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# Clara-An Elsewhere

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**CLARA-AN ELSEWHERE**

By

Travis Baker

B.A. New York University, 2004

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2006

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# CLARA-AN ELSEWHERE

By Travis Baker

Thesis Advisor: David Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
May, 2006

*Clara an elsewhere* seeks to convey to a reader the immediate and sensory rich experience of walking down Main Street in Clara, ME one fine summer morning and encountering the lives of two characters, Aaron and Katy even as their lives encounter each other.

The work follows a concept in astrophysics, the elsewhere-a time and space outside of the now, past the known future and as yet unseen by the known past- and applies it to a literary context. The effect upon a reader being that he or she is not reading a story that has occurred or will occur but one that *is* occurring as it is read, an occurrence that was simply missed by the reader as he or she was occupied by other matters.

It is my intention fully realize the story within the reader. The narrator employs rhythmic and sensory language patterns, as well as traditional narrative devices, to give a palatable sense of place, time and physical sensation. The reader becomes then a resident of Clara, ME and in compilation with the narrator, agent for the story's life.

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For Holly and Zane

*and*

*in Memory of*

*Constance Hunting*

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## INTRODUCTION

Exactly when and where was the story, *Clara*, conceived?

When its author ponders this question, only three possibilities seem worthy of serious consideration: either a certain evening on a park bench looking out onto the Stillwater, or a certain afternoon at the Bear Brew talking to a fellow English grad student or a certain summer morning picking up muffins at the Store and seeing two men sitting on the benches outside of the Art, etc. store, smoking cigarettes and talking lazily as they seemed to do nearly every summer morning, afternoon and early evening until the chill winds of October blow in and the younger one takes a ship and sails off into the wide world and the older one hibernates in his shop.

The inspirations and origins of *Clara- an elsewhere* are both numerous and singular, complicated and simple, global and local. Thousands of books went into its creation and yet a very short story served as its jumping off point. It is a universal tale told in a small town. It is a love story in which love fails. Any number of points concerning the text, the story, the language therein may be discussed. For the purposes of a critical introduction to the work, however, I shall limit the scope of these few thoughts preceding the presentation of the story to two aspects of its whole: the title and the narrator and how the two serve an identifiable present for the reader.

Clara is based, rather obviously to those in the know, on Orono, and peopled by certain persons identifiable to that town. It is pivotal to accept that Clara serves as more than setting, that while Clara is based upon a 'real' place, it, as with any character, has a life of its own. It exists, has existed and will exist despite both the reader's and my own ignorance of that existence prior to the reading and/or writing of it. In the opening scene, Ray asks, "Ain't we all just filled up with dirt?" The life of this story is filled with the dirt of Clara, good solid Maine dirt. The reader should not be led to believe that, as will be further discussed in a moment, the other characters in the work move through Clara, but that Clara moves through them.

As to the designation of the work as an *elsewhere*, it would be improper to call *Clara*, a novel due to its length and 'novella' strikes me as akin to 'pianoforte', something aristocratic, tinkling and rather annoying; therefore, I chose to designate this work an *elsewhere*. This designation, however, does not merely serve as a hipper, cooler, more postmodernly chic reference to the length of the work, but also as a conceptual guide to its production.

An *elsewhere* is a concept in astrophysics, or at least that's the way I remember it, harking back to my undergrad days and a certain astronomy class. Roughly translated it means that you are here, present in this moment of reading this sentence. The known future lies before you. You will eat dinner tonight, you will watch the news and perhaps *American Idol* and you will go to bed. The known past behind. You have eaten breakfast, yesterday was cold, etc. That which will/is/has occurred that you're missing because you are reading this sentence, paying attention to something else, sleeping, or watching *American Idol* happened in an

*elsewhere* and you'll just have to read about it later, like tomorrow. Or right now. I have taken this concept and applied it to a literary context. This story *is* happening. Under this concept however, if the author is busy recording the story and the reader is busy reading it both are in need of what Foucault called a 'function of discourse', an agent of interlocution, an intermediary, one who can transcend time and circumstance and present the present in the present, or bring an *elsewhere* into a personal now. We are in need of a narrator.

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I was struck by the flexible nature of narration therein employed. From the dialogue of "Circe" to the punctuationless conclusion, Joyce brought to bear a slew of narrative weaponry upon his subject. Most intriguing, however, was the use of a constant, singular present within the world of the story. A present based upon existence rather than memory.

An example:

Father Conmee was wonderfully well indeed. He would go to Buxtyon probably for the waters. And her boys, were they getton on well at Belvedere? Was that so? Father Conmee was very glad indeed to hear that. And Mr Sheehy himself? Still in London. The house was still sitting, to be sure it was. Beautiful weather it was, delightful indeed. Yes, it was very probable that Father Bernard Vaughan would come again to preach. Oh, yes: a very great success. A wonderful man really.

-Good afternoon, Mrs. Sheehy.

Father Conmee doffed his silk hat, as he took his leave, at the jet beads of her mantilla inkshining in the sun. And smiled yet again in going. He had cleaned his teeth, he knew, with arecaut paste (Joyce, 219).

From Father Conmee's discourse with Mrs. Sheehy to his assurance that he had cleaned his teeth with arecaut paste all actions occur within a present experience, that is to say that the character is not, as in conventional narrative, moving through a scene but that the scene moves through the character. Such a construct allows for

Dublin to be made vivid and alive, as was Joyce's goal, to the extent that the reader believes Father Conmee, for example, is vivid and alive. However, as the book is recorded in the past tense it is a Dublin come to life, rather than living at this very moment.

Refining the scope of present narration while remaining in a more conventional formatting, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, brings all of the actions of a scene into the present of the main character as well as that of the reader.

Gliding across Piccadilly, the car turned down St. James's Street. Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tail-coats and their white slips and their hair raked back who, for reasons difficult to discriminate, were standing in the bow window of Brook's with their hands behind the tails of their coats, looking out, perceived instinctively that greatness was passing and the pale light of the immortal presence fell upon them as it had fallen upon Clarissa Dalloway (Woolf, 18).

The 'pale light of immortal presence', (if I may borrow her highness and twist her designation) serves as a unifying factor for the scene, one that is then handed to Clarissa Dalloway. The narrator has constructed the telling of the tale so as to leave little doubt in the reader's mind who, precisely, the tale is to concern itself with, while also including the reader and by extension, author, in the unfolding of events. Thus the experience of the work is as immediate within its world as without. Clarissa will always be buying the flowers, by contrast Mr. Bloom's day is done with the completion of the final page and the acceptance, by the reader, of the final period. *Mrs. Dalloway* comes closer to an *elsewhere* in that her London, as was explored in *The Hours*, is a thing still living and capable of entering our lives. What it lacks, in terms of the *elsewhere*, is the idea that one could, without reading about it, happen upon it. Admittedly, at the time of its publication a contemporary reader may have

felt this very thing. That he or she may walk the very streets, visit the very flower shop and attend a very similar party, but how is the reader to believe he or she shall ever be introduced to Mrs. Dalloway without a mutual friend? For that an *elsewhere* the narrator must interact upon multiple levels and over several dimensions.

Shortly after the reading *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, in the grand tradition of *pastiche*, (not to mention the grander tradition of a grad students who have just read Joyce and Woolf to write something akin to it), I wrote a pivotal piece in my literary evolution, *A Lady in the Snow*. It took the notion that the character exists within the construct of the narrator's existence and that the narrator's only allegiance is to the reader.

The character, in this case the Lady, is imparted second-hand to the reader, who is privileged to the simultaneous thoughts of the narrator while he deals with both the present occupation of his senses by her speech/appearance/presence and the rendering of the tale. This ordering of involvement is signified by a lack of quotation marks around the narrator's dialogue.

A Lady in the Snow (a selection)

My Lady! My dear Lady! You've fallen down. Miss?

"Yes," she said. She said it so softly, like snow.

You've fallen down.

"I have," she said like snow. "I hadn't noticed."

You've fallen in the snow. And I remembered about the snow. The snow falling down all around, in large heavy flakes, slowly tumbling down from the sky to alight on the ground covered in snow and on the trees, with black bark and draped in white. ..(etc...)

The reader may thus infer that the narrator is not speaking directly to the Lady, but rather to the reader and, further, that the Lady's words and actions are filtered to the reader through that narrator.

Much like the time I discovered cerulean blue as a young art student and went cerulean blue crazy on several unfortunate canvases, I had not yet mastered techniques newly discovered. While the filtering of the character through the narrator and a certain descriptive freedom in the form of playful repetition would carry over into that which would become *Clara*, I had not yet resolved the present with the past nor placed these within the context of an *elsewhere*. In *A Lady in the Snow* those actions which seem to be occurring are told in the past tense, 'she said', while those that would seem to be of memory, "I remembered about the snow..." suddenly are present. The interplay of present memories and past actions is all well and good for a story of three pages but could I sustain such a thing over the length of the *elsewhere*? As it turns out, no.

Early attempts to employ this same narrative style to *Clara* met with bitter disappointment and occasional outrage. Prior to the first week of April, *Clara* was told entirely in the past tense by a crafty, shifty narrator but one that lacked any direct involvement in the action and characters, notably Aaron and Katy. Aaron is a native of Clara and works during the winter months (or when he's broke) as an able bodied seaman on merchant ships traveling the far seas. Katy, the she that under kinder circumstances would become his lover, is a recent arrival from Houston, TX and a soon to be graduate student at the University. It is at the moment of the story that the events of their lives encounter one another and it is these events; shared, remembered,

incidental, and unknown coupled with the immediate necessary actions of encounter that form the visceral, sensory rich present of the opening chapters. As with Clarissa Dalloway, the focuses all aspects of environment and action toward Aaron and Katy. The problem, however, was that under a construct of the past, as in *Ulysses*, the story of Aaron and Katy would seem a quaint one, something that happened last summer, something that lacks any impact on our present. It was on the occasion of writing this introduction that I resolved this flaw by changing the story to the present tense and allowing the narrator intrusion into both worlds in the first line:

I see Aaron feel the waves, still, in his legs and in the sway of himself,  
standing on the corner of Pine and Mill, in front of the Ray's Laundry, talking  
to Ray.

At no other point does the narrator's 'I' appear nor does it need to. Unlike much of contemporary fiction and so-called memoir the 'I' remains at a respectful distance to the action. Thus the focus of experience is not upon the narrator but the reader and his/her interaction with the text. The reader, by use of that initial 'I' is now asked to play the part of participatory observer, strolling along Main Street with the narrator, witness to Aaron and Katy's first meeting, feeling the nervous tension between them, the sun warming the pavement, the breeze blowing down to the river but is not asked to filter those observations through a third party even though that is precisely what is happening.

It is this belief, the notion that a reader might find familiarity in the story, to the point of intimacy, to the point of perceived knowledge that makes *Clara* unique, or at least mildly interesting. The plot is hardly original, boy meets girl, etc. There is some nice stuff with language, variations on repetition, cadence and sensory

reception, however, these all serve to make vivid experience. By directing experience through the characters, by placing the story within a present narrative and by allowing the narrator agency over those characters, it is hoped that this *elsewhere* elevates, for a reader, beyond story and reaches a more palpable, edible experience. I want the reader to feel as if he or she can walk down the street and get a big plate of buckwheat blueberry pancakes at Sammy's Diner or a pint of local beer at Tieg's Tavern, that they can drive out to Dobson and stack wood or go looking for spare part's in Aaron's junkyard. If they can't, it's only because they're elsewhere.

## CLARA

an *elsewhere*

An *elsewhere*: a concept in astrophysics. You are here. The known future lies before you. The known past behind. That which will/is/has occurred that you're missing because you are paying attention to something else (like this sentence) happened in the *elsewhere* and you'll just have to read about it later, like the next morning.

Or right now.

## 1-Something on the Nature of Distance

I see Aaron feel the waves, still, in his legs and in the sway of himself, standing on the corner of Pine and Mill, in front of the Ray's Laundry, talking to Ray. Not really talking, smoking a cigarette, sitting next to Ray, watching the tiny downtown of his tiny town, Clara, come to life. The summer sky just turning color, the air just edging to warm, Ray talks or rather, things come out of Ray's mouth from time to time.

"They got the blue now," he says. It isn't clear if he means the Collins house over on Birch the couple from away just bought and are having painted a very naval blue or the new napkins at Lori's Café with the little blueberries printed in the corner or the new University football uniforms with the blue piping or the birds or the sky or whatever. Aaron feels the roll of the Winters and Springs he spends on ship, riding around the world. He feels it in his legs and hips, and in his head. His feet are planted square, though, on the corner of Pine and Mill.

"Gonna be a nice day," says Ray. "Nice days are nice days."

"Yup."

Ray wears a gray undershirt and plastic looking purple shorts. He has nut brown skin, creased with the white lines of age. He wears cheap green flip-flops and smokes Parliaments. His eyes bug out when he talks, when things come out of his mouth. They settle back into their puffy sockets when his lips stop moving and his breathing settles down. They nearly close up completely when he takes a long drag on his Parliament.

Aaron shades his eyes against the morning sun, a summer visitor gets out of an SUV, hitching up his khaki shorts, checking the tuck of his forest green shirt, running a hand through his hair, looking over at his wife, at her sunglasses, at her putting her compact into her bag and him gesturing towards Sammy's Diner and saying that this is the place and her saying "Yes." Her mouth stays open, she's going to say something else but she doesn't. He holds the door for her. They go in and will order the buckwheat blueberry pancakes because that's what Sammy's is famous for. Aaron had some yesterday morning; he has some three or four times a week when he is home with real Maine maple syrup and homemade butter running down the big, fluffy, soggy stack of buckwheat and blueberry. He orders it with sausage sometimes or bacon others or eggs and on his birthday maybe all three and lets the bacon or sausage or eggs sit down in the syrup for a while, while he tackles the pancake stack and then he savors the bacon or sausage, covered in sweet, gooey maple syrup and butter.

Aaron lifts his right shoulder towards his ear and pulls the cigarette away, remembering the sensation of waking up in his trailer to a world not noticeably lifting and rolling but still feeling it in the sway of himself and wondering if someone has

hitched the trailer up and is dragging him down the road to God-knows-where. Mornings on ship, he never noticed. This morning is just a coffee and cigarette morning, an endless morning, a nothing morning, a morning that will slip into a day and then fade. Tomorrow will be his birthday.

“Nice days make me smile,” Ray says, “make me want to sit on my ass and smile.” Charlie is opening up the hardware store, setting out the mowers and clippers on the sidewalk, his kid Tom bringing out the flowers in hanging baskets. “Dig my toes in the dirt and just hang out under the sun. I mean the ground, you know...dirt!” He has large hands, shaping hands, they spread themselves out and make of the air a mudball. “Ain’t we all just filled up with dirt?”

