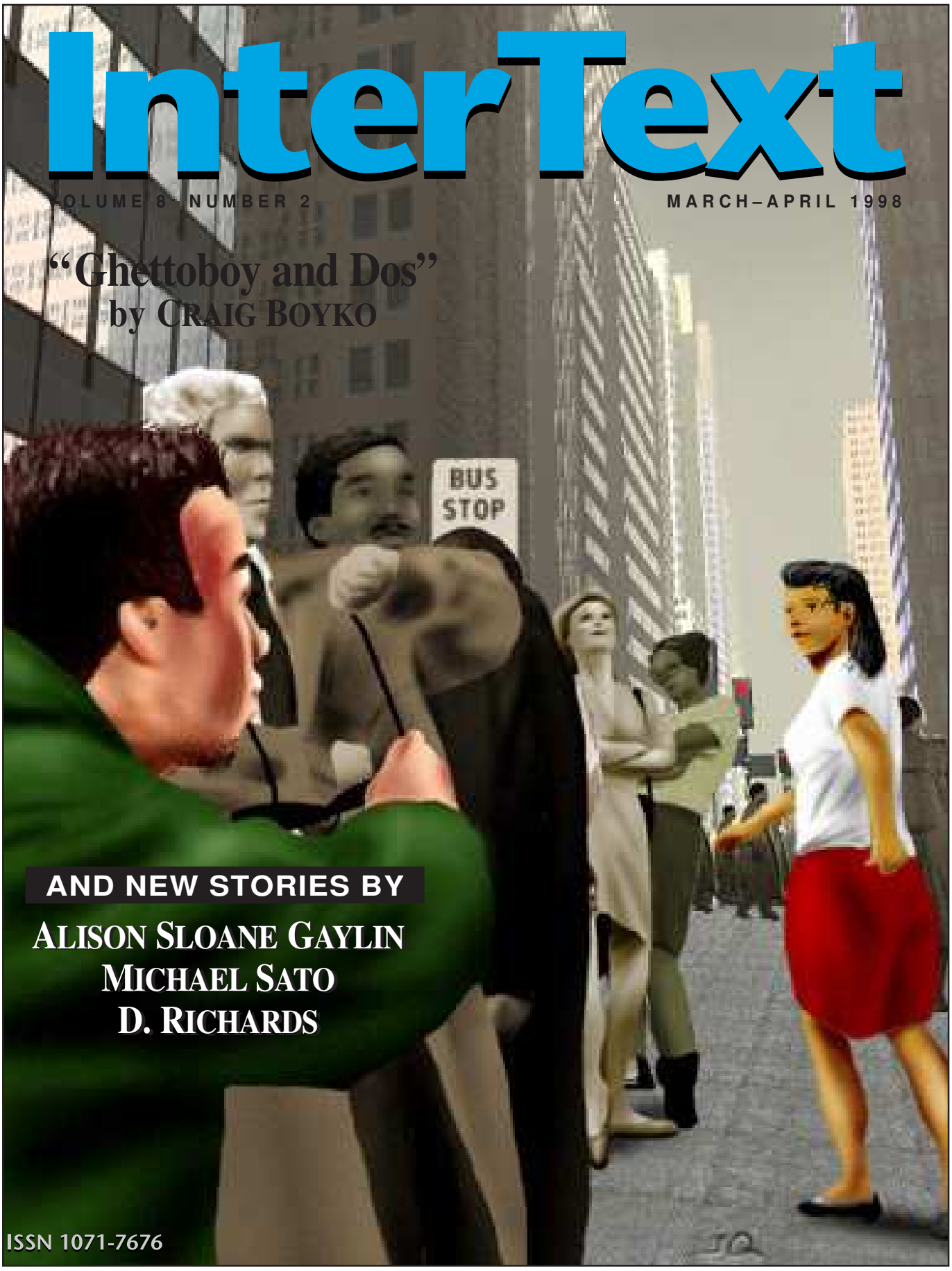
InterText

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2 MARCH–APRIL 1998

"Ghettoboy and Dos"
by CRAIG BOYKO



AND NEW STORIES BY

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ISSN 1071-7676

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MARCH–APRIL 1998
VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2

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***InterText* Vol. 8, No. 2.** *InterText* (ISSN 1071-7676) is published electronically every two months. Reproduction of this magazine is permitted as long as the magazine is not sold (either by itself or as part of a collection) and the entire text of the issue remains unchanged. Copyright © 1998 Jason Snell. All stories Copyright © 1998 by their respective authors. For more information about *InterText,* send a message to *info@intertext.com*. For submission guidelines, send a message to *guidelines@intertext.com.*

Getting Rid of January

ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN

Wherein our protagonist discovers the dangers of taking snapshots, playing Scrabble, and doing a favor for a friend.

EMERGENCY ROOMS INTIMIDATE ME, WHICH IS A problem because I'm in them a lot. I'm not sickly, just accident-prone.

Since I still haven't gotten around to finding myself a doctor, I go to the emergency room whenever I get hurt. My injuries are frequent and stupid. I tore ligaments in both ankles after I slipped on some water in an Arby's restroom. I got a minor concussion from sitting down too vigorously in a high-backed chair. One time I got a second-degree burn from lentil soup.

When I go into an emergency room, it's like a bad dream. You know, the kind of dream where you show up for a black-tie party in a terrycloth robe and try to pass it off as an evening gown.

There are people with heart attacks and bullet wounds and mangled legs and sharp objects stuck in their eyes. I'm sitting in the waiting area with a lentil soup burn, thinking, "I really have to find myself a doctor with an office."

The worst accident of all happened yesterday. The police were involved. I had to lodge a formal complaint against my best friend, who happens to be on vacation in the Bahamas. He's going to hate me.

MY BEST FRIEND IS NAMED WALTER. WALTER HAS A cat, a white Persian called January. January hates the world. It hisses and spits at everyone—except Walter. It claws. It bites. It often draws blood. When you go to Walter's apartment, you have to stand in the doorjamb while he tiptoes around, muttering "Where's my Jannie? Where's my Janniepoo?" until the cat comes out of its hiding place and bumps its head into Walter's leg. Then you're safe, so long as you don't try to approach January, or walk within one foot of where it's lying.

I made that mistake once. Walter and I were drinking port and playing Scrabble. And I was winning. I don't know what made me do it—maybe it was the thrill of victory, which believe me, I do not experience often. Maybe it was the port, which I find so perfectly sweet and cozy that I always wind up having one glass too many. Whatever the reason, right after I dropped an *e* and a *t* on the end of *blank* and Walter said "Oh, you bastard," because the *t* happened to be on a triple word space and I was now three points shy of winning the game, after which I planned to put the theme from "2001" on the stereo and do a victory dance around Walter, who I knew would try to hit me and/or crawl under the couch and hide, either of which would have been equally satisfying for someone like me, who hardly ever wins anything at all. Anyway, that's when I noticed January, lying on its back against the wall behind Walter, wiggling its fuzzy white feet, actually looking *playful*. It was an arresting sight. It made me go all warm and Christmasy inside. I couldn't help it. I *had* to cuddle with that cat.

My speech thick and slurry from port, I cried out, "Oh, look at the babeeee!"

I could hear Walter yelling "No!" under the continuous deadly whir of the cat. I was having an out-of-body experience.

Before Walter could stop me, I slid up to January, reached out my hand to rub its stomach—

I had never seen anything like it. The cat actually seemed to levitate off the floor, its claws aimed at my face like laser death guns. Then there was the *sound.* To call it a hiss or a growl wouldn't come close to describing it. It was more like the detonation of a thermonuclear bomb.

"No, Jannie, no!" Walter shrieked, as the cat affixed itself to my face with its Satanic claws and scratched and scratched and bit and scratched.

I could hear Walter yelling "No!" and "Stop!" and "Shit!" under the continuous deadly whir of the cat. I almost felt as if I was having an out-of-body experience.

When Walter was finally able to locate his gardener's gloves, which he kept in his apartment solely for the purpose of dislodging January from his friends, I was shaking from fear, but bleeding a lot less than I should have been. Fortunately, I'd managed to protect my eyes.

"Are you okay, Ellie?" Walter had whispered.

My eyes still closed, I moaned, "It *hates* me."

SO, THREE DAYS AGO WHEN WALTER ASKED ME IF I could go to his place and feed January while he went on his Club Med vacation, I was shocked. "But January hates me," I'd said.

"Actually, she likes you better than most people." That, as pathetic as it sounds, made me feel privileged. So I agreed to feed January, and listened carefully to Walter's instructions on how to do it: "Unlock the bottom lock

first, then the middle, then the upper lock. Upon opening the door, clear your throat twice. January will notice any departure from this routine—she's very smart. The gardener's gloves are in the upper right hand kitchen drawer, conveniently located over the cupboard that holds the cat food. Put on the gardener's gloves before opening the cat food cupboard. January takes two even measuring cups of dry food, mixed with one half cup wet. Two can openers are located in the cat food cupboard. Use the blue one only in emergency—January's accustomed to the red. Stay close to the cupboards as you pour the food. As January approaches, hold your breath and stand perfectly still. You can leave after she has begun eating. The food distracts her."

Walter had finally inhaled. "Got that?"

"Yep," I'd said. Because I had. I'd even taken notes.

"I'm sorry she's so high-maintenance."

"That's okay, Walter."

"I know you'll be able to handle it, Ellie," he'd said with his black eyebrows pressing into each other. I'd wondered why he sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

EVERYTHING WENT FINE THE FIRST DAY. I'D DONE ALL the steps right, down to the throat-clearing and the red can-opener. And January was so focused on the food and so happy with it that I almost felt like sticking around Walter's apartment and seeing maybe if it would watch TV with me. I sort of felt lonely for Walter, and it would have been nice to sit there on his zebra-striped couch,watching TV with his beautiful cat like we were waiting for him to come home from work. But I didn't.

The next day, I showed up at the same time, and unlocked Walter's door—bottom, middle, top, just like he told me. I stood in the doorjamb, and said, "Ahem. Ahem." I thought I heard a rustling, so I barely entered the kitchen. I got the gardener's gloves out of the top drawer. As I put them on, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. I turned (pivoted, actually), leaving no room between the cat-food cupboard and my body, still remembering Walter's rules, as I squinted to make out the shape on the top of the refrigerator. (Did I mention that I need to get myself a good optometrist, too?) It was a picture. Framed. Of Walter and me. Even though it was blurry, I still knew what picture it was because I took it. It was Walter and me in front of the Public Library. Each of us has one arm around a stone lion. I'd set my camera on automatic timer to take the picture, and it's one of my favorites. I took it this past summer. My copy is framed and in my bedroom.

I'd never even thought Walter had *kept* his copy, let alone framed it and put it on top of his refrigerator. He isn't a picture-framing sort of person. He isn't fond of clutter. It has to be a really, really special picture if Walter is going to frame it.

I wanted to hold it in my hands.

Forgetting momentarily every single one of Walter's rules, I moved away from the cat-food cupboard and headed for the refrigerator.

My eyes were glued to the picture. I didn't look down.

That's how I tripped over January.

I don't know how to explain it. One minute you're thrilled to discover that your best friend thinks so highly of you and your photographic ability. The next, you feel this furry, twitchy thing near your ankles and the linoleum's rushing up to hit you in the face.

"Oh, God, another concussion," I thought. Then I felt the claws and teeth and angry cat limbs in my hair, and I managed to roll over on my back, with January still battering me. I saw one claw graze the corner of my eye. Then I felt it. The sting. The blood. I was becoming very bloody. I could taste it in my mouth. I could feel it, oozing out of the side of my nose.

The only lucky thing was that I was wearing the gardening gloves. I pulled January off my face with both hands and threw it across the room. There was blood all over Walter's nice linoleum. All over his nice gardening gloves. I'd probably need stitches.

Still wearing the gardening gloves, I ran to the emergency room, which is just a few blocks away from Walter's apartment. For once, I was the only person in the waiting room. Wouldn't you know it? The one time I have visible injuries. The nurse took one look at me and said, "Don't worry about the forms. Just go back there!" She seemed to respect my wounds.

The nurse showed me to a bed with a curtain around it, and a young doctor with a curly mustache came in and said, "What happened?"

"I tripped over a cat," I said.

"Looks like the cat got you back," he said.

I said nothing.

"Cat got your tongue?"

The doctor chuckled. I chuckled, too.

My vision's blurry enough to begin with, so I couldn't tell if the cat had gotten me in the eye or near the eye. I told the doctor as much.

"Has the cat had his shots?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said as he cleaned my face with some kind of painful antiseptic. "Since your injuries involve an animal, you're going to have to fill out a report. Do you know the cat's name?"

"Yes. It's my friend's cat."

"Well, okay then. I'll call the police."

The police? I thought.

I didn't want Walter to get arrested.

"PLEASE DON'T ARREST WALTER," I TOLD THE policewoman when she showed up with the forms for me to fill out.

"We're not going to arrest him," she said. "We're just going to force him to keep his cat in his apartment for six months. It'll be quarantined."

"Oh," I'd said. That wasn't so bad. As far as I knew, January didn't leave Walter's apartment anyway. So I told the policewoman January's name, and Walter's name. And I described how I'd tripped over January and eventually pulled it off my face with the gardener's gloves. The policewoman nodded in a sympathetic way and said "Thank you," before she left with the forms.

I did not, the doctor said, experience damage to my cornea. I did require, and received, three stitches.

As I walked back to my apartment with the cold wind creeping under my bandages and pinching my wounds, I thought about Walter, and how he was going to come back from the Bahamas and there'd be a message from the NYPD on his answering machine, telling him to keep his cat indoors. I hoped he wouldn't get too angry.

This morning, I woke up, and took some of the bandages off. The wounds had almost healed. Except for the head trauma from the linoleum, I really felt much better. "That antiseptic must have done the trick," I thought.

As I made myself coffee, I realized that I had to go back to the scene of the crime today and feed the criminal. I remembered the blood on the linoleum, my blood, which I would need to clean up after January had been sufficiently distracted by its food. I remembered the attack, the claws near my eyes. I remembered how I'd thrown January off my face, how I'd seen the blood on the floor, how I'd hurried out Walter's door and headed for the hospital. Hurried out Walter's door without locking it.

