To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Linda S. Morgan entitled "Shadows On The Wall: A Collection of Poetry and Short Stories." 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.

Jon Manchip White

Jon Manchip White, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet

Frank K. Robinson

Accepted for the Council:

Lee Minkel

Vice Provost
and Dean of The Graduate School

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of the source is made.

Requests for permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted by the copyright holder.

Signature Linda S. Morgan

Date May 28, 1987

SHADOWS ON THE WALL: A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Linda S. Morgan

June 1987

Copyright © Linda S. Morgan, 1987
All rights reserved

This thesis is dedicated to

S. A. Morgan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Jon Manchip White, who acted as a consultant for the fiction; and Professor Marilyn Kallet, whose advice and guidance enabled me to complete the poetry portion of this thesis. Along with Professor Frank Robinson, they have graciously served as my committee, assisting me in the completion of my degree.

I am also indebted to Mr. Reed Hasek and Mr. Jim Wiggins for the superb artwork they each contributed, and to Cheryl Wilson to donating her services as typist and printer. Thank you for your generosity.

ABSTRACT

Poetry is "that in which [one] comes nearest to being able to utter the truth," Matthew Arnold writes in his essay on Wordsworth. But we humans lack the omniscience to immediately and precisely see what truths lie within persons, situations, or events. We can only seek to discover the truth by examining all the clues given us, much the same as we can guess the actual appearance of an object from the shadow it casts when a bright light is focused on it.

The poetry in this collection, for the most part, is my examination of the clues--the silhouettes--given by words, mannerisms, and actions of the people and events about which I have chosen to write. These poems are my attempts to "come nearest to being able to utter the truth" that lies within the given situations.

Sometimes the scope of the poem is sociological, such as the examination of the effect repression has on Arabian women in "Inside The Breeder Society." Other times the scope is more individually focused, attempting to describe and understand facets of personal relationships.

Occasionally an element from nature or a dream will symbolize aspects of the psyche that I wish to present without editorial comment, as in the poems "Drought" and "After The Battle."

I rely on devices such as alliteration and line breaks to develop a rhythm for each poem that seems more natural to the speaking voice than the traditional meters like the iambic or anapestic.

The short stories in this collection are unified by their exploration of the ambiguous roles of the stranger in our lives. We constantly encounter people who are strangers to us; many of those chance encounters will have an impact on our lives. Some strangers become our dearest friends, provide us with new perspectives and insights, help us to grow spiritually or psychologically. Others play an adverse role, changing our lives dramatically with events we didn't think could happen to us.

The strangers and events that spring forth from the shadows of the world constantly influence our perception of the environment in which we live and our personal mythology, affecting us for better, for worse, and usually forever.

INTRODUCTION

The roots of the poetry in this manuscript lie, I think, in the creative writing class I had in high school. It was in that class that I first studied modern poetry, primarily the confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Their practice of exploring the personal, internal world with words--and the catharsis that came with that exploration--appealed to me, as did the vibrant language unrestricted by rigid metres with which they wrote. I began writing poetry to express my feelings and perceptions, often using personas and "dream songs" as confessional poets had done.

In more recent years, Sharon Olds has been a strong influence. The directness of her tone has inspired me to strive for a poetry that is more conversational, albeit confidential in nature. It is this style of poetry I plan to continue to pursue in future manuscripts.

The idea for the group of short stories in Part II came from an untitled drawing by Jim Wiggins that I refer to as "The Stranger." The drawing is of three backwoods

men who gaze back at the viewer so intently that it evokes the feeling that the viewer is a stranger passing by on a seldom-traveled road. Since I travel more frequently, I have often found myself a Johnny-come-lately among people who are unfamiliar to me. The drawing and my own experiences served to make me more acutely aware of how encounters with strangers can shape our lives and our views.

"Killer On The Road" is derived from an incident that occurred when I was an adolescent growing up in California. Highway travelers were randomly shot by a man driving with a gun mounted on a swivel on his car's dashboard. I wrote the story as one answer to my wonder about what leads someone to commit mass murder in one big, usually self-destructive explosion of violence.

But the killer in the first draft was too harsh; I needed to find a way to make his psyche more understandable. Having previously written an experimental fiction story dealing with the pathos of soldiers after the Asian conflict, I decided to make this character a Vietnam veteran. I gleaned quite a bit of information from a Knoxville Journal feature article about a small-town Tennesseean whose life had been profoundly

affected by his participation in the Vietnam war.

"I feel like sometimes now, if it wasn't for my medication, I could do it to him or you," the veteran in the article states. "Put in a corner or boxed-in, helpless feeling: I could do it and it scares me real bad, especially when I get mad."

In that statement, I found my link between the Veteran experience and the man who goes past the bounds of sanity to become a mass murderer.

"Lonesome Al" was written for my friends; it depicts how strangers can influence our lives in a positive manner. "No Such Thing As Sacred" is intended to show that friends can become strangers, and sometimes we can be strangers to our own selves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

PART I: SILHOUETTES

First Confession 2
Burying the Past 3
A Visit to Saudi Arabia. 4
Illustration: After the Battle. 7
After the Battle 8
Ichtucknee River 9
Illustration: Stephanie 10
Stephanie. 11
Cuando Niños Envejecen (When Children Grow). 13
Illustration: The Visit Home 15
The Visit Home 16
Illustration: Drought 17
Drought. 18
Wanting to Understand. 19
Poem for My Older Sister 21
Illustration: Learning to Shrug 22
Learning to Shrug. 23
His Kids 24
Illustration: High Water. 25
High Water 26
For the Wrong Reasons. 27
Illustration: Scavenger Hunt. 28
Scavenger Hunt 29
Fallen Leaves. 30
Venice, 1984 31
Illustration: Insomnia. 33
Insomnia 34
Canto de Esperanza (Song of Waiting; Song of Hope) . . . 35
Lecture to the Boys of Muldoomed 38

PART II: THE STRANGER

Killer on the Road 43
Lonesome Al. 61
No Such Thing As Sacred. 84
Vita 115

PART I: SILHOUETTES

First Confession

Sister Sara smiles,
her round cheeks becoming
great O's beneath the black
and white cloths concealing her hair.
Our catechism class forms
two straight lines as
she pulls open the heavy,
carved wooden doors of the church.
We file silently inside
to make our first Confession,
the door shutting out the bright sunlight
behind us.

Past the wood pews, candles
flicker on the stone altar, casting
dancing shadows into the dark
corners of the church where
the little booths loom,
confessionals like closets
with screens inside; where nameless,
faceless voices pronounce penances
for seven-year-olds.

Nervously we await our turns,
practicing the little speech
we were taught to say.
Jesus' sweet face bows in death
in the stained window above the altar,
the ruby glass of his wounds splashing red streams
on our white dresses
as one by one we go down the aisle
to accept the guilt
for the sins we never knew
were ours.

Burying The Past

A German writes fifteen years after Auschwitz:
"There is nothing in the history of Europe
or even the world
to compare with the martyrdom of the Jews
of Medieval Europe."
Worse than World War II, yet
the world has forgotten.

In those early centuries,
in the stone houses of our fathers,
entrails steamed in the fists of Christian hypocrites
who slit Jews open like swine.
Carrying precious packs of sacred books
our fathers fled from France,
Lithuania,
Spain and Portugal,
the wind erasing their footprints
and the fine white bone dust of the Jews
whose bodies rotted on the gallows pole.

Now, in our century,
we watch with muted anguish
as the film unfolds the horrors of the Holocaust
to our history class.
A Nazi officer in his old-fashioned clothing
struts stiffly in black-and-white,
lining up thin nameless Jews before a ditch
for slaughter.

In Germany,
an oven door stands open, creaking,
the cold, empty belly of a once-fiery dragon
that reigned with terror.
An icy wind blows between the abandoned buildings
of Auschwitz, of Dachau,
carrying off the cries of the unknown Jews
from the camps no one
wants to remember.

A VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA

I. Inside The Breeder Society

(a poem of two voices)

The black shadows of women move through
the streets, garbed in the uniform
abayas and clutching their veils tighter
against the tugging
desert wind. On the hot pavement
a shapeless peddler woman sits,
her brown gnarled hand snaking out
to uselessly arrange
and rearrange
the seeds in her basket.

He says:
Our way is better.
We don't dress provocatively.
We commit no adultery in our hearts.
The women's shapes are hidden; no one
looks at them with lust.

Does your sister like to dance
naked before her mirror?
Does she want
to touch herself late at night?

He says:
My mother is content
to cook and sew. She
has raised six strong sons
and a daughter.
There is plenty
for her to do.

Inside the villa
a woman stares into the mirror,
hoping the reflection will tell her
something
about herself.

He says:
My little sister wants to go
to the United States.
I tell her
their ways are not
THAT good.

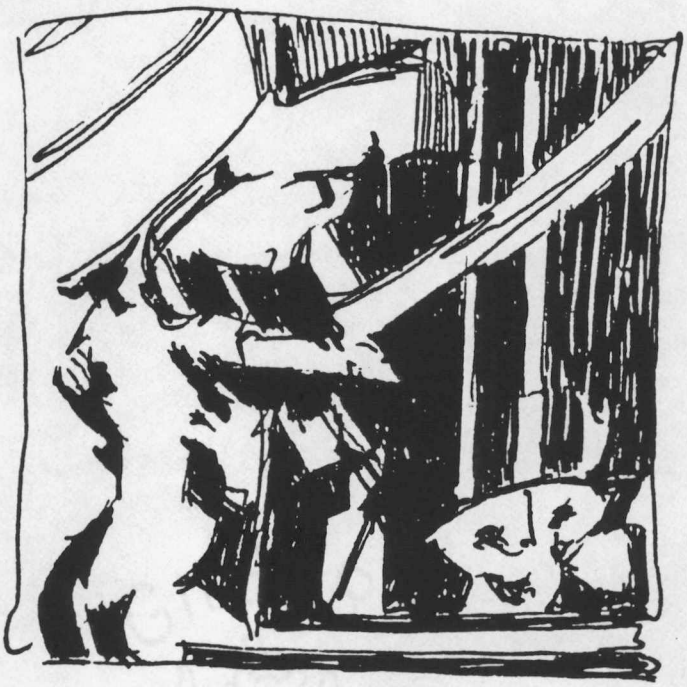
What was it those dark,
beautiful eyes
were trying to tell me
from behind the veils
when I passed her at the souks?
Was it fear I saw,
or envy,
or hate?

He says:
Our way IS better.
The women are sheltered;
protected.
They see the fast pace
of other places;
they always come back.

Brother, how can a woman
ever learn to keep pace
when she never knew
her lithe brown legs
could run?

II. The Beheading

The clock tower strikes
the hour, calling
the crowd together
for the Friday festivity. Uniformed men
with machine guns strapped to their sides
lead the prisoner forward, his face
showing daze as he
stumbles in the dust.
The crowd strains
eagerly to see, necks
craning in the back rows,
the gutteral sounds of
Arabic filling the air.
The matawa reads the charges
and the sentence; the accused
hangs his head
in guilt. The sword
rises, flashing silver
in the bright summer sun, then
falls through his neck
with a hollow thump like
carving watermelon at
a Fourth of July feast.
The crowd cheers and
jeers, jubilant at Justice's victory.
The matawa seats himself
facing Mecca, cradling
the severed head
in his lap, staining
his white thobe red,
red. He shakes
his stick at the crowd, chanting
in Arabic over
and over:
"Let this be
a lesson to you,"
rocking
until the sun
goes down.



AFTER THE BATTLE 86 JRHasek

After The Battle

(a dream song)

After the battle
we collect the casualties
lying in the meadow.
Sticky, overripe fruit spilling seeds
squishes under our feet
as we stack corpses on
flat bed trucks
for removal.
The diseased rubber of their flesh
bounces
as body
hits body. We cut
the last one down from
the white oak, leaving
the rope still cinched
around the bloated neck
and toss it on top;
light cigarettes and
leave,
leaving the burst fruit
still littering the meadow.

Ichtucknee River

We follow the dirt road
to the river, dodging
colorfully-clad children
carrying innertubes.
Humidity envelopes us,
moisture-laden air
heavy
in our lungs.
Trees shriek with birds
as we pull on wet suits,
rubber refusing to slide
over our bodies.
The cold water is a wave
of shock
as we immerse ourselves
into the Ichtucknee.