“Yup,” Aaron looks down at the dirty, dusty and cracked old skater shoes that barely cover his feet. “At sea,” he says as he sees the girl he would like to talk to wave to Ray as she crosses the street to go to Lori’s, “there’s a distance, a mile of water between you and the dirt.”

“Yeah, man.” Ray waves back to the girl who smiled. Their eyes meet, her’s and Aaron’s. She smiles shyly and watches her step going from the street to the sidewalk. Her long red tresses bounce like springs. She looks back once again and smiles again. Aaron stares in wonder. He wants to see her in a field of flowers, bounding, and little blue birds fluttering about. He wants to lie down beside her and kiss her lips. He watches her as one watches the sunrise, half-awake, cold, impatient but full of hope and wonder at what the day might bring.

They’d smiled at each other politely standing in line to get coffee a few times, the sort of polite little smile one smiles in lines, her white teeth and freckled cheeks

and his lips barely able to turn an upward corner but wanting to open wide and sing and take her bounding through the field of flowers and lay her down beside the murmuring stream and kiss her and maybe she'll be at the tavern tonight, he thinks, when the day has faded, when its time to eat something for dinner, when the fabric pulls back with a few drinks.

“The Mexicans,” Ray says, “I mean the old ones, they got a whole thing with distance.”

“Do they?”

“Yeah!” Ray says. His eyes bug out wide. “The Pinchacheto Indians-- I guess they aren't Indians! They aren't Mexicans, you know, I mean, there wasn't a Mexico when they got going. Then there was the Maya and the Inca and there was the Pinchacheto down in a little corner but they are up high! They are up on top of a waterfall, that's how come they escaped the Maya and the Inca and suchwhat. And they had this thing, being on top of the waterfall, about distance because they are the only ones for miles around that could see miles around, you know!” Ray has his hands out again, wrapping them around the air, making miles pass between them, making jungles and falls. “Them others, they built all the pyramids and such but there is the jungle! The trees! The vines and the canopy and leaves everywhere, just green as shit, you seen it?”

“Just the coast.”

“See! Yeah, see how you are looking in and they are looking out because they could see the coast from way up on their waterfall and they could see where the jungle ended at the mountains and they could see the mist rising up from the bottom

of the falls and through the mist they perceived distance but they perceived it a living thing that could be tamed and...”, Ray stops for a second. His eyes pull back inside his head as he cups the Parliament to his lips. “They had no word for ‘far’, you know? How far, far away...nothing.”

Aaron drops the ugly, stub filter of his cigarette to the sidewalk and flattens it with a twist of his shoe. He looks up, seeing the morning descend full upon the wide yellow wall of Sammy’s, picking at the flaking paint of the windowsills and making tiny shadows. He sees the empty space where the girl waved. He decides to get some more coffee.

Ray stares down the street at whatever.

Aaron turns for Lori’s. He feels the push in his foot as he checks for a tilt and sidewalk is flat, even and not pitching against any waves. “You want anything?”

Ray raises his hand. “I’m good,” he says as his head settles into his neck.

Aaron pulls back the door to Lori’s, and as he does, as he always does every time he goes in, he remembers the times when he was nine that he stole ribbons of candy out of the glass jars that once sat on the front counter and having to sweep the store those times he got caught trying for a jawbreaker or a licorice stick. The girl is picking out a raspberry muffin.

There is a moment, yes, a time, yes, between her picking out the muffin and his refilling the coffee, a space of When, the answer to a question, “When did you meet?”, a When when it might be possible to slip in a word, to divide a simple trip to the town café for a raspberry muffin into an invitation. But how does a When begin? Can it be hoped for if recognized or is it gone with the sharp intake of breath and the

burst of adrenaline upon the heart? How many times had Aaron approached a When and upon how many faces had he smiled and how often, just there at the threshold had he wondered Why as they walked away, as he walked away as always the When's and Why's become Whatevers and he is left to the waves and the open sea. But always there is the possibility, the mystery of uncharted waters. It begins with a barely audible, half-stuttered, thread between a smile, 'Hi,' of his, to her, when she looks back, over her shoulder, behind a curled red veil, at his approach, which she feels through the brushing of air upon the tiny hairs of her skin.

“Hi,” she says and then she pauses and looks away and looks back and says, “Did you just say, ‘Hi’?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Hi,” she says again and places her muffin on the counter in front of Anna, who is the daughter of Elle, who is the owner of Lori's since Lori sold four years ago and moved to Florida but suddenly Aaron couldn't think of who Anna is or if Elle is still married to her father or what ever happened to Lori and should he send her a check for the candy he stole that one time while his mother and Lori talked about the weather, because this girl, this red-headed girl of long curls, flowers and fields had spoken to him, he who adored her above all others, with a voice like fingernails across a blackboard, like the shattering of a silent morning on the ocean by a seagull's shrill cry or like the last thing he ever expected.

“Anything else?,” asks Anna.

“A cappuccino,” she scrapes, “just plain.”

Anna turns to make the cappuccino. The girl turns to him.

“Hi,” she says. It sounds like an iceberg carving wide gashes in a metal hull.

“I have to go.” Aaron places 87 cents on the counter and he goes. He turns. He leaves. The heat and the light of the rising sun and the bluing sky drape itself upon him like heavy canvas through the front window. He sips at his coffee as he shoves the glass door open and feels it burn his tongue and mouth and burn his fingers as the coffee sloshes out onto his hand. He screams. His fingers burn. He drops the cup. The coffee splashes out, onto his shirt, his pants and the street. He stomps up to Ray. He feels himself shaking.

“There’s a reason for distance, Ray.” He pulls out his cigarettes. “There’s a need to keep things far away.” He pulls out a single one and shoves the pack back in his pocket. He lights the smoke. “It’s…”

The girl comes out of the café. Steam lifts off of her cappuccino cup. She holds the small wax paper bag that holds her raspberry muffin down by her hip. He wants to touch that hip just at the uppermost bend where it rounds out into the air. He want’s to let his hand fall from that hip all the way down to her red freckled toes. Her red hair, her pink lips and the bright glowing sunlight bouncing off the wide window of the café, the blue sky overhead shining on her pale skin, she stands on the spot; with the gray sidewalk and dark asphalt of the street, shadows from Sammy’s, flowers in their hanging baskets in front of the hardware store; where Aaron’s coffee sinks into a stain; and Aaron says, “there are rocks.”

“Yeah,” says Ray.

## 2-Bugs and Wet Bottoms

'He's quiet,' Katy thinks, like a pile of rocks. So quiet she could fill his silence with a thousand words for what had he ever said but 'hi' just then and then he bolted out and she hears him scream when he spills his coffee and she sees him go over to Ray and say something and light a cigarette. The cigarettes mix with the dust of him and the smell of earth and the memory of passing close to him. She looks at his clothes splotted up by the coffee, already stained like he's a painter or sculptor, maybe, and the angry look on his face, a squarish face and dark blue eyes, a small, gold hoop earring and a shadow of stubble. His hair is dark brown, almost black hair cut short and a bit spiky. She sees that he is looking at her.

She feels a shudder, maybe a flutter. He looks away and kicks at the bench Ray sits on smiling and staring off into whatever. She feels the warmth of her cappuccino in its cup and the little crinkles of the muffin bag. 'He's shy,' she decides. 'Well, if ever he wants to say hello again,' she thinks, 'it's entirely up to him.'

She whistles the first notes of a silly little song and tries to decide on going home to her apartment or to the park.

To get to her home, Katy has to cross the street. To get to the park, she has to cross the bridge, which means not crossing the street but going down the street and across the bridge over the Pacson river, which divides the town in twain and valiantly attempts to contain the University beyond. She can't decide. He is looking at her again. She can feel eyes creeping across her. She looks down at her feet. She always does this when she knows someone is creeping across her. She always looks at her feet so she won't feel the soft, tickling presence of eyeballs upon her. They are nice feet as feet go, of freckled skin with little toes and nails painted pink in thin canvas sandals. She has spent many hours of her life in contemplation of her feet, that they are hers, that she should locomote upon them, that they have, to this point, rarely failed her and that they are good for picking dandelions in a field and testing the temperature of streams. And yet, with the exception of dire circumstances, they will never escape the domination of her ankles.

Her head rises with a snap. She will look at her feet no more! She will cross the street or turn with a spin and start walking or go over to that guy and Ray and say 'hi,' again and see if he doesn't freak out this time. Why did he freak out? Her voice, her voice, her voice, she knows it always frightens people at first. It's an awful thing to have happen to a pretty girl. Her grandfather used to call her his little canary. Katy would find him found passed out in the basement smelling sour and sweating sweet, just like a pickle. He had gotten someone to drive him to the grocery store on some pretext and bought several bottles of wine. Katy would move him, to stir him, to make sure he was still alive and she would ask him, "Are you still alive?" and he

would go, “tweet-tweet.” Her father couldn’t stand her voice and she learned to keep conversations short.

She decides to go to the park as it is a particularly pretty day and parks are made for pretty days or the other way around, and so Katy turns on her toes with a twist. She likes sunlight and air and there is a good deal of both today though the sun will cause her skin cancer if she doesn’t cover up, and the air smells faintly of the paper mill in Callaway. Still, there are sparrows darting between buildings and pigeons sitting on roofs. There aren’t many clouds to look at, but the great long banks of green trees along the river make almost cloud shapes. The deep, dark blue of the water seems a sort of song to her, a very old song, a very long song, with both sadness and joy.

Over the bridge she turns from the road and skips down the hill to the park. She finds a sunny spot with a view of the river between two old trees. She isn’t sure what kind of trees and can’t remember if the spiky leaves mean it is an oak or a maple or maybe one of both or maybe neither but still, the main problem is that the ground looks wet. She holds her muffin in its wax paper bag and sips her cappuccino, now a nice filling warm, and circles the spot. She looks up at the trees and the river between them and then back down at her spot, at the green grass and the brown earth beneath it but the grass looks a bit too green, still painted with dew and the earth too dark. She has only her thin cotton skirt on, and beneath that only her thin cotton panties. Then there is her little pink bottom which likes neither the cold nor the damp.

She wants to sit and take off her shoes, to sip her coffee, pick at her muffin and pop the raspberry-flavored bites into her mouth, taking turns sipping, picking and

popping, but the ground continues to look decidedly wet. A mosquito bites her on the neck, and now a gnat is trying to get into her ear. She hops up and down on her right leg and shakes her head violently. She drops the wax paper bag and the muffin and stuffs her pinky finger into her ear trying to dislodge the buzzing, biting little shitbag! She can hear it, she feels it buzzing in there, digging deeper and thrashing about. She pulls out her finger, and looks for a tiny black smear but there is none. She pauses. She listens. Nothing but a sharp itch and the river rushing by. Then a swarm of biting, buzzing black dots descends upon her like quivering raindrops; gnats, mosquitoes and a thousand other flying things. She snatches up her muffin and runs.

Up the gentle slope she runs screaming, the bugs swarming upon her, biting at her ankles, flying into her hair. She ducks her head, waving her arm, wax paper snapping against her flesh, clutching the cappuccino close to her chest, running up onto the bridge, stumbling, scrambling away from the buzzing, biting bugs everywhere. She stops when she runs into strong hands, the smell of cigarettes and dust and something of salt. The red ringlets of her hair part, his blue eyes look down upon her, and really, they should have go ahead and kiss right now, passionately, wildly, with the great wide sky behind them and the rushing river below, not caring who drives by or the bugs or her voice or his smell or that this was their first encounter with all that lay beneath each other's skins and what would become of them after in the ever after and gone to her place and experienced only skin to skin, made the sweet love having never known names or histories or hopes but only the sweet dear places opened by a touch.

Instead they both say, 'hi' again, and then Katy says, "I was going to sit by the river and have my coffee but the ground looks wet. I didn't want to get my ass all soaked so I wasn't sure what to do and then all these fucking bugs attacked me." He should kiss her now but he doesn't. He asks if she's 'okay'? She says she is.

They walk back towards town where they sit on a wooden bench in front of Dorothy's Scrapbooking shop so she can eat her muffin without all the bugs and her ass getting wet and he can sit next to her.

They sit for some time, saying nothing, wanting to say something and then not. She picks at her muffin and offers Aaron some, but he waves it off. Inevitably, she says, "I'm Katy."

"Aaron."

She wipes the muffin bits from her hand onto her skirt. He slaps his onto his pants, a small cloud of dust rising, before they shake, firmly and respectful, lingering with the seductive tang of electric intimacy coursing through their palms (oh, how much more to be had if lips would lock and hands roamed!) and then they release. There is a pause. The traffic stops on Mill Street. The sun stops moving overhead. The birds stops their dance upon the rooftops. They take each other in.

And then he asks her what she is up to that day.

"No idea." She takes another bite of the muffin, the last of the muffin, the stump of the muffin. She chews for a moment, thinking how wonderful it would be if muffins grew in fields and sprang up every morning or if they could be grown in flower boxes hanging from windows between petunias. One could simply harvest them in the morning while the coffee brewed. She says, "Mostly, I just hang out and

read. I have no idea what to read right now because I'm going to have to do so much reading in a few weeks for school, so I'm just reading for fun but I'm stuck on this Proust novel and every time I pick it up I read like a page and fall asleep."

Aaron knows nothing of Proust. He reads; he reads a good deal in fact, he can finish a Harry Potter book in a day or two, he's read Zane Grey and Hemmingway. He's a fan of Marquez, but Grisham and Greene get him through the long nights on ship. As to Proust, well he does go on for seven hundred pages without a period.

"What about you?" she inquires. "What thrilling adventures do you have planned for the day?"

"I have to go to my mother's house and stack wood."

"Sounds fun."

"It isn't."

Katy finishes her muffin and wedges the wax paper bag between the slats of the bench and feels it with her fingers, reaching back, from time to time, reminding herself to throw it away in a second. She can feel the six inches of space between them and the way it crackles every time she fingers the wax paper bag. "Where does she live?"

"She's out in Dobson." Aaron squints into the sun.

"Which way is Dobson?"

"It's north." The heat of the day is coming on. Sweat rolls down his sides and has begun to bead on his scalp. He wants to get up and move, but she is sitting there, next to him. Her voice is getting to be tolerable, like a steam pipe that scares you at first with its knocks and its pings until you get used to it. He finds it hard to look at

her because the sun is rising over her head, so he looks down at her ankle and means to ask about the tattoo. “Northwest.”

“What’s it like?”

“Oh, it’s a town.” He folds his fingers over each other and squints at her and then reaches for another cigarette.

