

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Keith Humphreys entitled *The Radius of Time*. I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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THE RADIUS OF TIME

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree,

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Keith K. Humphreys

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For my Parents, Family, and Fork--
they made me.

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ABSTRACT

This collection of twenty-five poems and three short stories is an attempt by the author to explain those moments when time and traditional reality become distorted. In those short periods of fast blood and terrible recognition the "real" reality is found because only then does life with all its quickening possibilities appear. In between those occurrences we are forced to face a sometimes boring and limited world. Thus, some of the other works are attempts to look ahead and behind and all around, and place the author in the world. That "world" can be any world because there are many, just as there are many realities.

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INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe has influenced both my poetry and my prose with his wonderful short stories. Having read many of them when I was small and then reread them in college, my admiration for Poe grows all the time. In those stories, Poe creates alternative realities to the one we face each morning. By experimenting with alternative times, creativity, landscapes, forms and voices, he makes worlds where the artist can express his main concerns unencumbered.

The four sections of this work represent my own experimentations with many of the same things Poe worked with. "WORK" is the first section; by "work" I refer to the creative imagination, contained within itself. The imagination often reacts to what is outside of it but, in this section, I wanted only to address the problems of pure imagination, and composing from ideas. These poems rise from the subconscious more than from any outer stimulus.

The title of the manuscript comes from a poem in the second section, "TIME". These poems are more meditative than any of the others. They concern the inability of our minds to actually conceive of time in its infinity. For all we can achieve, all the poetry we can write, we will die. Eventually all that we are will die as not only humanity but all of the world dies. Man has dominated the world for such a small period of time that if we disappeared today, our existence would be but an instant of memory. That instant could be one of those I wish to address in this section and the others as well. By creating moments in my fiction I hope to find some truth. Just as writing in form can make me say something I might never have said before, so can the contemplation of time and its distortions. Not only do I want to address those

instances when time bends, but all the times reality of any kind changes. Memory does this, but the study of memory stalls me and makes me too nostalgic. I want to find the new, the now. Time is happening every second and most of it passes by unexplored.

In the third section, "FORM," I have written formal poems that try to capture some expression of their forms. For a formal poem to work, the content must be integrated into the form. I placed "Post War" first so that its terse form might tie together the section.

"LAND" is the culmination of the three sections before it. By putting together form, the creative imagination, and the contemplation of time I can create alternative landscapes that try to produce without specific words the emotion or complex I wish to express. The last two poems deal with temples of different constructions. In these places I have tried to explore. I will not say exactly what I have tried to explore because the very saying of it seems to take away some of its power or ability as a seer. The three short stories contained in this section deal with not only the distortion of time, but with the distortion of narration. The stories progress from reliable to unreliable narration. Also contained in these stories are some of those alternative landscapes that poetry and the mind produce to try to explain the happenings and emotions of being.

I would be remiss if I led the reader to believe that only Poe had influenced my writing. Poe's stories, more than his poetry, have shaped my prose and verse. Several other writers have also had large influence upon both genres. The Czech

writer, Milan Kundera, has taught me about how humans hurt one another simply by living. Humans cannot exist with other humans in perfect harmony: the act of being alive itself breeds discord and nothing, except total death, can rid humanity of it.

Louise Erdrich's novels have taught me to value those times when the mystic world invades the real one. In her works she often places moments of seeming clarity illustrated by dreams or supernatural events. When these occur in real life we too often ignore them or think we are too sleepy. I would love to be able to remember all the supernatural things that have happened in my life but society and my upbringing taught me to disregard those that did not take an acceptable form.

Through writing I hope to recapture some of what I have lost. T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" has helped me to step back sometimes and look at my whole life. Though Erdrich's immersion into the mystic is insightful, Eliot's contemplation of life and death in a large picture can also be. Erdrich writes of instants of comprehension, whereas Eliot takes the whole life of Prufrock and looks at it as a unit. To Prufrock, there are no moments that provide perfect insight because anything that can be done in a minute can also been undone in that time. Dissecting time and condensing it can be useful observational tools and allow me to come at life from more than one point of view.

What gives life meaning? Hemingway addresses this, as I have tried to do from time to time. In doing so I have tried to learn from his terse style and not waste any words. At the same time I have tried to avoid his recurrent sentimentality. I have a natural propensity toward it, and fighting it produces some of my best work.

I have titled this thesis *The Radius of Time* because I want to explore all that goes on inside the realm of time. Or, to be more precise, I want to see how time affects me every day and how by changing it and bending it I can learn how to cope with the reality of being human.

I. WORK

Bait

Words

probe wet soil for
roots.

I have to dig them up,
put them in a can,
hold and hook them wriggling,
lower them in the green water.

Suspended too long,
they whiten, paste over.

When no fish bites, I rescue the
dead ones,
throw them on the grass as if
the green will bring them
back to life.

The Left

To hear one's shoes
scrape the street.

To hear mules' shod hooves
press red dust while
towing a barge.

A hundred years wasted
picking shoes. One
will do. Any one will
protect a foot.

How can I tell the difference
with two? With one I may
limp in a circle,
but at least one foot
will grow calloused
from pressing stones.

Work

The soothing rock river
twists my neck around the nights
like burns from a neutral world.

Rattling beech leaves
hover on their fingertips,
await the blackbirds' chorused
ravage. What rush of
lipped words
pulls my head around even when the
light shines through the shallow stream?

The rocks are slippery, the trees
thorned, the path too narrow for
my car. The bridge is wide enough,
and stable, but it exits where the
ditches begin. It meanders where leaves
collect and spiders leave
dry nests to scale twigs
and flag in the breeze.
Eyelash legs comb web strands,
hurry to sew up the damage
a falling leaf makes.

Andrew

He omits criminal

verbs from the small deck

of valuable language.

Bludgeoned animals

claw together

in trees with no distinction,

a pack of bloody fur

swollen with chunks of sweating flesh.

He molds his creatures in a lump

like a tumor:

all contorted,

never distinct,

never ordered,

never spaced out to last until the when.

Rain Howls

Peripheral ghosts
of the passing forest
flame into view with the
quickenings of a green eye.

A sick man sweats in his sheets,
waking now and again to
smell his

vomit on the wooden floor.

The scavenger bird's honed beak
chisels through the dusty mortar,
sheds tepid sunlight on the

fumes of a stained hallucinatory life.

Re-Creation

Blood flows black, thick, syrupy
from the blue arm extended
palm down, tight
fingers fondling mahogany
arm rail, pulling
loose skin.

Rampant pools collect on ceiling.

Bright eyes purge.

Smile broadens, pain goes.

Hot jungle mutterings in his head

smolder slower. Black

turns red--

ancient water drips, shapes rock.

Malleable world: brain's hated toy.

The Rewards of Stone

The man in the valley plows the turf,
sweats as he plants his seeds.
He wipes his brow, looks past the oxen
toward the willow beside the brook.
Each night he sleeps, rises slowly by the fire
to eat his fill of his labors and his rewards.
His smile in the evenings is everlasting in its repetition.
When he dies,
his soul cannot tell whether it lived one moment or a thousand.

The man on the mountain scratches the dirt,
sweats as he scavenges for grubs.
He cradles his head, falls on the rocks,
looks into It.
He starts awake each hour at the wind through his clothes,
huddles under the deity to start a fire.
He looks to the waterfall rumbling over his shoulder,
at the transient moss that clings to its walls each day.
Prey-birds circle his head, he paints them with myths
to explain the shifting of clouds and the cold in his belly
and the bounding of rams in rut.
His eyes water from the wind as he stoops
above a berry bush or a writhing rodent.
When he dies,
his soul knows it lived one moment.

II. TIME

Assonance and Alliteration on the First Day of Summer

The field stretches

simmering with its aura of

sun-sweetened souls,

pinked and yellowed.

From behind the shade of the maple tree

a form

tumbles lost with grass in her hair,

pulling him down.

The greenbacked-rubythroated birds

purr to the wind,

dip in time with the rustle of the grasses.

Hover and hover and

break

when a soft sound from below turns them

out to the south,

over the many-voiced whirr,

round

under the noisily ripening sun.

Waiting for the School Bus, on the Street

Red and orange
flow from my dog's head between my feet
to the wider street below.
I let it push its path of
least resistance over the gravel.

On the broad road,
it will puddle, maybe splash when the bus
parts it with speeding tires.

The other children wait,
a mass
in the corner, looking at the sky.
One small girl walks to me,
"Looks like tomato soup,"
she says and turns.

When the smaller dog waddles over
and licks,
I kick him off.
No one should interfere with my watching.

Fading Day

The opera slows now, a
mass of the
dead. Orange sky
drenches the once
white clouds in
acid brilliance. A

woman slouches home
under the clogged
streetlight. Its blue
pall stains her
hair, her shirt, her
bony shoes kicking up
stones. On the

other side a boy
spies through a green
bottle her red sun,
looks away blind.

The Radius of Time

A cloth's wipe took the black
from my eyes, the red
from my blood.

I had to repaint them so they could rise
silently from the flowing pool, morning.

I screamed often then,
the way I don't now.
Outside, the world is dull:
the where bleeds into the when.
My how walks truer but cold.

Could I go back to the former,
then, those, would my
voice return hot and bloodthirsty?
Or would it repeat,
like yesterday's rain,
wash out the color from the wood,
leave bark and leaves
and windswept limbs, but no core?

Fragile Concrete

Because the world was meant for me to destroy
I walk cautiously.

