AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Robert N. Burns for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in the co-departments of English, Writing, and Journalism presented on May 23, 1989.
Title: Counseling

Abstract approved: Redacted for Privacy
Jon Lewis, Associate Professor of English

Counseling is a novel in three parts structurally and metaphorically comparing and contrasting the workings of the brain and mind.

Through the story of a man recovering from a head injury I am creating a world in the text which equates the schizophrenia of postmodern criticism with the literal problems associated with such an injury. My character relates his tale in a first person narrative, predominantly in journal-entry form; however, the time sequence is deliberately nonlinear.

The plot follows the character from the initial accident, of which he has no memory, through his hospital stay, and over the course of his recovery, about three years. He becomes increasingly fascinated with movies, equating his present and past circumstances to various films, and eventually he takes a job in a theatre, a job which offers him a safe haven to watch the world.

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Counseling

by

Robert N. Burns

A THESIS

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APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Jon Lewis, Associate Professor of English

Redacted for Privacy

Tracy Daugherty, Assistant Professor of English

Redacted for Privacy

Rob Phillips, Professor of Journalism

Redacted for Privacy

Bob Frank, Chairman of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

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COUNSELING

In the field of the subject,
there is no referent.

Roland Barthes

It all started when this guy came back and called me an asshole.

He had this two bit entertainment guide and he held it up and pointed to where the shows were listed and said, "You're not above reproach, asshole."

Though I turned a little red, the lights covered me. I wasn't too impressed except the guy looked genuinely crazy. But if he read that cheesy tabloid he was holding like a shield, it wasn't my fault. It printed terrible reviews, not just of films, but records, plays and everything else. I felt sorry for the little girl he was tugging along. Not his daughter, more like a groupie. She looked at me with stringy brown hair, like gravy, and her stoned eyes were proud of him, for Christsakes.

Some people think I swear too much. They say it's like a disease. Well, I tell you what happened. I got most of an undergraduate B.A. in English, at a good school mind you, and it ruined me on words forever. I mean I read all this stuff, for years, and it was the world's most expensive reading list and I lost all faith in words. Like the number of lock washers in the front half of a Buick, all words became equal: a commune of words.

Sure, I'd heard my dad mumble "shit" under his breath and then say "shoot" more loudly, but this was different. From Milton to Mickey Mouse—Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained?—it was all the same to me. I even had a professor once who quoted me to the whole class. He said, "Tell us all what you said to me after class on Friday about words."

I was sitting in the back of the room with my feet up on the desk in front, twirling a pen in my fingers. I wanted a cigarette. "I said the dictionary is a cemetery where words go to die."

Doubleplusgood, but I'd stolen it from Cortazar two years before.

When I was a sophomore, in fact.

Anyway, this guy and his chick are standing there, all bent, probably in more ways than one.

What had happened was this. They showed up, bought two tickets, had a whole bag of their own candy, too, and watched the entire first feature. Then, after the final credits, after the house lights came on full, he wanted their money back.

They'd sat all the way through Privilege and thought it was Performance. I'd spent the whole show counting money and thinking about Steven Shorter and humming "Born in the USA" and these two were waiting for Mick Jagger.

Weird. So I looked at the guy and said, "Whose problem is that?" (Something I'd learned from a counseling book.)

They stomped out, probably did some more blow, and came back with the paper.

"You're not above reproach, asshole."

PART 1

It's so easy to slip,
It's so easy to fall...
And let your memory drift
And do nothing at all

Lowell George and
Little Feat

Day O

"Station one hundred for a code three ambulance to Highway ninety-nine and Greenberry Road for a motor vehicle accident."

"One twenty-one ten-one to highway ninety-nine and Greenberry Road.

"One twenty-one ten-two with one car off the road.

"Corvallis ambulance one twenty-one to Good Samaritan Hospital."

"Good Samaritan Hospital. Go ahead one twenty-one."

"Good evening Good Samaritan, ninety-four twenty-one. We're enroute to your location code three at this time with a thirty-six year old male patient who's the victim of a single car versus tree accident. No doctor preference.

"Patient was the driver and only occupant of a small sedan which left the road and hit a tree. Patient was not wearing a seat belt.

"Patient was found ambulatory but disoriented, apparently having extricated himself prior to our arrival. At this time patient is oriented times two. Chief complaint is upper back pain and severe headache. Patient exam reveals a small hematoma posterior to the right ear. At this time the vitals are one twenty-eight over seventy-six. Pulse is seventy-six and respirations are labored at twelve with patient indicating pain on inspiration. Lung sounds are clear and the chest rise is equal bilaterally. Skin is cool and somewhat moist. Patient's pupils are unequal, but reactive to light.

"We have the patient on a long back-board with C-spine precautions.

Oh-two being administered via mask at six litres and we have an IV established of Ringer's Lactate. We're about fifteen minutes out. Do you have any questions or orders?"

"No questions or orders. Good Samaritan standing by."

Day 30

To start I really only need two things, a title and a voice.

The last comes easy, the result of an analogic picture album, a bunch of home movies, and an electric typesetting keyboard. Because the machine won't keep going once I leave it—wouldn't that be nice, like a videocam panning the bank of my mind—the voice comes easy. Uptown or down, it's really not a case of me pushing buttons, it's me being pushed, a mental traffic cop telling where to park and what it costs. Like the Notel Motel with the hourly rates, my pen moves like magic fingers, like color TV, like the large mirror and Picasso print, the hangers that won't come off, always hanging there waiting for a job interview suit; my pen moves, sanitized for my protection, through rooms, out by the pool, into the bar.

My pen is also the Roach Motel in the city where there's no map, where the busses speak without understanding. The pen never sleeps.

The title should be easy; just pick it and go, the checkered flag on Memorial Day. Epicycloid is catchy, but then so is Postmodern Lover, and that's too corny. These days, even espresso bars are postmodern and everything goes in circles: including those Dawn of Man time lines above the chalk board in elementary school that truck around the room ending and beginning above the door.

It wasn't till later I was conscious of all this. At first it was the cats. That's all I could think of was cats, the one Shelly and I had when we were married, the one that disappeared, one that got run over, and the others, too, all of them male—well, ex-male. I was coming in and out of it propped in the hospital bed and I was thinking for some reason of cats, warm in my lap with morning coffee, Henry at my shoulder whenever I'd get stoned in

the car, even the stray we thought was a female till Shelly waded through the fur and found out it'd been a male, too.

They were telling me I had the shortest Volvo in the state and I was lucky to be alive. I had no memory. They spoke of CAT scans and MRI's and I thought of nothing but touching my nose and following the flashlight beam every two hours. Pills were every six, more often if I could. I knew the night nurse, I'd met her at some party, I was sure; didn't know her name anymore, but she was nice.

I needed the cats to put order to my life. I hadn't forgotten everything, just the accident. One car, just me, late at night, not drunk. So they could tell me. And they could tell me how many broken ribs, which fractured vertebrae, cracked skull and all about the popped aneurysm deep in my brain tissue that they couldn't operate on. Then there were the drugs: narcotics for seizure activity, codeine at first for pain, later Motrin, and something to soften stools so I wouldn't crack another vertebrae trying to pass a softball—no lie.

That was later; at first I wasn't hungry.

Trigger. The kind of cat that, when you were a kid, would come when you called and Mom never got mad at him because he didn't scratch furniture or climb drapes. Twice he went back across town, over twenty miles, to where we used to live, across freeways and everything. The old neighbors found him and called to tell us. I wanted to go back with him because the new house was nothing but more lawn to mow and Dad still only paid fifty cents. The third time we went back and got him he finally stayed at our new house.

I had my own room, too, in that house so I put posters on the ceiling,

Cream and Jimi Hendrix, I remember, and I put the bed kitty-corner to the wall. Mom and Dad'd promised me I could decorate it like I wanted so the windows were all black trim and the walls white with a foot-wide chartreuse stripe going around at an angle. It took six months to do because I wouldn't decide anything till Trigger stayed. Then I got a lava lamp and a Spock poster and played "2000 Light-years from Home" a lot. I made some new friends at the new school, mostly because I had a drum set and we could jam in the basement, and I forgot about my old ones.

I never felt like I mattered to anyone, though, till Rich found the keys to his brother's Army jeep one night when the whole family was out. He called me—I knew how to drive a stick but none of us had licenses—and I went over and we went and picked up his other friends. We drove to school and skidded around the track and baseball diamond. We tore out as much lawn as possible and in four-wheel we could go up and down these mounds. We tried the front steps, but couldn't make it.

Then we went to the country club, like six of us by now in the jeep, and we had a chain so we pulled out a chunk of fence and cruised the golf course; did nine holes, too. It was true rebellion to attack and run down every hole marker as we went. Sand traps were especially fun, but we almost got stuck in one. After we rocked the jeep out, Rich said he wished he'd brought his clubs.

Later we parked and I was making out on the lawn with Sally—was that her name?—and it was the first time I ever got second base. We were rolling around on each other and I thought she'd suck my tongue right out of my head and I just touched her and she moaned and kissed me so hard I could feel her braces.

I could hardly even feel her breast through her stiff, very padded bra, but it was something I'd dreamt about for so long, I probably had lead poisoning or something from Playboy pictures. I was humping her leg like a toy poodle, so excited I could've messed my shorts, and the sprinklers went on. All over. She screamed and bit my tongue. I looked up and saw Rich pulling up his pants for Christsakes. And his girlfriend was pulling down her dress. I don't know why, but I was shocked and just stared. Then Sally hit me on the arm and yelled, "Move."

For some reason, I never felt the same about Trigger after that. I don't know what he had to do with anything. I took him for granted as I learned to play the saxophone and stayed out late. He still slept on my bed, but left when I turned on the record player. He lived a long time, till after I dropped out and moved west. Then Dad died and Mom had him put to sleep and she went on a long trip around the world.

Day 705

Dear Dad,

I remember all your clocks, from ten till to ten after: bongs and rings and chimes.

Ticks and tocks all night.

I used to hate that Swiss cuckoo clock: every fifteen minutes.

You might like to know Mom gave me one after you died—your watch, too, and it made it through the accident: better than a Timex.

The clock's on the dresser. It's the Seth Thomas mantle clock with the two-tone chimes, so smooth and mellow, like tuning forks. I used to adjust them every couple months to keep them ringing right. Did you know that? The hammers hit on a slight angle and slowly move the chimes until the sound isn't right: too metallic.

But when I put the clock in my house, I didn't wind the chimes. Not for years and years. I didn't want to hear that noise surrounded by all the silence of all the clocks that weren't ringing.

Now, I keep it wound all the time. It's one musical sound that doesn't bother my ears.

Day 1

The nurse comes in with my meds. Later I don't know if I dreamt all these memories or thought them or just remembered them weeks later and fit them into my hospital stay. But she does help me turn over and rearrange the big pillows between my legs.

Day 2

"I feel like I have a pencil up my ear," I say.

I'd been admitted and slept and now my neurologist is telling me she doesn't like the original CAT Scan—I think of seven inch cat eyes with huge pupils—so they need to do another one with a tracer.

"A tracer? Like night scenes on Combat?"

She looks at me funny, as if I don't make sense, but keeps on talking while probing me with her little doctor's flashlight. It's got more attachments than a new Kirby. "You've definitely got something going on in there... I'd like someone else to have a look."

After two other med types take their time and say "hmmm" a lot, they decide to send me down to X-Ray first. I ease into my Property of Good Samaritan Hospital wheelchair and get pushed over to the elevators. The candy-striper pushes the button.

Normally I wouldn't let somebody ferry me around like this, but right now I don't care. What with the codeine and all, they could cut off my feet and I'd watch the pretty patterns of blood.

So I don't talk to her; don't even pay attention to what she looks like.

In X-Ray I don't have to wait and it makes me suspicious. The night before,in emergency, it took four hours to examine me. And this morning I had to wait for the technician to explain all about the EEG machine, too, all about how they could goober the little electrodes and stick them to my head or how they could use different ones and just poke them into my skull "even though it might hurt a little bit."

I know all about electricity; my journeyman card's upstairs in room 12-whatever-it-was. I didn't care. If he'd had a sixteen penny nail and a

framing hammer I would've rung for the nurse and asked for a couple more pills.

I shrugged. "Which works best?"

"Well, I get a better reading off the probes." While he's talking he's reaching under his work table and he pulled out another tray of wire and stuff. The little needles reminded me of miniature soldering gun tips. I wondered if he always did that: had the sharp ones ready to go while displaying the patches and the conductive jelly. "You see, the patches can sometimes come loose and foul up the results because they look like they're still in place but they're not giving a good reading and then we have to do this all over again."

Ouch, the first one goes in. "How do you know where they go?"

"Oh, it's not that exact."

"How many more?" All I saw was a mess of wires all hooked to a machine that looked like a sound mixer I saw at a Grateful Dead concert.

"Almost done," he said, sticking them all over my head.

"Quantity, not quality," I mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." But I was thinking about Slyvia Plath and shaking the electrodes loose.

Meanwhile, here I am in X-Ray and the guy is putting me in this totally weird position on the table. I mean I'm curled over with my opposite ear flat on the table; I'm telling you flat with my shoulder scrunched and my neck bent and he says, "Hold still."

Right. This is something I wouldn't do even with a healthy back, even for sex with an acrobat.

"Hold still," he says and comes back over and moves my head again.

"It hurts," I say.

"Hold still," he says.

I look towards the door to see if my helper is there—maybe this guy is a licensed technical sadist—but she's nowhere to be seen.

"Hold still," he says. Then I hear a bunch of clicks and hums.

He comes back a changed man, as if he'd just gotten the dose I did.

"You have headaches?"

"Yeah." Like he needs to ask this right after what he did to me.

"Wait right there." He goes flying out and now I'm really wondering. First no wait and now he actually runs: for me. I must be really fucked up.

When he comes back he's much more calm. "We're going to do a couple more and send you right back up to Dr. Florenza's office. She wants to see these right away."

The next shots don't hurt as bad, but I'm not paying attention. They told me I wrecked my car; that's what they said last night—I don't remember. But now I'm sure it's the big Ca or something. What's going on? They scraped, spread, tested, took, poked, and probed every last spot of my flesh last night. What's left?

In the elevator I rip open the package and look at the negatives. My volunteer—she really is wearing a striped tunic over her street clothes—says, "You shouldn't do that."

I'm looking at my skull, virtually life-size, with a black line across it that looks like a pinstripe on a low rider Chevy. It could be a bad butt job on two pieces of doorway molding, like the saw wasn't cutting right.

Then, after more waiting, Dr. Florenza is telling me, "You're bleeding

through the crack into your inner ear causing pressure on your ear drum. If it doesn't stop you could lose your hearing in that ear. You may also experience some dizziness or balance problems."

Never mind I earn much of my livelihood on a ladder, running wires, hanging lights, etc. What about my Selmer alto sax and my Ornette Coleman collection and Professor Longhair and Bob Marley?

I ask if I can go lay down for a while before the CAT Scan. She says. "Sure."

Outside the office I notice the volunteer for the first time. I wonder who died that she feels obligated to do time here in the hospital. Her silver hair is perfectly piled, as if she just came from the beauty shop. Her diamond looks like it could pay my entire bill and it twinkles as she flips the page of a Psychology Today. I can tell she knows it was not good news because she keeps quiet and her feet tap tap faster down the halls than before, on the way out. When we get to my wing, I mumble, "Thanks."

"You're welcome." And I twitch when she touches my shoulder.

The aides put me to bed and arrange the pillows, one for my head and two more around my legs. I ask the nurse for some juice and more codeine.

Day 365

Dear accident,

Today's my anniversary and I don't know what kind of flowers to buy. What do you think, black orchids, red roses or white clover, the four leaf kind?

I almost died; drove off the road and landed upside down in the ditch. At least I think I drove. I don't remember. In fact, what's left of the car probably remembers better than I do: a couple broken ribs, the usual lacerations, a fractured back and the clincher a cracked skull, a good one, too, from the back left all the way past my right ear. When I saw the X-Ray it looked like a huge canal across Ray Bradbury's Mars.

The problem was this—most of the rest would heal with a lot of yogurt and ice cream—the problem was the aneurysm, my aneurysm, located deep in the, no, my brain tissue right above my thalamus. I saw it, too, on the MRI negative, twelve shots of my brain like an egg yoke in a teaspoon. And I saw the subdermal hematomas, the bruised frontal and temporal lobes...you get the idea.

But the aneurysm: fate, chance, accident, weakness? Was it the reason or the result? Did it pop like a defective rubber on a too busy prick? Or did it blow when I hit the windshield, a healthy oil well?

Anyway, I flunked the EEG. Funny I should use that verb, but that's what it felt like. They called it "seizure activity." I was suddenly a Ford flathead firing on four instead of eight; the result was months of hard narcotics, Dilantin, every night before bed. I begged to stop and when I did I was the original cold turkey junkie.

I came across this quote I've been trying to digest. It's from

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross: "I'm not okay, you're not okay, but that's okay."

That's why I don't know what kind of flowers to buy because I've been coming at this from another side. Somebody in my dream said, "I'd forgive you if I could, but I can't."

Somewhere, those two statements should meet. There ought to be a flower for that, or a bush, a shrub. something.

My last EEG was pretty good. Even the technician, the one with all the pins who flashed hypnotic lights at me and watched pointers make scribbles on miles of paper, he said—with a smile, "I can't tell you ever had anything wrong with you."

Nothing that machine could test, anyway.

Strength? I'm a survivor? Luck? Like how I got a really low draft number? Fate? I'm a walking talking Borges time bomb? I don't know. If I'm acting funny make me touch my nose with my finger; shine a flashlight beam back and forth and see if my eyes can follow. Buy me some flowers, your choice.

Day 730

Dear Dad,

You were sick all those months with the cancer that finally got your liver. Then they wouldn't give you any more chemotherapy.

The only thing you ever said: "I don't want to be buried there"—when we drove by this cemetery where ten years before you'd bought some plots.

At 9:30 you said, clear as a bell, "Good night."

I slept on the couch in the den.

7:30 a.m.: you weren't cold, but you weren't hot: no pulse at your neck, mouth slightly open.

You were wearing blue pajamas. I called upstairs to Mom and went out to the garage and sat in your red Cadillac—smoked a joint.

A question I've been asking: was your silence out of strength or out of weakness?

Day 400

The two girls are late, but don't seem to care.

The first is chewing a huge wad of gum. She has a lock of curly purple hair that hangs over her left eye; the rest of her head is blond. "For Decline of Western Civilization?" she says and holds out a twenty.

Her friend isn't moving. "That's for two?" I ask.

"One. When does it start?"

"About twelve minutes ago." I give her change.

She shrugs and looks at her friend. The friend is wearing an old bomber coat, at least three sizes too big—it could be her dad's. From the pockets she pulls pennies, quarters, some dimes and a nickel.

It takes me a full minute to count it all. "Still thirty-eight cents short." I look at the first one and she hands me back a five.

As they walk in, the bomber coat is whispering to the purple curl and giggling.

"No," the first one says out loud. She looks back at me and flips her hair. "No, he's not a hippie. He's a '70s hippie." And the door swings shut.

Day 7

The strangest thing occurred to me this morning: my brain is in little pieces, little parts that do different things. I know because after a couple days in the hospital I wanted to read a book.

I asked Michelle on the phone to bring me some stuff and she showed up with the new Mother Jones, an Utne Reader, and a Raymond Chandler.

I couldn't read a goddamn page, not even the large print of the ads. My eyes wouldn't focus. It didn't make sense. It's not fair; I always read when I'm sick.

Later, at Michelle's, I tried to listen to some Robert Cray. It hurt like the Clavius scene in 2001; I had to hold my ears just to walk over and shut it off.

Then today I wrote Michelle a check for groceries. The handwriting's bad, but it always was. I filled in the stub and did the math, seven minus three leaves four, fourteen minus six leaves eight. Broke. I could see that, fuzzy or otherwise, but I did the numbers in my head and it hit me: I couldn't concentrate on a printed page, it hurt, but I could do math just like before. I mean I never had trouble keeping checks and things straight; I never needed a solar-powered calculator in my checkbook. Numbers were always easy for me.