Beneath the surface,
calm comes over us.
The current carries us along.
In this
other world,
it is only green:
green reeds and rushes
and mosses wave as
we pass by. Yellow spirals
of shell strewn at random
offer refuge to
homeless hermit crabs.
We kick lazily along, feeling
the grace of our fins.
A tube fish undulates by,
startling
the small fishes which nibble
about us.

We swim in tandem,
picking pebbles and
smooth shells, the water
numbing our warm flesh
until
we fall upon the sandy beach,
spit out by the river,
mouths gaping
as we try to regain
our human speech.



STEPHANIE

Stephanie

I. "I like to dance,"
she says,
stretching out a limb draped in gossamer
as she swirls delicately in a circle to
the backing beat of the band.
From somewhere behind her
the sound of strings rises,
enticing each frail hand
into the air,
fingers fluttering gently
as she bends flat-back at the waist:
a graceful swaying willow,
her wind
the music.

II. The thin reed
of her voice
reverberates
as she begins to sing
what the music has called forth.
the honesty of her words

confessing a pain

we do not confess.

She is dancing

for each of us,

naked

and perfect in these truths.

III. And I know

how songs like these are written--

during the darkest of night,

in the fury of the storm,

born from a desire to

see the stars

after the sun has set.

Like Orpheus,

we sing our way through the Underworld

and back.

Cuando Niños Envejecen

El espejo cuchichea de edad a mí.
Las ranuras de las arrugas
dibujan diseños delicados
en el lienzo de mi cutis.
Hay ceniza en mi pelo:
ceniza de un fuego moribundo
que raya un polvo grís
por el helado negro.
Mis ojos obtusos reflexionan
una madura mujer mejicana.
Estoy viejo:
estoy viejo.

Estoy solo en el mundo
que conozco:
un mundo del cuidado de ninos
y mudandose en vestidos pequenos
para la escuela.
Seis niños lloraban Mama
en mis faldas,
por querido, por necesidad
de mis atencíones.
--No lloren,--
Yo se conforté con mi amor.
--No lloren.--

Ahora mis niños no lloran.
Los gabinetes son vacío:
los juguetes habian roto
mucho tiempo.
La escuela reventa
a las tres,
vertindo los ninos
de algún otro.
Mis niños, en otro tiempo
como renuevos tiernos,
habían crecido como
los altos árboles.
Se tienen firme.
Yo soy viejo;
soy solo.
Solomente la espeja cuchichea a mí.
--no llora,
No llora.--

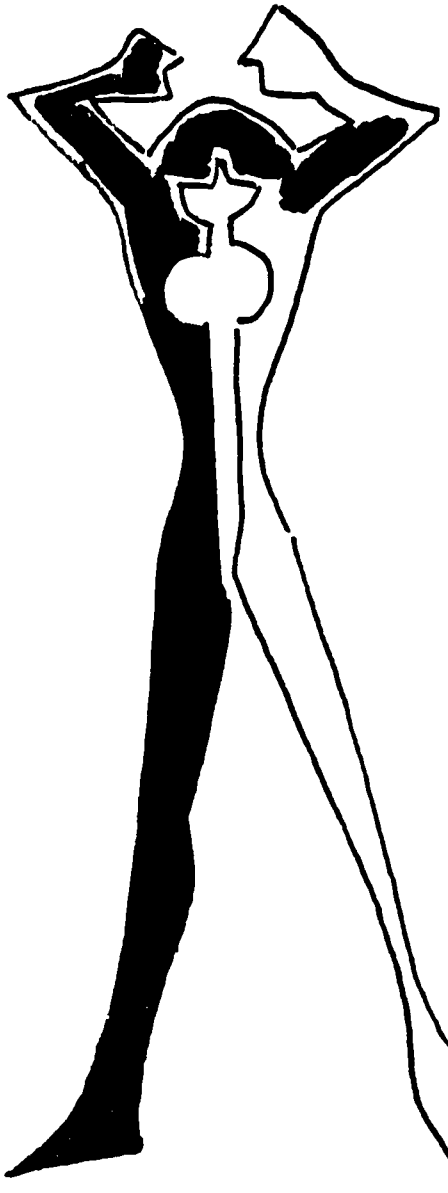
When Children Grow

(translation from the Spanish)

The mirror whispers age to me.
Grooved wrinkles draw fine sketches
in the canvas of my skin.
There is ash in my hair; ash
from a dying fire streaking
grey powder through the icy black.
The dull in my eyes
gazes back at
a worn Mexican woman.
I am old; I am
old.

I am alone in the world I know,
a world of caring for children
and dressing them in small suits
for school.
Six children cried Mama
into my skirts, wanting,
needing my attention.
"Don't cry."
I comforted them with my love,
"Don't cry."

Now my children don't cry.
The closets are empty;
the toys long broken.
The school burst at three
spilling someone else's children.
I am old;
I am alone.
Only the mirror whispers to me,
"Don't cry,
don't cry."



THE VISIT HOME 86 JRHasek

The Visit Home

(For Cissy)

When she arrives,
the first thing they say is
you're late.

All weekend Mama pushes plates of food
in front of her, begs
to brush her hair for her,
and chatters on about how
well her brother's new practice
is doing.
All weekend Daddy sits in his chair
scowling. He wants to know
where she is going
whenever she goes out.
He wants to know
how she got mud on her car
when she finally comes in.
His gruffness grates in her ears
as she grits her teeth and smiles.

When she leaves,
Mama cleans up the dishes
and falls into a chair.
Daddy stops feeling angry,
feels the sadness creeping back in
as they watch her go,
like all weekend they knew she would.



DROUGHT '86 JRHasek

Drought

Even inside my house
I can almost hear the roots
gasping for water
but still rain doesn't come.

Each morning I sit listlessly before my typewriter.
wiping the back of my neck where hair sticks in sweat.
hoping to hear a distant thunderclap announcing relief
from the humidity's building pressure. But
the only sound today is a steady
tap tap tap,
too hard with too long an interval
to be rain.

A flash of
angry red wings: a cardinal
beats violently at its own reflection
in the window below.
Again and again
it hurtles its soft body into the pane
with a thud that rattles the glass, its wing
furiously battering the air about it.
Not even my hollering
distracts it from self-destruction
as it flaps back for another strike.

Finally finding an old sheet, I
shoo the bird away
long enough to tape the cloth up
so the glass won't catch the brilliant
reflection of red. Its foe gone,
the cardinal circles the yard once.
then flies away above the trees.

Turning to return upstairs
to my typewriter,
the first drop of rain
splats on the step,
wet and fat
with the promise of reprieve.

WANTING TO UNDERSTAND

Tout savoir est tout pardonner.

I. Head Games

You dream of women
who will be all yours:
air-brushed heiresses who serve you
maintenance-free.

You go out like a big game hunter,
stalking prey that will provide a good chase
before being brought
to her knees.

II. Fire And Ice

For two weeks he allowed himself
to burn
the way I burn.
We consumed everything.

After two weeks he found this
too intense,
like breathing pure oxygen.
He turned to solid ice.

For two years
we have stayed strangers,
afraid to find out which perishes
when fire meets ice.

III. In The Dark

Lying alone in the dark
on your narrow bed,
the memory of your father's and mother's deaths

festers like a thorn
deep inside you.
In the stillness
of your loss,
you made your secret pact with God
that He could take you, too.

You use your pain as an excuse
to trash twenty-six years of living,
to crash cars on a regular basis,
to decide your ego is
between your legs
and love is not
to be trusted.

You feel safest lying on your narrow bed
alone in the dark
because darkness
does not slip
out the door.

Poem For My Older Sister

At nine I mixed magic potions
to place under your pillow so
you would leave me alone. I hated
sharing a room with you.
You would laugh with your girlfriends
about clothes, hair,
how tan you were and how ugly I was,
while I buried myself deeper into books
or tapped tales out on my typewriter
for our cousins to enjoy.

Nights when I was sure
the magic would keep you asleep,
I'd sneak out my window to write poetry.
I found my solace
in the solitude under the stars,
sitting on the sidewalk at midnight
with paper and pen,
incense burning beside me
with glowing tip.

And I'll tell you this:
the magic I used has power:
keeping you away all these years
while I pull poetry out of
the void between us.



LEARNING TO SHRUG 86 JRHosek

Learning to Shrug

Standing in the shower,
I practice shrugging
over and
over.
I am shrugging off the weight
of your self-denial,
your unhappiness,
the way you can't look me in the eye.
the way you pretend my friendship
doesn't mean a damn to you.

I recognize a sacrifice when
I see one.

And I don't want to watch.

His Kids

It was okay for the weekends.
They'd arrive Friday nights, miniature versions of
his dark good looks, their small suitcases and
tin of Tinker Toys tucked under
their father's arms.
Coaxed out of shyness, they were
angelic creatures, craving
any affection I cared to give.
All weekend
we shared their world, playing
in parks, building with blocks, or
singing songs until it was time
to take them home.
But now that
they've come to stay,
the sight of their two exhausted bodies
collapsed in the back seat
fills me with only
my own weariness.
Intruders into my world, they
interrupt me four bars into a song every
time, and can't be trusted
around nineteenth-century porcelain.
Watching them romp with their father,
I am an atheist
in a church whose mystical appeal
eludes me.
When they come to kiss us good-night,
they pause
before me, hesitant mouths
parted like wounds
as they gaze at the woman
who never wanted
children.



HIGH WATER 86 JRHasek

High Water

I am afraid of you the way
I am afraid
to plunge into cool,
deep water
that I can't see
to the bottom of.
It's what I don't know
about you yet
that may hurt me.

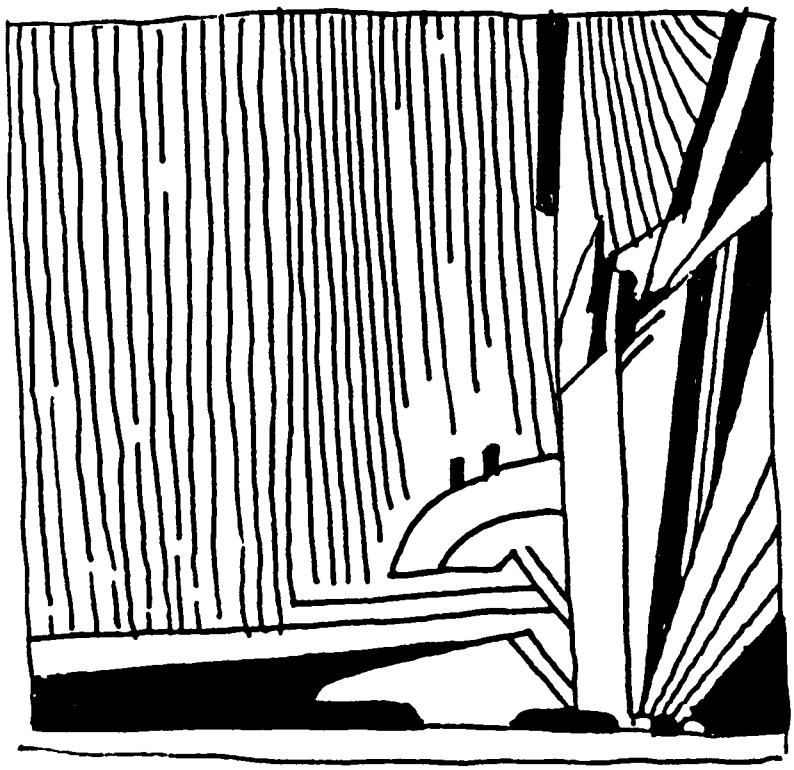
For The Wrong Reasons

You want a wife;
someone who will be
yours
so you will know your worth.

You greet each of our shining faces
with a greedy glance,
wondering which of us will be content
to play the role.

You woo us and win our trust
with tales of travels to distant lands
and all your big dreams.

But you are not the man
you seem to be;
slowly
you settle into your real self
the way you sink further into
your TV-viewing chair,
and never even notice
when the light in our eyes
goes out.



SCAVENGER HUNT 86 JRHasek

Scavenger Hunt

(for J. M.)

In dreams I go there, searching
for something lost accidently
some time ago. I know I
haven't much time to look.
Moving through
each room of my childhood home, I
touch the surfaces, hoping
to know what I seek
when I feel it.
In the vigorous green of
the courtyard outside the door
you wait, an impatient toe tapping
in time with the rain on the roof.
I am unable
to speak to you while I search;
listening in silence to the constant pecking
of the rain at the walls
around me.

