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Cover: Edge of the City, woodcut
by J. T. Lang
Our cover this month introduces the work of J. T. Lang to our readers. A member of the Fine Arts Department at La Salle College, Jim received his M.F.A. from the Tyler School of Fine Arts of Temple University. "Edge of the City," the title given to the work reproduced on the cover, combines the art of the woodcut with that of the lithograph. The Japanese influence is quite evident in Lang's work, the result of eight years of living and teaching in Japan, where he fell in love both with the Japanese culture and the girl he married. We plan to reproduce more of Jim Lang's splendid prints on future covers.

Since last summer we've been working on a special number to be published this May. The issue will be a tribute to the work of Robert Penn Warren and will include a number of critical articles and an interview with Mr. Warren himself. We're happy to report that the response from Warren enthusiasts in the academic community has surpassed our most optimistic expectations, and we now expect the issue to be the largest and perhaps the most important we've ever had. If you know teachers of American literature who have not yet seen Four Quarters we trust you'll be a good little reader and pass the word that the May issue is not to be missed.

One of the special pleasures of editing a little magazine is the opportunity to publish talented writers for the first time. Poetry editor Dick Lautz is especially pleased about the unusually large number of new poets we're introducing to readers of this issue. We trust you'll share our pleasure in reading the first published work of poets William Stott, Anne Maxwell, Cordell Caudron, Nina Sandrich, and Henry Jankiewicz.

J. J. K.
Game

• M. M. Liberman

Among these recent dreams is one in which I return to the small Pennsylvania college from which I was graduated nearly thirty years ago and to which I have never thought of going back for anything. I am myself and that boy. The place is changed—bigger, brighter, shinier. I sign up for classes, regard my fellows, check my mail. Knowing myself, I am easy; although I am almost fifty, getting off the station bus at the wrong end of the campus, so that I have to trudge a mile uphill, dragging my father’s battered brown satchel, sick with nerves and sweaty, I am only sixteen and college will be good at “Little Princeton.” It isn’t, it turns out, because an old hurt, like a disappointment, too deep to shrug off, is a claw at the heart. It’s the same old “college on the hill,” not what I wanted, not what I expected, not at all what hope had promised. It’s the same old place, cheating, threatening, judging me wanting, the same old younger self deluded, grown merely strange. To save myself I have to wake up before I shout, “... dirty trick,” disturbing my wife, alarming my son.

Another is my father leaving the house for work. He carries something brown. He turns to look at me, worried, but he doesn’t see me. I try to tell him to remember what he has in his hand, but it’s no use.

There had been a letter from my old roommate, the first word from him in twenty years. I was expecting it. “... noticed your name in the Alumni Mag and was very impressed by your success (five books!)—so much has happened to me since we last corresponded, I have three children (25-23-17)—two are married and I am the grandfather of a six-month old boy. Mildred died four years ago and I have remarried and live here in Hollywood, California and still in the appliance business—it is no longer my own and I represent the Appliance Corp. of America on the West Coast from Seattle to San Diego—It’s my way of life, I guess. How about yourself—wife, children, etc.—Why not drop a line and keep in touch—It is unlikely I will get to Illinois but perhaps you might visit the coast in the near future—Forgetting about the smog, it is pleasant. Best of luck to you. ...”

In the late fall I walked to my class, carrying two books, and my lunch in a bag, when the air was cold and damp, but delicious with the smell of a newly-cracked watermelon, when a particular kind of snowfall is in the offing which would cover the last of summer’s dried leaves and
mute the world. I know this Saturday. I would be nine or ten, standing like an orphan (a single jelly sandwich in a sack) since seven-thirty that morning, outside the front gate of the stadium at Ithaca, plotting to sneak in, no matter how, my very brown eyes great with excitement, my heart pounding football, Cornell, football, Cornell. I could hear the bands ringing out onto the field. There was not much time. Attendants guarded the fences, so that there was no crawling under. Some bigger boys went over. Students, smart in their shetland and furs, wearing hats, always laughing, danced forward and through in a red flock. “Take me with you, take me in,” I prayed, as if I could be heard. As if I had been, a young woman, in the company of two young men, let her careless soft glance fall directly on my pleading face. “Isn’t he the handsomest little thing? C’mon cutie, you can be my boyfriend.” I went under her warm fur, tight against her silk, past the ticket-taker, unseen, home free. Cuddled to her rabbit warmth, her arm around me, drunk on her sweet, expensive odor, I saw, all that brilliant afternoon, dreaming, Princeton charge, plunge and win. The classroom is overheated. I steal a peek at my wrist, as I fail to hear a question. Most of my women students wear coats of fur. Through the partially open window I see other crowds move to other games. Now I have a college of my own, but it’s not in the least the same.

What should I say to Will? A strange boy, who did not bother to reply thirteen years ago when I sent him an announcement of my wedding; so unaware of anyone’s feelings including, I see now, his own; grown pathetically into grandpa westcoast appliance. It’s my way of life, I guess. It was that line. Especially the I guess. There is enough half-awake sadness there to float The Queen. It’s no wonder I dreamt. “It may not be that way at all,” Norma said. “He may be OK with his job and his smog and his six-month old grandchild.”

“And his two married children on the verge of divorce and his seventeen-year old on drugs.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Do you doubt it?”

“No.”

Someday I will tell her about the Princeton game, dreamt exactly as it happened, and she will say, laughing kindly, “I see now how you got so corrupted so young.”

Perhaps you might visit the coast in the near future. Not likely, Will. Reading that line aloud, we both laughed until we hurt; tearfully we recalled that year in San Francisco when everything, leaking top and bottom, ran out. Norma is gorgeously sane and must have had in mind the choice between laughter and madness when everything goes wrong. In my own cracked eye was my father walking to work through 1947, carrying a brown paper bag. On his way he gets lost in his life, forgetting the bag in his hand which he was supposed to have deposited in the pail near the side
door. Three blocks from our flat the bag begins to ooze. Passers-by wonder. Father notices nothing. Father of children, father of bills, father of troubles and aches in the leg. Of what does he dream? Vocational High? Camp Upton? His own father’s death? In San Francisco I could not afford, at the last, to have the stuff trucked away, so I shaved carefully, wore a tie, put on my suit, strode down the hill toward Market Street, as if to the library, pretending that no black neighbor knew that I was not carrying my lunch, carrying tin cans, orange peels, crusts of French bread, coffee grounds, menstrual bandages, torn letters. In front of a used appliance store I saw a likely pail. Before I could free myself of my foul burden, I would make an elaborate show of studying a rusty popcorn maker through a cloudy window. But fate found me out. I saw my reflection, my father’s face, as the bag breaks around his feet, trying heroically to smile, ankle deep.

I take Hank to the game. It’s his idea, not mine. I promised. A promise is a promise. I want to bring Hank up, as well as out. I keep my damned promises. The little stadium is only four blocks away. Two small “prestige” colleges, one of which employs me, will field teams out of habit. No one will get excited. The cheerleaders may not show, but no one will notice. Forty dirty children will wave a Viet Cong flag. If I am not there, will they really have a game? Not to walk this distance is the measure of my failure, a fearfulness; but after nine years of uneasy fatherhood I am afraid I may not be able to bring the boy home and if we walk we may never make it. Why? What is there to fear in this prairie town? This fear has no name. Beside me, in the front seat, Hank’s excitement at the prospect of the game is exactly equal to my boredom. I try to conceal a burgeoning irritability because I am obligated to be here on a golden Saturday and not somewhere else. Where? I try to be decent about the obligation to sit all this afternoon on a throne of slivers watching twenty-two clowns falling down. Even before lunch Norma saw it coming when I snapped at the boy for some trifling nonsense. He was blameless and I felt rotten and took her rebuke like Gary Cooper, wordless. Now Hank has forgotten and is tasting delight, while I suck, un nourished, on my bitterness. Hank does not see me gazing at him, a diminutive version of his mother, a glorious dark boy, in love with the music of his own heartbeat, nearly out of his shoes with anticipation of the game. The Game. Hank is on his feet shaking a little fist at a fumble. Who the hell, I ask myself, are all these people? They resemble no football crowd I know. Where are the tipsy wistful drunks from Hanover waving their flasks? Where is Gil Dobie? Where is that alumnus, Edward G. Robinson, chewing a cigar, regal, led in theatrically late by his black chauffeur carrying a blanket? (Hi, Eddie Goldenberg! You used to be a jewboy! Now you’re a star!) Where are the seven consecutive plunges through center? Where are the silken sweeties in muskrat? Where is that son-of-a-bitch, my life?
Hank asks for thirty cents for some popcorn and a coke. I want to say no because I don’t want to lose him. As out of my sight he moves, I marvel at the assurance with which he makes his way over legs, around heads. He is gone a long time. Too long. I sweat, Is he lost? Has he been hurt? I am getting angry again. Why the hell doesn’t he come back? Has he a brain at all? Isn’t he old enough to know the meaning of worry?

Somebody has been tackled behind his own goal line and everyone stands to see, Hank, gone forever, is coming back. Again he threads, ducks, weaves, dances, sucks in his gut. He doesn’t spill a drop. Good boy. A bottle in one hand, a brown paper bag in the other, he pitches me a big blazing grin, lighting up the universe from twenty yards away. I hear myself addressing him, as if he were on my lap. Child, I see you have everything you will ever need, which is good, since it is all.

City Poet

- Matt Field

Random
  as sparrowflight
  skittering in the gutter
  of the mind
  quick
  small quarrelings
  of words, dusty straws
  of syntax
blown
  on the hungry asphalt
  chatter noisily
together.
Even the junkman’s horse is dead.
Unaccountably
  on an impulse lifting above
  alleys, in an accident
  of fusion
a sudden
  soaring makes of the moment
  one brief pure shape
  against sky.
Two Poems by William Stott

Insinuating the world of noon,
I stand
And my sitting blood rebels,
Causing vertigo,
A humming swarm
Of golden green
Distinctly seen
And felt.

Here, on the summit of the day,
Nothing moves
But down the fulcrum’s flank
Towards a
Shadowed light,
This noon in slipping,
Shapes
The ruthless night.

Punctured by light,
The pearly murk now hosts
A wrinkled shadow dance
That moves
To the thinly mournful cries
Of fisherman
Which shiver and excite
The pliant thighs of night.

A quiet wind,
In its borne mist,
Riffles her soft dark wet
—Now a half heard murmur—
Touching with its sweep,
Nudged-in prows
Along warped piers and
Sleep.
Overgrowth

• Anne Maxwell

blackberries thistle the hill beside Lee Anne’s house
where we used to frame ourselves
in bush and ivy climbings
hanging pink chintz curtains from the underarms of trees

we subdivided rooms and set off hallways
designated doors and swept the ground

we never cooked for company
in the pipestove that we found
(I saw it first half-rusted, nearly rooted in the trillium and toadflax)
we pulled it like a tooth from the summer overgrowth

10 o’clock mornings skipped their lunch
while (careful of snails and bugs)
our fingers went through weeds and weird discarded cartons
of cracked cups, button tins and puddleful sneakers:
the heirlooms of our house

4 o’clock suns and dinner saw our faces smudged with grins
when finally we stopped to pant and pat ourselves with praise
and gaze upon our labors—though we knew
no other eyes could see
as we—the rain-risk roof
the timbers of our house

yet pleased were we
teeth-braced, bespectacled
Lee
and flat-chested me
The Very Special Dead People

• Ann Jones

I heard my mother come out on the screened porch and stand quietly by my bed and look down at my lying there with my eyes closed. I knew she was worried because I had overslept, but I had a good reason. For the first time in my life I had seen the dawn turn a dark world into an understandable gray and it wasn’t until then that I had been able to even close my eyes. I had needed the reassuring sight of darkness ending and the sound of roosters crowing up and down the block. I had needed the certainty that another summer day would be there to greet me when I awoke. I couldn’t keep my eyelids still any longer so I opened them now and looked into her gentle blue eyes.