“I haven’t seen hardly anything of Maine. I don’t know where to start.” She wonders how old he is and decides not quite thirty. “I want to see, like, the ‘real’ Maine.” She wonders if he is ‘real’ Maine. “I went to the coast as soon as I got here, to see the Atlantic Ocean which I’d never seen before and give myself a blessing, you know, you ever do that? You just reach down and put your fingers in the water and touch it to your forehead like a baptism?”

“No,” Aaron lights his cigarette and tries to push the smoke away from the direction it seemed intent on going, which is right into Katy’s face, without success. “Sorry, the smoke’s going right in your face.”

Katy waves at it, but she smiles. “Keeps the bugs away.”

“Yeah, but,” he stands and leans against the thin birch tree planted in the sidewalk just a few feet away. “I go swimming, usually, when we get to some place and it’s warm enough, like India. If there’s a spot to swim.”

“What do you mean ‘like India’?” She leans forward towards him. He can almost see down her shirt so he tries not to. He wants to be away from the tree, to quit smoking and sit next to her, but he can’t quite do all those things at once.

“I work on ships.”

“Like a captain?”

“No. I’m an able-bodied seaman.” She giggles.

“What?”

“It’s funny.”

“Why?”

“You know!”

“Yeah. But, it’s not anything like that.”

“Sure. So what does an able-bodied seaman do?” She giggles again.

“I stand watch, sometimes I drive the boat, we all do fire crew.” Her lips part ever so slightly as if to laugh or maybe to say something just then, but she doesn’t; she smiles a lovely smile.

“That’s so cool,” she says. She thinks he looks taller against the tree.

“There’s not always a place to swim.”

“Yeah,” she rocks back on the bench, pulling her knees up inside her skirt, lifting her toes in the air, “I tried to find a place to get in or just dip my toes but there’s nothing but big ass rocks!”

“Where did you go?”

“I think Hearthport or someplace like that?”

“Big rocks up there.”

“Yeah, I found a spot though, so I did my duty to the goddess.”

Katy seemed content not to explain further her sense of divinity, and Aaron is glad for it. It is a new-agey, hippy, eco-tourist sort of thing to say, the sort of thing a person says whose never seen a wave climb over a 60 foot tall boat. Aaron has gods but they’re angry bitches.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

“Houston.” She folds herself down towards the ground.

“You came up for school?”

“Yeah,” she says to him, and her voice becomes low and soft and smooth,

“It’s about as far away from Houston as I could get and still bring my cat.” She looks down the street at a crow picking at an itinerant piece of pizza crust.

Aaron drops the cigarette to the sidewalk and gives it a quick tap with his foot to put it out. He sits next to her.

She tugs at the wax paper wedged into the slats of the bench.

“There’s some pretty country on the way up to Dobson. Real Maine country with trees and farms and barns and mobile homes up on hills and refrigerators on the lawns and everything. It should only take a couple hours or so stacking the wood and you’d probably run into my Mother, but I’ve got a motorcycle. I can show you some nice spots.”

Katy smiles a wide, beaming smile and claps like a seal in short, sharp bursts.

“Is that a ‘yes’?” he says.

“Very much so,” she replies and claps again.

“Okay,” he says and thinks there is nothing so beautiful in all the world as his little town on a summer morning. He looks around, pausing to note the mass of pigeons assembled under the fake owl on top of the old Archer building and the great, wide, white dripping circle of pigeon poop they have amassed up there. Which makes him think of his mother.

### 3-The Pleasures of Motorcycles

He holds the old Yamaha at the speed limit, a steady forty-five. Aaron likes forty-five. Forty-five means getting somewhere, going, the wind pushing, but not in any hurry. Forty-five is fast enough for someone with nothing to prove. He drifts towards the shoulder when a pick-up truck proclaims its place in the world, barreling up behind them, growling at them then surging past with a roar. He pulls out, accelerates, and passes an elderly couple doing thirty-eight. Sometimes he accelerates out of curves. Sometimes he slows going over tracks. He stops for lights. Katy sits behind him, her arms wrap around him, they cruise the two-lane road to Dobson at a comfortable forty-five.

Her hands are clasps around his waist, and she feels the hardness of him, how hard his waist feels, his back and his chest and how it would feel to feel him hard, his hard-on, as it were, which makes her giggle inside the helmet he had put on her. A muffled, cacophonous sort of thing makes her giggle more just to hear such a giggle inside of it, but there is no other word for how he feels between her arms, he's like a stump. But then she stops giggling, because, after all, what is she doing on a

motorcycle with a stump? The helmet smells of sweat, long rides and cigarettes and all she can think to think of him is that he is hard, like a stump or a marble would be if it is warm but more like a stump, which makes her laugh again and forget and makes him wonder what she is laughing at.

The road is, as Aaron had promised, a winding ribbon of color and sights. Wide rolling farms give way to woodlands that crowd the road. There might be no sign of human habitation for miles and then three small houses and a trailer erupt like mushrooms in a splotch of green grass shaded by tall pine trees. The air rushing by smells of lawn clippings, green leaves, and then manure, then wildflowers and a dead skunk but then clean, coming off a stream. Katy feels it as a patchwork quilt pulled from the bottom of the bed, frayed edges tickling her skin, loose string falling off and sticking to her knee. She feels herself waking up in the early morning hours and the chill of the night air and hugging the quilt to her, breathing in old smells. She looks down at the road, which becomes a velvety field of black as it passes away beneath her, that, with the yellow line that seems solid, but then skips, that moves on top of the black surface like a snake on water or like an old home movie. She feels the pull of hanging on, the pull one feels when standing up very high and looking down, and the thought of falling comes to her. Falling in, falling out, she feels she might let go of him, slipping off a rock into the road, beneath its surface. A faint ripple and down she might sink. Unless it is the sort of place she could swim and swirl and pretend to fly, and why wouldn't it be? Her hands feel the soft fabric of Aaron's t-shirt and the hardness of him beneath it. She lets her hands slide back so only her fingertips still touch him, the ridges of her fingertips grazing cotton. Would he find her, she

wondered, beneath the surface of the street, in the deep black waters, playing with the porpoises? Would he take a ship and search for her?

“Hold on,” he says in that funny Maine way, “there’s some bumps up ahead.”

She holds on tightly as the road heaves. She sees, across a field, hills behind some trees. Aaron feels her arms tighten around his waist, her body press against his back, her knees grip at his hips and gets uncomfortably erect. He struggles with it. This thing sticking up that he can’t push back down into himself, pressing against his jeans, making it difficult to shift as they lean into curves, ‘her curves,’ he thinks, ‘his stick,’ ‘his cobb,’ he remembers from that song, ‘her grill.’ He tries to think of baseball or cold winter days, but her hands are so small, and her arms so light, they hold him like a thin wire. He wants her to pull it tight and slice him open. Release him. His top half would slide off into the road and the other, his waist and legs and her would keep riding off into the everywhere. But if he did that, he wouldn’t have eyes to see her or hands to hold her. He wouldn’t have ears either, he thinks, to have to listen to her. This makes him laugh and makes her wonder what he’s laughing at.

A green and gold sign reads ‘Welcome to Dobson.’ A white one with black letters warns, ‘Reduced Speed Ahead.’

#### 4-Firewood and Toads

The house sits on the incline of a small hill, closely situated between a row of other houses similarly inclined and situated. The road runs up from the main intersection of Dobson, taking a right coming from the south, towards the Sunday Farm where they take the milk from the cows for Sunday Farm Ice Cream. Dobson lies along the Ankasteag River, which comes down from Canada and runs out into the Atlantic near Fulmouth. Aaron steers the motorcycle down the driveway around back of the house and stops it before a high pile of split and cut green wood. He knocks down the kick-stand and shuts the engine off. There is a sudden and very loud silence.

Katy pulls off the helmet and shakes out her hair. The house is much bigger from the back. Driving up, it looks like a gray-green toad hunched up on a patch of moss but, from behind, it is taller, two-stories, with a covered deck and a wooden stair leading down to a lawn dotted here and there with flower beds and stone gnomes. Katy slides off the bike. She smells grass and wet wood.

“This is where you grew up?”

“No,” Aaron answers. “Mom got this after my father passed.”

“When was that?”

“Some years ago.”

She turns to look at him. He has a wide expression to his face, a happy face without the smile. He pulls out his cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

“I’m sorry for asking. It was probably something horrible. Was it?” Katy places the helmet on the back of the bike. “Sorry.” She turns to the wood pile.

“Smell that,” she says, “all those poor trees.”

Aaron lights his smoke.

“He died at sea.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looks away, over at the small patch of hedges that grow between this yard and the next, at a chickadee sitting on top of one of the stubbed bushes. It chirps at her and flies up into a cedar looming high up over the house. He watches her follow the bird. He dismounts the bike and stretches out his legs.

“Storm washed him overboard.”

She smiles at him and then she says, “My father should get washed overboard or have a heart attack and die, but he just refuses,” and then, indicating the pile of wood says in the same breath, in the same scratched voice, “You have to stack all this?”

Aaron frowns. “Yup.” He takes a long drag of the cigarette. “You hate your dad or something?”

“Yes.”

Sometimes a 'yes' is like a lock on a strong box. This 'yes' is like that, a lock on a strong box labeled 'FAMILY ISSUES' with one of those blue strips of plastic tape that the letters had been punched into.

"Mom's car isn't here. You can go inside and help yourself, watch TV. or whatever."

"No, I'll help."

"Stacking wood?"

"I've never stacked wood before."

"It's not fun."

"It is if you've never done it!"

"When I got in trouble as a kid my dad would make me move the wood pile from one end of the yard to the other. Then when I got in trouble again I'd have to move it back."

"When I got in trouble I got the belt."

"I got that too. Plus the wood."

"Sometimes I got the pool cleaning pole."

"One time I got a roasting pan."

"I got an alligator one time." He starts laughing. "You're laughing because you think I'm kidding but I'm not. My dad kept alligators or I should say he tried to keep A alligator. It was just a baby and he didn't keep care of it. I guess he expected me to keep care of it, because the night it died he came in yelling at me about not keeping care of it and beat me with it. Fucking thing hurt, too." He stops laughing.

"Well, it's nice of you to help your mother," she says.

Aaron turns toward the house. “Do you need to use the bathroom or anything?”

“Oh, my God, I’m about to explode!”

The toilet seat is a pink, padded affair that makes a squishy noise when Katy sits on it. The bathroom itself smells of disinfectant and cinnamon bon-bon air fresheners. Hand towels hang on racks and little sea-shell shaped soaps occupy gilt-edged dishes. A liquid soap has been placed beside the sink inside a ceramic case covered in painted flowers. Katy feels the euphoria of a draining bladder and the paranoia of being in an alien and all-too-pink environment. Two photographs of winter wonderland scenes in cheap frames hang at identical heights on the wall accenting a large mirror over a sink which reflects the frosted glass of the bath and shower stall.

Katy slides the sliding shower door back on its track. She finds pale pink tile, an unwrapped bar of Ivory soap, and the three small plastic bottles labeled shampoo, conditioner, and regeneration. In the corner of the muted pink tub, on the little edge shelf, sits a little yellow ducky, grinning stupidly at nothing in particular.

Aaron heaves the firewood from the great pile towards the naked, cement foundation wall at the back of the house. The sun glints off the edge of his sunglasses. His t-shirt moves around his body as he twists and sends log after log sailing through the air where it lands with the crunch and shush of displaced gravel. He tosses her a pair of canvass and leather gloves.

“You’ll want those.”

She slips them on. They feel soft and heavy, protective, able and slightly too big.

Aaron doesn’t wear gloves. He doesn’t need them. He feels the scraping bark of the logs, but his worked-on hands, his scarred and calloused hands, stained and laced with old cuts and mottled burns are well protected. He heaves a split log towards the house.

Katy steps over to the pile. She reaches down with her thin, freckled arms and gloved hands and hefts a log up to her face. She traces the grain with her eyes. She breathes in its soft, wet smell.

“What kind is it?”

He gives it a quick glance. “Ash, I’d say.” He lifts another log and heaves it towards the house. “And beech.” He regards the pile. “Some birch.”

“Beech and birch,” and she breathes in again the smell of deep woods cut open. “Thank you,” she whispers and is reminded of the children’s story about the tree that gave and gave of itself until the man had used it all up, but still the tree is happy for what it had given, which is everything, and what had the man ever done but take and eventually rot between boards from a different tree because the giving one had been all spent. She is always angered by that story. She hates the tree for giving and giving until there is nothing left to give. The tree should have just fallen over on the guy if it was going to end up down and split open anyway. She swings the log back and then with a smile and a grunt sends it flying towards the scattered pile Aaron had been making.

“Nice one,” he says.

She picks up another log and sends it sailing and then another. “Makes me want to go Alaska!”

“Why’s that?”

“The fishing thing. You see all those fish flying all over the place!” Katy and Aaron send logs flying, gravel clattering and themselves breathing quickly.

“You want to go to Alaska to fish?”

“No”, Katy says “I wouldn’t fish, but this makes me think of all the fish they send flying around, which makes me think of Alaska, which I would definitely like to go to someday. I mean, Maine is practically Alaska except there’s a whole country...”

“Two countries.”

“Right!” Her hands hurt and she’s barely started. “Two countries,” she says shaking them out. “Have you been there?”

“Yep.” Aaron moves towards the house.

“What’s it like?”

“A lot like Maine,” he says “Except on the other side of the two countries.”

“You’re just a font of information, Aaron.”

Aaron smiles. He likes her. He wants to get the chore of stacking the wood over with so he can talk to her, really talk to her. He can’t really talk and work. He hates washing decks with talkers, Portuguese guys who really want to get to know you while you’re power blasting barnacles. He much prefers the Nigerians and Philipinos who aren’t working on their English. “After we’re done,” he says, “I

thought we might go to the lake up the road. It's pretty. I thought we could get some sandwiches at Gus's and have a picnic."

"Sounds great." She slaps her hands together. "So what now? Do we stack?"

"We do," Aaron replies and they began to stack the logs in a row along the cement wall under the porch. They take water breaks from time to time and talk of silly things, the sunshine and the trees, movies, books and songs stuck in the head. He has few opinions and she many. Her current favorite band is Coldplay but her all-time favorite band is a singer from Houston named Carolyn Wonderland who has this little bitty voice when she talks but sounds like an unacknowledged love-child of Aretha and Janis when she sings. Deep in his heart Aaron is a grungy bastard and while "London Calling" may be the song he most admires in the world, that world was suddenly and irrevocably changed in 1994 when, driving his big, maroon, '81 Mustang towards the Kingland Mall, he and two friends heard "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on the radio. They pulled over to the side of the road and sat in stunned silence. When they got to the mall they went straight to Harvey's where Matt and Craig bought the CD and Aaron bought the tape because his car didn't have a CD player. They went back to the car and played the whole tape, rewinding "Smells Like Teen Spirit" over at least ten times. They scored some beer at a Big Apple and drove to the campgrounds to keep listening. They screamed about starting a band called Crack Baby Sunshine but they never got around to it. Aaron doesn't tell Katy any of this; it all flashes across him so quickly and mercilessly that he can only mutter that he is mostly into the Clash and Nirvana and stare into the crack of memory wedged between two logs on the gravel. By the time he thinks to explain himself she's on to

her favorite book, *100 Years of Solitude* or it might be *No Telephone to Heaven* which really cried out to her on the rack at the Half Price Books because really, even if there is a God, she says, he's screening his calls.