The

street seams threaten
to come apart when
I trip. Gravel patches
lightened with finer slippery dust
flare like concrete
wounds on the softer earth,
luring my stilted steps.

The diamond glittering
mica edges
crumble under my broken
shoes.

I scrape along the corner,
it smoothes my nails,
sands my teeth to nubs.

I unmake this geometric sore slowly, but I am cowed.

Why I Stopped in the Museum

Since the world was made for me to destroy I've
pressed my hands hard into the mud.

But the wind threatens my
still-drying dirt sculptures.
Dares to try to freeze them alongside
the fossils, past bearded men,
bald heads that bled warmth from their brains.

My hand shadows the ice man's foot,
his heel-shattering kick I
grab and up-end. No
toes clench the weeds
of that once-hot jungle.
The frozen flesh comes
up in my fingers, an uncut
gem of absence. The air contained in
that footprint escapes when I hold it.
I void his crushing blow to the world, place mine over it,
hope for
no memory.

Like Tired Old Worlds

Weathered worlds gather
last breaths to
fling across the room,
out the window.

Newly cold,
they spin, float,
pull their blood
back inside,
numb their hands, feet,

turn & bounce off
rock-smooth walls,
search for some
uneven landing, some
dirty pinnacle
to be perfect on.

III. FORM

Post War

Carriages

caught on washed-

out streets rot

like spars of

sunken ships.

Clothes flag like

tattered sails.

Steel weapons

rust upright,

cornstalks in

furrowed ground.

Horse bodies

bask, inhale

one long breath.

Grass grows fast.

The Blanketed Man

Only the wind keeps me sane when it burrows
like a mole through the building where I live.

The expanding morning scrapes me out of bed
with its updrafts and weightless suspensions
on the way to the mirror. The air moves slowly, awake,
it tries to step aside when I move, but
often catches my knee with a departing heel.

By noon it speeds to an easier rate
where I can eat, watch television.
When I open the blinds, light pours its sawblade
through the air with hardly an effort.

By evening it's quick, much faster than I--
making me feel numb, off-balance, mute as an
old animal in an iron cage. The
dim light of my yellow lamp cuts through its
transparency deftly, barely pushing at all.

In the night, the wind speaks oaths while it races
out along the back wall and darts into the
keyhole. It knows I am here, but pays me
no mind. I am merely a blanketed man, a
lump of perforated, necessary matter,
a curve to accelerate into. In the dark,
a deeper shadow, some low fragment of landscape.

My Room

The rooms I've loved the most
lost their white perfection
before I came. The walls stand dull,
shadowed with cobwebs. Dun

brown carpet stinks of cats' urine.
The screens choke, clogged with lint,
their frames bent out by muscled storms
or weak thieves breaking in

to steal nothing. My room has not
held gold. It has only
lodged evicted tenants who paid
their rent infrequently.

I too have let my kitchen sink
fill up with dirty bowls.
I stood on the white john, slammed odd
doors, cracked the walls, drilled holes,

paid the price to the plasterers
when they mailed me the bills.

An untouched room, sterile, clean, would
haunt me--it is too still.

My room must, like a carven face,
bear scars of pain long past,
so I can add other wrinkles,
not watch my own trespass.

Two or Three Stones By the Road

A mosaic, a triangle set
into the gravel, like a thumb
pressed into concrete.

This flat space, hollowed
of its map, yet
keeps the potential of a womb.
Under the street

throbs an unshown
green stalk--a vegetable threat
to that peaceful, numb
body stretched in defeat

like a new-shadowed
Lucifer on the lake bed
with his brothers of doom.
A finger will pull its heat

up from the over-snowed
hard plates. Will melt and wet
the frozen shield and assume
its place in the pleated

sky. The edges will corrode
on the world's cement net.
The earth will turn to fuzzy loam,
with no place solid for leather feet.

As I Was Staring Out the Window

One wet day I climbed the steep mountainside
to walk among the slick rhododendron
and watch my feet press their indentations
into the dark graveled soil. I tried
to skirt the ledge, but my feet betrayed me by
narrowing the vertiginous margin
till I stood on the edge, wondered again
if the rocks would draw me down, stupefied,
or dare my chest to pound faster, wider,
make my lungs gulp mountain air, body fear
trees, fall on my knees, worship their native
entity. Were they reminding me there
are mountains towering, and I'm a mere
atom, a moth out from the cliff?

IV. LAND

and I thought about the dreams

trickling down the edges of the streets

mirroring the flights of pigeons

scattered concentrically about

the stone

creating

,by diversion,

a wider taste of sky.

The Malleable Stone

What god,
what striding juggernaut
paused for an instant,
sunk here into the giving rock
its sole?

Did he walk from mountaintop to mountaintop,
step on each
to bless his favorite sons?

Why did this thing of the sky
leave its eternal footprint
on the head of this cliff?

Where was it going?

I kneel in its insole,
kiss the mounds below,
the toes, their hollows.

When I look backward,
up, the white sky
leaves its imprint
in my back.

What creatures stand in Nepal's gardens

blazing
humming to the
rippling wind?
They stand
white black
with hard faces
stiff hands
their eyes
turned inward
mouths locked
they stand
among insect wings
purr
painless inert:
the mountains, water,
the wasps, droplets,
i am yes
terday,s

Eucharist

The dead enter, mill about and leave.
They float like invisible crystals of salt
suspended vertically
in the fluid plain--marchers without destination.
Their phalanx
buffets our eyes with unfelt blows,
sweeps with a rubbing hand
the sleep from our lashes.

Where has the hum gone?

New silence ascends
from the earth--
mist like the rising tide of ashes
over a waterfall.
Death's maw shatters the body,
sprays it like a scarlet fog
on the faces of the onlookers.

They roll their tongues in the sanguine tang,
lapping up the hot rivers that stream down the road.

The High Temple

I enter the field
 on the mountaintop.
 Pillars decorate,
 white and strong,
 bases wide, heads simple and heavy,
 rutted skins stained red from iron rain.
 They reach twice my height,
 almost touching the blown clouds--
 shelves for the sky waters to fall down.
 In that small round space,
 cold, smelling of copper and zinc,
 brave birds nest.
 A toucan mopes nearest,
 a peacock flaunts to the left,
 in the distance, a condor waits.

I walk among them,
 sit under the concrete pillar of a crow.
 The sky rushes over me like time passing,
 I think I can feel him kick,
 it's no myth this time.
 The clouds make me wish I had eighteen months to ready him.
 I am full with his weight,
 his body,
 his milk.

Her milk?
 No one has told me how to know.
 I weave through the pillars,
 my black clothes caught
 in the wind that whistles
 like the birds' unified voices
 about the colors of the grass and sky
 and black that crawls up the stone to meet iron red.
 The condor calls to me from its remote nest.
 I break from my winding path,
 stride toward its oak cylinder.
 This bird whose wings brush the horizon
 motions down to
 a mirror set, like a reflecting hand,
 into the maroon wood.

My face is freckled, tight, my eyes don't burn, don't pierce,
 just ask me questions,

ask for the time to look some more.
I pull off my shirt, push down my black skirt.
The mirror has expanded.
I can see my whole naked self, round and voracious.
My thin arms cradle my belly, distended,
my painful leaking breasts,
looking,
like my eyes, for the chances to make my child perfect.
If I could keep him just a few weeks more
maybe I could hold back the pecking of the birds.

If I bear him while I am here, I will give him to the condor.
He will grow straighter than pillars,
learn to bolt faster than swallows.
When he wanders the river of the sky,
he will fly higher than the washing clouds.

The Sunken Temple

If a man fell from the sky,
 how long
 would it take him to climb the nearest tree
 and jump back to the sky?

Would he break his ankles
 in the fall, set his own bones, jump again,
 feel stronger each time? Or would he cry
 in pain when he landed?

pull himself along on his elbows,
 scratch his belly on thorns, tufts of grass?
 Would his wandering blue eyes show
 a turtle's discipline
 in maneuvering small obstacles?

Would he crane his neck, eat berries, all prone?

Would he, more likely,
 wrap his arms around his chest,
 hold his guts from falling,
 cry dry tears? Would

he shiver so long he'd flatten the grass? Would he
 drown in that valley until the birds came--
 dissolve into the earth,

his eyes and hair, sky and trees,
 depart each to a different realm,
 over the hills, away
 from the carcass in the grass? If

he could only swim,
 legs meandering behind like billowing kelp,
 to the water,
 glimpse the mirror,
 see his distended face with downward eyes, he might climb
 and fall again.

When I fall from the sky,
 I fall into water.

When my eyes clear, bubbles rise away,
 I clamber down to the light below.

I find an angled temple,
 greek in symmetry, blackened with age,
 bowed like a plateau to fool the eye
 into thinking it's perfect.

I frog down among the pillars,
 roofless in their dim stance,

pull my face to one's gouged skin,
 feel its corroded salt chafe
 against my cheeks and palms, then
 hang suspended in the fluid plain,
 a halo unencumbered about my head.

But this is only one;
 many march without destination,
 people the strident walls of this silent cathedral,
 remind me of columns I lived among.

Some stand cracked, shot black with
 red veins, blurred in the shadowy water
 like cracks in the sidewalk beneath the soles
 of a thousand ghosts who traipse noisily about,
 gorging on the fat of my lips--the hungered
 whispers I mumble to remove the thorns in my palms.

In this sunken temple the pillars never fade,
they wink and hide behind brighter, stronger ones,
broken at the base like monuments ready
to topple when branches brush their hair.
I recognize the spotless pillars at the far end,
have played on them before,
swung my stiffening body in circles,
pulling against them.