“Didn’t you smell the hotcakes, Janey? Daddy made them just for you.”

I turned away because he shouldn’t have done that. It wasn’t Sunday. It was only Friday and he never made hotcakes on Friday.

“He said he was sorry you weren’t up to eat with him but we saved some batter for you.”

“Has he gone already?”

“It’s late, Janey. It’s almost nine o’clock. He has been gone over two hours.”

This made me feel worse, because I always packed his lunch pail for him and filled his thermos with hot coffee. “Oh, mom,” I said, suddenly feeling smothered by the weight of all that had happened since this time yesterday.

She sat on the edge of my bed and I let her pull me up into her arms and rock me back and forth like I was a baby. “Janey, Janey, if it will help you, I’ll tell you that this is one time I am not angry that you disobeyed me. I am grateful for it.” She smoothed my hair and shielded the side of my face with her hand, pressing me against her breasts. I knew she must have seen the wad of bubble gum I had taken out of my mouth last night and stuck on the shingled wall near my pillow, but she didn’t say anything. And even this made me feel worse. Nothing was ever going to make me feel better.

After breakfast she said she needed two loaves of bread and a quart of milk. There was just no way I could get out of going to the store for her—it was like the hotcakes, I had to eat them—so I got into my blue
...jeans and T-shirt and went out on the front porch to look around. I didn’t like the hot feel of my holey old tennis shoes but it hadn’t seemed right to go barefoot today. Behind me, through the screen door, I could hear my mother starting to vacuum the living room rug, and across the street Mr. Marcusi was sitting in his rocker on the front porch reading his newspaper, his feet propped up on the railing. As I started down the stairs I saw a window open at the side of his house and Mrs. Marcusi’s hand come out and vigorously shake a dust cloth. They all said that she was the worker in that family.

Mr. Marcusi put down his newspaper and hollered Hello to me. He loved to talk. “Come on over, Janey,” he called. I let myself go in his direction. The walnut trees at the front of his house spread their thick green leaves over the sidewalk and curb creating a river of flickering shadow. I walked through it and it was like being caught in a bouncing tide out in the bay. I stood there a minute before going up on the porch with Mr. Marcusi.

“Well, soldier boy,” he said, folding the paper carefully and shoving it under his chair, “how are you today?”

“Fine.” We always started like this. The ‘soldier boy’ began when he saw us kids playing war. I could never get him to stop calling me that, although I did finally get him to stop making me soldier hats out of his newspaper because that really did embarrass me in front of the other kids. The name actually didn’t bother me that much. I was used to it, I guess, and he was really a neat old man. He was knobby all over and very thin. I forget what they say he had, but it was something the sun was supposed to cure, and he would go off into the fields by the bay and trample himself a private little place in the deep green grass like kids do when they make a fort, and here, he would get naked and lay in the sun. At least that was what I heard. I never saw him walk anywhere myself, except down to the Post Office where he would sit on the rock wall and watch people picking up their mail. But now I had this picture of him trampling away at his private little place, and I thought of it and smiled at him. It seemed kind of nice to think of him doing that out there in the sun. I hoped it made him feel better. “Is this one of your good days, Mr. Marcusi?”

“Now that you have joined me, it is.”

This was more of the things we always said and it made me feel good to hear us talking this way, as though today was just the same as yesterday had started out to be, and tomorrow would be just the same as today. I wasn’t ready yet to think how yesterday had ended. Even in the bright sunlight I wasn’t ready to think of that, let alone in the long dark hours of last night. I suppose that was why I had come over to talk with Mr. Marcusi this morning, that, and to hear him read some of the paper to me. He would only pretend he was reading and then make up stories about everyone we knew and it was really funny to hear him. He made things
seem much more exciting than they really were, but he was never mean in his stories. In fact, he was the kindest person I knew. For instance, the first day I was supposed to walk to school by myself, he had met me way up at the corner and told me some jokes to make me stop being so scared. I can still remember looking back over my shoulder as I climbed through the school fence in my new green dress with the orange flowers on it, and seeing Mr. Marcusi standing there watching me.

I reached down for the newspaper now but one of the rockers had gotten on it and I couldn’t pull it loose. “Rock forward, Mr. Marcusi, and I’ll pull it out.” He just sat there and I gave it an impatient jerk.

“Wait, Janey. Let’s not bother with that today. There’s nothing in the paper that I don’t already know. For instance, have you heard about your neighbor two doors up the street?”

I backed away, not really hearing him, The mussed paper was there in front of me and the word was not completely hidden. It was in big black letters that spelled: M U R—

He sighed. “Has your family told you anything?”

I just stood there looking at him because I didn’t want to lie and tell him that they hadn’t told me anything, but I had just spent all night thinking up new questions that I didn’t dare ask them. Maybe he was the one who would answer them for me.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

I tried to think quickly of all the things I wanted to know but just then Mrs. Marcusi came bouncing out of the house, the screen door banging behind her like a shot gun going off. She didn’t even say Hello to me. “Pa,” was all she said, stiffly, looking over my head as though I wasn’t there. “Will you please stop talking to that child about things she doesn’t need to know?”

Before he could answer, my mother opened our front window, and although she hates to holler out windows, shouted: “Virginia-Jane, you stop pestering Mr. and Mrs. Marcusi and get on down to that store right this minute!” So I said good-by and left.

The morning breeze had stopped by then and it was very still. Heat seemed to be baking down into the asphalt and I knew that by the afternoon it would be boiling up into little round bubbles that you could pop with the sharp end of a stick. I went on down the hill and when I passed Mr. Donovan’s house he came out of his yard and said Good Morning to me. He was even older than Mr. Marcusi, very tall and bent over, but every day he would push his big wooden wheelbarrow to the edge of town, and over the fields on the trail to the bay where he would collect driftwood and bring it home to burn in his big stove.

I was always surprised when he noticed me because he and his wife were very quiet people. They just didn’t talk very much, although they
would wave to me if I waved first, I said Good Morning to him, too, and he hesitated like he might have something else to say, so I stopped walking and asked him how he was. He said, “Fine. Thank you.”

And then he just stood there leaning a little on his old hoe, looking down at me. I couldn’t walk away from him so I looked behind him at his big two story white house because I didn’t know where else to look. It was a neat house. From my sleeping porch at the top of the hill I could see the green roof and the brick chimney and their upstairs windows above the top of the acacia trees. These trees were full of the wildest soft yellow blooms in the spring, and the sidewalk was always littered with leaves or blossoms or seed pods. It was hard to roller skate there because of this, and also because of the special roughness of that sidewalk but we still did it. It had little lines and grooves all over it to keep people from slipping in the wet weather, and even without this, the hill alone was steep enough to be exciting. Not what I call dangerous though, because anyone who fell always had a chance to hit the grass and weeds at the side of the walk if they were lucky. One other good thing was that Mr. and Mrs. Donovan never yelled at us to go away, although like I said, they were very quiet people.

“Janey,” Mr. Donovan said now, “Mrs. Donovan has just baked a pan of gingerbread. Can I get you a piece?”

I almost fell over. He had never called me Janey before, let alone offered me a piece of gingerbread. All I could think was to say was, “Yes, please.” And he went off into the house leaving me standing there wondering if my mother was watching me from where she was hanging clothes from the special platform daddy had made for her at the back of the house. I didn’t even have to turn around to know she was there because practically the whole town could have heard the squeaking pulley when she started hanging the heavy work clothes. I wondered what she would think when she saw me going down the street eating a piece of Mrs. Donovan’s gingerbread.

In a minute, Mr. Donovan came out of the house and handed me the gingerbread wrapped in wax paper. It was still warm and smelled delicious and I thanked him. He said I was very welcome, and then he just stood there again. I didn’t know what to do, so I unwrapped the gingerbread and started to eat.

In a way I felt very close to the Donovan’s. One of the last things I see every night, looking out through the screens of my room, is the light in their upstairs bedroom, and once, with my grandfather’s old Navy binoculars I even saw Mr. Donovan himself in a gray night shirt, his white hair curling all around the back of his neck, kneeling by his bed saying his Catholic prayers. And then Mrs. Donovan in her pink nightgown, with her hair in a skinny braid hanging over her shoulder, came to the window and stood there a minute looking up at the sky which was crowded with
stars that night, and then she pulled down the green shade and it was all over.

"I want you to know," Mr. Donovan said now, speaking so softly that I had to ask him to repeat it. "I want you to know, that Mrs. Donovan and I were very sorry to hear what happened to your little friend."

Now why did he have to say that? I thought I was going to cry right there, hearing Joy talked about as if she was dead or something. I wrapped what was left of the gingerbread in the wax paper and tried to stuff it in my pocket but it wouldn't fit, so I just held it in my hand. I wanted to say something but I had sense enough to know that if I opened my mouth I would just howl, so I kept my lips pressed tightly together and turned and ran down the hill. Behind me, the pulley had stopped squeaking and I guessed my mother was standing there watching me but I didn't even care about that.

I ran as far as the curb at the back-street and then I sat down with my feet in the gutter and tried not to think about what I knew I was going to think about. One thing I knew I couldn't do though, was eat the rest of the gingerbread, so I unwrapped it and crumbled it up and tossed it out into the street for the sparrows to eat.

Behind me was one of the vacant lots in which Mr. Johnson used to stake out Joy's little brown and white pony, Bubbles, so he could eat all the grass and stuff. I didn't turn around, but it was like there was a movie going on behind me right this minute, a movie that would play over and over and over until the world ended. I could hear myself laughing at the sight of Joy trying to get up on her grazing pony's back and I knew how excited she looked when she succeeded, her fat little legs gripping the animal's sides, her hands twisted in his dark mane. He didn't even raise his head when she kicked him with her heels and hollered at him to Giddap. It was so funny that I couldn't stop laughing.

Even Mr. Johnson had to laugh, but he went up to her and hugged her, too, and she almost slid off the pony's back before he let her go. I could see her freckled face when he did this. Her eyes were squeezed shut and there was a frown on her forehead. It made me wonder what my face looked like when I was being hugged. I think she had been concentrating so hard on not falling off Bubbles that she didn't like to be disturbed that way. But Mr. Johnson was so excited and happy to see that she had finally decided not to be afraid of her little pony that he just couldn't help hugging her. I was happy, too. There were so many things she was afraid of. She was just naturally not brave. She would never even go with the rest of us kids down to the special spook-matinee that came to the theater every once in awhile, and she didn't like stories about ghosts or anything like that. She was what I call a peaceful little girl.