They stack wood along the wall then fling more from the pile towards the house. Katy stops flinging when her shoulders get too sore and takes to carrying the logs, one at a time, over to the growing rows of ordered firewood. Her arms are red and achy, her back begins to tighten, and her feet burn from standing so long. Aaron moves with habitual motion. He grows tired and sore, but these are familiar feelings, ones he ignores. She keeps close to the house now, stacking the logs he throws, they are almost all gone, and he is careful not to throw them too close to her. She hardly notices when he comes over to help or when he says, finally, "That's it." He leans against the four and a half rows, some eight or so feet long and about five feet high of firewood. "Fun, huh?"

"As a one time thing," she says, "not so bad. Just don't ask for my help next year."

He laughs a little sort of laugh. "I won't."

He lights a cigarette as a small, green Toyota rolls down from the driveway, lurchingly avoiding the motorcycle and stopping with a crunch on the bits of bark and wood that constitute the remains of the pile of wood. Through the driver's side window a small, round woman with gray hair, rose tinted glasses, and a blue sweat suit eyes them both suspiciously.

"That's my Mom."

## 5-Pictures that Smile on the Wall

Katy holds the white plastic bag containing the two sandwiches, chips, napkins, pickles, cookies, Coke and Vitamin Water between her thighs, keeping her left hand laced through the handles and the right arm around Aaron as he drives towards the lake. She had met Sharon only briefly. She had waited for Aaron to introduce her but as she shoved her way out of the car there had only been a snort or a sneer in her direction by the old woman who is not that old, really, in her late fifties maybe, perhaps, but years of sneering and long, brown cigarettes had dredged her. Aaron had waved a spiteful, "Hello, Mother!" as she waddled towards the back stair.

"Take up that bag, won't you," she commanded Aaron.

Katy put out her hand and strode forward. "Pleased to meet you, Mam!"

"You sick or something?" Sharon says, clutching her thick, shiny, black purse to her chest, looking over at her son.

"No."

"You sound like you've been swallowing, I don't know, glass or something, or you're sick."

“I just have a scratchy voice,” squeaked Katy.

“Hmm.” Sharon looks her up and down. “Those are my garden gloves.”

“I was helping.”

Aaron’s mother turned to Aaron. “You have your girlfriends help now?”

“She never stacked wood before. We’re not--”

Aaron’s mother turned to Katy. “You never stacked wood before?”

“I’m from Houston. We don’t have wood anymore.”

Aaron’s mother didn’t know if the girl was kidding or not. She didn’t know what to make of this bright young thing in her backyard with her red curls and bark stained skirt. She went up the steps. Aaron began to follow.

“I’ll be right back,” he murmured.

“I have to use the bathroom.”

“Okay,” he said and all three went up to the house.

‘Aaron and Sharon,’ she thought and she thought it sounded kind of gross, like those people who name all fourteen of their children with a ‘J’ name and get silly about it towards the middle, like they start off with Jacob and Jennifer and Jason and around kid six get into Jebidiah, Jayln, Jaws, Jabbatha, and then sort of return to a sense of normalcy by kid twelve and just name him John, followed by Jessica and Jackson, which is not a bad name, actually. Katy might use Jackson some day if she ever has a kid but there will be no other ‘J’ names to go with it. But Aaron and Sharon is stupid, she thought, and if there’s a sister her name is probably Karen, except with an ‘o’.

Aaron slid the brown paper bag onto the oak table near the kitchen. Within it was a bottle of coffee flavored brandy, three packs of Carlton 100's, four lotto tickets, a small bag of dill flavored potato chips, and some chap-stick. Katy went to the bathroom. His mother lit a cigarette and sat down on her brown leather chair with a squish.

“What that then?”

“What?”

“The girl?”

“Oh, she's a student, I think.”

“You think?”

“We only really met this morning, Mom.”

“You and your students.” She tapped an ash into the amber ashtray on the small table next to the chair. She picked up her remote and began to fight the various buttons that controlled the power to her dish network and television.

“My birthday's tomorrow,” Aaron said, his fingers feeling the notched surface of the table, looking at the woman in the chair, at the lights flickering on the small, flat, silver boxes sitting on top of the TV, outside at the afternoon sun.

“I know what goddamn day your birthday comes on,” she spat as a cooking show flashed onto the screen. “There's a hundred something in my purse.” She flapped her hand in the direction of the thick, black bag leaning against a leg of the table. “Leave me twenty for pizza.”

Aaron bent over the bag. He picked it up and wrestled its mouth open. He pulls out the small canvas purse from within and finding \$153 he takes \$133.

Dust flies in a great rising cloud behind them as they ride the motorcycle along the weathered road to the lake. Katy didn't hear anything of their conversation save some low snorts and rasped grunts. After she allows herself a pause at the mirror to push her hair around and pull out some stray bits of bark, she emerges into the hall decorated with family photographs, mostly of Sharon and Karen and a man who would probably be the son-in-law and one and then two and then three children in places like Maine or Boston, she thinks and maybe Atlanta and definitely Disneyland. In some of the Maine photos, Aaron crept in at the edges, and in some of the older photographs there is a man who might be in his fifties and looks just like Aaron who never seems to be looking at the camera. From the hallway she enters the deeply carpeted, brown burnished living room and sees Sharon smoking her long cigarette and Aaron pushing a small fold of green bills into his pocket.

They left. They went for sandwiches at Gus's small gas station/convenience store/diner at the edge of Dobson. Katy had ordered a turkey on wheat with lettuce, mustard, tomatoes, salt and pepper and a little olive oil. Aaron had salami and swiss on a roll. She had tried to pay for hers, but he had already pulled out the fold of bills and insisted. He gave the lady a ten and took back some change.

Katy wants to know Sharon. She wants to study her. She would like to go back as a small bug and watch her, except, she thinks, she's probably the type to spray for bugs incessantly and stomp on them when she sees them, so maybe she had better be a picture on the wall. If there is a smiling picture of herself up on the wall, maybe she could study her. Unless she gets put in the hall and can only watch Sharon

in passing and other times smile blandly at the smiling people smiling back at her from the other wall.

It is then that they see the two trucks pulled over to the side of the road and the two dogs barking and the three men trying to drag a horse out of a bog.

## 6-Dogs and Bogs

What does an old horse know of the world? He knows the green grass that grows at his feet in the warm months. He knows the water trough at the one end of his pasture and the small grove of trees at the other. He knows the shelter of his barn in the rain and the reach of his neck beyond the fence which at one time, for a long time gave him to know the sharp scrape of barbs upon his neck when he reached too far but now gave him a jolt all through his head and down to his forelegs from the white, electrified tape and so he did not reach beyond the fence, though the grass looks very green.

The old horse knows that his name is Joe, and that he is a dappled gray, for that is what the people have called him over the years and say about him as they hold out their hands holding carrots or sweet tarts or apples. He knows to come when called Joe, and once upon a time Little Joe and these days, Old Joe, to whinny when they hold out treats, to point his ears forward and reach out his muzzle to their hands. He knows their touch upon his nose, their scratch under his chin, their pats and smacks upon his back and rump. He has born them on his back, a saddle cinched up

tight, and known the weight of them from the very small to the rather large. He has known their fear and their joy. He has known the sorrow of the girl who rode him most often as she grew bigger and bigger until the night she held his head between her hands and he blew warm air across her cheek. She cried and cried. She had gone away for a time after that, a long time but when she returns to the house, from time to time, and comes out to the barn, he knows her.

He knows the changing of the seasons, the falling of leaves and chill in the air. He knows his coat grows thick, that his hooves grow cold, and that he will spend much of the next few months in his stall, away from the most bitter cold, a heavy blanket over his withers, hay and sawdust at his feet. He knows the first scents of Spring, the calls of the birds coming home, the turning out to the old pasture away from the white house, the plunge of his legs into the dark mud. He knows the bite of flies, the songs of crickets, the quiet hours, the star filled nights, the sun, the moon, and certain secrets only old horses know and only tell to gophers.

He knows fear.

From deep within his bones when the lonely howls drift up into the night, from the twitch of his ears when a branch snaps in the wood beyond his fence, from the frantic surge that courses through his body when the lightning crashes in the sky or with wide eyes and flared nostrils when he can smell a bear near by.

And he knows he can run.

He runs across the pasture for fun, because he is afraid, just to run, to throw out his legs and shove himself forward, to leap the small ditch that cuts across the

western corner, to throw his head about, toss his mane, call out to the world that he can leap and run. He runs less now. But he still runs.

What do the dogs know? The large golden labs that had come from the city and had only known a small yard, cement walks, fire hydrants, and fenced-in runs. That now have the freedom to roam. Dogs that had only known the scent of squirrels, pigeons, garbage, and other dogs feces now had so many new smells to catch in their nostrils and pursue as far as they dared.

A million years told them, as soon as they came through the wood and saw the horse that he is meat. He is old and weak. They are too citified to realize they are too few to bring him down. That their howls and barks would be heard. That the old man will come and chase them off or shoot them if he can. But the horse does not know this, either. The dogs know only that they must charge, and the horse knows only that he must flee.

They come like thunderbolts under the fence, like cannon balls bounding over the field. The horse races to his barn, but they come, their eyes wide, their teeth bright. He kicks but they dodge and snap at his legs. He runs for the fence and leaps high, as he had not leapt in years, but as high as he flies he still feels the sharp bite in his back legs, the electricity cracking at his bones. He stumbles and falls. They dive upon him, tearing at his belly, trying for his neck. He flails and twists. He catches one of the dogs a glancing blow to the head. It spins about and whimpers but rises, barks, barks and joins the game again.

The old horse stands on shaking legs and takes flight once again. Away from the house he flees, through a thicket, over a short wooden fence, into a ditch and then out, across a road, the dogs right behind him, snapping, barking, chasing, biting.

He sees a forest beyond a wide field of tall, dark grass, and before this a marsh. He thinks only of escape as he falls into the mud, sinks, surges forward, water rolling away from him, he tries to kick, to swim but the mud wraps itself around his legs and very gently, begins to pull slowly down. The dogs stop. They bite at the surface of the water, they howl great loud bellowing threats of teeth and blood, but they hold their places at the edge of the bog. An old man comes in large truck and chases them off with a 2x4.

The horse hears the voice of his long-time friend. The man who brings him carrots and mucks out his stall. But what good are carrots do now? What could a scratch behind the ears do for this mud? He tries to turn, to leap, to swim, but even more tightly the mud holds him, even deeper he sinks, up to the top of his chest now, and sliding over his back. The sun is hot over him. He can see the cool wood beyond. His tongue lolls out and tastes the black, gritty water.

Two other men come. They have ropes and throw them around his head and try to pull. His neck stretches out and it seems they might pull his head right off before the bog will release him. Aaron and Katy come and now one of the men wades into the muck to secure a line around the belly of the horse, but he can't reach all away around, nearly sucked under with the thrashings. Katy charges into the bog. Aaron pulls off his shirt, drops his sunglasses and wades into the mud.

"I'll pass the rope underneath to you," the man says to them.

The mud sucks at their legs and the water rises to their chests as they get alongside the horse. Katy puts a hand on its back and one to his nose, telling it to stay calm.

“Be a good boy, Mr. Horse,” Katy lullabies. “Be a good boy.”

“Okay, now,” the man says.

“Okay,” Aaron says.

He reaches under the horse, his chin and mouth just touching the surface of the water. He feels the end of the rope and then the horse thrashes and starts to roll towards them. He has his hand on the rope as the broad chest comes down on his arm. He sees the long back rise over his head and then come down. The head whips out of Katy’s hand and his broad cheek smacks her in the face, knocking her back, under the water. He is under the water. The side of the horse presses him down into the mud, he tries to shove back but only sinks deeper. She flops out her arms. The cold, gritty water runs up her nose, the mud pulls at her legs. She throws herself over, onto her stomach, “Aaron!” she calls out. She can’t see him. Everything is brown and heavy upon him and then the weight lifts. He fights upward, sinking to his knees in the mud, gasping for air as he brakes the surface.

“Aaron! You okay!”

“Yeah!” The horse is as before. He still holds the end of the rope and passes it over to the man who ties a right knot over the withers.

Katy paddles to the shore, grabbing the rope, standing and sinking in the mud.

“Pull!” she yells. The other end of the rope has been secured to a winch on the truck. Her eyes have grown red and swollen, threatening to burst as she tries to pull even more, as she tried to talk to the horse, to call out to him.

“His name is Joe,” says the old man.

They call out, “Joe! It’s gonna be okay, Joe! Take it easy, Joe!”

With the whine of steel set in motion and the calls of encouragement from the voices on the shore, with the dogs looking on and four hands on the rope pulling, and four on his rump pushing and the rope biting, Joe feels himself being torn in two. The rope pulls at him and the voices call for him but the mud will not give him up. Katy sees it in his eyes. Pain and fear, his last moments are nothing but pain and fear as his heart bursts. His head flops forward, splashing Katy. His body stops. The winch creaks on. A body is dragged from the bog.

“He just died! He just died like that! He just died! He died. He died. He just gave up and died like that. Like that. Flailing. Flailing! And then...and then...and then he died. You could see...you could see...you could see...you could see the spark. Go out. Just...he just died like that. He just died.”

Katy keeps an old toy box inside of her. It’s battered red, and there is a picture of a broken rocking horse painted in faded colors on the front. She keeps it within her for those times when she must, she feels, fill it with screams, or wishes or

tears. And there are times when it cracks open and all of those wishes, screams and tears fall out.

Aaron lights a cigarette for her, which she holds between trembling fingers and sucks down in shallow gulps and chokes out in stuttered coughs. She wipes the snot that oozes from her nose with her hands and wrists, which only serves to smear mud and snot across her face. She could go to the water and rub her hands beneath it but she dare not for fear the mud will reach for her.

“He was so afraid,” she says.

“He was an old horse.”

She turns her red, tear streaked face upon him. “He was still afraid!” She throws the cigarette on the ground, buries her head between her knees and covers herself with her arms.

