing I had said to Johnny last night and I hope he will forgive me but I know he probably won't. I touch our names on the tree and think about how we leave our scars behind just to let others know we're here.

While they sleep, I take a walk down the path that leads to the pond. The path goes downhill and the grass is wet with the morning dew. I slip once and nearly fall but manage to stay on my feet.

As I head down the hill, I look out over the grass, over the corn field, and to the far black trees silhouetted against the horizon. Overhead, a small plane flies low over the corn field, crop-dusting. The plane rises, dives, and swoops over the field and over the power lines. The plane is green and red and it glints brilliantly in the sun. It seems so close that I can just reach up and grab ahold of it. The engine roars as he flies overhead over the field. I can see the pilot and I wave, but he passes so quickly that I can't see if he waves back.

At the bottom of the hill is the pond. There's s a gate and I climb over it. The water is greenish-gray with the blue sky, the white clouds, and the trees on the bank reflecting in the water's glass surface. It looks blurry, like one of those French Impressionist paintings I saw last summer in a museum. Though it's beautiful, the pond scares me. The water is so deep, descending, cold and black. What must it have been like for that drowning kid, sinking, reaching up, his fingers filled with the fire of desperate life only grasping more water? And then he's quiet and floating, like a stick or a patch of moss.

Overhead, the plane flies away from the morning sun. I stand on the high bank, and look at the calm peaceful water. I finish my beer and toss the can into the water. It gurgles as it fills and sinks

On my way back to camp, I trip over a rock and fall knees down in the mud because my head is swimming with beer. After I rise from the mud I walk over to the

gate, I'm very careful not to fall as I climb over and head up the path that leads through the tall grass.

Treasure

I love the attic in the early winter when it's not yet so cold, and I can spend an hour rummaging in the dim light, searching through the boxes of old magazines, marveling at the moth eaten antique clothes on hangers looking like ghosts, and finding the forgotten treasures of people who died years before I was born.

And the attic is where I find it, in a box that sits in the shadows in the corner a few feet from the cracked window. It's a paperback book, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* It's pages, yellow, the corners water stained, A few pages are loose and I have to be careful as I hold it in then light so they don't fall out and flitter away lost in the shadows that spread across the attic's dusty wooden floor. The book has that old book smell, musty with dust and old age. When I hold the book close to my face I sneeze and wipe my nose on my sleeve.

The book's cover is tattered. On it, a man, flanked by a woman and a child, wears a broad hat, denim overalls, and has his back to me. He looks out over the broad flat plain beyond to the far blue mountains. Inside the front cover is the name of my great grandmother, a woman who had once taught school, played the guitar, and lived in an old house heated with coal stoves. Thinking it's a book about pissed off grapes, I take it down to read.

A few days later, I finish the book, a story about dirt and dust and hungry people from Oklahoma looking for salvation in California across the wide desert. At the end, a woman in a barn offers her nipple to a starving man. He drinks from it.

For a moment, I'm tempted to write my name in the book beneath my grandmother's. But I don't. Instead, I put between the other books on my shelf. It sits ragged tucked among the horror novels. Its spine cracked but stiff with strength.