Without *closing* it.

I think of January, roaming the cold streets of New York, a criminal on the loose. Prowling. Searching through the dark alleyways for its next victim. I picture January, creeping up a fire escape, finding an open window.

Walter's going to hate me.

ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN

Is a graduate of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She covers entertainment for several publications and Web sites. She and her husband reside in upstate New York. They have a dog and a very nice cat.

Gidding

MICHAEL SATO

Communication requires effort, patience, and honesty—but not necessarily words.

JACOB CAME HOME AT FOUR THIS MORNING. HE didn't hug me; he nodded at me with his tired eyes. Even at six, his thoughts and feelings are obscure to me. If I were him I'd be intractably resentful, but Jacob is careful, independent; he thinks about a thing until he understands it on his own terms, and then rarely makes his conclusions know n. He mutters them to himself, when he's alone, in his own private tongue. You'd think it'd be nice— having a child who doesn't complain out right. But sometimes I'd die to know what he's thinking.

Now, at the end of summer, he looks much like his father, a picture of wild health: suntan, hair long and thick. In a few months he will look more like me again, nerdy, irregular haircut, pale. I put him to bed—his father said he stayed awake all the way up from Berkeley, a ten-hour drive—and he fell asleep at once. His father and I talked for a while. He knows how to talk to me—knows how to be useful and honest without telling me his secrets, his love-words. He asked me if I'd had any more breakdowns and I said no, which was the truth. He asked me if I was seeing anyone important; I said yes. He congratulated me, I think sincerely, though that did not stop him from complaining. "Are you worried that Jacob will hear?" is all that he said, because the walls of this house are so thin.

I didn't want to cheat on him. I *needed* to. When he discovered my indiscretions, of course he could not abide.

I liked Jacob's father a lot—more than anyone save perhaps Max—but cheated on him more and more regularly as our relationship progressed. I didn't want to cheat on him. I *needed* to. Nonetheless, when he discovered my indiscretions, of course he could not abide.

When he left I stayed in bed. I hadn't slept much yet, and my brain was itching with weariness. I let my thoughts trickle away and was just ready to embark on a dream when, annoyingly, I became aware of the bell I'd set on my windowsill. Moonlight hardened into a thin white line on its profile, making the jade seem like bone. The bell was silent, of course, but I half-expected to hear sound from it. It kept me awake. Even when I closed my eyes, my ears stayed open, listening, through the end of the night and as sunlight slowly covered moonlight.

Even when the room was yellow the bell's spell on me was not broken until I heard real sounds, morning sounds—sounds coming from the kitchen: footsteps, a wooden rattling, some metal pieces clicking together. Very familiar sounds, but it took long minutes to recognize them as Jacob fixing his morning cereal. When he left here, in May, to spend the summer with his father and grandparents, he still wasn't old enough to get up and do this by himself. They are quite good to him, I think. His father's family is a good family, very stable, though Jacob has never told me what he thinks about all this moving around between parents. I wish he would, and am terrified to think that someday he will.

Now Jacob was tapping his spoon against the table and cereal bowl, experimenting with different tones and rhythms. He's very musical, and will often try to improvise some instrument out of whatever objects are at hand. I was pleased to hear that Jacob preferred making drums of my furniture to talking to himself. I dislike his private voice so much. I'm a bad mommy—I have so far been loath to buy him a proper instrument, for I fear all the noise that would no doubt follow. I love music, but even one badly played note makes my bones ache.

I bought a phone with no buzzer, but just a light that flashes. Sure, I miss a few calls, but the extra silence I get makes that a small price. If I know someone important is going to call, then I stay near the phone and look for the call. I had, this morning, a strong feeling that Max would be calling soon, so instead of getting up I stayed in bed and did some reading. This summer I've been reading *Hamlet* for a night school class I'm taking in Shakespearean Tragedy. I've been having a hard time getting past *Hamlet*; there's something about this story that, like a vacuum, sucks me in. The rest of the class has already moved on to *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, but reading *Hamlet* always leaves me stuck in my own thoughts. I was just moving into one of those thoughts when my phone started to flash.

"Good morning, Max. How are you doing?"

"Wyn, I feel cold inside," he said.

I've been seeing Max for about three months. When it began I wasn't looking for any serious romance. I hadn't dated for a long while, and I thought that I might try again, hoping that an interval of celibacy had made me stronger, whole enough to see something through. I wanted to be careful; I exercised what patience I have, spending plenty of time at the nice-guy hang outs, bookstores, campgrounds, to find someone who was really clean. Nice is boring, sure, but I didn't care so much about that any more. All I wanted was not to fail.

I got a nice one, all right. Max is almost monkish, a holy loner. He tells me he lost his faith, that he's not religious anymore, but I think that he still is. "It's easy to be good when you're unworldly and detached," he once said to me. "I always wanted to be good, but there came a time when I also wanted to be part of the game." Max has got an unbelievable amount of self-confidence, and there's nothing anyone can say to him that can hurt him. So I was very direct. I told him straight away that he was a lot more good than he was a part of the game. I also said there's a big difference between losing your faith and setting it aside. No one who sets his faith aside is "part of the game."

Max said that he used to be a pious Episcopalian, stuffed with all manner of religious dogma, but that he now holds a mere two beliefs that might be called, broadly speaking, metaphysical. One of these beliefs, as I understand it, is that, in the wide arc of time, there are a certain number of crucial moments—the moment you fall in love, the moment you die—and that these special moments have actual auras around them that, like ripples, spread out not only from the past, but also from the future. That is, there are a few moments, here and there, that *echo*. The other belief Max holds regards a certain very old family heirloom, a little bell made of gold and jade, that he kept hung from the rear-view mirror of his car. Quite an elegant ornament, this bell also has the power of feeling the aura of a crucial moment as it comes to pass. This he believes in honor of his mother, who gave the bell to him shortly before she died of cancer.

"Mom kept it with her at the hospital. She said it told her. That."

"Like magic? The bell rang on its own?"

"Mom said it didn't ring, but that she could hear its sound."

I asked him if he wasn't unwise to have something so valuable decorating his car, hanging there where everyone could see it.

"People don't steal things from me," he said. Ridiculous, I know; on the other hand, so far it's been true.

He came to get me at seven last night, wanting to drive me to a special place he knew, where, he said, the sunset was so beautiful that it lasts forever. Unfortunately, it was one of those days when nothing in my closet seemed to fit, and so when he came I wasn't ready. That he sat in the living room and waited so patiently made me even more

distressed, and I worked myself into an absolute fit, throwing clothes everywhere. Everything I put on looked worse than what I was wearing before.

At last I came out and said, "Can we do this another time? I really have lost the appetite for a beautiful sunset."

"What you've got on is fine," he said, though that before looking up to see that I was standing there in my underwear, which didn't match.

"Give me credit for a little shame," I said.

So he got up and walked right past me, into my room, and came back out with not only a T-shirt and jeans, but also shoes. "This time, it doesn't matter what *you* look like," he said.

We missed the sunset. Once we got on the highway he went ninety all the way, half-seriously invoking the power of the bell to keep the CHP at a distance. But we got to his place, a rough, wind-worn promontory overlooking a stretch of coastline, just in time to see the sun's crown blink off the horizon.

"Okay, I know another place," Max said, already running me back to the car. We got back on the highway and sped in the direction of the sun, though fast as we might go, the poor car shaking and rattling like the flu, we just couldn't catch up to the light. When we stopped again, at an empty lot next to the sand, the sun was still nothing more than a sliver of orange on the bay.

"Come on," he said, leaping out of the car. He grabbed my arm and dragged me down to the sand, saying, "We can catch it, we can catch it." I went off screaming and squealing but he didn't mind; he wouldn't let me go. Oh, I never go in the ocean; it's so cold, and the air was already cold too, and it was windy. We ran right into a big wave that knocked us over, but he never let me go, and we choked on water from laughing, the green saltiness soaked into my mouth and eyes. All the huge, indifferent water pushed and pulled me, making my feet light on the sand, and we splashed each other, the water going up like long strings of diamonds against the great stained-glass sky. Then I pressed myself against him, for warmth.

"Is this the part that lasts forever?" I said.

He looked around. "I think the part that lasts forever only happens from the shore," he answered.

Back at the car, we got his throw blanket out of the trunk, then got in and turned the heater all the way up, and sat together in the back seat until we were warm, wrapped in his blanket, listening to the waves crash one upon the other, the whispered hiss of water on the sand underneath, the soft sounds melting together into silence. And we were both I think listening in the same way—a kind of listening that's like thought, a kind of listening that keeps going and going so long as it hears nothing at all.

The way Max makes out, sometimes it seems like he doesn't know quite what to do, just a big clump of hands making guesses. He'd told me he wasn't a virgin, though in extremely equivocal terms. He's continually elusive, when he speaks, on all points regarding sex, and pry as I might, he seems incapable of disclosing the simple truth. All I know for sure is that I like the way that he touches me, much better anyway than so many of those virtuosos who would wield their parts on me like medical instruments. Max held my hand during the drive back, rubbed my fingers, and I was thinking, I was hoping, that this night would be the night that he'd stay over.

**I pressed against him, for warmth.
"Is this the part that lasts forever?"
"I think the part that lasts forever
only happens from the shore."**

When we got back to my house, I kissed Max goodnight and then hesitated, pretending to be scared to get out of the car. Max asked what was wrong. I said, "The house is so dark. Looks creepy. I hate going by myself in a house that's dark. Who knows who or what might be waiting in there?"

This was a trick of course, to get Max to come in with me. His line was supposed to have been something like, "I'll just go check to make sure that everything is okay."

Instead, Max unhooked the jade and gold bell from is rear-view mirror and put it in my hand. "This will protect you," he said.

No one had ever given me something that way. Never. Giving me the bell was a big mistake on Max's part. And I was back to the old way.

"I want you to have it. I feel like giving you something," he said.

"But this is yours."

"If you have it, then I still have it."

"Max, I don't think we should see each other any more."

Just like that. Again I had failed, and again I had let my failure take me by surprise. Hope is so miserable. I got out of the car, and ran into the house.

Standing there in the dark, in my living room, I realized that I had taken and was still holding onto Max's bell. I also realized that I really did have a fear, after all. But it wasn't a fear of the dark or some burglar or rapist waiting for me in the kitchen. It was a fear of Jacob.

What I was thinking when Max called this morning is that all of Hamlet's wandering and listening and searching is about Hamlet trying to find his father and his mother, because his father isn't there anymore, and his mother isn't who he thought she was. His life can't go on until he finds them. But he doesn't know how to find them.

"About what you said last night—about not seeing me anymore—where did that come from?" Max said on the phone. "Did you mean it?"

"Yes, Max, I meant it. Just accept it, don't make me explain, it's boring—trust issues, intimacy issues. Besides, Jacob is home now, summer's over. There won't be time anymore for us."

"But I don't need time. I don't need anything from you. I only know that it's lasting inside me. It goes on and on."

This sort of talk continued for a while, and Max was very clumsy, not because he didn't listen to me, but because he was so naïve about the importance of his own feelings. On the other hand, one might ask how much sympathy one ought to feel for a woman who routinely ruins a relationship just because it seems to be going well. I don't like it that people get hurt; other people's wounds hurt me more. But that doesn't seem to make much of a difference.

All I wanted to do now was settle the matter of the bell, which should have been easy, except that I was so awfully attached to the thing. The reason I wanted to keep it so badly was, of course, that the bell meant so much to Max. If he hadn't wanted it back, I suppose I wouldn't have cared that he'd given it to me in the first place. It was strangely obvious this morning that neither of us was in a position to make an outright claim of ownership; all that could be done, then, was to hypocritically deny it.

"It wouldn't be fair for me to keep it," I said to him.

"If you feel that way, then I'll stop by and get it," he answered. The readiness of his concession struck me as odd. Thick as I am, I didn't see that he was merely seizing an excuse to come over.

I would have liked to stay in my room and read *Hamlet* all day. I'm awful. I had not spoken to my son for three months, and I only wanted to read.

It seemed Jacob still had some work to do on his cereal preparation skills after all. A bowl's worth of Fruity Bran was spread pretty evenly across the whole surface area of the kitchen, and spilt milk dripped off the edge of the table in three or four places. On a more promising note, Jacob had carried his bowl and spoon to the sink, and had run some water into the bowl so that the little left-over pieces wouldn't harden onto the ceramic.

Jacob himself was gone; I could hear through the wall that he was back in his room. I leaned into the wall to better hear the sounds. This time, happily, there were only the normal sounds of playing, crashes, airplanes and lasers. Maybe Jacob had, over the summer, gotten over his problem with language. I allowed myself to hope it.

It was sometime before Jacob turned three that he began to employ, while playing by himself, an at-first simple but increasingly complex series of sounds that only he knew the meaning for. I only heard the sounds through the walls of his room; he never used them in my presence. Sometimes when he'd talk to me, although he's quite articulate, I'd imagine that he was thinking far too much about what he was saying, and I wondered if this personal language of his hadn't rendered English nothing more to him than a system of euphemisms. What bothered me most though about Jacob's private tongue was that no matter how hard I tried I couldn't understand it, and it gave me anxiety attacks to think that rendered through that arcane muddle of his was Jacob's judgment of me.

I took him to the doctor once. The doctor asked a couple of questions, then prescribed Ritalin. I refused; I abhor pills of any kind. They steal you away.

It took a couple of minutes to clean up Jacob's mess, but instead of stopping with the spilt milk and cereal I just kept on cleaning. Cleaning is one thing that, as a mother, I do well. Dust in my house has a shelf life of hours; books and candles might as well be bolted into their places. I cleaned to the muffled sounds of Jacob's playing, in my mind following the course of his games. The kitchen windows got a needed washing; the floor was duly mopped and waxed. Sometime there the sound of Jacob's playing ceased, although it wasn't until I was scrubbing out the sink that I was startled by the silence. Struck at the same instant with the feeling of being watched, I dropped my sponge and turned, half-expecting to see Jacob standing in the threshold.

"Jacob?" I said.