Aaron picks up the smoke. “When they found my father, his pants were down.” He takes a long drag. “And his...”, he stinks of the swamp, “his dick is hanging out of his shorts, the guy told me.” Only the shirt he had tossed off on account of the cigarettes in the pocket is still clean. They both lost their shoes and socks in the mire. “He’d been pissing, you know? Into the ocean. Fifty, sixty percent of guys that fall overboard have their pants down.” Aaron takes up the shirt and offers it to Katy. “Take this.” She looks up. “For your face.” She doesn’t. “It’s pretty gross. You’ve got snot and mud all over.” She almost smiles, but doesn’t and takes the shirt. “Almost all of the rest are drunk.” She wipes her face and her folds and refolds the shirt, wiping more mud from her cheeks and her neck. Holding it in her hands, folding it in her hands, she starts crying again. She buries her head in the

shirt and the mud in the shirt. “It wasn’t a heart attack like I said. Sometimes we fall in. I guess I’m not really helping, huh?”

A muffled, “no,” from the shirt.

A trooper from the State Police arrives. The dogs have tags and so the owner is called and says he’ll be there soon. The two men lean against their truck, telling the trooper what happened. The old man sits beside his dead horse and runs his hand along his nose.

“We should go,” Aaron whispers to her, his hand on her back.

“Okay,” she says between the tears.

Aaron stands. He helps Katy stand and gets her over to the bike. He tries to pull his shirt from her but she won’t let go. “You need to put the helmet on, okay?”

“I can’t.”

“It’s the law,” he lies.

After a few seconds she lowers the shirt. He slides the helmet over her head. Her cheeks are pushed together by the padding and make her red face redder, squish her eyes closer and squeeze the tears out faster. Aaron wraps the t-shirt around the back rest. He looks at her. She looks ridiculous, standing there beside the road, a dead horse not forty feet away, her arms limp by her side, her whole body shaking, her pale dress dirty, and wet hanging from her skinny frame and a big, fat helmet on her head.

He takes the helmet between his hands and lifts her face to his. “You’ll hold on, won’t you?” He says, “You’ll hold on until we get home.”

“Yes,” she whispers between sobs.

Aaron gets on the bike and starts it up. Katy slides in behind him. She wraps her arms around him, buries her head into his back and holds on the whole way, and after a short time, a too short of a time, she stops crying, only staring at the disenchanted green-gray blur of the edge of the road until the bike stops outside of Lori's. Ray sits on his bench in his grey shirt, purple shorts and green flip-flops soaking up the sun.

“We’re back,” he says.

She pulls her arms away from him. She pulls off the helmet and hands it to him. She swings her leg over the back of the bike and stands on the sidewalk. She notices he doesn't have any shoes.

“You lost your shoes.”

“So did you.”

She looks down at her feet. They don't have any shoes attached to them.

“Oh,” she says.

“Yes,” he says, hanging the helmet off of the handlebar and pulling out a cigarette.

“But yours are bleeding.”

“It's okay.”

“You should see a doctor or get some socks or something.”

“I will.”

“Socks might make it worse.”

“I'll clean them up. It's okay.”

She looks at him. He looks at her.

“I have to go home now and hug my cat.”

She starts to walk away.

“It’s my birthday tomorrow,” he says.

She stops and turns.

“Okay.”

“I thought we could go out, maybe?”

“Where?”

“The tavern. I usually go to the tavern.”

“Okay.”

She begins to walk away again.

“Do you need a drink? We could go now?”

“Maybe tomorrow,” she says not turning or stopping or looking back. She becomes small and white, walking two blocks down and then taking a right and disappearing behind the Ballinger’s place on Oak St. Aaron hangs his head and takes a long pull of his cigarette. His feet passed a certain threshold of pain, beyond pain, a scream so constant it is quiet. He stinks of mud and death. He looks over at Ray, just sitting there.

“How’s your mom,” Ray says.

“Same.”

## 7-The Cake Frosting House and a Silver Bullet

The Bennett Ortons had, in the early 1900's, a good many logging and shipping concerns, and from these proceeds Mr. Orton had built a large, dove-blue Victorian style house in the middle of Oak Street for his wife, their four children, Sarah, Bennett, Jr., Willa and Daisy, her mother, a maid, a nurse, and a coachman. Some years later, after the death of Bennett the Widow Orton was obliged to take in boarders. Bennett Jr. had passed many years previous from the flu and Sarah's husband, Thorstun had proved a detriment to the logging and shipping concerns. After her passing in 1941, and the sale by Sarah and Willa, (Daisy had died in the act of giving birth), to Sunday Qualls who continued the employment of its many rooms as a transient business. The house began to fade then, being painted white on account of the cost of the lovely dove blue and the necessity of painting nearly every spring due to the harsh Maine winter. So many years of scraping and painting gave the old home a crusted look, or the romantic would say, iced like a cake.

R. Wielder could not be accused of being romantic and upon the eventual move to a retirement community in 1964 of Ms. Qualls, and with the general shift

away from boarding houses into apartment living, the property was purchased by Mr. Wielder and converted into individual rooms with small kitchens and private baths. Some five years previous to the events herein accounted, S. Wielder sold the property to Charlie Sunderland, he of the hardware store, who made certain improvements and leased #3 to Katy roughly two weeks and five days ago. One of her first questions to Charlie Sunderland had been one of ghosts. She had been sincerely hoping for a kindly old ghost to share her dark hours with, and it was with great disappointment that she learned there are none; they had all been painted over.

Katy had immediately set about pinning a bright orange sheet upon the ceiling of her bedroom, letting it droop away from the harsh light and casting a warm glow over the room at night while fluttering brightly in the morning sun. She purchased a futon at the Import Store near the mall. She stacked a large number of books, all sorts of books from those by a variety of old and dead distinguished gentlemen and ladies to certain activist works by the living, from those that had been read to those meant to be, against the interior, western wall. On the southern wall and in the entry room she placed a series of posters by mainly French artists and a collage of picture postcards of her own making. The bathroom, just off of the bedroom, aside from the general toiletries, held a purple-polka dotted plastic shower curtain and some small framed photographs of trees, bunnies and rain-speckled city streets. The kitchen occupies part of the entry room with a small refrigerator, a stove, some cabinets, and just enough room for a little wooden desk next to the window upon which resided her notebook computer and spiral bound journals. The bedroom, too, received a window which looks out across a yard of short, green grass into the garden of a mustard

colored house beyond. Upon the screened sill she placed a bright white daisy in a short, clear glass filled about half-way with water. It is this she stares at as she falls disjointed on her bed.

She tries to coax the cat out from under the futon but meets with no success. Even banging her fists upon the bed and pleading with Preston, for that is the name of the cat, the name she gave him when she found him under a car, covered in oil and fleas, to come out and comfort her makes no impression on the cat; indeed, such histrionics only serve to solidify his resolve to stay put even as the futon is moved about and her grubby hands search for him he remains stubbornly out of reach. Thus it is given to Katy to flail herself upon the stiff mattress alone, gnash her teeth, ball her hands into fists, press them against her eyes, beg for further tears, rage that she can find none and finally, to lay upon her stomach staring at the flower on the window sill because the toy box is empty and all the little teddy bears lay scattered on the warped and sloping floorboards of a crusty old house.

Aaron takes a pair of green shorts and ragged tennis shoes from Ray's lost-and-found pile and goes down to the river by way of the little-used path behind Pressell's Garage. He hangs his shirt on a branch, leaves the shoes and shorts on the bank along with his wallet, and the cash he'd stuffed into his pants, he shoves into the toe of one of the shoes. He gingerly wades into the cool, slow-moving river until he can slide out under the surface. His pants go tight and heavy around his legs but the sharp, searing pain of his feet subsides.

Floating closer to shore, Aaron strips off his pants and flings them up on the grass. He looks across the river to the houses along the far bank and Chester Park just upstream near the bridge. Not seeing anyone paying any particular attention to him, no one in the backyards of the houses and just a few kids up by the park too busy and distant to worry about, he pulls off his boxers and tosses them as well, up on the bank.

Aaron swims out to the middle of the river and treads there. He feels the water all over him, the embrace of it, the swirling touch of it but knows enough not to drink it. He dives down into the dark brown depths, shedding the muck of the mire and rises, spouting mist into the air as he releases then catches more air. He twirls in a small circle, glad to have a river to bathe in, and hopes Katy is okay.

Thin white petals radiate from the yellow center of the flower so much like the sun. Long green stem dips in a graceful curve into the glass and the water. Within the water, sunlight bends so that a rounded reflection of the entire world folds around the microscopically torn end of the stem, but this is not what Katy sees. She takes in the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the orange of the house beyond and sees them as blobs and globs of blue, green and orange and wishes, again, that she could paint more than blobs and globs or at least blobs that amounted to something, like Monet or globs that built up to something, like Rodin, but clay does not hold in her hands, and paint always runs away from her.

“I’m sorry,” she says to the little dying flower. She stays on her bed until the deep dusk, when her little apartment falls to shadows, and it is time to feed Preston as he has come out of hiding and speaking in clipped impatience in front of the fridge.

“Meop!” he says and again, “Meop”.

Katy feeds Preston and gives him a big hug. She goes to the bathroom for a pee and a shower. She puts on pj's and makes something to eat. She has a spinach salad with cottage cheese. She looks at her bed. The duvet cover is stained with the dirt from her dress. She pulls off the cover and throws it in a corner. Preston sniffs at it. He doesn't like the smell and decides to pee on it when Katy falls asleep. This, he is sure, will make her happy. She crawls into bed and tries to read her Proust, but the image of that horse keeps slapping her on the inside of her right eye and it feels as if her legs are too tight, as if they aren't long enough, and though she kicks them out, they won't stretch, like a sweater that had been too many times through a dryer. She slams the book down on the mattress and thrusts herself onto her back, staring up at the orange glowing ceiling and commanding herself to relax. She closes her eyes and tells her toes to let go. She tells her calves to behave and her thighs to be still. She comes to terms with her hips and settles upon a mutually beneficial arrangement with her chest. Her arms become compliant and even the tips of her fingers let go their soft little movements. “If only,” she thinks, “I could stop thinking”.

He had thrown his jeans and briefs into one of Ray's washers and sat outside on the bench smoking and saying 'hello' from time to time to various passersby until he could put the clothes in the dryer for ten minutes. He straps his jeans and briefs to the seat of the bike with a bungee cord and rides home, feeling the not-unpleasant sensation of wind shooting up the loose legs of the shorts he had borrowed, whistling around his balls, tickling his penis. He pulls in to the dusty drive of Tom's Junk

Yard, stops, gets off, opens the tall, fenced gate, gets back on, guns his bike through, stops, closes the gate, gets back on, and heads down the second row of piled up old cars and disintegrating old trucks. At the end of the row, he stops the bike in front of his small, silver trailer, snaps off the bungee cord and takes himself, his pants, and his underwear inside.

The trailer looks like a silver bullet and holds a snug bed that is nearly always folded out, a miniature kitchen, a coffin-like bathroom with a tiny toilet in need of pumping and a shaded view of piles of old cars. It is, in all ways, to Aaron, perfect. He bought the trailer eight years ago new from the dealership with the proceeds of an extended voyage and made a deal with Tom, Sr. to park it at the junk yard and pay a certain amount for electricity and run a hose for the faucet and shower during the few, short, summer months he is in town. During the winter it sits, under a blanket of snow, unused and generally forgotten except by Aaron, who, on occasions such as when his sea birth is rolling and pitching in a storm, longs for it.

He throws his pants and briefs over the orange plastic chair attached to the table next to the kitchenette, grabs a beer from the pint-sized fridge, sprawls out on the bed, flicks on the TV, and lights a cigarette. The smoke fills in him. He watches nothing. He thinks about the size of the horse as it nearly rolled down on him. The blackness of it. After the beer and the most of another one and several more cigarettes, he closes his eyes. He awakes some few hours later. The world has gone dark and he is hard. He thinks of Katy and wishes she could be there right then with him. He wishes she had been down at the river and they could have skinny dipped together. He wishes his mother hadn't been such an old crotch. He thinks of the thin,

wet dress clinging to Katy's body. The slightly darker skin of her nipples showing through her wet clothes. He wants to come on Katy's pale, freckled tits. They must be pale, he thinks, and freckled. He pulls on his prick and pictures her going down on him on the banks of the river with no one around and her ringed red hair flowing in the breeze. He thinks about her on top of him and then him on top of her, and then he's going at her from behind and then Anna from the café comes along and asks if she can join in, so then Katy's riding his face and Anna's on his cock and then he's doing Anna in the ass while she goes down on Katy, and then he comes all over both of their faces and on to their tits and they slather it around and make out and then a sticky glob spurts out of his joint. He finds an old shirt to wipe himself up with and worries that he has cheapened Katy, soiled her. Anna is only fifteen. He's wrong. He knows. But the little pornographic versions of Katy and Anna that he will stash under the bedroom sink wink at him and giggle. They play with each other's hair and slide their tongues down each others necks. They tell him to come by anytime.

He decides he won't go to the tavern tonight because he told her he is going tomorrow. She might meet him there so he doesn't want to blow all of his money tonight but then he thinks she might get confused or want to talk about the horse and won't know where else to find him. Sfter all, tomorrow is his birthday and people will buy him drinks and he won't spend much tonight, so he can go. It will be his birthday at midnight. He stands in the trailer thinking about it for a minute then puts on his other clothes and goes.

She pulls her book to her, reads her page and a half and falls asleep. She dreams she is on a pirate ship and that she had been captured, but then she is a pirate and then she is the ship out on the warm Caribbean sea, and she awakes in the night to a floating feeling of warmth between her thighs, floating and rolling like the sea. She likes this feeling. She has only to turn on to her stomach and slowly work her thighs together for the warmth to grow and spread up to her chest and down to her toes, and this she decides to do. She keeps the warmth in her mind and reaches down with her hands, her right gripped at her hip and then along the outside and then along the inside of her leg, her left begins to move her clit back and forth across her pubic bone, building the warmth into very nice glowing and sparking ember. She thinks of pirates and ravishments and big, shiny swords. She places Aaron upon the forecastle. She gives him a big, shiny sword. The seas begin to churn. A storm grows. The ship will be dashed upon the rocks! She hears a whiney from the hold! She sees the horse lying still upon the beach, covered in seaweed. She takes up his reins and he rises, shaking off the seaweed. She mounts him. She holds the leather reins in her hands. She is naked. She digs her heels into him. They charge through the surf and pounding waves and waves crashing against their flesh! Hot, sparking embers shoot through her. She bites her lip, smiles, and soon falls asleep again.