Which is why I cannot stand the thought of what happened to her.
Why couldn’t she have had one brave friend who could have stayed with her and helped her? Someone who would not have left her on this very corner to walk home by herself? Now if that friend had been there, maybe she wouldn’t be in shock up at the hospital in the city today waiting for her grandmother to come all the way from Nevada and take care of her, and I wouldn’t be sitting here on this curb having to remember all these things. Oh, Joy, Joy. I was more afraid of hospitals than she was afraid of ghosts. I even closed my eyes whenever we passed one on our Sunday drive, but one thing I knew, and that was that if my father would take me there, I would go to that hospital and see Joy tomorrow.

It was quite a change for me to think of her in this way because she was a strange little girl. At first I had thought she was different than the rest of us because she had been adopted as a baby, but later I began to realize that she was different because that was the way she was, and I got tired of thinking about it, concentrating mainly on avoiding her. Even as late as yesterday, that is what I was doing. I spent a great part of last night trying not to admit this to myself, but it is true.

I stood up and began to walk up the back-street hill alone just as Joy had done yesterday. This was not the way to People’s Market but it didn’t matter, I was like a robot in a movie I had seen, controlled by something outside myself. I couldn’t feel the sun on my skin, I couldn’t hear the birds in the air. I just walked slowly up the hill remembering how yesterday morning I had been almost out the front door on the way to the beach, and in a great hurry, when my mother stopped me.

“Wait,” she said. “Why don’t you run around the corner and ask Joy if she would like to go with you?”

“Oh, mom, you know how she is. Do I have to?”

“No, you don’t have to,” she said in the way that meant I may not have to, but I had certainly better do it, like it or not.

I groaned and said, “OK. OK, but it’s going to ruin everything, that’s all. She’s just like a baby. She can’t even run as fast as a second grader.”

“That’s enough out of you, Virginia-Jane! If you can’t change the tone of your voice you can stay home!”

“I’m sorry.”

“All right. Now I want you out of the water the minute the forty-three whistle blows up at the refinery. Daddy will be home by five and I want you here by then. Inside the house, not just coming up the hill.”

I started out the front door, my blue wool bathing suit itching me already and the towel dragging around my neck. “And don’t forget,” my mother called after me, “you’re to walk all the way home with Joy. Don’t you dare leave that poor little girl standing on the corner. You mind me now.”

So I had gone over to Joy’s house and stood out in front calling her. The house was set far back on a great big lot behind willow trees trailing
their long weeping limbs. You could hardly see it from where I stood at the front gate. It was very quiet here. I could even hear a faint rattle of voices coming from the egg lady's house next door, and figured she was out on her front porch listening to soap operas on the radio again, because I knew no one would ever go to visit her. She was too mean. I tried to look under the loquat trees that grew along her fence but I couldn't get a glimpse of her, the leaves were so thick.

There was more space between the houses here on the backstreet. They were not set quite so close together and people had big side gardens as well as in the front and back, with lots of fruit trees and hedges of honeysuckle like thick walls to separate the yards. The houses were not all built in a straight line either. Some were at the front of the property and some were at the back. The egg lady's house was built kind of near the center of her lot, and yet there was plenty of room in back for the chicken house and wire-fenced yard. There were always a few fat red hens scratching around in her front yard, too. I could see one of them today. She had just taken a dust bath and mica glittered in her red feathers. There was a green stain on the side of her bill and her eyes had a wild look when she saw me watching her.

Up beyond her was a little wooden table and sitting on top of it was the brown wicker basket the egg lady used to deliver her eggs in. It was empty now and it was really strange to see it that way because I had never seen it except over her arm with the clean eggs mounded nicely inside it, covered by a freshly ironed red tea towel. She was such a funny looking little round lady, very soft and puffy. She wore a brown felt hat winter or summer, and a brown button-sweater like a man wears, over her cotton dress. Sometimes she had on faded purple bedroom slippers that were soft enough to show the shape of her toes. At first, when I finally got old enough to meet her on the street without my mother, I would say Hello to her, but she never answered. I didn't know then, but I found out later that she hates children. All of them. Not just me.

For instance, when we would ride quietly down the hill in front of her house on scooters we had made of apple boxes and old roller skates —I mean, not even yelling or anything like that—she would come out by her gate and scream at us to go away or she would get the sheriff after us. That's exactly the way she was. The boys in particular would get back at her sooner or later by sneaking up to her house and then running as fast as they could, pulling a long stick across the pickets in her fence, making it sound like a machine gun. I only did that once myself, and the next time she saw my father coming home from work, she told him about it and that night he asked me how I would like to be responsible for her hens not laying, so I didn't do it again.

Just because I knew she had heard me calling Joy, I got on the gate and started swinging it back and forth. I knew she hated the sound of the
squeaking hinges, but I had just got started when Mr. Johnson came out
the front door and down the walk toward me. I got off and closed the gate
carefully, staying on the outside of it.

Over and over last night I thought about how he had looked at that
moment, trying to see if there had been any difference in him, but I
couldn’t honestly remember a thing. He had the same bald head with
freckles on the top of it, and the same funny little round rimless glasses
kept slipping down his nose. He wore his blue work overalls and a blue
shirt, the same as he always did, and he was so short the great mounds of
yellow daisies bordering the path almost reached to his waist. I guess he
had been working hard because he was wiping the sweat off his forehead
with a white handkerchief, and he hadn’t shaved yet that morning for
what I had thought was a blue shadow on his face turned out to be stubby
whiskers that looked surprisingly like my own father’s dark whiskers. It
was funny to see them on someone so different. I wondered if he swung
Joy up in his arms and rubbed his rough chin against her cheek like my
father did with me. I didn’t even think it was strange to see him home at
this time of day because he worked over at the smelter and they had
different shifts than they did at the oil refinery. He stood there in front
of me without smiling.

“Mr. Johnson, can Joy go swimming with me?”

“Well, that’s nice of you to ask, Janey. She’s with her mother right
now, but I think it would be good for her to get away. Let me go call her.”

I let myself breathe a long sigh of relief as he turned to go because
I had thought he might ask me to run in and get Joy myself, and I didn’t
want to. I was afraid to go in that house because like I said, hospitals scare
me, and that little red house was like a hospital. Poor Mrs. Johnson never
even sat on the porch anymore. She had just kind of gradually disappeared
from the town. When I thought of it, I couldn’t recall the last time I had
seen her on the street or down at People’s Market, or in the church arrang-
ing the flowers like she used to. She was very good with roses, I remem-
her. I tried to think what she looked like but even that was difficult. Tall.
Taller than her husband, with bright yellow hair hanging down around
her shoulders like a girl, as strong as a man working in her garden. That’s
all I could remember and I didn’t want to think of the way they said she
looked now after all those months of sickness. That is the kind of thing
I am scared of. It’s true. I am more of a coward than Joy ever was.

Mr. Johnson came back down the walk holding Joy by the hand. She
had on a funny red, white and blue bathing suit and straw hat that looked
as if someone had just plopped it down on her head as she went out the
door. She even carried a sand pail, although I didn’t think she knew it
was in her hand, her eyes looked so strange. But a straw hat and a sand
pail—she was the only person in town who would have been caught dead
with either of those two things.
“Take care of her, Janey,” Mr. Johnson said, still gripping her hand. “She is our dear little girl.”

I shifted my weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. An ant crawled over my big toe and I reached down and brushed it off, watching it lay stunned for a moment in the soft dust.

“I want to thank you for being such a good friend to Joy. You don’t know how much you mean to her.”

Joy didn’t look at me. I could tell she wasn’t even listening to what he was saying. It was like someone was inside her head telling her things that she didn’t want to hear but there was no way she could escape. I really wished I had stayed home that morning. I finally looked directly at Mr. Johnson to see if he was ready to let her go, and he smiled at me in a very strange way, almost formally. I thought he was going to reach over the gate and shake my hand and I didn’t know what to do. How could I stand there shaking Mr. Johnson’s hand in the middle of the hot summer morning with the egg lady watching us through the loquat trees?

“We’ll be home right after the four-thirty whistle blows,” I said.

“All right, Janey. God be with you both.” Which I thought was a very strange thing to say when he wasn’t even a minister. He let go of Joy and she joined me. We walked down the hill without talking and she didn’t once turn even half-way around to see if he was watching us, but I did. And he was. I have found that grown-ups almost always watch children until they are out of sight, and I like to know when I am being watched.

Last night all I could remember was how all that day I had kept telling myself that there was no one worse to spend a day with than Joy who was always falling down and hurting herself, or dragging behind so much that I had to stop and wait for her when I wanted to run as fast as I could, but actually, she wasn’t that bad yesterday. All she did was sit on the beach and watch us swim, her fat little face blistering slowly under the same sun that turned the rest of us brown.

Now all this was before I knew that she was more brave than any of us, and had been that way for a long, long time, and it didn’t matter that she couldn’t run as fast or swim as far or laugh as loud. Not that it did me any good to know that now. I still should have been with her when she found them.

I made myself think of this now as I continued up the long hill. Tim O’Brien’s old dog, Patches, looked up at me as I passed but he didn’t bark. He wagged his tail a little though and I’m sure he wondered why I didn’t come over and sit with him for awhile, but that was the good thing about dogs. They would still love you even if you didn’t do what they expected you to, or what you should do. They would love you even if you didn’t love them.

Oh, Joy. I stopped in front of her house and looked up at the willow
trees, chaining their long trailing limbs like special decorations on a Christmas tree. It was quiet up there. I don't know what I expected to see. They were all gone now. From behind the egg lady's house I heard a sudden rise of sound as cackling hens objected to something or other, and then the slamming of her back door as she went out to see what was the matter with them. I wondered what it would be like to have only chickens to care about, as nice as her red hens were.

You know, I still don't understand what made me open that gate so carefully that it didn't even squeak and kind of slide up the walk past all those yellow daisies and into the willow fronds that swept against my face like soft fingers. It was like being in a safe green-golden room that loved me, but I pushed on past it, out the other side and up to the little red house where I stopped.

The whole world seemed full of the murmuring sound of the egg lady's hens. There was the faint smell of paper burning in someone's trash barrel further up the block. The house in front of me was faded pink by the sun and not bright red as I remembered it. A long time had passed since I had really looked at it. I thought a cloud passed over the sun just then but when I looked up there was not a cloud in the sky. The dimness was inside me, like curtains in front of my eyes, I seemed to be looking out on yesterday and I was Joy about to walk into the house and find that my father had killed my mother with some kind of medicine and then taken her into his arms and shot himself. Maybe he had meant to stay alive and take care of Joy, but at the last minute couldn't stand the thought of living without his yellow-haired wife. Surely, he could not have meant to do this knowing that Joy was coming home alone and would find them like that. Imagine if only the egg lady would be around to help you—and then the terrible heavy truth came to me again: he had not thought she would be alone.