There was a knock at the door (I'd taken out the doorbell; the ring of it was shrilling), that I mistook at first as being Jacob's response. I even opened my mouth to answer, and had in my mind the oddest image of Jacob's voice issued from Max's face. Then I remembered the bell. Leaving a tub full of suds, I scuttled to my room to get it, but found that the bell was no longer on my windowsill, where I'd left it the night before. I looked on by bed stand, under the bed, on my bookshelf. The knock repeated. "Just a minute," I yelled, running into the bathroom, looking again in the kitchen.

"Wyn? Are you all right?" Max had presumed to come in, without my permission. That wasn't right. I marched out into the living room, heated, all ready to yell at him, but his hands were full of flowers—a big anarchic bouquet of wild lilies and fireweed, poppies, white roses, all wrapped like an infant in delicate white paper. It is not civilized to yell at a man holding flowers. All the same, I was not happy to see them. If a man gives a woman flowers, it means he's got a plan.

"You gathered them yourself."

"How did you know?"

"Let me find a vase," I said, taking the flowers from his arms. I had every intention of looking for that vase, if I

had to pick through every room of the house until I found Max's bell. The shorter his stay, the better.

"Do you need some help?" Max said.

"No. I'll find it."

Max sat down on the couch rather casually, stretching his arms across the backrest. He said, "I don't really want the bell back; I want you to keep it. If I have a big moment coming, I don't want to know it if it doesn't happen here."

Preoccupied with finding the bell, I was only half-listening to Max, but something about this tugged at my ear; I felt I hadn't heard it all. I wished he'd say it again.

"Oh yeah, the bell. I'll just get it now," I said.

"You may as well leave it where it is," Max returned.

I thought, Max is telling me that he's ready to sleep with me. I second-guessed myself. I didn't know what he was saying. I brought the flowers to the couch and set them down, vase-less, on the coffee table, and then sat down next to Max, but not too close.

"Sorry, I didn't hear what you said."

Max looked at me long, as if preparing himself. I could see in his eyes that he had something important to say, and in my mind were all sorts of hypothetical revelations. They vanished when Max began to speak. It was an unusual kind of speech, abstract and aloof, some words about time, the past and future, a kind of thinking out loud, but much more deliberate. What was he saying? It seemed that every next word he spoke foreshadowed the point, the simple truth, but then left me feeling that the point was spoken and I had failed to understand, and that in turn made me bend closer in to each next word. And then I realized that Max was not speaking at all, but uttering poetry, real poetry, powerful and large, and I thought, not only is this poetry, but I've heard this poem before, and I was very confused because Max's delivery had the faltering tenderness that only newborn words can have. Max was telling me his love-words. He was telling me who he was.

"Oh, no, Max," I said, but Max made no sign that he heard me.

"Max, save this. I'm not the one."

But he only continued. And what was he saying? Each succeeding word seemed to promise the answer, and I was listening so hard that I lost track of the meaning and began to lose myself in the sound of the words, the falling of one upon the other of the grand, impossible images, cutting the cords that attach thoughts to things—they made me feel that I was floating, passing in measures into some great and completely specific silent, empty space. The words threw their weight against all my voices, all my needs. I listened hard. And then something changed; as the poem went on, something sharper and demanding grew into the words, they turned another face, and they started to scare me. I saw the words, deployed now in files, gathering around me, their circle tightening, conniving to trap me forever where I was, unmoored in the stillness. "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of our exploring—"

"Jacob, is that you?" I said, "Are you hiding, Jacob? Are you listening?"

"Listen to me, Wyn. This might be my only chance."

"I'll just go get your bell," I said.

"But that wasn't the end yet."

**I've heard this poem before.
Max was telling me his love-words.
He was telling me who he was.**

"I know a poem too," I said, and launched right into Hamlet's first soliloquy, which I had no idea I'd memorized. I blurted it out, like a fidget, full of nerves, needing only to do anything to halt the tyrannical momentum of Max's poem; it was so strong in its desire to go on. When the first soliloquy was finished, I began with the second, and would have gone on to the third and the fourth, and then started all over again, but my own recital was shattered by laughter and a flash of movement bursting out from behind the wall, then disappearing again. It was Jacob. I knew it. He'd been listening.

"Jacob, it's not polite to hide when there are guests."

Jacob, hid behind the recliner, did not show himself, but answered with a low, tired moan. My heart sank.

"What's he saying?" Max said. I shrugged. This sound was a sound of Jacob's private language—the one he'd never before produced in the presence even of me. The sound repeated, along with more giggling.

"He's got this hiding game," I said. "He plays it all the time."

Max nodded, puzzled, and released my hand. He got up and said, "Well, I'll see if I can't find him." He tip-toed across the room to where the recliner was, and at the last moment poked his head over it, saying, "There!" But Jacob had managed to squirm away, and was already hiding somewhere else. I could hear his giggling behind the bookcase.

"The game is for me," I said. "You don't have to play."

"No, I want to," Max said. "I'll find him." He just stood there though, hand on his chin, wondering where to look. It's not that my living room is so very thickly furnished, but Jacob's got a gift for evasion.

"Jacob, stop teasing my friend," I said. The answer was laughter, and then another sound, an airy, hollow note. Coming from behind the bookcase.

"What's that he's saying?" Max said, now creeping cat-like across the carpet, to the bookcase. "Is it part of the game? Are there secret words for things?"

"No, Max. I don't know. The sounds don't mean anything."

Max pounced around the edge of the bookcase, but Jacob, again, had contrived to slither off at the last moment.

"Surely they mean something," Max said. "Surely he wants me to understand." Now there was a third sound, this one coming from behind the television. It was an ugly sound, sucking and whistling.

"It sounds *like* something." He turned an ear toward the television, furrowed his eyebrows. "I can almost get it."

"The sounds don't mean anything! Jesus Max, don't you get it? I don't want you here. I want you to go—just go."

Max stuttered and had to throw his arm up against the wall for balance. He left it there, for a moment, as if needing the surface to reorient himself. He needed to take a couple of breaths. He actually needed to look around him to understand where he was, to understand what I was saying.

"Even if I'd changed my mind, it's too late. It's over with us. You have to go."

"Let me finish my poem."

"No Max, you can't finish your poem. You can't come back here any more. Not even to get your bell. I don't even have your bell anymore, Max. It's broken. I threw it away."

He dabbed a finger against his cheek. "I'm crying."

"Not so big a deal, Max. I cry every day."

He backed slowly toward the door, gazing fearfully at the tear on his finger. Something else inside him resisted, pushing him back again toward me. The forces played on him like a tug-of-war, pulling him this way and that, his feet airless on the floor, silent and mindless.

"Max, Whenever I get close to someone, whenever I start to trust someone, or start to have a need for someone, a voice inside me tells me to get away, and it's a voice that doesn't go away, and one I can't ignore. With you, Max, it's different. With you that voice is screaming."

Max said, softly, "Listen to my voice."

"Max, please go."

"Listen to *my* voice."

"Max, last night I had sex with Jacob's father."

The words sounded on, round and round in the room. And then there were so many sounds, of a car passing outside, of two birds, of a neighborhood dog barking, far away. What I had said; it was the sound of me, of what I am. Things say what they are with sounds; when I looked at it, there was a sound: the bookcase, the coffee table. The way I looked at it.

"You did?"

And I thought, I've ruined him. And he wasn't there anymore, but there was someone in the room, small breathing and footsteps, and the giggling. But it wasn't giggling—not Jacob's giggling. It was higher, and voiceless, a tin can full of stars.

"Jacob, put that down."

He held it above his head, and he shook it. He laughed at the ring, the ring upon the ring. It was louder than sunlight. I tried to cover my ears but couldn't lift my hands because Max's arms were wrapped around them. He'd come back. I buried myself in him and he put his mouth into my neck, and there was ringing all around.

"I love you."

"Max, you are a fool."

Jacob leapt onto the coffee table, shook his head and stomped his feet down on the great bouquet of flowers—an explosion of petals. He stretched his arms to the light, closed his little fingers around the bell and hurled it at the wall.

MICHAEL SATO

Has spent most of his life in the San Francisco Bay Area. He finished his M.A. in English in 1996, and since then has been working as a teacher and translator in Gunma Prefecture, Japan. His stories have appeared on the Internet in Eclectica *and* AfterNoon.

The Gray Day

D. RICHARDS

If a life is lived with nobody watching,
will anyone notice when it ends?

HE WOKE TO THE SOUNDS OF SQUEAKING BED springs. The red enameled Mickey *(M-I-C-K-E-Y)* Mouse alarm clock on his night stand cheerfully told him it was 6:45 a.m. (*why because we like you*). He rolled onto his back and stared at the water stains over his bed. *Squeak squeak squeak* came again from his mother's room.

His ears searched the house for any noise to mask the squeaking. The soft *tick tock* of the mouse *(M-O-U-S-E)* clock, forever guarding the gates of time with a sickly sweet disposition and oversized black ears. *Tick tock, tick tock.* The water faucet in the bathroom down the hall, *drip, drip,* dripping an unstoppable tattoo. Never slowing or ceasing no matter how raw he wore his hand on the rusty metal handles. *Tick tock, drip drip, squeak squeak,* pause, *squeasqueaksqueak,* faster and faster. Almost over now.

A bird chirped outside the snow-covered window, excited about the coming sunrise or perhaps lodging a neighborly complaint about so much racket at such an early hour. Its peaceful dreams of soft spring soil bursting with winter-fattened earthworms no doubt disturbed by the ever increasing cacophony from the next room.

Moan, moan. Groan, squeak, oh yeah… oh yeah. Shh… pant pant… not so loud (his mother). *Ugh ugh ugh, wheeze.*

Mr. Potter. The boy recognized his wheezing moans, always transparent through the plywood walls of their apartment.

The bird chirped again and lit off in search of a quieter spot to sing the songs that would attract a mate of his own.

Tick tock, drip drip, squeak squeak. Moan, groan… oh, god, oh god, oh yeah. The noises collided as the pace reached maddening new heights. The boy closed his hands over his ears so hard they hurt, screaming noiselessly as the train of sound derailed in a final burst of *Oh guhhh, yeah, oh…yeah…uh…uh..uh..mmmmmmm.*

Tick tock. Drip drip. *(See ya real soon!)*

THE BOY BALANCED PRECARIOUSLY ON A THREE-legged stool, stretching to the tips of his toes, straining to grasp the bottom edge of the Count Chocula box. Mr. Potter came into the kitchen barefoot on the cool tile floor. Holding the box tight to his chest, the boy climbed down from the stool and sat cross-legged on the floor. He set to shoving handfuls of the count of chocolate into his mouth from the wax paper packet inside. While he ate his breakfast he watched Mr. Potter rummage through the stacks of coupons and unpaid bills on the top of the refrigerator. His blue shirt bore the county sheriff's patch on the shoulder. It was unbuttoned, revealing a tremendous belly so thickly matted with black hair that the flesh underneath was barely visible. Mr. Potter wheezed and coughed as he searched. Abandoning the refrigerator, he turned and noticed the boy staring up at him.

"Hey boy, got a cigarette?" He chuckled at his own joke.

The boy watched him for a moment longer, methodically chewing his cereal. The hair covering his belly had spread to every bit of exposed flesh except for the top of his head, which gleamed brightly under the bare fluorescent bulb.

"Squeak squeak squeak," the boy replied in a monotone, searching the box for another handful of chocolate goodness.

Mr. Potter looked blank for a moment. Then slowly his face began to swell and turn a harsh red. "Why you little…" he wheezed.

"Oh god, oh yeah," the boy said blandly, never looking away.

Mr. Potter began to shake. Slowly he took large breaths and let out tense sighs. After a moment he forced an attempt at a smile and bent down to ruffle the boy's hair.

"Our little secret, right pal?" His sweet tones belied the murder in his eyes.

Sometimes Mrs. Potter would grab the boy and ask him if he ever "saw her old man nosin' around his house."

The Potters lived in the apartment below the boy and his mother. One week a month, when Mrs. Potter drew the graveyard shift at the silicon chip factory outside of town, Mr. Potter would come visit with his mother at night. He didn't always wake up there, in case Mrs. Potter came home early, but he and his mother had been up late drinking last night. The boy had heard them come in at 2:15, Mickey time.

Sometimes Mrs. Potter would grab the boy in the hallway and ask him in a harsh whisper if he ever "saw her old man nosin' around his house." She'd promise him candy if he told her what he knew, but since she never had any to actually offer him, the boy told her the same thing he told Mr. Potter about "their little secret."

"Squeak squeak squeak," he said, and returned to his cereal.

HIS MOTHER WAS SNORING BY THE TIME THE BOY WAS getting his coat on for school. Stopping by the refrigerator, he filled his pockets with raw hot dogs and a half a block of Velveeta.

On the first floor of the apartment building he waited for the school bus to come. The day was obscured by the frost on the glass doors, letting only a dull gray light pass through. He whispered softly as he waited, "Here kitty kitty, here kitty kitty." He laid the hot dogs and cheese on the carpet by the stairs. "Here kitty kitty, here kitty kitty."

He'd last seen the cat outside the front doors of the building. His mother had started putting it outside when Mr. Potter came over for his secret visits. The cat had tucked itself as far back as it could under the thin evergreen bushes on either side of the entryway; there was a vent that let out hot air if anyone in the apartment ran the quarter dryer in the basement. The boy had called to the cat again and again but with no reaction. He crawled under the bush, calling softly to it all the while. The snow soaked his coat, making him shiver. He called, "here kitty kitty, here kitty kitty," crawling on his belly closer and closer. Finally he was unable to go any further under the bush and had to use a stick to prod the cat into motion. It felt firm, frozen firm. He knew right away that it was dead.

When he'd returned that day from school he had looked again and seen that it was gone. He wasn't sure if he believed it or not, but he'd heard somewhere that cats have nine lives, so he'd taken up the habit of leaving it treats, just in case he was wrong.

AFTER HE FELT HE'D GIVEN THE CAT ENOUGH TIME TO return to him he began to draw tiny roadways on the frosted glass of the doors. Drawing was his favorite thing to do, especially tiny mazes and highways. As he drew he imagined the highways packed with tiny cars filled with tiny families. He drew the roads they went down in tighter and tighter circles. He pictured the father banging on the steering wheel of the station wagon and cursing at the world for not providing him with an exit. When he'd drawn so much that the frost melted to reveal the snow-covered streets outside he'd breathe on the window until he could begin anew.