## 8-Tieg's Tavern and a Brief Digression

Well back in the early 1800's, when this country was still sorting itself out, Colonel Robert H. Teig received a commission from the Federal District 1 (New England) Land Management Office in Boston to go to Maine and do some of the sorting. Finding Portland already overrun with Colonels, Generals, and the like and Augusta overrun with politicians, lawyers and whatnot, Col. Teig made his way farther north to the timber processing towns of Down East, eventually building himself a small house along what would become Main Street in what would soon be called Clara after his wife who, to their mutual benefit, never came to visit but wrote sweetly perfumed letters every few months sitting at her cherry wood desk in the morning light in her comfortable town house in Beacon Hill.

Why the Colonel chose the muddy logging-wagon tracks of what was Point 31 and would be Clara can be generally surmised if not easily guessed at. Clara was in its infancy, consisting of a small collection of river driver barracks and overseer shacks with some few merchants, traders, a barber, a small hotel (four rooms) run by a conservative French family, and an even smaller brothel (this being run by two

sisters and an Indian woman) just around the corner. Its position at the juncture of two rivers--the Pacson which swept between Clara proper and the Pacson Indians (a generally congenial tribe but one that could be goaded into a healthy fight from time to time) lands across it and the Argessecot, which met the Pacson a few hundred feet below the town (the 31<sup>st</sup> navigable point on the Argessecot) and eventually flowed clear out to the Atlantic--this juncture provided a strategic intelligence gathering (not to mention tax collecting) location.

Moreover, its forests to the north and fields to the south gave the Colonel a variety of hunting opportunities as well as scenic rides on his horse, Balustrade. What Clara lacked were three things dear to the Colonel's heart, a good Christian name, a golf course, and a respectable tavern.

Therefore and thusly, between sorting, putting, provoking, hunting, and riding, the Colonel had the fields and woods north of his home transmogrified into nine challenging but not overly aggressive holes and the neighboring shack converted into a tavern open to local townsmen, logging company managers, visiting dignitaries, and on Thursday evenings the wives of such. Indians, blacks, Chinamen, women of other sorts, day laborers, etc. were asked to find their entertainments elsewhere. A local man and former river driver who had been recently retired by a left foot crushed between two great, bobbing logs, Ernest Bineford, was hired to fill drinks and keep the place in general order, which he did most adroitly with a smile and a wink on the one hand and a solid piece of maple in the other.

Officially the Colonel's heart gave out after a wickedly sliced fairway-wood led to the unfortunate circumstance of his body being found one cold, crisp, October

morning slapped naked across boom tie-4, just up from where the big old pine hangs over the Pacson River. Though to this day there persist rumors of a young woman and an Indian in those bushes that may or may not have facilitated Col. Tieg's transgression from the good, solid dirt of Maine into its deep, cold waters. In any event, Ernest Binneford bought the Colonel's house from his estate (his family back in Boston having no interest in either the place nor the property). Mr. Binneford formalized the name of what had come to be known as Tieg's Tavern with a painted sign over the door in honor of the noble gentlemen, and thus it has been known ever since, through a dozen owners, the turning of the golf course into home lots, the first admission of a woman on an evening other than Thursday, the eventual serving of Indians, Blacks and all others, prohibition, depression, civil wars, world wars, the fire of '37 and the fire of '63, gas lights, electric lights, several rewirings, the addition of a kitchen, television, cable, computer system, wine coolers, the smoking ban and Professor Peter Scott, Ph.D. Professor Scott typically sat at the corner of the long, glazed, native Maine maple bar and professed to know the entire history of the place, for such is his particular field of study; taverns, et. al. and in specific, Tieg's. His dissertation delved into the chemo/psycho/socio/literati terms with which the town identified itself with the tavern and vice versa. He could regale any number of persons who happened to sit next to him with any number of stories touching on any number of subjects as connected to and extrapolated from his barstool. He recently divorced as well, affording him even more time to dedicate to his subject.

It is this man that Aaron, for want of other company, sits next to on his birthday, and theirs is a curious conversation, for it is one they have engaged in many,

many times before to no point, or if a point might be imposed, it is that both men are waiting for someone else to come along. It is not that they dislike each other nor that they cannot converse freely when in a social setting but rather that they are of such a chemical/psychological/rhetorical fitting that a third party is needed to provide flow. There not being a third party present, save the bartender, Gale, a stout, smiling young man who checks in at that end of the bar from time to time to freshen drinks and make quick work of lively chatter before moving back down the line, Prof. Scott tends to go on long monologues to his own amusement. These prodigious tales are punctuated by an occasional grunt or banal observation from Aaron. Thus they sit, sipping their drinks, casting hopeful glances at the door.

“Have we spoken as to the mysterious death of the Colonel?” The original painted sign hangs in a glass case over the bar, and to this the professor raises his glass.

“Oh, yes,” replies Aaron glancing upwards to the faded portrait.

Ignoring the assent, the Prof. Continues, “It was his heart, but,” the professor pauses and considers the portrait, “there is some evidence...” From memory of other pictures of the man, the professor fills in the daring eyes, the robust cheek, and rakish chin that are the Colonel’s features now transmuted into a brownish over a dusted smudge. “I’ve come to give some credence to the ‘Errant Fairway Wood into the Clearing where the Girl and the Indian Are Having an Illicit Rendezvous’ theory. Do you know it?”

“Not really,” Aaron replies. He had not gone back to the trailer the previous night.

“Well, sir,” The professor began and would continue.

At some point just before closing time at 1 a.m. Aaron had gone to the bathroom, thrown up, and staggered unseen by the three remaining patrons nor the fading staff, slipped quietly under the pool table. He found the carpet under there quite comfortable, cool and clean and passed out. He awoke the next day, his birthday, around noon, by a vacuum cleaner smacking him in the face. He gets up then, nods to Geneva, the Pacson woman who cleans the place in the mornings, goes to the bathroom and then over to Sammy’s for coffee and his buckwheat blueberry pancakes slathered in maple syrup running down into the eggs and bacon and sausage. After breakfast, he hangs out on the bench and looks for Katy to come by. He gets a sandwich at Lori’s and figures he still has about sixty bucks left over for the evening. He goes down to the river, eats his sandwich, naps on the grass under the sun, takes a swim, dries off on the grass, put his clothes back on, and hits the tavern.

“Supposedly it is a two-iron on the 7<sup>th</sup> hole, coming back along the river. The historical evidence indicates the 7<sup>th</sup> is a 398-yard par 4. Logging had cleared out most of the trees on the property-- so it played more of a links style, which was the fashion at the time.” The professor takes a sip, “Mmm...the Colonel insisted a barrier line of timber be kept upright along the river, mostly to keep his balls from disappearing into the murky depths...so to speak.” The professor snorts and smiles. “That’s funny, you see because, well, the story goes,” he keep his Scotch glass pressed against his lower lip, “that he drove into a clump of woods over there-the Colonel had a notorious slice-Mm, he’s looking around for it when he comes upon this young Pacson guy, and a young woman. A white woman and not just any white

girl but the white girl that the Colonel had been playing house with, so to speak, being as his family is in Boston and he is of a social status that he couldn't visit the brothel. So, the great founder finds this Pacson and the girl in a state of carnal delight, so to speak, and the Colonel gets upset about it and either a) has a heart attack on the spot and either falls into or gets pushed into the river, b) has a heart attack trying to bash the boy's brains in with his fairway-wood and either falls into or gets pushed into the river, or c) gets the stuffing beat out of him by the Pacson and ends up in the river, either by being pushed or falling. In any event, it's a plausible theory." He takes another sip. "Wanna get a smoke?"

"Sure."

The professor and Aaron take a final sip of their drinks, push back their stools, and move towards the door of the tavern, fishing cigarettes and matches from their pockets. They stand outside the brown façade in the fading sun smoking and watching the slight summer traffic roll by on Main Street.

Aaron turns to the Prof., "What did the caddy say?"

"Well," Scott leans back, closes his eyes, gathers his thoughts, lets out a tuneless whistle and replies, "he's a Pacson as well, so he originally told people, the white people, that they'd gone searching for the lost ball, which he found, but then he couldn't find the Colonel, so..."

"He didn't hear a splash?"

"No. Not over the shoving and rustling of the bushes looking for the ball. That's what he reported at least but he told some other people, his people, a different story, and since the Pacson keep their stories, by telling them, you know, they tell

them over and over to keep them that's how they do it." He looks at Aaron to make sure he understands the point.

"Yeah."

"Yeah! But no one ever listened, because who the fuck ever listens to an Indian? Right? Until now! But, you know, for research you really have to find things written down. It's the cache of history. They won't let me write it down because they don't want the caddy to get into trouble, but a sister of the girl left a diary, and in that diary there is mention that the girl kept a diary, so if I can just find that diary..." He whistles his tuneless whistle again and flicks his cigarette into the street but then he picks it up because he remembers there has been some problem with the city about all the cigarette butts outside since the smoking ban. So he picks it up and shoves it into the sand and cigarette butt filled can next to the door, which smells of rotten dreams and misspent anger.

The light on the corner changes, and Aaron sees Katy coming across the street carrying a small, plain, brown paper bag. She wears loose jeans that hang on her hips and a pale blue t-shirt that is too short to cover her pale, ever-so-slightly rounded belly. Her red hair flows outward, and blue tinted sunglasses cover her eyes.

The professor whistles low as Aaron waves.

"Friend of yours?"

"Yeah," Aaron puts out his cigarette in the can. "That's Katy."

The professor whistles low again and smiles wide as she approaches. As she gets closer, they can see there is a glittery iron-on of a kitten with devil horns on her chest.

“Hey,” she says to Aaron, stopping about three and one half feet in front of him.

“Hey,” he says back, standing there, smiling at her with his hands to his sides.

“Hello,” says the professor, and he introduces himself and shakes her hand.

“How’s it going?” Aaron asks.

“Good. How’s your birthday?”

“Just getting started.”

She shifts herself around a nonce. “Alright then. Let’s get it starts as the song goes.”

Aaron opens the door to the taverns and she enters, followed quickly by the professor and then, happily, himself.

## 9-Local Beer

She orders a 'local beer'. That's what she says.

"What would you like," Aaron says as Prof. Scott arranges the barstools, and Katy takes the one offered between the two men and sets the small, brown bag down by her feet. Gale approaches with a slow saunter, slapping his bar towel across his arm absently.

"A local beer," she says.

"Well," says the professor, picking up his Scotch, "there's...", he drifts his eyes to the taps.

"There's a few," says Aaron.

"What can I get for you," says Gale leaning forward onto the bar.

Katy brushes her hair back over her ear with her right hand. "What kind of local beer do you have?"

"There's Argessecot," chirps in the professor reading the crest of the nearest tap.

"What's that like?"

“Would you like to try it?” asks Gale with a sleazy grin.

“Sure.”

Gale wheels on his heel, snaps up a shot glass from the low rack, and pours a taster of the Argessecot with practiced professionalism and nuanced flair. Aaron takes his stool and leans into her line of sight. “It’s a bit hoppy.”

“What does that mean?”

“Too many hops,” Aaron explains. “For my taste.”

“A bit bitter,” adds the professor.

“Oh,” she says as Gale slides her the shot glass and nods to the professor.

Katy takes up the glass, perched on her stool; the three men watch as she draws it to her lips and sips the ale ever so delicately.

“It’s nice.”

Gale slides his towel along the bar in front of him. “Would you like one?”

Katy hold the glass away from her just so that it is level with her shoulder in her right hand, her arm bent at the elbow, her posture correct, her chest pushed out ever so much, her legs crossed, her belly rounding ever so slightly over the lip of her jeans, her tattooed ankle showing above the flip-flops. She waves her left hand around.

“Is the hops that business?” by ‘business’ she means the slightly springy, mossy taste that’s jumping around on her tongue, she explains.

“Yeah,” Aaron says.

“The sharpness,” the professor chimes in.

“They double hop it,” explains Gale.

“What does that mean?”

“At the end...,” the professor starts.

“After they brew it once, at the end, they add more hops and brew it again,” concluded Gale.

“Do you have anything lighter, like a Corona?”

“We have Corona.”

“No,” she slides the glass across the bar towards him. “Local though.”

“Mary Jett Summer is pretty light. It’s a wheat beer.”

“Can I try that?”

“Sure.”

Gale turns and snaps up another shot glass.

“You can use the same glass!” she calls after him.

“Wouldn’t want to taint the tasting. Is that right? Taint? Is that right?”

“I think so.”

“Contaminate,” slurps the professor, himself fairly contaminated.

“Yeah, taint’s good.” Aaron puts in, tapping his foot on the rung of his stool, wishing to God the whole beer selection process would come to a swift conclusion and Gale would piss off and the professor would pass out so he could talk to Katy and get her drunk and do body shots off her navel and get her back to the trailer and make wild passionate love to her for three days and then go for ice cream.

Gale hands her the shot glass of beer. She tastes it. She likes it. She orders one and says to Aaron, “What are you having?”

“The special.”

“What’s the special?”

“Ukks.”

“That hardly sounds like a birthday drink?”

“It’s okay. Only \$2.50.”

“Let me rephrase.” She touches his shoulder. He thinks he might spout hot jets of lava. “What sort of birthday drink would you like? I’m buying.”

“That’s okay.”

“I insist.”

“Shots?” intrudes Gale.

“Shots!” the professor cheers.

“Does your friend want one?” she says turning to the prof. “Do you want one?”

Professor Scott looks chastened. “No. I like the idea of shots much more than the practice of them. You kids go ahead,” he says and sips his Scotch.

“Two shots, too. Unless you’re having one,” she nods to Gale, “then make it three.”

“What kind?”

“Cuervo?” She turns to Aaron. He shrugs.

“Cuervo!” she shouts and stamps her fist on the bar.

Gale raises his hand in the air, a sign of lustful victory, “Cuervo e tres!”, he proclaims and goes to work pouring the beer and the tequila.

Katy tosses her hair one way and her head another making a grand flourish and an announcement to Aaron. “I got you a present.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” She lifts the small, plain brown paper bag up from her feet onto the bar. As she bends down to get it, the professor raises two eyebrows over at Aaron and Gale looks over and smirks. When she comes up, her mouth open, her lips parted, all three of them are thinking the same thing and calculating who they have to kill to get it. “It’s...”, Gale slides the three shot glasses down to them and plunks the frothing beer next to the plain brown paper bag, “...well, you’ll see in a second.”

Aaron, Katy, and Gale take up their shots, shout ‘Happy Birthday!’, smash them down their gullets, and slap the empty glasses onto the bar with a smack. And then each one, in silent, personal agony tries to quell the near unshiftable sensation of needing to puke his or her guts out.

### 10-A Guy Walks into a Bar-Ouch!

She is drunk. He is drunk. Everyone is drunk.