I stopped pretending I was Joy. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't become that sad little girl walking into her house alone. It was too much. I went to the window and looked in, shielding the sides of my face with my hands. I was looking right into their bedroom, but there was nothing to see. No blood. Not even any sheets on the bed. The rough striped ticking of their mattress was just like on our own beds at home. There was something on the floor though, between the bed and the window, I raised on tiptoe to get a better view. Do you now what I saw? Snapshots. Snapshots torn out of a photograph album and scattered all over the floor. Some of them still had on the little black corners that had glued them to the page. Others were bent and a few were torn. I couldn't really see them, I mean to tell you what pictures they were, but I knew they were just like in our album at home. Joy in her Easter dress with a big stuffed pink rabbit in her arms. Joy in her bathing suit jumping through the sprinklers on the lawn. Joy feeding Bubbles a carrot, her eyes closed because she was so
afraid the pony would bite her. Joy and me with our arms around each other's shoulders. It made me sick to see them, some of them bent and torn and all. Why were they there? Had he taken them out of the album so she could hold them easier in her tired hands? Had they talked together about all these pictures as she died?

“Well! And I always knew you were a wicked, wicked little girl! Just what are you doing spying about on other people's property?”

I whirled around, feeling faint, but it was only the egg lady with a white towel tied around her head and big flopping galoshes covered with chicken manure on her feet. She was carrying an old broom that trailed spider webs from its straw, and I felt sorry for the spiders she had been after.

“I should think you would be ashamed of yourself—” she went on, shaking the broom at me. “Is death just one more thing to be disrespectful toward?”

What could I have said to her, a crazy old white-haired lady with only hens to care about, and me, standing there in front of her with the new weight of these very special dead people in my mind? She had been right next door and watched them live and die a little every day for years, but what did she know about them? And what did she know about me who lived clear on the other side of the block? I just walked away from her, down past the mounds of yellow daisies, out the squeaking gate and into the street. Far down the hill, just coming around the corner, I could see my mother heading toward me and I can tell you, I was glad to see her.

**Mother-May-I**

- Nina Sandrich

Sing a song of may-poles!
Toadstools on the green
Mould of early morning
Ring around the Queen,
Bound within her bower,
Chewing conger pie,
Trip her with the skipping rope
To see if she will cry.

Kiss the see-saw maidens,
Circle hand in hand,
When they drop their baskets,
You will understand
Jack will partner Jill un-
Til he pairs with Joan,
Push the Queen from in between
And watch her swing alone!
In the Family

• Allen Shepherd

On the mind of an eight-year-old, aged relatives often make little or no impression. I had to "please," "thank you," and "sir" them, listen quietly to stories which I could have repeated word for word, obey them instantly, and in general put up with them. They were usually tall and thin, wore dark clothes, lived in old houses, and the more affluent of them had chauffeurs named Arthur or David and elderly, good-natured cooks named Ida or Mattie. At length they died, and rapidly became only names in my memory.

Not so with Uncle Rufus, who stands out in my mind for his excessive parsimony and his general ill nature. He was really my great-great-uncle by marriage, having married my great-grandmother's sister shortly after the Civil War. I would not have had the doubtful pleasure of his acquaintance in the first place, I suppose, if it had not been for his extreme frugality. The most charitable representation of the facts is that on the evening of his wife's funeral, he accepted with alacrity my great-grandmother's invitation to spend the night at her house. He arrived at eight o'clock in the evening and left at half past two in the afternoon, eleven years later. With no further word, either on his part or my great-grandmother's, he simply established himself there. During this eleven-year interval, he sold his own house and all its furnishings at a good profit, and proceeded to take the reins of her household firmly into his own hands.

Mr. Stanley, as my great-grandmother always called him, was in his ninetieth year when I first saw him. He was tall and portly, a living refutation of the theory that over-eating brings a man to an early grave. His only extravagance was his clothes, which were always well-tailored and immaculate. What he did with his old clothes I'm sure I don't know, because he certainly didn't wear them, and I know he never gave anything away. He had retired at the age of forty-one—from what I have never found out—and had been engaged for nearly half a century in the pleasant occupation of "living on his income."

I never saw my uncle without his cane, which he carried not as an aid to locomotion, but more, I believe, to brandish when necessary. This cane figured in one of the few incidents I ever knew which brought a stern reprimand from my great-grandmother, who was herself a resolute and severe old lady.
By way of preface it is necessary to relate that Uncle Rufus was a life-
long member of the Congregational Church. He felt, of course, that he was
entirely within his rights if he stamped out of church when he disagreed
with the minister’s sermon, and he once stopped attending services com-
pletely when one young clergyman especially displeased him by asking
for a special donation. But he still supported the church, and looked with
extreme intolerance on other Protestant denominations, while his feeling
for the Church of Rome was equalled only by that credited to his Puritan
ancestors. Among his other dislikes, which were many, were dogs. When,
therefore, a dog, belonging to the priest of a nearby church, ran through
my grandmother’s yard daily on its morning rounds, my uncle’s course
was clear. Immediately after breakfast he stationed himself, cane in hand,
in the shelter of a trumpet vine which grew over the porch, and lay in
wait for the inoffensive animal, counting that day a success when he man-
aged to strike a simultaneous blow against popery and dogdom. Before
many days, my grandmother heard of this, and rebuked him so severely
and so unexpectedly that he actually muttered something about not mean-
any harm, and retired to his room. The dog ran unmolested thereafter,
but Uncle Rufus never lost an opportunity to call attention to a broken
plant in the garden or a thin place in the hedge. “Looks as though some
dog had been running wild around here,” he would say.

My uncle’s life was one of pendulum-like regularity. He had decided
early in life that there was no need or justification of any decent person’s
“lying abed” after five o’clock in the morning, and enforced his belief with
an iron will. Upon rising, he would thump out of bed, walk heavily across
the room, and slam his door loudly. He would then march briskly down
the hall to the bathroom, vigorously clearing his throat all the while.

He disapproved thoroughly of the waste involved in producing con-
tinuous hot water in the tap, even though it was not produced at his ex-
 pense, and insisted on a kettle of boiling water every day for his morning
toilet. He would have preferred that the long-suffering Ida bring it up to
him at 5:15, but here again my great-grandmother took one of her infre-
quent stands, and ruled that Ida need not arise before six o’clock. Thus it
fell to Uncle Rufus to get his own kettle of boiling water, but I think he
secretly enjoyed these morning trips. They not only gave him a chance to
inspect the refrigerator for evidence of waste and extravagance while the
water was boiling, but in the course of his round trip between bathroom
and kitchen he was able to awaken any sluggard who might have turned
over for another nap.

After breakfast, which was served on the stroke of seven, he set out
on his regular rounds. First he went to the mailbox and picked up the
mail. This he always did personally, allowing no one to accompany him,
because, I suspect, he wished to have a good chance to look over all in-
coming mail. Next he would have Arthur drive down to the village, where
he would do the daily shopping. He inevitably became involved in an argument with one or more of the local merchants about the price or quality of an item, and I have heard it said that they dreaded to see him coming, poking about the stock with his cane, and demanding instant service.

At quarter of one he would arrive home and prepare for dinner, of which he always ate abundantly. Having finished, he would again journey to the mailbox and pick up the second delivery, which arrived at 1:30. Then he would sit down for a critical survey of the daily paper. Sometimes he just sat. On rare occasions he would talk to me. He would discuss the condition of the stock market, would berate the thieving store-keepers or the Democratic administration, or would ask me if I remembered boys who had gone to school with him.

Supper was served at six. Immediately after supper Uncle Rufus would retire to his room. He would stay there until quarter of nine, when he would come downstairs and have Ida get him something to eat, generally a dish of chocolate ice cream, before he went to bed. His bedtime was exactly nine o'clock.

Everyone agreed that my uncle's long life had never been marred by exertion of any sort. It bothered him intensely, however, to see other people idle. Even my great-grandmother, who should have been exempt, being, after all, only a few years his junior, and in her own home, did not altogether escape his displeasure. In the morning she would often sit down in a sunny window and work a cross-word puzzle. Sometimes she would play Chinese checkers with me. My uncle, seeing this, would without fail mutter, "Humph, wasting your time, wasting your time. Work to be done, work to be done."

Uncle Rufus had always suspected that he would die at an early age of consumption, like his six brothers and sisters. He cherished this idea all through life to his ninety-fourth year, when he died of pneumonia. My uncle had been left a considerable amount of money by his parents, and this had been added to by various bequests from other relatives. Although as far as anyone could see, he never made any attempt to increase his fortune, he considered any male who had reached maturity without being well-endowed with the world's goods as just "darned shiftless." No sickness or other misfortune could excuse the culprit. He also believed implicitly that charity begins at home. It ended there as well, and there was no quicker way for a fellow-citizen to lose face with my uncle than to collect funds for any cause, however worthy. "Beggars," he would remark quite audibly, as he marched upstairs rather than witness the passage of my great-grandmother's check into the hands of a disquieted solicitor.

When Uncle Rufus did die, he was regarded, by New Hampshire standards at least, as a rich man. The townspeople, not to mention the family, discussed with spirit who should be his heir. He must have wrestled with the problem for many years after my aunt's death deprived him of
a natural solution. At any rate, his will proved to have been made only a short time before his death. I think he would have been more critical than ever in his survey of the daily news if he could have read that final headline: “Local Philanthropist Leaves Fortune to Charity.”

**Flower Lady**

- Cordell Caudron

In the morning,
when the furthest ashes point the dawn
and the deep wind creeps along pale streets
settling mists and memories,
a flower lady sets the stems of roses
into the ashless water of a pewter bowl
and turns the bowl
as the moon turns infidelities.

The wet face of the wind
raises the soft hairs of her skin
and drifts with the scent of metals
into the damp of her backbone.

She dreams of her wind-drawn youth:
the little girl with the love of colors
collecting flowers on the gray-green hill,
the wind turning her laughter in the love-me-nots
as it would turn her tears in love.

Long ago her fingers lost the feel of flowers.

She sits on the wooden stool feeling
the deflection of dew upon the dulled wind,
hers pale lips concealing flecks of rigid teeth
and the breaths they are winter in,
hers moist eyes faltering before faltering eyes.

**Her gaze** fixes the granite line of the gutter,
remembering the young girl
with long hair drifting,
rushing slim-legs lifted
through the clear fin of the sun,
the white envy of her arms
swaying translucent
in the cold rays of its coming.
At the ten o'clock Mass on the Sunday following her father's stroke, Agatha discovered her power. The responses (Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy) spoke themselves, while inside she said, "You should have died," to the vision of her father, his jaw slack, his eyes staring, a thin trail of saliva tracing its way to his pillow.

To shut out the faint glimmer of guilt, she shifted her weight and fixed her attention on Father Marcus. Suddenly, the thought Look at me! seized her with such intensity that she glanced furtively to either side, wondering if she had unwittingly spoken. She located the place in the Mass booklet and tried to ignore the disquieting stimulation the thought provoked.

Look at me. It was written across the epistle. LOOK AT ME! It obliterated the gospel. When finally she glanced up, Father Marcus was looking directly at her. Her eyes watered at contact, and she diverted them to the sunburst crucifix behind him. It glittered in a diffusion of sunlight and burned her eyes like smoke.