I started to cry. A calculator could do my checkbook, but not read The Long Goodbye.

"Everything you've ever heard about Little Feat and drugs," he paused, "is absolutely true."

My next cat, Juno. Whenever I think of him, I hear this line. We were carrying the mixer down the aisle, setting up for the show that night and the sound guy was talking a mile a minute. I'd met him before, some big beard and cowboy boots, because he'd done other shows with us. We were in Hancher Auditorium on the University of Iowa campus and I was a member of a student production group doing shows in this hall. It was the first, and last, concert we ever did through a promoter.

I was living with Shelly in a cheesy duplex out on Muscatine. We'd been worried that the landlady'd be down on us for not being married, but she was blind to most everything. Juno came from across town at Black's Gaslight Village, a strange mixture of houses all in the same block, all rented by Theatre and Lit types. We knew somebody up there who'd adopted this kitty because the neighbors were feeding him acid. He was a runted little thing, a tuxedo cat with a white face and boots. He followed us on walks around the neighborhood, even in the snow, and he was forever jumping into closed windows. But he was affectionate, with a great little motor and he made cute buzzing noises instead of "meows."

For Hancher Productions I did day-of-show stuff, getting equipment, picking people up, going to the liquor store. The roadies for the bands always thought we should get them high, but we always felt like taking care of ourselves. In fact, we reserved dressing room number one just for us. Of course we had nice seats reserved, too.

I'd already been up to Cedar Rapids that day to get a Leslie cabinet for the warm-up band's organist, a group called Orleans. Later, after the

show at the party (Lowell George left early but I got stoned with Paul Barrère) somebody asked the bass player in Orleans how much he made a week. The guy looked up real fast, over his Scotch, with big eyes, and said, "I don't think it's any of your business."

Anyway, we're moving stuff around, unloading the truck; the Hancher people're there, too, nervous as always that some rock and roller will pee on the expensive piano or something, but it was going real smooth. You never knew what would happen, though, like the time Jerry Jeff Walker flew to Ames instead of Iowa City, or a bunch of women from the Black Student Union met Stanley Turrentine at the airport and nobody saw him again all day until he walked on stage twenty minutes into the show.

Little Feat went almost perfect, perfect except for the promoters. Doing a show's like any other business. There's the budget for the talent, the cost of the hall and ushers, the food and drinks (usually specified in the contract to the last bottle of beer), and any number of other costs, from campus cops and ROTC to handle parking to printing the posters and tickets. Some costs stay the same, hall rental for instance, while some vary widely.

Then the whole show's on a percentage.

The band would get so much guaranteed and then a cut of the gross, say, $5,000 up front and fifty percent over $11,000. In a place like Hancher with not quite three thousand seats, at five dollars each, the potential would be almost fifteen grand. So Hancher Productions would have to make the minimum, the expenses, and then split the remainder with the band.

For Little Feat we were suddenly only the in-betweeners. Hancher

handled ticket sales, we provided the hall, the promoters did the rest. It went like this. After the show got underway, we met in the box office. The two promoters were like Mutt and Jeff, tall and thin, short and fat. We all counted up the receipts, we got our share. No problem there. Then they scooped their share into a metal briefcase and locked it on Mutt's wrist, a share some thousands bigger than figured. Mrs. Gillespie, the wiz box office manager at Hancher just watched them walk off into the night with her mouth open. We could guess how they did it, padded this and that, but we never figured it out. And we saw it all right there in front of us.

Day 1

When they finally admit me, it must be hours later, the nurse says, "Smoking room or non?"

It dawns on me I haven't had a cigarette. And I don't want one.

"Non," I say, amazed.

It was fall in the very early '70s.

I met Shelly in Rhetoric class, the writing/speech class that everyone had to take at U of I. I watched her across the room, bell bottoms, hips and that thin waist, a burgundy or dark blue leotard, short curly hair, very dark. She talked with her hands and always tapped a cigarette out of her pack on the way out of class. I wondered why she waited; the instructor, this skinny grad student, chain-smoked all hour long.

Shelly smoked Kools. The only time I ever bummed one from her we were driving someplace and I almost put the car in the ditch. I myself bought the very lightest Sail pipe tobacco and rolled my own with Club papers. She told me later she thought I was weird at first because of my strange habits like rolling cigs and wearing clogs. And I always talked in class.

I wanted to ask her out for weeks, but never got closer than, "What did you think of the reading assignment?"

We'd chat and I found out her brother was a senior and lived off campus so she lived with him. That made her even cooler; I was stuck on the eleventh floor of Reinow One Dormitory. But it worked out okay in the long run. My roommate, this nerd from South America who trimmed his nose hairs every Friday night and went looking for chicks, he flunked out and I had a single the rest of the year.

They showed movies on the weekend in the dorm lounge, usually Wait Until Dark or something like that. One weekend it was In Cold Blood and I had to see it and that pushed me over the edge to ask Shelly out. She said yes and didn't even act surprised. Just turned her head to one side and narrowed her eyes, then smiled as she shook out her match.

I felt so collegiate all week, having a date, even when I had to get a jump start on my Jag. It was a '61 Mark 2 sedan, all rusty with a couple scrapes. The red leather was torn in spots and it leaked oil like a sonofabitch. But it was cool. We used to take it to the drive-in, too, and climb in the back seat.

I pulled up in front of her brother Brendon's place, a clap-trap house with a sagging porch and she bounced down the steps and stopped, looking all over the car before nodding her head and opening the door. She torched a Kool and flipped the match out the window, the narrow eyes and the smile coming my way again.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"A Dodge Dart would've been okay. Is it yours?"

I looked at her, shifted into fourth. "A car to last my lifetime. Nobody else'd be dumb enough to buy it."

"My daddy used to drive an Alfa coupe when I was a kid. Till it got rear ended on the way home from the liquor store...Before that he had an Avantii."

"Oh, yeah? What happened to it?"

"Sold it after Brendon crunched it."

Shelly was from Evanston, she said. Her mom taught at Northwestern. She was never clear what her dad did, but he did it downtown and he drank a lot. There were gobs of Northside Chicago kids in Iowa City; seemed like most of them wanted to get away from their parents but Eastern Iowa was as far as the money went.

Shelly wanted to teach, too, "not little kids, but before their hormones all kick in."

We got to the dorm just as the show started and we had to sit up front on the floor, stepping over other bodies to get there. She didn't complain. At the end I sat up to stretch, when the guys are hanging, and she rubbed my neck.

Back in the car I said, "Let's get a beer."

"No can do." Iowa'd just lowered its drinking age, but she was a year younger than I was.

"Well, to the A and P," I said.

"Sure." She handed me a buck. "Package of Kools, too."

I got us a bottle of Gallo Hearty Burgundy and we went back to her brother's. He was out. There was a homemade water pipe on the dining room table, all out of chemistry tubes and stoppers and things.

"So, is your brother into chemistry?" I picked it up.

Shelly came back from somewhere with two glasses and a bag of dope. "No, pharmacy. Can't you tell?"

"Really?"

She shook her head. "He's a psych major."

We did a bowlful; good Jamaican, it was musty.

I was plenty stoned, but even so, I could tell I was more used to drinking. After a glass and a half she was giggling in my lap. "No, no. That's not what I said."

"Oh, yeah. Sounded anti-Semitic to me..."

That degenerated into tickling and then into one of those moments when lips are still and eyes say kiss.

Shelly was my first experience with sex where the girl's not just letting you have something, she's giving it to you, sharing it with you, fifty

fifty.

She undid one button of her dress, not even the top one, and just looked at me. I undid one more and one on my shirt. She pulled on my zipper, so slowly I heard each metal click.

Soon after that, we rented a duplex together. And eight weeks later I locked my keys in the car—broke a window to get in—after putting her in a first class seat to New York to get an abortion.

Juno also makes me remember George. He had loose curls way past his shoulders and a beard about the same length. Kind of busy and crazy blue eyes way up in the stratosphere, both because he was a doper Zen type and he was over six four.

I first met him at a concert in a downtown bar, the C.O.D. The show was Willy Dixon—or maybe the Sons, I don't remember, but George was standing at the back of the dance floor trying to talk to the sound guy. Shelly and I wandered by on our way to the front bar.

George was saying, "No man, what good's your equalizer if you're not going to use it? You just carry it for ballast in the back of the truck?"

The sound man, a face I recognized from other shows, didn't know whether to fight or flee. His eyes were so red it must've taken two days to get them that way.

I stopped to listen because George was right: "Man, use your ears...Involve yourself with the sounds you're controlling. A good sound man's not God with a knob; you gotta be that electric guitar, flatten your head into that ride cymbal, you know, experience it."

I nodded a "hi" to the sound dude and said, "I think the guy's right. I don't know if you can hear it from back here, but there's this ringing going on down front, way up high."

"Yeah." George was moving his head in up and down circles. "Whenever that drummer taps his ride, you got some kind of high-end feedback or something. Equalizer city'd fix it. Just chop it all off above sixteen or seventeen thou. Magic."

The guy wasn't sure he was going to take advice from either of us. He kept looking over his shoulder like some invisible partner should fix it.

Shelly whispered in my ear—the band'd gone on break—that she'd go for beers. She also said, "His name's George, probably has some coke we could do..."

I pulled out my tobacco to roll one and George pulled out a pack of Drum. He used the little terrible papers that came with the tobacco, but he had one rolled long before I did. "Here," he held it out to me.

"Thanks." I shook my head no. "Too hard core for me. Drum makes me dizzy, believe it or not."

"Huh. Yet you smoke that?" Made a motion towards my Sail.

I shrugged. "Just don't inhale real deep."

It turned out that George had a small sound company. He didn't do sound for shows, just sold equipment, rapped advice, hung out, did drugs. He was older, had been drafted and done a tour in Turkey, worked on electronics for the guys who were always trying to listen to the Russians.

Eventually he opened a small stereo store and I worked there off and on. We were usually stoned and people would come in and say, "Sure smells nice in here."

One of George's biggest disappointments was selling this huge P.A. to some band and after a month they bought distortion generators to mess up the sound, like too clean was too good. George went around for a month saying, "Fucking waste, what a fucking waste."

At the store, the cash drawer change usually went for beer. I did sell the biggest home stereo we ever moved: about $1500 worth. The guy paid in one hundred dollar bills and we toked him up on black hash after we loaded his car.

One day these two friends of George's dropped by. They looked like

white Rastas through that word wasn't around then, but they always had good smoke. This day it was some weird pot with white dust all over it, something we never worried about back then. We just smoked it in these guys' tobacco pipe.

Well, it changed my day. I wandered around town smiling at everybody for two or three hours. I went home, Shelly was out, and suddenly I had to take a shower. Under the water I was underwater. There were fishes coming up to me, smiling at me and moving away. Beautiful little fish with big mouths and bright teeth, bright smiles like Pepsodent. They were friendly, I could tell. I stayed there and stayed there, eyes closed, fish all around. They were beautiful, green and shiny and slightly iridescent blue and there was one big one that stayed right by me and just smiled, not moving at all.

I never told anybody about the fish, but I did ask George about that dope. "Good" was all he said.

George was also into politics: my first real experience with activism. People kept coming by the store to discuss the rally and protest at the Computer Center. The place had some sort of Fed contract that involved the military.

It always bugged me that in Iowa City everybody showed up to a protest with a six pack of cans hooked to their waist. After you drink the first one you can hook the plastic loop through your belt and carry around the rest. That night, the protest started at the Computer Center with chants and singing. A few people brought placards and signs but that always seemed like such a hassle. Iowa City's one famous undercover cop was there, too, in plaid pants and a polo shirt. About ten at night we all

moved, still chanting, and blocked one of the downtown intersections. Then the cops showed up. Now I realize this was planned on both sides, but back then it was mostly fun with a layer of seriousness over the top.

The cops started in on the bullhorns; "You have one minute to clear the intersection."

We all sat down, holding hands.

They marched about fifty feet towards us.

"You have thirty seconds to clear the intersection."

We all started to sing: "All we are saying is give peace a chance."

They waded right in. Riot gear and clubs. But they didn't use any on us, just picked people up and tossed them aside, two cops to a student. We were still singing, but now we were being herded back towards campus. Stragglers got thumped with the side of a club. Never saw any blood that night, and nobody got arrested there.

Then a fire started back in the intersection. It looked like somebody had driven up and dumped a burning camper off the back of a pickup. Which, I found out later, is what did happen. They had it all ready, waiting in the line of cars being held back, all the tie-downs removed and the thing pushed back in the bed to almost the balance-point. When they got there, they dumped the clutch and slid around the corner. The inside of the camper had been sprayed with charcoal lighter and there was an open can of Coleman fuel, too. A match did the trick. I turned around when I heard the skid of the tires and <u>whoosh</u> it went. The cops just let it burn. It was out in the middle of the street so they diverted traffic and let it go.

We were all scattered by then, but some people already had another plan I didn't know. They all regrouped and headed towards the interstate,

to I-80. They actually blocked it, too, before the night was over and that's when the cops got excited, chasing people through fields. A helicopter showed up with searchlights and a bunch of people got busted. George was all excited later when he found it made the next day's news.

But Shelly and I had missed all that; we'd gone home hours before to roll and tumble each other.

Day 3

Two aides guide me past this huge console that looks like Mission Control and SAC Headquarters combined. They lay me down and strap this helmet on my head; it fits tight around the forehead and has a mirror placed so that, lying down, I can see my feet. They slide me back into an opening about the size of a small garbage can: I can see my feet still sticking out in the daylight of the room.

Click. "How do you feel?" I try to turn my head to look around, but this helmet is latched down, too, just like me.

"How do you feel?" I can hear muzac.

"Can you turn it off?" I say.

"Sure." It stops.

This is the MRI I've been waiting for. I'd spent the night again on "seizure precautions"; that is, the nurse every two hours with the flashlight beam and the touch-your-nose routine.

Then another striper showed up to push me around in another wheelchair. We went all the way down in the elevator and through a tunnel. I remember reading something about MRI technology being a sort of accidental by-product of experiments to see if magnetism could be used to contain fusion reactions: "Magnetic Resonance Imaging." They put your body in a huge magnetic field and a computer reads your hydrogen atoms and turns them into a picture. Seems like they said something about radio waves, too.

Mostly I remember I had to change into yet another hospital gown and be led around with my ass again flapping in the breeze.

I've crawled through enough cat shit under houses and wiggled

through enough insulation in attics that the small space doesn't bother me. I'm more afraid of the technology—Lost in Space gone wild, Mr. Whatsis-name.

"How do you feel?", the voice asks.

"Okay. Like an echo, sort of."

"Welcome to the MRI." He explains about the machine and I'm thinking about Pink Floyd. "The police," he goes on to say, "were up here when we first turned it on because they heard from some other police force that the magnetism is strong enough to jerk the pistol right out of an officer's hand. Ha. We assured them it's not that strong.

"Here's what's going to happen. You need to be very still for a few minutes at a time. That's how long it takes for the images to come through. I'll tell you when we're going to start and let you know throughout how it's going. Okay?"

"Okay." I'm looking at my feet and I think of the doctor in Sleeper who says, "Have a cigarette; it's the best thing you can do for yourself."

"Okay," the voice says. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

Some of the shots take eight minutes, some longer. I think the longest was eleven or fifteen. I fall asleep during at least two of them. During the others I wonder if it can read my thoughts, too. And all the time there's this unpleasant buzz. I can't tell if it's in my head or out.

"Two minutes to go." He'd said this was the last one.

"One minute." Is the space shuttle like this?

"Got it."

They slide me out of the machine and I think of a Yugoslavian film I

once saw where they do a gruesome autopsy on a dead woman. She's on this table and they're cutting her apart and discussing it for the camera. It keeps flashing back to the night this guy murders her; it'd started as an innocent pick-up.

The two aides stand me up and all I can see is my feet, and their feet. I get dizzy and start to feel sick. They quickly pull off the helmet and sit me down.

"How do you feel?" they both say.

"Okay." I manage to smile, but don't mean it.

"You're lucky," one of them says. I can't tell if it's the same voice I heard when I was inside. "There's only three of these machines in Oregon."

"You're lucky," I think, "that there's fucked up people like me to ride the son of a bitch for you."

Later, Dr. Florenza shows me the picture. It looks like a photo negative, like twelve of them on the same page. There's shots of the inside of my head from all different angles: top, side, front. It's weird to look at. My eyeballs are right there and the optic nerves trail along and cone out to nothing. The bruises on my brain look like white splotches; if this was a weather map, they'd be storm clouds. The aneurysm itself is a white dot, a hard white dot like a burn spot.

She explains that it is in the middle of my brain, halfway down the back. If it doesn't stop bleeding, they can't get there to operate. It's not likely it was caused by the accident because it's in such a central location, but there's no way to tell, of course.

"Depending how your EEG's look over the next few months," she

finishes up, "we might want to do another." She indicates the MRI.

Great. My insurance pays eighty percent, so that only leaves a hundred and sixty dollars an hour for me to pick up: for something nobody knows where it came from. And nobody knows how to get rid of.

"Oh, and one more thing. If you have somewhere to stay—I don't want you to be alone—we'd like to discharge you tomorrow. There's nothing we can do for you here. You just need bed rest."

"Don't give him that."

"What's wrong with it?" I looked at Shelly, one hand on her hip, the other holding a spatula.

"Don't give the cat any catnip."

"Why not? He loves it."

"Because I don't want him all fucked up, trying to learn about cars." She turned back to the stove, flipped the pancakes. It was Saturday morning and we'd stayed in bed till late. Shelly had wanted to stay even longer.

"But look at him go for it. He loves it."

"That's no excuse." She took a drag from her Kool, balanced it back on the edge of the sink.

"It's not an excuse: he's a cat and that's why they call it catnip."

"I said don't give it to him." She came over, reached down, and took what was left away from him. He sat and looked up at her; meowed twice. Shelly went over to the kitchen window, pulled the plant out by the roots and pushed it down the garbage disposal. Then she turned it on with no water running and I heard the blades scream.

"Don't give him any more catnip," she said, picking up her Kool.

Day 11

I watch these videos the first week I am out of the hospital: Putney Swope, Thief, Doña Flor and her Two Husbands, Gunga Din, The Women, The Big Sleep, Chinatown, and Red River. I fall asleep during Thief and The Women.

I also eat a half-gallon of yogurt and four cartons of Häagen-Dazs—Michelle helps.

This doesn't include TV shows like Moonlighting or late night Honeymooner reruns. I watch some godawful afternoon movies, too, including a two part atrocity about the young F.D.R. and a bad item with James Cagney as a reporter in Tokyo.

Day 63

I've started to remember scenes from films I saw as a kid, mostly ones my Uncle Dave took me to when he was in town. Fail Safe, Cleopatra, What's New Pussycat. Far from the Madding Crowd where the guy stabs all the sheep and the suicide turns out to be fake.

We saw The Russians are Coming and I was just old enough to laugh but still be scared.

And then there was Saturday afternoon movies with friends. Robert Mitchum in The Enemy Below because I'd read the book and then all the guys on the submarine in Run Silent Run Deep which I liked better because the ships didn't look so fake.

The first time I saw the overhead microphone sneak into the frame was 12 to the Moon. I remember all the logs smashing the pirates in Swiss Family Robinson and the guy throwing out bottles with messages in 20,000 Leagues under the Sea while Captain Nemo played his organ in the parlor.

And I remember the late Bond films: Thunderball and scuba gear, Pussy Galore and the big guy—Odd Job?—in Goldfinger. "My name is Bond, James Bond." I was heavy into masturbation by then.

I remember the acid pit in the basement and the blond guy passing out .45's to everybody in House on Haunted Hill. In fact I never went to another scary moving till Alien.

Day 192

"Wanted: Person Friday for Art Movie House. Must be able to deal with the public, must be honest, well groomed. Job also involves minimal bookkeeping. Experience helpful but not required, enthusiasm a must. Apply in person..." etcetera.

Turns out the job is at the recently rechristened Apollo Theatre in downtown Springfield and the guy doing the hiring is trying to find his replacement. I hit him up on my background in music production and he just stands there like he is going to hire the first person to walk in, no matter what. He never makes eye contact once, and he has bad acne.