The professor slumps against the wall, a thin sliver of drool sliding down his chin and pooling in the space below that chin, making a puddle from which Katy can see a small horse trying desperately to free itself. She has not had that much, but that much is a bit much for her. A few shots, a few beers and she is hunching forward, using her arms to keep herself from sliding off of the bar stool and into Aaron's lap. She giggles. She is loud. Her voice peels the paint off of the walls when she screeches. Gale had gone away, driven away by that nail shivering banshee wail. Aaron leans his head into it and rides it out.

They kiss. Leaning forward, telling a secret, their faces close, the smell of each other, and the alcohol rising into their nostrils. They can see, with clarity, the skin of each other's necks,, and then their mouths move forward, their lips part and meet. They kiss and release and kiss again, longer, lingeringly, swirlingalongingly. Almost, it seems, they kiss under the bar. Their mouths move

away. They giggle and sip their beers. Katy darts her eyes around, but no one is paying any attention to their little garden party.

He feels fine. He feels good. As long as he doesn't try to stand up. Standing up is fraught with danger. He might slide right off the edge of the world and fall into the void, and that would be bad because then he would miss her as she rocketed across the sky. He wouldn't be able reach out and grasp her, pull her from the sky and down onto the soft earth with him, down into the bog with him. He would be falling in the void ,and she would be rocketing across the sky. So, he holds on by the touch of her arm against his that steers him to shore.

Inside the plain, brown paper bag had been three items of different natures. He had opened it shortly after the first round of shots and found within a giant jawbreaker, a small drawing of a small flower, and a poem. The giant jawbreaker was from Lori's, from the big glass jar full of giant jawbreakers that sat on the counter near the register. The picture of the flower was a daisy in a glass, done in watercolor on card weight paper, very delicately and quite nicely with the words, 'Happy Birthday, Aaron' written in blue ink. The poem read:

riding

on

the back

of the motorbike

the asphalt races by

the trees race by

the houses and homes pass by  
he is driving  
he is there in front of me  
as I ride  
on  
the back  
of the motorbike

It was printed in the same blue ink on the same paper. Aaron held it in one hand and the picture of the daisy in the other.

“Do you like it? I mean it’s just stupid but...”

“No, I’m trying to think if I ever had a poem written for me before. Maybe, I don’t know. No one ever gave me one though,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Hey,” she leaned in, her hands folded in her lap and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Happy Birthday.” He went all googely down into his toes. He put the poem and the flower back in the plain, brown paper bag to keep them safe. He took a drink and rolled the jawbreaker around on the bar.

“You got this at Lori’s?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I was in there and I saw it and I thought of you, I don’t know why, so I got it for you. I mean you might hate jawbreakers!”

“They are too big to get out of the jars.”

Katy took a long sip of her beer, spilling some on her chin and down the side of the glass. “Mmm,” she snatched a napkin up to her chin and ran it around her fingers, “What do you mean?”

“To swipe.” He held it before him like Hamlet. “When I was a kid, I’d go into Lori’s and swipe candy sometimes. I mean, not all the time but from time to time. We all did it. Ribbons are easy, and gumballs, but every kid that tried to swipe a jawbreaker or a licorice stick, ‘cause they are too long, would get caught.”

“What’d she do?”

“She’d make us sweep the store.”

“Probably why she kept the candy out there.” Katy returned the beer to her lips, “Get free janitorial services.” She sipped some more and spilled some more.

Aaron put the jawbreaker down.

“I never thought of that.”

“You’re a romantic.”

Aaron blushed and grabbed up his beer. “No one ever called me that before.”

She knocked his arm with her elbow.

“C’mon! You ride a bike, you sail in ships on the high sea, you smoke, you hang out on a bench all day watching...,” she isn’t quite sure what he watched, “...things and you have deeply connected childhood memories of stealing candy from an old woman, probably as a manifestation of parental...,” she bit at her lip, “...stuff and, where do you live?”

“A junk yard.”

“You live in a junk yard?”

“In a trailer in a junk yard.”

“How did that happen?”

“Mom sold the house. I didn’t want to spend summers out in Dobson and I worked sometimes at Tom’s and asked him about putting one out there. He said ‘yes’.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah. I keep meaning to put up Christmas lights.”

“You’re a classic romantic.” She took a drink.

“I should have brought flowers.”

“I brought you a flower.”

“Yep.”

They stopped talking and here the first kiss could have happened if it weren’t for the hour, it being still early in the evening and not busy enough for a full bar side tongue tussle, what with the professor lurking about and Gale still keeping an eye on things. As it was, Aaron and Katy spent several moments attempting, in the grand Romantic fashion to delve deeply into each others souls through the infinite blackness of their irises and the kaleidoscopic constellations of their pupils.

“I didn’t think you would come out tonight,” Aaron says.

“I almost didn’t.”

They spoke, almost in a whisper.

“I wasn’t going to, until I saw the jawbreakers. I was buying tea and a bottle of wine to stay in with, but then I saw them on the counter and remembered it is your birthday. How are your feet?”

“They hurt.”

She laughs at the way he says it and he laughs with her. The laughter is interrupted when Prof. Scott inquires as to Katy's knowledge of the Tavern, of which she assures him she possesses very little. A great, long, lesson is begun. If Aaron wants to punch the prof in his big, fat nose for butting in he is assuaged by Katy's hand slipping in to his and staying there, like a silk scarf over a rock, and returning again and again from ventures out to grasp a drink or scratch an ankle. He goes forth from time to time, outside into the coming night, and then under the stars for a cigarette and blow low clouds into the heavens. He knows the stars from the sea. He knows how they shift, how they turn about the world and the drawing of them closer to himself as he comes back, each spring, to Clara. Under them at this spot, in front of the tavern, he knows them and wants them not to change for a night, for many nights, forever. He tosses the cigarettes into the bucket and heads back inside. His hand finds hers. In time, in secret, in a whisper in a crowded room, they kiss.

It feels like...it feels like...lips are soft, yes, there's that and a first kiss, in a crowded bar is invariably a tender kiss at first, rising to a certain level of passion while retaining a modicum of modesty owing to surroundings and such and professors slumped against the wall just adjacent, and there is taste, the fleshy taste of tongue, the taste of lemony beer on her part and ashtrayesque alcohol on his and the haunting notion that kissing is a rather silly thing to do if it didn't feel so good and meant so much. It means to her that she likes him and she will sleep with him tonight and perhaps two or three more times before she starts school and gets entirely too busy for such things and hopefully he'd be off at sea somewhere. They can write letters, or rather, she can imagine the letters she would write to him if she weren't so

busy. To him it means that she might sleep with him tonight either at his place or hopefully hers, and they can get together and he can move in with her and get a job around town and have a few beers after work at the tavern while she studies and then come home to her. She would read him poetry, and he would make fun of it, but be secretly touched and moved and she would know it and keep reading it to him even when he pretended to be asleep. They would have a life together. He would follow her wherever she decided to go after school and if they needed money he'd take a boat and they'd write long letters to each other.

## 11-The Weight of an Anchor

There is a problem with the bill. The problem is that the bill rather exceeds Aaron's positive cash flow and yet, he keeps insisting on paying it. The debate goes something like--

"I got it."

"But you just said you don't have enough."

"It's okay. I got it. Hey! (To Gale) Hey!"

"This is stupid! Just let me pay for it."

"(To Gale) I got this okay?"

"Okay. Cash or card?"

"No. I got it."

"Yeah. Cash or card?"

"I got twenty. I get the rest to you tomorrow."

"What?"

"Just let me get it."

"I didn't bring you flowers! I got this."

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

The problem with the bill arose shortly after Katy had leaned back, taken a big breath, leaned forward again, put her lips to his ear and said, “Why don’t we get a cab and hit the junkyard?” to which Aaron had replied, “Check please!”

Alas, romance has given way to the ancient struggle of barter and commerce, gift and graft, vice and Visa.

“It’s my birthday.”

“I know. The first shots are on me.”

“So, I’ll get the rest to you tomorrow.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Just...” and Katy thrust her card at Gale while Aaron thrust the twenty and each, like so many little leaguers, called out, “I got it!”

“Look,” Gale says, holding the card and the twenty, “I’ll take the twenty and put the rest on the card and you two can sort it out later.”

“I said I got it,” Aaron says, turning red.

“Well, you don’t have it,” Gale retorted over his shoulder, heading for the card machine, “so now she’s getting some of it.”

“Fuck!”

“What is the matter?” She puts her hand on his arm. He feels the drag of it, the mooring, the weight of it, like a fucking anchor.

“I’m supposed to get it.” He is supposed to get it. Since time immemorial he’s been getting it. Time as defined by man, that is, or men rather. Since the first mother back in Africa said to the first father, “I could use some water” and he said, “I got it”, and he went down to the river, fought off the lions and crocodiles and came back with a big gourd of water. Aaron had failed all humanity or at least slightly less than half of it.

“What does it matter?” She looks at him the way a person looks at a dog when it won’t get in the car, the way we look at kids that won’t go to sleep even though they’re beyond tired, the way an osprey looks down from his tree top-perch upon a novice kayaker who can’t find her disposable camera in one of the six pockets in her shirt or the eight in her shorts while the rest of the tour group is snapping away, and by the time she finally does find it, the osprey has flown off in disgust, and in her frustration for missing the picture and the moment she bashes the camera against the kayak; it then pops out of her hand and sinks to the bottom of the bay taking with it the lighthouse pictures and the lobster boat pictures as well as polluting the ocean.

“I’m going for a smoke,” he says and stomps outside.

Katy signs the bill and asks Gale to call them a cab.

“You sure?” Gale gives her a look like the lady in the kayak’s husband gave her as she was putting on her shirt and shorts with all those pockets.

Aaron feels the waves pulling back, building, leaving a barren beach, waiting. Pride where there is nothing to be proud of. He’ll definitely pay her back. All he had left of his mother’s money is that twenty and a couple of ones and some change.

He'll talk to Tom in the morning about doing something in the yard and getting an advance. Tom is always good for a quick job, or Ray might need help at something, or a dozen other people he knows need help sometimes. Why did he have to be broke all the time? Even stepping off ship with 12K in his pocket he already feels broke. He's only been back since the end of April and he's spent it all on his bike, buckwheat blueberry pancakes, and beer. Why cant he be like normal people? Why can't he do the 9-5? He sucked. He'd come back tomorrow and say to Gale that he'd work it off, dish washing or sweeping up or cooking or barback or whatever and then he'd credit her card and then maybe he could stick around doing that, working at the tavern, except getting paid and hang out with Katy. He should call the union and see about a boat and sail away from everyone again. He's only good at sailing away, he thinks.

Aaron feels the waves coming at him. He stands beneath them, in awe, great, high, dark blue waves against the star-lit night sky, and then the world begins to turn as the wave catches him by the feet and pulls him upward, spinning forward as he holds the cigarette to his lips, and then the wave catches with a chunk, and holds him helpless, dangling fifty feet over the sand and then rolls backward, pulling him down into the deep dark. With a rush, with a roar, the wave returns, flings him into the sky, slams him against the seawall then turns him, over and over, over and over in her surf. He drops the cigarette. He bends forward into a ball, hoping to bounced up into the air.

Katy comes out of the tavern. She says, "Are you okay? I called a cab," and slides an arm around Aaron.

He turns on her. He stands. He grabs her face between his cement smelling hands and mashes his lips against hers. She feels the weight of him upon her and his mouth trying to suck the air from her lungs. They fall. He lands on top of her. She is crushed between the asphalt of the parking lot beneath her and the warm, wet, smelly man above. He gasps for air. He throws up on her, all over the little evil kitty ironed on her chest. He rolls off. He lies on the grass, half-way under the bushes, gasping for air. His hands rip at the grass. He pulls chunks of it out and tosses them aside. His fingers dig down into the dark, damp earth. He holds his dirt covered hands up to his face. "This is me," he spits. "This is mine filled up!" Aaron shoves his face into the dirt and drags it back and forth. "Mine, mine, mine," he stutters as he passes out.

## 12-Fucktard

Two guys hanging out, smoking, by the door, help Katy to her feet. They ask her if she's 'okay?'. She says she is. They say she should go inside and wash the puke off but, she says it is 'Okay. He'll just puke on her again on the way home'. They says she shouldn't go home with Aaron. He lives in a junkyard and pretty much falls down drunk most nights he's in town. They say she should go in and wash up, and that they'd see her home if she wants.

Aaron flings out his arms and lolls out his tongue. His eyes wrench open for a second, "Leaves and fishes," he slurs, or something to that effect; it might be 'bees and bushes'. His arm lugs back over himself and he drools. She asks for a cigarette. They give her one. She says thanks and then tells them to 'fuck off.' Just next to the toy box filled with tears that she keeps inside herself is an angry little doll, the kind with ragged red yarn for hair, stitched 'x's' for eyes, one arm hanging by a few slender threads and dark brown blood stains on her torn and tattered dress. The moon hangs fat overhead. She can see stars. She wants to catch a train to Mars. The boys

go back inside with a haughty, 'Whatever!' The streets are empty. Lights flash red and yellow.

"Right now!" she says to herself. "Go home."

She looks over at Aaron. She remembers the horse and how hard he tried and his bloody feet. She can't leave him. She'll get him to his junkyard and wash his feet.

The cab comes and the guy knows Aaron and won't take him because the last two times he did he got puked on once and didn't get paid the other.

"I'll pay you double if you help me get him up."

"What if he pukes?"

"I'll give you a blowjob! Okay! Jesus Christ just help me get him home, okay?"

The cabbie comes over reluctantly and reluctantly they get Aaron up on his feet before folding him into the cab. Aaron blubbers something about fishes. Katy slides in beside him and pulls his head onto her lap. The guy pulls out onto Main Street. They pass below the few street lights and under the dark elms and maple trees in front of the great old houses. She brushes her hand across his face. She sees in it a memory.

The cab rolls past the turn to the freeway, the golf course just past that, and then the fields past the dip and then over the short bridge. They pull into the junkyard. Aaron feels the rolling, swimming, swaying of the road, and then the crunch of the gravel drive. He opens his eyes. Katy is holding him, he can smell her

skin, and the stink and stench on them both and his insides thunder up. He shoots hot, pink, brothy liquid out of his mouth, tracing sickly webs over her jeans and glittering, running streams down the back of the seats. She looks at the cabbie in the rear view mirror.

“Just so you know,” he says. “I’m of mixed emotions.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“What’s wrong with your voice? You sick or something?”

“I’ve got a scratchy voice, okay? All the women in my family have scratchy voices!”

“Just asking. Thought you might be sick. Hey, you know, a bet’s a bet.”

“I was being sarcastic!”

The cabbie winks and goes to open the gate.

The cab stops in front of Aaron’s trailer down the rows of disemboweled trucks and stacked up cars. Katy slides out from under Aaron and looks around. If there were Christmas lights, yes, she thought, it could be romantic. The cabbie pushes and shoves Aaron out of the cab and onto the gravel.