As he waited for his bus he drew and softly sang to himself, *"Oh god, oh god, oh yeah, oh god*."

ON THE BUS HE FOUND HIS SEAT. IT WAS ALWAYS vacant. Reserved just for him. He tried most of the time not to notice but some days he was aware that the other children would switch seats to sit by their new best friends, or maybe to get away from their old ones.

Today he played with the frost on the window, continuing his master plan for the never-ending highway. Lost in his work, he'd try to ignore the spit wads that struck his head and face, shot whenever the bus driver wasn't watching. He worked diligently on his highways, until the fog disappeared and revealed the flat gray outside world. He'd lean in close and breathe a new window canvas to life, all the while pretending not to notice the soft giggles coming from the surrounding seats.

IN THE CLASSROOM HE SAT IN THE UNCOMFORTABLE wooden desk seat he'd been assigned in the back corner of the classroom. He used a yellow number two pencil to draw his tiny highways on a weathered Big Chief tablet. Lost in his tiny world of automobiles and highways and very unhappy fathers always looking for an exit, he sometimes thought he could hear the teacher calling his name. The other children would laugh and laugh until they were hushed. He just bent over closer to the paper. If he squinted hard enough he could almost see them moving, hear them screaming, "Daddy, are we there yet?"

AT LUNCHTIME HE SAT ALONE, EATING EVERYTHING on his plate without tasting or caring what it was. Unless it was chili day. On chili day they gave him a cinnamon roll.

He would carefully set his plate aside and unfold his thin white paper napkin and set it in the center of the yellow linoleum topped table. Daintily, he'd place his cinnamon roll on the napkin and begin the process of unrolling it. Many times in the process it would threaten to break at one of the thinner turns of the inward spiral. When the occasional inevitable break did occur he would stop and with great care mash the torn bites of the moist dough back together until they were once again whole. When he'd finally reach the center he'd turn the entire length of the pastry on its side and put both ends into his mouth. He'd chew the entire length of the roll to its end, never swallowing until he'd managed to put the whole thing into his mouth.

"BOY," THE TEACHER SNAPPED, SNATCHING THE pencil from his hand and breaking him abruptly out of his fog. "What are you wearing?"

He stared down at his highways, perfect circles, no beginning, no end, wishing he could swallow her whole.

The other children giggled, of course.

Leaning closer so the others might not hear she asked again. "Boy, are those pajamas?"

Go away, go away, go away, he thought.

The class laughed harder. "Shut up," she told them. "All of you just shut up!" They were instantly quiet. Even he could feel how much she meant it.

"Boy," she started, and then stopped, letting her thoughts fade away.

Go away, go away, go away. She sighed, shaking her head.

He never looked up, never moved.

Gently she laid his pencil down on the almost black paper in front of him. He quickly scooped it up, trying hard to re-establish the block he had on the world.

"You poor thing," she whispered, laying a hand on his shoulder. "You poor, poor thing."

ON THE BUS RIDE HOME HE SAT WITH HIS HANDS clenched tightly in his lap. He felt as if he were trapped on one of his highways, spiraling tighter and tighter into himself.

He thought about her, the teacher, putting her hand on him. Every time he felt it in his memories the lump in his throat grew larger, until it seemed as if he were choking. Opening his mouth to gasp for air, the tears started to come. A spit wad stung his cheek, followed by a barrage of them. The bus driver glanced into his overhead mirror, the giggles faded and the straw weapons disappeared. He ignored them, straining to see even a hint of color in the view through the window. There was none. Just gray.

Just another gray day.

The bus lurched to a stop. Lifting his books from the space that had always been empty in his seat he moved for the doors. "You poor thing," one of the girls from his class mocked as he passed. Their whispers and laughter blurred into a dull noise at the back of his mind. The frayed wet ends of his pajamas swished against the rubber running mat as he walked. The driver held open the doors, letting in the gray, letting him out.

THE GRAY DAY SWALLOWED HIM. THE TEARS RAN down his cheeks and froze on his coat collar.

Squeak squeak, Mr. Potter, *squeak squeak,* mother. *Tick tock drip drop squeak squeak. Oh god oh god* goes the *chugga chugga* choo choo train come to drive little boys insane. *Squeak squeak* says the tiny family waiting in the wings to come and kidnap the boy for a ride on the no-exit highway.

Following the color green, the boy shed his coat and pajamas and laid his books aside. "Here kitty kitty," he cried softly, as he lay down naked in the snow.

"Here kitty kitty, here kitty kitty." The tears turning to ice, the ice filling his soul, the soul swallowed as whole as a cinnamon roll by the gray.

They say the little boy just gave up.

D. RICHARDS

Hails from Lawrence, Kansas. "The Gray Day" was inspired by a story he read as a child about strange deaths and mysterious disappearances. He is currently at work on a full-length novel.

Ghettoboy and Dos

CRAIG BOYKO

A boy and a girl. Past, present, or future—some kinds of stories are eternal.

THERE IS A BOY AND THERE IS A GIRL. SOMEWHERE not far away (we can be sure) there is a boy and a boy, and elsewhere in the City tonight there is, without a doubt, a group of girls and not a single boy.

But tonight, here and now, it is about *this* boy (eyeing this girl and goddamn what's happening to his heart throbbing like that and it's like his lungs are rattling) and it is about *this* girl (she saw him when she came in and there was definitely something small but promising in his nonchalance and she kind of likes the glisten of the hairs on his chin but come on now, this isn't like her at all, so play it sparkles, girl).

The boy licks his lips and plays cool. Girl buys cigarettes and smiles stoically (glimmer of something mutual in the shudder of her shoulder, he thinks) at the countertop. Girl turns away from him as she turns and falls through the crowds of confection-seekers. She washes summer twilight sighs across her neck-skin, painting bars of blue and smoke on perfect paleness; then the door swings and new bodies take her place.

Boy relinquishes his spot in line, gives up his chance at an early bus, loses all hope for getting back in time to save face with his employer, all possibility of securing a weekly score. But hope breeds necessity, and he doesn't need anything, not now, nothing but his feet on that sidewalk, and now, and how.

She knows he's there before he says anything, before she can even really know he's there, so maybe it's half anticipation and half desire for it to be so. So when he really does say, "Hey, so how much?" and she's fumbling with her cigarette and lighter and pack and coughing little don't-inhale puffs because she only picked up the habit fourteen days ago, and when he taps her on the shoulder because he's not sure she heard even though she's the only one nearby, well, she turns and sees that it's him, and she smiles inside, and it mingles with the smoke she just swallowed, and it burns, but burns *nice.* Maybe like his face was something she should be smiling at, like it all fit just perfect, because hadn't she sensed him back there, checking her out?

"Too smooth," she says, and forgets, and inhales, and coughs.

He thinks it might be too early here to make fun of her coughing like that, like a novice, and only light-brand cigarettes, but he falters himself, and his stomach feels weird tonight, and so he says: "You don't smoke much, huh?" and it feels so dumb once it slips past his tongue and hangs on the warmth of the air.

"Really too," she says, and keeps walking, eyes sliding away from him onto her path of determination.

"Huh, what?"

"You want to know how much?"

"Yeah," he says, maybe feeling defiant here.

"You say 'how much' and I say 'too smooth.' Really too."

She stops. They stop. She looks at him. Her cigarette fingers flutter to her lips. "Thing is," she says, "I don't turn."

His eyebrows crease. He means to say "fuck you," he's sure (that feels about right), but that something weird in his stomach is spreading, malignant, into his throat, and instead, "Hey, I'm sorry," are the words that are issued.

The nightsky pink of her lips wrap around the white-pink of cancer stick, fingers pale and thin and quivering all but imperceptibly.

Her eyelids lower a notch; her cigarette hand jitters. She sucks in smoke slowly, almost but not quite faking it, and shrugs.

Their eyes:

Lock-catch-sputter-speak-connect.

She can't explain this feeling but knows it for what it might be, if he doesn't turn out to be a complete asshole. And he's just looking, looking, watching (but why?) the nightsky pink of her lips wrap around the white-pink of cancer stick, fingers pale and thin and quivering all but imperceptibly.

Her neck is very smooth and he wants her to speak.

She says, " 'Least not for cash," smiling.

His heart is kicking his rib cage, thumping weird, non-rhythmic patterns. Her smile, though, wrests one from him, and he says, "Now that's just *not* good business sense."

She turns and walks again, her gaze devoted to the cracks of the sidewalk directly before her. "Tell you what," she says, her voice soft and almost lost in the traffic-laden night air. "You charge and I'll charge and we'll call it even."

IT ALMOST HAPPENS ANYWAY, THIS VERY NIGHT, which was what he was wanting all along, and now she is

definitely on that same wavelength, isn't she? It was what he is wanting, but now that it's in sight, but free, it's somewhat disconcerting to him.

She leads him through fogged crowded street mazes beneath and between and shadowed by soot-stained neon glow-towers of the sky and day-business—which is what they call it where she comes from, "day-business"—that which you hear about but maybe only see expensive-sports-car vestiges of, that which makes the city sprawl like it does, and beat, and respire, and spin and weave and yearn to the clouds.

She leads him to a small cavernous grove of aluminum and soft light, dug into the street, with shops and booths lining the peripheries, and stars twinkling—not really visible, but you know they're up there because of the sweet oil-fresh smell of the night mixed with ozone and barbecue. He buys from a beer booth, she from a canned cola dispenser with all its stickers ripped off. They find two adjacent seats wedged between a couple on the one side and a white-knuckled, nervous-looking teenager on the other. He cracks the cap on his Bathing Beauty Beer and eyes the kid next to them, maybe five years his junior, with a hairstyle he might have considered last month but might have decided to be too blatantly Westside, and he was all Midtown, but never proud of it. The kid leaves after only the most perfunctory pretense of non-disgust.

They say little as they sip at their drinks, his eyes on her face as she looks beyond him, somewhere out into the ebullient crowd as she feigns cogitation, then her eyes swing back and catch his and they both retreat, but she returns to his face before he does, and now he pretends to stare beyond her, concentrating on something invisible within his own head, and the sequence repeats, reversed.

He thinks about speaking to her, not the words so much as the actual physical operation of parting his lips and eliciting noise from down there where the beer goes. He decides against saying anything, for fear of contaminating the moment. Somehow creating guttural sound seems beneath them both right now. Instead, they play eyeball hockey.

He feels sick.

THE TIME CLICK-CLICKS PAST THREE IN THE A.M. AND still the crowd does not thin, so she begins to think it's time to move on. He hasn't tried anything and he hasn't complained and the way he looks at her then quick-quick looks away…

"Wanna go for a walk?" she asks and he nods, swallowing suds from a third or fourth beer, the one exact brand that she can't stand to smell, let alone ingest.

They stand and she grabs his hand and *Oh God* he thinks and she leads him through the streets of the sweet desperate night.

"MY NAME IS GHETTOBOY," HE PROFFERS, YET HE'S not sure why, because she has released his hand long ago. She smiles at him, though, in silent thanks, and maybe that's why.

"Hi," she says, too quiet to be heard over the slap-slap of her shoes and the clap-clap of his boots on the concrete, but he can read her lips by the flickering orange neon of sky-high back-alley penthouse dance club and so he smiles and whispers *Hi* to the back of her neck once she turns around again.

Out of narrow and into wide open. Street lights augmented by backlit streetside advertisements reaching to the sky, televised or static, shifting, smiles and breasts, white teeth, warm beaches and blue skies, products, bottles, pictures of fried chicken and pizza, advertisements with hidden advertisements within, Pepsi and Slazenger condoms, McDonald's and United World Adult Video. They walk, as she motions for him to follow, down the wide sidewalks lining the wide streets, busy as ever at this hour, traffic humming, rubber squeaks and brakes howling and motors coughing. They peel through the throng, always together, sometimes side by side, usually he a step or two behind, not knowing their destination if there is one.

Stupid, because it's loud here, but he speaks anyway: "Are we getting lopers?" She doesn't hear him, walking faster now, hopping out of the way of some large Indian-American pushing a baby stroller stacked with frayed paperbacks.

Touching her shoulder and she slows, the line of her lips neutral and curious. "Are we going somewhere to get drugs?" he asks.

"What? Why?" The edges of her mouth twist into an almost-frown.

"I just thought back there, maybe, you were waiting for someone. All that time."

"What do you mean?"

"Like a dealer," he says, feeling maybe almost stupid now, because of her confusion and the way she's looking at him. "All that time we were there. I thought you were waiting for someone."

She shrugs. "No. I wasn't." She continues to walk. He follows her.

"Sorry," he says, but she doesn't hear, or pretends not to, but then again, he's not really sure he actually spoke the word, instead of just thinking it, and he doesn't want to take the risk of saying it twice, so he just follows her, through the night getting cold and the crowd blowing smoke into their faces.

THEY PASS THROUGH A DOOR THAT SHE HAS TO SWIPE her palm through a glass-encrusted reader to open, and climb a steep, folding flight of stairs where they have to

step over broken bottles and syringes and around a sleeping cat, and shuffle quietly at her cue through a dim hallway past crooked sleeping doors. The smell is of pasta and soil and heroin residue and old wood that gets wet and then dries again.

She uses a thick metal key on the door at the very end of the hall. In the middle of the door hangs a taped-up sign which reads "Radioactive Materials: Hazardous Chemicals: Clearance Level Two Required" and scribbled beneath these blocky words which look like blow-ups of the typeface you get on paper receipts at old shopping centers are the words "Stay the fuck out!" Below that, printed smaller and with a different color pen is the word "please."

The door swings inward and she is inside, washed away by darkness, and he follows before he can think too much about it.

The door slams behind him and then a sweaty pinkish light flashes awake before his mind can run away into the darkness thinking about her sweet face smiling as her thin pale fingers drive a blade into his gut.

"Something to drink?" she asks, (just like they'd say in the movies, he thinks) stepping out of her shoes like they could have fallen off at any moment had she not willed them to stay on, and he shrugs half-way out of his jacket and then decides against that just yet, and says "How about a Coke?"