None will fall:
 neither the shattered nor the bold.
All stand armed for inspection, say nothing,
 shift their heads slowly from side to side, as if
 waking from a nap. I want to remove these soldiers
from asphyxiating water,
 scoop out the silencing fluid in their mouths, caress
 their black, channelled skin. I want to touch them
in the open air,
 polish their shoulders for a place on my mantel.
My friends will say what an interesting ornament,
 how did you ever manage
 to escape its weight, cut it down?
I'll lie, say it was always on display, or in the attic.
But these monoliths are too heavy,
 they are fixed
 to the mosaic floor,
 to dancing water nymphs,

piping satyrs.

Let me go then, to lie on the picture

on the floor, face to the mottled sun.
 In repose,
 I know my breathing seems heavy,
 like a suppressed memory fighting fatigue
 to crack a mind's shell.
 The pillars rim the corners of my eyes,
 their sharp forms, gravestones of whitened age,
 dance twisting like Spring ghosts beckoning
 me to succumb to the water's weight,
 to drown,
 exhale all my strength,
 let them fall on my shrivelled body.
 I resist because I know the light
 still filters down from the surface.
 If I lie a certain way, the waves are a sunset, white with direction;
 another, they fall into dawn, blare red in my eyes.

 One day,
 when I want to leave this sunken temple,
 I will claw my fingers into the giving crystal of the strongest pillar,
 clench my knees to its rasping side,
 fumble up until I reach the surface's reflection.
 If I don't climb hard enough I may fall.
 I'll float like salt to the floor,
 unbroken.

Vertical Cage

The lobby was on the first floor, and Wall lived on the nineteenth.

Sometimes he could ride all by himself to his floor. This fortunate occurrence, as he saw it, depended almost entirely on the number of people waiting for the elevator in the lobby when he arrived. Most of the building's other residents lived on the lower floors. Most of the residents did not travel from floor to floor. Most elevator trips, if one considers it logically, proceed from the lobby to a particular floor and then from there back down to the lobby. All the service facilities, such as the laundry room and the gym, were located on the lobby's floor. Therefore, if Wall could only start his trip by himself then he could likely finish it alone because very few would embark on a mid-range floor to go up.

The red-lit button went dark and Wall knew that a lift would soon arrive. The bell chimed and Wall faced the yellow steel doors directly behind him. The doors opened and two very small men with dull red hair exited. They paused and stared at Wall's dirty feet, and walked out of the building.

Wall waited for them to pass and stepped into the dingy cage. He turned around to face forward, alone in the elevator, and smiled. He pressed the button for the top floor and held his hand on the "door close" switch. The doors clunked and began to close, the rubber section in the middle slightly out ahead of the outer shields. When they were only four inches apart a hand cut between them, followed by an arm. The doors lightly squeezed the arm, paused, and reopened for the intruder.

Wall removed his hand from the switch and drew himself back into the corner when Mr. Freem rushed with a sigh into the small space. Mr. Freem lived on the same floor as Wall. Mr. Freem rocked back and forth on his toes and heels with his hands in the front pockets of his faded jeans and stared Wall full in the face.

Mr. Freem was short and thin and maybe forty years old. His hair was close cut, almost shaven, and swept forward. His face, Wall had thought to himself in the past, looked much like a police drawing: blurred, distorted, indistinct around the eyes and nose and mouth. His eyes had no color, nor did his lips. His nose jutted off to his left side so that when one looked at his reflection in a mirror one could not right away recognize him. His short haircut allowed Wall to see the shape of his skull, undistinguished except that it did not conceal such bumps and ridges.

Wall looked back into the bland eyes of Mr. Freem and again pressed on the "door close" switch. Mr. Freem stopped rocking, withdrew his left hand from its pocket, and rubbed it over his stubbly head. He leaned past Wall and pressed the sixth floor button.

"So, Wall, how are you doing today?"

"Fine, Mr. Freem, and you?"

"Oh fine, fine, fine, fine."

The doors finally shuddered and then inched shut. Both Wall and Mr. Freem felt the slight tug of inertia as the lift began its ascent.

"Don't mind if we stop at the sixth floor, do you, Wall?"

"Not at all, Mr. Freem."

"Do you know my first name, Wall?"

"No."

"It's Su."

"Su? What's that mean?"

"It's a nickname."

"For what?"

"For Suture. Never heard that one before have you?"

"No. Your parents must have had quite a sense of humor."

"So must have yours, Wall. In fact, I think your name is stranger than mine, and that's saying quite a lot. Why do you think your parents named you that? Do you know, was it your mom or your dad?"

"I don't know."

"I'll bet it was your father. You know why? Because a mother is always over-concerned her son will not properly acclimate if he has a funny name. Fathers don't worry about it because they know that at some time in the boy's life he will look at his signature and be glad he can write Wall or Suture rather than Bob or John or Mike. We were quite lucky to have bold and adventurous fathers, wouldn't you say, Wall?"

"Whatever you say."

"You know the problem with you, Wall? You don't think enough. You know so much happens around us and in us and you don't seem to take much of any notice of how strange and coincidental life really is."

"You're starting to sound like the television."

"Do you know why I like to keep my hair this short, Wall?"

"Because you like how it looks?"

"Not at all. I did this to my head because it helps me see my bumps more clearly. Phrenology."

"You mean that the shape of your skull determines what kind of person you are and in what areas you're strong?"

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Freem, but that's ridiculous."

"Ah, you don't believe."

The elevator stopped and the bell rung on the sixth floor announcing that it had arrived. Mr. Freem turned from Wall to look out at the empty hallway when the doors opened. He watched for a moment and turned back to Wall.

"Aren't you going to get out," Wall asked as the doors hung open.

"No, I just wanted to stop here, I don't want to get out."

"Why?" The young man pressed the switch to close the doors.

Mr. Freem leaned over when the doors had shut and pressed the button for the ninth floor.

"Are you going to get out there?"

"Probably not."

"Then why did you push the button?"

"Like I told you, I just want to stop there, I don't want to get off."

Once again, the elevator shook as it started to climb higher in the shaft of the apartment building.

"But doesn't it make sense," Mr. Freem pressed, "that our brains control who we are and that our skulls are shaped to fit our brains? Then why shouldn't the shape of our skulls show us what we are truly like? The bumps on our heads don't determine who we are; but they are the indicators that we should pay more attention to."

"Really, Mr. Freem, that makes some sense, but--"

"How else are we to look clearly at our heads than to shave them for the best view? I did it because I could always feel the ridges on me but I could never actually look at them the way I think we need to do. I never really looked at the phrenology books. Have you read anything on it, Wall?"

"No. I never have. Why would I have?"

"Because it should interest you. You have bumps on your head just as I do. We might even have the same shapes, you never know. What do you think that would mean about us if we did?"

"That we think the same way?"

"Yes, exactly. How is your head shaped? Where are the bulges and where are the recesses?"

The bell for the ninth floor dinged and the doors opened to a blank hallway. Mr. Freem reached over and punched the button for the twelfth floor and continued talking while the door groaned and closed and the elevator continued.

"I can't see them because your hair is too long. Show them to me, will you?"

"Come on. Why bother with this? It seems to be a hobby of yours but I really don't care about phrenology."

"You damn well should, Wall. If you don't know the metal of which you are made then how can you rely upon your judgment in life or death situations? You've got to know yourself intimately before you can trust what you do. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, but aren't there other ways?"

"None that I know of that are as sure. You can't rely upon how you act in those high-adrenaline situations because they happen so seldom and there are always extenuating circumstances that affect your results. Phrenology does not require a test to work. The information is always there for you to examine. You say you've never felt your head to check out what it says? I'll bet it's just like mine. I have a prominent ridge across the middle from of my skull and two large swellings behind my ears."

"What does that mean?"

The elevator ground to a halt at the twelfth floor and Wall leaned on the switch as soon as the doors started to open. Mr. Freem pushed the orange button for the fourteenth floor.

"Mr. Freem, I would really like to get to my apartment and not have to spend the whole afternoon in the elevator."

"We'll get there, Wall. I don't want to rush--I want you to understand me." He continued as the doors began to shut, "I tried to decipher the books on phrenology but they were awfully confusing. My bumps seem to say, however, that my organs of intelligence and self-perception are very large--both of which I could have told you in the first place."

"How do you know all this? Didn't you say that you found the books too hard?"

"Not too hard, did I say too hard? I am a man who can look at himself and see what he is made of."

"Then why did you need phrenology to tell you that?"

"Because we all have potentials, Wall, but we just need a little motivation to see and use them. Feel your head and tell me what's there--what are your potentials, what are you like?"

Mr. Freem placed his fingertips on Wall's head and felt around as if he were massaging the man's scalp. The elevator stopped at the fourteenth floor and Mr. Freem freed one hand to press the orange oval for the sixteenth floor.

"Mr. Freem, I don't think this--"

"Keep still, Wall, I can't feel you very well if you squirm around." He ran his thin fingers through Wall's long thick dark hair: around the back of his skull and up along the sides and behind his ears and just above his hairline and back along the crest. "You have the remnants of a nubial crest, Wall. Do you know what that means?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Freem, but would you please let go of my head?"

"Sure. That crest comes from the jaw muscles that attach at the top of the skull shaping the bone. In other animals it means that they have a rough diet, but with humans I guess it means that you have the remnants of the primordial state of mind. Do you feel in the least primal?"