Fallen Leaves

The fallen leaves swirl beneath your rake
as I watch you unnoticed
from the silent warmth of
the kitchen. Moisture
trapped on the window's glass
blurs your features behind water,
separating us
by a foreign ocean I cannot cross.
And I remember too well
the nights spent alone,
the months apart when
I would try to imagine your face
but couldn't quite picture
each delicate detail:
the memory of that separation
awakening a fear in me
until I want to reach through the glass
and pull you back
into focus.

Venice, 1984

We feast on fat peaches and thick slabs of salami,
our aching feet resting
from the many stairs of San Marco.
Outside our hotel, the warning calls of porters
pushing carts of baggage through the crowded **calli**
drift in our open window:
"Attenzione,
Attenzione."

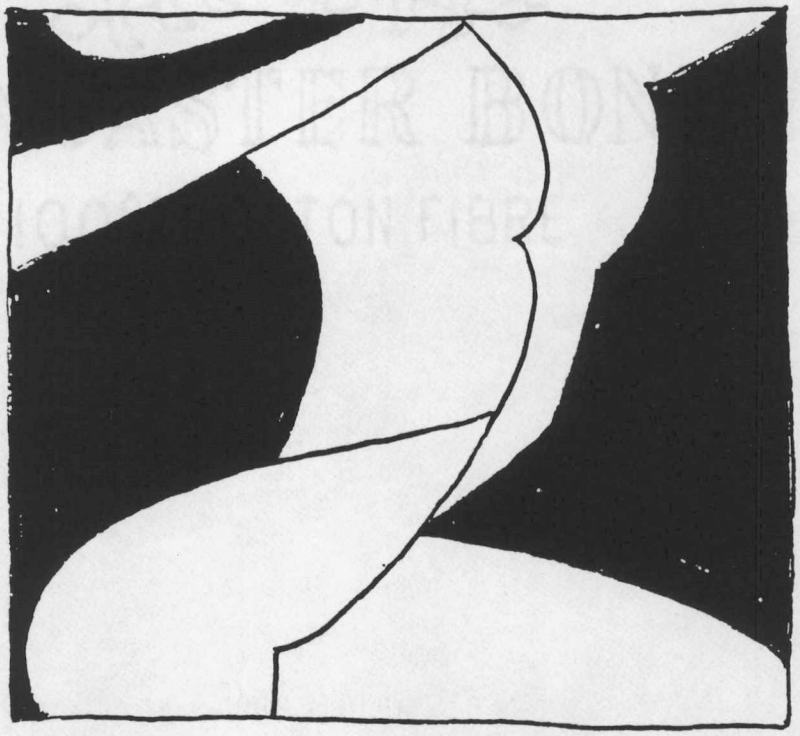
Slurping peach juice in the moist
summer heat pervading the room, I
half-listen as my father talks.
So much time passes between
our yearly rendezvous from our
separate continents; he ages faster now.
Silver-grey has replaced most of the blond curls
that crown his handsome
tanned face. A jaw muscle
just beginning to sag
pulses as he speaks, reminiscing
about his childhood visits to my great-grandfather
in the crazy cement house with no stairs to the second floor
whenever he and his brothers wanted a quarter
for peanuts and a movie.

His voice patters on, pleasant
and deep like the echo in the cool dark well
hidden in the thicket behind our empty Tennessee home.
And I close my eyes,
suddenly swept up in the memory
of me, five years old,
leaping from stone to stone in
the light breeze of Fish Canyon as I try
to keep up with my father's long,
purposeful strides.

"This is where I used to play,"
he's telling me;
"We would ride our bikes up here to go hiking."
In my five-year-old mind I try to picture my Daddy,
a towheaded lanky youth of perhaps eight or ten
pumping the pedals of an old
battered bike of the forties
in this place of flowing snow water,
rustling rushes, and creek stones.

We pause before thick stalks of bamboo: he reaches
for his pocket knife bright yellow as the day
and cuts a piece. "See,
this is how you
make a flute," he shows me.
nicking the odd wood
and boring a few holes.
He places it, cool and smooth.
in my small hand.

The bells around the square of San Marco
begin to clamor the hour, bringing
us out of memories
and back to Venice.
I smile, not at
the grandfather-story I've heard so many times,
but at the realization my father
was always an explorer,
showing me the world then
and now. The fingers that
once carved bamboo
curl from age and arthritis like
withering leaves as he
reaches to slice another slab of salami,
his yellow pocket knife now dulled in color,
the blade still sharp.



INSOMNIA 86 JRHosek

Insomnia

I could never forget the nights
remembering how you held me
touching me here
and here
one hand entwined in my hair
as you buried yourself
deeper
into my warmth until
we became one.

I could never forget the nights
knowing
they once belonged to us.

Canto de Esperanza

Querido,
estoy esperando para tí.
y todas mis pensamientos
viajan contigo.
Te quiero estes aquí.
Quiero besarte
como la caída de lluvia
ligero en tu cutis.
Quiero que me abrazarás
una vez más.
Sin tu presencia,
todas las noches paracen
solitarios,
tristes.
El cielo llora para tí.

Para pasar el tiempo,
yo toco la guitarra y
te estoy tocando,
lo mismo que tu musica
canta de mí.
Venga, mi amigo,
y tocaremos juntos.

Cantaramos a la diosa del sol

que no esconderíase

detras de las nubes,

y la luz levantará nuestras almas

como el viento levanta las alas del azulejo:

como la brisa alza la mariposa.

Song of Waiting; Song of Hope
(translation from the Spanish)

Lover,

I am waiting for you

and all my thoughts

travel with you...

I want you to be here.

I want to kiss you like drops of rain

falling lightly on your skin.

I wish you could hold me again.

Without you,

the nights seem lonely,

sad.

Even the sky cries for you.

To pass time,

I play my guitar

and I am touching you,

just as your music

sings of me.

Come, my love,

and we will play together.

We will sing to the goddess of the Sun

not to hide behind the clouds,

and the light will lift our souls

the way wind lifts the wings of the bluebird:

the way breeze carries the butterfly.

LECTURE TO THE BOYS OF MULDOOMED

I.

Don't
speak to me
of love,
you
who never surrendered
your suspicions
and doubts
to swim in its
warm bath,
splashing
and giggling.
A hesitant toe
plunged partially
into water
does not
understand fishes.

II.

Don't
speak to me
of laughter.
you
who never abandoned
pretenses
to roll
around on the ground,
sides shaking
and body wriggling
like an excited,
eager pup.
A few polite notes
on request
do not resemble
an orchestra's
rich resonance.

III.

Don't
speak to me
of living,
you
who hide in booze bottles
and never
embrace Life
as your oldest friend.
Admiring distant roses
is less risky
than braving thorns
to get one.

IV.

Don't
preach to me
of God in Heaven,
you
who imagine some
final reprieve.
This world
is not
a pregnant piñata
that spills
sweets in your lap
when brutally beaten.

PART II: THE STRANGER


STRANGER

NOTICE

The following stories are fictional and are not intended to portray any real persons, living or dead.

KILLER ON THE ROAD

Riders on the storm
There's a killer on the road
His brain is squirming like a toad
Take a long holiday
Let your children play
If you give this man a ride
Sweet memories will die
Killer on the road...

[1]
--James Douglas Morrison

"It's hot, L. A.; and it's going to get hotter still as the heat wave continues this Memorial Weekend. Dr. George will be back with the rest of the weather as Eyewitness News continues," Jerry Dunphy said.

"Piss," said Larry, crinkling his Budweiser can and tossing it at the television as Jerry Dunphy's image faded to a commercial for "Pam." He dragged deeply from the burning Camel non-filter and blew a cloud of smoke at the screen. Damn, it was hot; as miserable as the dog days he'd seen in Vietnam. His undershirt was sticking to his sweaty flesh, defining how pronounced his beer belly had become. His brown hair was plastered to his forehead as

---

[1] The Doors, "Riders On The Storm," L.A. Woman, Elektra Records, 1971

he sweltered in the unusual humidity affecting the Los Angeles basin. Maybe he should take a cool bath. Dr. George came on to tell him all about the inversion layer that was responsible for the trapped smog and unrelenting heat. Larry stared blankly at the screen as Dr. George flailed his arms before a map of Southern California. Memorial Weekend. He and Gloria had planned on going camping at the River this weekend. Damn her, he thought. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway, walking out on him like that?

He popped another beer open and took a long drink from it. Beer sure tasted good after loading cargo all day in this heat. All that damn smog made it worse, too; every time he took a deep breath it stabbed in his lungs.

"Another victim of the Hillside Strangler was found today in the wooded area around Mulholland Drive." Christine Lund was reporting, her serious eyes staring out from the blond bubble of hair that surrounded her face. Larry wondered if her hair was really blond. It looked so phony, not at all like the long, dark waves of Gloria's in which he loved to tangle his fingers. Hers always looked so good, shadowing her tanned skin as she lay naked in his

arms... He crumpled another beer can as he drained the last of its contents in his dry throat. Damn it; he wasn't going to think about her anymore. He could get along just fine without her around; just watch and see. At least he wouldn't have to listen to her nag him anymore. "I'm sorry, Larry," he mimicked her parting words inside his head, "But I just can't handle living with you anymore. You need help." Huh. Dumb bitch. Did she think he had been on a picnic in 'Nam? She knew he only took the Demerol for the pain. It's the only thing that got him through most days. And she ought to know he didn't mean it when he pushed her around a little or punched holes in the wall. He had tried to explain to her plenty of times before about how caged up he felt. It wasn't really her that set him off, it was just that he couldn't stand the boxed-in feeling he often had.

"Look at this--highs in the neighborhood of one hundred and four!" Dr. George shrieked as the second hour of news and weather continued on ABC. "And for the desert areas, you can expect temperatures around one hundred and sixteen degrees!"

Damn her timing! This would have been the perfect

weekend to just kick back at the River, drinking beer and floating around in innertubes. Another day in this stinking smog was going to kill him. But that was just like Gloria; she always screwed everything up because she couldn't understand anything. She couldn't figure out that he was really looking forward to a nice weekend camping out together; she just wanted to walk out on him and play some head trip. She probably only wanted him to come chasing after her, begging her to come back just so she could blackmail him into going to therapy again. Huh. She was probably at her sister's now, crying her eyes out. Well, good; let her stay there for awhile. Maybe she'd find out a little bit about what the real world was like and learn how to stand on her own two feet instead of trying to lean on him. He remembered when she first moved in, how she harped at him to get a job. She acted as if jobs were plentiful for ex-machine gunners whose only experience was search-and-destroy missions. But he'd finally found one loading cargo at San Pedro. So now he had to take crap off his foreman all day. And by the time he got home each evening, his bum leg would be throbbing. Then Gloria would get on his back for taking pills. He just couldn't win. Christ, he had chunks of metal and

magnesium still in his leg; what else was he supposed to do? What did she expect from him, anyway?

"The hell with you," he muttered, "I don't need you. I'll go to the River anyway, without you."

He went to the closet and dug through the assortment of old coats, sporting equipment, and mangled tennis shoes until he produced a sleeping bag and a Coleman cooler. He left them sitting in the middle of the floor while he went to the bedroom and selected some jeans and T-shirts that didn't look too dirty from the heap of clothes that were on the floor. He wadded them into a compact ball and placed them with the sleeping bag and cooler. Next he went to the freezer and removed the package of foil in which he kept his savings wrapped.

"Nothing like a little cold cash to get the weekend off to a good start," Larry joked with himself, peeling off several bills and placing them in his trouser pocket. He lugged the bulky cooler into the kitchen and placed it beneath the freezer. He emptied all the ice cubes from the freezer's trays into the chest, then closed the freezer door and opened the refrigerator. Three cases of Budweiser were stacked on the only shelf that remained in the neglected appliance. Larry began pushing the beer

cans one by one down into the ice in the cooler, turning his face away to avoid the rotten smell emanating from inside the refrigerator. Finishing, he closed the cooler lid with a muted thump and fastened the catch.

He opened his front door. Outside a pink haze obscured the sky as the late afternoon sun reflected on the smog. He dragged the cooler out to his green '67 GTO, noting the scratches and rust spots in the paint that he kept meaning to fix as he unlocked the trunk and hoisted the cooler inside. His femur increased its customary throbbing, reminding him of the long day he'd put in at work. The numbnuts that was in charge always saved the heaviest shit for him; he seemed to have it in for Larry. Hell, between the jerks at work and Gloria always giving him problems at home, it was enough to drive him crazy. Sometimes it seemed like there was a conspiracy to screw up his life and make him totally miserable. Well, to hell with all of them. He was going to head out to the River and party all weekend. Maybe he'd even pick up some foxy girlie in a little bikini to party down with him.