At the gospel side, Father Marcus' all-encompassing gaze swept the church and fell upon her, an answer to her summons, Look at me. And while he read, his eyes sought hers once, twice, three times.

Agatha bowed her head at the beginning of the offertory and dared not look up until after the communion. Then, with his hands outspread and his eyes upon her, Father Marcus said, "Go in peace," and the Mass was over.

He looked at her once more as the altar boys positioned themselves for the recessional and the organist intoned an introductory chord. The white chasuble fluttered about his feet, and when he passed near the vigil light stand the variegated flames breathed uneasily. After he had gone, a steady stream of smoke arose, and one light died.

Agatha sat rigid against the straight-backed bench oblivious to the people who crawled over her. Behind her, the click of light switches darkened the church. Stooped, white-haired Sarah shuffled up the aisle and stopped beside her. "You staying?" she rasped, leaning close. "The next is a First Mass. Neighborhood boy. Very beautiful." Her fish-eyes, rheumy behind thick lenses, fixed Agatha with frightening familiarity. Agatha recoiled. Sarah. It shocked Agatha to realize she knew the woman's name,
had always known her name, though she could not recall anyone ever having told it to her. Sarah. Self-appointed sexton presiding as though by invitation or office at first Masses and weddings and baptisms and funerals and novenas. Strange. Like an office wife.

Agatha pulled her gloves over her shiny mottled palms and stood. The old woman minced across the nave behind her, saying, “That Father Marcus, he’s a one. I remember the first day he came here.”

At the side exit, the aspersorium was nearly empty: the remaining water, silky with stagnation. Sarah peered into it. “Wants filling,” she said and scuttled toward the back of the church.

Agatha crossed herself and went out into the lilac-scented air, hesitating against the light. Across the walk Father Marcus in his black soutane joked with a young couple. When he saw her, he nodded solemnly between their heads, Agatha thought to wait and talk to him. She would tell him that her father was in the hospital and ask him to make a priestly call. But her tongue thickened against the words, and she answered his greeting with a perfunctory nod of her own and hurried across the courtyard.

Agatha attended eight o’clock Mass every morning that week. She experimented with locations: right nave, five pews back; left nave across from the confessional which bore his name Rev. Paul Marcus, in gold letters; right aisle under the second station; left aisle, third pew, where he looked down upon her during his brief sibilant homily. She was concerned also with timing. After the first few awkward moments on Monday, she could control the thought, summon it at will with the intensity necessary to draw Father Marcus’ eyes whenever she wished, and by Wednesday she could meet those eyes without the least trace of discomfort. During the consecration, however, the thought seized her with a perniciously independent force against which she braced herself with downcast eyes. She dared not look up. And when she filed with the others to communion, as she did now every morning, she closed her eyes before his fingers grazed her waiting tongue.

With her power nearly under control, she began to notice things about him: his unruly dark hair; his pouting lower lip; the blue-black shadow that veiled the lower half of his face—a curiously unlined and doughy face, though not fat; his manicured hands, white as marble delicately veined with blue; his trouble with s’s and his unwavering devotion to words that contained them. And she began to wonder what he noticed about her.

On the second Friday, she went into her father’s room and opened the window. A crack. He hated open windows. After a moment’s consideration she thrust it up as far as it would go.

“It’s spring, Papa,” she said. “And you were wrong. ‘Not a saving grace.’ That’s what you said. But it’s not true. Not true at all. I have this . . . ability. This power.” She stood before his bureau mirror and removed
the pins one by one from the hastily knotted twist at the back of her head. "I've probably had it all the time. Latent." She leaned close to her reflection. Her dark eyes were small. Her bulbous nose with its large pores looked like a strawberry under the light. She could fix all that with make-up. All except her mouth—her thin, pinched, spinster's mouth. Even when she smiled it was a tentative, virginal smile. She piled her coarse black hair atop her head. The trace of gray she could—how did they say it?—wash away. She faced the empty bed, "You see, Papa. It's always been there. You were just too blind to see it."

In her own room she reached under the jersey dresses in her closet for a shoebox. When she removed the golden lid, there arose the fragrance of new leather and the memory of a trip not taken. She was past blaming anyone for that. The time, as her father was fond of saying, had not been right although at twenty-eight she had never been away from home. She had worn the high-heeled sandals and left him raging after her. She was a harlot he said. Running off as her mother had. From the cab, she had seen him in the living room window, his mouth working over the word. Harlot. It had a nice sound.

At the train station she had found that indeed the time was not right. Somehow she had confused the dates and her trip would not begin until the next week. She had returned home, and it had never begun at all.

Ten years had softened the bitter crust of that memory. When she thought about it—rarely—it was with no particular interest or concern. So remote was it that it might have been a dream, someone else's dream, not even her own.

She slipped out of her walking shoes and into the house sandals. She had good feet, long and narrow with high arches and straight toes. She had never had a corn nor a bunion nor a blister. Though the sandals showed off her feet to advantage and gave her legs a coltish look she liked, the high spindly heels were dated. She nodded decisively (she would wear them someday regardless) and replaced the shoes in the box.

She took a bus downtown to Dryden's Department Store and walked through Blouses and Gloves and Stationery to Cosmetics. Everything glittered: the atomizers filled with perfumes she couldn't pronounce, the lipstick tubes, the flat golden compacts, the teeth of clerks in blue smocks and eyelids.

Agatha wandered from luxurious aisle to luxurious aisle, pausing to examine a pyramid of white boxes embossed with deep red velvet. The wrappings promised so much. Like these women. She wondered how they got out of their luminous skins at night or if they did.

A clerk in a pink smock, her frosted face emotionless as a porcelain doll's, said, "May I help you," in a voice that might have been squeezed from a pastry tube.

Feeling inexplicably guilty at being here, Agatha slunk away.
She went to the dime store where no one bothered her in her scrutiny of labels and directions. She selected eye-shadow and liner, foundation and powder, nail polish and remover, deodorant and mouthwash. She paid the hair-netted, pock-marked cashier, crumpled the top of the brown paper bag, and went home.

She experimented with her purchases during the next few days, being careful to remove every trace before she left the house to shop or visit her father or go to church. Once she took the garbage out in her new face, but at the last second with the door open and the garbage in her arms she covered her eyes with dark glasses.

She would change the image gradually, she decided, so that she would be a different person on the day her father returned from the hospital. On that day, she would wear her hair loose about her slim shoulders; she would make up her eyes and powder her face; she would wear the high-heeled sandals on her feet. She would stand in the doorway and smile an unvirginal smile and dismiss his croak of disapproval with a kiss upon his creased forehead.

But the morning of his return home dawned hot, and her hair lay heavy on her neck. The eye make-up stung her eyes, and when she rubbed them, grotesque black circles made of them hollow sockets. Under the fluorescent bathroom light, the powder clogged her pores and coated the dark fringe along her upper lip rose-beige. The muscles in the back of her legs pulled and her arches ached.

Shortly after noon, she stood at the front door exactly as he had left her, holding it wide so that they could wheel him through. When she leaned in to give him a dutiful, dry kiss on his sunken cheek, he recoiled, and the dacron nurse whispered, “We are not ourself today.”

It stunned Agatha to realize how true that was. And how untrue. On the outside he was not himself. Nor would he be. Today or any future day. He had dissolved, his corpulence melted away by the heat of his struggle, and now, a thin, waxen coating barely concealed the cold incombustible core that remained. That had not changed. That would never change.

Morning after morning, though he winced at her touch, Agatha massaged him, coaxing life into the useless leg, the withered arm. Under her uncertain fingers, the flesh of his arm hung as loose and empty as a played-out balloon. And, though he barely ate, grimacing painfully at each mouthful, Agatha still thought of him as fat. Before his stroke, he had eaten feverishly, bent over his plate in ritualistic reverence, not because he had enjoyed it (Agatha had sensed that even then), but because it had been necessary, and he had chosen foods—fried, fricassee, gooey, greasy—to serve that necessity, layering him against the others, insulating him, burying him in his own flesh. She had heard somewhere that obesity was related to sensuality; Agatha knew better. It was the opposite: a dread of being touched, a fear of being recognized.
One morning she leaned close to him, ignoring his odor which reminded her of long closed rooms. "You will always be a fat man," she said, 
She gave up daily Mass because the hospital established schedule would not allow for it. Nor would her father. His eyes said more now than his mouth had ever said. They followed her in her ministrations as had the eyes of Christ from a reproduction on a classroom wall. They called her clumsy, thoughtless, inefficient, ugly, and whenever she told him she had to go out however briefly and for whatever purpose, they called her Harlot.

He was gaining strength—could hold a glass and direct the straw to his mouth, lift his leg in and out of his bed, and croak a few halting commands—when he died.

Agatha cleaned him and herself. She opened the window and closed his eyes. She took down the crucifix above his bed, slid it open, and removed the small blessed candles and the bottle marked with a silver cross. The holy water had evaporated. She laid out the the accouterments following the diagram exactly. She made up her face with a surprisingly steady hand and slipped into the high-heeled sandals. She put up fresh coffee, changed the shoes again, and called Father Marcus.

His eyes were puffed when he arrived and the side of his face was marked with the lines of sleep. He said, "Peace to this house," and she responded "And to all who live here."

The smell of coffee and the soft breathing sounds of the electric pot belied the presence of Death. Agatha heard Father Marcus’ stomach growl as he bent to anoint her father’s closed, silent eyes, and saw his face tighten against the distraction. The bedside lamp illuminated his profile with an eerie unreality as though he were a sculpture in a black and white photograph. Agatha suppressed the desire to try out her power and intoned the responses with what she hoped was sufficient feeling.

After she had closed the door on her father, she asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

Father Marcus removed his stole and put it and the holy oils into his black bag. "If it isn’t too much trouble," he said.

They sat across the dimly-lit room from one another. He asked if he could help with the arrangements and Agatha said, "Thank you, but I’ve taken care of everything," though she had not. The clinking of cups and spoons and the ticking of the shade cord in her father’s room were the only sounds in the stiff silence.

When Father Marcus stood, Agatha said, "What do you think of the changes?" hoping he did not hear the urgency in her voice.

His eyes narrowed. "Changes?"

She crossed the room and refilled his cup. "In the church. Everything’s changing so fast it’s hard to . . . ."

He nodded. "Seems so." She sat on the edge of the couch, feeling flush
with her unexpected boldness, and he sat beside her, taking his saucer onto his lap. "It's a resuscitation I think. A breath of fresh air."

"But even God is changing," she said.

He laughed. His face, fleetingly stricken with the inappropriateness of his reaction, closed up, and he fixed his attention on his cup.

"I know that's impossible," she said. "God is . . . I've forgotten the word."

"Eternal," he offered.
"There's another one."
"Immutable."

"When I was a child, God was . . . different."
"God was the same. Your idea of him was different." He set his half-full cup on the coffee table and reached for his bag.

"I suppose it's harder being a priest now."

He knotted his jaw muscles. "Easier for some."

"All these—renegades?—running off, getting married."

He regarded her silently. "Yes, well . . ." He stood.

Agatha stood.