He wants me to do the candy counter that night.

Day 34

Dear accident,

Thanks a fucking lot. I'm just screwed up enough to know I'm not right. But not enough to not care.

Like some perverted F Troop or the sea anemone after being touched by drifting seaweed, I've retreated. I can read—and write—and do arithmetic; music still screams in my ears. I'm afraid of everything in three dimensions, people, places, stores, buildings, cars. I'm only safe with a video screen or pen, paper or book.

The grocery store terrifies me. All those carts that might bump into me—Michelle has to drag me around, aisle to aisle. People reaching, pushing, wanting; kids yelling, getting slapped, tugged around like me. It's too much and it's more than just the mush of Dilantin: I want to be alone.

Day 35

I remember that the whole time with Shelly I never played much music, and now I can't even listen.

I played a few times at frat parties when people I knew in bands said come on over and sit in, and I played once or twice at Max's and The Sanctuary. It's not like drugs and sex took the place of music, just that it was more like one elevator went up while the other went down. Maybe I was too tired from working construction all day.

One time I was jamming some slow blues in the living room—I had bought this beautiful Selmer alto Mark VI; the guy must have been a junkie or a thief to sell it for $475. But Shelly came home while I'm wailing out some long high notes and she gets this huge grin on her face. She drops all her stuff on the couch and starts to dance, real slow, all over the room. She dances out into the kitchen where I can't see her and reappears with her shoes off. She does it again: no shirt. She's a great dancer and I'm getting into it, biting hard on the reed. Then she's naked, slips off her panties right in front of me while moving her hips in a slow circle.

She comes over to me, looks me right in the eye, unzips my pants and goes down with them. I close my eyes and hit the same note over and over and over.

I wish we would have done that more. And now I can't.

Day 90

I am returning to Eugene on the Amtrak. It is my first trip out of town since the accident, and Dr. Florenza still won't let me drive.

I've just left the bathroom after taking my meds and this woman in the seat next to me says, "You know, it's like we're the niggers, now."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The prejudice is against us now." She holds up her smoke and I watch the paper burn—I haven't had a cigarette in three months. "Because we smoke," she keeps going. "We're the ones people love to hate. We're segregated out, behind the line, special section."

"Uh-huh."

"It's not killing them. That's what I say to shut them up. It doesn't always work, though."

She is elderly, very spry, dressed in a chartreuse pants suit and smoking a generic menthol, one hundred millimeters at least and as thin as her. She has a Styrofoam coffee cup in her other hand. I want peace and quiet, now this. I think about the bathroom but she's just watched me come from there.

"It's not fair," she goes on. "We have rights, too. They shouldn't be able to tell us what to do."

"Uh-huh." I look out the window, hoping to see an elk, an eagle, a buffalo.

The train bumps over a crossing. She puts her hand out for support. I see her ash drop and make a smudge on her jacket. It's not the first.

"We have rights, too. People do all sorts of strange things, give each other diseases'll kill you quicker than tobacco. Indian women keep having

babies, makes their welfare checks bigger. Who pays for that? We do, don't you know?"

"Uh-huh." Read my body language, I'm very interested in a large flat field.

"And people feed their children American cheese. All those television ads say it's so good and healthy? There ought to be a law. It's nothing but reject cheese been melted all down and put back together. Not the same food value as real cheese at all."

She looks like the cottage cheese type, winters in Florida. But she should switch to de-caf.

"Well," I say.

"You know I eat right, no red meat, watch my cholesterol, only three eggs a week, and my friends all say, 'How can you still smoke?' It's easy, I tell 'em. Collect match books and buy my cartons at that Freddie's Super Save. Cigarettes are cheap, but the Cadillac Club'll drive you broke."

She laughs and uses her gold-toed sandal to crush her smoke. I wonder if it would be an accident if I push her out the door?

I say, "Well, what can you say?" I kind of shrug and turn to leave.

"You take care." She is lighting another menthol with her Bic. It is in a Mexican silver and turquoise holder. Then she shakes it out like a match and exhales through her nose. "Nice chatting with you. See you again." She holds up her cigarette. "I'll probably be right here. I've got 1500 miles to go and I'm getting too old to move around much. I thought about going to dinner but breakfast was terrible and they wouldn't let me smoke. I've heard what they do on these trains, what <u>they</u> smoke. Why, it's lucky if we arrive anywhere at all in one piece. It's getting so you take

your life in your hands just to cross the street. It's not safe to be young or old these days. Kids're all on dope. Their parents don't care—too busy making money. Both parents working means there's no one home for the children. In prisons they're all abused as children. What's going to happen when these kids grow up? They're bad enough now. Just imagine a colored boy telling me not to smoke after my English muffin..."

I stop and look at her for the first time. I think, "We're all colored. You're just colored white."

Day 702

Dear Dad,

I remember you used to travel and be the expert witness in lawsuits.

You said one time this guy sued because he drove his tractor down a steep hill and it broke in half and he was hurt. He said it was the tractor's fault.

I remember you said you had the same tractor welded back together, drove it down the same hill, and testified in court that it must have been operator error, because you didn't have any trouble at all. The tractor broke when the guy rolled it.

Was my accident like that? Operator error?

Day 120

Dr. Florenza says I can drive again so I go shopping for cars with Michelle. I'd begged Florenza to take me off Dilantin, too, but she wouldn't; said that it would have to continue for at least six months. But not even the underwater haze of the drug or the years since I'd left Detroit could ruin a good day looking at cars.

The one I'd wrecked that night was a '63 Volvo 544. It had a rebuilt drive train, IPD sway bars front and rear, manifolds and carbs from a '68 wagon, and the front seats and headrests, too. I'd added an oil cooler from a P1800, an electric overdrive, full gauges, and a nice tape deck with JBL's in the back.

It was a good car.

The white paint'd been redone with just a touch of pearl in it. The trim was all blacked, the wheels were stock with the thin trim rings and then on top, the hubcaps off the same junkyard '68. Back under the hood was a slightly hot cam and non-stock lifters together with a thick head gasket so I could burn regular.

I never saw it again after that night till weeks later when it dawned on me to try and get the stereo out of it. Michelle tracked it down to a tow storage lot in Corvallis, but it was depressing: stereo long gone, the interior all wet, blackberries already coming through the grill.

We shop at Shepard's in Eugene to Scoville's in Corvallis and all the way up to the big Volvo sign in downtown Portland. Nothing. Find a pisspoor 1800 Sportwagon with an automatic and we get offered lots of new ones with leather interiors for twenty or thirty grand. All the salespeople assume we are together as hubby and wife, making the big plunge. Even

so, Michelle gets kind of pissed at me because they all only talk to me. One guy goes out of his way to show her some built-in vanity light on a new Volvo. She just looks at him, turns to me and raises one eyebrow and walks away. I find her later in a coffee shop across the street. The sales dude is non-phased, though. He looks right back at me, starting in on a rap about how he can change the stereo for no additional charge.

One day of that is enough. I miss my one chance to buy a car off a lot. I start looking in all the papers and finally find a '69 145 four-door. It's dark blue and totally stock except for a factory rebuilt engine. The odometer stands at 232,045; it is rusty behind the wheels, and the seats are trashed.

Michelle is very tired of me being at her house all the time. I've moved temporarily, twice, to other friends' places to housesit and Michelle has just returned from a month trip to visit her brother in the bay area. I'm sure I am a pain, all the visits to the physical therapist, appointments with Florenza, a couple more EEG's along the way. Then there are crying jags, weird mood swings, day-in day-out emergencies. One day, I feel really proud—I want to help. My clothes are invading her bedroom, my insurance statements piling over her desk, and I manage to wash the dishes, her dishes from breakfast. I never wake up until eleven or twelve and then I usually watch the afternoon movie or a couple videos that she's brought home. She gets home from her admin job at ESL at Oregon State University—her duplex is only about eight blocks away—and I am so pleased I struggled through the dishes, I mean it did hurt to lean over the sink. She walks into the living room and trips over my shoes; I'd left them there when

I brought in the mail.

She sits down on the floor and starts to cry. I can hardly understand her. "I can't yell at you...I can't," she is sobbing and rocking back and forth. "You're hurt. I can't. I can't. You're hurt. It's not your fault."

I don't know what to do, I'm just standing there still holding the dish towel. I can't talk.

I buy the blue Volvo the next afternoon.

Day 4

I remember this as Discharge Day: though, for some reason, I prefer Check Out Time. I'd rather this was some strange kind of very special motel with way too much service, not an odd bodily fluid from an infected wound.

The nurse mentions it first thing in the morning. She has my chart in her hand. "How are we doing today?"

"Okay."

"It's"—she smiled—"your ticket out of here." She waves this yellow piece of paper. "Dr. Florenza says you can go at noon: no lunch and only a half day to go."

Shit, no lunch. My breakfast tray is still in front of me. In four days I'd had, like, three bowls of soup, cranberry juice and water. I really don't care if they dump me in the street.

The dietary person says the same thing. "Not hungry this morning? Well, last one."

I just shake my head.

Michelle comes all smiles, too, late in the morning. They'd moved somebody in to the other bed during the night and first thing he'd turned on the 700 Club. I went back to sleep. It wasn't hard.

Michelle wakes me up. "Hi," I say.

"I talked to Dr. Florenza and it's all set. You can come home with me for now. She doesn't want you alone and my place doesn't cost two hundred bucks a day." She bends down and kisses me lightly on the nose. "What do you think, can we get you back on your feet in no time?"

"Okay." I smile a little bit; her lips do feel nice.

She straightens up my things that are there in the room, my watch, wallet, my pack that I always carry in the car—it's funny I haven't thought of the car at all—and my clothes. She'd gone down to my place to feed my cats, John and Jackie, and picked up some clothes for me. She has to help me put them on, but her choices are good: a zip-up-the-front hooded sweatshirt so I don't have to bend my arms putting it on, and an old pair of jeans. Michelle helps me put the clothes on and notices me feel how too-big the pants are. She slips her hand down between the waistband and my hip. "You've lost a little weight, huh? You're dehydrated, too; they told me to get you to drink a lot of liquids."

I feel dizzy and put my hand on her shoulder. "Sit down," she says. "I'll get this stuff."

She puts the clothes I was wearing four days ago into a bag. Also, there is hospital stuff, like mouthwash, hand cream, a toothbrush. She packs all that, too, and sees me watching her. "You're gonna get to pay for it all so you might as well take it."

Then when somebody shows up to wheel me downstairs—I have to ride in the wheelchair—she hands Michelle my water pitcher. It seems like I just bought that, too.

In front of Good Sam Hospital I can see Michelle's car packed in the loading spot. I know she hardly ever drives it.

Her dad has a car shop down somewhere near L.A. and he mostly works on old restorations. It's funny, but I knew Michelle for over a month and even spent the night at her place and never knew about her car. Her dad had done it up for her when she got out of grad school and finished her ESL certificate at Portland State. Now, it had never looked so good. Two

big tears come down out of my left eye—except for her visits, it is the most familiar thing I've seen in days.

It is an early '60's Mercury Comet, an S-22, and a convertible: white with a black top and red bucket seats. It is totally stock, hubcaps and all, with a 260 V-8. I see it sitting there and remember months before, in the fall, when we put the top down an drove to the coast on a sunny day. On the spur of the moment we stayed overnight at this little motel near Waldport and in the morning, after the fog cleared, the ocean was as smooth as glass.

Now, out of the winter mist, under the hospital portico, this woman with a nasal voice and lacquered hair is putting on the wheelchair brakes. Michelle is holding the car door. I sit down in the car carefully and put on the seat belt. I smile a little at that. Michelle swings the door shut and I'm looking at the dashboard. I like the car, but I sure hate everything else.

After a few months together in the basement duplex, Shelly and Juno and I were pretty well settled. It had two bedrooms, a small one with mostly Shelly's stuff in it and a large one completely filled with our water-bed. There was room for a small end table, courtesy of Goodwill, and one chest of drawers. I kept my socks and t-shirts in a linen cabinet in the hall. Mostly in our bedroom there were candles; hanging candles, homemade candles, candles made over ice, and one set on the dresser in Shelly's grandparents' crystal holders. One night we lit them all at once and we counted fourteen separate flames, two cigarette glows, and an ashtray.

So much energy we had. We'd light one set and make love, blow them out and fall asleep. A few hours later one of us would strike a match, light some others. Whenever I heard that noise I'd smile and watch to see which ones she would light. Then I'd tug her over on top of me.

Saturday morning meant cartoons, more loving, and American Band-stand, not necessarily in that order. I liked to bring coffee and a reefer back to bed; sometimes Shelly showed up with Bloody Marys.

One time George came over, it must have been noon. He walked right into the kitchen, got a cup of coffee, came to the bedroom. He knocked gently then crawled into bed with us, clothes and all. He sniffed at the dope in the air and smiled.

Then he poured out a small line on a pocket mirror and handed it to me. He looked at me seriously and said, "Do you suppose if I gave you two an hour, you could come down and help me out at the shop this afternoon?"

Shelly and I were both still in school part-time. She worked flipping noon-time burgers five days a week at Hamburg Inn II. Days I wasn't at work, I'd go by for a tenderloin sandwich and beer. I worked as a gopher—

"Go for this, go for that"— for an electrician out of West Branch (the birth-place of Herbert Hoover). It was only two days a week at first, but good money. I'd carry the ladder, fetch parts from the truck, clean and sweep up. The guy was a red-neck and never would've hired somebody like me, with a ponytail, except this guy I met playing foosball worked for him and put in a good word. Still, I had to make three trips out there, each time remembering to take off my bracelet, tie my hair back, and dress like a farmer.

When Juno disappeared the first time, we were both pretty worried. Turned out he was less than a half block away. This guy, an older guy with a beer gut was holding him when we got there. He had a towel around the cat.

"I just found him in the garage, all covered with oil."

Shelly ran up and grabbed Juno. I hung back and rolled a cig.

"Guess you folks didn't know," he looked at me. "That the female lives behind is in heat. Got every male cat in God knows how far right here in my back yard. Your little guy musta got trapped in the garage in all the fuss. Probably couldn't keep up with some of the big toms that've been around."

"Well, thanks," I said. "Much obliged." I nodded my head towards Shelly. "We been worried sick."

He waved a hand and smiled with a twinkle in his eye. "I know, I know. They get to be like in place of kids." He gave Juno a pat on the head and I could hear the cat purring from a step and a half away. Shelly was hugging him tight and rocking him back and forth.

"Well, you folks take care," the man said. "Remember to come back by shortly if you want a couple kittens." He smiled again and motioned over his shoulder. "I'm sure there's going to be a whole mess."

Juno didn't disappear again for four months, long after his successful kitty castration.

We did the same thing: put up signs, ads in the paper, the whole bit. No response for a week. Then one day I came home from work, we'd been wiring some motors on a couple grain driers, and Shelly was crying on the couch.

"This lady called," she sobbed. "Said she put it off for days...because she couldn't. But then she had to. She found him walking funny, staggering, on the side of the road and stopped and took him to the vet right away... But he died right away anyway, in the office. She said the vet said it was probably internal injuries from a car. And she didn't want to pay for an autopsy because she couldn't afford it, but now we'll never know..."

I held her and rocked her back and forth, like I'd seen her do with Juno. "It doesn't matter. He's died. He's died and it will have to be okay." I felt sad—I'd miss him—he was a good cat with a good purr motor. But I felt worse for Shelly, because she was upset. I wanted her to be okay.

Day 706

Dear Dad,

When I quit school and told you I was going to be an electrician, you only said one thing.

You said, "Make sure all the connections are tight."

"Look," Shelly said.

We were walking arm in arm through Iowa City's Mall. She tugged on my arm to turn me and she pointed. "Look."

"What?"

"You know, there. The kitty."

I did know; I saw it plainly in the pet store window. It was a "tiger" kitten, sitting there without moving, a clear "M" marking on its forehead and stripes—clear ones—all the way back to its tail.

We walked over to the store. "What would you name it?" Shelly asked.

"I thought you didn't want to get another cat for while?"

"No, no. Just what would you name it? If it was yours."

"I'd call it Henry."

"Henry?" She said it like she was calling a senile uncle up from the basement, only she wasn't sure he was here.

"Yeah. Henry."

"Why?" She was tapping on the glass to get its attention.

"Well, I presume it's a boy. Otherwise it won't fly at all, but he looks so old: just sitting there without moving. He needs a dignified older name, something with respect and dignity." He had very orange eyes and a very round head, good-sized for as young as he must have been. Suddenly, he leaped for a fly in the corner of the window. He missed by a mile; the fly was long gone, but he wrestled with a handful of cedar shavings instead.

Shelly laughed, "That's the mark of a senior citizen?"

"Sure. It's second childhood, plain to see."

"Ha." She tugged me into the store. The price by the cage said

"Tell us about the kitten," Shelly said.

She calmed down right away and smoothed down her pink smock, tugging it on each side. It had "Amy" stitched white over the breast pocket.

It turned out that Henry had already had his first shots and he'd been wormed once, too, so that fifteen dollars was not such a bad deal. Shelly really wanted him—he was a him—and I thought he was pretty good-looking. Trigger was a tiger-striped cat, too, though not as well marked as Henry.

Amy threw in a cardboard cat-carrying box and that clinched the deal. We took him home and shot a whole roll of Instamatic film in about twenty minutes: Henry jumping—none of those came out; Henry sitting, alone, with me, with Shelly; Henry terrified on the waterbed.

He grew into a big cat, and very protected. Shelly, and less so I, decided to keep him inside. He'd sit at the window and make funny noises at the birds he could see outside, but he always kept that regal look, as if he'd had acting lessons or something. He never scratched up furniture, not that we would have cared, but he did go through a phase where he ran up and down my pants legs.

And we never needed that carrying box again. The Thanksgiving after we were married, and Henry was a year and a half, we went to Shelly's parents in Chicago for the holiday. We got some kitty barbs for Henry because Shelly refused to leave him home alone for three days. We only gave him about a third of what the vet said to give him because we knew other people who'd tried to down their cat for a trip and it only put the kitty onto a truly bad trip, like bad acid or something.

About halfway to Chicago, Shelly got Henry out of his box and held him in her lap. He did fine. He purred and licked her hand for a full twenty minutes. And he traveled fine after that with no meds.

He used to sit on the back of the front seat, or on the rear deck, and he'd come close and meow whenever we'd get stoned: only in the car, though—he didn't like to get high in the apartment. Other people would freak out on the freeway when you'd drive by them and this mellow cat'd be sitting in the window watching the USA.

It was a little weird, though, that first time at her parents' house when we pulled in the drive. Shelly'd married this goyim, long haired, at a hippie ceremony without them. Second, this was their first view of the brand new Honda Civic they bought us as a wedding gift and we'd already glued a glow-in-the-dark Jesus upside down on the dash. But to show up at their pristine lakeside home with this, this feline on a rope was more than they could handle.

But it turned out okay. We kept Henry locked in Shelly's room, where we slept—and her parents' idea of Thanksgiving was to take us all out to Jonathan Livingston Seafood and get smashed. The salad bar in that place included all the crab and shrimp you could eat and the menu stated in about twelve places that you couldn't share, but we did anyway.

Back out in Evanston—I was stuffed to the gills, so to speak—I said to Shelly, "Let's take a walk." She got my drift; we could blow some pot. We ended up driving to the Baha'i Temple and walking around there. It was all lit up, looking like a cross between the Taj Mahal and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It was nice, so much more real than listening to a Seals and

Crofts album or just reading about the Baha'is.

We got stoned—had some Thai stick—and shared some nice hugs. Then we went back to Evanston and drank Scotch with her dad.

After the third Chivas he said, "I can handle the long hair and the rebellion stuff; hell, in the '50's it was kids with their jeans pulled up to their chests and white t-shirts." He poured himself another and handed me the bottle. "But where do you get off being so goddamn righteous about it all?"

I was looking down at my glass. It was cut crystal.

Then Shelly said, "I gotta go check on the cat."

He finished his drink and looked at me, his gaze suddenly very steady. "Thanks, that explains it. There is no change."

George and I were riding around in his Corvette and we saw this girl hitchhiking on Burlington Street.