"Catch ya on the rebound, clown," Larry said sarcastically as he snapped off Frank Reynolds. He reached above the television and removed his thirty-thirty

rifle from the rack on the wall. It seemed to him there were several boxes of ammo around somewhere. He went and dug through his dresser drawers until he came up with the boxes. Satisfied, he carried the rifle out to his car and laid it tenderly on the back seat.

"Think I'll do me a little shooting this weekend," he thought to himself. "Let off some steam."

The sky was turning into a blaze of red as the sun hung barely above the horizon. The towering buildings of the city were quickly left behind as Larry weaved the GTO through the traffic on Interstate 10. It seemed like everyone was headed to the desert and the Colorado River this weekend, pulling boats and motorcycles on trailers behind every make of trucks and vans. Larry nodded as he passed a blue Chevy van with murals painted on it, admiring the young honey-blond girl riding inside. She lifted her chin, nodding back slightly as she raised a burning joint to her lips and inhaled. Larry grinned.

"Hey, let me have some!" he shouted out the window, the words dying in the wind as the vehicles raced along. The girl grinned and looked away.

"Bitch," growled Larry, disappointed. He could use a

toke or two; it'd help him relax. An exit sign for the town of Banning was just coming up--the last town before the long stretch of empty desert. Might as well stop and get a couple more cold six packs and a bottle of Jack to sip on while he crossed the desert. That would leave him the three cases for the weekend--a case a day; plenty to stay buzzed. He swung the GTO off the interstate and onto the exit ramp. The wind rushing in his windows decreased its roar as he slowed and came to a stop before a liquor store.

After making his purchases, he sat in the car for a minute before starting it up and took a gulp of Jack. There ought to be some of that Demerol still stashed in the glove compartment. Might as well pop a few and kick back; he had about a hundred and fifty miles to go across the flat desert before he'd reach the River. The wind would keep him awake, plus he had a few tapes he could shove in the tape deck and blare. He tucked the bottle of Jack under his seat where he could easily reach it, opened the glove compartment and dug around until he came up with the bottle of drugs and a couple worn cassettes. Opening the Demerol, he popped several of the capsules into his mouth and washed them down with a swig of freshly-opened

beer.

"Ahh," he smacked his lips at the feel of cold liquid pouring down his throat. He plugged in one of the cassettes. Distorted sound leapt from the speakers.

"I can't get no satisfaction," Mick Jagger crooned. Larry turned the key and gunned the engine, watching the needle on the tachometer climb to 5500 before he released the gas pedal. He put it in reverse and pulled out of the parking lot, tires screeching.

Back on the interstate Larry settled down into his seat as he cruised along at 70 MPH. He slid the bottle of Jack out and took a swig off it, chasing it with a swallow of beer.

"Hey, you, get offa my cloud," he sang along with Mick and then belched. The air blowing across his face was warm and dry. It felt good to be out of the sticky heat in the city. At least the air was cleaner out here. That damn Gloria didn't know what she was missing out on. He hoped she was sweating like a stuck pig back at her sister's house. He could picture her clothes sticking to her, the smell of her perspiration heavy in the air. She'd probably be whining about the heat and how uncomfortable it was. Thank God he didn't have to listen

to it--the heat made him miserable enough without her going on and on about it.

It always annoyed him immensely when Gloria would complain about stupid little things like the weather, as if he could do something about it. She didn't even know what being uncomfortable really felt like. Discomfort was sitting, eating, and shitting in dirt and mud day after day, unable to get any real sleep, waiting to get shot or overrun or blown to bits. Discomfort was the stench of napalm and burning flesh. And it was definitely damn uncomfortable having a leg full of metal from when the helicopter he was being evacuated in was bombarded by the V.C. But what did Gloria care? She was just like everybody else; she took all the pleasures in life for granted and bitched about the tiniest stuff. She even displayed some of that same self-righteous indignation toward vets that he'd encountered in other people, as if the politics of the war had been the fault of the soldiers. Gloria didn't have any more respect for him than the rest of the ignorant sons of bitches he'd encountered when he had come home.

He'd tried to tell Gloria a few times what it was like. She seemed to understand when he explained that it

was the soldiers' war, not the President's. They were the ones stepping on mines, getting shot, trying to do their job even when the President was refusing to turn them loose and let them do it right. But she'd stared at him as if he were something detestable when he'd told her that he'd gotten to where he enjoyed it. That wasn't something that others could understand, Larry had decided.

Well, forget about Gloria. She probably wasn't coming back this time, anyway. She'd sounded like she really meant it when she said she was leaving Larry for good. She had said some pretty mean things to him, too; like telling him he was dangerous when he didn't take his medication. She never could understand why he didn't want to take the Elavil anymore. Nag, nag, nag. Everything had to be Gloria's way or else. Well, he didn't have to put up with it. It was Larry's life, after all; why shouldn't he have things his way?

He took another gulp of beer, letting the liquid soothe his dry mouth before swallowing it. A cold brew always tasted good, especially in this weather. It was going to be nice soaking up the sun, floating in the innertube with his beer this weekend. Gloria would be sorry she missed out; she always liked going to the River.

He hoped it wouldn't be too crowded when he got there; he wanted to find a good spot. At least traffic wasn't too bad; there were gaps of miles between the packs of travelers on the interstate. He could barely see the taillights from the cars ahead of him.

Respect; that's what it all came down to. Gloria just didn't respect him, or she wouldn't always be giving him such a hard time. Damn it, she knew he was looking forward to this weekend in particular; that's why she picked now to pull this leaving crap. Women just couldn't be trusted, not for anything. He ought to know that better than anybody.

He exhaled heavily through his nostrils, feeling his irritation rise. Yeah, he ought to know that better than anybody. He'd sure learned it the hard way, more than once. Look at when he'd gone to 'Nam. Like most of the guys in his squad, his girlfriend quit waiting for him to come back after only the first few months. But that wasn't the worst; no. The worst was that girl in that village.

He'd only arrived in 'Nam the week before when his squad encountered the village. The soldiers moved swiftly through each hut, rifles ready as they searched for Viet

Cong. But there were only the old men, women, and children left in the village.

A young girl with waist-length black hair had smiled at them as Larry and his lieutenant stopped near the well by which she was standing. The peasant's smock she wore billowed from her swollen belly; she must have been about five months pregnant. She held out a dipper of water in invitation. Her teeth were so white in contrast to her brown skin. The lieutenant accepted the ladle from her with a grateful nod. She lowered her eyes and stuffed her hands into the oversized pockets of her smock. When she pulled them back out, Larry was shocked to see a grenade was in one. She tore the pin and dropped the explosive at the lieutenant's feet, turning and running away as she did. Larry didn't even have time to think, he just ran and dived for cover as the grenade exploded. The lieutenant wasn't that lucky; he never even had time to react.

Larry could still see the girl running away as the dust and bits of stone were flying from the blast. Raising his rifle, he instinctively sighted her and pulled the trigger. Her back arched just before she fell, a heap of clothes and dust and long, black hair. Larry had

looked from her to where the lieutenant had been, dazed by the events of the last few seconds. Then he'd put his head down and puked until there was nothing left inside him.

Larry took another giant swig of the whisky. He shuddered as the potent drink momentarily took his breath away.

"Where in the hell is that Rest Area?" he said aloud. "I know it's coming up soon." He needed to urinate so much his gut was beginning to hurt.

The tail lights he was approaching drew nearer. Larry was mildly surprised to see the blue muraled van again. Maybe he could convince that chick to burn a doobie with him at the next rest area. He stepped on the gas, sending the speedometer up to 75 and pulled alongside the van. The blond was looking the other way.

"Hey!" Larry shrieked out his window. "Hey, baby!" The girl looked over at him. Larry raised his bottle of Jack and toasted her before taking a long swallow. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, still holding the bottle, and gave her a grin.

"Hey, wanna drink?" he yelled, trying to be heard over the roar of wind and engines as he waved the bottle

in her direction. She smiled as if bemused and turned away.

"Hey!" yelled Larry, becoming enraged. "I'm talking to you!" The girl stared straight ahead as if Larry wasn't there.

"Bitch, don't act like you don't hear me!" Larry screamed, his face turning a deep red. Just then the driver of the van leaned over to where Larry could see him. Both the driver and the blond raised their middle fingers and showed them to Larry.

"God damn it!" Larry was livid now. He stomped on the gas and the GTO shot forward, leaving the van behind. Larry swore a steady stream of curses as he raced down the interstate. A blue sign announcing "Rest Area Ahead" streaked past.

"You stupid assholes," Larry bellowed inside his car. "How dare you flip me off. I'll teach you!" He rumbled recklessly into the rest area and locked up the brakes, skidding to a stop. He took another long guzzle from the bottle of Jack and got out of the car, staggering toward the restrooms. After ridding himself of some of the liquor he'd drunk, he returned to his car. His thirty-thirty lay attractively on the back seat, glinting

slightly in the artificial light of the Rest Area. He picked it up, feeling its weighty rigid length. A rifle; now that was man's true best friend. Through two years of 'Nam his rifle had never let him down. He grabbed a box of ammo and loaded the weapon. It was time he taught them some respect. Those stupid assholes.

The rifle lay on the seat beside him now, its muzzle pointed at the passenger door as Larry cruised down the interstate, his eyes seeking the blue van. Even his thoughts were silent as he methodically scanned the tail lights of the pack of cars ahead of him. He had a queer expression on his face as he drove, feeling the car growl beneath him. Moving through the pack of weekend travellers, he looked sullenly into the vehicles as he passed by. A carefully-coifed woman in a Mazda RX-7 briefly glanced at him with distaste before returning her eyes to the road. A family with a bunch of brats hanging their arms out the windows didn't even notice his car gunning by as they tried to contain the turmoil inside their own vehicle. He moved up to pass the lead car of the pack, an old '65 Chevy station wagon. He stared defiantly at the occupants as he pulled past. Two black

faces stared back.

"Niggers," Larry muttered hatefully, knowing they couldn't hear him as they sat in air-conditioned comfort. Either that, or they were crazy--even with the night air blowing in, Larry was still perspiring something fierce from the heat.

He could barely make out the tail lights of a large vehicle ahead. Larry stepped on the accelerator, trying to pull close enough to see. As he approached the lights, his bright beams picked out the painted murals of the Chevy van he was seeking.

"All right, you S.O.B.'s," Larry muttered. "Have I got a surprise for you." He gingerly picked up the thirty-thirty as he pulled closer to the van and laid the rifle's stock across the passenger seat's back. The muzzle pointed inconspicuously out the window at an angle toward the front. Larry eased the GTO up until he was just behind the rear of the van on the driver's side. Maneuvering the gun stock, he aimed down toward the left rear tire and fired.

Boom! The gun exploded with sound, deafening him momentarily as the muzzle lashed. The ejected shell flew up and bounced off the roof, landing somewhere in the back

seat with a muted ring. The van swerved sharply as the tire disintegrated into shreds of rubber.

"Ha, ha, assholes!" Larry said with glee, watching in the rear view mirror as the van careened to the side of the road. "Maybe now you'll learn a little respect!" Hey, that was fun. His ears were still ringing from the noise, but at least he could fire with one hand, using the seat as a brace. He grinned.

"I think I'll just wait up ahead," he said, cackling loudly. This weekend might turn out to be some fun after all.

LONESOME AL

"Now which way do we go?" Jim Winston asked as the Volkswagen came to a halt, not expecting an immediate answer. His partner, Chris Hughes, stared out the dusty windshield at the intersection of narrow dirt roads, then down at the Xeroxed county map in Jim's hands.

"I'm not really sure," Chris said as they pored over the map with their heads together. "According to this, we shouldn't be encountering any more forks. Unless, of course, this is this fork back here that we thought we'd already passed."

Jim squinted into the darkness outside the small Bug, trying to discern the features of the terrain surrounding them. The blue-white glow of the moon outlined the jagged rock of a series of peaks not far in the distance.

"There's some mountains to the right. I bet we aren't as far along as we thought, and we are just now at this last fork." He traced the line on the map. "Maybe those mountains are what the map shows as Eagle Peak." He looked at Chris and waited.