They reached the door simultaneously and for a brief electrifying moment, her hand closed over his on the doorknob. Scalded by the intensity of the feeling that shot through her, Agatha drew back.

He said, "I'm sorry about your father. If there's anything I can do," as though they hadn't just that minute touched.

Dismayed at his control, she tittered.

He cleared his throat, pulled up his collar, said, "Yes. Well, Good night," and went out.

Each morning after Mass during the week of the funeral, Agatha threw open the bedroom window and went through her father's things. She discarded the plastic straws and squat glasses at his bedside, old photographs yellowed with age even as he himself had yellowed, scraps of meaningless paper tucked away in plastic envelopes, odd thread-clogged screws and bent nails that rolled in the drawers she emptied. She packed his underwear and socks and brushed his suits and put them all on the front porch for the charity pick-up.

When no vestige of his life in this room remained, she painted the headboard of the double bed he had once shared with her mother red, and moved her own things into the room.

She added to the daily Mass weekly confession, checking the name on the confessional to be sure that Rev. Paul Marcus was hearing. The small light in the new confessionals above the sign that said If You Wish to Use the Hearing Aid, Inform the Priest, disturbed her. She would have preferred total darkness. The box itself had a soothing effect, nevertheless, as if she were enveloped by a twilight sleep, distantly aware of the mumblings of those who were fully awake. Her heart fluttered when the voice
beyond the grille rose in absolution. The words were in English now, but she never really heard them. The rhythm and the tone had always made it official, and she listened for that still.

She brought him sins: "I gossiped," though she hadn't spoken to anyone for a week; "I lied," though this was the only lie. He kept her, it seemed, longer than the others, and he spoke to her in so intimate a voice about God and His goodness and the necessity for diligence that she was certain he must know it was she.

Afterwards she thumbed through the magazines and papers on the radiator in the vestibule, buying those with articles on the role of the New Priest. She preferred secular publications, however, for their handling of the growing debate on celibacy (a word she liked to say). She clipped these pieces, secured them with rubber bands, and slipped them under the lingerie in her top drawer. She became adept at determining which articles portended an announcement and accompanying photograph of the author on his wedding day. These she saved also. It amused and excited her to think that it was no longer true that gods married mortals only in myth.

Agatha timed her arrivals and departures, hoping to catch a glimpse of Father Marcus crossing from the rectory to the church and back again. She was seldom successful. When she was, he was already engaged in conversation or so rushed that he had barely time to nod a greeting.

She sat now always in the third pew, left aisle, and would not be displaced though the eight o'clock was the children's Mass, and they swarmed in to surround her, squirming and wiggling like worms in a can, making Agatha uneasy until Father Marcus glided out of the sacristy onto the altar. Then, she became so absorbed in the exercise of her power that nothing could distract her.

On the morning of the Feast of St. Agatha, she noticed his peculiar, reined-in walk. Perhaps it was the red vestments. He looked particularly handsome in the red though larger than he actually was and his movements by contrast were restrained to the point of delicacy.

He talked that day of the beauty of St. Agatha and her constancy despite the overtures of the Roman governor. He spoke of her martyrdom on the hot coals and of God's love for her. The words he chose were intended for the children, but the look, Agatha knew, was meant for her.

She went home and stripped and studied herself in the full length mirror. Her breasts were no longer firm, but the pendulous curve was graceful and not unattractive. Her hips and thighs were voluptuous with the weight of her sedentary years. She realized clearly and suddenly that she had misinterpreted her power. It was not a special gift granted exclusively to her. It was a gift she shared with certain women from the beginning of time. And the thought that had seized her on that very first day
(LOOK AT ME!) had not been her thought but his. “You were just too blind to see,” she said.

Agatha slept naked that night. Paul Marcus came to her in sleep and lay beside her; his scarlet chasuble a heap beside the bed. She awoke writhing in a cold sweat and put on the flannel pajamas she hadn’t worn since her father’s death.

But there was not sufficient strength in that to assuage the assault he made upon her senses. And mingled with the anticipation of his nightly visits that week was the anxiety of preparing for Saturday’s confession.

This time, the confessional was a sepulcher of stale, congealed air, smelling of tobacco and perspiration. Her breathing was shallow and quick and painful. The light burned into her as she waited. When a rustle of movement and the rattle of the sliding door signaled his coming. Agatha reached up and unscrewed the small bulb. The door slid aside, and she drew an audible breath at the unexpected sight of the amorphous blackness beyond the grille.

“Bless me, Father. I have sinned,” she said, growing easier as the words, so long a part of her, took hold. “My last confession was one week ago. Since that time I have had—” (She leaned closer, her mouth nearly touching the screen between them.) “—impure thoughts.”

On the other side of the partition he was silent. She drew back, waiting.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“All?”

“Is that all you wish to confess?”

All? All! She closed her eyes. “Yes, Father.”

“All? All! She closed her eyes. “Yes, Father.”

“Did you welcome these thoughts?”

Behind her eyelids he was waiting, stretched out beside her. “Welcome them?”

“Wish for them, initiate them, harbor them, entertain them.”


“Then you have not sinned.”

“But, Father—”

“You must be careful to form a right conscience. Scrupulousness is not a virtue; it can be harmful to spiritual progress.”

“But, Father, there’s more to it than that. The thoughts—they’re only a part of it.” She strained forward. “They involved . . . a priest.”

Beyond the screen, the shape shifted and changed. “If you did not deliberately . . .”

“But, Father, it’s not just that I have had these . . . thoughts. He is . . . suffering too.”

In the silence she counted eight breaths. Five of her own, three of his. “Perhaps you are mistaken.”
“Oh, no, Father. I am not mistaken.”

“In that case, it is a matter between the man and his confessor.” Though he paused, she sensed that he would continue. He moved again; the outline wavered, redrew itself, and solidified. “Is there anything else?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing else except that I know it’s true because, you see, he avoids me. Makes a point of avoiding me.”

“Perhaps that is something you are imagining.”

“Imagining!” A paroxysm of indignation forced her to her feet.

“Your voice,” he admonished with disembodied urgency.

“You are the one!” she accused him. “You are the one that needs the hearing aid!” She pushed open the door and went out, blinking against the sudden painful penetration of light. Her breath came unevenly, and she stood on the threshold, holding the door.

Despite the dizzying pounding in her ears, Agatha executed a precise genuflection on the red runner before she left the shadowed church.

Outside, Sarah clucked like a harridan under her black velvet cloche and rubbed her sneakered foot across a chalk inscription scrawled at the foot of the stairs.

As Agatha descended, the old woman said, “Look at this,” her sun-struck glasses, golden voids. “Don’t know what this world is coming to. Shameful.” She ground her foot against the pavement.

GOD IS NOT DEAD HE JUST CAN’T CUT THE MUSTARD.

Agatha moved up the street while Sarah bleated, “Blasphemy. Sacrilege.”

At home she realized she had not received absolution. Nor would she grant it. Paul Marcus was not without blame. He had put the thought in her head. He had seduced her with his soulful, impatient eyes, and when she had finally acquiesced, he had not been man enough to carry through.

Agatha went into the bathroom and covered her face with the greasy cold cream adding layer upon layer until her eyes peered at her like something apart. God, she thought, it’s like that. She scrubbed at her face frantically until it was red and stinging. Still she was a stranger, locked inside a body she did not understand, behind a face that came to her falsely, reversed and contorted by reflection. She struck the mirror violently with the heel of her hand, spinning an instant web of hairlike cracks across the glass, fragmenting her image into a myriad of unrelated pieces. Shards of pain shot up her arm, but there was no blood.

She reached inside the cabinet for her father’s small medicine bottle that lay beside the only other things that remained of him—his razor and his toothbrush. She thumbed off the plastic cap and poured several of the pills into her throbbing hand. Weightless. How many would it take, she wondered.

She envisioned the scene. The blessed candles flickering beside her bed. The feel of Paul Marcus’ thumb on her eyelids, the taste of it on her
lips. His breath in her hair. The pleading behind the rush of ordained words. She would not die, of course. He would see to that. And from that moment, an eternal light would burn in her eyes, signalling the power that was hers. Sweat strung itself like rosary beads along the fine hairs of her upper lip and the back of her neck crawled in anticipation.

She rolled the capsules in the cup of her hand, remembering the Mexican jumping beans of another, almost forgotten day. Even they had been fake: lead balls creating the illusion of life in empty shells.

She replaced the capsules. Now, as her father would have said, was not the time. Paul Marcus must be made to realize that nothing—nothing!—was as it seemed.

Agatha began to attend all the Masses (three on week-days, seven on Sundays) and evening devotions (less frequent since the Council). Her intention being to taunt Paul Marcus with the power he himself had unleashed, she exercised it on them all, and even the paunchy, oracular pastor responded, singling her out with scalding eyes, softening his fire-and-brimstone delivery during those moments of intimacy. It was not her success, however, that brought her the profoundest joy. Buoyed up by the ebb and flow of an essentially changeless ritual, she began to expand with the sense of belonging. At last, Agatha was home. And, as a dutiful daughter, she took a proprietary interest in the operations of that home. If the ushers forgot the spotlight over the Virgin’s altar, as they usually did, Agatha snapped it on. If the hymnals were left in disarray, as they usually were, Agatha stacked them neatly, kicking kneelers up out of the way as she glided from pew to pew. When the stoups were empty, she informed the ushers; when they did nothing, she filled them herself.

It was months before Agatha became aware of Sarah’s absence. Poor old Sarah, “Where is Sarah?” she asked the children, who snickered behind hands folded like church spires. “What happened to Sarah?” she inquired of familiar faces glazed with noncommittal half-smiles. No one seemed to know what had become of her. No one seemed to care. Perhaps, Agatha conjectured, Sarah had been assumed, body and soul, into heaven. Glorified For All Eternity. Perhaps she had been merely an apparition. Agatha did not know. “Poor old Sarah,” she said, burying her once and for all.

Let the dead rest. Life was for the living. And Agatha was more alive than she had ever been, for it was not only the priests who saw in her what her father had failed to see; it was the people too. They looked at her everywhere: outside church, on buses, in supermarket aisles. And she looked at them. They nodded and she nodded. They smiled and she smiled. They spoke and she spoke.

It was indicative of the human condition and not hers solely, she realized finally, that no one ever saw his own face truly. A gift of sight was bestowed upon those who accepted it, as she did, stoically. And to those
who recognized her power, those who truly looked into her eager face, Agatha gave, as a gift, themselves. It was a kind of mission, a thread through all the fragments of her life. She had no doubt that one day Paul Marcus would look into her eyes and see his own image reflected there more truly than he had ever seen it: under the lean crust of discipline, a fat man. Like her father. Agatha had found him out. She had found them all out.

She reflected upon these things happily one spring day as she approached the church, Tulips and lilacs lined the walk. Overhead trees whispered green promise and flags unfurled against the clear blue air.

Father Marcus emerged from the rectory and crossed the walk.

Agatha smiled a greeting. “Nice day.”

Father Marcus hesitated, studying the sky. “Yes,” he agreed. “Nice day.”

Behind her a child’s voice said, “Hi, Agatha,” and Agatha smiled.

“Who’s that?” a woman asked.