"Do you think I feel primal?"

Wall jammed his palm against the "door close" switch then the elevator slowed, but the machine still paused and opened as if to disgorge its contents. Mr. Freem reached past Wall and pushed the buttons for the seventeenth and eighteenth floors.

"Wall, we're close to figuring out who you are and I think that we need those couple more minutes before the top floor to finally decipher you."

"Thanks and all for trying, but I really don't care. I think you're just strange and what you're saying means a lot to you but it has no bearing on me. Do you understand? I just want to get to my apartment and relax or watch television or do something else besides be the model for your brand of phrenology."

"There it is, Wall, that instinct, that power, that voice you can express when you need it. See, I told you that you had the heart of the primal man."

"Would you please leave me alone?"

The seventeenth floor came and went.

"Why are you having such a problem with this, Wall?"

"Are you going to keep it up?"

"Don't you see that we now know each other? Imagine if we had not done it and did not now know to whom we were talking?"

"Mr. Freem, I don't want you telling me who you think I am. I don't need so badly to know what I will do in certain situations. I can wait and find out."

The eighteenth floor created no pause in Mr. Freem's thoughts. "How can you be so complacent? Do you really know who you are? I know my character from studying myself?"

"I don't care, Mr. Freem."

"You should, Wall, because there is nothing more important in life than understanding oneself. Do you believe that? Do you believe that I can ever know enough about myself that I will be satisfied and that I will know enough to rest assured of my character?"

The nineteenth floor arrived and Wall walked quickly out of the doors when they parted. Mr. Freem rushed after him, talking to his back while Wall strode to his apartment near the end of the hall.

"Wall, I want you to tell me--do you think my skull's construct really tells me who I am? Or do you think that I need to examine it more clearly? Sometimes I must admit I am not too sure about what it says. I don't know whether to believe its truth."

Wall reached his door, and was struggling to insert the key when Mr. Freem tackled him onto the thinly carpeted hallway, maneuvered on top, and pinned Wall's arms down with his knees. He placed his hands roughly on Wall's head and felt around, examining.

"Wall, what do you think of me? What kind of man am I?"

"I think you're insane. Let me up!"

"Wall, I know that what I say may sound far-fetched to someone like you who doesn't have the proper understanding. But, believe me, I've lived longer than you and I know what really happens in this world."

"You're hurting my head. Don't press down so hard."

"Just a moment's discomfort for the procedure."

"What procedure?"

"I'm going to give you a final diagnosis right here. I couldn't get a proper one before in that elevator."

"You already told me what I'm like."

"Yes. But, Wall, I think you have a rather dangerous propensity toward violence that you don't even know yourself."

Wall struggled to overturn Mr. Freem. "Get off me."

"See what I'm telling you?"

Wall toppled Mr. Freem and stood while the man was still kneeling off balance on the floor.

"Wall, you're just confirming what I've told you with this behavior."

Wall looked up and down the hallway. It was empty. "I don't need your damn diagnosis. I know perfectly well who I am and it's no fault of mine that you're confused." He kicked Mr. Freem in the stomach. The man shrugged down to the

floor on his side. Wall kicked him again, stood watching for a moment while Mr. Freem writhed in pain, then opened his door, entered, and shut it.

"Wall. You know," Mr. Freem croaked from his position on the floor.
"Sometimes when I look at the back of my head, I can't tell who I am."

While I Kiss the Sky

Lately, things, they don't seem the same.
Acting funny, but I don't know why,
'Scuse me, while I kiss the sky.

--Jimi Hendrix

The dead-flower odor of Sibilant's breath woke Wash. He wrinkled his nose at the smell that reminded him of the cemetery on a hot summer afternoon. Wash concentrated on the aroma and let it draw him into the black reality that surrounded him. His smell was the only sense awake.

He lay somewhere, he did not know where, floating as he often did when he could not remember where he was. He did not want to move. Why withdraw his body from the first complete peace it had had in days? The smell conjured up the tall grass around the brown tombstones and the fresh mounds of red clay. He used to play hide and seek with his sister and brother there when they were all little enough to hide behind the stone monuments. Wash's sister, Su, would gather the artificially vibrant bouquets from the new graves, separate out single blossoms, and place them on top of the squat gray stones near the road for passing motorists to see.

Whenever he was hiding from his brother--who was much better at hide and seek than he was--Wash would lay himself out behind a particularly wide marker--usually either a Breidenbaugh, a Clayton, or Ishmael Day's--and stare up at the rolling blue sky. He knew his brother would find him soon and he would grow excited when he heard his brother's bare feet swishing through the stiff grass. The grass thrived in the corner where Wash usually hid because the large walk-behind mower the old man used to cut the grave-dotted field could not weave well among the old tree stumps the Board of Trustees had never found the money to extract.

Wash heard Bord's footsteps slowing over by Ishmael Day's grave. He felt the long grass fondling his bare back like a brush and the cool the Breidenbaugh grave applied to his shoulder as he lay against it. He could hear Bord approaching the face of the stone. He knew that any second now his brother would jump over the obstacle and scream through his enormous horsy smile and tickle Wash until he died laughing. Through the gray marble Wash could sense Bord squatting and his heart raced. The coming mayhem excited him more than if his brother had come unexpected. His chest jumped with his heartbeats. He held his breath for the shock to come and stared at the billowing bright sky above his upturned, sweating face in the tangle of grass.

The clouds bulged and rumbled, coming in toward him like waves. He felt their shadows graze his scalp as his eyes turned up into his skull to watch the tide. Then he could see through the gliding waves of thick cotton clouds to fragile cirrus tatters beyond.

The grass surrounding Wash's head grew longer until it crept into the corners of his blazing vision. Trunks reached up past Wash's buried head, scratched his hot

skin. He pressed his ear to the cold stone and listened to the ocean and the gasping breath Border drew the instant before he jumped.

Wash felt a wooden match being struck on his arm. He opened his eyes at the pain and saw that Sibilant was stroking her index finger up and down his upper left arm. He was lying on his right side, face to face with her.

"Good morning," she said.

He turned on his back and rubbed his eyes with both hands. He remembered where he was and who she was. How could he forget? He opened one eye slowly on the creamy light of the motel room. Venetian blinds sprayed the morning sun on the wood walls in horizontal bars. Dust particles that had settled during the night puffed into the bright miasma when Wash kicked his feet free of the gold and brown flowered comforter. A large truck rolled by the shaded window on its way back to the highway, momentarily blocking the sharp sunlight that thickened the air.

Sibilant touched him on the shoulder and said, "I'm going to take a shower."

Wash looked over at the black hair that framed her dark brown eyes and bowlike mouth, and sat up. He felt the narrow bed shake as she also righted herself. Wash leaned over and kissed her warm shoulder. She stood from the bed and walked into the tiled bathroom. The door closed and latched with a hollow plywood clack. Wash looked across the shaggy rust carpet for his clothes. He spotted his pants inside-out on the chair by the window closest to the room's door. He retrieved them and sat down to draw each leg on. The cold, metal chairback burned his spine but he put up with it because leaning forward took too much effort: his back was sore from the cramped night on the narrow bed.

Wash heard the faucets whine through the bathroom door. The shower water started and he slid on the green t-shirt the blood-drive people had given him free last month. He pulled on gray socks and his almost treadless work boots. After grabbing his wallet from the end table he open the door and walked out into the day.

The sun was still low in the morning sky. Bands of brown rose above the pink desert hills in the distance. The wind gave him goose bumps as he walked across the gravel parking lot to the car.

"Damn," he said when he saw he had left the top down again. The dew had already dried because the leather seats of the old brown El Dorado were cold and smooth. He opened the trunk and sifted through the bundle of grass clippings and twigs he had there. He parted it to its center and looked in on the warm sleeping lump of brown mice who lived there. Several stirred when they felt the entering cold air before Wash shut the trunk.

"They're fine but Sidney's going to be angry, or just cold," Wash muttered as he opened the glove compartment. Sidney curled there motionless. "Sorry, Sid." He reached in with both hands and extracted the cold boa from its hideaway. Sidney had an inconsistent diamond pattern on his back and off-white ridges on his belly. He looked dead, but Wash knew that he was merely a reptile who needed to warm his blood. He placed the snake on the chair inside the door of the room and walked to the office.

The motel's manager had set up a small convenience store alongside his rooms. Wash and Sibilant had paid fourteen-fifty for the night--including free television.

"Hey there," said the short red-haired manager. "What can I get for you?"

Wash ran his fingers back through his long brown hair, scratched the base of his scalp, stretched. "I'd like some crackers--and do you have any danishes?"

"What kind would you like," he said, pointing to a large windowed counter.

"Give me one of those red ones and two of those apple ones."

When he returned to the room with a small paper bag he saw Sibilant standing on the other side of the room with her back toward him. For an instant, she seemed like another person. Her wet hair, darker than usual now, changed her appearance. He thought of no one in particular: she did not remind him of a past lover or acquaintance. He saw someone who, for a second, was new; he was happy for that moment. Then she turned around and smiled at him.

"You ready," he asked.

"Almost. What's the hurry?"

"We've got a lot of driving to reach your parents' today, and we don't have enough money for another night in a motel. That's not if we get some gas and we want to eat today. Here's some danishes. You want cherry or apple?"

"I don't care."

"I'll give you the cherry because I think the mice like apple better and I want apple too."

"Oh, Jesus," Sibilant said, noticing Sidney coiled on the chair by the door.

"What is he doing here?"