"Oh, oh," George downshifted. "Weigh the anchor."

"A lot," I said. It was a standard joke between us.

The girl had dishwater blond hair with bangs that needed a trim. A roll of baby fat stuck out under her halter top over her jeans. She was wearing sandals and holding a huge, dirty pack with a thirteen-star American flag embroidered on it. Up close, after we stopped, I could see her very round cheeks—but her smile was genuinely beautiful and her eyes the color of Mexican turquoise.

"Y'all going into town?" She stuck her head right in my window.

"Sure," George said. "Hop in."

I got out and she squeezed herself and her pack into the back. It was an even bet which fit more easily.

But the first thing out of her mouth was this: "You guys got a pipe? Something we could toke a little oil in?"

George glanced at me, then looked at her in the rear view mirror. He smiled just a little. "All kinds of pipes." He drew out the "all" then smiled a lot. "What do you got?"

"Well, I just flew into Chicago and got a ride here this morning. I was on one of those cattle-car airlines, where you all exhale and they fit a couple more folks in?"

George glanced at me again. I said, "I've been on Icelandic, to Luxembourg and back, it was just like that."

George laughed and he said, "Let me get this straight: you smuggled drugs into the United States of America?"

She smiled her beautiful smile and pushed him lightly on the shoulder, ignoring him otherwise. "Anyway, me and my girlfriend had just come from India, been on this long flight to London first. She got paranoid in the air and tried to smoke all this hash by herself, even offered chunks to some other freaks on the plane. But she couldn't do it all, no way. I mean the tubes of her pack frame were crammed with the stuff.

"So twenty minutes out of London we ate what was left. Boy, I never went up and down at the same time before."

My turn to glance at George. She had to be flying, still.

And not stopping: "I tried to tell her in India that she'd never get any hash anywhere near back to the States and that's why I got this." She rummaged around in the pack and pulled out an airline whiskey bottle, Cutty Sark. She handed it to me, then hit me with her eyes. "Oil, pure oil. Pour off the couple drops of Scotch on top and it's pure Afghani oil. Nothing finer in all of Carolina. So you guys got a pipe, or what?

George looked out the window, over his shoulder, took the turn lane and did a left with the tires squealing. She damn near fell over, laughing.

Two more quick lefts and George ran the Burlington stop sign—a fly across town and we were at his apartment. He had the upstairs of a house all to himself, complete with a little balcony that overlooked the street. It was on Church Street just a block from the Eagles grocery store.

He came out from his bedroom with a little glass pipe. It had an open orb at one end for the oil and three loop-de-loops before the mouthpiece so you could watch the smoke zing around in a circle before going into your lungs. She opened the bottle—it even had a tax seal—and drank the

dribble of whiskey. She poured a little oil into the pipe and George lit a tall candle on the coffee table so we wouldn't keep going through matches.

After four hits I was gone, totally. I handed the pipe back to her and she leaned towards the candle to take another hit. "Wow," I said, "Xanadu city." I meant it, the shit was like opium.

She stopped and looked at me, her pretty eyes already puffy and slightly red. "Y'all going to be a lightweight?" she said. "I don't want to have to talk you down to earth." She snapped her fingers in front of my nose and laughed.

George saved me: "Hey, he might be light as a feather, but he's no lightweight."

I sat back in my chair, rolled a cig; very stoned. After a few more hits, George got up and put on a record. I recognized it: side four of Miles Davis' "Big Fun." It was over twenty minutes long, one song, and we all just sat there, listening and spacing out. I watched the sky turn pink, an orange-ish sunset cloud drifted across the window. Davis' trumpet was doing reverb echo things, across the speakers and out the window, out to that cloud. It paced itself slowly across my view, moving with the music, changing shape, changing colors.

It drifted out of sight, plain evening-gray now, and the record stopped turning. She opened her eyes; she'd been lying on the floor. "I'm thirsty," she said. "Y'all got any beer?"

We both looked at George. He shook his head "no" and reached for his wallet. "Munchies," he said, starting to shake a big "yes." It made his beard flop on his chest. "Munchies, too."

"I'll go," I said. I suddenly wanted to be outside.

"Here. Here's a little action from Mr. Jackson." He handed me a twenty.

I went out on the balcony and stood there. I rolled another cigarette and lit it. The night was just on that edge where you need a jacket. Somebody's cat walked silently across the street. It crouched and looked up when the streetlamp clicked on, blinking.

"That's right," I said to the cat. "They steal the night, don't they? Turn the whole world piss-yellow every evening."

The cat looked up at me then with a jerk of its head. "You don't need them," I went on. "You don't need those lights, do you, big guy?"

The cat ran away and I flicked my smoke into the street.

I came back from the store with a bag of chips, a pound of unshelled peanuts, two big Hershey bars, and a six-pack of Heineken. I put the bag down on the table and blew out the candle. I could hear their voices coming from around the corner in the bedroom. I smiled, trying to hear what they were saying.

Suddenly, her voice came through clear: "No! Don't."

She came into the living room fast, her face mad. She stopped short when she saw me, made a wry smile. She grabbed her Cutty Sark bottle and made sure the top was on tight. She dropped it into the pack and pulled out a blue flannel shirt.

At the door she stopped, turning to me. "Y'all are all right," she said. "But your friend"—she glanced toward the bedroom—"he talks out the side of his neck."

I had a beer in my hand, unopened. I held it out to her, then tossed it. She caught it and dropped it into the pack. After the door closed, I

waited a minute before I reached for another one. George was strangely silent.

Day 62

Dear accident,

I took a class once at Iowa, a whole semester of Don Quixote. We read the book in true postmodern fashion: as a text, a methodological field, if you will.

For my final paper in that class, I wrote this opening sentence: "I am Don Quixote." I lived his confusion for fifteen weeks. I approached his reality, suffered his excesses. And that way, Sancho Panza became the unbalanced side of myself, eating bread and onion sandwiches, waiting like a fool for his personal island to govern. What was normal, true, objective, was lost.

Now, I take my 300mg of Dilantin every midnight, wake at noon and live as the Knight of the Sad Cerebral. I can't tell soap dishes from helmets, can't tell jokes from biting lips.

I'm lost in my own body: it might as well be Spain.

"Que pasa, che?" "Je t'aime la biblioteque." But no anecdote lives.

I got an "A" in Don Quixote: I'm failing at life.

I liked being an electrician, driving around to different farms and houses, doing physical labor, climbing ladders. And there's a thrill in flipping a circuit breaker for the first time, especially when the homeowner's watching.

At first, for a few months at least, it was like a medieval apprenticeship. Fetching parts and tools, I learned the names of things: half-inch romex connectors, chase nipples, offset benders and widgets, L.B.s, bushings, grounding bushings. And then there were code rules to learn, like wire sizes and circuit amperage, how many outlets per running feet of wall, and also code rules that nobody really followed: How much wall space a two hundred amp box required. When you need a disconnect. There's even rules for how tight you can bend a wire around a corner; the radius of the turn's proportionate to the size of the wire. Out on somebody's farm, though, you just make it fit, make it right, and make it work. A good job's a code job, anyway.

Our unofficial motto was "build to plan, beat to fit, and paint to cover."

I used to get in trouble for asking too many questions. When I got to actually run wires, simple stuff like TV cable, I'd always ask how—because I'd see so many possibilities: across the attic and down the wall, or down and then across the basement.

Frank would look at me and say, "Just do it."

Frank's the guy who got me the job. He was from back East—Jersey or somewhere—and he'd moved his family to Iowa and bought a little land, a couple acres like what they call a "gentleman's acre," enough to putz

around and have a big garden; he grew the best hot peppers. Frank thought it was weird to live in Hoobert Heverville, as he called it, in a state with hardly any unionism, and then vote democratic every year.

We worked for Swenson Electric and Swenson was blond, and big; you expected him to say "yah, is good" all the time. He was a redneck beer drinker, but Frank and I got along okay. We'd drink a beer after work and do a bowlful together. Of course, if we had it, lots of days we'd do a bowlful after lunch, too, and in the morning. Nothing serious, just a few hits each.

If carpenters are burly, Frank was the classic electrician: tall, skinny, quick dark eyes, and Pall Malls. Swenson kept us both busy all summer, Saturdays, too, some weeks. In the winter there'd be time off. You can't pour good concrete when it's freezing, and down below about ten degrees the insulation on the wire cracks when you bend it. One winter day we did go to this pig farm. There was a beautiful white house, but run down all to shit. It had a two story turret with curved glass windows and a big porch on two sides. Behind was a long wind break of eighty-foot pines.

The guy had some mickey mouse wires run underground to his water heater for the pigs, to keep the water from freezing. It looked like he'd just installed it, but he didn't say so.

He took us out to the pen, walking with a limp and puffing a pipe, and said, "There must be something strange underground. You can see the water ain't frozen, but every time the pigs take a drink it shocks the shit outa them."

Frank and I just looked at each other. Then we ran twenty feet or so of sunlight-resistant cable over from the barn and down this gate post right

by the tank. We cut a piece of conduit and put it up so the pigs couldn't chew the wire. When we hooked it up inside the barn, we found his whole electric service in there—in this huge one hundred-year-old barn on a stone foundation—the whole thing was connected by two wires wrapped once around each other. Only the weight of the wires kept them together and you could see where the insulation was burned back, from too much current. Of course, the guy had the place packed with every damn wiener pig he owned; at least a couple hundred.

We fixed the wires and didn't even tell the guy. It didn't seem worth it. When we were done and went back outside, the guy was standing there, waiting. It was about fifteen degrees out and clear blue sunny. He invited us in for coffee—the house was even sadder on the inside, boxes and crap everywhere, probably three generations worth—and he laced the coffee with a silver pocket flask. He drank his in two swallows: cast iron mouth and stomach. He had a bit more twinkle in his eye. "Ahhh," he said. "Ain't nothing much else to keep a guy going: Black Velvet and baby pigs."

We stood in front of his gas heater for half an hour and when the guy finally paid us, in cash, he gave us ten bucks extra. "Don't hurry back to Swenson, boys," he said. "You know he's out getting drunk himself while you two do the work."

After I'd worked for Swenson almost a year we were driving back to the shop late one afternoon. I asked Frank something that had been bugging me for weeks: "How is it that the two wires into a house are a hundred and ten volts, but it's two twenty between them?"

Frank glanced at me, frowned, shook his head. "Don't know. That's

just the way it is."

Day 42

Dear accident,

Dad had a pistol collection that he got during WWII. There was a Beretta, a Walthers PP—almost like 007's but .22 calibre—and a Colt .45 automatic. He had some other weird guns, too, like a nine-shot twenty-two revolver with a long barrel, and a couple nickel-plated thirty-two's.

The Walthers was a joy to plug tin cans, but it jammed on anything except long-rifles. The .45 was a huge, wicked thing, like a sledgehammer in your hand with a trigger. Its balance was terrible; if you missed, though, whatever was nearby got creamed.

Right now, I want the Luger. It's in the original black leather holster, under a snapping flap. Inside, there's a matching serial number and an extra clip. It's a gun with perfect balance, an extension of your hand. The grips are dark checkered wood. It's loaded with one round in the chamber.

I'd like to slip the muzzle up inside my right ear, point it at the bad part of my brain, and pull the trigger.

Day 41

I've started reading to Michelle in the evenings; I've been able to focus on the newspaper for a couple weeks now, so tonight we begin a novel. I pick The Crying of Lot 49.

I've read it at least five times before, including twice for classes back at Iowa. Once was Intro to Lit: Comedy, and the other was Death in Lit. In fact, Gravity's Rainbow was the book I read while Shelly and I were making the big move out to the West Coast. And Michelle had never read any Pynchon.

I've just read the first few pages—it's slow going, Michelle is patient—and I get to this part: "He had believed too much in the lot, he believed not at all in the station. Yet to look at him now, in the twilit living room, gliding like a large bird in an updraft toward the sweating shakerful of booze-"

"Wait," Michelle comes over from the sink; I'm sitting at the table. "Where are you?"

"There." I point on the page.

"It says 'twilit' and you pronounced it twilight: it didn't make sense."

I look at the page and start to cry. I didn't know I did anything wrong; read it wrong. My tears are wrinkling the pages.

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Michelle leans over and kisses my head, right above the forehead, right where the frontals are bruised. "You're doing fine. Two weeks ago you couldn't read at all."

Henry, Shelly and I were cruising along fine. I drove the Honda to work most days; it started all the time. I would have preferred my Jaguar, but it was becoming a weekend car: tinker with it, polish the wood, take it out Saturday night to hear some music at the Sanctuary or the C.O.D.

Henry was a big cat, full grown, but still indoors. Shelly did take him out once in a while, on his leash, but the older he got, the more hassle it was. One day I got home from work a little late. She was sitting on the couch with Henry and reading the paper. He was sitting on it.

"Hi," I said. She looked up and I kissed her forehead. I walked through to the kitchen, got a beer, a Special Export: cheap beer in a fancy bottle. I went back, sat down on the floor.

"You want to take a shower?" I asked. I had rigged up a plastic hose and a curtain out of old plumbing pipe.

"I want to let Henry out. It's not fair."

He was sitting across the room, licking his chest. I went over and picked him up and he started to purr.

"Cats and cars don't get along very well." I looked at Shelly. "Can you say that: Ford Fairlane?"

"He's so unhappy. I took him out this afternoon. He was jumping on leaves, smelling the grass, looking all around. We came back in and I fed him and he didn't want to eat. It doesn't seem fair." She looked like she might cry.

I shrugged. "It's probably not fair either way."

It didn't take long. I was coming home from work. I'd stopped downtown for rolling papers and tobacco. Bought Shelly a pack of Kools on

general principles. I headed out Burlington, onto Lower Muscatine. Just a block from home, I saw it happen right in front of me. This dog started to run, came out from under a brown porch, after what I couldn't see, but I could see the chain snaking across the grass. Then brake lights up ahead, a rusty colored Chevy squealing to a stop.

I saw Henry wander to the right edge of the road. His rear legs weren't working, his back had a bad kink. I was out of the Honda, running. He was bleeding from the mouth, leaving a trail on the pavement. The right half of his face, from the eye down, was bare bone. The skin was hanging below his mouth.

This young girl in the Chevy was just sitting there. I looked at her, back at Henry, back at her. The dog was barking. Somebody in a green apron came out onto the brown porch. "You got a gun?" I yelled. Traffic was stopped both ways. I looked towards the duplex, hoped Shelly wasn't home. I saw some concrete blocks along the edge of the parking space. I ran to get one, to drop it on him, to stop the weird coughing noise he was making.

But he was already dead. Curled in a ball in a puddle of blood. I held the block, breathing hard. Only a few of his tiger stripes were visible.

I slapped the hood of the Chevy with my left hand. The girl jerked upright. I made a motion for her to drive on. She did, looking straight ahead. I noticed the Honda then, didn't remember turning on the flashers.

I set the block near Henry, got two more and made a little protective wall around him and covered him with newspapers. I still remember the torn section of headline: "...ituation Grim."

I drove to the hardware store, bought a spade, saw a cop but didn't

get stopped on the way home. I buried him outside the bedroom, in the yard. He was safe there.

I was smoking a joint in the shower when Shelly came home. I'd never been in such a hot shower before. I heard her say, "Henry, kitty, kitty, kitty, are you home?"

After I told her and showed her the grave—I made it sound like a clean bump and kitty heaven—she was quiet for three hours; didn't even cry.

I phoned for a pizza and ate most of it. She didn't have a bite.

Finally, she said, "I want to move."

"Where?"

"Away from here."

"Where?" I looked at her. She was staring at the floor.

"The West Coast. California. Or Oregon."

We'd heard all about it from George; he traveled out west every year. Yosemite. How the Haight was falling apart but Eugene, Oregon was cool. Seattle. Eli's Mile High Club in Oakland. Highway 101. And possession was almost legal in Oregon.

Shelly and I made love long and sweet that night: the books would call it tantric. We were there, together, not moving. And then, looking at each other in the candlelight, she started to cry, her tears dripping down on my chest. I didn't move—I wanted to hold everything right there forever. But she did. When she finally came, she was crying so hard, her eyes squeezed tight, I was afraid because I didn't understand.

Afterward, she fell asleep on my chest, her sobs slowly coming down,

changing into deep breaths. I just lay there with my arms around her, watching the candles burn, looking at the ceiling, listening to Shelly sleep.

Day 121

"Man, you're such a Renaissance Man...but with a technological solution to everything. Open up. Don't dominate, feel."

George said this to me once and I never forgot it. I hadn't thought of him in a long time, not since Shelly and I bought the Oldsmobile road rocket and moved to Oregon. Until the accident.

George died in Nicaragua in the late seventies sometime. Evidently he got cleared through some roadblock and then failed to stop when the Somoza's changed their mind. It got local press in his hometown and in Iowa City, but nowhere else. If it had happened today it'd be page one everywhere. George might not have liked that, but maybe so. He was a hard guy to read.

This line of his comes back to me today because I am cleaning out some closets, glad to be back home, and I find this box of stuff I haven't looked at in a long time. Inside is a letter from his folks saying I should have his diary (I'd never known he kept one). I'd been with him lots of times to visit his family farm down near Red Oak. His mom would make wilted lettuce salads with fresh-picked dandelion greens and bacon grease. His dad was retired but there was always something to do: most of the land was leased out, but not all. There was still a couple fields of corn, a hundred acres or so, and some pasture with fifty head of cattle. It was city boy's big chance down on the farm.

I've never read the whole diary, its always felt like I shouldn't or something, but I notice an entry about our marriage. George was the best man when we got married and his girlfriend, Joan, who I guess still teaches fourth grade in Des Moines, was Shelly's attendant. Joan made an incred-

ible fuss over refusing to be maid of honor, but she'd "do the duties."

We got married high on this bluff overlooking the Mississippi River on June 21, 1974. It was George who decided that the wedding should be at dawn. Originally it had been scheduled for noon. We'd all arrived the night before and everybody was crashing at this nice house that belonged to somebody's uncle. The driveway was full of bottomed-out Fords, day-glo VW vans and bugs, and George's '63 Corvette split window coupe. Inside, the party was rolling on tequila and beer, until George broke out the mescaline. Everybody danced to Jimi and Janis until about three a.m. when everyone was coming down but a couple of speed freaks who started thumping on some busted five-string guitars.

Shelly and I went for a walk out on the bluff. There was moonlight and we wanted to be together long enough to make love. After a long time on the damp ground Shelly still couldn't come. Usually she really liked sex when she was high. I kept trying.

Finally, she said, "Will you shut up?"

I stopped moving. "What?" I looked at her for a moment, her embroidered blue work shirt, unbuttoned, her cut-offs on the ground beside her, small breasts almost flat, nipples hard. I wanted to stare into her eyes but my peripheral vision was dancing. Those little come-down peaks were getting to me.

"What?"

She smiled, just a little, and started to sing: "If you feel like loving me, if you got that notion, I second that emotion..." She ran her fingers through my hair and grabbed a bunch of my ponytail. "Can you stop that incessant humming? It's driving me nuts."

"Oh." I finished the song in my mind, "If you feel like giving me a lifetime of devotion, I second that emotion." I didn't know I was humming. "Sorry," I said and kissed her forehead.

Sex was hard for me on psychedelics. I had trouble concentrating, my mind went everywhere but between her legs. Cocaine, sure, no problem, but mesc was, well, I just couldn't stay in one place long enough. George got us to snort the stuff. We should have eaten it, a more mellow ride all the way around. I really liked making her come when she was high. Shelly got so lost it was worth it, even though the sex wasn't that big a deal to me.

I kept trying. I thought about Dad teaching me to play golf when I was a kid. He said, "Follow through." And I thought about eighteen holes of golf, Shelly was every one, and putters and drivers and Titans. And setting up on tees and greens fees and I wondered if loving Shelly was a par three course or a full nine holes, a professional purse or a Saturday afternoon twosome? I wanted to play her under par, write the scorecard below her navel, give her my winnings. Every shot a hole in one.

Then I rolled around her and turned her over, her ass smooth in the pale light. I humped on her, doggie-style—God, I hate that description, but I love the verb—until I blissfully forgot about drugs and mind games and only watched myself pound her into the ground.