“Agatha,” the child said.

“How do you know her name?”

“I just know it. Everybody knows her name is Agatha.”

Yes, Agatha, Yes, Yes.

Agatha pushed through the new amber-tinted glass and bronze doors into the sun-striped church. She moved up a narrow corridor of light, nodding and smiling at the faces agleam with recognition. Agatha had all that she had ever wanted now, more than she had ever expected.

Nearing the front, though she could barely contain her joy, Agatha put on a narrow-eyed compassionate face. The Mass would be black today. A funeral.

Night Flight

• Catherine Petroski

MY in the dark rockingroom
composition of verse
all mental all at once
the breathing draws
Out and I creak forward
begging the floor’s pity
One foot, the other, hoping
my joints won’t crack
or some horn beep or car
race by, giving me
away before
I’m out.
The Grasshopper and The Cricket

• Henry Jankiewicz

The Grasshopper:
    Clad all in plates of dusty green I whirr
    Erratically and briefly through the simmer
    Of an April noon; and nothing
    Is more beautiful, nothing sings
    Like the sunlight sweeping the dry weeds,
    And my fretted armor is struck alight with chivalries
    That no benighted creature could surpass;
    And when I leap, I am a dragon in the grass.

The Cricket:
    There is more peace in darkness, my playful friend,
    Where every hue and pigment tends
    Toward one condition, than in all the chivalries
    Or visions you can concoct, Or flights of fancy.
    Mock me as you will: “Dark scarab! How he sings!
    Like a fiddler who scrapes on wooden strings!”
    But know—there’s comfort in my house beneath the hearth
    That no beast knows who dreams above the earth.

Early Riser

• Terence M. Adams

Come quietly to the morning,
    Blackly at the bidding
    Of the glowing, symmetrical face
    Of the moon-clock on the nightstand,

    Reach hugely with numb feet
    For the carpet, take, in your hands
    Each by each the mysterious
    Obstacles in your path.

    Enter the blinding room
    Of likeness, and the tumbling
    Hot and cold wetness;
    The cleansing, the unwinking
    Gradually of eye after eye.

    Grasp the day by its damp, lank
    Fur in your teeth and walk,
    Run, if you will,
    To safety.
The Marbles, The Blocks, And The Rubber Toy Soldiers

Carl Schiffman

Right from the beginning, Roy and Lois had disagreed about what toys to get for David. At first, their disagreements were purely theoretical, looking toward a future when David would be old enough to buy real toys for, and gliding without much effort or debate over a present comprised of crib ornaments, wheeled and ringing anti-musical instruments, and stuffed animals. Lois had expected Roy to object to the cuddly soft animals; and when he didn’t, wondered whether he was deferring to her judgment until David reached a certain age. As it turned out, Roy had cherished through most of his life the memory of a stuffed elephant that had shared bed and board with him until his ninth birthday, when his own father had confiscated it, thereby—as Roy told it now—with that one coup ending Roy’s childhood. David was eight now, well past teddy-bears, and the battle between his parents had long since moved from theory into practice. The lines were fairly clearly drawn and perhaps not untypical, although the intensity with which the battle was fought made Roy, who had once studied very seriously to be an actor, think of Strindberg.

Three engagements are sometimes enough to characterize an entire war: with Roy and Lois, there were the marbles, the blocks, and the rubber toy soldiers.

“What is he going to do with them?” Lois asked, keeping her voice low and her manner gentle. “The question isn’t how nice they look, I think they’re nice-looking, too. But David isn’t going to just look at them. He hasn’t the aesthetic sense of a frog. David is going to do something with them. Now I want to know what it is you think David is going to do.”

“What does a kid do with marbles?” Roy replied, as if there could only be one answer, and Lois already knew what that was.

“Exactly,” she said, agreeing with him. “He’s going to go downstairs and shoot marbles with some other kids to see who can take all of whose marbles away. It’s competitive and destructive, and I won’t let him do it.”

“All kids play marbles,” Roy said. “We used to carry them to school in a cloth bag with a draw-string, and play in the yard during lunch hours. The teachers didn’t mind. They even had a circle painted there for us to use.”
"I suppose those schools taught you the truth about World War One, too. Or about Teddy Roosevelt and San Juan Hill. Those were great places for learning, those schools were. What about Jay Gould and the stock market? Or don't you think acquisitiveness and materialism have anything to do with playing marbles?"

"It's too late anyway," Roy said, going halfway down the hall to make sure the door to David's room was closed. "I left the marbles in his room last night. He thanked me for them when I kissed him goodnight."

"They're not there now," Lois poured herself a second cup of coffee. "I saw them hanging in that obscene bag and took them away. I hope you saved the sales slip."

"You took them away?" Roy was having trouble controlling his voice. "They were already his, he already said he liked them. I started teaching him how to play."

"He likes what we teach him to like, what he learns we approve of. Besides, you know you're not supposed to give him anything unless we talk about it first."

"For Christ's sake, Lois, they're just marbles!"

She shook her head, smiling at him to show she knew he couldn't be as simple as he sounded, and took his hand. "Come with me, I want to show you something." He followed her to the hall closet. There was a large rectangular package, wrapped in brown paper, a UPS sticker on it. "Bring it to the bedroom."

Roy could hardly move the package from the closet floor. "If you let somebody sell you the goddamn Encyclopedia Britannica for an eight year old kid—"

"It's from Macy's, it was on sale, and it is exactly perfect for an eight year old kid."

He tore the wrapping off, lifted a cardboard cover and disclosed the largest set of wooden blocks he had ever seen. "When did you decide David was retarded?"

"Why don't you look at what they are first?" Roy unloaded the entire set, laying each piece flat on the floor, no block touching any other. There were columns and arches, turrets and minarets, walls and platforms. They covered the whole floor. "Architectural blocks," Lois purred. "David can build anything from a subway station to a Greek temple. He can build a modern skyscraper or a Roman whatchamacallit that they carried water on—he can even make up new forms of his own. There are no limits."

"Aqueducts," Roy said. "How much did all this cost?"

"Forty-nine and change, marked down from seventy." She looked at the blocks. The cheerfulness was out of her voice now. She was frankly pleading with him. "Please, Roy, I don't think I've ever seen anything I've wanted so much for him to have. There's a whole world in there:
history, art; it's not just a toy or a game, it's something for David's mind, for his imagination."

"And you begrudge me giving him a buck's worth of marbles," he began to repack the blocks. His voice was serious now, too. thoughtful not argumentative. "What bothers me isn't so much that you don't want me to give him the marbles, while you want me to let you give him—"

"Us. Us give him. The blocks would be from both of us."

"—the blocks." He finished his sentence. "David would know which one of us the blocks came from no matter what either of us said. But that's not what bothers me." He paused, examining one of the arches, weighing it in his hand. "What bothers me is the effect that all of these so-called cre-ative toys is having on David. Don't you see, you're turning him into a solitary child."

"He's in school with other children all day long."

"That's still school. That's still just him, David, learning. And that's just what these blocks would be: David all by himself, David's mind, David's imagination. Lois, David needs to play with other children. He needs to learn games that will bring him in close contact with other kids. That means competition. Marbles or baseball, it means somebody wins and somebody loses, and it means caring about the difference."

"Why can't it mean playing together? Why can't he invite a friend up to play with the blocks with him? They could make up things to build together."

"Because other little kids are out playing ball, because other little kids' fathers don't take this kind of crap." He suddenly threw the arch across the room, slamming it into the far wall. "If I ever thought I wouldn't be allowed to buy my own son a bag of marbles...!"

Lois picked up the arch. It was completely unmarked. There was a deep dent in the plaster. "Give him the marbles, give him anything you like. I'm going to give him the blocks as a present from myself. Just from me."

Roy gave David back the marbles that very morning and later in the day Lois gave David the blocks. The day marked the beginning of what might be called an extended truce or cease-fire. Roy and Lois, without consulting or seeking each other's approval, each gave David the gifts they separately chose for him. Realizing some delicacy was required, they did not give gifts too frequently and they did not quarrel over gifts once given. Since they had fought over very little else, all their differences seeming to come to a head in just this one area of their child's upbringing, the months that followed were the most harmonious they had known since David's infancy. Roy and Lois began to talk about starting a second child.

The one discordant note that sounded during this time, and which they chose to pass over in silence even though no covenant bound them, was what happened to the new gifts they were giving David. It was simply
that these gifts didn’t last very long. This was not true of the marbles or the blocks, all and each of which David guarded scrupulously, but of what was given to him afterwards. The gifts, touching mainly on the arts when from Lois, or on sports or athletics when from Roy, seemed to get misplaced, or stolen, or lent to friends and never returned. This was especially upsetting because Roy and Lois were each spending more time alone with David, teaching him how to cast miniature statues, or run in cleats, and the loss of equipment seemed somehow like a loss of themselves, of the time they had spent teaching David to use it.

What ended the truce, however, was not what happened to the gifts purchased during it, but Roy’s hopes of turning truce into armistice. It was in the interests of a permanent peace that Roy decided to show Lois the rubber toy soldiers before giving them to David. They both marvelled afterwards that their marriage had withstood the test of that first fifteen minutes. Roy was all the more furious for not being able to understand what Lois was angry about. He had expected her to be pleased. The soldiers, after all, were a “Lois” gift, something artistic.

Roy had been noticing, the times he would come into his son’s room, the increasingly sophisticated, graceful, and for all Roy knew, architecturally accurate, castles and palaces David had been building with the blocks. Roy could admit to himself that he liked the blocks, even that he was proud of how well David had learned to build with them, although he never said a word of this to either David or Lois. But when Roy saw the soldiers in the dusty window of a downtown miscellany shop that was really half a junk store, he decided that giving the soldiers to David and explaining what they were and how they were to be used might help David understand that his father didn’t disapprove of his playing with the blocks, and in fact wanted to give him something he could use with the blocks. This is what Roy could not understand Lois’s not understanding.

The soldiers, it must be admitted, were very poorly made. Cut awkwardly of rubber, traces of the mold still adhering to almost every figure, and gross, even negligent in physical detail, they had, Roy himself knew, no conventional artistic merit. What was special about them, almost unique, was their equipage, the weapons cast with them in the mold. There were no rifles or machine guns, no bayonets or funny helmets, no Buck Rogers space weaponry. These soldiers carried halberds and pikes, cros-bows and battleaxes. There were knights mounted on prancing steeds, lances held high; and jesters with foolscaps, mock bells drooping to the ground. There were trumpeters sounding alarms. Roy had found a whole medieval army for David to staff his castles with.

There was no need this time to check and see if David’s door was shut. If he was home, he was listening, and that was that. Late that night, they heard his radio playing, not too loudly. They left him alone, thinking it was something he would have to work out for himself.
Roy and Lois reached no agreements. He would give David the soldiers, and Lois promised she would throw them out if Roy told David one word about how to use them with the blocks. David's castles were like churches: she had helped him build them. They were places of beauty, not a place of war. Lois told Roy to just go ahead and give the soldiers to David. "He'll never think of putting them in a castle, unless you tell him to. He never tries to mix our gifts." There were ancillary arguments, of course, about masculinity and femininity, and evil and good in the world, but Roy and Lois came to no new resolutions and the fight ended with Roy's giving David the soldiers the next morning, but not telling David how he was supposed to play with them.