He sees her profile smile as she walks across the small room toward the fridge, which rests two feet away from her crumpled bed, which sits two feet away from her thirteen-inch television, which sits on a cut-in-half coffee-type table, which blocks part of the entrance to her bathroom. "Anything with that? Vodka or rum? Think that's all I got."

He doesn't really think she's much older than fifteen and it seems strange to him, these words belonging to her, but rightfully to a woman ten years her senior. And this place, with its one bed and separate bathroom and clean carpet and full-sized oven: is this all hers?

"Rum, then, with the Coke, and some ice."

"No ice."

"Okay."

She pulls bottles from the fridge and glasses from the sink, kicks the fridge door shut, pulls caps off the bottles and starts pouring like a pro. He watches her. She closes her eyes and rubs the back of her neck with one hand while she pours his drink.

"And for me," she says, "the same, but with more rum than Coke, and shaken-not-stirred, and a-toast-to-your-children."

HOW MANY HAVE I HAD? HE WONDERS. SHE SITS down next to the muted television once again, the screen at an angle and flashing images off her resilient skin (he watches as fingers and white teeth float across her shoulders in a long, crawling zoom-in), and he's sure that she's matched him one-for-one; in fact, she's just poured herself another, so why is it that he's having difficulty focussing and she seems perfectly all right?

"How old are you?" he asks, regretting the question for only a moment before he is washed over by total equanimity; acceptance accompanied by alcohol; the knowledge that anything he might say now is not really, entirely, his fault.

"Why does it matter?" she returns, smiling almost mischievously. He wishes vaguely and fleetingly he had a better foothold with which to comprehend that smile. He lets it pass and concentrates on her soft features.

"What is age, besides a count of how many years we've been alive? Who cares? It doesn't stand for anything."

"I think it matters."

"No. It doesn't. I'm any age you want me to be. And don't take that in the wrong way, it's not like an offer, or a cheap turn-on line, Jesus. I only mean that if I don't tell you, you won't get any misconceptions and eventually, ultimately, it will stop mattering. I'll become that age you're most comfortable with. And what is age, besides a count of how many years we've been alive, anyway? Who cares? It doesn't stand for anything. Not when the first sixteen don't really count, anyway."

So she's seventeen, he thinks. At least.

He turns down another drink.

She smiles. Knowingly?

"So how about this place?" he asks, on some kind of a stupid roll, out of it, unable to stop, keep bugging her, he thinks, get information out of her, but maybe he's just making conversation.

"What about it?" She watches him closely. He's acting maybe a little obnoxious, but she's seen worse drunks, and he's not that bad off, not yet, not really, but is that a good thing or a bad thing?

"Is it yours?"

She sips at her glass and her eyes fall gracefully to the carpet, then linger there, and she runs the index finger of her glass-holding hand along the soft, slow arc of her eyebrow as she swallows the liquid. "It's my mom's," she says eventually.

"You both—you both live here?"

Which implies, she thinks, that he thinks it's small. Too small for them both, and he'd be right.

"She's not around much these days," she says carefully. "She has a job."

His eyes almost light up, and he straightens himself in the chair. "You mean like a—"

"No. Don't ask. Like a job."

"Oh."

His posture falls back and the pink glow of the curve of the rim of his glass momentarily mesmerizes him, and when he looks back at her she's staring deep into the television screen.

HE ALMOST FALLS FORWARD OFF HIS CHAIR SO SHE leads him to the couch. He has lost his jacket somewhere, somehow, and he likes the warmth of her palm on his shoulder as she says "I gave you too much," and he laughs, replying, "I let you give me too much."

She lets him fall onto the couch. He stares, amazed, as she begins to untie his shoes, but then realizes it's just because she doesn't want her couch dirtied.

"After a certain point, though, it becomes my responsibility."

"I shouldn't be your responsibility," he says. Something, he knows, is wrong. Somehow he has lost some control, some remainder of upper-hand, but maybe it doesn't matter, and maybe where he is right now is better.

"You have to be," she says. "You're in my home."

He feels guilty. "I'm sorry."

"No," she smiles up at him. "Don't be."

She tosses his shoes across the room and they collide plangently with the front door. She moves around the couch in the breadth of a blink, and bends down, touches something out of his eyesight, and lowers the back of the couch in one fluid, mechanic motion. She straightens the cushions and falls down next to him, in control of gravity and time and space.

The TV turns itself off.

Almost asleep and her fingers brush his shoulder and he does the wrong thing and rolls over to face her. Leans into her.

"No," she says, and touches his chin with her thumb. "It's not a good time."

"No, it's not," he says, apologetic, and closes his eyes.

SHE LOOKS SO SERENE, HE THINKS, AS HIS EYES PEEL awake, shocked by the thick orange sun of the late-late morning as it soaks in past thin curtains and rusty insect-grate and flights of fire-escape skeletons. She is fully clothed and her hair is flared about her head and her face tilted away from him and for the longest time, maybe until he falls asleep again, he cannot remember what happened last night. But he decides it doesn't matter, and just stares at the soft hazy opalescence of her neck and shoulders.

There is something intrinsically beautiful about sleep, and it awes him that he has never noticed it before.

When she awakens it's just as he's slipping back under once again and so he asks her, his voice thick with morning throat-paste, what her name is. She tilts her head a little toward him and then smiles to the ceiling and then tells him, after touching his foot under the sheets with her own, that it doesn't matter, either. Her movements as she delicately extracts herself from the cushions of the couch reverberate through his body, soporific and subtle, and he lets himself close his eyes once again, perfectly content to be here, now, no questions asked.

SHE LOOKS AT HIM FOR LONG, LONG MINUTES, AS SHE has known his newly discovered appreciation of slumber for quite some time, and knows as well how it can be deceiving, how she can see him here, like this, as whoever she wants him to be, and it's frightening how much she's beginning to like him, and he's likely going to wake up with a hangover and who knows what he'll be like then, but everything here is too perfect right now in its silence and calm for her to want to detract from that in any way, so she allows these thoughts to fade, and she just watches him sleep.

She gets up after some time and drinks some orange juice from the fridge. She spits the pulp into the sink. She changes her shirt. She looks at him again and curses herself. She leaves a note on the counter which reads:

went to buy groceries
I should be back in 30 minutes
its 1:30 now
wait for me? we can go get
breckfast if you want
I had a good time last night
hope your here when I get back
Dos

She wants to erase the last couple of lines before her name, and maybe her name along with it, but she has written with pen, and doesn't want to go back and do it all over again, and maybe if she hurries she can be back before he wakes up anyway.

Hopefully he won't steal anything. Maybe the letter will help.

HE ISN'T THERE WHEN SHE GETS BACK. SHE PANICS, looks around, slams the door, thinking—but the toilet flushes and she sighs and cusses to herself, drops the Safeway bags on the kitchen counter and steps out of her shoe s. Stares at the letter she left but then as she hears him fiddling with the bathroom door she crumples it and tosses it down the disposal, thinking maybe he didn't see it.

He comes out blinking and zipping his fly, and she thinks that he looks tired and messy and she frowns

inside, all the while knowing that it is just his bad moment, his transition from asleep to awake, and everyone has it—but maybe this is as bad as it gets.

He blinks and nods and says, "Oh. I thought you had gone." Rubs his eyes with fisted fingers and then picks at the eye-glue with his pinkies.

"I went to," she motions behind her with her fingers, and turns around and looks at the dirty dishes in the sink, "you know, get some groceries. Some food and," she runs her hand through her hair and frowns slightly and looks at his socked feet, "supplies."

"That's sparkles. I got this, this deal in my apartment block, I live with a couple other guys, and the place comes with food, so they restock the place for you every week. If you remember, you know, to put in your order. Before Wednesday."

"Yeah?" she says. He needs to shave, she thinks. She needs to shave, too.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's not bad. It's too bad the place is a complete shithole otherwise."

She laughs. He smiles. "Do you want to go out and get some breakfast with me?" she asks then.

He looks down at the carpet and pushes at the curve of his back like maybe he slept on it wrong. He looks up at her finally and tries to keep his eyes with hers but she has to look away. "I don't know. I should probably be going."

"No, yeah, that's okay," she says quickly.

He starts to say something. Picks his way into his shoes instead.

Plucks his jacket and looks at her but she's putting away groceries, seemingly engrossed. He goes to the door. She almost looks up. Moves more slowly.

"Hey, listen," he says, "thanks for the…"

She does look up. Smiles. Tilts her head. Looks down. At her hands. "Don't mention it," she says.

He leaves.

She walks to the door and locks it. Leans her back into it and closes her eyes.

He walks into the street, back the way they came (he thinks), becomes disoriented anyway, stands in the middle of the sidewalk, looking for landmarks, shielding his eyes from the blow-up dirty heat of the sun; late midday crowds curve around him on their collectively individual ways; to work, to buy, to sell, to home.

She turns on the TV and watches it from the kitchen, at an angle where all the lines merge and all the colors are condensed and even the words spoken sound dull, faraway, distorted, but maybe that's not the television so much as the thoughts pushing through her head.

He walks a couple of blocks, stands at the corner near a bus-stop, and watches stolidly as the #11 (which by all means should be his to catch) idles up to the curb, pauses, opens its doors, swallows its fares, and then slides away in an eruption of stale eddies of oxygen.

She answers the door half an hour later without even thinking, at least not till after the fact (well, the chain-lock is in place, but a lot of good that's going to do against an armed intruder), but it's him, and she's maybe stunned, but also happy, and she wants to swing the door open and let him in, but she just stands there with her face at the crack and blinks at him. Maybe he forgot something.

He smiles and clears his throat. "Hi."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Places a fist softly into the palm of his hand. "I forgot that I'll need your phone number."

"Hi."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Places a fist softly into the palm of his other hand. "I forgot that I'll need your phone number."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Right," she says, as if waking up again, pulling at the door, pulling at the chain lock, letting him in, walking quickly-no-naturally into the kitchen and grabbing pen-paper-pencil-paper, jotting numbers and her name, yes, both, so he'll know who to ask for, turning around, surprised because he has moved up right behind her, and she hands him the yellow piece of paper and he takes it.

She smiles. "Okay."

"Thanks," he says. "I'll call."

"Okay."

He backs up and slips through the door.

"Bye," she says.

There.

NONE OF HIS CLOCKS HAVE ARMS, BUT THEY STRETCH. Anyway. The electric blip-blip-blip of the eyebulbs of the alarm clock blink knowingly at him. Beyond the city-sky grease of his window the sun blinks and wavers and drowns in steel coolness; the early evening whispers through the rafters of the clouds.

Tripping, sucking at his thumbnails, the world is green.

SHE VACUUMS, LISTENS TO ONE OF HER MOTHER'S shitty '80s discs, pauses, glances at the tel, then the phone, then out the window (where she can see brick and smoke and soft blue effulgence from the window of the cash dentist downstairs) and she pauses, and pauses, and sits down on the couch, and wipes her forehead.

HE SPREADS HIMSELF OUT INTO THE JUNK OF THE evening, leaking through the pathways of the music and the birth of light and noise and whispers of business and tough night-slammers packing heat/metal and flipping daunting fingers at each other across the street-ways saturated with rusty traffic. He clicks his tongue at the back of his throat, smiles serenely at scar-tissue faces poking out of the smog, runs his fingers across different patches on his jacket and various veins on his face and down the line of his jaw, indicative of his all-too copesetic nature, his intrinsic all-rightness, no problems here, he is cool, he's down, leave him alone, search elsewhere 'cause this cat's ace-of-spades.

Flashes card and he slides inside the warm concrete minimalist retro-proactive designer womb of the burrito libido—absolutely no capital letters, it's part of the theme, it's the ineffably irreducible thing of the place, and besides, they're just not sparkles. The libido is big and plain, the operators capitalizing on the oneness of the place, the earthiness of a pure solid block of cement, the object that it is, replaceable, simple, non-threatening.

A vast box of cement, abandoned industrial-something, nothing but floor and wall and speakers attached haphazardly to the gray sky and glued-on drink dispensers near the back wall, next to the paper-thin toilet booths. It's too nothing to be anything, and maybe that's why it draws the crowds, as they attach themselves to the walls; they project their own inherent emptiness onto the blankness, and the place becomes themselves, and they languish, and they love it. He picks through the bodies, hating the place for its ostentatious anomie, its ass-backwardness, because how is he ever going to find Nine Ways amid this disarray; misanthropy and bile rising like a pollution cloud within him, but maybe it's just the drugs, the comedown.

Endless looping in lethargic circles, skin and muscle and leather and cleavage excreting sweat onto him and making his eyes sting. This place wouldn't be so bad, he thinks, if he could get some lopers inside him and wash away the throbbing behind his eyeballs.

He gets into the three-deep sweet vodka line, picks at the edge of his nose with his thumb, spins around slowly watching the faces and the illuminated haircuts, then buys a forty-percent eighty-proof lime-Coke vodka fixer-mix. The machine pours the bright green fluid into a floral-patterned paper cup after it swallows his tattered fiver. He extracts himself from the crush of the drink lines and spin-slides into the hardcore dance nucleus. Sips at cool fruit-flavored effervescence and wipes the glow from his chapped lips with the back of his hand; makes eye-contact with the schoolgirls and nods solemnly at their boy-friends; scans the ranks of sweat and skin for Nine.

RUBS A TOWEL ACROSS HER HEAD, FUMBLES WITH THE door, slips across the linoleum and picks up the phone. Her mother.

"Where's Roger?"

"I don't know, Mom. What do you want?"

"Roger?"

"No, it's Dos. What do you want?"

"When I get my hands on that kid, when I get enough money to get around to… what time is it?"

"It's late."

"Dos?"

"What?"

"Okay, Roger's here."

"Okay, Mom."

"Are you doing your homework?"

"Yeah."

"You better be staying away from that club. And that *boy*."

"Right."

"Going to get… he won't let me leave, Dos."

She closes her eyes.

"No, Mom?"

"No. But he… he doesn't, you know… he pays me well."

"I know, Mom." He's a wonderful human being.

"I'm coming home tomorrow to pick up some of my clothes."

"Great."

"Why don't you ever clean up around that fucking place?"

"Why don't you ever call when you're fucking sober?"

"Don't you *ever* fucking—"

"Bye." She hangs the phone back on the wall.