Then, we just stayed like that for a bit, holding still, hearts pumping, in unison I was sure, until Shelly turned to look at me over her shoulder. She spoke very quietly, with a smile in her voice. "Will you marry me?" she asked.

Fifteen years later this is what I read in George's diary while sitting

on my closet floor in Alpine, Oregon:

"Wedding day, June 21:

"Gonna miss not being able to ball Shelly any more. We were always just friends, but she's a girl who got into it. And hell, I introduced them. I used to take some coke over to her place and we'd do it and then maybe do each other, too. Then one night I showed up with a gram and a half and all three of us tooted it all. And they started to make it right there in front of me. Party last night: I was bummed to find everybody crashing—I'm the best man. I came out of the sauna, had to, in fact, because I thought I'd have a heart attack. Tripping my nuts off and some girl wants to suck me off in a two hundred degree sauna. It felt okay, but she wasn't that great-looking. I'm a few years older than everybody else and I gotta watch out for myself, that's all. Eighteen and I would have let her do it no matter what she looked like. So many chicks just go through the motions, whimper a couple times and that's it. But Shelly's a real live wire—they're a good couple; she don't pull no shit on him or cocktease him or run head trips. Small tits but she's a good girl. Anyway: bummed, the party almost dead. Shit, this's a wedding, a drug feast, not some drunken pass-out and puke gig for kids. I broke out some coke, avoided the speed freaks with the guitars, hoping they'd break the rest of the strings, and soon, but I managed to wake everybody up by inviting them into the bathroom in ones and twos. I laid out another round of mesc then. Christ, sometimes I feel like a concertmaster, having to take care of everybody. But somebody had to do it or it'd end up a weed-and-wine party like some kind of Grace Slick etiquette gig with nobody even eating the roaches. It worked. Get down. The Stones go on, loud. Where's the bridal couple, their royal themselves? And

where's the tequila? Time to get the bottle stashed special under the car seat. Finally got to fuck Joan, been waiting for hours. Finally find the two of them getting a group massage. Joan's working on Shelly. I know the two of them've made it, I just know it. I sent some people for the wedding clothes and then I said to them on the floor, "Let's go, it's time, almost dawn." She made the dress herself, been talking to Joan about it for weeks. It looks like her version of homespun, very plain, meant to be, but it's form-fitting and she knew it looked good on her. Then they were dressed. He's in his coffee bag shirt, beads, one of the girls did his ponytail in a fancy braid. Never seen his un-cut cords before, they're dark green with huge bells, no shoes. Shelly's got daisies in her hair, and lupines, all colors, in a bouquet. I sent somebody out to liberate the garden; they did a good job. I got everybody together, twenty or thirty strong and we marched out to the bluff. We all followed this guy, friend of Joan's from the music department, who'd brought his baritone sax. He ran ahead and started wailing these long low notes which just rolled off the bluffs. Cool. Good idea. Everybody's in a circle; they're in the middle. The ceremony's an airy-fairy affair performed by this dude with a California matchbook license. I had to hold a jug of wine and two glasses, then pass around the wine for everybody to have a little drink. They wrote the ceremony themselves, they smiled all the way through. Near as I could tell they remembered all their lines. Funny thing, though, off in the distance down in the water is a yellow wheel and tire all rusty. Sort of just floating there. Later in the day somebody asked me if I put it there just to mess with everybody's mind. I wanted to hit the guy."

Day 707

Dear Dad,

I remember when I told you I wanted to buy a house and I think you finally forgave me for dropping out of school.

We'd flown back for Christmas; you bought the tickets. Shelly was in Chicago and I was in Detroit. I waited till the last night, after dinner, to tell you.

You looked up from your pie and there was a faint smile, a twinkle. And you said, "I hope you like your job."

On the way to the airport the next morning you offered to lend me money.

Later, when I had the place and Shelly was living town, I told you we were breaking up.

"Well," you said. "You'll be more independent now."

Day 122

I remember the first time I saw my place. We followed the directions the guy had given us over the phone: sixteen miles south of Corvallis on Highway 99, a right on Alpine Road, about two miles and another right on McFarland. After a couple hundred yards, we crossed a short iron bridge over a creek, then the place was a half mile on the left. I still love that bridge. It's rounded and rusted with huge rivets showing. And the creek takes a bend right there through a pasture with a couple cottonwoods and some oaks.

Turned out the place had belonged to this guy's dad and he'd waited till spring to put it up for sale after the old guy died. I loved it right away: some oaks and firs around the house, a nice view of the hills to the west, that pasture on one side, a field of Christmas trees on the other. I could see where there'd been a garden, and in the tool shed were a couple old shovels with smooth handles.

I walked back to the car and Shelly was sitting sideways in the front seat with the door open. She was smoking a cigarette. I could tell by the look on her face that all she saw was an unpainted shack with no foundation and a washing machine on the porch.

I bought it on a land sales contract, probably overpriced, but the terms were good: eight percent, no balloon, and only $2,500 down. I bought in spite of the three rooms with low ceilings, in spite of the plumbing pipes and vents running down the outside walls, in spite of the bad septic system.

It had great water.

Shelly and I had talked about getting a place in the country ever

since we'd moved to Oregon. We met a few people with small places outside of town and they had goats and gardens and projects and greenhouses. We were city people: we wanted the same.

Shelly had bought me Finding and Buying your Place in the Country for Christmas. I'd got the Sunset Western Garden Book for her.

"If you want it, buy it," she'd said to me.

"What about you?"

She shrugged. "You're the one with money, not me. You're the electrician, remember? I'm the student who waits tables at Mazzi's."

"I don't care about that; it'd be our place." We were driving back to Corvallis after our fifth trip out there. I'd been crawling around underneath the porch, looking for bug damage.

Shelly finished rolling a joint and lit it. She handed it to me. "I want to keep the apartment while I'm in school."

"That's okay. I can afford both for now."

In a month I was moving. Every day after work Shelly had a box packed and ready by the door. She came out a couple weekends and helped paint the inside and put up curtains. We slept outside in our sleeping bags and made love and drank wine under the stars. One morning I woke up and there was a deer not fifteen feet away.

In two months I had to move my bed into the living room because there was a drip on my forehead every time it rained.

In four months Shelly was sleeping with a graduate student in oceanography.

Eight months later they were living together and we were getting a divorce. Now they live in Woods Hole, Massachusetts and Shelly sends me

pictures of their two kids.

PART 2

To me, style is just
the outside of content,
and content the inside
of style, like the outside
and inside of the human
body—both go together,
they can't be separated.

Jean-Luc Godard

Day 125

Dear accident,

If I have sympathy, do you pass judgement?

Day 45

"I'm not notifying the state about your seizure activity." This is from Dr. Florenza at my six-week check-up.

"What do you mean?" I say. Michelle had driven me over for the appointment, but she's waiting in the lobby. I'd left her reading an old issue of Omni.

"Well, if you've had a seizure, legally I have to notify the state and you lose your driver's license. But your EEG's only show that you've had seizure-like activity. There's no proof you've actually had a seizure."

I'd just had another EEG before seeing her. A different technician but the same two choices: stuck-on pins, or stuck-in pins. I told her—it was a woman this time—"Stick 'em in. I wouldn't want a loose connection."

She looked at me, then, not knowing if it was a joke. I wasn't sure, either. Otherwise, it was the same deal, the bright white strobe light flashing at odd intervals, the wires attached to my head recording the electrical impulses of my brain, the results translated to squiggly lines on reams of paper, all accomplished with lots of knobs for her to adjust—my 1984 Room 101 to her Richard Burton's O'Brien, all being plotted like the San Diego quake.

"I still don't want you to drive, though," Dr. Florenza goes on.

"Oh." Then: "Do I still have to take the Dilantin?" I feel like I'm bartering for cookies after school.

"Yes." She adjusts her glasses. They have beautiful tortoise-shell frames and I always wonder if they are real. "Dilantin is not something you can take like two aspirins. Some people take it their whole life. In any case, you're looking at six months, minimum, I'd say. And if you have some

more activity: five years minimum."

I look at her nose—very small, slightly upturned. Dr. Florenza has beautiful brown eyes, too. She goes on, "And, of course, no drinking alcohol."

That's something else I've wondered about: what was in my blood in the ER Room. I can't remember if I'd been smoking a joint or not. Now, it doesn't matter, I feel like I'm stoned, drunk, spaced all the time, morning to night. And it suddenly isn't any fun when I don't have a choice.

Great, I'm thinking, five years a legal barb junkie.

I say, "What's it mean, 'seizure activity'?"

Dr. Florenza looks up and around at me. She'd been writing on my chart, probably thought we were done. "Quite simply, I suppose, the two sides of the brain are not in rhythm."

"Like they're out of phase?"

"Phase?" One eyebrow above the frame of her glasses.

"Like AC current in your house, the phase pulses are at opposite intervals." I point to my shirt, a sleeveless black T Shelly had given me years earlier. It says, "Wild Leg 208 to Ground." "You see," I say, "when you have a wild leg, like in a factory—some place with a lot of 220—it's out of phase with both the others."

She makes another note in the chart. "When are you going back to work? Have you been thinking of that?"

Good question. With one ear screwed up, my balance is out of whack. I am not a good candidate to send up a ladder with a light bulb.

She is writing on another pad, her prescription book. "Here's a prescription for Motrin, a muscle relaxant. You might break each pill in

half, but it will help the stress and strain in your back. With the type of fracture you have, there's not much else to be done." She is still writing. "And here's a prescription for some physical therapy, some massages would be good to help you relax. Finally, here is the name of a man who could make you a back brace. He's very good. For your line of work I think you'll need it. Just take it slow, go easy at first, don't over-extend yourself."

Dr. Florenza goes back to writing on the chart. "And come see me in another six weeks. You're really doing quite well, you know. Many of my head injury patients are in a position where they never get well."

I walk out with a handful of paper. And I'm thinking, fuck my back, fuck my ear, what about my brain?

In the lobby, Michelle jumps up, smiling, blond curls bouncing. "How'd it go?"

"Pretty good." Big smile from her. "No driving, still Dilantin"—quick frown—"for a few more months, at least." Tentative smile. "Pills for my back and some massages, too. She said I was doing 'quite well.'" Smile again, plus a big hug. That's nice. Michelle has learned how to hug and not hurt my back.

The first time Michelle came to my house—the first time I saw her Comet—she asked about the little sign above my front door. It says, "rayuela."

I told her it meant something like "hopscotch," which was how it felt when I first bought the place, like I'd landed on my own plot of earth.

She smiled and said she thought real estate was like a river, and by paying the bank so much every month for her duplex she got to take care of a little piece of water.

"Huh," I said.

"Of course," she went on, "I get to make a little on what others drink, too."

"Not very much because you said you rent that half for only two fifty."

"Enough," she said.

Michelle was two-and-a-half years older than I was and had a set of Tarot cards on her living room wall—she'd painted them. I'd been apart from Shelly for almost two years and had only gone out with one other person, this woman named Nancy who had a seven-year-old daughter.

I liked Nancy, but didn't relate to the instant just-add-water father routine. We went out and she stayed out at my place when Kristie was at her dad's, but one night we arrived at her house, paid off the sitter, and Kristie came up to me and said, "Are you going to stay with Mommie? Because if you do, then we won't be able to do our games in the morning."

That was that.

I met Michelle at the Peacock, Corvallis' only real bar. I still had the same job I had for years, working as an electrician for the school district. I really liked that job, fixing everything from lights and intercoms to aquarium pumps and movie projectors. I liked to go to the Peacock on the weekends; they always had good rhythm and blues bands. I liked to listen and sometimes dance.

Anyway, this one night, early, the dance floor was pretty empty and I was out there by myself, with my eyes closed—the song was "Wait Till the Midnight Hour," a band from Portland doing a reasonable job—and I opened my eyes and there's this woman dancing right in front of me, obviously by herself. I'd seen her there before, very loose on the dance floor, clothes halfway between hippy chic and elite punk, round cheeks and blond hair in curls that wouldn't quit, all about five feet tall.

That night she was wearing paisley capri pants and a tie-dye T-shirt. Over one shoulder and under the other was a beautiful dark scarf which made her look even shorter. We smiled at each other a couple times and I

went home after the set was over, humming Wilson Pickett.

A few days later the phone rang one evening and it's a woman needing some wiring done. I did a few jobs on the side—weekend stuff—by word of mouth. This woman said do I know so and so, yes, where I, yes, so could I do something, yes, at her duplex? Yes.

We set a date for Saturday next and when she opened the door, it was the same woman, barefoot now, with a rip in the knee of her jeans and a man's shirt, very purple, top button undone.

"Michelle?" I said. I was carrying my toolbelt and voltage tester. "You talked to me about that fuse that blew?"

"Oh, yeah. Come in." She was looking at me weird, head to one side and curls going every which way.

"Thanks." She was gorgeous. "Sure is a small town, isn't it?" I said. I did a little James Brown on her doormat. "Did you like that band last weekend?"

Then I saw it click in her, like her eyes focused. "Oh," she said. "I saw you at the Peacock. There was this woman watching you dance by yourself. It was hysterical. I thought she'd pee her cowboy boots—like it was against the rules for singles to be out on the floor."

"Huh. Well, thanks for the dance."

"Don't thank me. I rescued you from those boots; thank me for <u>that</u>." Then she looked at me again with her head on the side, her left side it always was.

I fixed her problem, a short in a ceiling box, above a light fixture where light bulbs—too big—had fried the wires. Halfway through the job I started having construction worker fantasies: work on her house, work on

her. She had a beautiful smile and had turned the stereo on to KLCC's Blues Power, which I would have been listening to at home, anyway. She left and went to the store; I always appreciate when people trust me in their houses. When she got back and I was done, she paid me in cash, the true way to a workingman's heart.

I was ready to ask if I could work on the plumbing or something, but I was just standing there, looking at the money in my hand.

She asked, "You want a beer?"

I felt like one of the Village People, wearing my toolbelt low on my hip like High Noon. Besides, I was scared shitless; after Shelly left, it'd taken me months—years—just to get used to me again.

I looked at Michelle. She was smiling. "Sure," I finally said.

Ten months and four days before I wrecked my car.

Day 128

"What are these?" Michelle is over at my house. It's a Sunday morning, clouds to the west. It'll probably rain in an hour, but right now the sun is pouring through the skylight.

We're in bed, but she'd gotten up to pee. The bed at my place is up in this loft—the only big remodel I've done since I owned it, except for re-wire and re-plumb and new fixtures. The bedroom is this square, two-story turret on the southwest corner of the house, with windows all around and a big skylight. It overheats in the summer, but is beautiful all winter.

"What are these?" Michelle climbs off the top of the stairs—it is so steep, almost a ladder, definitely not code. Her breasts dance alternate to her body, which is lovely: soft and Mediterranean with curves like a Rubens or a Rembrandt.

"What's what?" I throw back the covers.

"These." She climbs in—half on top of me—kisses my cheek, opens her hand.

"They're dreidels, for Channukah." I whistle a little of the "Dreidel Song," half consciously, until I hear myself and stop.

"You Jewish? They look like tops." Michelle is always like that. You'd think she's a kid visiting Grandpa's farm whenever she stays over; she's always finding shit, too often something of Shelly's.

"They <u>are</u> tops; it's a kid's game." I look at them, four different colors of plastic. "My ex-wife's Jewish."

"You didn't tell me you had kids." Michelle moves a little away, to look at me.

"No kids. She does now, though."

"I'm glad you never talk about her. I went out with this guy once, all he did, talk talk talk about what a bitch she was"—she catches herself at something, flashes a reproachful and self-effacing smile, if such a thing's possible—"How do you play?"

"Spin it." I smile at her.

Michelle rolls over, smiling again, leaning out of bed, pushes the Indian blanket rug out of the way It's a woman's body on a five foot girl. I slip my hand between her legs. "Just spin it."

"No fair. You'll affect my concentration." I hear it spin, she laughs, her breasts move.

"When it stops, see which side is up."

"This side." She picks it up, rolls back to me.

I smile. "That's good. Gimmel."

"What's it mean?"

"You win."

"What?"

"Whatever we're playing for."

It does rain an hour later; we are still in bed. The dreidels are scattered, I can feel one by my left foot. Michelle is asleep, curled up tight to my right side and I don't even care that my arm is asleep. I watch the rain fall on the cows across the road and I feel sorry for them. It is the first real emotion I've had in months.

Day 210

I've been working at the theatre about three weeks. At first it seems stupid to take a low-paying job when all my insurance and state benefits pay me at least as much. Michelle even said, "Why can't they pay you out of the till, in cash, and you wouldn't have to report it?"

But, truth is, I like it at the theatre. I like being at the center of things, but not really involved. Sure, there are some regular patrons, folks who are almost acquaintances, but I get to be near people and be anonymous.

Nobody knows me beyond "the guy in the theatre." In Corvallis it's always, "How're you feeling? You look great." (This last always sounds like, "Sure glad it isn't me.") And then if you really tell them, they can't handle it: "Yeah, well, I'm not deaf, dumb, crippled or blind, but it's pretty shitty here on the inside. If my leg was broken, you could relate and maybe sign the cast. As it is, I'm damaged on the inside and you don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

So I really like the theatre.

I've already worked all the jobs: candy counter, box office, projection. And then I've already put a new power cord on the coffee maker and fixed the light in the base of the popcorn machine. I've also moved some wires around in the absolutely ancient fuse box in the basement; it has to predate the theatre by at least twenty or thirty years. Some of the circuits were overloaded, like the lobby and marquee lights, and blew out every couple days. Others, like outlet circuits and exit lights were not loaded at all. I left the exit lights alone; wouldn't want them to go off when something else blew a fuse, but I put some of the lights onto the outlet circuits. Never had

a fuse blow since.

I also bought the right size fuses, too, and put them in. The trouble with old screw-in fuses is, everybody puts in 30's, the largest amperage that screws in, when the circuits are all designed for 20's. I bought 15's—after all, the wiring's fifty years old at least.

This night is the last for the guy who hired me. We're showing Itami's The Funeral, a funny film with the sickest hump scene on celluloid. Crowds are light, but it's always that way for subtitled films: people really can't read any more.

Ted comes down from the projection booth, still picking his zits and looking like a speed freak on bad acid. It's still early, forty minutes till the first show. He's busting a gut because whenever he touches the speaker wire, he hears this buzzing sound.

"In your head or out over the P.A.?"

He doesn't get it, maybe it isn't a joke. But he wants me to take a look. The box office doesn't open for twenty minutes, so we both walk up there and I say, "It sounds like a bad ground."

The whole system is mickey-mouse. The wire goes out of the projector, over to this worthless equalizer—Ted says they bought it to show Gimme Shelter and Yellow Submarine and I say it doesn't work. Then it goes from there to this wall jack. And from there, God knows how it gets to the speakers over the stage, which are surprisingly nice, some Altec Voice of the Theater's.

Someday I'd rewire the whole sound system, but right now, I can see the wire coming out of the quarter-inch phono plug on the wall is all

smashed. I know why, too. When you open the door too far, it hits the plug: good planning. I wonder out loud if the place was built for silent movies.

Well, the smashed wire is okay, not broken all the way through yet, but I unscrew the plug cap and inside I can see the ground wire is attached with a stone-cold solder joint.

"See?" I point. "The solder's all grey, not shiny. Cold joint, sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. Fix it in a flash. Where's a soldering gun?"

Ted goes for a big zit on his right cheek. "Do you have one?" He says.

"Well, yeah, at home."

"Oh."

"I got pliers and screwdrivers in the car. I got something that'll work."

In the trunk I know I have some aluminum wire conductive paste. I can re-attach the wire with that, wrap it with tape, solder it later. And put a rock on the floor so the door can't open so far.

Ted watches me do all this like I'm a famous surgeon. When I get done, his face is bleeding. Then he goes over to the projector and gives it a pat like a dog. He says, "The box office might be the soul of the theatre, but this here's the heart. Without this, we're dead."

"Uh-huh." I look out the little window, down towards the stage and screen. "Unless somebody's gonna sing and dance; do performance art."