Standing, sweating, huffing and puffing the guy stands looking at Katy and says, “That’s \$54.”

“What?”

“Hey,” he holds out his hands, “I mean, a bet’s a bet but otherwise,” the way he looks at her, wants her, wants her, actually, to do a thing, wants anything like her

to do anything like that thing makes her feel..., “otherwise its \$40 for cleaning the cab and double the \$7 for the ride home.”

“Where do you get \$40?”

Makes her feel... “That’s the rate.”

“Look, I’ll clean it okay.”

...needed. “You can wipe it out all you want but that doesn’t get the smell.

It’s getting the smell that costs \$40. Of course, we could forget the \$40.”

“Well, I charge \$50.”

“When did you talk about charging?”

“That’s the rate.”

He takes a step back and collects his thoughts.

“Well the ride is \$7 and you said you’d pay double.”

“So, I’d owe you \$4.”

He counts it out on his hands.

“I guess so.”

“First you help me get him up into his trailer and then why don’t you clean up your cab a little?”

“Yes, Mam. My name is Dave, by the way.”

“My name is I’m not gonna tell you what my name is.”

“Okay,” Dave says, “but it’s a real small town.”

Dave gets Aaron up under the arms while Katy gets his legs. They hoist him inside the trailer and heave him on top of the small bed-like structure within. Dave

finds a light. Everything inside the trailer is uncomfortably close. He takes a t-shirt from the floor and goes outside to his cab.

Katy makes for the sink and tests it to see if any water comes out. It does. It isn't brown. She washes her face and splashes some on her pants and with the help of a ragged dish towel wipes as much of the puke off of it as she can. She tries to do the same with her top but it only gets soaked so she takes it off. She takes off her bra too. She wipes off her chest and her belly and then mashes the t-shirt and bra around in the small sink under the tap.

Dave appears in the doorway. He holds the vomit stained rag in one hand.

“That got it pretty good.”

“Maybe you should just throw that on the ground.”

“Yeah,” he tosses the rag and on a cigarette butt clustered hub cap rim. “Mind if I wash my hands?” he says, looking at her little pink titties.

Katy squeezes out her t-shirt and rings out her bra. She hangs them on the back of the chair next to the little table next to the bed. “Go ahead,” she says. As he passes by her, his eyes on her tits and then her belly and then her mouth, she steps outside. The stacks of crushed vehicles make a long, dark tunnel with a canopy of stars. She can pick out Orion's belt and the Little Dipper, which is also the Little Bear, she remembers. She can't see the Big Bear. She sits down on a frayed lawn chair that squeaks as she settles into it and puts her head into her hands.

She hears his shoes on the trailer step and then on the gravel.

“Hi, Dave,” she says without looking up.

Dave looks around. Nobody is coming. He can't see any cameras or kids hanging around to play a joke on him. Aaron is passed out. If she does this, he is thinking, God must be shitting him. If they get into the cab and he undoes his pants and gets his cock out and she reaches over for it and strokes it up till he is hard as a nail and she goes down on him. If he reclines his seat as far as it can go and puts his hand on the back of her head, feeling it bob up and down and put his other hand on her back and strokes her back and maybe she lets him reach around and get a hold on them titties of hers. That would be the second best night of his life, maybe the third. The first is that night in Germany.

She is still sitting there and then she starts to cry.

“Well, alright then if you're gonna cry forget about it.” He kicks some gravel.  
“But you still owe me \$14 for the ride.”

She looks up at him. The tears running down her face, the stars over head, the junk all around her make her beautiful. “What the fuck am I doing in Maine, Dave?”

“Sorry?”

“I'm in fucking Maine!”

“I like Maine.”

“You're from Maine, right?”

“Syracuse.”

“Oh,” she wipes away a tear with the back of her hand.

“They have these greeters at the airport for when we came back. I was in the Army and all the transports stop in Bangor to refuel and they let you off for an hour or more and there's these greeters there, 2 a.m. and they're there shaking hands and

saying how proud they are of you. I thought that was nice. So when things didn't work out in Syracuse, I moved to Maine. I like it well enough."

"That's nice, Dave."

"It is, yeah."

"I'm from Houston. Do you know what's in Houston?"

"Cowboys?"

"Nope."

"Space shuttle?"

"Nope. They're in Florida. Mission Control is in Houston. Actually, Clear Lake which didn't used to be Houston but then it got annexed so now it is Houston. Houston's a big city. Four million people. Ninety miles across in some spots."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Space. A lot of space getting filled up with nothing. Space is nothing. It's a void. When I was little, me and Celia went back behind the neighborhood to the bushes to run around and we came along this trail when all of a sudden this Great Blue Heron flies up out of a ditch and up into the sky and Celia and I are scared to death and then just in awe. Now there's a street there. Streets are empty, you know what I mean? Nothing lives on a street. We say we live on such and such street, but we don't. We live next to it. Nothing lives on a street. If it did, it would get run over, you see my point? The guy I left in Houston, he's empty. You try to fill him up but there's too much space, so its never enough, and then you're dying trying to save this guy, which you can't, because first he gets vertigo and then he becomes a heroin addict, which you don't even realize because you both work

nights in bars and come home late and usually fucked up and you just figure he doesn't want you anymore or care anymore! You scream at him but he isn't fucking listening! He's on the couch staring at the back of his arm so you drink a lot and fuck around a lot looking for something to fill up that nothing he's left you with but, let's face it," she looks up at Dave, "you can't. And just when you think you can't ever, never ever, you finally catch him with a needle in his arm. There's this big scene. You confess to all the fucks you've fucked but you end up crying in each other's arms saying its going to be better. He goes into rehab. You start to plan to get on with your life and you wonder how far away from Houston can the two of you get and still bring the cat, so you apply for grad schools far away from the void, you end up in Maine, the State of Maine! I've liked that since I first read it. Good thing too because here I am. Alone. When he got out he didn't want me anymore because I'm a bad influence, with all the drinking and fucking around," she says as she presses her hands together. "Got the cat, though. He's a great cat. I found him under a car, covered in oil and fleas."

"That is nice of you to take him in."

"Thanks, Dave." She starts to shiver in the cold, night air. "And then this beautiful horse died. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Sure."

"You don't, but thanks."

"Sure."

"Well..."

Dave crunches some gravel under his feet. “Give me \$5 and we’ll call it even.”

“You don’t want the blowjob?”

“Sure...I mean hell!” he kicks at the gravel, crunching it up. “Who wouldn’t but,” smoothing it out, “you’re just being smart.”

She stands, her tits jingling, and shoves her hand into one of the pockets of her jeans. She pulled out a five.

“You got change?” she asked.

“For what?”

“You owe me \$1 change.”

“For what?”

“\$14 for the ride, \$40 for the cleaning is \$54 minus the \$50 is \$4.”

“No tip?”

“Don’t get fucking funny, Dave.”

As she bobs up and down on his meatstick, Katy thinks about Proust and the endless sentence. What’s the point of a period anyway? Does life happen in phrases? Are not all thoughts fragments, she wonders? And if all thoughts are fragments should they not be combined with ellipses rather than the period? Why does one dot signify the end of thought while three are the eternal fading of that thought? Are thoughts fractal? Will the center hold? Are all propositions equal? Is the universe whole? Who has ownership of language, when all language may be so easily abused by the imposition of dots?

Katy feels the quick, sticky burst hit the inside of her cheek and his cock pulsing its last throes. She rises from him and smiles a small, close lipped, saliva smeared smile.

“Oh, baby!” He says, his head lolling back and then rising up to look at her. “You can spit it out. It’s cool.”

And so she does. She spits the glob of goo at him. It hits him in the right eye and proceeds to slither down his nose.

“What the fuck!”

“I give you this gift and you presume an ownership dialectic,” she says and gets out of the cab. “Fucktard.”

She looks up to the stars and then spits again upon the ground. The milky, gooey semen spit clings to the dark gray rocks.

“Crazy, fucking bitch!” Dave calls, wiping the come off his face and slapping his meat back in its holster. “I was gonna give you a ride back for free!”

He had undone his pants and gotten his cock out and she had reached over for it and stroked it up till he is hard as a nail and she had gone down on him. He reclined his seat as far as it would go and put his hand on the back of her head, feeling it bob up and down and put his other hand on her back and stroked her back and she even let him reach around and get a hold on them titties of hers. It had been the third best night of his life after Germany and that time in Rochester right up until she spit on him.

“Goodnight, Dave.”

“Crazy, fucking bitch!” With a high whistle, the roar of an engine and a rumble of tires on gravel Dave recedes like a wave. Katy is left standing before the trailer shivering slightly, smiling ever so sardonically.

She goes in and finds a not too disgusting t-shirt to pull on. Aaron snores. She takes the pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and opens them. He has five left. She finds a half-used book of matches on the floor and smokes, sitting in the doorway of the trailer, looking out at the long dark tunnel and the stars. She washes out her mouth at the sink with some toothpaste squeezed out of a much abused tube and then smokes another cigarette at the little table, staring at Aaron, listening to him snore.

She begins smacking the side of her head with her fist. She does this four times until it hurts very much, and then she stops. She holds her fist in front of her face, squeezing and feeling the utter weakness of it. Some things, like trying to go down to a river and eat a muffin are just stupid. There are flies everywhere.

She crushes out the cigarette and stands, looking down at Aaron lying in his filth and wallow. It is an all-too-familiar and comfortable bed.

### 13-The Lifeguard

Aaron surfaces from the murky depths of night around 5 a.m. His head feels like a brass balloon that keeps clanging against a cement casement and his bladder like a bowling ball. Katy sleeps beside him. He looks at her and wonders what she is doing there. He remembers falling down into the bushes. He feels as if one of those piles of junk outside is falling on him, never collapsing completely but falling and falling on him. She is like the coast of Turkey, a smooth white and freckled face lightly dusted by the dawn. He wants to reach out and touch her face and play with her hair, but there is a distance. He feels if he reaches out to her, he would not even cross the bow of the ship. He could dive overboard and swim for it but distances are deceiving and the crumpled surface of the blanket she drifts on holds unknown currents. She is asleep. He is awake. There is distance.

He stands, finds two cigarettes left in the pack on the table and lights one. He takes off his clothes, stumbling and smacking himself against the walls of the trailer, trying to keep from dropping the cigarette and waking up Katy. She sleeps. Even as he pees, she sleeps.

“It’s not my birthday,” he thinks as the last, clear tinkles fall from him and he mashes the cigarette butt out in an empty tuna fish can. Aaron squeezes into the small shower, trying to peel off the layers of fuzz with cold water. He gets out, snatches up a slightly damp towel and dries off enough to pull on some boxers and a white t-shirt from the laundry bag under the table. He decides to wait on the last cigarette until he is ready to go out and get more. He has half a glass of water from the sink and then slips down next to Katy, putting his hand on her hip. She is still in her jeans but has on one of his shirts. Her eyes open.

“Do you know what it takes to save something?” she says, her voice soft, soothing and gentle.

“What?”

“More than you’ve got. More than you’re willing to give. And chances are you’ll die too.”

“That horse almost killed me trying to save it.”

“There you go.” She closes her eyes but before he can say something else they open again and his mouth moves shut. “I can’t save you Aaron. I didn’t come to Maine to save people.” Her voice begins to rise, the nails within it pulling across a blackboard.

Katy sits up. She stands. She goes into the little bathroom and pees. Aaron waits. She comes out. She strips off the dingy shirt. Aaron thinks he might be getting a little bit of early morning action but she isn’t even looking at him. She puts on her own damp things. She takes up the last cigarette and lights it. Standing in the doorway, she turns to him and says, “I had to give Dave the cabbie a blowjob because

you puked in the back of his car.” She points at him with the cigarette. “Just think about that the next time, okay?”

“Jesus,” he calls after her as she marches through the corridor of rusted trucks, “you should have just left me in the bushes!”

## Epilogue

Aaron takes a ship shortly thereafter. Prior to his departure their eyes meet once at Lori's. He comes in for coffee, and she is getting a muffin. They are both acutely aware that this is precisely how the whole thing started and avoid any prolonged unpleasantness by ignoring each other completely, but still, the other hangs on the edges of sight, like a smudge on one's glasses and, proverbially speaking, Katy drags Aaron out of the café like an unnoticed ribbon of toilet paper, and she clings under his skin like a curled up leg hair that one picks at absently when there's nothing better to do on a hot, summer day while standing watch on the Indian Ocean.

Katy manages to finish her Proust novel shortly before the fall semester begins. She teaches English 101 and takes a Contemporary Criticism class. She briefly dates an Engineer she meets at a grad social, but their schedules and base structures never seem to work out. She turns her head whenever she sees a cab coming down the road and never calls one herself, though she does find herself in one coming back from Bangor after a late night, but that is in the company of three other students and the cabbie is not Dave. She stays in town over break, and in the spring signs up for Modern British Poetry and Semiotics of Thought. She is dashing out of

the pharmacy with a new bottle of eco-friendly dish washing detergent and some cat food on a cold and snowy March morning when she looks up and sees Aaron helping an old woman down the sidewalk in front of Sammy's.

I see Aaron happen to look up at that precise moment. Their eyes meet. He smiles. Katy smiles back and waves to him. He can't wave. Both of his hands are occupied with the old woman. There is in an implied wave. Katy darts off into the snow and back home to feed her cat and do the dishes.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Travis Baker was born in Boston, MA in 1970. He was raised in the suburbs of Houston, Texas and graduated from Friendswood High School in 1988. He attended the Savanna College of Art and Design (Illustration Major), and the University of Houston (Theatre Major) before ultimately receiving his Bachelor of Arts-Creative Writing from New York Univeristy in 2004.

Travis Baker lived in New York City for ten years, during which time he had numerous plays produced both Off-and Off-Off-Broadway including: *Cold, The Weatherbox* and *God & Mr. Smith* and was a recipient of an Edward F. Albee Foundation Fellowship in 1997 and a Berilla Kerr Award in 1998. While in New York he found employment as a scenic artist, stage hand, book store clerk, temp and for four years at NYU's Metropolitan Center for Urban Education as an administrative aide and data coordinator for the Team Success Program, a tutoring program for over three thousand NYC public school students per year. Travis currently teaches College Composition within the Department of English as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. His fiction work has been published in the Stolen Island Review, the Acacia Conference Journal, Theatrewarehouse.com, and The Online Learning Center. *Clara-an elsewhere* is tentatively scheduled to be published in the New English Press, a division of MAMMOTH Books later this year.

Travis Baker lives with his wife, Holly, son, Zane, dog, Peanut Bear and cats, Edgar, Julia and Clara Bow in Orono, Maine where he hopes to stay, write and continue to teach. Travis is a candidate for a Master of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing at the University of Maine in May, 2006.