Both twenty-four with wavy brown hair and bright,

hazel eyes, the two engineering students from the University of Tennessee looked enough alike to be brothers. Their years of rooming together had created a deep friendship between the two; it had seemed natural for Jim to accompany Chris to California for the summer break. Chris had been eager to share his home state with Jim, vowing to show him all his favorite places.

It had been Jim's idea to find a ghost town in which to spend the night.

"If you're going to show me the Mojave desert, I want to really experience it," he'd told Chris. "And it can't be a tourist ghost town, either."

"I don't know how we'll find one," Chris had shaken his head, "But we will."

After spending an afternoon in the library searching through books of western ghost towns, they had finally found mention of an obscure site not unfeasibly far from where they were staying with Chris' relatives. By perusing the county maps that enlarged gridded areas of barren desert, they had been able to pinpoint the location of the ghost town.

"We'll have to arrive there in the cool of the night if we're going to camp," Chris had explained. "It'll be easier on us and the car that way. The sun's wicked here

in the desert. If we were to get stranded out there, we'd be dead."

They had waited until almost sunset before stowing their gear in the Volkswagen and leaving Palmdale to head north on Highway 14. After passing the sleepy, neon town of Mojave, Chris had kept an eye on the little Bug's odometer. When they had gone twenty-two miles toward Red Rock Canyon, he instructed Jim to watch for the turn.

"There's the sign! Jawbone Canyon!" Jim had declared while Chris slowed and made a left turn onto the road. Patches of pavement covered portions of soft sand, but the road appeared to be passable.

They followed the road as the last light was waning in the sky. An occasional loud whine of off-road vehicles would assault their ears as they chugged along, picking their way over the bumpy patches of asphalt. After a few miles the pavement petered out altogether, leaving them with a hard, washboard road scraped into the desert's dirt to traverse. Chris was forced to downshift from third to second gear, slowing to a mere ten miles per hour in order to ease the jarring of the road's ridges.

Jim navigated, using the wrinkled reproduction of the county map as they wound through canyons rimmed by black peaks of lava rock. A full moon had risen above them,

bright orange first, then growing paler as it climbed in the sky. Somehow they had managed to stay on the main road, despite the many branches they had encountered. But now they sat stymied at the crossroads, unsure which direction they should go.

"Well, if we are only now at this point on the map, then we need to take the road to the right," Chris said. "But it seems to me we should be farther along than that."

"How many miles have we gone since turning off Highway 14?"

Chris looked at the green glow of instruments on the flat metal dashboard. "Forty-four. Uh oh."

"What is it?"

"We're down to half a tank of gas."

Jim chewed his lip. "Hmm. I guess we didn't count on how quickly we'd use up our fuel poking over this washboard road. Well, since we gassed up in Palmdale, we still have enough to get back to Mojave from here. We can go a little farther before we have to turn back; perhaps another ten miles."

"The ghost town should be within that distance, according to the map's scale."

"Well, shall we go on then?"

There was no reply.

"Chris?"

"I don't believe it!" Chris took his eyes off the rear-view mirror and turned in his seat to look over his shoulder. "Headlights."

"You're kidding. Someone else is out here in the middle of nowhere?" Jim also turned to look out the rear window. Two white beams were piercing the darkness in the distance, winding around the peaks bulging out of the flat desert floor the same way Chris and Jim had just driven. "That'd be as weird as seeing another ship in the middle of the ocean."

The beams disappeared for brief moments several times as the terrain temporarily blocked the view, always reappearing closer each time until finally they could hear the rasping whine of the vehicle's engine. The vehicle disappeared momentarily one last time before overtaking the stopped blue Volkswagen in a blinding flash of light that half-startled Chris and Jim. Then the lights went out as quickly as they had descended, leaving both young men blinking as their eyes tried to readjust.

"Off-roaders?" Jim whispered.

"I don't think so," Chris answered. "Not out this far!"

Finally focusing, they saw the shadowy figure of an

old, battered pickup stopped directly behind them, its engine still whirring.

"What should we do?"

Chris shrugged. "I hope they're harmless, whoever they are."

The truck's engine wheezed to a stop.

"What in the blazes are you doing way out here?" an astonished voice called out, masculine and gravelly.

Jim opened his door and stepped out onto the road. Hesitating briefly, Chris did the same. They turned to gaze at a man leaning out the truck's window.

"We're, uh," Chris started, then stopped. How could he explain they were driving into the middle of nowhere in the treacherous Mojave to spend the night camping in a desert ghost town for no reason other than to do it?

"We're tourists from Tennessee," Jim volunteered.

"You're a long way from there," the stranger remarked. "Are you lost?"

"We're going to a place called Sageland," Jim said, stepping closer to the window to see to whom he was speaking. The stranger's face was etched with wrinkles; the skin appeared tan and weathered even in the pale moonlight. His full beard was solid white, with no hint of what color it might have been in his youth. His teeth

were so straight and bright that Jim thought they must be dentures. A hound dog sat on the seat beside the man, tongue flapping as it waited for its master to resume traveling.

"We were just checking our map to see which road we need to take," Chris finally relaxed enough to speak, beginning to believe the stranger meant them no harm.

"Well, I can tell you how to get there, but what do you want to go to Sageland for?"

Jim and Chris exchanged a glance.

"We're going to spend the night there."

"Why?"

"'Cause we wanted to spend the night in a ghost town." Chris wasn't eager to give out much information; he knew it sounded silly.

The stranger cracked a grin. "Well, there ain't nothing there; just a marker and an old bunker. You ought to go to Claraville. It's just up the road a ways." The stranger reached into the glove box of his truck and extracted a paper from its depth.

"Here's where we are now," he said, unfolding his map and pointing as Jim and Chris stepped closer to look. "Here's Sageland. And here's Claraville." His finger moved to the west.

"What's in Claraville?"

"Oh, it's got some old buildings still standing -- a cantina; a schoolhouse; a store; my house."

"Your house! You live in a ghost town?" Chris was surprised.

"Yep. Me and my dog Blue here. Say hello, old girl." The dog placed a paw on the stranger's arm and looked up at them, panting.

"My name's Lonesome Al," he continued, friendlier now. "You're welcome to spend the night in my town."

"You really live there? By yourself?"

"Yep. I always wanted to live in an old ghost town, so I bought me one."

"You bought it?!"

"Sure did. You might even say I bought it for a song," Lonesome Al chuckled. "I wrote a song for my Blue here a few years back, and some country band recorded it. I made me a nice sum of money off that song; enough to buy Claraville. Blue and I have lived there ever since."

"I guess it isn't a ghost town then, technically speaking," Chris tried to joke, but the stranger remained silent, waiting. Chris looked at Jim and saw the eagerness in his face, though Jim was letting Chris decide whether or not to accept Lonesome Al's offer.

"Well, we'd like to go," Chris made up his mind. "We'd like to spend the night in Claraville. Shall we follow you?"

"Sure. I'll go slow enough for you to keep up. That sure is a funny-looking car. You drive it all the way from Tennessee?"

"It's a Volkswagen," Chris told him. "It ought to make it the rest of the way. Claraville's not too far, is it?"

"'Bout six miles."

Chris and Jim hopped inside the VW again as Lonesome Al cranked over the engine of the old pickup. Chris started the Bug's engine and checked the fuel gauge once more.

"We'll be okay on gas," he reassured himself and Jim.

Lonesome Al swung his truck around to pull in front of the little blue car. Chris honked to let him know they were ready and began trailing the pickup as they turned to the right and left the crossroads behind them.

They traveled for several miles at a slow pace, trying to stay far behind the dusty wake of the truck without losing sight of Lonesome Al's tail lights completely.

"I can't believe that old truck runs at all, let alone goes that quickly over these damn bumps," Chris complained.

"Yeah, it sure is old. A '41 Dodge, if I'm not mistaken," Jim noted. "Wow, look at all those stars. This is sure a great night to camp out. Too bad you don't have your guitar; that would make it perfect."

"I wish I hadn't given it up."

Ahead, the truck's lights blazed brighter as Lonesome Al braked before the dark silhouettes of buildings. Chris and Jim rolled to a stop behind the pickup a few moments later, gaping at the buildings that had sprung up unexpectedly in the vast expanse of sand, scrub-brush, and black, shadowy peaks that surrounded them. They opened the doors of the VW with a squeak that echoed in the quiet, and stepped out.

"Wow!"

"This is great!"

"Perfect--just what we were hoping for."

"Welcome to Claraville, boys," Lonesome Al stepped up beside them, the hound at his feet.

"I love it," Chris grinned.

"It's spectacular," Jim agreed.

"Come look around," Lonesome Al invited. "I'll fetch

us a lantern." Now that he was out of his truck, Jim and Chris could see he was a short man. He was dressed in blue denim Levis; a plaid, buttoned shirt; and worn, leather boots. A beige cowboy hat hid his pate and cast a shadow over all his face except the snowy beard, which reflected the bright moonlight as if it were glowing.

The hound shuffled behind Lonesome Al as he snatched a kerosene lantern from a hook on a building designated "Mercantile" in painted letters. He fumbled in his pocket for a minute, finally producing a small tin of wood matches. He struck one with his thumbnail and held it to the lantern's mantle, pumping fuel to it with his other hand. After a moment the mantle blazed and began glowing, growing brighter until the immediate area was flooded with light. He handed the lantern to Chris.

"Step over here, boys. We'll begin the tour at this end of town." Lonesome Al tottered with quick, short steps toward the farthest building along the dusty road.

"This here's the school house," he said, hinges groaning as he pushed open the door for them to enter. The smell of freshly cut lumber filled their nostrils.

"Mm. I love the smell of wood," Chris signed, inhaling the rich odor deeply into his nose.

"Are you fixing it up?" Jim asked, walking around

examining the building. Several old desks dotted the single room, all of them heavily carved and one lying broken on its side.

"Yep," Lonesome Al nodded. "The buildings were falling down when I moved here. I've reinforced them some; repaired the roofs so what little rain we do get doesn't ruin them inside."

"These desks are almost as old as ours at school; eh, Jim?" Chris joked.

"So you go to school, huh," Lonesome Al commented as they returned to the road and headed toward the next building. "What do you study?"

"Engineering," Jim told him.

"I was a Music major," Chris clarified, "But I switched after my freshman year. I want to be able to get a real job that pays well after I get out of college."

"Well, music paid well enough for Lonesome Al," Jim pointed out quickly. "After all, his song bought him a pretty decent ghost town."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Chris said. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"Boys, I'll let you in on a secret," Lonesome Al stopped walking and turned to look them in the eye. "I would've written that song for my Blue here whether it got

heard, or bought, or not. I was just doing what I felt like doing. As it turns out, someone liked it enough to record it, and my luck was on enough of a roll that I made the money I needed to buy this town. But I sure didn't waste my time worrying about whether or not I'd make my fortune on that song. You can always find a way to make the money you need; you just have to remember to enjoy yourself, too."

"Here's the Cantina," Jim tried to direct the conversation back to the building before them. The word "Cantina" was faint but decipherable on the high, false-front of the simple structure. His feet scrunched on loose dirt littering the plank porch as he crossed it to step inside the building.

Chris followed, raising the lantern high to throw the light into the far reaches of the room. A long, wooden bar lined the wall opposite the doorway. A few bottles coated with dust were placed sporadically on the shelves behind the bar. Two round tables still stood in the otherwise empty room, a guitar leaning against one. Chris walked over to it and plucked a string. A note twanged, reverberating in the quiet desert night.

"That's mine," Lonesome Al's voice startled Chris when the note had died. "I like to pick a little when I'm

drinkin'." He crossed the room with stacatto steps and reached behind the bar to extract an amber bottle. He held it up to check the level of the liquid inside it. The glass glinted in the lantern's light; the darker shadows of the bottle revealed it to be three-quarters full.

"Care for a swig of bourbon?" He uncorked the bottle and indulged himself before extending it toward the two young men.

"Sounds good," Jim took the bottle and drank. "Chris?"

"Sure. Might settle some of the dust in my throat."

They passed around the bottle a few more times before Lonesome Al replaced the cork and picked up the lantern.

"Let's head on to my quarters. Grab that guitar and bring it along."

A small, shanty-like structure stood beyond, and a bit behind, the row of false-fronted buildings. The three men walked past the vehicles parked in front of the Mercantile toward the little home, Blue trotting ahead on her stubby legs.

"Is this all there was to the town?" Jim asked.