I'm not sure that that is funny, either, so I go downstairs and open the box office.

Day 221

Michelle doesn't come down to the movies very often. It is a long ways from Corvallis to Springfield, but I wish she'd come more on the weekends, then she could stay over with me.

It is like she doesn't approve of my job and doesn't want to acknowledge it.

Michelle did come down to The Go Masters. After the show right in the lobby, she made this little Oriental bow and called it "Go with the Wind."

She also comes to the special Tuesday night series we're doing on romantic comedies. We've tried hard to book films not readily available in video, and we bill it that way in all the newspaper ads: films like Midnight, Twentieth Century, Palm Beach Story. We show a double feature every week and Michelle says her favorites are Trouble in Paradise, The Lady Eve, The Awful Truth, and Bringing Up Baby.

One night, late, after I light a fire in the wood stove and crawl into bed, I say, "If this is Tuesday, it must be Alpine."

But Michelle doesn't get it and she wants to go to sleep.

Day 129

I sign up for a class at Linn-Benton Community College: Technical Electricity. It meets in the Electronics Lab on the main campus in Albany—about a fifty minute drive. It is an evening class, twice a week, which is good because I take my full dose of Dilantin before bed each night. By the following evening I am pretty awake and alert.

The class is easy, really, and I get a 100 on the first two quizes. It's a lot of math—ohms, watts, volts, and amps problems and also some easy circuit stuff: if a battery so big is hooked with two so big resistors in series, how much current passes through the circuit? And how much if the two resistors are in parallel? I've bought a calculator and everything.

We also get to actually make the circuits on little test boards and then measure the voltage and current and compare with the mathematical results. It's fun. The batteries are almost always low, one night there was a car battery with seven volts, but I like going every week and hooking up the wires.

I like the drive, too. There are only so many movies to see and so many books to read and it is boring at home. I tried to carry some firewood one day and thought I'd die. This new Volvo has a decent radio—no tape deck—but I don't often turn it on. I'm always lost in my thoughts, in the circuits of my head somewhere. Every time I drive by the spot where I'd wrecked, it feels like somebody else. I always think, too, that one day I'll remember what happened that night. I still only remember driving down the road, then standing beside the car, then the ambulance showing up; I don't even know who called them.

So I drive by this spot at least four, sometimes six times a week. I

know it by heart, which trees and bushes, the fence, but I know it all vicariously, by driving by and seeing through the window of my car. I never stop. It is a vision I slow down for, where somebody in a white car got hurt. It plays like a film preview in my mind; I drive by, see my white Volvo coming the other way, then see me standing there lighting a cig and looking at the tip, wondering why it tastes so bad.

On the way to school, I forget about it when I get there; start doing problems, making wire connections, measuring batteries. I always get absorbed in the math, or in trading dry cells off the lab shelves to find a six-volter with at least five and a half.

On the way home, it's harder. The scene replays in my mind all night—even in my dreams. Once I dreamt I remembered what actually happened, but then I knew it was a dream because it was my blue Volvo in the desert someplace. I'd driven off the road and hit a mound of stinging ants.

Lots of nights I stop in the Finley Wildlife refuge on the way home. It's about five miles south of where I wrecked, a few miles north of my house, and only a mile or so off the highway. I park there and roll down the windows—even in the cold and rain—and listen. There's birds, owls sometimes and geese, and on a quiet night, I can hear past the highway, all the way to the interstate, a faint drone of whining tires. I park on this hill and see the lights out in the valley, yard lights at farmhouses where everybody sits at the table and remembers what happened last month and last year. I can see the smokestack at Halsey where they're probably still making paper bags. I can see the reflection off low clouds of the blinking airport lights in Corvallis and the other way, the circling green tower light at the

Eugene airport.

I sit there trying to remember and trying to forget, both the accident and the four months since. I can never sit long enough, though, because my back always starts to hurt, so I start the car, hear the clunk of the exhaust pipe against the frame when the engine catches, and then drive home on the back roads.

Day 220

"I liked your white car better than this one." Michelle says this as we are driving back from Eugene one afternoon. She'd taken the day off and showed up at my house at ten or so—I wasn't even awake. She wanted to go shopping.

She ended up buying a hand-knit wool sweater at the 5th Street Market and then a silk tie-dye scarf, too—something I said reminded me of Grace Slick.

"Better than your Comet?" I say. I glance over at her; she is wearing the new scarf, in purples and reds. I'm driving a little fast, to drop her off again at my place and then I have to go back to Springfield to work. We're starting a month-long run of off-night double feature Westerns, even a night of singing cowboys. But Michelle refuses to stay to see a couple classics: Stagecoach and Red River. I told her how she'd enjoyed Bringing Up Baby, and Red River has the same director—never mind how Hawks kills off John Wayne's love interest in the first five minutes: no skirt to get in the way of the hombre action.

"No, not better than my car, just better than this one."

"Actually, I like your Comet better than Ingrid, too, but I couldn't afford the gas," I laugh.

Michelle stops playing with the knot in the scarf and looks at me. "Who's Ingrid?" Very suspiciously.

I don't realize I've said it. "Um, Ingrid is this car; that's what I named it."

"Ingrid. Swedish, right?"

"Well, party that." I feel stupid, now that I've said it out loud. "Also

because of the automatic."

"Automatic?"

Too late now. "It's a thing from Shelly. She thought stick shift cars should be male and automatics female. The big Olds 98 turnpike cruiser we bought to move out here, we called Ethel." I shrug. "On account of the gas. She called my Jaguar, Heathcliff and the white Volvo was Ingemar. Don't you have a name for the Comet?"

"Yeah. Mercury."

65 miles per and silence for ten minutes.

In Monroe, I turn off the highway to go by the post office and get my mail. I'd rented a P.O. Box about four years before after finding my third mailbox smashed.

"Where're you going?" More of a bark than a question.

"To get my mail. We didn't stop this morning."

"I thought you had to get to work? And I need to get home." I notice it's the sixth time she's retied her scarf.

I shrug. "I do."

I drive right by the P.O., take two rights and am back at the highway.

Silence again for the five minutes to my house, then a less-than-genuine Michelle hug, perfunctory kiss on the cheek and she drives off. I never even shut off the motor. In the rear view mirror I watch the Comet's bullet brake lights flash on when she reaches the bend in the road.

I drive back to Monroe, get my mail—two insurance statements and a bill from Florenza. On the way to work, I figure I should maybe invite Michelle to Johnny Guitar. Joan Crawford looks great in men's clothes and

Sterling Hayden even gets to sing a song.

Day 130

Michelle is more excited than I am that I've signed up for the Tech Electricity class. "I'm so glad you're doing something," she says.

"And what are you doing?" I'm sitting on her couch and she is on her knees on the floor, unzipping my Levi's.

"You can't just sit around all the time, you know?"

Sex and Dilantin is weird. It feels good and all that, but sometimes I'm so distanced from myself, like my dick is in L.A. and my head in Cleveland. Like trying to heat a hundred pound anvil with a Bic lighter.

Michelle is really good: when I was first at her place, sitting around, fractured back and all, she was so gentle. She'd always get on top and I wouldn't have to move at all. I'm not complaining; and, like I said, she was really good—for a couple months. Then the novelty wore off, I guess, and once when I was having trouble coming, she climbed off me and said, "Just finish yourself."

Her footsteps thumped across the floor, into the bathroom, and then I heard her start to cry. I just laid there, didn't even pull up the covers, her wetness on my crotch like butter on yesterday's noodles. I was numb all over; my body was in her bed, but I wasn't sure it was mine.

I got up and took my Dilantin, went back to bed. Then, as I was dropping off, she came back all apologies. She cuddled up close and I remembered she said, "I know how hard it is."

I thought, no, you don't, but I hugged her anyway and we fell asleep.

Before the accident, we used to love each other all over the bed. Now, it seems like sex has become some kind of reward: I'm getting sucked off for good behavior. I eat my spinach, go to school—whatever—and get a

reward.

Michelle pulls all the strings. After that night, I never seduced her. But when reading the newspaper and surviving the day are major ordeals, sex takes a back seat.

No way could Michelle understand that.

After my orgasm, I want her to just sit beside me and kiss and hug. I want to just be together and be still. Her lips taste so good, I want to lay my head on her chest. I smile and hold her close, don't say a word.

But in about thirty seconds she squirms away and stands up. "You want to go get a pizza?" she asks. She is smiling, too.

"Okay, sure."

Then out at Cirello's—double cheese, pepperoni, olives and onions—she drinks four beers and keeps telling me how glad she is I'm taking this class. Later, though, I want to stay with her, but she sends me home, saying she wants to meditate.

Day 160

"Why don't you go back to work?"

I shrug. Maybe I shouldn't have stopped by Michelle's on my way home from class. At the door I get a big hug and a nice kiss, and then she gets the bedroom pillow and puts it on the couch like I like it. She sits down at the other end of the couch, stands up in two minutes and flips off the TV—it's some show on PBS about epilepsy.

Michelle sits down again, head to the side, looking at me, half a smile. Her curls bounce once. "You should go back to work. All you do is sit around, drive around, read books, go to a wimpy class you probably know it all already. What happened to the electrician who worked six days a week and had money coming out of his ears, always full of energy?"

"A few months ago I couldn't read a book at all."

"It's been half a year."

I shrug. "It's still me."

"I know it takes a long time," she says. "You've had time. Call that guy that Dr. Florenza gave you the number. He can make you a back brace, custom, just for you. That'll protect you at work."

"I'm sure it would." I look at the blank TV screen.

"What's with you? Everybody's been so nice. Dr. Florenza is wonderful, the guys at work, and Charlie and Mary, too, all send you cards. You said the massages and physical therapy were great: how can you sit around all day, all night? I know you sleep till noon, stay up till three or four. You live for Fridays—when they change the 99 cent movie at the State."

All true. "I don't know," I say. I look at Michelle; she is about to cry.

I wonder if I can cry, why I can't. Dilantin? The lock's rusted? Double-throw switch jammed?

"Talk to me," Michelle sobs, one perfect tear in each eye. "You never even smile anymore."

I look at my hands, the skin soft and smooth, so fair, the work calluses gone. I wonder if it'd take two hands to handle a Phillips screwdriver. I know I did try to put on my toolbelt the week before and my back screamed. Dr. Florenza had said compression fracture, spasms and intermittent pain forever, get a brace. And all I can see is the star pattern of the broken Volvo windshield, high up, dented metal trim, too, wondering who did that as I hear sirens in the distance.

"No, I don't smile much. I almost died—everybody says, 'How lucky, how fortunate.' But part of me did die, if only for a moment, trip the light fandango: I don't know who wrecked my car. I wasn't even there."

"It was an accident."

"Accident. I've looked that word up a hundred times in the dictionary: 'an event that takes place without one's foresight of expectation, especially one of an afflictive or unfortunate character. A casualty.' What difference does it make? No skid marks. No deer dead in the ditch. I don't know who wrecked my car." I look at Michelle. "Can you understand that? I do not know?"

"And that's your excuse to hibernate?" A dump truck of sarcasm in her voice.

"I'm going to school, the first college classroom I've been in in almost fifteen years. Aren't you glad I bought another Volvo with comfortable seats to get me back and forth?" My back suddenly hurts like hell.

Michelle touches my arm. I want to jerk away but don't.

She says, "You can't just sit and waste away. You can't run ninety percent of the race and quit. I've watched you come too far, don't stop."

"Don't stop," I echo. I wish I was parked at Finley listening to the owls say, "Whooo, whooo, whooooo." But I'm watching my hands again. "Don't stop for you or don't stop for me? You want a medal? 'I Repaired This Man'?"

Michelle is crying. I can see the tears hit her knees, dark spots growing, merging across her Levis. "Please go," she says.

I do, too, and am ten miles south of town before I realize I am driving 92 miles an hour, still with no seat belt on.

I don't see her or talk to her for days, until the sound of the dual pipes of her Comet thump-thump into my drive the next Saturday afternoon. I look out the window and Michelle gets out, a bag of groceries in one hand, a bunch of daffodils and white narcissus in the other. She bumps the door shut with her butt. I step out onto the porch, want to peel her Levis off right in the front yard.

"Hi," she says. Big smile. "I figured you'd be home. These are for you." She holds out the flowers. "Want some company?"

I take them and smell. Narcissus used to be a big favorite, now I can't smell a thing, another job of the Head Injury Club. When I chop up onions, I can't smell, but my eyes still tear.

I hold the door for Michelle. We don't really apologize to each other, but we do leave the French bread and Brie on the kitchen table, take the Häagen-Dazs up to bed. "You need your calcium," she says, pulling the

chocolate-chocolate chip and vanilla Swiss almond out of the bag.

"I've heard it's good for the bones." I reach two spoons from the drawer.

Later, Michelle never complains that it takes me a long time to come. I even climb on top and she is worried about my back, but I say it will be okay. And it is.

Day 191

Dear accident,

There was a moon last night, a Victorian novel moon, full, bright, white. It came in through the skylight and I was naked on my bed, even under two blankets—one from the Amana Colonies, the other a wedding gift—I was raw, trapped by white heat and black and white shadows.

I thought of movies with close-up pagan moons, like El Norte when the Federales massacre the peasants. I thought of who played Heathcliff—Barrymore? I thought of movies with day-for-night, always fake, like Manchurian Candidate or I Married a Monster from Outer Space where the night scenes have daytime shadows and you can see clouds in the sky. Thank god for Film Noir when they really shot them at night. Even Dance with a Stranger has all those wet night-time streets leading to warm clubs and parties.

Dance with a Stranger is me. Or maybe All of Me, when Steve Martin's jazz guitarist meets—literally—rich bitch. I'm stuck with this person—myself, really—and I don't know him. He doesn't drink beer, doesn't smoke, just takes little pills once a day: "Go ask Alice, I think she'll know." I wonder if Dreamchild has a full moon anywhere in it?

I don't know this person; it's me, but I don't know him. He looks like me, close enough anyway, except for the one vertebra that's kind of lumpy now. He doesn't act like me. Doesn't do my things. He doesn't have a beer at Murphy's or the Stein to relax after work, doesn't even work. Doesn't smoke dope in the evenings and blow a little alto sax to mellow out. This one watches Dexter Gordon keep cool in Round Midnight, and Bird, too, all dark and smoky.

He used to like 2001—there's a moon movie for you—but now it's Repo Man. From Clockwork Orange to Sid and Nancy.

And still the moon is on me, on him. He can hardly taste or smell. Florenza says, "It takes time, possibly ninety percent recovered is one hundred percent healed for you." Can't lift heavy weights. "Get a brace." I wonder what it would look like in the moonlight. Would I take it off or leave it on for sex? In the moonlight? Surgical steel or slick white plastic?

The best moon is the USA Cable Net one: made by a computer, sitting over that hypothetical city, looking yellow instead of white, and so big because it's next to the horizon. It's not real, but it's the best one, that paper moon. Whatever happened to Bogdanavich? After Last Picture Show it was all down hill; love that scene where they show Red River as the last picture. Real Men. I don't remember moons in either of those films.

But this moon's real, near the edge of the skylight, now. It can leave me alone. I want a beer.

What do the Moonies have to do with the Moon? Anybody ever make a movie about the Moonies? They used to be in Iowa City, pushed out of a van on a street corner and not let back in until they sold enough flowers. They'd go back—all spaced, do I walk like that, now? They'd go back and the side door of the van would open a crack, count the flowers and shut on them till they were all gone, all sold.

Used to go to the afternoon movies in Iowa City. They had $1.25 matinees. Shelly and I would get stoned and go. Didn't matter what: Three Muskateers—or was it Four? Or Barry Lyndon, we'd see them all during the winter. I loved all the candlelight in Barry Lyndon and then we'd go back outside and it would be still light and freezing and our eyes

would hurt and we'd walk over to the C.O.D. for Double Bubble, or down to Gabe's where the liquor was really bad.

The moon's on the edge now, only half of it there. My room—his room—is getting dark again, like in that old show My Little Margie where she covers all the windows and doors with black paper so he'll think it's night when it's really day. And then he gets up to pee or something and goes crashing around.

Goodnight, Mr. Moon, I wish I had a drink.

Day 243

Never do I need my two cats more than after Florenza finally lets me quit Dilantin.

Shelly and I had one other cat when we first arrived in Eugene, rented this upstairs apartment near 5th and Oak. We were hanging out, unemployed. She went for a walk one cold rainy night—just before Halloween—and this black cat followed her home. All black, long haired, with a very round face and green eyes. Puffy tail, too.

"Look what I found." Shelly was smiling.

It was a reserved cat, its motor buried deep under the fur, but friendly. It would never look you in the eye, though. I was holding it at arms' length, trying to turn it this way and that, but it wouldn't make eye contact.

"Obviously a pixote," I said. I knew the word, not from the film, but from a Latin American Lit class in Iowa City. "What do you think?"

"Can we keep him, huh, huh?" Shelly was hamming it up like a three-year-old.

I shrugged. "If it's not somebody else's."

Shelly named it Zelda and it was just about the nicest cat we ever had. Very unconcerned, it would lie right in the middle of the sidewalk and a bike would zing by and have to go around it.

Six months after Shelly and I moved to Oregon, no job in sight, I went to the Unemployment Office. They sent me right away to Corvallis and the School District. Turns out they had a standing order in, but most electricians wanted the residential and commercial work: it paid more.

But it was still plenty good money and benefits and they hired me right off.

We all moved to Corvallis a few weeks later, after we'd had Zelda for a month. We got this beautifully shaped old house, steep-roofed, white with white trim, a hundred years old and all run down. The rent was good and it had high ceilings and picture rails, and nice landscaping with a laurel hedge and a couple beeches in the back. It was on 7th Street, close enough to walk downtown and right across the street from a small park. After we were settled, Shelly waded through the cat's fur and found out he was a neutered male, not a female.

"What do we do?" she asked me one night after work.

I was sitting, feet up, drinking a Henry's—a new beer I'd discovered; they made it in Portland. Great stuff.

"Change his name," I said.

"To what?"

"Draco." I'd studied and learned the constellations on the move West; lay in the night looking up with a little glow-in-the-dark star chart. Beautiful when you're stoned, and Draco was one of my favorites.

Draco became the only hassle when we broke up, like fighting over a kid. I wanted him, knew he could make the move to the country, but I also knew he was her cat, followed her home in the rain.

Draco moved to Massachusetts in a kitty carrier and had a bad attack of cystitis.

I got two kittens for my place a few months later. I found them in a cardboard box being lugged around by two small girls near the maintenance shops. One of the elementary schools was right across the drive. I

was just getting off work, in a hurry to drive downtown to get an oil filter for the Volvo. They were in the middle of the drive—a short girl with dark hair and designer jeans and her sister probably, a little older with the same hair in a ponytail with three tie bands.

I thought they had a problem. I switched off the engine, pulled the brake, and watched the oil pressure slowly fall.

"Hey, would you like a cat?" the older one said. She was looking right at me.

It clicked. "Yeah, I would. Is that what you got?" I opened the door and went over: mama lying all contented, with three little kittens mostly buried in crumpled newspapers.

"My friend Kristie took one at show and tell today, but Mom says they all gotta go or she'll take them to the pound and they'll kill them."

"You're good at sales," I said. Two were tuxedo kitties, white on mostly black. One had white front feet, the other white rear feet. The third was a little bigger, sort of a cinnamon color, more like the mom. They were barely old enough to wean. "Are you selling them?"

"Mom says they just gotta have good homes." Her little sister kept looking at her and the kittens. I could tell she'd be sad if I took one.

"Do they have names?"

"No." The kid looked at me like I was stupid. "They're just kittens." She laughed and looked at her sister.

I shrugged and picked up one of the tuxedos. "Which is your favorite?"

"We like the brown one." This was the first thing the little one had said.

Something clicked again. "Okay. Tell you what. I'd like both the others. I live in the country, away from big roads."

The older one narrowed her eyes, suddenly suspicious and very grown up. "Will you give them good homes?"

I smiled. "I'll give them my home. I work right here. You can see me any time and ask about them."

"But-" the little one said.

"Shadow!" The big one said, accusingly.

The little girl could just about cry so I introduced myself and asked the big girl her name.