There was no peace in the house now though, no return of harmony. There was only silence between Roy and Lois; silence, and a feeling of betrayal so deep it frightened them. They stopped entirely buying gifts for David. They told themselves they were waiting for a sign.

It was about three weeks after the fight that the noises began to come from David's room. Lois, home more, heard them first and went to David's door. "David?" David answered that he was playing and couldn't open the door or he'd spoil it. She asked if he was all right, then went back to the kitchen. The sounds repeated a couple of days later, and then again a couple of days after that. Lois meant to find out what David was doing, but didn't want to interrupt him or make him think she was spying. One day, while David was at school, she cleaned his room with special thoroughness, going into every cupboard, every drawer. She found nothing unusual, nothing broken, and no way of accounting for the noises.

Roy first heard David on a Saturday morning. The banging started while he was shaving and stayed with all the time he was getting dressed. He asked Lois and was told it was a new game David was playing. She explained about the door. This time it was Roy, after David had gone to the children's matinee, who went into David's room and through all his possessions, not finding anything amiss.

The banging, almost like wood being hammered but irregular and more shrill, resumed on Sunday morning. During that week, it started every day when David came home from school, and on two nights—on both of which Roy happened to be working late—started in again briefly after dinner, when David was supposed to be doing quiet reading before bedtime. Lois knew David was taking advantage of his father's not being home, but felt helpless to do anything about it. She hadn't had any trouble in the past disciplining David, but the closed door and all the banging, at times it seemed against the very door itself, cowed her and made her feel uncertain.

Lois was grateful then, early Saturday, when David's game, starting right after an early breakfast, woke Roy up furious. "David," he shouted
from bed, "stop that goddamn racket and put whatever the hell it is away! Right after breakfast, your mother and I are coming in to have a talk with you." Lois was so relieved by the authority in Roy's voice, she didn't tell him the banging had started in again when he went down to get the morning papers.

David came into the kitchen to get the funnies while his parents were finishing their second cups of coffee, the papers open in front of them. Roy handed him the funny pages, "Wait in your room." David took the pages and went out. He looked all right to Lois, a little tense maybe but not uncheerful and certainly not afraid. Why should he be?

They walked into David's room together. He was sitting at his desk, a scrapbook open in front of him, the radio playing. His bed was made with fresh linen, his bookshelves dusted. He looked a little confused; family conferences were not the rule.

"We wanted," Roy said, turning off David's radio, "to know what all that banging is. Your mother tells me it's been going on all the time."

"Playing," David said, in a very soft voice. He scribbled something on a piece of paper.

"Playing," his father echoed. "Playing what? What do you have to play with that makes that kind of noise?"

David got up from the desk and went to the bookcase. He took down a hand puppet, once a favorite toy. He laughed, and put the puppet on his hand. "I did," he made the puppet say, still giggling, "I made all that noise. Me—Squeaky." He carried the puppet to the door, then struck the thin paneling with it sharply. "Bang, bang, bang," David said, "This is how I bang my head." He rapped the plastic head against the paneling. "Ouch, ouch, ouch." He giggled.

Roy took the puppet away from David. "That isn't what you were doing. Your mother and I want to know the truth. Does the game you were playing have a name?"

David went to the closet and took down a toy Roy and Lois had agreed on long ago, an actor's kit, with masks and make-up. David kept his back to them, When he turned around, he had three eyes, and a nose growing out of the side of his forehead; his teeth were black, and one of his ears was missing.

"I asked you what the game was, David. This is a different game now, the one you're playing with me. And I don't like it."

"Daddy wants to know what game you've been playing." She could feel Roy's anger. "Won't you tell us?"

David was frightened now, pulling off the mask, eyes very bright: the verge of tears. He mumbled something.

"What'd he say?"

"He said he made it up. It doesn't have a name."
"This is ridiculous! I don't care about the name. The kid can just
tell us what he does, can't he?"

Lois helped put the actor's kit away. "Will you show us, David? I'll
close the door the way you always do." Lois closed the door and sat next
to Roy on the bed. She felt closer to him than she had in months, needing
to have him there. They watched their son.

David looked at them once, wide-eyed, seeing them both in his room,
sitting together on his bed, then seemed to forget they were there. He
shrugged freeing himself, then tugged the blocks out from under the
dresser, where he kept them in two cardboard boxes according to size. He
dragged the boxes to the alcove where the door opened into his room and
began to unload the blocks. He worked quickly, the outlines of a structure,
filling the alcove from wall to wall, began to appear. Roy was restless, not
sure if David was gulling them. Lois put a hand on Roy's arm, quieting
him.

David paused after the first level of the structure was traced and
opened a dresser drawer. He took out the large flat box the toy soldiers
had come in and carried the box, open, to the alcove. He began to lift the
rubber toy soldiers out of their niches in the box and place them in the
evolving structure.

David never looked up; his hands flying blocks and men through the
alcove were designing a fortress in which each man had his place: the
knights in a central courtyard; the men at arms and archers within the
walls or cleverly concealed in narrow, well-protected embrasures. The
upper battlements grew, and David carefully placed a solitary trumpeter
atop the highest tower. Alongside the knights, in the central courtyard,
the jesters capered.

"What did I tell you," Roy murmured, "Do you see that?"

"Do you think he's tricking us?" she whispered.

David cleared the unused blocks from the alcove and moved the empty
cartons to one side. He paused to study his handiwork, his concentration
unfamiliar and intense. When they thought he was finished and would
turn to them for approval, David went to his desk and opened the deep
bottom drawer. He took out a cloth bag, a drawstring closing it at the
neck, and put the bag by his side as he knelt facing the alcove, two-thirds
of the way across the room. He undid the drawstring and opened the bag.

Neither Roy nor Lois were ready when the first marble crashed
against the side of the castle, just missing one of the embrasures and
bouncing back off one of the blocks, pushing it just slightly out of line.
A second and third marble flew across the room: one went over the wall
into the courtyard, upending a knight; the other knocked down part of
a battlement, taking an archer with it.

Lois gasped. She was going to cry out. Roy put his hand over her
mouth and held it there firmly. She struggled, then reached up and held on to Roy's hand. They watched David.

He was throwing one marble at a time: aiming carefully, and throwing hard. When he missed, as now, the marble whizzing just past the trumpeter's head cracked sharply against the door's paneling. David kept throwing until the battlements were clear and the courtyard a shambles of wood squares and rubber bodies.

For the lower walls, David had heavier armament: giant marbles, walnut-sized, that crashed like cannon-fire into the blocks, knocking them askew, breaching the embrasures and opening the last of the defending army to direct fire. David threw without let until he had nothing left to throw at. Then, approaching cautiously, he examined the ruins, not touching anything, until he found a single survivor. He went back to place and threw until he hit. The man flew straight up in the air, pike spinning.

David picked up the marbles first, crawling under furniture, reaching under the bed to where they had rolled and putting them back in their bag. Then he reconstituted his army, digging the men out and lining them helter-skelter on one side of the alcove. Finally, he gathered the blocks and stacked them, none too neatly, near the empty boxes.

Before Roy or Lois were able to talk, David had begun building a second fortress. Revising his design, he was placing his men more cannily, in deeper embrasures, behind thicker, more ingeniously reinforced walls. Only the trumpeter, brazen on the highest point, was as vulnerable as before.

It took David much longer to knock his second castle down. Many more marbles bounced off the walls before the last block fell and the last man was overthrown. David saved the trumpeter until near the last this time. It presiding over the growing wreckage like an angel of death.

The third castle, woven tightly in wood around each of the defenders, seemed as if it would never fall. David threw the same marble two or three times, in mounting tempo and barely suppressed rage, only to have it bounce straight back off the walls to his hand. David threw harder still, a marble cold fury that kept the marbles flying for minutes after the last man fell.

They watched David clean up after the third time: putting the marbles back in his desk, stacking the blocks, putting the soldiers into their niches in the carton. He went to the kitchen for a sandwich, then collected his allowance and left for the children's movie matinee, a block away.

Roy and Lois remained in David's room. They looked at the blocks. The blocks were hardwood, well made, showing only the faintest dents like shadows in the grain. Paint was slightly chipped in places around the alcove; the baseboard, in one small spot, showed bare plaster.

Last, they looked at the soldiers. Roy lifted them gingerly from their niches, half-expecting them to come apart in his hands, and passed them
one at a time to Lois. She stood them in ranks on the dresser: the knights and archers, the men at arms with pikes or axes, the jesters, in front of them all, the proud trumpeter. The men were perfect, or at least not visibly damaged, just the way they had come from the store. Roy put the rubber toy soldiers back in the carton and closed the drawer.

A couple of hours later, David came home from the matinee. He found his room just the way he usually left it; his parents even having taken the trouble to smooth the covers of his bed behind them, leaving no trace, not the faintest indentation, to show they'd ever been sitting there.

The Boy

- Joseph Meredith

Once when I was on the road from Jamestown to Dutch Island I stopped to watch a kneeling boy pull mollusks from the grey ooze of the Narragansett’s bottom mud.

“You eat them, I suppose,” I said, and broke his concentration, “Sir,” he turned snail-slow, regarded me with mud-gray eyes that flicked my look away, “I kill them.”

He hunched again to his slow quarry. I thought him meaner than the Bay. From down the road I saw him rise and hobble on two twisted legs to execute his consolation.
CONTRIBUTORS

M. LIBERMAN is Oakes Ames Professor of English at Grinnell College in Iowa. In addition to a collection of stories, he has recently published a critical study of Katherine Anne Porter. MATT FIELD'S poems have appeared often in these pages. He teaches creative writing at Southeastern Massachusetts University. WILLIAM STOTT, who teaches at Fordham, has been writing verse for years without attempting to publish. We are happy to print his work here for the first time. ANNE MAXWELL, a student at La Salle College, is also publishing her verse for the first time, as is CORDELL CAUDRON, a young Californian. ANN JONES won the Emily Clark Balch Award for her story published last summer in the Virginia Quarterly Review. She has also published poetry in Fiddlehead. NINA SANDRICH joins the other new poets we are proud to introduce in this issue. She too had been writing for years before deciding to submit some of her work after taking a writing class at Everywoman's Village. She is married to television director Jay Sandrich and lives in the San Fernando Valley. ALLEN SHEPHERD is a member of the English Department at the University of Vermont and has authored numerous critical articles. CAROL ADORJAN, a Chicaguan and mother of three, has published short fiction, poetry, features, stories for teenagers, and two juvenile picture books. This is her first appearance here. CATHERINE PETROSKI completes the husband and wife tandem that began when husband HENRY appeared in our November issue. HENRY JANKIEWICZ is another La Salle College student making a promising debut. His poems have appeared in the undergraduate literary magazine, Grimoire. TERENCE M. ADAMS has published in College English and in several Ohio magazines. CARL SCHIFFMAN lives in New York City. "The Blocks, the Marbles, and the Rubber Toy Soldiers" is his first published story. JOSEPH MEREDITH first appeared in these pages last year.

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