"Claraville was bigger in its day, but this is all that was left when I bought the town. 'Course, there's

some old line shacks remaining in the hills around here, left over from the mining days. And some chimneys still are standing from houses outside of the town. But it never was much of a town; just one that sprang up around the mines and died out when the mining moved on to other places. It wasn't meant to last."

"What did they mine for?"

"Gold. Silver. Copper. This desert's rich with it. The hills around here sparkle when the sun hits it just right."

"Wow! It must have been exciting to be a miner back then, digging out all that precious metal."

They stopped in front of Lonesome Al's abode.

"Maybe," Lonesome Al said, looking out at the desert. "But mostly it was a tough life, especially with the hardships of the desert. They were men willing to work hard toward their dreams without knowing whether they would ever strike it rich or not." He turned the knob on the shanty's door. "Well, step inside."

Chris and Jim surveyed the tidy surroundings as Lonesome Al ushered them in with the lantern. The furniture, all made of wood, included a narrow bed; a wash-basin stand complete with basin and pitcher; a round table identical to the two in the Cantina; and a chair. A

battered deck of playing cards lay neatly stacked on the table, waiting with an empty tin cup beside it. Beyond the immediate pool of light, they could see shelves stacked with cans stretching into the shadows. Blue shuffled to a bed of blankets beside the stone fireplace and lay down, resting her muzzle on her paws and gazing up at Lonesome Al with droopy eyes.

"Just make yourselves comfortable," Lonesome Al offered, reaching into the shadows and pulling out a wood crate. "Here's something to perch on. I believe I've got another one here."

The boys took the two crates he held out and tipped them up on their sides, settling down astride them.

"I don't have any extra cups, so we'll just have to pass the bottle 'round. Will you hand me that guitar?"

Chris gave it to him after he had settled into his chair. Lonesome Al took a long, slow drink from the bottle, letting the bourbon slide down his throat. He passed the bottle to Chris, then grasped the guitar's neck firmly and began to pick chords.

"This is the song I wrote. Maybe you've heard it."

"You've shared with me the things it takes," he sang in a rough, strong voice. "To make a dream come true. I'd rather roam the night forever than spend a day without

you, my dear lady Blue."

"I don't think we've heard it before; we don't listen to country/western music," Jim explained politely. "But it sounds good."

"Yes, sir; ain't anything I like better than to pick my guitar and sip my bourbon in the cool of the night."

"It feels so different here in the desert," Jim noted, tinges of awe in his voice. "It feels so wide open, so infinite."

"Aye. I like the desert for that. Here, young man; you give it a try now."

Chris accepted the guitar from Lonesome Al a bit reluctantly.

"What do you want me to play?"

"Just play what comes to you."

"Okay, but it's been a while; I've lost a lot of the feel for it."

Chris hesitated, then began picking single notes with a flowing motion. The notes rose and fell like a gusting wind, finally crescendoing to a major-seventh chord progression that evoked a melancholy feeling in the three men drinking bourbon in a deserted desert town.

When Chris finally stopped strumming and put the

guitar aside, Jim passed him the last sip of bourbon remaining in the bottle.

"Wow, that was a haunting song," he said admiringly.

"You play real well, boy," Lonesome Al complimented him. "You ever try writing any songs?"

"I used to, when I was younger. But I've been too busy studying since I got into college. And then I had to sell my guitar awhile back so I could buy my school books."

"You should've kept the guitar and found another way to get them. You could've even made money for books by playing your guitar."

"No, I couldn't. I'm not good enough."

"You're plenty good enough. That was a pretty piece of playing you just did."

"Well, once I have my engineering degree I'll be able to get a good job that will enable me to afford plenty of guitars."

"If you're not too busy making money to find playing time," Lonesome Al said drily. "Which would you rather do with your time if you didn't have to worry about money?"

"Between playing music and engineering? I'd much rather play my guitar, if I didn't have to worry about my income. But that's just a dream."

"Well, the only way I know to make dreams come true is to pursue them until you make them happen."

"That makes sense," Jim agreed. Chris didn't reply; he appeared lost in thought.

"Are you about ready to hit the sack?" Jim stood and punched his partner lightly on the shoulder.

"Sure."

"Let's go get the gear out of the Bug. Lonesome Al, do you mind if we sleep outside? We want to sleep under the stars."

"That's just fine."

The two visitors stretched their legs, trying to shake the stiffness that came from sitting so long. Feeling the effects of the alcohol they had drunk, they staggered somewhat as they shuffled through the gritty sand to where the Volkswagen was parked. They unloaded their gear and picked out a spot on the wooden porch of the Cantina on which to lay their sleeping bags. Lonesome Al came to check on them, with Blue following, as the boys were settling down to get some sleep.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked hospitably.

"No, I think we'll be fine. Thanks a lot for everything. We really appreciate it."

"It was no trouble at all. Come on, Blue. It's time we settled down ourselves, old girl."

Chris and Jim watched the man and the hound as they returned to the shanty, the lantern bobbing in Al's hand.

"What an interesting old man. I'm glad we met him."

"Yeah. Who would've thought somebody would be crazy enough to live all alone in the middle of the desert?"

"Well, at least he enjoys it." Jim turned on his side and pulled the bag closer around him, closing his eyes. "Good-night."

"Good-night." Chris sighed and settled down to sleep.

The rising sun was already making the sleeping bags uncomfortably hot when they awoke the next morning.

"Mm. Boy, did I sleep soundly," Chris yawned and wiped the sand from the corners of his eyes.

"Must've been all that bourbon," Jim remarked as he stretched and yawned, too. Then his eyes widened. "Oh, my God! Chris!"

"What?" But no explanation was necessary as Chris saw what his partner was viewing. The false-front and roof of the Cantina were gone, eaten by fire. Of the buildings that had stood the night before, only blackened and splintered frames remained. The smell of freshly-cut

lumber had been replaced with the acrid odor of smoke biting in their nostrils.

"There's been a fire!"

"How? Why didn't we wake up?"

They jumped to their feet, looking around in bewildered amazement. The old pickup still sat parked on the dusty road, but now the windshield was missing, the rear window was webbed with cracks, and the tires were flat and rotted.

"I don't get it. What's going on?"

"Look at Lonesome Al's house!"

Jim looked. Only the stone chimney remained where the shanty had stood. Slightly to the left of it was a cross made with thick sticks.

"What's that? Was that there last night?" Jim crossed towards it, stepping lightly from bare foot to bare foot over the gravel. Chris bent and slipped on his shoes before catching up to Jim at the cross.

"Well, what is it?"

Jim pointed silently. Chris stooped to read the single word scratched into the crudely fashioned cross. "Blue."

"It wasn't a dream," Jim said, primarily to himself. "I know it wasn't a dream."

"I don't know what's going on, but I have a hunch we aren't going to find Lonesome Al anywhere around this morning."

"The fire that destroyed this town couldn't have occurred last night," Jim noted with wonder. "The smell of smoke isn't strong enough for it to have happened any time recently."

They turned back to their gear.

"Let's just get out of here. We need to get going before the day really heats up, anyway."

Lapsing into silence, they rolled their sleeping bags and packed the gear back into the car. They climbed in and Chris started the engine.

"Just slightly under half a tank of fuel. We'll have enough to make it back to Mojave." He sighed and put the car in gear, turning sideways to give the remains of the Cantina one last look.

"Wait a second!" he said suddenly, startling Jim as he jumped out of the car and darted into the barely-standing shell of the saloon. In a moment he was back, carrying a worn wooden object. Jim recognized it as the guitar, though now it was blacked in one spot and its strings were coated with rust and soot.

"I just had to get this," Chris explained as he laid

the fragile instrument delicately on the back seat.

"Somehow, I don't think Lonesome Al would mind," Jim nodded as the VW swung around in a U and chugged off, leaving Claraville behind them.

NO SUCH THING AS SACRED

If I'd been paying more attention then, I might have realized things were about to change for good. But for the first fourteen years of my life, everything had stayed pretty much the same, as familiar and comfortable to me as my bedroom in my parents' home. It never occurred to me that I would quit being pals with Earl, or that my best friend Tom would suddenly move away to another state. I can still remember that last summer day we spent together.

The dull drone of cicadas that had lulled me to sleep the night before had risen to an urgent shriek by the time I awoke. I could already feel the heat from the bright, morning light filtering through the gauzy curtains over my window. It was going to be another scorcher of a day. The sound of my mother humming as she rattled dishes in the kitchen sink downstairs greeted my ears; I'd overslept. Tom would probably be along any minute.

I grabbed the Levis lying crumpled beside my bed and pulled them on in one rapid motion. Snatching a T-shirt from where it was draped over the chair, I bounded down

the stairs, pulling the shirt on as I went.

"Good morning," my mother called out at the sound of my step. "You missed breakfast."

"That's okay. I'll just have a glass of milk. Tom's coming over."

She turned from the sink to look at me, a few soapsuds glistening on her wrist.

"A growing teenager like you really ought to have something more substantial, Chris. I was going to wake you to have breakfast with your father before he left for work, but I thought I'd let you sleep late since it's the last day of summer vacation.

I groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Just think, you're starting high school." My mother loved sentimentality. "I can hardly believe it. It seems like it's only been a short while since I was in high school myself. Those were some of the best times of my life; so bubbly. Going to football games and dances; going to the mountains for retreat with all my friends from St. Patrick's..."

"Yeah, Mom; I know." I cut her reverie short. "But you've got to remember I'm not the same as you."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning don't expect me to be just like you. I have

my own life, you know."

"Well, excuse me for thinking we might have anything in common." I saw the wounded look in her eyes before she turned back to the sink.

I was sorry for a moment that I had hurt her feelings, but then the anger I often felt towards her flooded back, making me feel justified in my meanness. After all, I didn't want her meddling in my life, or trying to turn me into some sort of panty-waist. A reputation like that would've finished me for sure in high school.

The clatter of someone rapping on the kitchen door's window pane startled me. I turned to see Tom poking his friendly head around the door.

"Hey, Chris. Hi, Mrs. Matthews," he greeted us, wiping his sneakers' soles on the doormat.

"Good morning, Tom," my mother smiled. She always did like Tom; she was glad we were friends although she wasn't really sociable with his parents. "And what are you young men planning for this gorgeous summer day?" She removed the bird seed from the cupboard and began filling a bright plastic feeder.

"Well, we need to ask you about that," Tom did all the talking as we had previously planned. "We're going to hang out at our tree-fort today, and we were hoping you'd

give us permission to spend the night there. My dad already said it was okay with him."

"Isn't your fort all the way on the other side of town?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's out along the highway, just at the outskirts. It's not far to walk from here if you cut along the river bank."

"It's by the Harpers' property, isn't it?" I could see her frowning as she returned the seed to its shelf. "You know I want you boys to stay away from them. There's no telling what kind of trouble you'd land in."

"It's just the eldest boy that gets in trouble, Mrs. Matthews," Tom explained patiently. He knew how to deal with my mom. "Earl Harper's in our grade; we've known him since kindergarten and he's no problem."

"C'mon, Mom," I implored. "It's no big deal. You know you can trust us. Besides, it's the last day of summer vacation. Please let us camp out tonight."

"Well, I don't know," she hesitated. I held my breath. "Tomorrow is Saturday..."

I realized what was causing her concern and pounced to assure her. "Oh, don't worry. I'll make it home in plenty of time to go to Catechism class tomorrow."

She looked at Tom and me; our faces strained for her

verdict. "Well, all right. But make sure you're home by nine so I can drive you to St. Patrick's."

"Thanks, Mom!" I sprang up and gave her arm a squeeze. "Come on, Tom; let's go grab my gear."

I had assembled my pack of necessities the night before in anticipation of convincing my mother to let us go. I retrieved it from under my bed and hoisted it to my shoulder.

"Where's your gear, Tom?"

"I left it at my house. We can pick it up on our way."

The weight of my pack felt good on my shoulder as we trotted downstairs and out the door; it was a constant reminder we were headed on another adventure. It seems like every time Tom and I went somewhere together, something would happen. Once when we went fishing we discovered two escaped convicts living in a cave by the river bank. We got our names in the paper for that. And whenever we went to the county fair together, one of us would always find money--as much as a twenty-dollar bill a couple of times.

We walked wordlessly for a few minutes, feeling the sun on our backs. I always felt so comfortable doing things with Tom that talking wasn't necessary. We

understood each other. I wish my parents could've let me be me like Tom did.