"Sterling." She looked at her feet.

I got down on my knees, held out my hand. "So, is it a deal if I can have the box, too?"

She shook my hand, smiling, a future business leader. "Yes."

Shadow felt better she could carry the brown kitten. Sterling picked up the mom. I hoped mama wouldn't get upset.

I took the box. I wanted to get out of there before they started to cry, the kittens and the girls.

"Wait," the older one said.

"What?"

"What're you gonna call them?"

I smiled. "I think they're a boy and a girl: John and Jackie."

She was suspicious again. "Those are weird names."

"No," I said. "What do you call the mom?"

"This is Softie." She held her up, rear legs dangling.

"Careful with Mama, don't hurt her. Softie's a nice name and she's a

good mother. Well, goodbye," I said.

"Goodbye." She was suddenly formal again.

The two little guys started to scream before I reached the corner. Very noisy, too. I figured they were part Siamese. Great.

I didn't get an oil filter and I didn't get any sleep, either. We all ended up on the waterbed. They were wrapped in an old blanket on my chest, crying but not fussing.

It wasn't long, though, before they were ripping up my house, climbing up my pants whenever I stood still and generally causing destruction everywhere. So I got this fancy kitty door and installed it in the pantry window. They could come and go at will, pushing their way through a hanging flap. And they each had a little magnet on their collar so only they could go through the little door. The magnets activated a switch; for other animals it wouldn't open.

When the weather was nice I sometimes wouldn't see them for days—freaked me out the first time, but I got used to it. They'd be back, looking fit. They were both neuters by then so there weren't mating problems and John didn't run around all over the countryside: but I did sometimes see them from the bedroom, way out in the pasture or the Christmas trees, stalking, hiding, lying in the sun.

John and Jackie were about three years old when I met Michelle. They weren't totally spoiled and I was buying them chicken livers less often. They still went ape for canned mackerel and peanut butter. And they loved tomato juice. Michelle had first said she didn't care for cats, but she certainly got along with mine. Whenever she was over, one would be curled in her lap and the other by her side. I was only jealous when I

wanted her lap, but upstairs they learned to disappear for a while when the bed rocked.

The first time Michelle visited, she'd said the same as the little girl, "What bizarre cat names."

"No, not at all," I shrugged. "This is John Lennon, and this, with the white feet, is Jackie Onassis."

Now, Florenza has said I can stop the Dilantin and John and Jackie are my only reality.

At her office, she'd said, "You might experience some nervousness or irritability. I recommend you taper off slowly. Reduce the dosage over two weeks. But with your level, it's probably okay just to stop."

I was so excited, like I was well. Underwater, hazed, stoned, and drunk-feeling for eight months, I didn't know which was accident and which was narcotics.

She went on, "If you do have some other seizure activity, you're probably looking at five years, minimum. And I have other patients who dislike the idea of discontinuing, so if you want to keep on; resume. Just call the office. Some people take this their whole life."

That night, at home in the bathroom, with Jackie lying on my right foot and John rubbing my left, I tap two pills instead of three out of the bottle. I am nervous, too, because if this decreased dosage leads to seizures, I'm screwed. But the EEG had looked great. According to even the technician, yet another person who did the same rigmarole with the pins and needles—I went with the pins, again—there was no sign of any problems.

So I eat these two pills and my life is instant hell. For starters, I

can't sleep: wake up at least ten or fifteen times a night. Every time John moves, every time Jackie moves, the fridge clicks on, the fridge clicks off, the fridge defrosts. In the morning, when a car goes by, the cats go out, the cats come in, the sun comes up.

And I get pissed off at everything; get mad at Michelle, even, when she calls to see how I am. She calls at noon, all excited, like quitting drugs would put me right back on track, set me straight.

"How are you?" she says.

"Okay." I don't know what I sound like.

"You don't sound it."

"It's okay, couldn't sleep."

"They say sleeping pills really disrupt your sleep."

"This is Dilantin."

"Still a barbiturate. It'll take time for your system to detox."

"You think I'm a junkie?" Fingers white on the phone. "Maybe I should've taken four instead of two?"

There is silence on the phone for six pounding heartbeats.

"Huh?" I yell.

"What's wrong?" She says it very quietly.

Silence.

"Maybe you just better be by yourself," she says. "I'll call you later."

I have to watch people's fingers and hands at work in order not to give them dirty looks, mean looks. I'm mad when they fumble with their money. If not for the glass ticket booth, I would just jerk it out of their hands, throw them the change. I don't even remember the films I see.

I am not sleeping, not eating, living on rage. I want drugs, alcohol, whiskey, cigarettes, anything but Dilantin. I think sure I'll blow another head gasket, be found dead on the bathroom floor, blood trickling from my nose and ears.

I sit at home, rock in my chair, can't even read. I rip up the paper if they mention the Republicans. I rip up the paper if they mention the Democrats, when the film review is negative, when I find a misspelled word.

Michelle thinks I'm mad at her. I try to explain that I am mad at everything; hate every fucking thing I see, touch, feel, fuck, eat, drive by, listen to, piss on, shit out and can't smell.

Except John and Jackie. I want to strangle them a couple times, but I've never hated them. I end up in bed most nights, with them, just like when they were young. I hear their purr motors and it calms me down. I still can't sleep, but I do back off the voltage a bit.

They know when I am uptight; they are my yardstick. If I fuss, or fidget, or yell, they split. So, to keep them there with me, I have to be calm, stay relaxed, an iceberg with a molten core: in order to listen, their purring my only reality.

Day 262

Dear accident,

Why do you lead me towards an overdose of pills? They wait there, patiently, stacked on top of each other, a couple months-worth of Dilantin in close quarters, touching each other.

Something happens, a car insurance bill—the wrong word from a check-out girl—and I'm in a rage. But I don't do it: you do it.

Dr. Florenza talks about the reptilian part of the brain, where the aneurysm is, that it's more primitive, the root of emotion, but it's yours. Not mine.

Certainly you kicked in that red Volkswagon fender last night, not me. The two girls couldn't parallel park, ended up on the sidewalk right beside me, not two steps away.

Stupid bitches, probably two months out of driver training and two months into lipstick. You kicked their car, but it's me they promised to have their boyfriends beat up. Yelled back from a safe distance, of course, through a barely open window.

I'll own the frontal and temporal bruises, the reading problems I had, but you own the reptile, that snake in the grass whose jaw can unhinge to swallow a whole bottle with a child-proof cap.

Day 703

Dear Dad,

Why were you always so good with cats? And babies, too: Mom said when I was young, you could hold me and I'd stop fussing.

Even though Trigger was my cat, it was your lap he liked to sit in in the den. He slept there for hours when you read, or purred real hard and twisted his head into your fingers when you scratched behind his ears.

The den was always the quiet room; the TV was in the basement. Is that why Trigger liked it there? Were you always calm?

Day 292

I drive all over—not even listening to the radio, just driving.

Sometimes I go south, out of Monroe straight south on Territorial Highway to Cheshire, where a mobile home court is perched on the hillside like a row of dominos. Then west to Triangle Lake—I went fishing there, once, about five years ago with Charlie; we caught three, had to throw two back. We were terribly high on mushrooms: I kept seeing two yellow lines on the drive home.

From Triangle Lake I keep driving west to the coast, where the Siuslaw hits the Pacific at Florence. I never stop—even at the dunes on the coast—just drive. That isn't my favorite way to go, through Territorial and on to Triangle Lake is pretty—sometimes hawks overhead, floating across fields, and deer, too, if I go to Deadwood and back into the hills on the gravel logging roads. But over by Mapleton, near the coast, there's lots of timber industry: mills, log trucks, old ponds. It's just ugly after all the beauty.

The other way to go from my place: straight west: To Alpine. They say it was a booming town back at the turn of the century, even had an opera house for vaudeville. You can still see the old orchards, apple trees all overgrown, only fit for birds. The Alpine Orchard Tract was divided into five acre plots and sold in newspapers back east—St. Louis, probably, and Kansas City. People came to the area and then there was a second boom around and about World War II for logs. What wasn't already cut for apples, was cut for timber: some of it was even replanted. I talked to an old guy in the Alpine Tavern who'd replanted the base of Green Peak, west of town, in the '30's or '40's. I bought him three beers, at least, and never

got the exact date out of him. But the trees are big enough now to cut again.

I just like to drive. When I first started going, the trees were just turning, the alders yellow, the maples more orange, and the dogwoods bright red. It was a drier fall than most so the leaves hung on. Usually, they just get rained off.

My trips always start with a purpose: to Monroe to get my mail or have breakfast, to see the fall colors, for groceries. But I always keep going, just driving, and I eventually realize that I've picked a route with a spot halfway out—the store at Triangle Lake or Alsea, Alpha-bit Cafe in Mapleton, whatever—so I can get a pop or a snack before driving home.

Sometimes I end up in Corvallis for a film, or Eugene, or even at work in Springfield hours early.

I don't drive across the valley up into the foothills of the Cascades. I don't know why—it's pretty, too, with different trees, different ferns, rhododendrons. I just don't want to cover the valley floor, flat as Iowa, full of old farmhouses built by somebody's grandfather from Kansas. I stay in my part of the Coast Range, usually the area I can see from my bedroom windows.

It takes me a long time to realize I just want to be going, on the move someplace, not sitting at home. My loops seem to get farther and farther out, though, and I never know if I'm driving towards something or away.

Day 300

On the way home from the theatre last night I listened to the "Midnight Boogie" on KRVM; they played Slim Harpo's "It's Raining in my Heart." I wasn't sure it was true about my heart.

I talk to Michelle about fish.

"I saw you yesterday," she says. This is on the phone; she's called me.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"At Payless." It sounds like an accusation.

"I was only there for a bit—I didn't see you."

"I didn't want you to. I was running errands over lunch, in a hurry, and I saw you in the pet store."

"Flea collars."

"I saw you back by the aquariums."

"Yeah, I was thinking about getting one."

"You were just standing there."

"Yeah," I say. I look out the window at the cows across the road. They aren't moving.

"I said you were just standing there."

"I said: Yeah?"

"Just standing there like in a trance, some kind of a zombie."

"I like watching fish. I think a tank's too much hassle, though. I knew someone who had one." (It was my friend, George.)

"You can't just stand there watching fish." She is getting pissed, but I'm not.

"Why not?" I say.

"It's a waste. You're just gonna atrophy, mind and all."

"But my mind's never worked better. After fifteen years of dope and six months of underwater: I'm a fish who's learned what water is."

"You're acting like a retread, standing there, watching fish."

"Do you know what I was looking at?" I say. "I was watching the neons, because they move in a group, darting."

"So?" She says this like the response is a joke.

Maybe it is. "Because they're blue and red, hot and cold. You said those were my astrological colors and I've been cold and hot since I quit the drug, two months ago. Don't you see? After fifteen years, I'm drug free. I just de-toxed like a goddamn junkie."

"Dr. Florenza gave you the Dilantin for your head. That's different."

The cows haven't moved. "No, it's not—still a drug. I'm finally a neon, moving with the world."

"You need to see your doctor."

"I got an appointment in a couple months."

She hangs up. One of the cows turns to its left.

Day 301

I change the oil in the Volvo; it is a bitch. It hurts to lay on my back behind the right front wheel and reach up under the car with my right arm. I use a socket wrench with the longest handle I have—so it'd be easier to loosen the drain plug. But it is still screaming pain up and down my spine.

The oil filter is just as bad, but at least I don't have to lay on my back. I screw on a new one, a genuine "Volvo Replacement Part," and get the plug back in. I add four quarts of Valvoline 20-50W Racing; that's what I always put in my old 544. I start it up and look for leaks.

Not even a wet spot.

I hurt from below my shoulders to below my ribs—wonder if Florenza's back brace would really do any good—but I go in the house and get the air filters I'd bought the day after the car. I knew they needed replacing, but I'd never changed them. They aren't as bad as the oil filter to work on, I don't have to bend over; so after that I check the little oil reservoirs on the carburetors (low—I fill them), the brake fluid (fine), and the transmission fluid (okay—little low, but the car isn't hot). I check everything I can think of, then get a bucket and a sponge, unwind the hose and wash the car: soap and wipe what I can, but it hurts too much to do the roof.

I look at the rust spots behind the wheels. Really not too bad, yet, the paint is just badly blistered. They can be fixed with sanding to bare metal, undercoat and paint.

The only nice thing about this car over the 544: disc brakes. It doesn't go as well as my old Volvo, but it sure stops better.

When I get done I go inside, put water on for tea and sit at the kitchen table. I can't stand coffee any more. Partly, it tastes like acid in a cup; partly, it reminds me too much of cigarettes. I can see my car, dark blue, drip drying, out the small window which faces the road.

The kitchen and the bath in my house are at one end, down a step, under a shed roof. It used to be a shed because the door to the bath looks like it was an outside door, and the opening to the kitchen is only a double-wide doorway with a low header. My next plan for the house has always been to rip off this end and rebuild a bigger bathroom and kitchen. But all I'd ever done is paint it light blue in a nice enamel. The cabinet doors and trim are a medium brown.

Sitting there with my tea, looking at my Volvo out the window, I don't know if I'll ever get up out of my unpainted wooden kitchen chair—forget framing a new addition. It feels good that I worked on the car—that's a first in all these months—but I suddenly feel ninety years old, like I'm moving with the slow, shuffling steps of the old guys at the Alpine Tavern. My memory is about that good, too. I'm not sure about yesterday, or tomorrow.

One short ride in an ambulance and I'd gone from 36 to 106. Florenza wants a back brace; maybe I should just get an aluminum walker, one of those with two front wheels and two rear pegs: that's the biggest ladder I'll ever climb.

I go to lie down on the couch. At least from there I can see the new part of the house, the part I built, wired, roofed, painted. I'm supposed to be happy to be alive, but I feel like crying.

When I wake up, John is licking my neck and Jackie is sniffing my socks. It hurts to sit up; it is late afternoon and I need to leave for work. I am glad to see the cats: they'd been suspicious of me when I first moved home, like I was a foreigner in their house, but they warmed up to me after a few weeks. I give them each some dry food, change my clothes and drive to Springfield.

The car is as strong as I am weak. It knocks less—must have really needed the air filters—and I think it sounds better, too. I drive fast enough that I have time to stop at Bi-Mart and pick up some sheepskin covers for the front seats.

After work—an interesting Japanese thing called Himatsura, about work and nature and progress—the oil level is right up there, haven't lost a drop. I smile. The seatcovers feel really nice.

Day 309

Dear accident,

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

I haven't thought of this poem since Dad died of colon cancer. Now, I'm humming it like a rocking radio song on Top 40: "Do not go gentle into that good night."

I think Michelle finally figured out I'm going to stay at the theatre: I know she disapproves, like it's not good enough for me—no, for her idea of me.

She probably thinks about all those things you read about people who hurt their heads and have totally different personalities afterwards. Jeckyl and Hyde stuff, or Heckle and Jeckle, the crows on TV.

But it's still me, don't you know it, accident? I'm the same person, aren't I?

Michelle's been the Nurse for all this time and it's like she's got a vested interest, now, in the outcome: "Vell, Doctor, once ve insert the electrodes, he'll be as good as new, no?"

But she doesn't understand, no one does. I wish I'd fractured both legs so people could see the limp, sign the cast. Then when the plaster's sawn off, it'd be all better. The head stuff doesn't work that way: there's no reference point, no base line. And besides, it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me that I want to work in a movie theatre. I've got enough money saved from the years before the wreck that I could pay my whole place off; live here for expenses and taxes and insurance.

This isn't Brian's Song and I'm not whatsisname with the burned feet who ran the four-minute mile with no toes. "Ain't no such thing as a

Superman": ain't no Rocky, no matter how many times they reshoot the same story, no matter how many times Talia takes off her glasses and becomes beautiful. Jean Paul ain't Bogart.

So tell them, accident, there ain't no such thing. There's you and there's me and a bunch of people outside the circle, beyond the light of the projector.

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

I love you, Michelle, but my accident doesn't. And you don't love him. You like that guy who painted your duplex, installed gas pipe for you to get a gas stove, replaced the electric service, went dancing, could afford champagne.

Now, I might as well be a gas pump jockey: "Dipstick your oil, ma'am?"

What do you want? That I should drive your Comet over the Golden Gate Bridge and have some mystical revelation which can suddenly explain life in the latter part of the twentieth century? Wear red and move to Antelope and fuck the Bhagwan?

I'm having enough trouble being me these days. Everywhere I go there's this creature following me around. The only place to shake him is a dark room, a private toilet stall, an empty theatre. He says, "Hi, I'm your accident. Remember me?" He stands in front of me: "Could I interest you in a magazine subscription? I'm working my way through college and every one I sell brings me one small step closer to my final goal. Could you help me out? No, that's not my foot in your door."

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

I saw The Unbearable Lightness of Being on my night off last week.

I sat through it twice, a first for me and for you. And you were the only hand I had to hold. No sweetie beside me to discuss the sensuality, contemplate the heaviness, understand the kitsch.

I am neither light, nor heavy; or rather, I am both. In either case, I can't face the road, the ride home past those bushes and trees that claimed my other car. Can't face myself, or you, and I'd already read the book.

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Would you roll that one more time, please? And cut it to slow motion right where the car starts to leave the road.

Day 704

Dear Dad,

I remember once you wrote to Shelly and me, after we were in Oregon and I'd bought the Volvo. You asked, "How's your Vulva?"

Shelly thought that was the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

Day 310

I run into my friend Charlie Sunday night at the Alpine Store. It is the first time I've seen him, first time I've been over there since the wreck. He tells me he's not with Mary any more and he's just there to drop off "the kid." I don't even know they're separated.

Charlie is a big guy, bushy and bearded, built like a pickle barrel. In fact, his fingers look like pickles and he forever defies the first rule of guitar playing: how big fat fingers can actually play the individual strings.

Charlie and I and a couple other guys, sometimes Mary, too, used to jam in his wood shop. Once a week we'd unplug the table saw, joiner, and radial drill, move them all aside and move in amps and speakers and Charlie's cousin Ted's drum set. Mary had a nice voice for blues, high and a bit raspy, but she only joined us when they were getting along. Charlie played a wicked Stratocaster, an old white one with gold plated pegs. He was good, really good, and I'd take my horn and we'd play songs like "Hideaway." Ted had a nice voice, too, for stuff like "Back Door Man" or "I'm so Glad." He looked and dressed like a skinhead, but he was a cool Zen doper, sitting there banging the drums, belting out "Beast of Burden." We covered lots of old Stones, and Yardbirds, and generally had a good time. Somebody'd have a bottle, somebody else a couple reefers, and I took a gram of coke once and it was the best night ever, but Ted couldn't sing for shit after two lines. It did bring Mary out; didn't affect her voice at all. She sang a beautiful "Since I Fell for You" and I had my horn in there just right.

But everybody was thin on commitment. One week would be fine, another would be: "I'm too tired" or "I worked too much today." I wanted to say, "We <u>all</u> worked all day." After a few months of regular gigs it all

flaked apart. I liked the chance to play with others; the rest of my week always went better after a night of music.

Charlie asks me about music in the drizzle outside the store: "I heard you got banged up, but you were out of the hospital quicker'n I could get my butt up there. How're you doing? Blowing any sax?"

"No." I shake my head. His handshake about destroys my arm up to the elbow: the choke setter's grip. "No music. I fucked up my ear. Things don't sound the same: can't pick out the keys. Don't know if I could play even if the solos were written out note by note."

Charlie spits a big wad to his left. That's one drug I never cared to try: chewing tobacco.

"That's too bad," he says. "I heard you fucked up your back, too? Tough break for a working man."

"Yeah, Fucked up my head, too. Doctor had me on weird drugs."

"Oh yeah? Anything good?" His eyes get shiny bright.

"Nope." I shake my head and shrug. Little drops of moisture are forming on his black beard. I can see his breath in the light from inside the store. "Not unless you're having any seizures."

"Oh." He reaches for more chew. "I do got a new woman in town, giving me seizures about every night."

"That's not the same." I laugh, watching his hands.

"Well, I got to get going. We'll see you later, drop by to check on you in your fire tower."