"He needed some warming up because I left the top down last night again."

"I told you I don't want him in the room. Think if he crawled on us when we were sleeping."

"It was just for this morning." Wash walked over to her and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Now you get ready while I give this and the crackers to the mice."

During the first hour of driving, Sidney lay across the dash beneath the windshield. Wash had put him there so that the hot sun coming through the glass would warm him up enough that he could move and catch some breakfast.

"There's one," Sibilant pointed to a darting brown ball that Wash caught in the rearview mirror.

"It's about time they're up. Those things have the easiest life of anything I know. I feed them pastries and crackers and whatever else I think of and they just burrow away in that hay with no worries."

"I'd rather be dead than hunted. Would you like all the food you could eat but on the condition that you'd be hunted?"

"I must admit, the car doesn't leave much room for escape from Sid," he ran his right hand along the smooth back of the snake while driving with his left. Sidney darted his tongue out and twisted his neck in Wash's direction.

"You ready for some food, boy?" Sidney crawled off the dash onto the front seat. He maneuvered to the floor and disappeared beneath the cushion on the passenger's side.

"You must have been a lonely little kid," Sibilant said and looked away to the passing pink hills, now orange-lit from a higher angle. Tall grass bordered the highway and billowed like tough, mutated grain when their car swept by. "Did your mother let you have snakes?"

"No," he said. "Besides, the little garter snakes back in Connecticut are no fun to play with. They're so small and harmless that I used to get bitten all the time and not feel it."

"But don't you have any poisonous snakes there?"

"Copperheads--but I've never seen one. They live too much in the woods." A mouse ran across Wash's lap and into the hole between the door and the driver's seat. "Look at the little guy run."

"Sadist."

"I am not. What I have is the perfect solution. The mice breed and live back in the trunk, but have the run of the whole car. Lord knows, I couldn't keep them just back there if I wanted to anyway. But to control them and keep the population down, I need Sidney to roam and devour. He only eats one a day. Actually sometimes less if I leave him out in the cold."

"You're cruel. Wouldn't it be better just not to have animals in the first place?"

"How am I cruel? You think they would live any better somewhere else? Would mice live better in a cage in a lab or some kid's bedroom? Would Sidney enjoy life more in an aquarium with pebbles and a little pool of water to climb over each day? I give them excitement."

"But they're not humans, maybe they don't want excitement."

"They should want it. If someone offered to put you in this situation, would you do it?"

"No."

"Neither would I, maybe. But I bet in the end I would be glad because someone had had the foresight to know that I would be bored with living everyday in stasis. These animals can never be bored. The mice know they must wake up and hide so the snake doesn't get them, and Sid knows he's got to hustle to catch his food. After one is caught, the others rest in peace knowing they're safe for another day. Sid sits back with his lump of mouse in his belly and sleeps with little snake dreams."

The highway rounded a soft bend and entered the flat expanse of the desert, leaving the pink hills behind. Wash pulled out his sunglasses from the trash can on the hump in the floor, put them on, and looked over at Sibilant. Her jacket hung just off her shoulders, showing her red t-shirt underneath. She stared forward at the flat, straight road.

"Sib."

A moment passed before she answered, "Yes?"

"You want your sunglasses?"

"Yes." She took them from his hand and shoved them on her face.

"You thinking maybe we shouldn't be doing this?"

"Of course. But I don't see any other way we can do it. We need the money bad enough, don't we?"

"We sure do." He examined her body entwined in its seatbelt. "How do you feel today?"

"Okay. I wonder what they'll say about that."

"You don't have to tell them."

"I know." She looked down into her lap and tightened her lips. "It's not that easy."

"Feel it first. Feel all you can. Find what you really think and center it and feel it until you can't feel anymore and then tell me what you think."

She caressed his far cheek with her right hand and squinted confusion at him. She withdrew her hand and pushed back her hair.

"Here," he said. "I'll do it with you. I want to know what I think too."

"Be careful of the road."

"I will. Let's find an answer. We've still got choices."

They were both silent as they sped through the flat desert now bright with the sun. The passing plants had no shadows and the birds of prey in the sky sailed in motionless circles. Wash had both hands on the wheel.

Except for the pressure of his hands, he found it difficult to tell just by touch where he was. After several minutes, his foot had melted into the gas pedal and his body into the seat. They were driving straight down the uncurving road into the flat distance.

"Wash, Jesus, watch out."

"What," he mumbled, half dazed. "Oh," he felt it and looked down. Sidney was crawling around his right leg in pursuit of two mice.

"Pull over, I'll get them off."

"No, that's alright, I can get him. Come on, Sid, what are you doing?"

A mouse darted into the seat between Wash's legs and the snake followed. Wash jumped up off the seat instinctively. His new position forced his foot forward into the accelerator and the car gunned down the highway faster and faster. Two more mice appeared, scurried up his shirt, the snake followed, climbing up Wash's chest.

Wash reached for the animals with both hands and the car swerved off the road. He tried to regain control but the El Dorado was already running on sandy dirt. Wash pushed his foot around the pedals frantically, hoping to feel the brake. He found it and stomped on it.

The car plowed up dirt into billowing clouds and hit a low rise that sent Wash's head into the windshield. They lurched to a stop and the radio popped on. The engine was still running when Wash pulled his face away from the steering wheel where it had fallen. He looked over at Sibilant and saw that she had been wearing her seatbelt and was unhurt.

"Jesus," she swore as she pushed her head back on the headrest. "Look at your face, Wash. Are you okay?"

"Sure, I feel okay. What's this?"

"It's Sid."

"Oh God." The accident had crushed the snake between the steering wheel and Wash's chest. Sidney's cylindrical shape was flattened out in two places where it had contacted the top and bottom of the wheel. Wash daintily lifted the snake's body and tossed it over the side of the car. He opened the door and fell on the ground. He sat up, tugged off his t-shirt and flung it on the nearby sand. Leaning on the car for support, he stood.

"Pop the trunk, will you?"

Sibilant reached into the glove compartment and pushed the yellow button. The trunk lid jumped open and Wash went around to the back. "Here you go little guys. Sorry, no more eco-system," he said and lifted the bundle of grass and sticks and put it on the ground. Mice ran out of the nest and scattered among the small plants.

"What is that playing on the radio?" Wash closed the trunk and wiped the blood from his face. "I think you'd better drive. Can you see past the shattered part? I didn't mean to do that to the windshield." He looked over at his discarded shirt.

"I hope the car still works right." Sibilant undid her seatbelt, walked around to the back and put her arm around Wash.

Wash withdrew himself and sat in the passenger's seat. "I don't feel much like driving."

"I can see fine around the place where your face hit. Here, wipe your head again with this." She pulled a rag from beneath the seat and placed it on his forehead. "Just sit back and we'll be going."

Sibilant wrenched the car into reverse and pressed the accelerator. The vehicle groaned and pulled back. The fenders were free of the tires and did not rub. She slammed it into drive and drove to the highway. The road was empty and the sun was high in the sky. She steered it over the shoulder and out on the pavement again.

"I think you should keep talking, Wash. Tell me about snakes back in Connecticut."

"I don't want to talk about snakes."

"Tell me about something else. Tell me about your brother."

"Border. In the cemetery?"

"I don't know. Yes."

"Look at the clouds. They're moving."

"That's just because we're moving."

"No. The other way I mean."

He listened to the droning waves of the radio and stared at the sun. The clouds raced across the sky and shadows lengthened from the few brown plants beneath.

Wash closed his eyes and sunk down into the seat. The music formed a pinpoint light in the neon blackness of the backs of his eyelids, bobbed in rhythm. He saw the strong bouncing light etch its way across his eyes and he could no longer feel his body.

A small rustling approached his ear and he turned his face to meet it. He felt a tickling of whiskers. A tiny, cold wet nose blotted his hot ear.

When he opened his eyes again, trees towered over his head into the flaring, greedy sun, the air swam like honey in his eyes, and he could not feel Sibilant when he thought he reached for her.

The Chympe's Tale

I love more than anything sitting in the rain. But today this man interrupts my daydreaming. He squats on the cliff edge only a few feet from my tree perch. I usually lie face-down on my tree that sticks out from the rock wall that stretches a thousand feet below. I nap that way because the height gives me happy dreams, reminds me of some lost belonging deep within.

What possible reason can this man have for being here? I have not seen men around this high mesa for years. It is strange to see one after such an absence. His lack of motion is stranger still. He is just crouching in the rain with the water running down from his stubbled head, dripping from his eyebrows, flowing from his gaping grey eyes, washing over his bare chest, soaking his pants. He was not here when I first went to sleep for my nap. The rain must have kept me from hearing him, and when I awoke, he was here, and has remained unaltered but for an occasional blink of his eyes.

I look at him for some time. I cannot say that he has a certain look about him, but I believe that this kind of behavior is rather odd for men. I do not think that he sees me, or that he cares. But how could he find his way to this place, and position himself so close to me and not bother me. I will try to find out his intentions, for he must have them--all men do.

I scream at him, just a little one, I do not want to scare him. He does not respond, so I climb in from my little horizontal tree and scale the top of the stone where he sits. The patterns of his grey eyes are still, without motion. His body is the same. I put out my hand in front of his eyes but he does not seem to see it. I maneuver around to his front and sit in the narrow space between him and the cliff. This way I can look straight into his face and not miss anything he does. Will he push me out of his way, will he mistake my broad grinning for the reaction of a half-wit and just shun me? Will he reply in a kind voice that he is sorry for disturbing my slumber and leave?