Back in the bathroom, she brushes her hair.

Sits on the toilet; looks at her hands. The phone rings. And rings.

She notices that he left one of his socks behind.

DIALS THE NUMBER FROM THE WRINKLED CORNER OF paper that he's thumbed out of his wallet and holds the receiver away from his ear and avoids touching the walls of the booth with his jacket.

"Grundle, Incorporated."

"Spokes?"

"Grundle, In*corp*orated," Spokes repeats.

"Oh, yeah, shit… this is, what, Williams and Son? Regarding the advertisement in this weekend's… fuck—"

"Close enough, GeeBee. What's sprinklin?"

"It's negligible. You got the phone tonight, Spokes?"

"Indeed I do, for another hour."

"Seen Nine Ways tonight?"

"He's to my immediate and direct left-most, not more than three to four feet away from my very own self."

"Oh, oh," he says, and speaks more softly, as if Nine had appeared outside the very phone booth, and not merely allegedly at the other end of the phone, in third person: "Is he smoked about last night?"

"Nah, no." Then away from the phone, but louder, and he can hear the sound of music and bodies mix-filtering into the voice: "Hey, Nine, you smoked about Ghettoboy skipping his ass out on you last night?"

He winces.

"Nah, man, he ain't smoked. Things is sparkles. So, GeeBee, you making an appearance tonight or is this your sick-leave call?"

"No, it's… well, where you guys at?"

"Libido." Then Spokes screams, not into the phone, but utterly out of context to Ghettoboy's ear: "Samantha! Suck my cock!"

He forgets and slumps back against the pane of the booth-wall, curses, and peels himself off with a sickly sticking velcro sound. He looks dully at the amorphous pink smear which he knows is the front entrance to the libido; obscured by layers of chewing gum, expectorate, cola, back-alley breeze-dust.

"What'sat?" screams Spokes.

"Nothing."

"Gonna show, then, huh? Samantha! No! Fuck you!"

"Don't think so, Spokes. It's a, well…"

A bus floats by on winter wheels, reflecting the steel sky in its windshield; revolving destination glow-letters slinking by in green and blue.

"Bitch! Okay! Tonight!"

"Thing is, it's not a definite, understand, but there might be this girl I'm checking in on."

"No shit?" Spokes asks, disinterested. "Feed her some for me."

"Sure. Say greets to Nine."

"All the way, catch you later, right-O, Gee. Saman—"

He extricates himself from the choking humidity of the booth, looks at his shoes and lights a cigarette. Steps back inside and dials another number from another piece of paper with less folds and cleaner writing, but no one is home at that number, or at least they're not answering.

HE DOESN'T LIKE WALKING BUT HE DOES IT NOW, maybe because it's at least something more than sitting around, waiting for the big nothing to happen, which never does, anyway. The city lies low here, sprawled and squalid, busted and torn, cracked, spiraled and grated and chain-linked to the nuts.

He avoids eye-contact with the squatters. Shuffles his feet across the pavement, crossing paths with wind-scattered paper refuse and cigarette butts.

Red street lights and open sewer grates and brick and steel suffused with lugubrious graffiti.

Streets of home.

Sky dense with rain smog and the reflection-glow of down-downtown.

Smells like old water and clean paper smoke.

The el rattle-shoots by, three blocks away, in a shower of turquoise sparks.

He walks.

HE'S NOT GOING TO CALL FOR AT LEAST THREE DAYS, if at all, and that's a fact. Right, so, and even anyways, it's not like this is a *big thing,* this was barely-if-that a one night thing and it didn't equal up to even that, so let it pass, relegate it to the place where lovely things are allowed to be forgotten.

That's now officially a gone thing. She's absolutely out. And so what if he paid for the blouse? He has nothing over her anymore and she's told him so.

Or so she tells herself.

And instead of letting it bother her she gets dressed, clean clothes, clean skin: the black panties and bra (the one with the thin lace periphery), the leather-denim shortskirt (she decides to go bare-legged), the high-heels (the comfortable ones) because they're the easiest to get into, and the white shirt (button-up) that she bought last month and has only (so far) worn twice for (that asshole) Wilson. But enough of that—that's now officially a gone thing, she's absolutely out, and *so what* if he paid for the blouse? He has nothing over her anymore and she's told him so. And so she plays her mirror-reflected fingers across the brittle mirror-collar of the shirt and sighs, purses her lips, and decides to go without makeup, because it feels like one of those nights (she doesn't look that bad at all).

And so she goes to make some money. (Instead of sitting around this place and thinking about these things that are almost forgotten.)

HE CLIMBS SOME FENCE AND SCRAPES HIS HANDS ON the way up, loses his balance and scrapes his knees on the way down. He curses loudly, voice rolling out like water through the streets, and if anyone's around they're all staring at him, but he doesn't care.

He's in Two-Toe Town. Knows this place in night or day, like he knows how to find and place his own feet; it's the watery graveyard that feeds his dreams.

Uses that carbon-copy flash-of-light-and-close-your-eyes knowledge of the environment to spit his form stealthily through the heated knot of streetways. On a

mission, with a destination, he reaches Toby's in mere minutes, trying not to let himself feel nostalgic about the surroundings.

He knocks loudly on the front door, (it's a house, just like they used to put on TV, only much scaled-down) feeling suddenly vulnerable here, four feet off street level and saturated in the pearly glow of Toby's front light, which hangs by half a screw over the door and attracts a steady nucleus of moths and mosquitos and others less recognizable.

He waits an eternity and starts to think Toby's not around—but he can see the blue flicker of the television through the window to his left, so maybe he's just stoned out in the bathtub again—but then this voice comes out of the obdurate gloom and scares the shit out of him until he realizes that it's Toby himself:

"Hey, fuck you, Ghettoboy, I don't use that door anymore. Come around back."

He jumps from the step and lands in soft mud. "Good to see you too, Toby."

As his eyes adjust to the darkness a hand drops onto his shoulder. Toby's voice close and warm and redolent of peach brandy: "No shit, thanks for coming by. Where've you been?"

"The usual. Keeping busy."

Toby's glassy eyes smile. "Yeah."

And the warm emerald lambency of Toby's super-humble domicile inhale them away from the smells and sounds of ultra-suburban nighttime.

TOBY IS A NON-PRACTICING POST-INDUSTRIALIST agnostic Christian; gothic heroin-spiking shotgun faggot. Or he is none of these and only claims it to be via arched eyebrows and shared needles and mutations of fashion. Ghettoboy feels, at best, ambivalent about most of the substrata that Toby traverses, but he has known him since the age of zero-minus-one and so most of the usual rules don't apply. It also makes him more comfortable to know that none of the people he knows know Toby.

Toby whips them inside, closing the door behind them in a twitch of the wrist. He twists his neck and makes it pop. He floats across pinkgreen linoleum and plucks them pink lemonade Pepsis from the fridge. They sit down immediately, Toby's house warm and solid and humid with its dull brown walls and thinning cream carpets; Toby in his usual chair which faces directly the scattered, half de-scrambled, muted television screen, Ghettoboy on the scuffed sleepover couch. With the crack of aluminum they suck at their Pepsis. Toby scratches himself and smiles.

There is a ritual they share, traveling with them from the past, birthed from puerile boredom and the humorless necessity of experimentation, but carried with them out of reverence for the what-once-was. And it begins tonight as Toby says:

"You want to start it? I've got some powerful blue-grade lopers in the fridge we could use."

"No. Tonight I think we should go without."

"Clean?"

"Clean."

Empty.

Raw.

VITAL.

Young.

Eric is thirteen, has been for three months, but Toby is two years older, and sometimes as much as three. It's hard to tell, though. He looks young. He acts old.

They bike hard-fast and splice through traffic, Toby in the lead, Eric a few feet behind, but sometimes taking the initiative and pedalling up ahead and wheeling a turn of his own choosing. Someone honks a horn and Toby screams "Fuck you, cock suck!" at the top of his lungs and they have a good laugh about that later, in the safety of Eric's mother's kitchen, chewing freeze-pops as a mitigation to the ozone-slick television summer sun they've just come in from.

They come here often on weekday afternoons, especially Friday (today's a Friday), because Toby (Eric, too) can't stand being in school on a crippling Friday afternoon, by virtue of its proximity to Saturday. Eric's mom works. Downtown business, Toby figures, because of the money she ostensibly makes. Eric's dad is never mentioned, never thought of. Dead or gone, jailed or divorced, what's the difference? The apartment is theirs.

Toby plugs the tape into the VCR and Eric pulls the popcorn from the microwave. They sit down on the carpet with their backs to the sofa and watch the credits come up, accompanied by some weird music. Eric leaps to his feet, spilling the popcorn, and cranks on the Dolby.

Toby says that he's seen one of these at one of his sister's parties, once. A year or so ago. Eric says that he's never seen one, but of course Toby must know this.

The moving flesh appears on the screen right away. A tremor passes through Eric's body, a feeling that he's unable to understand. Illicit behavior on his part evoking fear and excitement. Toby watches, head tilted, seemingly insouciant.

They turn it off after half an hour and three scenes. Agreeing that the part with the two girls together was both stupid and gross. Imagine, Toby says, next thing they'll do is put two guys together. Gross, Eric agrees.

You get a boner? Toby asks. Eric shakes his head. Hey, Toby assures, you can tell me. I got one.

Just now?

Yeah, says Toby. Wanna see?

No, I believe you.

So, did you?

Yeah. So?

No you didn't. Let me see.

No. Why?

Dunno. You ever get them in school? Like looking at girls?

Nah. Sometimes at night.

Yeah, me neither. Hey, you wanna play a game?

"CHANGED MY MIND. LET'S DO THE LOPERS."

Toby spreads the tablets, cartridges, and bottles out on the coffee table amid the already-present clutter of gay porn mags, loose tobacco, videodiscs, miscellaneous jewelry and desiccated junk food. "I'm myself gonna take a double hit of spark with a chaser lob of this smack gunk. Lopers here for the G-Boy, nice stuff. I like this nasal spray myself, goes straight away. God, I'm horny. Here," Toby passes him a small taped-up Advil bottle.

Ghettoboy slams the bottle up his nose and bends over, head between his knees, and squeezes. Inhales hard, moves to the next nostril. Dizziness; breathe; white, soft white, and he's soaking the world in through the pores of his skin; global sun…

Toby pops in the disc and turns the volume up just right, to the level that their minds can alternately soak it up or filter it out. The flesh appears suddenly in all its fifty-two inch glory, and Ghettoboy watches, enraptured, however fleetingly.

SHE LICKS HIS DIRTY EAR IN THE DARK, THE SMELL OF urine coming from around the corner or off the trick himself, runs her fingers through his hair, and that's a trick in itself, with his hair greasy and knotted.

He speaks cock-talk, dirty mouth, bitch this, cunt whore that. She moans like she wants it. Tries not to cry when he jabs a thumb into her without warning.

He takes her bent over boxes and metal, biting her lip.

Later, she straightens herself out a little in a diner washroom. The waitress who eyed her acrimoniously when she came in is knocking on the stall door. She walks past her without meeting her eye and is back on the street feeling at least nominally better.

Bad trick, but the fifty bucks sits comfortably in her purse, warm and true, unchanging.

"AND WHAT'S HER NAME?"

"Who, this girl?"

"Yeah, what's her name?"

The girl the girl the girl. "I don't think you'd know her."

"Yeah, so what?"

"I don't know her name."

"You don't know her *name*?"

"Wait, yeah, she gave it to me. Hold on."

Fumble fingers switchblade to his pocket and grasp his wallet. He slips paper through leather and focuses carefully on the ink scrawl. The girl. Her number. She wasn't home.

"Her name is Dos."

"Ha! Her parents must be chippies. That's good. I like that."

"I don't think she has parents. A mother, maybe, but I think she works."

Bad trick, but the fifty bucks sits comfortably in her purse, warm and true, unchanging.

Silence, then. Mutual silence filled by spaces. Spaces filled by swirling voids of illusion and shortness of breath. The brown walls shudder. Ghettoboy licks his lips. "She's real cute," he says.

"You sound like a fucking pip."

"You should talk. Faggot."

Toby doesn't so much as shrug this off. Instead gives Ghettoboy a bland look of heard-it-too-many-times. "What's her name again?"

"Dos."

"Yeah?"

"Why?"

"I think I *do* know her. You met her through Wilson, right?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, you met her through Wilson, right? You met her *through* Wilson? He, like, introduced you two?"

"What's that supposed to mean? What does fucking Nine Ways have to do with anything?"

"I thought… never mind."

"What?"

"Never mind. I thought she serviced Nine Ways a time back. Wrong person. Wrong name, I guess. Never mind."

"Like his girlfriend?"

"Like that, but not like that. You know."

"Fucking Nine Ways Wilson. What a load of shit."

"Sorry, hey. Maybe I'm wrong."

"*Maybe*?" He gets up.

"Hey, listen…"

"Look, I'm gonna go now. Thanks for…"

"Yeah."

"So see you later."

" 'Kay. See you later."

"Maybe I'll call that girl, see what she's up to."

"Sounds good. You go."

He goes.

BLEEDING. FUCKING BLEEDING. *BLEEDING.*

Walks fast, loose spikes of adrenaline and pain shooting up her legs as she pounds the street.

Her rhythm is lost, her night is lost, whatever she had hoped for this to be is gone, miles behind, faded into the mysterious land of bullshit stories and almost-was. Bad tricks, two in a row, and she's never been this poor on judging them, and what's *happening* to her?

She kicks at a stray cat as it hesitantly curls toward her ankles; kicks it hard, catching it square in the head. It screams and is gone, defense mechanisms ringing past code red as it fires itself into the safety of darkness and refuse. All she can think is: Is this all it is? Is it everything trying to take a piece of me, and nothing more, when all I want is to roll up and simply die?

Her nerves attack her body; her brain retaliates, discharging random senselessness into every limb; limbs retaliate, telling her that it's so absolutely the pain that's important, so pay attention; mind wants to shut it out, shut it up, but it ricochets; the tears seem to help, as it's momentarily something to concentrate on; but then it begins again with heightened urgency.

She walks, walks home. The night's over, she's a wreck, and the world's a joke at the bottom of a hole in the middle of a raging ball of meaninglessness.