"Yeah, see you." Asshole.

Inside the store it is nice to see Mary. She stares, definitely acting

like it is nice to see me. She always looks overworked, plump in a cheap dress, pale skin, short red hair just chopped off, pale eyes dark and tired. Her kids, though—only one of the three is Charlie's—have beautiful haircuts which she gives them. They are always dressed well, too, not like high fashion, but nice and clean. Rachel and Ruth are her daughters, budding teenagers, and Max is the youngest—Charlie's kid—about three, maybe four.

She is holding him and he is holding her for all he's worth. They both smile when I wink at them. What I can't believe, though, is the store. It's always been Mad Dog and Ripple, M&M's and 7 Up. Now there is a new cooler—lots more cheese and yogurt and eggs—and new shelves with canned goods, bags of flour and sugar.

"What happened?" I ask, looking around.

"Thank the Lord. I spent Charlie's money the day he moved out."

I go around and pick up a dozen eggs, a quart of yogurt, two cans of refried beans, a big bag of tortilla chips, and the 7 Up I came in for.

"How're you feeling?" she asks as she rings up my food. It's an old register, nothing electronic, nickel plated.

"Not too bad, most of the time."

"God willing, you're going to be all right, then." Mary is the only person I know who is into God and drugs. One time, she even quoted me a Biblical passage about the herbs on earth being for man's benefit.

I stop, a ten dollar bill in my hand. "Well, I don't know if it's God willing, or me willing." This is a disagreement we'd had before.

She smiles. "He could be helping you, behind the scenes, like, and you might not know it." She takes the ten, makes change.

"Then it wouldn't matter to me, would it?"

I look at her, we're both smiling.

I take my change, head for the door. "Thanks. See you later."

"You keep getting better," she says, "or I'll be taking you to church."

"Right. Pray for it either way you like."

I know she is a regular at the Alpine Church, choir leader, too. I'm not sure if it is more Baptist or Fundamental, but the preacher is basically okay, except when he yells "Lord be praised" whenever somebody hits a home run in softball.

Day 312

I am in a deep sleep—it must be about nine, hours before I normally face the world—and something wakes me up. I look outside, my eyes hurt. There is a red bicycle leaning in the yard, a kid's bike. Jackie is on the foot of the bed, John is sitting in the window. Whatever it is, they've heard it, too. All their ears are up and pointed.

"Anybody home?"

Whose voice is that? Not Michelle's.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Did I wake you up?" Steps across the living room, right to the base of the stairs.

"Yeah. Who is it? Steps up the stairs.

"Me." I see the red hair when I figure it out. Mary had never been to my place but once, when I had a party after finishing the bedroom addition. "I brought you these."

"What?" Too, too early.

"These." It is flowers, wild irises and a couple daisies. "They help you get well; it's in the Bible."

"Sleep does, too." I am almost too surprised to be angry.

"Oh, should I go?" Both cats are on her in a flash, instant attachment. She is petting one with each hand. Unusual for them to be so openly friendly so fast.

"No," I shake my head. "Too late now. I'll never go back to sleep."

"Maybe I can help?" She starts to unbutton her dress, a plaid rag from K-Mart, no bra, pink panties, and before I can answer she is in bed with me. John and Jackie have split and Mary is working on me with her

pale, pale lips.

I am actually amazed I can get a hard-on at that hour.

So we have sex. It feels good; she has incredible contractions when she comes, but it's weird. After getting me all excited, then she just lays there like it's my turn to perform. Does the Bible mandate this?

Afterwards, she is twirling the hair on my chest around her little finger. She is covered with sweat and still panting. "God be praised, but you can love a woman for a long time."

"Huh?" I say. I'd been falling asleep. "Thank you."

Then I say, "Do you always thank the Lord when you come? Isn't your orgasm your responsibility?"

I think I meant it as the kind of teasing we've always done, but she gets instantly pissed off; throws on her dress and leaves. Tears in her eyes, she says, "That's the rudest thing any man has ever said to me. God believes in love and you should, too."

She slams the door on her way out. I watch her pedal away and after a few minutes John and Jackie come back. But I don't fall asleep. Instead, I get up and feed the cats a can of Tuna.

Day 500

Dear accident,

I just sat through about eighteen showings of Paul Cox's Vincent, with John "Elephant Man" Hurt reading Van Gogh's letters.

The ending funeral scene, after Van Gogh's suicide, bothered me. After an entirely subjective first-person cinema experience, complete with first-person narrator, it's a bit much to see the black-eyed Susans laid gently on his casket, his paintings on the walls, his brother crying in the background.

And unless the self-portrait is a mirror image, it also looks like Vincent lost the same ear as I did.

Late in life Vincent said, "Painting makes life bearable." How far from his early evangelical enthusiasms and later optimism about his work! He talks about God being merely an unfinished study and how sailors fear the sea, but that doesn't keep them on the shore.

Cox's rapid pans and track shots gave me a headache, made me dizzy. I prefer a still camera, mise-en-shot, if you will. Yet, Vincent, so worried early on about the world butchering the pronunciation of "Van Gogh," kept me mesmerized.

The faith, the failed faith, the colors, the paint, the expressionism of his impressionism, after the first night I went home and took out my sax, the Selmer '56 Mark VI. And I cleaned it, polished it, tried to play it. But it sounded different to my right ear, the quality wasn't there. Maybe it's just no tobacco in the lungs: no, I can't pick out the changes in the jazz tune on the radio, can't tell if it's G blues, or D. But the horn is golden, a beautiful yellow, the enamel job is perfect, the ivory of the keys translucent

as pearl. I would play it if I could—that could be my faith, my connection—even in my living room, playing along to the stereo.

But no, I go back to work each night and watch Vincent. I watch him lose faith, hear him grow doubtful. I watch him—at my own age—get carried out of a room in a box with a cross on top, the cross buried by a bouquet of yellow flowers, knowing his last painting was a yellow wheat field and a flock of black crows.

Day 700

Dear accident,

You've trapped me in a booth between my eyes. I am an Axolotl.

I watch the street crew tear up the road and rebuild it. I watch families go by in four-door sedans. I watch boys kiss girls and girls kiss boys. I watch young lovers come to the movies: Last Tango in Springfield.

But I'm still watching—not even seeing—trapped inside. My tongue's an electric ticket dispenser, "two out of twenty," "one out of ten," "thank you very much," "cheeseburger fries and a Coke."

Is the bulb going to burn out, accident? Is it only time till you blow a fifty amp fuse? Does it pop like shorted furnace-fuse? Or blow like a big cartridge fuse under an old knife switch, no longer good but still passing minimal current? What about a Square D circuit breaker and its logo, "Shows When It Blows"?

Huh, accident? You tell me, you cocksucker.

Day 374

I tally the evening's ticket sales, a Friday night and over 200 hundred seats for Man Facing Southeast. I count out $100 for the box office till and put the rest in a First Interstate deposit bag. I record the ticket information and then count the concessions' take for the night. It's interesting how different crowds buy different foods. For a film like this, we always sell lots of black coffee and Rollos; and for a comedy, peanut M&M's and popcorn with butter. I leave $100 in the safe for this cash register, too, and put the rest in a different bank bag; it goes into another account so there's a second deposit slip to fill out, too.

When I'm done I shut off all the power except a sixty watt night light in the lobby and a small seventy-five watt flood over the front doors. I lock up and drive to the bank, deposit both bags in the locking night teller. Then I call Yuseff, the owner—he has a chain of sixteen video stores and this must be his operate-at-a-loss hobby—to tell him the evening's totals. I've never even met the guy, but he always answers after two rings. His accent is thick, his voice pleasant. I always imagine him as Saeed Jaffrey from My Beautiful Laundrette.

On the way home I think about both films: the schizophrenic who thinks he's from outer space in Man Facing Southeast, yet who perfectly sums up man's weaknesses on earth, and the two men from My Beautiful Laundrette, trying to survive in a culture they can't control.

In Man Facing Southeast, there's a scene where Rantes, the nut, is working in a lab and he cuts open a human brain. He's trying to understand human beings' root lack of compassion. It's a chilling scene, the two halves of the brain falling open, right and left, looking like mirror images.

But mine wouldn't look like that: one side would show hematomas and contusions, while the other would be clear and unscarred.

It bothers me and I turn on the radio.

Day 375

I am listening to Dr. Florenza at my one year check-up. We're discussing my nose and lack of smell.

"If you're still realizing improvement after a year, that's a good sign. You're still healing. It takes a long time for these types of injuries."

I frown at her and look at my hands.

"Everyone is different. To be completely healed might eventually mean 100% function. For others, 90% is all they achieve. For them then, that is 100% healed.

"You make it sound like roulette."

"No, I'm making it sound like it takes a long time. Believe me, it does. With head injuries the brain can sometimes be repaired, like, say, a leaky pipe or a table lamp, but the mind is also affected. You see, there is a lot of blood in the brain, but in your case, with the aneurysm and the bruises, that blood is not only toxic to the surrounding tissue, but very difficult to be re-absorbed."

"I remember you said you couldn't operate on that part of the brain, anyway."

"It takes a very long time to heal."

"And my sense of taste and smell?"

"It's a good sign you're still improving. That shows you're still healing. From what you describe—that you can taste salt and sugar and things like salsa—I think your sense of taste is functioning, but smell is closely interrelated. Your tongue, of course, can only taste four things: sweet, sour, bitter, salt: your nose supplies the rest of the flavor to you. Your particular injury has put you at a disadvantage because flavor sensations

end up traveling to two sections of the brain: the older more primal section where emotions are located, like hunger, fear, anger; and also to more cognitive higher functioning areas. So imagine you're hungry and eat a meal to satisfy that basic urge. Yet you can also analyze the taste and smell: a little garlic, some onion, whatever."

"Hematoma hurdy-gurdy?"

"The location of the aneurysm, back near the thalamus, is near that older area of the brain, while your bruises are all on the right frontals and temporals, higher function areas, where healing and self-repair are much more possible."

"So maybe in fifty years, when I don't have any teeth, I'll be able to smell? And my ear'll work, too?"

"With your fracture, and the fluid drain into your inner ear, you very easily could have lost your hearing in that ear completely. Yet your hearing is above average."

"Yeah, great on the print-out and through the machine's headphones, but the sound quality's all different. Coming up here, I couldn't even tell you what key the elevator music was in."

"Don't sell yourself short. You've made remarkable progress considering the extent of the damage. I like having you for a patient; you're one of the few who can get better."

Day 175

Dear accident,

Which of my Socratic horses—the base or the noble, reaching for the heavens—is you, and which is me?

Or am I just the Phoenix, ready to simply fly the friendly skies?

Okay, already. You're right, I'm angry. Reminds me of Network: "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more."

There's an angry self and a calm self and now you've fucked them all up into one great big mess. I used to be able to keep the angry one calm—a beer or two, a joint, then it was all okay.

Now, so clean I squeak, and the angry one is growing like a Macy's parade float. Its shadow is my shadow, its persona won't leave me alone.

And you know the worst of it, accident? It's your fault. That reptilian part of the brain is firing like a toy rocket and I'm the mouse in the nose cone When the flight's over and the parachute opens: there's no parachute, no trust.

I don't trust my own feelings, my own reactions. What used to be an electrician's version of The Right Stuff has become the film version in garish colors as directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Day 282

"All I want is drugs. I keep wanting to get stoned, buy some Cutty Sark." I'm talking to Michelle on the phone.

"It's probably nicotine withdrawal. I'm glad you finally quit."

"No, I still want cigarettes, but I can choose to not have one. This other I just crave—which is weird because I just felt fucked up for six months straight, no hangover, no escape, and now I want a bong hit, a big one."

"It'd probably do you good, help you relax."

"No. You don't understand."

"What's the big deal?" I can hear she is ready to give up, ready to hang up.

"It's a big deal because I'm confused and I hurt."

"You're fine: look at all the progress you've made the last few months, going to school and all and besides"—her voice is calming down—"Your horoscope today says to focus on the positive."

"Great. The Amazing Omar says I'm fine."

"And mine says to remain patient. At work today everybody was angry, but I didn't let it bother me. I just said I had an appointment over lunch. And I went back at two-thirty."

"If I could take a long lunch break from myself, I would."

Day 376

Dear accident,

That weirds me out: talking to Dr. Florenza about the brain and the mind. Suddenly my brain's a chunk of liver, pate or otherwise, and my mind's something off of Wheel of Fortune.

I mean, it's like Fortuna going around and around and nobody knows which side will end up. I could be facing the sky, tasting, smelling, maybe even playing rhythm and blues. Or I could end up face down in the gutter, the aneurysm pumping my sweet blood into the cranial cavity—bread soaking up gravy—a bum outside the theatre beating my head with a rubber hose for all my pocket change.

"No, no," I say, trying to protect myself. "I need that Goodyear hose to repair a leak."

Dear 377

Dear accident,

I've got a vertebrae that sticks out like a camel's hump, one ear that's totally fucked, a nose that only works on stun setting, and emotions that run rampant as a wild horse, independent as Dirty Harry or Gene Hackman's Popeye.

What more do you want?

I'd trade the whole rest of my life for one complete day when I could say, "I'm recovered."

Day 708

Dear Dad,

I remember being on car trips as a kid, laying on the floor in the back of our '54 Mercury, looking up, listening to you whistle along with the radio.

Years later, you told me you had to take piano lessons as a kid. But you refused to learn to read music, so you played everything by ear.

It's not fair: now I want to play music and I can't.

Day 709

Dear Dad,

I remember telling you once that I'd like to own a record store; it'd be a good business. You asked how could I stand it: working with the public? If you knew I ran a movie theatre, what would you say?

You were always most comfortable with a diesel engine, but you never bought a diesel car—said they were too hard to start, too hard to buy fuel.

Well, I don't really work with the public. I'm safe behind the counter, selling candy, safe behind glass in the ticket booth, safe behind the projector.

I'm the man behind the film, watching it from both sides.

Day 150

Michelle has bought me a VCR for my birthday. I've never had a TV since Shelly left, but I was over at Sears in Albany last month, getting a new battery put in the Volvo, and I was waiting, watching some horror film about this cat who ate people's heads—it reminded me of Draco who always ate the mouse heads first, before the body. I was watching on a "Sears Best," a nice little color portable. Then I noticed it was on sale.

So Michelle brings out this big heavy package from the bedroom. It's wrapped in brown butcher paper and marked "fragile." She's made a nice Mexican dinner, spicy food I can taste, and a cake, too, with candles. The cake is chocolate with cream cheese frosting and writing in green mint that says, "Steps Ahead. Go For It."

Then she brings out the gift and gives me a kiss on the cheek. She is smiling, with her head leaning to one side, just like always.

I wonder what it is, and even with half the paper off, I figure it must be something else in the box. When I have the thing out and the styrofoam off, I can't say a word and start to cry.

"Hey, it's all right," Michelle says, hugging me. "I thought you've been seeing a lot of videos here and all. It's only a playback unit, but that's all you need, really. I mean you're not going to Hollywood or anything."

"Thanks," I say.

Day 152

Dear accident,

The first video I watch on my new machine is The Conversation.

Then I have nightmares all night: I am Harry Caul, the wiretapper, and everybody is checking on me, examining me, probing my life with wires and dials.

I hate you for invading my life.

Day 1001

Dear me,

1001 days and 1001 nights and dreams like you wouldn't believe:

Hobbling on crutches across the cobblestone streets of a foreign city, I meet Shelly.

She walks right up to me and says, "I'd forgive you if I could, but I can't."

She turns and moves away, a great ending shot, telephoto, her in the distance, getting smaller, the empty street and quaint stucco buildings disappearing to the vanishing point.

Me talking to Tim, my friend from down the block in Detroit: we've just had a childhood fight and the camera catches us sitting as adults in a red restaurant booth.

I say, "Since the accident, it's been hard to be a friend to me."

Outside my house: I'm following a new vague woman friend around and around. It's only halfway fun. Then Michelle shows up and whispers in her ear.

I can't hear, but this woman looks at me, a strong reaction shot, close-up, eyes big, mouth open, shock.

"No," she says to me.

Day 1001

Spring. Clouds in convoluted shapes, colored like bad bruises. It could thundershower.

I drive up the road a half mile to the dairy farm where a small muddy pasture holds a dozen buffaloes.

They're always so majestic and huge, standing still and proud, not even blinking, their manes reminding me of everything Western, like the teepee scene in Little Big Man.

I watch them.

In a few minutes it does start to rain, big fat drops splatting the windshield. The buffaloes don't move, don't even notice.

I start the car and head to work; we're showing Jim Jarmusch's Down by Law.

Day 999

Dear Shelly,

I woke up two, almost three, years ago, suddenly old. My bones creak in the morning. My back hurts all the time; screams, in fact, if I turn or twist the wrong way.

I never wanted to grow old. I only thought of staying young with you, being young, active, alive.

Now, I move more slowly, lose my balance trying to dance, hold every handrail. Now, I feel old, and alone.

I hate you, Shelly, for leaving.

Day 1000

Dear Michelle,

I woke up two, almost three, years ago, suddenly old. My bones creak in the morning. My back hurts all the time; screams, in fact, if I twist or turn the wrong way.

I never wanted to grow old. I only thought of staying young with you, being young, active, alive.

Now, I move more slowly, lose my balance trying to dance, hold every handrail. Now, I feel old, and alone.

I hate you , Michelle, for leaving.

Day 900

Dear the girl in the gas station,

You scratched my paint with the nozzle on the gas hose. But thanks for doing the windshield.

Day 800

Dear last night's dream,

I don't think Alain Robe-Grillet died in 1848. I don't think he slit his own throat and I don't think he gave me a "C-" on a high school essay.

Day 642

Dear Dad,

I remember the day of the funeral. The sleet was so bad the hearse couldn't make it up the hill to the grave site, so the ceremony was at the cemetery chapel. The plot's a nice one, with a view over to that pond where you used to take me as a kid to feed the geese.

I was so afraid of them, holding out my hand, arm stiff, eyes closed, afraid of their long necks and squawking noises.

Later that night, though, I drove your car back down there, up the hill and parked by the grave. The dirt was dark, still soft and mounded, the flowers starting to wilt and freeze. I hate it when I see those metal wires that the flowers come attached to: after they're all gone, the skeletons remain, poised, like empty horseshoes and dish racks.

Did you find the keys I left you? I had an extra set cut at the hardware store, out of brass, and they're buried right at the head, a few inches down: one for the ignition, one for the trunk and one for the gas cap.

Who's going to do that for me?

EPILOGUE

The other one, the one
called Borges, is the
one things happen to.
Thus my life is a flight
and I lose everything and
everything belongs to
oblivion, or to him.

Jorge Luis Borges

"So, how have you been doing?"

"Lots of anger, out of control. I sometimes go outside and just beat two by four scraps over my sawhorses until they're kindling."

"And this continued for how long after you quit the Dilantin?"

"Still is. It's like there's two of me: the accident side and then my side."

"What do you mean?"

"Sort of like on one side there's my mind and it's a movie: it watches and notices what goes on. Then the brain side is like an ungrounded circuit, electricity out of control. It'll do anything, go anywhere—wherever there's least resistance at the moment."

"Hmmm. There is one other drug therapy we could consider, which might be of use for an organic problem."

"What?"

"Lithium. There would be extensive routine blood work required."

"I don't know."

"Basically, it slows down the transmissions along nerves; it could smooth out your mood swings. Your chart indicates some emotional swings and the nurse mentioned you were talking to her about it."

"I don't know—my mind kind of balks. Seems like I just spent fifteen years coping with the help of a drug. I'm not sure I want to start another."

"The brain is an organ like the liver or the lungs. You wouldn't take a pill or a drug if you had the flu?"

"I don't think so: not if it affects my mind."

Dear Dad,

I remember when Mom and I flew to New York to meet you—Detroit Metro to Laguardia, my first time in a jet plane. First time in a taxi, too, a big yellow Checker down to Manhattan.

I remember the cab driver hassled Mom outside of the St. Moritz for a bigger tip. She gave it to him and then later, in the room, she yelled at me.

Who do I get mad at now? You? For not ever being sick or hurt? For never showing me how to do this?