"Does your mom give you a hard time like that?" I couldn't picture Tom's mother behaving like mine. His parents were more interested in being buddies. "Did she make you have to practically beg her to let you camp out tonight?"

"My mom's not home," Tom answered evenly. "She's at my grandmother's."

I knew what that meant. "Oh, sorry." I felt awkward. "Give her a couple weeks," I told him with artificial assurance.

In the twelve years Tom and I had been friends, I'd come to know his family's routine well. Once a year, every year, his mother would announce at the dinner table how "fed up" she was with everything and how life was "wasting away." Then Tom's father would throw down his fork and say, "For chrissakes, are you going to start that again?" Total chaos would follow as they began yelling, fighting over each other's faults.

"Isn't it ridiculous?" Tom asked me once when I'd witnessed a confrontation. After his parents had screamed at each other long enough, Tom's mother would inevitably began crying. At that point she would pack her suitcase

and announce that she was "running away." Mr. Mueller never tried to stop her. She always went home to her mother's up in Indiana or Illinois; somewhere. She always came back in two or three weeks, meek and never mentioning anything about having left.

Tom was used to his parents' ways; he just minded his own business and kept right on with his own life. He usually hung around my house when we weren't out doing something. I'm glad my parents weren't like his. It would've driven me crazy.

We reached his driveway and turned simultaneously.

"My dad's still home. He doesn't have to be at the lot until noon. He's working late tonight." Tom's father was a used car salesman over in Jackson, the small city near our town.

Tom opened the front door. The house was dark after the white sunlight; all the curtains were still drawn. The bright blue glare of the TV stabbed out toward the couch where Mr. Mueller sat, still in his underwear.

"I'll go grab my stuff," Tom's voice was low in my ear.

"Well, Chris!" I heard Tom's father turn on that booming, artificially cheerful voice. "How the hell are you?"

"Just fine, Mr. Mueller," I replied, trapped into being sociable. Tom's father was always twice as talkative when Mrs. Mueller was away. "What are you watching?"

"Destination Tokyo, with Cary Grant. Great flick." He got up and started coming towards me. "Did I ever tell you about when I was in the war?"

"Here I am," Tom reappeared with his gear. I shot him a helpless look.

"Did I ever tell you boys about the time we was flying corpses?" Mr. Mueller was warming up already. "I'll tell you, if you thump 'em real hard in the gut, they'll sit straight up. Damndest thing you ever saw. Anyway, there was this snot-nosed kid they let pilot. He came from one of those fancy military schools; thought he knew everything. He flew a load of casualties with me. I teased him the whole trip, spooking him, saying, 'Listen! You hear something moving back there?'--stuff like that. When we landed, I told him I was going to check the noises out. As soon as I got back there, I let out a scream that would've chilled a polar bear's blood. 'Captain!' I hollered. He comes running in, and I hit the biggest corpse as hard as I could in the gut. It let out a belching sound and sat straight up, coming face to face with that punk Captain. Stared him square in the eye. I

thought that Captain was going to die of fright right on the spot. Funniest damn thing I ever saw. I'll bet he had to clean out his boots later, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, Dad," Tom finally managed to cut him off. "Well, we're leaving now." We hustled out the door before Mr. Mueller could start talking again.

"Sorry about that," Tom apologized, although we both knew it wasn't his fault.

"It's okay."

We lapsed back into contented silence as we strolled along. The swishing of our denim-covered legs blended with the whirring of thousands of insects. I could smell the fresh scent of grass mingled with dust in the steadily warming air. At the end of the street, we turned to cut through the vacant lot. Tall grass, gold and dry from the summer's heat, crackled stiffly as we waded through it until finally emerging on the clover covered bank of the river.

It wasn't a wide river, one could easily throw a rock to the other side of the green, mossy water. We stopped and stared at the surface for a moment, wishing it were possible to see what lay hidden in its depths, before turning to follow its meandering path.

"I wish my parents weren't so strict," I complained

to Tom. "Here I am, fifteen years old almost, and my mom still acts as if camping out somewhere other than our backyard is a big deal."

"Yeah, your mom's definitely weird about some things."

"I guess it's because her parents were that way. At least she doesn't make me go to parochial school like she had to."

"With those uniforms, you'd be an outcast for sure," Tom laughed.

"Yeah. It's hard enough as it is to avoid getting harassed. I'm afraid being a freshman this year is going to be a drag."

"At least we're friends with Earl. No one will mess with him."

"That's because he's cool. He's got a reputation."

"Plus he's got an older brother that would tear anybody to shreds just for the fun of it. Nobody wants to get on his bad side."

"Is his brother still around? I thought Kurt had left town for good. The sheriff's still looking for him. He knows Kurt's the one that blew up the ticket booth at the drive-in."

"What was he trying to do? Rob it?"

"I don't know. You think he'd do something like that?" The thought hadn't occurred to me before. "Earl only told me that Kurt was trying out a bomb he made from a bunch of firecrackers. I thought it was just, you know, a prank."

"I wonder how he constructed his bomb," Tom was curious.

"I just hope my mom doesn't hear about it. I don't need another lecture about how the Harpers are nothing but bad news."

"No kidding. Even my parents tell me to stay away from them, and they don't usually say stuff like that."

"I've heard Mrs. Harper's addled from drinking so much."

"They both are. And ol' man Harper is mean as can be, too. I'm glad he doesn't get around much anymore."

"At least Earl's cool. Did you tell him we were coming today?"

"Yeah. He said to stop at the fence and whistle, as usual."

"You know, if my mom ever found out how much we pal around with Earl, she'd never let me out of the house." I was probably exaggerating, but to this day I'm glad I never told her about my dealings with Earl.

We instinctively grew quieter as we drew closer to the Harpers' property. This particular time we spied Earl bent over the engine of a car as we stopped at the wood rail fence. His younger brother, Walter, was beside him, hunched over just like Earl. They both were shirtless; their skin was a rich cocoa from constant exposure to the sun.

Tom let out a low whistle with a steady blow. Earl looked around and saw us. He waved a wrench, then disappeared into the car briefly. He emerged without the tool, wiping his greasy hands on a rag. He said something we couldn't hear to Walter, who scampered off. Earl crossed to where we stood at the fence, striding casually with that swinging gait of his.

"Hey, dudes," he greeted us in his deep voice.

"Hey, Earl," Tom and I relaxed when we heard his friendly tone.

"What're you up to?" Tom asked him.

"Trying to get my brother's car running for him. He told Wally and me he'd give us twenty dollars if we can fix it for him."

"Where's your brother at?" I was surprised he hadn't left town.

"Oh, hanging out here and there," Earl said airily,

giving me a cool stare as he continued wiping his hands. "Why?"

"I heard he left." I was embarrassed I'd asked such a dumb question. It wasn't really any of my business.

"Yeah. He's going to blow this town as soon as his car's fixed."

A rustling of the grass redirected our attention to where Wally was emerging from some trees by the fence. A large paper bag filled his arms; he could barely see past it.

"Got it, Earl," he panted. "Now let's go."

"I'll tell you, I'm about ready for a swim," Earl squinted as he noted the sun's overhead position. "How about you guys?"

I hadn't planned on going swimming, but I was willing to go along with whatever Earl wanted to do. It was fun hanging around him.

"Sounds good to me," Tom said, and I nodded in agreement.

"Well, let's go," Wally prodded.

"Is that your gear there?" I pointed at the bag.

"You'll see," Earl teased. "Race you fools. Last one in is sissy." He took off running toward the river before we even comprehended his words. Tom and I sprang

after him, our packs jostling and impeding our attempts to catch him.

"Wait up! Fer chrissakes!" We could hear Wally cussing as he tottered clumsily behind, his short legs unable to move quickly with the weight of the bag.

Tom and I reached the river bank within a step of each other. We dropped our packs and began pulling off shoes, socks, shirts, and belts.

"Come on, you sissies!" Earl splashed water tauntingly at us from where he was already dog-paddling mid-river. "I'm going to be the first one to the swing!" He turned and began stroking down river toward where a large tree stood, growing on the opposite bank from Tom and me. A thick rope with a couple of knots in it hung from a branch growing over the river. Tom and I dove together and began racing for the rope, water splashing white all around.

I stroked furiously, but the weight of my wet, denim jeans slowed me down. By the time Tom and I reached where the rope hung, Earl already had hold of it.

"You guys are sure slow. What are you, a couple of wimps?" Earl was enjoying his status.

"Must've been that head start you took, you cheater," I retorted good-naturedly.

"Oh yeah?" Earl inhaled and ducked under water. I felt him grab my feet just in time to hold my breath before he pulled me beneath the surface.

My eyes instinctively opened, but the green of the water allowed no visibility. I tried to bend and free my ankles from Earl's grip, but he was dragging me with too much force. I twisted helplessly, vainly attempting to kick free. Damn that Earl! I didn't have much air left; I needed to get back to the surface. I struggled to bring my right knee closer to my chest, then reached down and hammered with my fist on Earl's hand. Still he hung onto me. Panicking now, I reached out. Something soft brushed at my fingers--Earl's hair. I grabbed and pulled frantically. The hands released my ankles and I kicked up to the surface. Air wooshed into my lungs in a relieving blast.

"Ouch! My hair!" Earl popped to the surface beside me, hollering and holding his head. "Jesus Christ, what are you trying to do?"

"Sorry about that, Earl. I just needed some air; I was going to drown," I apologized, still breathing deeply and trying to slow my wildly thumping heart.

"Hey, you guys," Wally was standing where we had left our stuff on the bank. "Wait for me." He began wriggling

out of his clothes.

"I'm going off the swing first," Earl snatched the rope and began climbing up the bank.

"Earl!" I was shocked to see his naked body.

"What?"

"You're skinny-dipping!" Even Tom was surprised.

"Sure. It's the best way to swim."

"Aren't you afraid someone will see you?" I looked around, half expecting to see someone watching us.

"Nah. No one knows about this spot anyway, except the girls I've brought up here to go skinny-dipping."

You've brought girls up here?" Tom and I were impressed. "Who?"

"Mary Jo, for one. And that girl you always sit next to, Chris--Sara what's-her-name."

I could hardly believe it. Earl had my admiration if he could persuade a girl like Sara to go swimming in the nude with him. My stomach flip-flopped at the thought.

"Cowabunga!" Earl whooped as he flew overhead on the swing, plopping into the river at the end of the rope's arc.

"You want to dry off our Levi's on the bank while we swim?" Tom asked me. "I'm going to." He sloshed to the bank and began unbuttoning his jeans.

"C'mon, you turd; move." Wally splashed beside me.

"I was just waiting for Tom to move out of the way," I retorted and paddled toward the shore.

"Toss me the rope, Earl," Tom called, standing on the knoll beside the tree's trunk.

"You'll love it. It's such a rush!" Earl swung the rope to Tom. I scrambled up the bank and stripped, spreading the jeans out to dry in the afternoon sun. I shivered in a slight breeze as I watched Tom swing and awaited my turn. It was awhile before I stopped feeling self-conscious, as if my mother would suddenly appear and see us nude.

I don't remember how long we stayed there, taking turns dropping into the river and racing each other. It must've been at least a couple of hours, for the sun was well into the western sky when we stopped. Tom and I retrieved our Levis; only a few patches remained damp. We held them above our heads as we paddled back to where we left our stuff. I used my T-shirt to dry off my body, then wiggled into my jeans. I put on my sneakers without socks and stowed the rest of my clothes in my pack. I waited for the others to finish.

Earl grabbed the brown paper bag and started off, leading the way along the bank in the direction of where

the river crossed the highway. I went behind him, with Wally and Tom bringing up the rear.

The dirt trail we followed had been trampled into the grass and clover by our many excursions to the tree. Even before Tom, Earl, and I had built the fort, we used to come this way to play Army undisturbed by concerned adults.

Just as the river approached the highway a field of tall grass stretched out to the left. It was easily an acre of land, clear but for the lone, majestic weeping willow which rose up as high as any two-story house. We left the river bank and began cutting through the field toward the tree.

"Are you and Wally planning on spending the night, Earl?" I asked.

"Sure. I've been staying here the last few nights; my stuff's already up in the fort."

We parted the dense, leafy vines and stepped under the umbrella of light green. The shade felt cool on my skin. Earl set the bag he was carrying down by the base of the tree.

"We're here," he called out.

"What didja bring?" A dark head peered over the edge of the wooden platform we had built high in the branches,

surprising me so that my mouth dropped open.