I venture a one-fingered touch of his cheek. He does nothing. I push my whole hand over the stubby curve of his scalp. He still stares forward past my squinting eyes and out into the thick atmosphere of the balanced grey and green of the earth and sky. I place a hand on either side of his face and bring my nose on a level with his. His eyes shift to meet mine, and hold for several moments. Excited at having made contact, I scream into his face. He springs up quickly with a growl. I jump backward confused and luckily grab hold of a branch of my sleeping tree with one hand and a foot. He runs off, where I cannot see him.

No words have as yet come from his mouth. I do not know whether or not he can speak, or if he just chooses not to. I try to return to my slumber on my clawed looking tree. I wonder what this man is? What has he lived? When has he run and why is he now alone? When I sleep I can always see the truth about those around me.

The sky was blue the day we married. The ceremony was slow in the small presbyterian church near her parents' home. She was so beautiful in her gown that I

could not believe I was going to marry this wonderful creature. People have told me since that this is a common feeling among grooms on their wedding days. I don't know if brides feel it or not--it's one of those things that you don't ask your new spouse on the honeymoon. At least I didn't because I didn't think about it after the wedding and reception and the flight and all. The reception was outside--so when I tell you that the sky was blue you know that I'm not just trying to embellish a commonplace story. Maybe each person's life seems special to him, as I guess it should be because he is the only one who has lived it.

I shared my life gladly with her. I have thought often of the sound of that name, but all names sound foreign if you dwell on them too long. In fact, I will have to stop thinking of this so that I can tell you my story without getting caught up in the sound of the words and thus losing all their meaning. In that last sentence I used the phrase "my story." I hate the way that sounds, thus you might as well forget that I ever said it. But I promise you that my story won't bore you.

The reception was outside in the meadow behind her house. The air smelled of the fresh blossoms of all the dwarf fruit trees that her father tended. That spring, the wedding was in mid-May, seemed forever slow in coming. Winter had seemed to stand fast in its footprints and refused to allow spring to break its warlock facade. The fruit trees that bloomed with olfactory brilliance on our wedding day were the same ones that I had helped her father prune in the late winter. Their transformation into halos of pastel, which I had not seen since those cold pruning days, caught me right in the chest. I don't know if it was all the pollen in the air or excitement, but I had difficulty in breathing when we arrived at the gorgeously decorated reception meadow. I would call it a field, which is what it resembled during any other season, but the nostalgic memory of my perception at that time cannot allow me to simply refer to it by its proper name when so much of my love and life was consummated there. Maybe I sound melodramatic to you, but I'm sure that you also have those lingering hazy days when time stood still and each moment was a fine jewel.

Part of me couldn't breathe because of her. She had looked like a dove in a stained glass window in her wedding gown when we were in the church but, out here in the transient, swirling vapors of her lovely meadow, she was a free spirit, an angel who had descended to my side to bless me. I can't say that the features of her body had changed any from the time we had been dating, but today, I mean that day, she was woman incarnate and her red hair flew as she danced with her brother in the loose ring of a pagan celebration of spring. She was a small girl. Is a small girl, I mean. Her long strawberry blonde hair always fell languidly about her shoulders. I used to love to caress her bare shoulders and play with her beautifully smooth neck when we swam in the secluded pond further out on her parents' property. She was petite. She was thin and beautifully crafted with small breasts that fit her lithe body perfectly. Her legs were powerful and smooth but not overly muscular. She would ride her bicycle quite often and I know that this helped to keep her in good physical shape. She was small and strong and sexy and intelligent too. Though she exercised quite often, she did not look like a "butch." You know the girls I'm talking about when I say that. She did not look athletic; she would never be a girl's gym teacher.

She was active only to keep herself in shape. When I was feeling arrogant I believed she did it for me. But I realized that people don't really improve themselves for others but for themselves. Anyway, she was beautiful. She had, has, I guess, large blue eyes that never hid a grain of truth from my questions. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a jealous kind of person. What I always liked about her was the fact that I would never feel that she was lying to me. If she didn't want to tell me something, she told me that she didn't want to tell me. She would never play those little blush and eye-contact games that lovers always seem to play in the movies. She was straightforward.

She was also unafraid of being who she was. She knew I found her beautiful and she did not hide that she knew it. She could tell when I was looking at her lustfully and she would, not show off like so many other women do when they know you are watching them, come over to me and kiss me with all the poise that I felt I didn't have. I guess in some ways I felt inferior to her. I don't know if that is natural or not when it comes to matters of love because no one ever really instructed me on those things. I wonder if anyone has ever really successfully taught anyone about those mysterious rites. I can't truthfully say that my feeling of inferiority led to the problems we later had, or that she later had and I later had since they weren't about us as a couple at all.

When I saw her dancing and laughing at the reception it affected me more than seeing some other girl do the same, not just because I was now married to her and she was the girl I loved, but because I knew that she was mature and sincere and not just dancing wildly with laughter like a college girl drunk at some frat party. She showed the whole world that she was happier than she had ever been because she was now my wife, and that that day was a day of celebration. Her happiness legitimized the ceremony. If I had been happy only, or only I visibly so, then the event would have remained in my mind and not gone out into the spring world to paint the blue sky bluer and the sunlight more golden. I saw her start to sweat from the vigorous dance and I rushed out to her and grabbed her and kissed her among all her family and they cheered for us.

I actually can't remember all of that day. It's funny how such vivid memories end up fuzzy. The less sharp they become the more precious they become because they always hark back to the time when the world was so golden with the bliss of life that the mind could not take it all in. Whereas today the world looks dark and rainy. Not that I don't like rain, but I prefer to live in the spring of my mind, and dance forever with the golden-haired girl with the bright eyes.

I wake sad. Is this the life of the man in the forest? I remove myself from the haven of my tree, tearing my eyes away from the intoxicating jungle below. The birds have just started to emerge from the still damp leaves, and they are making the their usual racket which has served to awaken me.

I cannot see any sign of the man. This hill where I live, however, is a large one, and I am sure he will not find it difficult to hide from me temporarily if he so wishes. I do not know why he would wish to conceal himself unless he simply does

not want my company or, most likely, he wants to be alone. I have often seen men in the past who would sit for hours on end and do nothing but murmur into the air. I do not understand this behavior when there is not rain. At least this man was like stone in the rain. He seems to display some sense.

The cliff from which my tree grows is not the highest point on this hill, but it is the place with the most impressive drop and view as well. Would the man wish to reach the highest point and brood there? I have often observed that men seem always to want the best or most of everything. Though this point is far better for sleeping, he may have chosen to occupy the highest part of the land for his broodings.

I walk toward the hill with no particular haste. Nothing presses me at this moment. I do not believe one man sees me as a threat. I will act like another man who simply wishes to talk to him about some social matter. He cannot refuse me that even if I cannot speak as he does. I will do my best to make him understand.

As I near the minor summit, I can see his squatting form on the highest of the upturned boulders. He has chosen the ultimate position just as I thought he would, according to his kind. He sits just as before, immobile and staring. His blue eyes do not shift toward me when I climb up next to him though he surely must be able to hear me. I sit before him among the tall trees that block the view from this vertical rock. Shadows fall across his thin face and cause the leaves to look like a rustling of birds in his staring blue eyes. The weaving pattern there reminds me of the swirling leaf patterns on the black surface of the tarn from which I often drink.

I do not scream this time, but simply reach out a bent finger and touch his cheek where it is red from the cold. His eyes dart to me, "You again." I scream in assent and he removes my finger from his face. "What do you want from me? Are you just going to sit there and make faces or what?" He looks up at the straight trunks of the deciduous trees overhead. "Why am I even talking to you? You can't understand me." Here he pushes me so violently that I begin to fall off the rock. Quickly I turn around and leap to the nearest tree to catch myself. Holding on with hands and feet, I turn around to look and scream at him.

"You are funny," he says with a slight smile. I do not understand his smile. Usually, when men smile, they mean something is funny. He also said this, but I do not know whether to believe him because he jumps down from the rock on the other side and runs downhill into the denser forest.

I climb down to the ground and sit on a rock to think. I thought that I understood the behavior of men. I had long experience with them when I was younger, but maybe they have changed considerably. Maybe this man is abnormal. If so, then I should definitely try to decipher his behavior because if I can comprehend the oddities of men, then maybe I can better understand the normality of men. His behavior has confused me.

I leave the rock and walk down to the cliff and my tree. I lie face down on the tree's rough branches and wait for the faraway view of the lower forest to mold my mind so that the answers I want arrive before the unknown questions I should ask.

After the beautiful sun-filled honeymoon in the Bahamas, we settled down so to speak in a small house that some friends of my parents' had found for us. Luckily we didn't live near either of our parents because I have heard that such an arrangement can cause marital problems. We never had any of the usual marital problems. We didn't argue about having children: neither of us wanted any. We didn't argue about money because both of our jobs paid well enough to supply us with our needs and some luxuries. Nor did we ever have disagreements about the decoration of the inside of the house. We sat down and thought about what would look best and then we did it together.

She was still as beautiful as she ever could be. Some people seem to fatten up when they get married, I think, because they let their personal requirements go and think only that they should play the cute little roles of husband and wife. She and I did not do that and I think that was a good idea. She still exercised and she still looked more like a dove or an angel than a wife. We acted like we were still dating and things fell together the right way because we were relaxed about it and did not try to force perfect married bliss. We really were the happiest people I can describe on the planet.