HE GOES TO THE FIRST PHONE BOOTH HE SEES, exactly and precisely to call her, just so it will feel right, so that what he has said will be accurate and thusly fulfilled. He'd planned it all along. But, when she answers on the fifth ring…

"Hi, it's me."

"Who?"

…maybe it begins to seem to be the wrong time to do anything of the sort.

"Ghettoboy. We… I was at your…"

Three days, he thinks. Standard. Should have waited.

"Hi," she says. She *says* it like she *means* it, if the word can mean anything more than what it does.

He feels better. He asks her to breakfast.

"Do you have a car?" she asks. She's disappointed but determined, it would seem, when he says no. "It'll have to be the bus."

"What will? Where are we going?"

There is a long silence from her. The street beyond the booth glass comes suddenly alive: blackened water and rust and metal and street and the deep-night sound of the respiration of the meticulously hidden people of the city.

Her voice is sad when she asks, "Have you ever been to the country?"

IT IS FOUR O'CLOCK AND SOME SIXTEEN HOURS SINCE sleep as the horizon gives birth to tenuous promise of light. Sky turns a lighter black. City recedes; amazing, cold, encompassing. He turns and watches from where they have come, then where they are, then where they are going—or is there a distinction? He has, of course, not been to the country before.

They sit at the back of the emptiness of the bus, this bus which has cost them the price of nine or ten normal fares. But then again it's not local transit: it's long distance, it's cross-country, it's spanning the negative expanses, it's where have you been and where are you going and why—and is there a difference?

The first town and unscheduled stop is called Opal. They get off, hardly having even begun, and Ghettoboy thinks as he watches the bus spin up dust and stone that the driver might as well return to the city, as they were the only two passengers. But then maybe he has a real destination—another city, somewhere far away, where the people live and breathe and work and pay for bus tickets to get the hell out of there.

Like anywhere, he supposes. Where you came like where you're going. Anywhere is everywhere. Just with different street names.

The sky is coming alive and the morning breeze—real road-and-horizon morning breeze—catches their nostrils with teasings of ditch-cut weed, dirt, and crops they can't identify. Atop the warm and soft flows the lacquer of nascent metropolis, just riding in off the wind, sending out its concentric vibes and consternations.

"God," she breathes, "it's so beautiful out here."

"Yeah," he says, although he disagrees, because all it is is long, and sad, and soft and dark, and monotone and mild, boring, boring, quiet and wet, black and white, sky and land, one and the same, the same, the same.

The bus-stop cafe they find themselves deposited in front of is called, of course, The Road & Horizon. Maybe, she thinks, with a flicker of a thought-smile, that when they named it they could see the intrinsic beauty of the simple: parallel lines, stretching to forever, all that you need, all that we have; enough. Maybe, he thinks, they named it at a loss, realizing at last that there was nothing but these two, the road and the edge of the land, and nothing they could call this dive would change that fact, so why bother, because if you're here you're here, where else are you going to go, and it doesn't get any worse so accept it.

She grabs his hand (here's a thrill, he thinks, and for a spark of a white-hot ineffable moment, with the warmth of her perfect soft hand touching his, maybe all this shit has been worth it, maybe he hasn't been acting crazy, maybe this moment is what it has all been for, right?) (and what am I doing, she thinks, maybe five-eighths on her way to feeling giddy and yet all the time growing bold, because it's *okay,* this guy is okay, so much not like the

others) and pulls him inside the Road & Horizon, Open 24 Hrs. don't you know.

Grimy fluorescent lights, red-black checkered floors and counter tile and tablecloths, dirt streaks trailed from the door to the unisex bathroom near the back, a wide and multi-scraped freezer pushing obtrusively into the dining space, such as it is, and a counter barring access to the kitchen, behind which stands an old woman in a dead green apron and in front of which sits an old man who chews on the edge of his coffee cup and swings his heavy head around to look at the newcomers, his eyes alight with distance and depth, or an effortless impression thereof.

Then turns away, indifferent.

Dos smiles at Ghettoboy. Grips his hand, and then, suddenly cognizant of this action, lets go. "Isn't this place…" she says, searching for the words.

"Ugly as fuck?" whispers Ghettoboy.

Her smile falls and she just shrugs.

"Help you kids?" asks the waitress, shifting her weight behind the counter.

"From the city," says the old man to the woman, his voice like sneakers skimming pavement.

"Yeah?" asks the woman, in their direction, unimpressed.

"Well, yeah, we are," says Dos, and points out the window at the expanding thread of orange sunrise, "from the city."

"Yeah?" says the woman, with no tone of voice at all. "Get you both something?"

"Yeah," says Dos, and draws nearer. Eyes scanning for a phosphorescent menu of some sort, a high and wide emblazoned Pepsi sign inundated with listings of hamburgers, milkshakes, pies and their prices. Finding nothing but crumbling holes in the walls, she hesitates. Finally, she asks for a bowl of ice cream. "With chocolate sauce or something on it," she adds.

The woman raises an eyebrow and swings her gaze toward Ghettoboy. "Anything else?"

"Just a…"—he looks at the walls and then at the counter and then at his own hands—"Just a coffee."

"Black?"

"Two sugar one cream."

Without grace or sound, the woman disappears into the kitchen, with only the swinging Employees Only door marking her wake.

Dos takes the humming white silence as her cue and leads Ghettoboy over to a small table near the front, between the window and the freezer. She sits, hands curled around each other awkwardly, and she stares out the windows, eyes locked on the intangible terminus.

He follows her gaze momentarily, but his eyes pull him back. He watches her. Watches her watching. Her eyes, her light brown hair in ethereal tangles, freckles, skin, neck lips teeth. She turns to him and smiles, and he fights with himself not to look away.

"I have to go the bathroom," he says, and stands up.

"NOT AS FUCKING COOL AS YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE," he says aloud to himself as he dribbles into the toilet bowl. "She's nothing and yet you're fucking everything up. Too smooth."

His piss is the color of the water. He rotates his head in a slow arc, back and around, his eyes closed, his neck muscles spasming. He finishes, shakes it with two fingers and looks at it. "Behave," he says.

Maybe when they named it they could see the intrinsic beauty of the simple: parallel lines, stretching to forever, all that you need, all that we have; enough.

He flushes. Pulls up his pants and reads the graffiti. *Fags suck cock. Franky's mom has big boobs. O.R.P. was here. There once was a girl named McDuckett…*

He jiggles the handle on the toilet but the water keeps swirling, spiraling, flushing. He backs out of the stall, eyes himself warily in the plexus of soap-scum mirror, then washes his hands only to find a defective dryer and no paper towels. He shakes them off then runs them through his hair.

"You're the king," he says to his obscured reflection, and clicks a finger-gun at his gut with a smile.

HE RETURNS TO THE TABLE AS SHE'S SPOONING ICE cream into her mouth, and she looks up with her head tilted over the bowl and smiles self-consciously. He smiles back.

He sits down, stirs and sips his coffee, which tastes about two sugars and one cream short of perfection. He stirs it again, with flagrant concentration, trying to maybe dredge up something lost beneath the black viscosity. He steals a look at her. She licks her spoon and *smiles.*

SHE LEAVES A TIP DESPITE HIS OBJECTIONS ("NO ONE leaves tips in these places," and "She probably gets paid more than they do in the city, anyway.") and they pay at the front. Connie, as her name tag reads, punches up their bill on a pocket calculator and then asks for the five seventy-five. The guy sitting at the counter grunts and taps his mug against the sugar canister in non-rhythmic sequences. Ghettoboy pays with a ten, disgusted that Dos' tip alone would have covered the bill, but he might

as well forget that and play it gallant, as he would have insisted on paying for her ice cream anyway. He thinks he probably would have, anyway.

"You kids have a good trip," says Connie, but her eyes are cold and silent. Like she knows no one would actually be coming here, small-town speck-on-the-highway Opal, to stay, thinks Ghettoboy. Dos takes it at face value and thanks her. They drift together, side by side, across sullied checker linoleum and into the outside once again.

They stand beyond the in-swing of the door, breathing deeply the graveled parking-lot edge-of-the-universe morning air. She reaches blindly and holds his hand.

"The earth," she whispers.

Morning.

THEY WALK INTO THE FIELD AND THE DUST AND THE breaking light through the weeds and stalks. They walk until they are walking a ghost, knees weak and eyes skyward, warm fingers entwined, and then they drop-fall into the dryness of soil, hot and together, one and one and *one* with the earth.

His lips on her lips and hers on his and all this and more as the sun tears free of the horizon with a sudden warm and appreciative hello to their naked flesh.

SHE LIES AND LISTENS TO THE FLUCTUATIONS AND imperfections of his voice as he speaks to her through the medium of soft country air and recovering depth of forlorn soul. Sun wavers and filters unhindered, finally, into her eyes, and she turns over onto her stomach, with her face nestled between his chest and arm. And the smell there, the scent so strongly of him, eases and teases and fondles her sadness. As he speaks.

"And the kid, you know, he wasn't even in Picky's group. But I hated that kid. Had some brain complex, brain defect, congenital, I don't know. It's not fair, you know, not really, to hate a kid like that, or at least you feel bad about it, anyway."

He's a little like that guy from the east side of last year, she thinks. Purple hair and razored eyebrows. His name was Aaron, maybe, or Eric. His hands were soft like this, and his chin hair was longer, and his voice was deeper, and his arms were stronger, and he was an asshole, and of course that's maybe why she was in love with him. Is this what's happening here? Can't be.

"It's like the same kind of thing that makes you feel bad about punching a girl. Not that I do, you know, but there was this one chick, I mean she was a fucking ninja, I guess, and was racing me around with these finger daggers, shit, I don't know. Like I stole her boyfriend or brother's dope, she was screaming. And what do you do when they're going to kill you, and you can tell? You fight back. But you don't feel good about it."

This utterly foreign landscape, both the sky and the peace and calm of the smell of his armpit and the soft blue fog of serenity that's building up at the back of her mind. These are the things that scare her and should not. Get too comfortable and the bridge always breaks, doesn't it? Every time, she knows. Every time it's the same, and nothing is learned. Hope precedes and overrides precaution in some sickeningly cellular way. And here it all comes rushing back. This fucker. He makes her so comfortable.

"And I don't know why that should matter. Because they're weaker, I guess, and can't normally on a good day be as lethal as should be necessary on a bad one. Or because you're attracted to them? Respect or fear them—love them. I guess it's all the same ball of wax. Scary. Because I don't even want any of that. Nothing should come to that. That belated entrapment of the soul, you know, screaming to break free. That relationship thing. I don't think I want that. Could hack that."

But caution flees from her grasp each time, and yet she'll resolve it, she'll break free of these internal strings that stretch her beyond her limit. Caution in the wind, isn't it always? Caught up in the stars and the sun somewhere there, drifting down at inopportune moments to catch in the sunlight like motes of dust and grab our attention. Peripheral vision, hindsight; ignore these. Feel the correctness of this absolute vision. This feeling of peace is not as wrong as she'd like to believe.

"Because I'm just myself, and how do I portray that to a completely other individual?"

It could just be all right. Because things get better.

"And I don't need to know the difficulty of that portrayal. I don't need that, and let me be hollow and shallow, it doesn't matter. I'm not a fucking TV movie star. I got to take it how I take it."

"You do," she says. "Things get better."

His hand brushes down her neck. "You're right."

AND SO SHE TALKS, NOT SO MUCH TO FILL THE elaborate spaces, but because she can, and because this situation—her hand alternately grasping his shoulder, his belt, or his hand, as they walk together, slow and straight and free, and he bitches about the dirt that's in his pants and in his hair, and he's not really listening to her at all, it seems—this situation soothes and calms her and fills her with the conviction that all is all right with anything she might possibly have to say.

"You can take any one singular thing of pure oneness and self, anything that is what it is without confusion or debate, and when you remove it from its intricate context, it suddenly becomes more than it could when it was relying on its environment. Whether it's a phrase or a word or a person or a symbol, without context or past or predetermination it suddenly becomes a beautiful thing,

and we can see it for what it didn't have without everything you tried to give it, and we understand the aesthetics we've been hiding from it."

"I think I got dirt in my nostrils, for shit sake."

"Yeah? Me too. Like I was saying. Like a song. Like song titles. You pick up a disc and look at song titles. And the titles are something like 'Orange,' or 'I'm a Fool,' or 'Touch,' and suddenly you intuitively know that there's so much more to those simple words, and aren't they beautiful? Just all by themselves. It's all they need."

"Yeah," he says as he buckles his belt with two dedicated hands.

THEY SIT BY THE EDGE OF THE ROAD. SILENT AND secure, with only the wind blowing between them.

This nature, this world, she thinks. The glistening green glow of the sky in all its premature, predatory glory. This world and this silence swallows us all. And if we're lucky enough we find the time to sit by the edge of the road and watch it; watch ourselves as we fall beneath the horizon, a sparkling simulacrum of what we could have been—now forgotten. Forever. And if we're luckier than we have any right to be, we catch ourselves before we're gone, and find bodies to keep warm with, and minds to meld with, and together, two separate entities feigning as one, we take comfort in the minute stigmata of ourselves.

She's so beautiful, he thinks. Something bothers him. Bothers him because she's not like he might have expected, and he doesn't know how to handle this newness. She's wonderful, as she holds him, but can he hold her?

It's too much; he hasn't the strength. He lets his brain rake trenches past his heart, patterned as shivers down his spine, until it's too much. It hurts.

It's enough to know that she's here now and there's no reason to believe he'll do anything to disrupt that. He couldn't if he wanted to.

She points to the waning points of light in the purpling sky, stars about to wink out for the duration of another overheated day. He just nods and smiles as the breeze catches the dust in his hair.

BACK IN THE CITY ALREADY, WITH ITS GLOOM AND gauntness, looming structures of stained sky, white-hot burning points of headlight sunrise screaming past the dust, concrete, and french-fry grease. So soon, almost as if nothing has changed, he thinks. Silently sad, really, the way that it is already sinking somewhere away from immediate consciousness and into the obdurate blueness that constitutes memory. Like it never happened.