"I couldn't get any more food," Earl called up to who I now recognized as Kurt, Earl's older brother. "But Wally pilfered some of the old man's beer for us. A whole case."

"Great. Bring it on up." Kurt's head retracted out of view.

"What's he doing here?" I hissed in a low tone.

"Camping out. Anything wrong with that?" Earl challenged.

"No, I guess not." There wasn't much I could do about it. Earl began shinnying up the tree.

"Did you know Kurt was here?" I whispered to Tom.

"No."

"Do you think we should stay?"

"Whatever. I can live with it, either way. "Do you want to go?"

I thought for a minute. I really wanted to camp out, and I certainly didn't want to explain to my mother why I wasn't doing just that. "We'll stay. I just hope no one finds out."

"Toss the basket down, Earl," Wally hollered. Immediately the blue plastic carrying basket we'd taken from the local five-and-dime dropped down, bouncing when

it reached the end of its rope's length. Wally began removing the cans of beer from the bag and placing them in the basket.

"Okay, haul it up." We watched the full basket ascend. When it reached the platform Wally began climbing the tree. Tom followed. I waited for them to reach the fort, then placed my foot on the familiar knot of wood and reached for the first branch. By swinging with my legs I hauled myself up, going from branch to branch until I pulled myself onto the platform high in the tree.

"How's it going?" Earl's brother Kurt grunted, sitting up from where he was reclining on a pile of sleeping bags to make room for me. With all of us up there, there wasn't a whole lot of room to move around. A couple of us would have to sleep under the tree; no way could we all stretch out up there.

"Hey, Kurt. How do you like our fort?"

"It'll do. Hey, Wally, hand me a brew."

"Sure, Kurt. I get one, too, huh?"

"Help yourselves, all of you. We'll have us a party."

Earl grabbed one and popped the top. A bit of foam frothed out, which he slurped.

"Here, Tom," he held it out. Tom took it.

"Chris?"

"Uh, no thanks." I tried to sound as casual as possible so they wouldn't think I was wimping out. I had never drunk a whole beer before in my life. I'd tried sips before; it tasted so bad I could hardly believe anyone could like it. It was definitely a taste one acquired.

"Ah, go on," Kurt urged, placing one in my lap. "I insist."

I looked at everyone watching me. "Okay, if you insist." I pulled the tab with all the nonchalance I could muster and took a swig. The sour taste made me almost grimace, but I was determined to drink it as if it were nothing unusual for me. I'd heard about the keg parties the football players had after home games; maybe if they heard I drank they would invite me to go to one.

"Got a smoke?" Kurt punched Earl in the arm.

"Sure." Earl extracted a mangled pack of Marlboros from his back pocket. Earl was the only kid in our grade who smoked; even the older boys were impressed by his ability to blow perfect little smoke rings through larger rings. It was cool.

"Let me have one," Wally whined. Earl gave him one, then extended the pack.

"Anyone else?"

"I'll pass," Tom said. I shook my head no and took another swallow of beer. It wasn't so bad if I took small sips, and it helped to wet my dry mouth. I wondered how long the smell of beer would be on my breath; I didn't want my parents to find out. I'd get put on restriction for the rest of my life.

"It sure has been a nice day," Tom remarked to no one in particular. I looked around. From that height I could see the asphalt stripe of highway stretching out horizontally before us. The green river ran perpendicular to it, passing under a short bridge where it intersected the highway. The white concrete guard rails were sending out long shadows in the late afternoon sunlight; twilight was fast approaching.

"Yeah, it has been nice," I commented aloud. "Too bad school starts Monday."

"Hey, check out that car," Earl interrupted. He pointed to a dirty white Ford which was swaying down the highway, not going too fast, weaving over the center line and back across its lane onto the shoulder. "He's having trouble finding the road."

As if in slow motion, we watched as the car came closer, careening and raising dust from the shoulder. The

sound of grating metal made me shiver as the car hit the bridge's stone guardrail. The Ford scraped the entire length of the bridge's rail, finally bouncing off the end pillar with a big bang. It spun around the road and came to rest in the field, its metal mangled and tires flat.

"Wow! Did you see that?" Wally shouted needlessly. All of our attention was already on the vehicle.

A flash of lights appeared from the direction the car had come.

"That looks like the deputy sheriff. He must've seen 'em."

"Sh! Be quiet! We don't want them to know we're up here."

We watched in mute excitement as the deputy screeched to a halt in the road. He got out and trotted to the Ford.

"Are you hurt?" He tried to peer into the car. "Would you please step out of the car?"

The driver emerged, staggering and reaching several times for the car before steadying himself.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"I don't know. Some stranger," Tom whispered back.

"It's some old drunk Mexican," Earl said.

"How much have you had to drink?" The deputy's words

carried plainly to where we were hiding, but the answer was indistinguishable.

"Come on; let's take a ride to the station." The deputy took the man by the arm and ushered him to the back seat of the patrol car. We watched wordlessly as they drove away.

"C'mon," Kurt straightened up so quickly that his knees cracked and startled me. "Let's go check out the car."

He dropped from the platform to lower branches, then jumped the last six feet to the ground. Earl and Wally scrambled down after him. Tom and I looked at each other for a moment before he shrugged and gestured for me to go next. I hugged the thick branch extending from the fort and swung out, finding the next lower branch with my feet. Steadying myself carefully, I let go of the upper branch and swiftly squatted down to wrap my legs and arms around the lower one. I swung upside down, detached my legs and dropped the rest of the way to the ground as the others had done. I waited for Tom before catching up with the Harpers where they were admiring the wreck.

"Look at that wheel. It's practically horizontal," I whistled at the sight.

"Yup; he bent the hell out of that axle."

"Ripped that front fender panel open like it was a tin can."

"That frame is mangled! Come look at how twisted the steering column is. He sure won't be driving this car anywhere," Earl noted. "Hey, the keys are still in it." He opened the door and reached inside. "I can't get them out; they're jammed."

"Let me try," Kurt pushed past us. He jiggled the keys, but they remained stuck in the ignition.

"Wally, go look under the hood and see if there's any salvageable parts we can use. Earl, you help me," Kurt ordered.

Tom and I felt like invisible bystanders as we watched the three brothers work. Kurt had Earl pull on the steering wheel in an attempt to straighten the column long enough for him to remove the keys.

"There!" We heard him breathe as the jangling keys finally came free. "Now let's see what he's got in the trunk."

"Hey, Kurt! We might be able to use this carburetor if you can find me a screwdriver," Wally used a stage whisper so his voice wouldn't carry too far.

Kurt bent to open the trunk. Brown paper bags crackled as he lifted the lid.

"Groceries! Great! Let's see what we got here. Mm, chicken! That'll be great for roasting on the fire tonight!"

"You think we should take it, just like that?" My uncertainty was obvious in my voice. "What if he comes back?"

"So what?" Kurt stopped rummaging and glared at me.

"He won't be back tonight. He'll be sitting in jail for a least twenty-four hours for driving drunk," Wally answered matter-of-factly.

"It won't hurt if we take it," Tom spoke up. "It will just sit in his trunk and spoil in the heat otherwise. Like Wally says, he won't be back for a day or two."

"I guess it won't matter." I was glad Tom made me see it rationally; it was reassuring.

Kurt renewed his rummaging. "All the rest of this is just baby food and diapers. Oh well; the chicken will do just fine." He handed the package of meat to Earl. "Let's see if we can find some tools. A lug wrench; big deal." It clattered as Kurt tossed it aside. "Here's a slot screwdriver; give it a try." He tossed it to Wally. Wally looked at me and Tom and shrugged before going back to where the hood was raised.

"I'll have that carb off for you in a sec, Kurt; no problem. That guy ain't going to be driving this car anyway." He began stripping the engine of its carburetor.

"Wonder what else this guy has," Kurt ducked inside the car and began prowling through the glove box.

"Hey, what's this?" I saw him snatch a dangling object from where it had been draped over the rear view mirror. "Looks like a necklace." He climbed out to get a better look in the now-fading twilight. In his hand lay a chain of beads, with a cross affixed to it. I knew immediately what it was.

"It's a rosary," I blurted out. Kurt looked up at me, then back to the chain.

"This looks like turquoise here in the center of the cross."

"Aw, it ain't worth anything. Go ahead and leave it," I feigned a casual air. The cool evening breeze was beginning to cause me to tremble.

"It's got to be worth something. It's got turquoise in it."

"Let me see it." He extended it just enough for me to catch sight of the small blue stone set in the center of the silver cross. "That probably isn't even real. It looks fake to me." I tried to convince him it didn't

warrant taking.

"Maybe you're right," Kurt conceded, looking more closely at it. "Maybe I'll just give it to one of my girlfriends instead."

"Come on, Kurt. Just put it back," I wheedled.

"Why should I?" His voice was a snarl now. I gave up trying to sound nice.

"Because it isn't yours. It doesn't mean anything to you; it means something to him."

"So what."

"You don't understand," I was stammering from exasperation. "It's his rosary. It's sacred."

"Ain't no such thing as sacred to me. It's a matter of getting what you can while the getting is good."

"But it's sacred to him! It means more to him than the few lousy bucks you'll get for it!" I wanted so much for him to see it my way and put it back; I didn't notice I was making him mad.

"What's the matter with you anyway, Matthews?" Kurt was definitely getting riled. He came up close to me, his left shoulder practically touching mine.

"Yah, what's the big deal?" Even Earl was highly irritated with me. I hadn't meant to cause a confrontation; I just didn't want them to take the rosary. I

stared at them as coolly as I could despite the thumping in my temples and ears.

"It's no big deal. I just figured since it was junk, you might as well leave it for the guy. It's probably sentimental to him." Kurt backed off. "Well, I'm gonna keep it."

"Whatever." I shrugged to show him it was cool with me. "I just hope nothing happens to you because of it."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. Like a curse or something. Bad karma."

"You think it'd be bad news to take it?" Earl was curious.

"Definitely," Tom came to my aid. "It's a religious object. If you take it from its owner, you'll bring bad luck on yourself."

"Plagued with bad luck," I ad libbed. Earl looked at Kurt uneasily, not sure what to think.

"That turquoise does look kind of cheap," Earl told Kurt. "It might not be real."

"Ah, you're probably right. I'll bet it's not worth as much as I thought." Kurt avoided looking at me. "Got that carb yet, Wally?"

"Right here," Wally held up his prize.

"Then let's head back to the fort," Kurt turned to look at Tom and me. A slow grin started across his face. Instead of starting for the fort, he pivoted suddenly. I saw his arm cock back and then hurtle something high into the air. Silver flashed in the last light of dusk and I heard the tinkle of beads too late to protest as the rosary flew across the field to fall in the obscurity of tall grass, lost forever.

I quit hanging around Earl after that day. I just couldn't look at him the same way as before. Every time I saw him at school I would remember what we had done to that stranger's car; it made me think of vultures picking at a carcass. It turned my stomach queasy.

And then Tom moved away three weeks after school started. His mother came and got him one night; she'd found a job and was leaving Mr. Mueller for good. I never saw Tom after that; we wrote but it was never quite the same.

Sometimes when I missed Tom the most, especially during my high-school years, I would go walking in the field where the weeping willow stood. Although I never set out consciously to do it, I would look through the grass in search of the rosary. It was like a part of me

felt that if I could find it, maybe my life would be restored to what it had been before that day. Of course, the car had long since been towed away, and I never did find the beads. But it passed time to look, and gave me a chance to think.

I still remember when Tom and I were in the tree alone later that last summer night. We were watching the flames of the fire where the Harpers were gathered below. Their laughter as they told one another jokes would erupt occasionally above the singing night insects. I was hugging my knees to my chest, trying to control my shivering.

"Do you think anything really is sacred?" Tom asked me.

I tried to think about it, but my stomach was all in an uproar and the smell of roasting chicken was making me feel more and more nauseous.

"I don't know, Tom," I shook my head. "I don't know."

VITA

Linda S. Morgan was born on August 31, 1961. She was raised primarily in Southern California, living first in Orange County and later in the Mojave Desert. She received her Associate in Arts degree with High Honors from Antelope Valley College in June 1980, and was awarded life membership in the Alpha Gamma Sigma Honor Society.

After teaching handicapped children in Alaska, she moved to Tennessee to resume her education. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with High Honors from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in December 1983.

In 1984 she was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship while she worked towards completing a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This degree was awarded with Honors in June 1987.

Ms. Morgan enjoys traveling a great deal and plans to pursue a career in free-lance writing after graduation.