One thing we always enjoyed was taking showers together. I don't know why I liked it so much, but I think maybe I liked it for the same reasons that my heart had pounded so hard when I had seen her dancing with bright eyes and skin at the reception. By being there with me she legitimized my desire for her. She was saying to me, in her often withdrawn but always true way, that she wanted me as much as I wanted her. I find the hardest thing about loving someone is taking in the fact that she also loves you in the same way and degree. When I finally grasped that at the reception it excited and scared me at the same time. I loved the thrill long ago and I loved it when we were married too. I loved this girl who, with all her remarkable peculiarity and beauty and bright blue eyes, loved me so much that she would take a lovely hot shower with me and then lie with me the whole night and kiss me in the darkness if I awoke.

The shower was the first thing that caught my attention. Or should I say that the idea of a shower, or bath, or even simply a washing of the hands made me stop and notice. Don't get me wrong--I don't mean "washing of hands" in any kind of Pontius Pilate symbolic sense. Let me explain. Whenever she returned from exercise, which was several times a week, she would, naturally, take a shower. And sometimes if we had gone jogging or hiking together we would then also take a shower together. I have already said that I enjoyed this very much, and that had not changed. I found that she started taking showers in the mornings. This in itself was not strange, because I took them in the morning myself not only because I was too lazy to take them at night but also because I needed that warm feeling of the hot water to motivate me for the workday ahead. On the weekends, however, I sometimes did not shower at all if I knew I would only be watching television or doing something equally as un strenuous. She started taking showers even those mornings that followed evenings of exercise. That is, she could not possibly have

gotten dirty enough during the hours of sleep to warrant taking another shower. I asked her about this.

"After I run I feel all sweaty and I want to take a shower. What is wrong with that," was her reply.

"But then you took one this morning also. You couldn't have gotten that dirty. This is not the first time anyway--it has happened before."

"When?"

"I'm not going to go into it right now, but it just seems a little strange to me. Why is it necessary? This is not because I worry about the cost of the water. You know that such expenses don't concern me."

"Since you ask, I'll tell you. We have sex every night--wonderful sex. Well, sometimes in the mornings after our wonderful sex I just do not feel that clean." Seeing that this hurt my feelings she hurried to explain. "It is nothing to do with you. It's not being with you that makes me feel dirty. On the contrary, being with you in bed is the most precious experience I could ever imagine. I think what bothers me is all the fluid that passes between us and then dries on the sheets and all over each of us. I don't feel clean when I wake up after sleeping in such an environment. Do you understand me?"

I did somewhat. Males, I think, however, seem to cherish the smell of last night's sex in the way they value a battle scar or some other trophy of a conquest. I felt this way often. I don't think that I treated her as a relic or something to be hallowed or gained, but nonetheless I loved to think of the previous night. I used to look back on our activities with a certain fondness but not an onanistic relish. I was different, I believe, from most men in the consideration of their women. I didn't consider her my wife and therefore property--to the contrary: I didn't consider her my property at all. I still saw her as the angel who had graciously allowed me to share her life and who loved me as much as I loved her.

Anyway, I did not love her any less because she wanted to wash off my sex in the morning. In fact, her act didn't in the least hurt my pride the way it might have many men. I also knew that she did not love me any less than the day we married just because she wanted to be clean when she went to work. When I had asked her why, as I previously recorded, she was still able to look me in the eye. I knew that she was telling the truth and I had no reason to doubt anything she said. I would not have anything to doubt her about until later.

"Yes, I understand you. I'm glad you explained it to me. I guess sex must feel quite different for men than it does for women since women have something put inside of them."

"You don't feel dirty in any way after sex? I don't mean dirty in a moral sense, but dirty as in unclean."

"I guess, somewhat. But I like thinking about it too much to worry about it."

"You must be the horniest guy on earth. But that's all right--I married you."

"You sure did. Thank you." Then I grabbed her there on the couch where we had been sitting after each coming home from work and we made love, or I mean we had rather tumultuous sex then took a long hot shower together.

I wake briefly only to see the man bent over my sleeping tree. The sky is beginning to grow dark and rain is starting to fall. This is my favorite time of day. Rain during the morning or while the sun is still high in the sky is depressing though I can still enjoy its gentle rhythms. The slight drizzle seems to place a nimbus around the man's head and I look up and scream in excitement at the illusion.

"Jesus Christ," the man swears and retreats back into the half sleepy world of my meditating mind. I sink again into my ponderings.

"Why did you cut your hair," I asked when she walked into the house later than usual.

"Because I was getting tired of it. What you are supposed to say is how wonderful it looks and that you really love it."

"I do love it. It looks great on you--anything looks great on you."

"No. You're avoiding the issue. Do you like my hair or not like this?"

"I loved your long hair. I don't mind that you cut it--it's your hair after all, but I sort of wish you hadn't cut it all off like that. But don't worry, I'll get used to it." I could see she was about to cry so I quickly went and hugged her and told her how beautiful she was and how her hair looked wonderful.

"With summer coming on," she explained, "I didn't want to have to bother with washing it everyday. When it's long I can't keep it clean enough. This way, I will only have to wash it once a day to keep it clean and it won't be that much of a hassle."

These words stunned me. Did she chop off her beautiful hair only so that she could keep it cleaner? My beautiful dove who had grown up in the country, with whom I had skinny-dipped in her pond, was she afraid of a bit of soil? I thought I was rapidly jumping to conclusions. I dismissed the idea that she was becoming preoccupied with cleanliness and put all my energies into consoling her.

For reasons I have never understood, women always cry after they get their hair cut. Even if they are thrilled with the cut, they seem to regret the loss of their feminine symbol: flowing, waving, flashing in the sunshine when they dance a pagan dance long hair. I must admit, I have always had a penchant for long hair. That is not to say that I have not at times been attracted to girls with short hair, but that I usually prefer the other. But I can sympathize with their melancholy or nostalgia or whatever you call it at the passing of their hair. I have tried to grow my hair out from time to time, but the results have never satisfied me. I have seen many men on whom long hair is a true adornment. I look at them and I think that I could also look that good if I were to let it grow out to a certain length and then cut and style it so that it would best accentuate my features. Somewhere in the middle of this, however, I always see a guy who has hair very similar to mine in both color and texture, and I notice how really stupid his hair looks. Back to the point--I too have felt a certain longing for the return of my snipped locks on those occasions.

That summer, she stopped exercising. I cannot say that she stopped suddenly and threw away all her running shoes and shorts, but I noticed that she grew more

and more sluggish. I think that I noticed specifically because I preferred to exercise during the hottest months because I hated cold weather. She had had no aversion to either temperature and had gone out to keep herself in shape at all times of the year. She had been much more conscientious about it than me up until that summer.

I didn't want to ask her outright why she had stopped her usual routine because I was afraid that she would become defensive. Though she had responded to my questions about the showers and her hair with clarity and no apparent evasion, I sensed that this occasion would be different because exercise had always seemed an integral part of her life. She had seemed to draw from it a certain pride that she could maintain her good physical shape while the rest of the women of the country were turning into flab. She had been condescending of the general aerobics programs that went on throughout the whole damn country because she thought that each person should be able to control his own body without the help of others. This was one point we had shared and that was why we both enjoyed watching track and field as opposed to watching football or baseball. The Olympian sport was much older than the others and it pitted the individual against another individual. We believed that only when a person strived singularly against the rest of the world could he achieve a worthy goal. I don't mean to preach, but you must understand that at this point I didn't think she any longer believed this. I could not keep my curiosity to myself for very long. She spent much of her time watching television even though it was apparent the program didn't interest her. After entering the house after a good run one evening, I sat down on the rug in front of the sofa, blocking her view.

"You should have come with me. I ran the fastest time yet this summer."

"That's nice."

"Let's go tomorrow after work. Wait for me when you get off and we will go together. Don't worry, I will take it easy on you. Just kidding!"

She didn't take it as a joke. She also didn't take it as an insult. She murmured that she did not want to go running anymore and would rather stay in the house tomorrow evening.

"But why?"

"I don't feel like going out and getting myself all sweaty for the sake of nothing."

"I thought you loved exercise."

"I do, but I don't feel like doing it now. Can you let me have a moment's peace about it?"

This was the first time that I ever saw a blush come to her face when she was talking to me. She was hiding something. Or maybe not hiding something, but embarrassed about something. I became angry at her for shattering the perfect faith I had had in her. Why did she choose to change from what she was? Did she have no control over it? "This is the first time I've mentioned it to you. So don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying to you. I am telling you the truth: I don't want to go running with you. But not because it's with you. I do not want to go running because I do not want to go running with anyone. I am tired of exercising--it makes me all dirty and sweaty and afterward I have to shower. If you want to exercise, then I won't

stop you. I'm sorry if you are disappointed by my lack of your enthusiasm. I just don't want to do it anymore."

From this little speech I learned much. She had mentioned the word "dirty" again--that she did or did not do something because it made her feel dirty. Also she had said that she did not want to do it "anymore." Was that a definite? Was she acknowledging that she had once valued those things, she could not deny it I am sure, but no longer did? "Why," was all I could say because I could not see a reason for the change.

She looked closely into my eyes and made a motion to touch my face. But she retracted her caressing palm before it contacted my sweaty cheek. "I would kiss you but you are still sweaty from your run."

I felt another blast of anger. "What the hell is wrong with you. First you take showers after sex, then you cut your hair so you can keep it cleaner, and now you refuse to exercise anymore because you don't want to get yourself dirty."