But it happened, she thinks, and she smiles as she incorporates this into her envisioned reality by giving him a quick-soft kiss on the corner of his mouth. Fulfillment and this alien sense of calm kicking and clawing its way into her capillaries. She won't let it, though, she resolves as she fights back a smile.

He picks up her hand and brushes his thumb lightly across her palm. She takes sudden comfort in his poorly concealed confusion.

"Hey, it was nice," she says.

He looks into her eyes and feels a disquieted bubbling in his stomach. Telltales of a hunger, he thinks.

"I'll call you later, and maybe we can go out and do something," he says.

"I think I'll sleep in late," she simpers, "but yes, give me a call."

"Okay."

She turns around and walks in the direction of her mother's empty apartment. He watches her for half a second and then turns and walks away from her. Neither turns to look back. Not looking back.

HE BEATS THE SO-COMMON PATH ALL THE WAY BACK to home of all homes and hole of all shit-holes at residence 909 Forget Street, Basement Suite B. The sky burns as he sinks below street level, but the city sleeps. The day which is night is over, and the negative space which is day has come. Sleep, because we're all nocturnal seekers of fortune and entertainment, and when the scores of pale-faced business doers purr to life in their rusting pavement-licking spaceships, it's time to forget today and move resolutely past the dream transition of never-quite-tomorrow.

His head hurts.

He can't sleep and so cranks local radio stations, one after the next, settling on the pirate euro feeds. He fires up his notebook and scans random sites, settling eventually on the infinite listings of names and actions: Kathy Ireland, Belle Gracetown, anal, oral, trad, lez, celeb, Ambrosia, Madonna, kink. He tilts flat Sprite from a two-liter down his throat as he advances and retreats past multi-tiered layers of pics, movies, and softs with the click of a fingernail.

SHE CHEWS ON WEEK-GONE FRIED CHICKEN leftovers from the fridge, still good as ever. She washes it down with tap water from her filtration canister. She shakes salt onto her plate and finishes a drumstick.

The purple glow of neon morning percolates in through the interstices of curtains as she methodically turns out all the lights, steps out of her shoes, peels off her clothes, and power-collapses onto the couch.

She's not tired, and so watches the walls as her eyes grow accustomed to the mutating light.

She sucks on sleeping pills from the bathroom cabinet. Time-lapse oblivion takes three-quarters of forever and ever to greet her aching eyelids.

AND WHEN SHE BREATHES THE FIRST WISPS OF AWAKE, it's all heavy and thick with thought and heated like a dry mouth after a day of walking the simmering pavement, and the only thoughts that infiltrate her disorientation are: Was she working? Does she need to be working soon? Who's missing her? Is she late? Is he going to be pissed off again? Is—

And then she's awake, all awake, and consciousness dawns and short-term dissipates. The dreams fade like hunger once fed, forgotten and weak with no leverage left to cause her pain.

She smiles at the full-day suffusion of sunlight that streams importunately in through the windows despite the curtains and other objects in its way: stereo cabinet, empty; television antenna, abandoned; speaker cables hanging from the ceiling, severed, derelict.

"This place looks like it's been robbed," she laughs, as if for the first time.

She barefoots it into the bathroom and swallows four extra strength Alleves. The unfiltered softwater burns her throat. She coughs and smiles at her myriad reflections.

"Morning," she giggles.

A GRIMY THUMB, NOT HIS OWN, PEELS OPEN HIS eyelids, one after the other. It takes a minute for this newly available visual dimension to be properly processed as valid sensory input, and then another minute for his brain to know what to do with it. Finally, his skull screams: you're awake.

Pitsy, the girl from Basement Suite A, has broken in again—although maybe not accurately "broken in," as he gave her a key after the third incident to curb any further damage to his lock bolt—and is methodically redistributing her weight as she stares plaintively down at him.

"Hey, wake up," she pleads in a broken voice.

"Fuck off, Pitsy. What are you doing here?"

Throaty giggle. "Fuck off *Pitsy*? Shit, Ghetto, the sun is going down already, what are you doing sleeping still?"

He moans. Does he need this now? "I was up late. Early. Whatever. I'm tired."

"Are you getting up, though, or what?"

"What do you *want?*"

"Aww," she whines, and collapses next to him on the futon. She brushes her fingers across his forehead and frowns as he cringes away from her. "You got some good stuff for me?"

"No, I got nothing for you."

"Got some stuff at all, like maybe you're selling, laying around here? I can't pay you for it *now,* but…"

He looks at her. Limp, unwashed blond hair framing her junkie-bitch pallor. Her breath is curdled Listerine trying to mask macaroni, tobacco, maybe semen. Emaciated, disgusting. "What's happening to you?"

She laughs. "You know. You know. Happened to you for awhile last year, remember, and I had to lend *you* the money? It's okay, I can handle it, I just need something to get me going for today and maybe the rest of the week, but it's okay because I'm totally on top of this shit. Remember what you used to say? 'The shit is not better than me'? Hey," she says, pushing a hand abruptly into his underwear, "can I get you off?"

"No," he says, too emphatically, grabbing her wrist. "No," he sighs.

"Come on," she implores, her voice worse and worse, sad and sore, red and blue, raw. "Come on, Ghetto, like old times, like we used to, then you can get me some of the good shit, huh?"

He extracts himself delicately from her grip and stands up next to the futon. Stares at her for a moment and then backs up into the kitchen nook. "It's not like that anymore," he says as he pours himself some artificially sweetened orange juice. He stands and looks at the glass in his hand. "I've got a girl now."

Her laughter behind him. She coughs. "You don't got girls. Girls get you. You screw it up. You screwed *me* up. It won't last. You can't last. Now come on." Her voice breaks. "I need some stuff." She cries softly as she crosses the floor and touches his neck. "I need some stuff and I don't care how I have to get it."

She stinks.

Anger. "Why do you keep coming here?"

"You can help me. Come on. Let's do it. Don't you want me?"

Revulsion. "No. I don't."

"You do. You need me."

He turns and pushes her. Pushes her with a force he never knew he had. And if he had known, would never have used. She flies across his floor and falls over the edge of his armchair. She hits the floor, hard, the air knocked out of her lungs before she can even be scared, and then he's on top of her.

"This means you'll get me the stuff?"

He backhands her across the face.

She cries. No tears. Not unhappy.

IT'S SEVEN TWENTY-NINE WHEN HE CALLS, EVEN though she has decided that he's not going to call—it's too soon. Even though she has decided he is not going to call she has further decided she's not going to work tonight, and maybe more than likely not tomorrow night, and possibly extremely likely never again. Something within her is glowing soft and warm and as she senses this glow she knows she's better than the job and doesn't need it like she maybe used to, although she's pretty sure she never needed it and it was just other people who needed her who convinced her that it was the other way around.

She's at home when he calls because right now she doesn't know where else to be, and even though she's sure that it's not him calling she gets a funny sparkling feeling at the back of her throat when she picks it up.

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi," she says.

"How are you?" Polished; aloof.

"I'm fine." Cool; smooth.

Low-voltage silence hum, and then: "Listen, do you want to go out and do something with me? Now, or later? Tonight sometime?"

She smiles and sits down on the edge of the couch. "Yes. Now would be good."

"I'll come pick you up."

THIS WORLD IS THEIRS, THIS NIGHT AND ITS elaborate product placement are speaking to them in the tongues which have been created by their need; buy and sell, supply and demand, youth-oriented aggressive advertising campaigns all culminating in a synesthesia which transcends the media which comprises it all. The night with its neon and carbon monoxide haze slakes their flesh and pulls them deeper into the crevices of the city streets. They know what is happening, understand—or think they do—how each piece relates to each other and themselves, and they accept and welcome this, as they are the ones who have inadvertently shaped it.

Part of the machine, they hold hands, whisper loudly to defeat the noise, hum key melodies which emanate from converted shop fronts, dive in and out of hipster funk beat bars, sit and watch the foot-flow, smell the smells, buy refried re-greased fast foods, tread mute sidewalk, kiss.

Later, pulled away from the garish thoroughfare into a gray corner, he whispers in her ear.

"Where do you want to go tonight?"

"I don't care," she breathes, her warmth mingling with his and the rest. "Take me to the places you usually go."

AND SO IT CRUMBLES, ALL BUT IMPERCEPTIBLY, AS they step hand-linked inside the heated metallic glow of the sweatshop that is the Hybrid Harbor. Clubnoise and clublights and clublove and clubstench. One in all, quintessential: loud, hot, fun. The jive permeates their bones as they are instantaneously sopped up by a greater force immeasurable: clubscene.

She smiles as he leads her, and she gesticulates toward the upper levels, trying to relate a story about a girlfriend of hers who had passed out on one of the metal railings many months ago and had to be dragged down the stairs, unconscious, by three bouncers, but he just smiles and nods and shakes his head and points mutely at his ears. She gives up and resorts to the gyration and slow methodical rocking of default club mode.

He pulls her through the crowd. Nine Ways is here tonight, playing heroin commando and multi-charmed global contact extraordinaire. He is at his table near the back of the bar, surrounded by delegates, flunkies, tissue boys and potential customers. He nods his head minutely as eight or nine voices vie for his attention.

"There he is. He can get us some good—"

"NATHAN? YOU WORK FOR NATHAN?"

THEY BREAK THROUGH THE PERIPHERY OF SYCOphants and easy-comers, and Nine Ways breaks abruptly out of his reverie with a smile-nod and a lugubrious "Ghettoboy, how the fuck *are* you?"

"Good good," he shouts. "Hey—"

But Nine's interest wanders elsewhere and then he smiles broadly. "Who the *fuck* is the lovely lady with you?" He laughs.

Ghettoboy turns and looks at a despondent Dos. She shakes her head at him.

He turns around. "You know her?"

Nine laughs. "That's my *slut,* man."

Ghettoboy looks at her. She looks at her feet.

He turns around. "She worked for you?"

"Right. Worked *hard.*"

Ghettoboy shrugs.

"She followed me in here," he says.

Nine laughs. "You wanted something."

Ghettoboy sits down. "You know. Just wondering if there's any business tonight. Anything for me?"

Nine smiles. "There's always business. Always. I told you."

Ghettoboy smiles.

When he turns around again she is gone.

DEEP SKY-REFLECTED FLASH OF NIGHT. THREE A.M. IF she had to guess.

She wanders. Legs tired, feet sore.

They get in her way, loud and obnoxious as they are kicked out of basement bars or dropped off by fed-up taxi drivers. Drunk and happy. Business has climaxed. Down-slope.

Another night, a normal night, she'd give up on the regular loop and call it endgame. Time to go home. Rest and count bills. Play soft music and clean herself up. Sleep.

Not tonight. She wanders. Legs tired, feet sore.

HE DROPS OFF THE THIRD PACKAGE TO A DECREPIT woman in a wheelchair hiding behind a reinforced door. She allows him inside after shakily removing lock bolt after chain bolt after slip lock. As he hands her the package he looks around: maybe ten by ten feet, with a

dirty low-watt lamp in one corner, a flattened cot against the opposite wall, a narrow doorway leading to a squalid washroom. Needles and band-aid wrappers and splinters of wood scattered about the threadbare carpet.

The woman snatches the package away from him and then, instead of opening it, looks up at him pleadingly and says, "Music?"

"Yeah. Music. That's gonna be seventy-five."

She hands him a ziploc baggie with the appropriate bills. He nods and exits.

False dawn mimics images against the smog overhead. The smell of sewage and steel. Intimations of morning silence echo above the street noise.

He stands at a corner, pretending to wait for each alternating set of lights to change so that he can cross. Faces north, then east, then north, then east.

Three blocks back the way he came he enters a phone booth. He peels a small bill off soon-to-be-Nine's wad, and feeds it into the reader. Four point five minutes local, flashes the display. He picks up the receiver and it begins to count down as he dials Toby's number.

"Ghetto?"

"Yeah, Toby, you busy?"

"Not really." Tech music in the background being gradiently silenced. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, really. Just thought I'd call."

"No. Really, Ghetto. What the fuck's up?"

He closes his eyes until blood lightning flashes. "I just got a question. A stupid question. I don't know. We can talk later if you don't got time now."

"No. I got time."

"You ever really fuck something up? With a girl? I mean, with another person? But like that?"

"No. But you did?"

"Yeah, tonight, sort of."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, really. It doesn't matter.Just wondering."

"You liked her?"

"She's okay. But she doesn't… understand me. What I'm about."

"So you fucked it up."

"I didn't."

"No?"

"Sort of. Yes. I did. Fuck."

Silence. He hears a voice, not Toby's, in the background.

"Toby?"

"Yeah?"

"Why? Why did I do that?"

"You want my opinion?"

"Yes."

"My candid opinion? No bullshit?"

"Yes, no shit."

"You did that, probably, because deep down you fully realize you're not nearly deserving of someone like that."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe. I think so."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, fuck you. Fuck you, Toby. Fuck you." He hangs up the phone.

He sits down on the sidewalk outside a McDonald's. Watches traffic slow down to watch him. He flips a coin, whispering "tails" each time but never checking the result, until he misses it, and it drops to the street and rolls into a rain grate.

Across the street and half a block away, in all its tacky secular glory, burns a neon green cross. Some church, he guesses. Some people, some lives, some beliefs.

SHE BUYS TWO DOUBLE CHEESEBURGERS AT A DAIRY Queen. She smiles at the pockmarked boy who hands her the brown bag, even though she told him she wanted it for inside. She sits down anyway, near the window, away from the doors.

As she eats, she counts the number of stars that make up the words *Super Value* on a poster that's pasted against one of the inner windows.

She doesn't notice the man who enters until he is standing next to her table.

"Do you remember me?"

She doesn't, of course, but she gets this question on occasion. Knows what it means.

"Sure I do," she says.

"Are the prices the same?" he asks, halfway to embarrassed.

"The same," she sighs with mock exuberance.

"I got a motel room, half a block away. Are you busy?"

"No," she says, and stands, leaving behind half a cheeseburger, and smiles at him as he leads her diffidently into the fluorescent-powdered night air. He's one of the good ones.

CRAIG BOYKO

Is a sometimes student at the University of Calgary in Alberta. He's constantly being shushed by his next-door neighbor. Unless you're his parents, you can check out his home page at www.geocities.com/Paris/3308/top.html.

Lights out. Good.