"Why are you attacking me?"

"Because--," I had opened my mouth to pronounce the questions or judgements or whatever they were that I had just thought out. I did not have the heart to pour my invective onto my beloved. At that moment I could no longer see her as my wedding dove or the angel of our reception. I don't think it was because she looked different, though, as much as I thought some fundamental change had taken place in her. I did not want to believe that any force could change my beloved strong, sexy wife.

I leaned back on the floor and relaxed the muscles I had tensed during the little fray. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to attack you. I guess I was feeling a bit hurt when you would not run with me. I'm going to take a shower now."

"I'll join you."

I smiled at this because we had not had the chance to share a shower for a week or so. I let my apprehensions dissolve in the anticipation of the forthcoming bathing ceremony. I went into our bedroom and removed all my clothes. When I entered the bathroom she was just stepping out of her robe. Simultaneously I noticed three significant things: she had been wearing a robe while watching television, the shower stall was wet though neither one of us had yet turned it on, and she looked more beautiful than ever stepping out of her robe--not unlike Venus at her sea-shell birth. She had recently taken a shower. I was sure that this was correct but not sure about its meaning. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt and not ascribe this second shower to an overwhelming need for cleanliness but with a desire to please me. She knew I loved sharing showers and thus, I thought, she did it for me so that I would be happy.

I must say that through this all I never doubted that she loved me. Even when, after having had explosive--what an understatement--sex that night, she awoke and showered, I did not condemn my beautifully sparkling clean girl. When I came home that day, she was sitting on the couch in her robe.

I awake in darkness. Though it began raining just before the sun set, I can now see the stars. I have never understood how the sky seems to sometimes miraculously clear up during the sunless hours. A small fire up on the summit draws my eyes to that place. The man must be up there. He must be rather clever if he is able to light a fire after it rained earlier today. I do not know how to make fire. Many times have I come upon it burning in the forest and felt its heat, but its secret eludes me.

I walk up to the fire and find the man squatting facing away from it. I circle him and look into his eyes. They are wide open and facing the darkness. I cannot decide whether this is his permanent position or whether he is just trying to warm his back. I do not know men well enough to decide so I put forth my hands to feel the warmth of the flames. I learned years ago not to touch them and am thus very careful not to place my limbs too close.

"So you're back, huh," the man says over his shoulder. I look at him but his face is still turned toward the darkness.

Since my screaming has only made him angry in the past, I say nothing. I move from a squat to sitting on my rump so that I can place my feet also before the fire. I should probably learn how to make this thing because it interests me. I wish I could ask the man, but I know he will not understand me. I will have to watch him prepare it some time. Tomorrow night I will have to try to stay awake during the first dark hours.

The man swivels on his buttocks then lies on his side facing the fire. He curls his legs up into a crouching position and crosses his arms over his chest. His eyes still remain open, however, as if he is searching for something in the ever-changing flames of the small blaze. I follow his example and find the position not all that comfortable. I try to meditate, however, because I think that perhaps the man is lying this way not for comfort but to establish a better mood in which to think.

I can't remember when we stopped having sex. You can believe me that the choice to stop wasn't mine. And yet I can't really say that it was hers either. Somewhere we just stopped. I think I didn't fight it because she started always to take showers directly following the act rather than waiting for morning or later if we did it during the day. Though I was afraid to think it, I decided that she let us stop because she felt physically dirty both during and after the event. She must have become so preoccupied with her cleanliness that she sacrificed even her sexual pleasure.

I guess I for that matter also sacrificed mine. I did not cheat on her with other women as some men might have.

I still continued to exercise as she spent more time on the couch and grew fat. Actually I can't say that she grew fat all of the sudden, nor can I rightly say that she became obese overnight. I think that some people can never truly be obese simply because their body types will not allow it. But she started to lose that wonderful form of her angelic body. Weight grew on her hips and thighs and back and arms and belly and face.

I noticed specifically her weight gain and something else frightening one early winter evening when I had returned from a run. She was sitting on the couch again, this time reading a book. I sat down beside her and just looked at her concentrating face for a long time. Her chin was no longer as firm as it had been. I could see a still small second chin starting to protrude from her neck. Her eyes looked bit smaller than they had because her cheeks had grown fatter and taken up more space. My eyes wandered down to the book's cover and that's when I noticed that her hands were bleeding.

"What happened to your hands," I asked grabbing them.

"Nothing. The winter air dries them out when I wash them too much."

"Why do you wash them too much, they don't look dirty to me."

"Well they were dirty. And they will be after I get done reading this book. The ink always comes off on my fingers in a bad way that I have to clean off."

I looked at her fingers and noticed no ink smudged on them. "But your hands are clean."

"No they're not. Can't you see how filthy they've become from just these few pages. I think next time that I will have to wear gloves to read these paperback books."

Her problem was obviously worse than I had thought because she then told me she had quit her job because her workplace could not be kept clean enough to suit her. She said it almost with a hint of fear in her voice as if she were afraid of what an unclean place would do to her.

I was ready to explode. Not only had she ruined our marriage with her stupid obsessive cleanliness, but she now had just cut out family income in half. I could not stand to even look at the fat silly woman so I stormed outside. I exited into the backyard and sat down next to our small garden. I could not think straight. This formerly lovely woman who I had loved so dearly and who I had considered my dove and angel had turned into nothing more than a fat bundle of fear. She was afraid to do anything for fear that she would get "dirty." I felt like killing her for ruining my life, for destroying the best immortal parts of my mind. She had destroyed all that was good and sweet and wild in our marriage. We no longer had sex, we no longer did anything together, we no longer even talked because though I think she still loved me in much the same way that she had, I hated her. I hated her for what she had let herself become. I hated her for no longer being my angel with bright eyes and bright skin. I hated her for withdrawing from the outside world. I hated her because she had lost the individual battle against the world. I felt that she had not only lost it but she had never even tried to fight.

I hated her because, as I ground my fingers into the moist dirt of the garden, she scolded out of the screen door that I had better be careful because the soil contained all kinds of harmful germs. I purposely picked up a handful of dark soil and examined it close to my face. I heard the back door shut as she returned inside, unable to watch me place myself close to the filthy substance.

An idea flashed through my mind. I wanted to kill her for stealing the beauty from my life. But I do not have the heart or the desire for murder. Somewhere

maybe I felt some sort of pity for her, but I laughed at her. My body convulsed there beside the garden when I thought of the perfect torture for this silly cow who now occupied my house. Not only did she occupy the house, but she refused to leave it. I had not seen her outside of the house since she had quit her job. The bitch had ruined my life for her petty fears. That woman, I can barely restrain myself from calling her a cunt, would succumb to her worst fears. I did not know when I would do it, but I knew I would do it.

The next evening I came home from work and changed clothes to go out running. She was talking on the telephone to a company about cleaning products and how the ones she used did not clean well enough that she felt clean after using them. She held on to the phone daintily with white gloves on her hands. She kept the receiver away from her mouth as she talked.

I ran angry. I hated her every step of the way for her fears and how they truncated my life. I ran the last hundred yards to our house and bolted in the front door. She looked up in surprise from her usual place on the couch. She spoke something soothing to me but I did not hear it because I stripped off all of my clothes right there in the living room. I ran out the back door naked and darted to the garden. I heard her call to me from the back door and I smiled because the whole thing would be easy to do. I grabbed globs of wet soil and I rubbed them all over my body. I kneaded the mud into my hair, all over my face, buttocks, penis. I broke off branches of the rose bushes and ran their thorned sticks across my chest and loins so that I bled from numerous lacerations.

I turned around to see a look of fear race into her eyes. She stood rigid just inside the door, unable to control the fear she felt not only at what I was doing but also because she feared what I was about to do. I ran to her and ripped off her robe. I pushed her back into the kitchen and slammed the door behind me. She had already begun to cry when I forced her onto her back on the floor. I dropped on top of her and pried apart her fat thighs so I could enter with my mud caked penis. I writhed my body over hers like an animal would, sweating and panting and drooling and laughing and grinding all the dirt and blood into her skin. She pleaded with me to stop, over and over but I laughed in her face and kept going after I came until I couldn't any longer. I raised myself from her shaking body, and walked into the bedroom. She had cried the whole time, had offered no resistance, just cried. I grabbed some of my clothes and stuffed them into a suitcase. I did not bother to shower. I revelled in being dirty, not only from the earth but also from inside of the cleanest woman on earth, or so she had been until that evening.

I stayed in a hotel that night and woke up the next morning in mud-caked sheets. I laughed at what the housekeepers would think. I hoped they would laugh too. I smiled to think of my crime. I knew that she would never tell anyone. She would feel too humiliated and reviled to call the police or even a friend if she had any left.

I awake in a fit of fear. The man is sitting by the smoldering embers of the fire. Light is streaming from the east but clouds loom overhead. He sits as I met

him: staring and still. I look up and feel the first drops of rain fall onto my head. The man seems serene: he is humming a happy tune. I do not recognize the music, but its rhythm mixes with the increasingly loud rhythm of the falling rain and lulls me. I sit in the rain and place my hands over my head.

VITA

Keith Humphreys, born in April 1969, was raised in the small town of Fork, Maryland. From 1987 to 1991 he attended James Madison University and graduated from there with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. His undergraduate thesis was a creative prose work titled *Leopards Watch*. From 1991 to 1993 he attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville on a Teaching Associateship and earned a Master of Arts degree in English.

His future plans are unspecific, but he hopes they take him to an "undiscovered country".